



South African rand notes

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THE RAINBOW LANGUAGES:
THE SCENE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Cay Dollerup

There is no one word, nor one single feeling that can adequately sum up one's impression of the language scene in present-day South Africa. It is daunting, incredibly complex, fascinating and perplexing. No matter how many people in key positions one sees, one cannot more than scratch the surface on a brief visit like the single two-week tour on which Cay Dollerup bases the following observations.

Republic of South Africa



Cay Dollerup reports:

Every answer calls forth some new query. Some point which is not obvious the first time round, turns out to be relevant at some later stage. Generalisations are more misleading than informative. So the below is merely a foreigner's impressions and thoughts on the South African language scene. Some of the features are comparable to problems elsewhere, and some are specific to South Africa.

Essential statistics

The basic statistics serve to illustrate the complexity at some levels.

Post-apartheid South Africa is a developing nation with an area of 1.22 million square kilometres and a population of c. 40.5 million (increase 2.4% per year). About half the population is urbanised, and some estimates have it that illiteracy is about 50% because education was not obligatory for blacks under apartheid. In terms of governance, it is divided into nine provinces, each with its own parliament and administration with considerable autonomy concerning regional affairs.

The constitution

The first chapter, 'Founding Provisions', of the modern South African Constitution from 1996 which is the basis of the present language policies, contains a long and detailed section on 'Languages' (§ 6). It specifies that the Republic has eleven official languages. In addition, there are provisions for the use of sign language, of three minority indigenous languages, of languages used for religious purposes, such as Arabic, Hebrew and Sanskrit, and of the so-called heritage languages (such as German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi).

The language statistics

The multitude of languages reflects various waves of immigration to the large swathe of land which constitutes present-day South Africa: indigenous peoples, Dutch, French and British settlers, later Indians and Malay, and in the latter half of the twentieth century, Portuguese immigrants – but, essentially, you name them - they are also in South Africa.

Linguistically, the indigenous languages fall into two major branches, the Nguni and the Sotho languages. According to the statistics, the most widely spoken language nationwide is Zulu (22.9% of the population) followed by Xhosa (17.9%), Afrikaans (14.4%), Sepedi (9.2%), English (8.6%), Setswana (8.2%) and Sesotho (7.7%). Again nationwide, all other groups comprise less than 5.0% but their number may be much higher in specific provinces. In addition, there are people dependent on sign language as well as many South African citizens whose 'heritage language' is their first language.

The role of the European languages

Nearly all European languages appear to be represented in the country: there are pockets and groups of Greeks, Ukrainians, and Russians, but Afrikaans and English are, unquestionably, the dominant Indo-European languages. During apartheid, which crumbled around 1990, Afrikaans

held the highest position. As the dominant language in many regions, it was inevitably also the European language which many black Africans would learn and use in conversation with whites. Language sensitivity among Afrikaans speakers is higher than with any other group. Afrikaans previously had what may well have been the world's best dubbing techniques and even today it is the only South African language which has its own separate language board that issues guidelines for spelling and language usage. After a period of stigmatisation, Afrikaans is now openly accepted, but there is an undeniable movement towards English as the preferred second language in all contexts. This makes English function as a 'relay' language for much communication. It is a situation termed the 'period of grace for English', but there is little doubt that English will retain this position, a kind of neutral ground for many years to come. Given the fact that South Africa has its Parliament in Cape Town (dominated by Afrikaans (59.2%), English (20.3%) and Xhosa (19.1%)), its Government in Pretoria and financial centre in Johannesburg (both in the province of Guateng in which the largest group are speakers of Zulu), and its judicial capital in Bloemfontein (in which Sesotho dominates), there is no single indigenous language which will hold a natural key to domination (unlike, for instance, in India where Hindi is gaining ground).

I deliberately use the term 'relay' language, for, despite South Africa's excellent infrastructure, the population movement nationwide seems to be from country to city rather than from one region to another. Add to this that despite the obligatory education introduced for all, now independent of race and creed, much English teaching is, out of necessity, undertaken by non-native speakers of English. Therefore, the English in outlying and small communities cannot be standard South African English. This is not surprising, for this essentially applies to all non-Anglophone-speaking countries, including the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries where most foreign visitors get the impression that all natives speak English fluently. But it does mean that in South Africa, English will have both a crucial and specific role in the linguistic future of South Africa – a role which is, in all likelihood, a far cry from the role it plays elsewhere. It will, in my view, not be 'elevated' to the lingua franca on a national scale, although it will, for a considerable period, be the 'lingua franca' for certain strata of the population, such as academics, administrators working at the national level and national politicians. There is a significant difference between these two roles.

The indigenous languages

Even during the years of apartheid there was teaching in the indigenous languages only it was not mandatory for blacks to go to school.

Given the size of the country and the distribution of languages, it is obvious that there are problems with local dialects and with sociolects. There are problems between rural and urban versions of the 'same language'. There is also a lack of standardisation as well as problems with introducing new concepts of modern post-apartheid times in the indigenous languages. There are minority languages which are being studied in order to establish whether they are dialects or languages in their own right. Conversely, there is one place in which there is an 'artificial' African-based Language For Special Purposes: in the gold and diamond mines, all new workers, many of them from outside South Africa, are taught the specialised (and limited) vocabulary needed for work ('Fanagalo').

But it also stands to reason that in real life situations, many well-educated, non-European South Africans will switch to English and ensure that their children learn it as well. There is, thus, a certain lack of enthusiasm for indigenous languages among some of their own speakers. At the same time, there are native speakers who do not know that their mother tongue is an official language of the Republic.

Yet, the 'natural' indigenous languages are carriers of culture, and the everyday means of communication for the vast majority of the population.

Work to preserve culture is undertaken by, for instance, Mr Mbulungeni Madiba and his team (of AALRDISA at UNISA) who comprise representatives of all nine indigenous languages. As they become aware of gaps in indigenous literatures, the team tries to fill them. When I met them, they were translating a collection of dramatic pieces written by an African playwright into their respective languages. This was done in order to make this work of literature accessible to audiences speaking indigenous languages since the team found that the issues raised were pertinent to all black South Africans.

Language policy and government translation

The Language Planning section of National Language Service (which is headed by Anne-Marie Beukes and part of the DACST) draws up language policy in the form of flexible guidelines which make allowance for the complexities in South Africa. It is primarily concerned with administrative language and policy development at the macro-level. It gives advice to government

structures on language policy development and monitors the implementation of the constitutional language rights I referred to above.

In-house translation and revision (most often self-revision) is done in the Translation and Editing section of the National Language Service, mostly of important official documents, but some work is out-sourced. Translation is revised, most often in self-revision. Allowing for considerable individual variation and for differences in text types, the translation norms call for translation of up to 5 pages of 300 words per day, and 24-32 pages of making clean copy (transferring hand-written corrections to computer text and the like). The two main source languages are English and Afrikaans, with the former steadily gaining ground. Translation into indigenous languages is undertaken by native speakers. However, relatively few documents are translated into all eleven official languages: These that are include the Constitution (translated by the Ministry of Justice), annual reports and some legal translation for government usage and for use in statutory bodies. One specific problem for translators is one familiar in international organisations: many English source texts are drawn up by people who are not native speakers of English, so there are provisions for translators to contact originators.

In order to promote equitable use of the eleven languages, there are plans to have the use of languages rotated in terms of four categories of languages in official written documents. This would imply that one from each of the major indigenous branches (Nguni and Sotho), and one 'minority language' (Venda or Tsonga) and either Afrikaans or English, will be used in any given document.

The National Language Service – and PANSALB - are concerned with the lack of standardisation in some indigenous languages and with the insufficiency of the training possibilities for language professionals. Selection for the police and army thus demands some flexibility.

The National Language Service cooperates with the Ministry of Education and the PANSALB.

The political will: the PANSALB

The Pan South African Language Board is founded according to the first chapter of the Constitution. It was established in 1995 in terms of the PANSALB Act and has since then worked for the promotion and development of the underprivileged indigenous languages, sign language and for the protection and respect for religious and heritage languages. Chaired by Mr Mpiyakhe

Kumalo and with Cynthia Marivate as the Chief Executive Officer, it is operating with multilingual board meetings and numerous subcommittees (terminology, translation and interpreting, etc.) the members of which are chosen according to professional backgrounds. The staff in the main office in Pretoria is small but it does play a key role in the execution of language policy and usage in South Africa. It is placed in the centre of the difficult transition in which marginalized indigenous languages have become official languages, in which mutual respect of language rights is crucial to personal and ethnic dignity, and in which this linguistic diversity must also somehow or other contribute to a common national vision.

The PANSALB's main thrust is the promotion of the indigenous languages. Thus it has taken a strong stance in favour of the usage of indigenous languages in teaching subject matters, as opposed to Ministry of Education which has tried to compensate for non-mother tongue teaching by allotting students extra marks to their exams for matriculation purposes if they have been taught in their second language.

The general plan is to have to provincial committees in addition to the expert subcommittees already operating, and to have strategic planning in place. This is difficult: at the time of my visit, such committees were established in only three provinces. One major obstacle is that priorities are often unclear, especially at the grass-root level – which is not unaffected by the fact that many politicians are inclined to neglect the indigenous languages.

In order to promote indigenous languages, there are bodies that look into each language in interaction with users. Within its limited budget the PANSALB furthermore supports c. 20 projects which, in some way or other, study or try to come to grips with specifics in the language situation: They address issues such as monolingualism and the Indians in South Africa, Zulu in chemistry teaching, and N. Madiba's 'translation of classical literary works across African languages' which I mentioned above.

The promotion of indigenous languages is also going on in terms of place names given by Europeans. The names are being checked in all provinces and this is expected to lead to the introduction of at least bilingual road signs (such as 'the way to x-town' and 'you are now in x-town').

Judi de Beer of the Terminology section of the National Language Service informed me about problems with terminology. In principle, there is work going on towards multilingual computerised terminology bases. Afrikaans and English have a fairly large number of domains that are covered by respective terminologies (e.g. geology), and there is a dictionary of political and

related sciences. The focus in terminology is, of course, on establishing or producing new words, notably in the indigenous languages so as to, in the long perspective, make it possible for learners at all levels to acquire knowledge in all domains. But it is hard to attract qualified specialists in the indigenous languages.



The implementation in politics

In practical political life, much work is carried out in English and (increasingly to a lesser degree) in Afrikaans. This is primarily because of limited funds, and partly because of the lack of professionals speaking indigenous languages.

According to the Constitution, Parliament may use any languages for its purposes. In practice, English, Afrikaans and Zulu have permanent interpreting booths, whereas speakers of other languages have to advise the interpreting services days in advance that they will deliver their speeches in an indigenous language, so that the appropriate interpreters can be called in. This means that in fact English is promoted. However, on important occasions, such as the opening of Parliament, all languages are used by the members who may also dress traditionally in order to mark their linguistic and cultural background. The budget speech (in English) is interpreted into Afrikaans, Zulu and Setswana. Once again, it is fair to stress that there is a balancing act to be performed between budgetary and linguistic possibilities. The parliamentary national Hansard is published in English. Some provincial legislatures, such as that of the Free State have Hansards,

while others outsource their translation functions.

The overall South African language policies call for the introduction of multiple language services in four tiers. The first one is the national government, the second the provincial administration, the third the local government level directed towards the user, and the fourth, the private sector.

Like the national parliament, the provincial governments must have at least two official languages. I was present at a meeting headed by Ms B. S. Mereeotlhe, Deputy Speaker of the North West province which focused on the need to identify and train interpreters who would constitute a pool of free-lancers available to the courts, police, and so on. The topic was approached from a large number of angles and discussed in terms of employment, options, and practical and financial terms.

The will is there, but there are issues surrounding education, employment, including that of handicapped people, as well as budget, social and interethnic relations that come into play.

Interpreting: an illustration

Annelie Lotriet provided an overview of the development of the scene of interpreting. It serves to illustrate the old and the new issues that came to the fore with the introduction of the new equitable use of languages in 1994, including the challenges it posed and the relative speed with which it has been implemented.

There was court interpreting as well as some interpreting in the medical services (frequently undertaken by nurses and cleaning staff) during the apartheid years but always consecutive. There was translation, but no interpreting services in Parliament where English and Afrikaans were treated on a par. Simultaneous conference interpreting for international meetings would avail itself of interpreters flown in from abroad, mostly Europe.

In 1994 the first free elections took place. The result led to the need for interpreting in Parliament, and interpreters were trained on short courses, continuing with in-house or on-the-job training, often based, unavoidably on a process of trial and error. The European Union has provided funding in the past few years for the Parliament and provincial legislatures for language services, notably for training.

Since 1994 on, simultaneous interpreting has advanced, mostly by dint of recruitment of students (some of them not-so-young and with prior experience if not formal training), who then go through short intensive courses before moving directly into work. The University of the Orange

Free State thus had to provide c. 35 interpreters in 2 months in two or three courses for the SATRC when this body was established in 1996, also for simultaneous interpreting. And simultaneous interpreting (usually then into 2-4 languages) is now gradually being introduced into the provincial legislatures.

There have been numerous courses. Many of these are based on a combination of distance learning and contact classes on weekends. What is more, whereas interpreters' renditions would previously not be controlled and the records would be in English only, these may now be checked.

There is contact with interpreting services, notably in the EU, with the Flemish-speaking schools in Belgium, and – especially for liaison interpreting – Canada.

The needs for simultaneous interpreting are then, in some measure, being met (again there are problems with recruiting a sufficient number of speakers of indigenous languages). Accordingly, courses are expanding their scope from court interpreting, medical and administrative services to liaison interpreting. In the same fashion, translation has been moving from the government level to medical forms used by the population at large.

In general, interpreting looms large in the South African context, which must be understood against the rate of illiteracy which demands oral communication. This is particularly obvious with court interpreting.

The pragmatic approach

In virtually all fields, one is struck by the pragmatic approach to problems.

It goes for the priorities given: translation work is extended to municipal authorities, but a certain preference is given to ensuring that the community functions – electricity and water supply services get preferential treatment in respect to translation work.

On the media, most events are televised with the original sound-track and the original language. But on the radio, there are channels in various languages, broadcast simultaneously, so that one can turn off the sound on television and listen to the radio speak and sound while watching television.

Long distance work, dictated by the scarcity of language workers, the size of the country and made possible by country's excellent infrastructure, is used in training, in teaching (for instance at the UNISA), and also in translation work where South African translators can translate French and English documents in negotiations in some other African nation.

The appearance of sign language to the extent that it is actually inscribed in the constitution is novel to me. But it is used: for instance in the opening of Parliament and in the news.

Language technology is also used, with multilingual programmes on computers, with documentation posted and to some extent also translated by computer-assisted translation and translation memory.

The market forces

Court interpreters are organised, but otherwise there is little formal cooperation. The PANSALB and the Universities organise meetings and conferences as fora for exchange of views.

The legislatures and administration seem to be provided for with translators and interpreters in English and Afrikaans, whereas there is a generally admitted lack of professionals working into the indigenous languages. The awareness of the visible need for language services is, once again officially, slowly permeating society. In addition to the government, the local administration, the municipalities, the public services and the medical world, there must be much more liaison work that goes on, without being noticed because it is part of everyday life.

There must be innumerable children that go to school whose services are enlisted for interethnic communication. On the farms, the owners must be able to communicate. The white farmers' children must also listen and come to understand indigenous languages. It is border country – not only in the rural areas but also in the cities. I was told that in municipal administrations, translation and interpreting would often be part of clerical work, performed by secretaries, that administrators would have to interpret, and that bright young boys who were good at liaison interpreting would, rather than sticking with that profession, strive to become lawyers. Translation work is not all that well-paid and salaries must often be supplemented by additional work – and industry can always be trusted to coax with better pay.



Mediation

Listening to simultaneous interpreting into an indigenous language was food for thought:

the interpreters were working from English, and, even in their language, I could get the general drift of the discussion on the floor: ‘democracia’, ‘white paper’, ‘political’, ‘demarcation process’, etc – a host of words adapted to the language in question. The number of identifiable words was not smaller when the original was Afrikaans which was interpreted in relay from English.

This is thought-provoking. Firstly, of course, I was witnessing a process in which a new domain was introduced (or confirmed) in the target culture and the words that first came to interpreters’ minds were source-language concepts. Secondly, it is doubtful if large-scale indigenous terminologies can be handled in interpreting contexts, as (a) there must be an awesome array of new domains which makes it near-impossible to keep up with loans, and (b) the interpreters would have major problems tackling the time lag (now at 10-15 seconds) – because the indigenous words tend to be longer than English ones.

Is it, then, a disaster to have domains dominated by other languages? The Icelanders, the French, and quite a few of my own Danish compatriots find it a major threat to national identity that English is found everywhere. I wonder whether at least my own countrymen would be happy with doctors speaking Danish dialects instead of pseudo-Latin. The truth is probably that all languages have domains introduced from abroad and adapted to their own tongue.

There is indeed another feature that was striking, if only because it takes place all the time in South Africa, whereas we meet with it only occasionally in largely monolingual and monoethnic cultures: People with different cultural backgrounds have totally different ways of addressing problems, even shared ones. There is much staking out, there is what Europeans would call circumlocution which, when one listens carefully, is at a time respectful and yet a testing of sincerity, a checking on how far the word will hold good, how far the other party can be trusted.

It would seem as if the retention of and respect for the different approaches, however difficult in specific cases, would be better for the promotion of all the cultures involved.

The academic efforts

The universities I visited (Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, UNISA in Pretoria, The University of the Orange Free State in Bloemfontein, and The University of Potchefstroom) all have Translation Studies programmes. The programmes have a practical bent, and there are both intensive courses as well as prolonged academic programmes with diplomas and graduate components. At the University of Witwatersrand, Elisabeth Meintjes and Judith Inggs had MA students discuss their thesis work, ranging from studying problems in rendering *Alice in Wonderland* to the

reception of information among the black community, and by cautious counselling making the students foresee problems and avoid casting their nets too widely. UNISA focuses on distance teaching and has overseas students in its programme (Alet Kruger and Kim Wallmach). The University of the Orange Free State and its Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment (director: Theo du Plessis) has the oldest school of sign language interpreting in Africa (Mabel Erasmus and Philemon Akach (head of programme)), and it offers comprehensive interpreter training ranging from court, via liaison to (consecutive and simultaneous) conference interpreting. Plotchefstroom University (Annette Combrink) offers court interpreting (which was the reason for the meeting with the North-West legislature referred to before), and it is investigating subtitling (Haide Kotze and Jan-Louis Kruger).

They vary in scope, in the combination of languages offered, and in the scarcity of speakers of indigenous languages. There are thus problems in terms of recruitment which, in turn, affect the programmes. On the other hand, it is certainly in place to stress that in the South African context, there is a need for translation between any given European language pair spoken in the country. It may be that some do not get in contact that often, but there is definitely work (if only on a part-time basis) for any graduate in translation in the broad sense. It is also telling that the theory that seemed to enjoy the broadest appeal seemed to be the ‘Skopostheory’ which does, after all, allow for the ‘otherness’ in the target audience.

The final view

There are no easy solutions to the language complexities of the South African scene. The language scenario is, after all, only one out of a number of intricate operations calling for the unity of the country. There is a need to cooperate, there are painful processes of redistribution of rights, privileges and there are the challenges involved in globalisation as well as marginalisation in the modern world.

There is friction, certainly. One notes with interest that most complaints about unequal language treatment lodged with the PANSALB are by Afrikaans speakers. It is interesting to observe groups of young people speaking some other language, all of sudden to hear a dialogue in English, and then watch everybody laughing: speakers of English are quoted directly.

In some respects, the experience of the rainbow nation, as Nelson Mandela called his country, is not so special: shortage of language professionals is not all that unfamiliar; the European Union also has eleven official languages, once again with two languages, English and French, vying

for power, once again English gaining the upper hand, but – mind you – with the difference that English is becoming a true ‘lingua franca’ for the Europeans. I doubt that English will play a similar role for all citizens of South Africa.

In other respects, South Africa is unique, for instance, in the blend of languages represented from totally different language families.

South Africa can indeed leapfrog developments in other parts of the world. I do not see why South Africa should go into prolonged and agonised discussion of some of the more ethereal European theories when these are clearly inapplicable to the South African scene as a whole.

I do not argue that I know South Africa. But one cannot ignore the fact that life in South Africa is a unique challenge both on a national scale and for each individual. It is a strange experience one moment to understand every word that is said, then, the next moment to be surrounded by human sound which is utterly incomprehensible. Many times, every day, all the year round. In order to survive as a human, there is a need for the individual, indeed all citizens of that nation, to be allowed to be ignorant of some aspects of the lives of others. At the same time, there is a need to allow others to feel the same. Tolerance is the key. You have to take care of your neighbour’s dignity to preserve your own.

It is the challenge for language professionals to sensitise their compatriots to the multiplicity of languages in their surroundings in South Africa, to mediate between languages and cultures. It is therefore appropriate that the ‘Fifth Language International conference: Teaching translation and interpreting: ‘Making languages work’ will take place in Bloemfontein in July.

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“Any passenger speaking Portuguese is asked to report immediately at the information desk.”

Call at Johannesburg Airport

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A task requiring some thinking:

Realising that many immigrants from India will appreciate being welcomed, the Johannesburg airport authorities wish to set up a ‘Welcome’ in Indian. Most immigrants come from West or Southern India

where Gujarati, Tamil and Telegu are spoken. What language should the translation be in?

- task to Kim Wallmach, UNISA

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Answer to task:

Hindi. Otherwise the diplomats who come from Hindi-speaking Delhi will complain.

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If that is really what you thought the original meant, then what on earth convinced you that it was worth translating?

- Note in Annette Combrink's office

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XITSONGA:

Inkomu.Famba (ni) kahle!

U(mi) hlayiseka

AFRIKAANS

Baie dankei. Totsiens!

Mag dit goed gaan.

ENGLISH

Thank you. Good-bye! Keep well.

ISI NDEBELA

Nygiyathokoza.

Khamba bugwala / Sala bugwala.

ISIXHOSA

Enkosei/Ndiyabulela. Hamba kakuhle/Sala kakuhle! Yimbasempilweni.

ISISZULU

Ngiyabonga. Uhambe kahle.

Impilo enhle.

(from '11 Lingo Pal', a miniature multilingual phrase leaflet issued by the DACST)

ACRONYMS

AALRDISA = The All African Languages Redevelopment Institute (at UNISA)

DACTS = Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology.

PANSALB = Pan South African Language Board based in Pretoria, and established according to the Constitution of 1996, Chapter 1, § 6.

SATRC = South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee, a body set up to decide on amnesty for crimes committed during the conflicts of the apartheid years.

UNISA = University of South Africa in Pretoria, working mostly with distance teaching.

