

Global Expansion of English: The South African Case

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Abstract. The article aims at providing a general overview of the language situation in South Africa and at the same time puts the discussion in the context of the global spread of English. Authors such as Phillipson or Penycook pose warnings concerning the hegemony of English in the post-colonial settings; Skutnabb-Kangas refers to English as the ‘language killer’ being a serious threat to minority languages. South Africa is no exception in this respect. After the first democratic elections, English has become the most widely used language in the realm of government, the judiciary as well as the educational system leaving the remaining ten official languages far behind. Alexander, Webb, Heugh and other prominent scholars in South Africa also warn against the uncontrolled expansion of English in the official contexts. As an alternative, they promote the ideas of the additive bilingualism, the development and intellectualization of the African languages.

1. Introduction

How does Zulu sound to God? I asked myself. Is it aggressive or romantic? I can hear every preacher saying that there is only one God we must direct our prayers to. But does he have good interpreters like the woman in the train interpreted the preacher’s Sesotho? Does the Man understand tsotsitaal, or are we just wasting our time praying to Him in that language?

[. . .] It also seemed to matter to me that English and Afrikaans are God’s languages. Mastering those two languages in our country had since become the only way to avoid the poverty of twilight zones like Soweto (Mhlongo 2004: 182).

The above quotation comes from a novel titled *Dog eat dog*, written by Niq Mhlongo, an author widely acknowledged for being among the most interesting representatives of contemporary black South African fiction, as well as the voice of the so called “kwaito generation.” It seems that in these few lines Mhlongo has managed to capture the predicaments of a black South African student

functioning in a new political system, after the first democratic elections in 1994. The writer poses fundamental questions concerning the status of language, which is not only dependent on political planning, but also on social attitudes prevailing among its speakers. English and Afrikaans have long been recognized as the tools enabling their users to achieve success in their life-careers. The cultivation of the black languages, on the other hand, has not been perceived as beneficial in economic terms, and as it is well illustrated by the words of Mhlongo's character, it might have proved to be a mere "waste of time." After the long years of apartheid, South Africa has theoretically become the land of opportunity for all its citizens regardless of their ethnic background and the new constitution adopted in 1994 has been designed to guard the rights of all racial groups represented in the country. Indigenous languages indisputably constitute one of the most eminent aspects of cultural heritage and they are indeed also protected by the constitutional laws. Still, even though the status of all of the eleven official languages, speaking in the formal terms of law, is supposed to be equal; in fact, the position of English proves to be the strongest, leaving all other languages far behind.

In the context of the discussion on the global spread of English, the English language is often presented as the language killer, being a threat to local languages, as well as to local cultures. The Anglicization of South Africa began in 1806 with the re-establishment of British rule in the Cape Colony, but the process of westernization has not yet finished and is still further strengthened by the phenomenon of Americanization. The present paper is far from claiming that the above mentioned processes are intrinsically evil. English seems to fulfil its role as a lingua franca in South Africa's multilingual setting and is of help in the process of modernisation of the country. However, it still remains an exclusive token in the hands of the educated elite. The present paper will aim at providing an overview of the language situation in South Africa in the context of the position of English as a global language and the potential threat that it poses to the indigenous languages and cultures of South Africa.

2. English as a global language

The process of instantiating English as a global language arouses heated debates in numerous fields of study, both in social sciences and linguistics. The understanding of the term "global" is itself not without controversy, as the globalisation of language is endowed with multiple definitions. Moreover, apart from the notion of the "global language," alternative, yet not exactly interchanging, terms are also widely used, such as, for instance, "international English" (e.g., Pennycook 1998; Seidlhofer and Jenkins 2003), English as "lingua

franca" (e.g., Seidlhofer and Jenkins 2003; House 2003), or "world English" (e.g., Mair 2003). The discussion of the issues denoted by all these terms seems indeed vibrant, which can be corroborated by the fact that there are a number of major international journals devoted exclusively to this set of research questions; these include, for instance, *World Englishes*; *English Worldwide: A Journal of Varieties of English*; and *English Today: The International Review of the English language*. It would prove a vast and challenging exercise to try to present a detailed overview of the considerable body of research that has been accumulated on the topic. The following remarks on the subject will, thus, have to remain largely tentative, as they are only meant to serve a preparatory purpose with respect to the main aim of conducting the discussion of the South African case.

Although the basic trend that the number of people using English is constantly increasing seems to be difficult to deny, and it is fairly obvious that this language has been rapidly gaining popularity for a number of decades, the precise number of the speakers of English is not easy to assess. Crystal (1998) provides the reader with specific data on this matter, but at the same time enumerates the problems connected with these estimates. The most important factor is the level of English proficiency that one takes into account. Thus, if considering speakers of English with a native or native-like competence, the number would approximate 670 million people, while the number of speakers with 'reasonable competence' is estimated at around 1,800 million (Crystal 1998: 61). The usual compromise is struck at around 12,000-15,000 million speakers, and according to Crystal, this number is most widely used.

The most common categorization divides speakers of English into three categories: native speakers of English, speakers of English as a second language, and speakers of English as a foreign language, with an analogous division of English into three groups: English as a native language (ENL), English as a second language (ESL), English as a foreign language (EFL). The neat model serves as a useful starting point in the discussion of English as a language used globally. The distinction corresponds to the 'three concentric circles' model provided by Kachru, which remains the most influential descriptive device accounting for the spread of English. The circles represent "the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition, and the functional allocation of English in diverse cultural contexts" (Kachru 1992: 356). The "inner circle" (the UK, the USA, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) comprises the countries where English is the first language, and which constitute the traditional cultural bases of the language. The "outer circle" (e.g., Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Singapore, Zambia) refers to the countries where English has an important status in a multilingual setting, and which were often subjected to the colonial expansion of the "inner circle." The "expanding circle" (China, Japan, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan) contains the countries where English has no official recognition

and is of restrictive use, but constitutes a predominant language in the ELT (English language teaching) context.

The framework, however, is not devoid of inconsistencies, and does indeed appear problematic in a number of ways. According to Crystal (1995), the model does not provide a comprehensive account of the actual linguistic situation on the ground. He points out to the fact that it is not at all easy to divide the world into the above mentioned categories, as "there are several countries where population movement, language loss, divergent language attitudes, and massive shifts in language use have made it difficult to answer the question 'What is your first language?'" (Crystal 1995: 363). To put his observation into a more specific context, South Africa can serve as an example of the fact that such territorial categorizations are indeed problematic. Firstly, English in South Africa is one of the official languages and has enjoyed a special status since the re-establishment of British rule in the Cape Colony in 1806, which is generally considered as the beginning of the process of Anglicization in South Africa (e.g., Kamwangamalu 2003: 237). This would place the country somehow on the fence between the "inner" and "outer" circle. Secondly, the number of speakers of ENL in South Africa is considerable; there are about 3.45 million native speakers of English, who comprise (using old racial divisions): 1.71 million white, 0.58 coloured, 0.97 Indian and 0.11 'African.' South African English is divided into separate ethnolects and is naturally a continuum ranging from 'standard' to vernacular (Lass 2002: 104-105). However, there is also a large number of speakers of ESL in South Africa, and localised varieties of 'New Englishes' (the term related to Kachru's outer circle) are present in local cultures. This goes even further than the previous regularity, as such cultural embedding of the language is a clear example of "inner" circle sort of dynamics. On the other hand, the percentage of those ENL speakers with respect to the overall population makes them a clear minority, and the acquisition of English by new groups follows rather the creolised patterns of the "outer" range. Therefore, South Africa appears to be a troubling combination of the elements that are characteristic of both the inner as well as the outer circle, which does not allow for a straightforward labelling utilising the neat tri-circular typology. Nevertheless, it seems useful to retain this typology as a reference point, as this would allow for placing the description of the local linguistic dynamics in the global context, even if this requires some theoretical reservations to be made.

3. Explanations for the continuing spread of English

The mere description of the global positioning of English looks controversial, but the explanatory frameworks that have been developed to account for this process of globalisation prove a much more contagious source of disagreement and debate. Typical explanations for the status of English as world language seem to be concentrated around two main factors: the expansion of the British during the colonial time and the position of the United States as the most eminent economic power throughout the twentieth century (Crystal 1998: 53). There are, however, at least two different general attitudes with respect to the existence of this process. They differ substantially in their understanding of the role of what should be referred to as “socio-political factors.” To give them distinct labels, Pennycook refers to these as the “heterogeny” and “homogeny” positions (2003).

3.1. The heterogeny position

The central idea behind the heterogeny position is the notion of Kachru’s New Englishes (e.g., Kachru 1992). The scholar endorses the general idea that English has spread around the world in a natural way. Hence, it has been reworked by the speakers of the outer circle and adapted to the local contexts giving rise to diverse, but equally legitimate, varieties of English. Specifically appropriated varieties of English can then function as tools for the expression of local identities. Already in the early 1980s, Kachru made a claim that “non-native users ought to develop an identity with the local model of English without feeling that it is a ‘deficient model’” (1983: 51). This obviously entails the demand for a linguistic take-over and dissent from the standards of the original communities of speakers.

Referring to a specific instance of this position, House strongly believes that English as a lingua franca constitutes no viable threat to multilingualism in Europe. In order to move the discussion from a strictly socio-political context, the scholar makes a distinction between ‘languages for communication’ and ‘languages for identification.’ In line with Kachru’s idea of New Englishes, House makes a claim that “English is no longer ‘owned’ by its native speakers, and there is a strong tendency towards more rapid ‘de-owning’ ” (2003: 557). Other academics working on this issue, such as Seidlhofer and Jenkins, acknowledge the fact that the discussions on the consequences of the global spread of English are important. But at the same time they claim that the issue of the definition and nature of English as an international language, which crept out of the inner circle into the outer, and the expanding circle, is still widely neglected and should be examined more closely.

The critics of this framework (e.g., Phillipson 1992, 2003; Pennycook 1998) claim that by ignoring the political context and consequences of the spread of

English, the proponents of the heterogeny position present the process as a sort of natural development, which can be viewed as normatively neutral and altogether beneficial. Pennycook provides counter examples to this simplifying perception of the globalization of English, arguing that the expansion of English is not merely “a result of inevitable global forces,” and the English language should not be considered as if it was “detached from its original cultural context” (1998: 9). This line of doubt has been further developed by Phillipson: “much discourse on ‘global English’ rests on [. . .] unstable scholarly foundations: ‘English as a global language’ tends to be used uncritically” (2003: 20). In other words, the theorists of this persuasion perceive the apparent normative neutrality of the “global English” approach as an ideological guise, which serves the purpose to justify the expansion of English. This leads them into voicing what has been dubbed “the homogeny position.”

3.2. Homogeny position

The scholars endorsing the homogeny position, in contrast to those supporting the heterogeny attitude, perceive the unchecked spread of English as anything but natural, neutral and beneficial. Its proponents argue that the expansion of the language can lead to a unification of world culture, which in turn, may bring unexpected linguistic, as well as social changes. To put it still differently, they deny the very possibility of severing politics and culture, and tend to claim that there can be no change in the cultural domain without inducing significant imbalances within the socio-political domain. By the same token, the global spread of English should not be perceived as the optimal output of a free interplay of communicative preferences. It is rather an outcome enforced on the people by the differential distributions of social, political and economic capital. Ricento notes that there exists a general feeling among certain scholars that this specific form of cultural expansion can prove to be more threatening to independence of the formerly colonized countries than the colonial expansion itself (2000: 203).

According to this view, historically speaking, the idea of English as a global language has been actively supported by powerful British and American interests. Yet, at present, it is still strongly promoted as a part of the ongoing processes of globalization (e.g., Phillipson 1992, 2003). As the two processes have been, or still are supported by the imperialist structures, they may not be viewed as natural in any reasonable sense – unless one takes imperialist domination to be a necessary feature of the global order. Thus, Phillipson makes a bold statement that “[t]he transition from a world of colonial linguistic imperialism to a postmodern, postnational, neoliberal world has required only minor modifications in the structural and ideological legitimation of English as a dominant language” (2003: 24). The scholar identifies numerous examples of the supposed cultural imperialism

of the English language, still very much present in the realms of science, the media, and education, which can also be generically referred to as 'literary colonialism' (Phillipson 1992: 58). The main points of the argument relevant to the present discussion seem to be as follows:

1. the belief that the West has almost exclusive control over scientific research (supported by the imperialist structure)
2. the existence of media imperialism (asymmetrical exchange of information)
3. the existence of government-financed activities in cultural diplomacy (e.g. ensuring the position of the dominant language in the educational system) (Phillipson 1992: 58-65).

In his book *Linguistic Imperialism*, Phillipson points to a number of reasons, why the spread of English should not be viewed as neutral. One of the best researched and at the same time the most important agents of the spread of English seems to be what Phillipson identifies as the ELT industry. The scholar provides a working definition of the English language imperialism referring, among others, to the ELT institutions by stating that, "the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages" (1992: 47). It is not uncommon for English in a colonial or a postcolonial setting to serve as an important tool for asserting a specific social status. In order to cover such supposed instances of linguistic imperialism, a term "linguicism" has been developed (coined by Skutnabb-Kangas 1986) and like sexism or racism, is used by Phillipson in the context of unequal allocation of power and resource, with language serving as a central element (instead of gender or race) (1992: 54).

4. Language situation in South Africa after 1994

Along with the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, various changes occurred in the political and public life of the country. Nelson Mandela, the leader of the ANC and the first democratically elected president, strongly supported the idea that all culture groups present in South Africa are equal and ought to be treated as such, both at national and individual level. The idea is well expressed in the already famous metaphor of the 'rainbow nation' and has strongly influenced the post-apartheid political discourse and the policy planning. As Mandela puts it himself: "[w]e have at last achieved our political emancipation. We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender, and other discrimination," and adds: "[n]ever, never, and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another" (1994: 620-621). The general urge to rediscover and revive the previously underprivileged cultures did not neglect the question of

language. Thus, the South African constitution (chapter 1 section six) makes very clear provisions for the status of the languages of South Africa. Firstly, it enumerates eleven official languages: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu. It ought to be noted here that in terms of the number of languages officially recognized, South Africa is an honourable exception with its progressive acknowledgement of a multilingual reality. Furthermore, the constitution highlights the need to recognise and at the same time, re-evaluate the indigenous languages, whose status and use were historically diminished. Then, it allows the national and provincial governments the use of any of the official languages, as long as the choice remains optimal with respect to the demand of the local citizens. An additional request has been placed that service should be available in at least two of the official languages. The constitutional provisions additionally command the national and provincial governments to regulate and monitor their use of official languages, with a special view to the equal status of all eleven languages.

Apart from making those provisions, special attention is devoted to the Pan South African Language Board, which is expected to promote the development of all official languages, the Khoi, Nama and San languages and sign language. Secondly, its further duty is to promote respect for the languages that are commonly used in South Africa and those which are used for religious purposes. The actual operations of the board, however, remains under strong criticism as it is accused of having failed in its role as a controlling body over the government in the process of implementing language policies (e.g. Heugh 2002). The problem of language in the sphere of the judiciary, the government, and education systems in South Africa, even though addressed in many academic and non-academic debates, remains unsolved in many aspects. It needs to be noted here that the present paper will limit its scope of interest to the problem of language in the educational system.

In 1997 the problematic apartheid language in education policy was finally abandoned after the adoption of a new policy. Heugh (2000) reports that the new policy promised the best possible access to mother tongue education in the multilingual South African setting, as well as to a second language chosen by a student (this language of choice, not unexpectedly, has proven to be English in a big majority of cases). She adds, however, that because of the lack of a satisfactory implementation of the policy, the former policy of the apartheid government is still being pursued (2000: 3). Kamwangamalu (2003) notes that it is still English and Afrikaans that dominate in the realm of education and observes that "African languages are used as media of learning only for the first four years of primary education, much as was the case before and after the Soweto uprising of June 1976 against the imposition of Afrikaans" (2003: 240). In other words, it has been difficult to actually produce an effective policy of putting local languages into

educational use and despite the formally equal status of all the eleven official languages, ensuring academic progress still often requires a concession to the imposition of a language different from one's native tongue.

Despite the relatively strong educational position of Afrikaans with respect to languages like Zulu or Xhosa, it is English that proves to be winning the great majority of the linguistic converts. Heugh (2002) localises two main reasons, why the English language became preferred over Afrikaans and the mother tongues among the black population. Firstly, while Afrikaans was directly linked to the apartheid regime, the support of the English-speaking community for the system was at the same time unjustifiably underestimated (2002: 450). The indigenous languages, in turn, were also associated with the faulty system, which tried to create artificial ethnic divisions (retribalisation): "It is clear that mother-tongue programmes for blacks were not only consistent with the 'ideology of apartheid, but that they functioned as one of the pillars of apartheid in perpetuating both racial and ethnolinguistic divisions in South Africa society" (Reagan 2002: 423). In this context, it appears that it was difficult to create a genuine sense of ethnic identity referring to the system imposed by apartheid, and the English language (supposedly neutral) appeared as an appropriate tool for expressing protest against the cultural oppression. Consequently, English came to be widely recognised and used as the symbol of the struggle against the regime.

Secondly, the apartheid government limited access to English in its broad scheme of Bantu education (Heugh 2002: 450). The institution of Bantu education was of course one of the most important measures constituting the practise of the apartheid regime. It constituted one of the principal mechanisms that was meant to control the black population. An adapted simplified curriculum and Afrikaans as a compulsory school subject, was to prepare the black students for their inferior position in the South African community. The frustration with the faulty educational system led to the culmination in the Soweto uprising of 1976. Giliomee (2003) provides examples of the placards carried by the black students expressing their attitude to the language in education policy: "Down with Afrikaans," "We are not Boers," "If we must do Afrikaans [Prime Minister] Vorster must do Zulu" (2003: 17). Heugh (2002) argues that as far as the struggle for the access to the English language was justifiable, the exclusive reliance on English as the public language, at the expense of the African languages, did not fulfil its role of bringing equality into South African society and caused that the Africans "collaborated with the larger political and economic interests of the West," (2002: 451).

The English language has remained an important resource even after the end of the white regime, perhaps even more so. Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1998) highlight the fact that the colonial language remains a powerful tool of asserting social power among local elites in a post-colonial setting. Giliomee (2003) admits that there is a common trend in Africa that the elite support the

maintenance of the Western language after liberation from the colonial rule in order to keep their superior position, also in the new political reality. The scholar observes that the pattern was also true for South Africa, with President Thabo Mbeki as the best representative of the almost “distinct ethnic group,” whose members are at present commonly referred to as “Afro-Saxons” (2003: 19). When examining the problem of language planning in South Africa it is necessary to take note of the conflicting attitudes towards English. It needs to be acknowledged that it functions as a valuable token on the linguistic market, therefore, the access to the language should be widely provided. On the other hand, however, there are voices in the language debate suggesting that the equal status of the eleven official languages remains only in the realm of planning and is not being implemented in reality. The actual state of affairs has been expressed by Kamwangamalu (2003) in a simple equation constituting a part of a title of his paper: “when $9 + 2 = 1$ ” (nine representing the African official languages, two representing Afrikaans and English, and one representing English).

5. Highlights of the corrosive influence of the globalisation of English in the South Africa context

The position presenting the uncontrolled expansion of English as a potential threat to African languages, which is advocated by African intellectuals, is by no means simply anti-English. Alexander (2000) argues that access to English should be granted to all who wish for it, as it remains a crucial criterion of advancement in the social hierarchy. The scholar, however, admits that the exclusive use of English in the public sphere may bring in certain unwanted consequences (2000: 15). Therefore, a number of researchers working in the field of language policy and planning in South Africa pose a reasonable claim for the introduction of the “additive bilingualism” in the educational system. At the same time they warn against relying on the misconception that the growing use of English as medium of instruction poses no threat to the balance of the language situation in South Africa. The following sections will discuss two selected aspects of a potential corrosive influence of English on a global scale with special attention to the South African multilingual context.

5.1. Supposed corrosive influence on linguistic and cultural diversity

The question of the excessive spread of English is commonly linked to the question of language death (e.g. Phillipson 1992; Pennycook 1998; Skutnabb-Kangas 2003). English is thus referred to as a “killer language” (Skutnabb-Kangas 2003), a “Trojan horse” and the process of its spread as “linguistic genocide”

(Pennycook 1998). It seems fairly easy to invoke telling statistics to provide backing for such powerful labels. Thus, Skutnabb-Kangas provides specific data concerning the number of languages, its speakers and the predictions concerning language death. It is estimated that over 95% of world languages are used by fewer than one million native speakers and 83-84% of the languages are endemic (2003: 33). In light of such estimations, it is argued that the languages spoken by a vast number of people become killer languages, and at the same time, a threat to minority languages. Further data presents itself as follows: according to the optimistic estimates "half of today's oral languages may have disappeared or at least not be learned by children in a 100 years' time," and according to the pessimistic estimates "90% may be 'dead' or on 'death row'" (2003: 34). In view of the above presented data, the scholar correlates the cultural and linguistic diversity to biodiversity and goes as far as to claim that the relation between the two may prove to be not merely correlational, but also causal: "We suggest that if the long-lasting co-evolution which people have had with their environments from time immemorial is abruptly disrupted, without nature (and people) getting enough time to adjust and adapt, we can expect a catastrophe" (2003: 37). The link between linguistic diversity and the benevolence of biodiversity is by no means obvious, but it should perhaps be read as a statement of a normative commitment that a multiplicity of languages is good in principle.

The examples provided by Heugh (2003) of small communities fighting for their linguistic rights, show further reasons to endorse the statement that there is a strong and genuine need in South African society for linguistic diversity. Language developments in Northern Ndebele, introduction of Khoekhoegowab (Nama) as part of the curriculum of a school near the Namibian border, language and culture maintenance programme for the Schmodtsdrift San Combined School, all indicate the importance of the cultivation of the mother tongue, regardless of how minor the linguistic communities are (2003: 127). Furthermore, Heugh (2000) attempts to debunk the myth that there is a strong and clear trend of African school children and their parents opting for English education only (2000: 15-23). In addition, Webb poses a claim that the expansion of English might prove to be detrimental to the indigenous languages, because of the still low status of the latter. The scholar supports his argument with a research finding that "the use of a non-home language (such as ESL) for learning purposes, can only work if the home language (in our case an African language) is strongly supported in society" (2002: n.pag.). In light of this assumption it is only reasonable to claim that in order to preserve the multilingual character of South Africa (granted by the Constitution, secured by international organizations), serious attempts ought to be made to re-evaluate the indigenous languages. A substantially lower social status of African languages, in comparison to English, constitutes a result of the already mentioned historical processes.

5.2. Supposed corrosive influence on collective cultural identity and individual self-esteem

According to Phillipson the use of English in a postcolonial setting does not merely constitute the substitution of one language by another, but the imposing of new 'mental structures.' Therefore, the appropriation of English and adaptation to new, natural, social and cultural environment is never fully successful. Just as racism, linguistic imperialism appears to Phillipson as a complex phenomenon full of contradictions. "Even if the definitions of linguisticism and of English linguistic imperialism are explicit and unambiguous enough to permit identification of what is linguisticist or linguistic imperialism in a given historically-determined context, this does not mean that English linguistic imperialism and linguisticism are straightforward and invariably functional" (1992: 56). In other words, one should not really expect to be able to produce a black and white, although authors such as Phillipson leave no uncertainty as to their preferred distribution of the shades of grey.

These views, however, have been criticised for their heavy reliance on its dubious and untested empirically "neo-Whorfian position." Ricento (2000) notes that the criticism of Phillipson's models is twofold: firstly, it generally remains empirically untested, or even more so simply not testable at all, and, secondly, it appears to be too deterministic, by virtue of expecting specific cultural developments stemming out of the socio-political causes (2000: 204). The scholar further observes that the propagators of linguistic human rights operating in the 1980s and 1990s might be criticised for "utopianism in their [. . .] 'dream of modernist universalism'" (2000: 206). It is then perhaps fair to say that such utopianism proves a nice idea to develop in the safe contexts of the academia, but not exactly a useful attitude on the ground, where the implementation of linguistic policy has to produce practical results.

Yet, it has to be admitted that a number South African scholars promote the necessity of developing the African languages for educational and academic purposes using some of Phillipson's arguments. Alexander (2006) puts the need of intellectualisation of African languages in the context of "increasing homogenisation and hegemonisation on the one hand, and cultural diversity and multilingualism on the other hand" (2006: n.pag.). It only seems natural that the African language scholars are willing to elevate the African languages to a higher social position. Alexander (2006), however, provides very sound arguments for the purpose of the present debate. He reminds us that language constitutes an important element of the individual and social identity construction, which is why language rights constitute an important part of human rights concerns (2006: n.pag.). The development of African languages is, therefore, no longer a purely linguistic problem, but a sociolinguistic one. Webb argues that the use of first

language as medium of instruction is associated with a successful negotiation of identity, as well as symmetrical classroom relations, which in turn, is linked to developing self-confidence and emotional security. Moreover, the use of the home language at school allows for a less traumatic “cultural and emotional transfer” and a more successful involvement of the parents (2003: n.pag.). Webb also supports the thesis that languages are not neutral and observes that “[t]hey are carriers of a community’s values, norms, patterns of behaviour, convictions, aspirations, and so on, and play an important role in the construction of personal and community identity, a sense of belonging, an emotional security” (2002: n.pag.).

Going beyond the question of identity construction, one can point to cognitive development deficiencies which may result from the fact that students are deprived of instruction in their first language. Skutnabb-Kangas, one of the strongest proponents of mother tongue education, believes that it constitutes one of the most basic human rights. While taking such an explicitly normative position, she emphasises the importance of the first language as the medium of instruction by highlighting its importance in the cognitive development of an individual: “[t]he mother tongue is needed for psychological cognitive, and spiritual survival—cultural rights,” and further adds: “[t]he mother tongue(s) is (are) vital for this. Further education, job prospects, and the ability to participate in the wider society require other languages. Thus high level of multilingualism must be one of the goals of proper education” (Skutnabb-Kangas 1999: 58, in Harvey 2003: 248).

Both of the above lines of argument promote the necessity raising the African languages to the position of medium of instruction at higher levels of the education system. In this context, it is crucial to consider seriously Webb’s line of argumentation according to which one needs to deal with the sociolinguistic aspects of the development of the African languages first before the purely linguistic ones are taken into account (2003). The issue of confronting the problem of negative attitudes towards African languages as medium of instruction seems to be a priority in the context of language planning in South Africa. African languages are believed to be required for a successful development of Africa and for the sake of raising the standards of living of the average citizens. All this has to happen if, as Alexander (2006) notes, “President Mbeki’s African century is ever to become a meaningful notion” (2006: n.pag.).

6. Conclusion

The re-evaluation of indigenous African cultures appears to be quite an important issue in the sphere of public debates, as well as the process of law-making in South Africa. It is reduced, however, in the majority of cases, to the domain of

planning. Why are the laws concerning language rights not being implemented in the realm of education? The first often mentioned reason is economic in nature. It is wrongly assumed that the use of English is the easiest and most efficient solution. The above presented arguments, however, clearly indicate that mother tongue education and preservation of the indigenous languages will in the long run prove to be more beneficial than the sole reliance on English. The second commonly used argument is the assumption that if English is a widely and willingly chosen medium of instruction, then the language can and should dominate in the realm of education. This argument is simplistic in nature, as it does not take into account the complexity of language attitudes, disregarding for instance, the historical context that influenced their formation. Naturally, it would be improper to impose any particular language as medium of instruction, as it is the still fresh memories of the forced process of retribalization that constitute one of the reasons for a negative perception of the mother-tongue education. In a democratic society its citizens need to be allowed for a free decision concerning their rights. Skutnabb-Kangas (2003) writes about "our responsibility" for the future fate of linguistic diversity. The very term "responsibility," however, implies that one is granted the right to take conscious decisions. In the specific context of South Africa, it would be only reasonable to ask for informative programmes devoted to the mother tongue case, including the discussions on the consequences of language shift and language loss, as South Africans deserve the right to be responsible for the future of the indigenous languages that constitute a crucial part of the cultural makeup of the country.

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