

"Developmental Local Government" and the Language Issue in South Africa¹

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ABSTRACT The aim of this article is to establish whether it is possible for local government to act effectively as a development catalyst if citizen participation is not secured through developing functional multilingualism within municipalities. As point of departure I chose the reference made by the South African White Paper on Local Government to "Developmental Local Government" (1998), i.e. the explicit requirement for municipalities to find sustainable ways to meet the social, economic and material needs of their residents and to improve the quality of their lives. The intricate connections between language rights, local government and the issue of securing livelihoods for all citizens of South Africa will be illustrated with reference to the experience gained from the establishment of a Local Government Translation and Interpreting Services (LOGTIS) in the Free State province. With the example of the LOGTIS project I hope to illustrate that workable, practical solutions to problems posed by the dichotomy between multiculturalism and universalism can already be found already at the level of local government.

INTRODUCTION

For any given society critical discourse analyses are bound to uncover linguistic strategies through which power relations and social control are regulated. These phenomena, naturally, become increasingly obvious and concentrated in relation to how a particular society experiences socio-politico-economic change as well as the inevitable power struggles resulting from such changes. So-called developing or industrializing countries or communities are especially open to the abuse of power through linguistic means. The main reason for this is most probably the covert, subtle ways in which language tends to be entrenched within the very fiber of dominant ideologies.

Whether we want to face this fact or not,

language is one of the key arenas for struggle among social groups, especially when the socio-cultural, political and economic security of the members of these groups are contested. Where development initiatives are at stake, ignoring the language issue in an attempt to save time, effort and money may in fact prove to be counterproductive, if not disastrous. In an appraisal of studies conducted in intercultural communication, the Nigerian sociolinguist Ayo Bamgbose (1994: 99) very aptly points to "the need for the re-examination of development strategies that depend crucially for their implementation on a language foreign to the culture of the consumers". In the light of the fact that intercultural communication is characteristic of development projects in multicultural societies, the following warning by Bamgbose (1994: 100) regarding the possibility of cultural domination rings particularly true:

While an appreciation of other people's culture is a *sine-qua-non* for effective intercultural communication, this should be done from the basis of an understanding, acceptance and appreciation of one's own culture. A situation in which such communication is perpetually licensed by the norms of a dominant language is, for the speakers forced all the time to adapt to the dominant language and culture, nothing short of cultural deprivation.

At the post-postmodern (or "PoPoMo") juncture where we are now, facing a new millennium in which globalization seems to be an overwhelming trend, development initiatives may very well stand or fall on the basis of how seriously the issues regarding linguistic and cultural domination are taken by all involved. At the roots of this fact lies the realisation that language, communication and human needs are intimately connected, since individuals and groups are obliged "to communicate with one another to fulfill

human needs - economic, political, social and cultural" (cf. Pattanayak, 1986: v).

LANGUAGE RIGHTS AND OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's first democratic government has spelt out its development initiatives in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as well as the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR). Although inclusive language rights have been newly written into the Constitution (1996), these two prominent instruments that should stimulate development for all, refer only in passing to these rights and not in any practical sense. In fact, a study of the RDP and GEAR as important components of the dominant discourse on development issues in South Africa reveals that no specific reference is made in either of these documents to providing for the practical implementation of multilingualism. Although the RDP does, in passing, refer to language, the document limits the sphere in which language exerts an influence to the so-called "soft sectors (comprising social and cultural aspects of life)" (Bamgbose, 1994: 99). In the RDP, language is thus mentioned within the realm of arts and culture, setting itself the lofty task to "affirm and promote the rich and diverse expression of South African culture (...)" (RDP, 1994: 69).

South Africa is, however, in a favourable position to become a world leader in the field of Linguistic Human Rights within all other sectors of life, as well as on all three tiers of government (i.e. national, provincial and local). What gives us the edge over many others is the constitutional provision in a language clause (Section 6) contained within the Founding Principles of the Constitution (1996) made for 11 official languages and the development of previously disadvantaged languages. Especially relevant to my argument in this article, is the specific reference made to municipalities and language rights in Section 6 (3) (b):

Languages

6. (1) The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati,

Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.

- (2) Recognizing the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.
- (3) (a) The national government and provincial governments may use any particular official languages for the purpose of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balance of needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned; but the national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages.
(b) Municipalities must take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents.
- (4) The national government and provincial governments, by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. Without detracting from the provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.

The developmental field in which I have first-hand experience and which forms the basis of the research results presented in this article, is the establishment of language facilitation services for local governments (municipalities). LOGTIS (Local Government Translation and Interpreting Service), a development project funded by the Flemish Government, is the focus of this article. The data have been gathered through my personal involvement in the establishment of LOGTIS (Goldfields) from 1 November 1997 until 31 January 1999, as well as by means of a language audit that was conducted by Green Zebra Development Initiatives in Welkom (the largest city of the Goldfields area in the Free State Province) during March 1998.

"DEVELOPMENTAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT" AND LANGUAGE

The question I want to raise here is whether it is possible for local government to act effectively

as a development catalyst if citizen participation is not secured through developing functional multilingualism within municipalities.

Section B of the White Paper on Local Government (No. 18739) which was issued in March 1998 deals with the inspiring theme of "Developmental Local Government" (DLG). On p.37 DLG is defined as "local government committed to working with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve the quality of their lives".

Although the association is not spelt out, the following provisos of the White paper may be linked to the language rights of citizens within the sphere of local government:

- "municipal councillors should promote the involvement of citizens and community groups in the design and delivery of municipal programmes" (p.40).
- "Municipalities must adopt inclusive approaches to fostering community participation, including strategies aimed at removing obstacles to, and actively encouraging, the participation of marginalized groups in the local community" (p.40).
- "Municipalities should develop mechanisms to ensure citizen participation in policy initiation and formulation (...)" (p.53) (my emphasis).

Similarly, in at least two of the eight key principles underlying the Batho Pele ("People First") White Paper, issued by the Minister for Public Service and Administration, language rights are implied, even though no explicit references are present:

- Access: all citizens should have equal access to the services to which they are entitled.
- Information: citizens should be given full and accurate information about the public services they are entitled to receive. (Quoted from p.54 of the White Paper on Local Government.)

To me, these two documents are striking examples of the subtle, ingenious ways in which unequal power relations are disguised and entrenched within the very fabric of society. They illustrate the 'conspiracy of silence' - in all 11 official languages - which seems to enshroud the issue of Linguistic Human Rights (LHRs) in

South Africa. As far as I and many others are concerned, it does not, however, make sense to entertain the ideal of Developmental Local Government without simultaneously addressing the language issue.

LANGUAGE WITHIN THE SPHERE OF DEVELOPMENT

At the turn of the century, a post-postmodernist and eclectic perspective on the relation between development and language seems to me the most acceptable perspective. Language and linguistics relate closely to key issues of the postmodern paradigm, such as "discourse" (which is, as defined by Michel Foucault, is a domain of power / knowledge); "text" (Roland Barthes); "context" and/or "deferred meaning and difference" (Derrida's notion of *differance*). In his illuminating contribution to *Reconstruction, Development and People* (Coetzee & Graaff, 1996), Windsor Leroy utilizes these notions in a "reconstruction of development". According to him, the specific contribution of postmodernism is the thesis that development must be understood as text and discourse, thus drawing attention to the complex interrelationships among the participants in development.

While Leroy (1996: 245) focuses on issues other than language, the following statement is clearly related to the language issue: "The knowledge that is generated in development is one that *redefines* those who are involved, in as much as they are defined by it" (emphasis mine). Therefore, if knowledge is generated exclusively in English, as seems to be the popular tendency, the "redefining" is done in a way that *excludes* more than it could ever include, English being the home language of only 8,6 per cent of the total population in the country (*Census in Brief*). The tendency in municipalities towards monolingualism is irreconcilable with the White Paper's insistence on "inclusive approaches to fostering community participation" within local government. Apart from this, language also has a practical, direct bearing on the delivery of services to citizens.

The link between language rights and development is made explicit in the Declaration that

was drafted after the *Intergovernmental Conference of Ministers on Language Policies in Africa*, held in Harare in March 1997. In this noteworthy Declaration a vision for Africa regarding language policy options, strategies for the implementation of such policies, as well as commitments and appeals are postulated very eloquently. It refers, for example, to "the richness of the linguistic diversity in Africa and its potential as a resource for all types of development", and further states that "the optimal use of African languages is a prerequisite for maximizing African creativity and resourcefulness in development activities". This conviction is expressed in the face of the realization that the language policies introduced in African countries since their independence have generally favoured colonial languages, rendering, in effect, millions of mother tongue speakers of indigenous African languages voiceless.

It is possible for local government to become the first line of defence against such "voicelessness" which is equal to the exclusion of ordinary South African citizens from the benefits that the new, democratic dispensation is supposed to provide the previously disenfranchised and disadvantaged.

AD HOC WAYS OF ADDRESSING LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

The implementation of monolingual policies and practices is often seen as the "natural" solution to situations where language differences become problematic. However, many critical sociolinguists regard this assumption of monolingualism as being a "natural" solution, to be ideological. In a critique of modernization theory and the indiscriminate spread of English through English Second Language (ESL) teaching in so-called developing countries, Tollefson (1996: 83) makes the following statement relevant to my argument in this paper:

Although the belief that English is a useful tool to facilitate [so-called] "modernization" is widely accepted, it is incomplete in that it fails to connect the spread of English to inequality and exploitation. That is, the spread of English - and the 'tool' metaphor which justifies it - is ideo-

logical.

Furthermore, the metaphor of English as a tool for modernization is subject to two similar criticisms, the first being that the spread of English supports unequal relationships between "developed" and "developing" societies, and the second that English is in fact associated with the institutionalization of inequality in "developing" countries (cf. Tollefson, 1996: 83-84). The latter tendency is indeed becoming increasingly noticeable in South Africa, in spite of lip service being paid to the ideal of "levelling the playing field". In his book, *Planning language, planning inequality*, Tollefson (1996) argues very convincingly that monolingual language policies forced upon multilingual communities tend to serve the purpose of providing a cheap labour force. This is achieved by making the dominant language a prerequisite for access to higher education and better paid positions without providing the "minority" language speakers, i.e. the "migrants" in some countries, or, in South Africa's case, the "masses", with the means or opportunity to reach the required level of proficiency in the dominant language.

Bamgbose (1994) refers to the recurrent preoccupation in African countries with a "horizontal language" to facilitate communication between different groups, and across national boundaries, with the resultant fallacy that a Language of Wider Communication (LWC) is "neutral" and not associated with any ethnic group. In fact, Bamgbose (1994: 99) argues, "neutrality of language is a myth, since every person who uses a second language must at least have an awareness of the cultural associations of the language". Furthermore, the allocation of language function such that the dominant language is used in most so-called hard sectors (economy, government, higher education, etc.), while the use of indigenous languages is limited to soft sectors (social and cultural aspects), "is bound to leave a lasting effect on the self-esteem that people attach to their language and culture relative to the (dominant) language and its culture" (Bamgbose, 1994: 99).

The use in research of indigenous languages for development purposes tends to be limited to activities such as information gathering from the "grassroots" or the "community". When

discussions reach the level of policy matters or decision making, only those proficient in the dominant language are allowed to participate, *unless* provision is made for language facilitation through interpreting and translation services.

Ad hoc ways of addressing language barriers include the following: Field workers are trained and used to communicate with community members; any bilingual person may be used as an interpreter; or bilingual employees are called upon to interpret, e.g. general assistants ("cleaners") in municipal clinics (primary health care environment).

Hazards and dangers of ad hoc solutions to language problems abound. Interpreting is often needed in crucial, even life-and-death situations such as in health care and mental health care, police services, court cases, negotiations about issues such as amnesty, immigration or social security, etc. If the services of professional interpreters are not obtained in these situations, the linguistic human rights of the clients or patients are at stake.

Professionally translated versions of important documents in bureaucratic processes are also crucial in order to lessen the alienating or "outsider" effect that state and government institutions have on individuals who are not first language speakers of the dominant language.

Properly selected and well-trained interpreters/translators are aware of issues regarding professional conduct, such as competence, confidentiality and neutrality, which can only be guaranteed in the case of trained and accredited language practitioners who are bound by the ethical code of their profession. If professional interpreters are not available, special care should be taken to prepare ad hoc interpreters for their task and also to remunerate them for the essential function they have to fulfil.

THE HIDDEN COST OF ENFORCED MONOLINGUALISM IN MUNICIPALITIES

Of the three tiers of government it is especially in the sphere of local government where the negative impact and hidden cost of enforced monolingualism should be monitored carefully. This is where the government's development

policies are supposed to have an effect on the lives of real people - living, breathing, feeling human beings, and not the 'subjects' or 'populations' of impersonal empirical research reports (cf. Tollefson, 1996: 205). A statement such as the following serves as an example of how the language of social scientific investigation dehumanizes and depersonalizes, blinding investigators to the experiences of the people who are affected by state policies and practices:

Attention to the impact of policies on real people is stated as 'planners must consider the costs involved in any implementation plans'. (Tollefson, 1996: 205)

The "costs involved in any implementation plans" for language facilitation regularly serve as an excuse for not seriously addressing language issues. Obstacles to realizing principles of language rights are issues such as affordability and "reasonable" practicability and are pointed out whenever the need for language facilitation services becomes obvious. It is, however, imperative to view the question of language from the opposite perspective: What is the cost of enforced monolingualism in a multilingual, multicultural, multi-ethnic society?

A language audit performed within the municipality of Welkom by UOFS's Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment (ULFE) has strongly indicated that the hidden cost of enforced monolingualism should not be underestimated. From the report of the audit, some of the hidden cost factors of monolingualism became glaringly obvious. Among others the following were identified:

- Lower levels of productivity and feelings of inadequacy were reported by some of the employees not fluent in English.
- Many residents displayed a negative attitude towards the municipality for not taking the languages used by them and their language preferences into account, as is in fact required by Section 6(3)(b) of the Constitution. Their attitude sometimes resulted in non-payment for municipal services such as water, electricity and sanitation.
- In municipal clinics, breakdowns in communication between service providers (mostly physicians from foreign countries who can only communicate through English) and

patients occur regularly. In such cases the cost in terms of prolonged suffering, ineffective treatment and a loss of human dignity can scarcely be estimated.

- Language barriers in the above instances hampered access to information regarding local government related issues where communication took place in only one of the four main languages used in the area.
- The much needed community participation in matters relating to new policies and development initiatives was, in fact, limited to those who were fluent in the 'élite' language (mostly English). A category of second class citizens is created in this way.
- In the case of disciplinary hearings, officials can manipulate communication if interpreting is done by one of their employees.
- If monthly council meetings are conducted in English only, participation in the debates is limited to those proficient in English, and understanding of proceedings by members of the community is severely hampered.

The crucial question is: How can these and other problems be addressed efficiently and in a cost-effective manner?

A MODEL FOR EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE FACILITATION AT THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

The Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment at the University of the Orange Free State launched the Local Government Translation and Interpreting Service (LOGTIS) project in the Goldfields area (based in Welkom Transitional Local Council) during 1998 in an attempt to find solutions to the problems mentioned under the previous heading. The LOGTIS interpreters/translators, who have been selected and are still being trained by the Unit/ULFE, provide professional simultaneous and consecutive interpreting services, as well as translation services within the Welkom municipality. Council meetings, disciplinary hearings, large gatherings, inter alia, are interpreted and translations into the relevant regional languages are provided for documentation, notices, letters, etc. This leads to empowerment of officials (management, supervisors and workers) as well as residents or

clients of the municipality.

The project was required to sustain itself without foreign donor funding after less than a year, leaving us with an extremely difficult, almost impossible task, due to the financial constraints and severe political tensions within the recently formed transitional local councils (TLCs). Could, or should, local government, at this point in time, be regarded as a potential catalyst for sustainable development?

Establishing the team of interpreters/translators in the municipality of the Greater Welkom when the 10 months funding period ended, was, as I have just mentioned, no easy task. As a result of the severe financial difficulties, crucial posts had then to be left vacant for many months. The introduction of the new job category of language practitioner was frowned upon by many at that stage. With Flemish funds we initially employed six people - two per language combination, i.e. Sesotho-English, Afrikaans-English and isiXhosa-English (English being the link language for relay purposes). In the end only three (one per language combination) could be retained when the municipality had to take over the service, and they are employed on a contractual basis for one year, i.e. without any benefits. Hopefully, by the end of this contract period, on 30 January 2000, Welkom TLC's financial position will have improved and authorities will at last take seriously those studies which prove that such services are indispensable to the effective functioning of municipalities. The three trained, experienced language practitioners who have not been employed by Welkom TLC are being placed in Sasolburg and Kroonstad where phase II of the project will be implemented (if everything turns out as planned).

The preliminary results of an impact study conducted during April 1999 already indicate strongly that recognition and advancement of multilingualism at the level of local government stimulates development. In other words, the effective accommodation of cross-cultural communication in this important area of social, political and economic life enhances development initiatives and increases their chances to succeed. Further proof that this is indeed the case, was produced by numerous experiences of members

of the LOGTIS team in the municipality, by personal accounts of employees and residents, as well as in an evaluation report concerning the project that was submitted to the Flemish Government by the Chief Executive Officer of Welkom municipality.

The project will subsequently be repeated in other regions of the Free State, and functional multilingualism at the local government level will be promoted throughout the province. An added benefit of this project is that capacity building results from the training that LOGTIS translators and interpreters undergo during their first year of employment. Furthermore, job opportunities within the professional field of language practitioners are created for people with multilingual skills. This is obviously aimed at sustainable human resource development in the sense that the need for language empowerment increases, as people become increasingly aware of their linguistic human rights.

The significance of being in a position to use one's mother tongue in the workplace should not be underestimated. Tollefson (1996: 207) refers in strong terms to the alienating effect of monolingual practices in multicultural work environments:

Therefore when individuals are not permitted to use their own languages at work, they are alienated not only from their work and the workplace, but also from themselves. From this perspective, language policies that deny individuals the use of their own languages at work are unnatural, antihuman, and anticultural.

Enforced monolingualism creates a situation in which some tend to be regarded as second class citizens, namely those who are not proficient in the dominant language (usually English). Another consequence is that people are at first selected for positions on linguistic grounds, which might not necessarily coincide with their ability to do a particular job efficiently. Élite forming follows naturally from this, because of the fact that language often serves as a powerful tool for exclusion (Tollefson, 1996: 201). Between policy and practice the issue of LHRs may go terribly wrong in South Africa.

[Please note that this is not a paranoid cru-

sade against the spread of English in this or any other country - the positive, useful effect of having access to a LWC can and should never be underestimated. The crucial point is that an emphasis on the usefulness of a LWC should not be allowed to grow into an ideology of monolingualism through which unequal power-relations are established or maintained.]

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR LANGUAGE FACILITATION IN DEVELOPMENT DRIVES

During our involvement in the LOGTIS project, the LOGTIS team and I have come across several additional examples of development initiatives that can benefit from language services. Each of these development drives is, in one way or the other, directly related to securing the livelihoods of people at grassroots level.

- *Integrated Development Planning (IDP) and Land Development Objectives (LDOs)* need to be discussed by all involved. IDPs are "planning and strategic frameworks to help municipalities fulfil their developmental mandate" (White Paper on Local Government, p.47) which is required by the Local Government Transition Act (Second Amendment Act) "in order to help municipalities to develop a holistic strategy for poverty alleviation" (p.48). Producing LDOs should form part of the IDP of each municipality and these LDOs are supposed to be the result of an extensive, inclusive consultation process between TLCs and their residents. Tenders submitted for funding such workshops should include quotations for language facilitation services. Workshops that have been conducted with interpreting services have proven to be more successful than those where language barriers were ignored. Development consultants of the Free State Province, such as Green Zebra Development Initiatives, who have made use of LOGTIS interpreting services during such workshops, state in evidence that community participation was greatly improved by the language facilitation and that future IDP and LDO workshops conducted by them

would therefore make provision for such a service.

- *Environmental education programmes*: The messages conveyed during workshops on such programmes are often lost because of language barriers so that these efforts suffer when cultural and linguistic problems are not addressed (personal communication by Ms Debbie Yeats of the Parks Board in Welkom). In future LOGTIS will be utilized to promote communication at these vital meetings.
- Calls for *municipal and other tenders* by means of tender notices in local newspapers should be published in the local languages in order to empower local entrepreneurs. If tenders could be submitted in one of the local languages and, if necessary, subsequently translated, these and other business opportunities will be made accessible to more *Small, Micro and Medium Enterprises* (SMMEs) through such language empowerment.
- Surveys for research purposes, e.g. research projects related to land claims, as well as awareness-raising campaigns of all kinds, can benefit greatly from effective language facilitation during cross-cultural encounters.

In a multicultural country such as South Africa the need for professional language facilitation in development initiatives is obvious, however seldom this need might be articulated explicitly by those who initiate and drive them.

CONCLUSION

In an appraisal of language rights in postcolonial Africa, Robertson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1995: 335-345) focus on the widespread tendency in African states to favour dominant (mostly colonial) languages through restrictive language policies. Their investigation culminates in the following disheartened statement:

Sadly, there is little sign of any change in language policy in African countries, while the economic, political and social problems accumulate. The relationship between language policies and such problems has not been explored in any detail, but there is no doubt that present policies serve to educate an elite which

is closely tied to Western interests and to marginalize the majority of the population. (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995: 345)

They do, however, conclude their article, "Language rights in postcolonial Africa", on a more positive note:

Hopefully greater democratization will lead to greater enjoyment of linguistic human rights and to the solution of some of Africa's grave social, economic and political problems. (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995: 345)

The challenge, for South Africa in particular, is to prove that the time has come to make this a reality in our continent where, in the words of Thabo Mbeki (1998: 300), the "journey of self-discovery and the restoration of our self-esteem" is currently culminating in an African renaissance - the rebirth and renewal of Africa.

The aim of this article was to give a practical example of the intricate ways in which livelihoods, local government and language rights are interlinked. I conclude with the following remarks: As far as the notion of "developmental local government" is concerned, establishing language services on this tier of government will most certainly be worth the effort involved in such an endeavour. The results are bound to be in line with the provisos contained in the White Paper on Local Government alluded to earlier, namely to "promote the involvement of citizens"; to "adopt inclusive approaches to fostering community participation"; to remove obstacles to and actively encourage the participation of marginalized groups, etc.

The LOGTIS project illustrates that workable, practical solutions to problems posed by the dichotomy between multiculturalism and universalism can be found already at the level of local government. This project can, on a very modest scale, serve as a model for the functional multilingualism, which should be regarded as one of the pillars of Developmental Local Government.

In an era of mega-communication and globalization, appreciation for the value of individual and group identities is steadily growing. One of the most daunting challenges for the New Millennium is finding flexible solutions to the

painful and potentially dangerous paradoxes arising from the clash between ethnic and other forms of particularism and the universalistic, globalizing tradition of European/Western civilization. To me, it seems obvious that those who are involved in development projects should take note of the danger involved in not meeting this challenge.

NOTES

- 1 An adapted version of a paper presented at a conference of the *Development Society of Southern Africa (DSSA)*, "THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT SCENARIO: Challenges for the New Millennium," at the Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg, South Africa on 7-8 April 1999.

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