

Bilingualism, Language Attitudes, Language Policy and Language Planning: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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Abstract

This paper is a synopsis of sociolinguistic aspects in general with reference to the South African linguistic scenario. During the apartheid years South Africa had two official languages, namely, English and Afrikaans. The forced implementation of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools sounded the death knell for apartheid as black students revolted against this policy. In the new democratic South Africa, nine previously disadvantaged languages have been elevated to the status of official language. In order for the language policy of the present South African government to succeed, it is imperative that proper planning and an awareness of the dynamics of linguistics are carefully considered. It is pivotal that extensive research is undertaken on languages and their different roles in society.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism, in a general sense, means being able to speak two languages. In the South African context, until 1994, bilingualism meant being able to speak English and Afrikaans fluently. This was largely due to the fact that English and Afrikaans were languages which were legislated as official languages at the expense of all other languages in the country, leading to the marginalization of those languages. This was a political decision on the part of the Apartheid government planners. Bilingualism, in the context of second language acquisition means more than the restrictive definition of the former South African context. According to Rene Apple and Pieter Mysken, language contact inevitably leads to bilingualism. Generally two types of bilingualism are distinguished: societal and individual bilingualism. Societal bilingualism occurs when in a given society two or more languages are spoken. In this sense, nearly all societies are bilingual, but they can differ with regard to the degree of the form of bilingualism (1987:1).

Apple and Mysken go on to point out that "any definition of bilingualism has to come up with a central problem in the social sciences: that of scale and aggregation" (1987:3). They go on to

express two definitions of bilingualism. They state that Bloomfield made the highest demands. According to him a bilingual should possess native-like control of two or more languages. At the other extreme, they point out that McNamara (1969), proposed that somebody should be called bilingual if he has some second language skills in one of the four modalities (speaking, listening, writing and reading), in addition to his first language skills (1987:3).

McNamara's definition is widely acceptable as it discards of the problem of "scale and aggregation". Whosoever has a reasonable command of a second language is bilingual. So in the South African context, bilingualism would be defined as having a good level of competency in both English and Afrikaans.

Perhaps it would be appropriate here to digress and explore this issue in detail as black South Africans were, prior to the establishment of the new democratic order, forced by circumstances to be bilingual. The dynamics involved with bilingualism have to do with relationships between individuals and societies. When two people who speak different languages interact one, or both of them will inevitably become bilingual. Our communicative utterances are based on the satisfaction of our needs. The spread of bilingualism is due to human interdependence. Human beings and society in general depend on each other for survival purposes. For example, long before colonialism as expressed in the Western sense, African societies co-existed with each other and most of these people were bilingual for various reasons ranging from domination of one group by another to simple mutual dependence. With the advent of colonialism, colonized African societies have had to adapt their circumstances to suit the dominant colonizer. For instance, the need for jobs in English dominated countries resulted in bilingualism for most native inhabitants of those countries. According to Janet Holmes, when language shifts occur, it almost always shifts towards the language of the dominant powerful group. A dominant group has no incentive to adopt the language of a minority. The dominant language is associated with status, prestige and social success. It is used in the "glamour" contexts in the wider society - for formal speeches and ceremonial occasions, by newsreaders and radio, and by those whom young people admire - pop stars, fashion models and disc jockeys. It is scarcely surprising that many young minority group speakers should see its advantages and abandon their own language (1992:60).

Holmes (1992) presents two forms of language shifts. One shift will be that of indigenous societies abandoning their language altogether in favour of the dominant group's language. A case in point is the Maori in New Zealand and some North American Indian tribes. These societies have adopted the language of the colonizers for the reasons given above. Language shift can be voluntary or involuntary. But the trend is that it begins involuntarily when a language is imposed on the dominated group and then it becomes monolingual. Their own language dies out. In illustrating the Maori case, Holmes points out that the indigenous people were swamped by English, the language of the dominant group. The result of colonial and economic control was not diglossia with varying degrees of bilingualism as found in many African, Asian and South American countries, but the complete eradication of the many indigenous languages. Over time the communities shifted to the colonizer's English, and their own language died out (1992:60).

Another shift will be that of the need to necessarily have command of a language used by the dominant group without eradicating your own. In most cases this is an imposed situation by the dominant group or simply a genuine legislated necessity for that society. Diglossia is a characteristic of speech communities rather than individuals. Individuals may be bilingual. Societies and communities are diglossic. In other words, the term diglossia describes societal or institutionalized bilingualism, where two varieties are required to cover all the community's domains (1992:36).

An interesting case of one form of diglossia was apartheid South Africa. The then government of the country legislated English and Afrikaans as the official languages and tried their level best to delegate African languages to a lower status. Surprisingly, to a large extent, this form of language imposition worked. It is difficult today to find a South African of any skin colour who cannot speak both those languages, with, of course, varying degrees of competence.

Language attitudes

A group in a society usually distinguishes itself by its language and its cultural norms and values are transmitted through language. The identity and pride in a culture of a group is expressed through its language. An example that readily comes to mind here is that of the Zulus of South

Africa. The Zulus are very proud of their culture and language so much that they have developed a negative attitude towards other South African languages. They are so uncompromising in their attitude towards other languages that the need for jobs has not changed their perspective of second language acquisition. In fact, in most cases, an employer would have to learn their language in order to communicate with most of them in the job environment.

Holmes (1992), expresses three levels of attitudes towards a social or ethnic group. The first level is that of attitudes towards a social or ethnic group. The second level is that of attitudes towards the language of that group and the third is, attitude towards individual speakers of that language. This is the formation of attitude developmental levels. People generally do not hold opinions about languages in a vacuum. They develop attitudes towards language which reflect their views about those who speak the language, and the contents and functions with which they are associated. Holmes points out that the underlying assumption is that in a society, social or ethnic groups have certain attitudes towards each other, relating to their differing positions. These attitudes affect attitudes towards cultural institutions or patterns characterizing these groups such as language, and carry over to and are reflected in attitudes towards individual members of the group (1992:16). She goes on to state that it has been suggested that intelligibility is also affected by attitudes, so people find it easier to understand languages and dialects spoken by people they like or admire. A closely related point, at least for majority group members, is that people are more highly motivated and consequently often more successful in acquiring a second language when they feel positive towards those who use it (1992:345).

Therefore attitudes to language reflect attitude to the users and the uses of that language. Attitudes are also strongly influenced by social and political factors. Wherever they are, the English almost always ignore other languages and simply express themselves in English. They assume that "everyone" they come into contact with understands English. Perhaps this attitude stems from historical factors. The English-speaking section South Africans, acquire Afrikaans as a second language for various reasons of necessity. First; because Afrikaans is legislated as an official language and second; for economic reasons. The Afrikaner usually has a negative attitude towards English because of political reasons. The memory of the Anglo-Boer war is still fresh in the Afrikaner's mind. Africans on the other hand, have a negative attitude towards Afrikaans, and

a positive attitude towards English. This is largely because they associated the Afrikaans language with oppression, as it was the language of the dominant, oppressive group. However, most Africans acquire both English and Afrikaans for political and economic reasons despite their resentment of Afrikaans.

On the education front, students of non-western countries generally have to learn a western language as that language opens educational, political and economic doors. In most cases English is such a language. Although English was at first an imposed language, it gradually became an acceptable common "international" language. People in Africa and almost everywhere in the world acquired not only the language itself, but also its tradition. Palazzo (1990:142) reinforces this point by observing that when students acquire a second language, they acquire a second culture, and thus an alternative tradition of thought and expression; a tradition which usually proves very useful.

It is fair to surmise here that by acquiring a second language's values and traditions, one's perspective of life changes to some degree because one acquires the native user's whole logical system. This viewpoint is vehemently opposed by Ngugi vva Thiongo who decries the loss of our "Africanness" through second language usage. He asks: "by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit?" (Ngugi wa Thiongo, cited in Palazzo 1990:143).

Ngugi's concerns are well meaning and desperate cries for the reinstatement of African culture through African languages. But they come too late to have any effect. As the world changed, it has dragged the African along. The African's survival depends on the value system of the western world. Nonconformity with world standards and ways of life unfortunately means doom for the African because the impact and influences of colonialism cannot, much as we might desire, be wished away.

The dynamics of language attitude can also be attributed to two main players, the user and his audience. Trudgill notes that "he will learn these things not so much from what the other man says, as from how he says it, for whenever we speak we cannot avoid giving our listeners clues

about our origins and the sort of people we are. Our accent and our speech generally show what part of the country we come from and what background we have. We may even give some indications of certain of our ideas and attitudes, and all this information can be used by people we are speaking with, to help them formulate an opinion about us" (1974:14).

The user's attitude towards the language he is using depends on whether he identifies with the language or not. So his/her attitude is usually inward- centered. The learner's attitude is formulated when he hears utterances spelled out and how they are spelled out. Spolsky (1971), pointed out that it is important to distinguish between languages as a reason for discrimination. There are cases in which language is used as an excuse, like race, or skin colour or sex for not hiring someone. No amount of language training will change this, for the discrimination exists in the hearer, not the speaker (cited in Tosi 1984:30).

Policy

Language is usually used to define a country and its people. It is through language that a country and its identity can best be defined. Through historical misfortunes, most countries have communities, which speak different languages. It is primarily because of this that a need arises for one or two languages to be identified and given the status of official language. This enables the government to unify a country and give it a single identity. Usually what governments do is to commission a research on languages so that the researchers can come up with a language that is acceptable to most people in the country. Some governments, for political or ideological reasons, simply impose a language of their choice on the populace. This latter course usually provokes defiance on the part of those whom a particular language is imposed upon.

A government usually institutes a policy on language to realise its intentions. Policy may be defined as a course of action adopted by government "which is laid down in legislation, ordinances and regulations, and implemented through control measures such as financing and administration and inspection, with the general implication that such a course for action is advantageous or expedient for the state. Behind the adoption of a policy is the assumption of power and authority necessary to carry it out" (Hartshorne 1987:62).

The above definition should not be construed to define policy only in relation to and association with governments only. Hartshorne's definition is just in the context of his argument about governmental policy in language. The definition does not in any way mean that non-governmental agencies such as churches and other institutions do not formulate policy in respect of a language they intend to promote in accordance with furthering or achieving their goals. In many instances the colonizers brought with them missionaries to teach "the savages". The missionaries realised that one solution was to learn the colonized people's language and preach to them in their language. Translation of the bible, dictionaries and school reading books in the vernacular languages, all had their origins in the works of the missionary societies, as did the drive for their use in the early years of primary school (1987:65).

In the British colonies the missionaries' language policy suited the British because it was in line with their general policy of "divide and rule" in governing those colonies. However, when the British were routed out of Africa they left serious problems in their former colonies. One problem was that when the British, the French and other colonizers created geographical boundaries, they did so with scant regard of the people living in those areas. As a result many tribes with different languages were pulled together in what the colonizers designed as one country.

In South Africa, the language policy of the then ruling Afrikaners was unsuccessful largely because the ruled African majority was denied economic and political power. All aspects of the African's life were rigidly controlled and he did not take part in decisions affecting him. In as far as education was concerned the African was allowed the type of education that enabled him to be a hewer of wood and a drawer of water. So the African was not allowed to develop his full human potential. On the issue of language as in all aspects of life the apartheid government did not, obviously, consult the majority of those for whom the language policy was designed. Government policy on language, as in other aspects of education, will be most effective when it has the acceptance of the user and when the latter is involved and participates in the decisions. If this acceptance is not achieved, a crisis of legitimacy arises in which the authority behind the system and the policy on which it is based are questioned, challenged and ultimately rejected (Hartshorne 1987: 62-63). The riots of 1976 are a good example of this assertion.

The apartheid South African's government policy on language failed drastically because the language it imposed was rejected, as it was associated with oppression in general. The new South African government on the other hand, learnt from the mistakes of the former government and through several processes of consultations legislated a language policy that gave eleven languages official status. This is actually a first in the world, but it was also a first for a government to voluntarily give up power and its attended privileges. The South African language policy is largely a political necessity and the government must tread carefully as it does not want to be seen to be promoting one language at the expense of the others. However, the reality of the matter is that English is widely accepted and used for administrative, educational and general communicative purposes by most South Africans, thereby giving it a *de facto* official language status.

Language planning

Language planning is a direct result of a language policy or the other way around. Once an agency or government has decided on the promotion and implementation of a policy in line with the promotion and consolidation of its political power, it gives the task of planning to a language board of some sort. The composition of such a board is usually skewed in favour of the government who would, in any case have appointed members in the form of political patronage. According to Appel and Mysken (1987), language planning is in fact, part of, or the factual realization of a language policy: a government adopts a certain policy with regard to the language(s) spoken in the nation and will try to carry it out in a form of language planning. Any case of language planning is based on a certain language policy, and this will reflect a more general government policy.

They (Appel and Mysken), give the Spanish example of language policy and language planning. The Spanish dictator, Franco, viewed the Catalan section of the Spanish society with suspicion. He was wary of their secessionist aspirations. The Catalans, like most societal groups, took pride in their language. So Franco imposed Spanish on them through a language policy that was directed at the strengthening of a unitary state. In this case, as it is in most instances, language was used to suppress for purely political and ideological reasons. Language planning can also be

directed at the further development of languages. Official or government language planning takes place via language agencies, academics or government departments. The task of such a department might be to devise orthography for an unwritten language, to revise a spelling system or to coin new words, etc. (1987:47).

Hebrew and Afrikaans languages are cases in point. In Palestine long before Israel could achieve statehood, a Jewish woman called Eliezer Ben Yehuda, was so concerned about the revival of the Jewish language Hebrew that she took it upon herself to ensure the survival of the language. She began by developing her household activities using Hebrew with her family members. To some extent she can be regarded as a language planner. The Afrikaners welded themselves into a single group by devising, developing and consolidating Afrikaans. Through a language different people from different European countries gave themselves a single identity and similar aspirations. The Afrikaners developed and consolidated their language so much that they eventually became a dominant group in South African society. The Afrikaners, when they were in power, legislated a language policy that gave English and Afrikaans official status and African languages were oppressed or promoted only in so far as they served "the divide and rule strategy". This language policy was doomed to failure as it inevitably caused resentment amongst blacks. Ideally, language planners must take account of attitudes when they select a suitable language for the development as official or national language. In most countries, the official status given to unpopular languages caused problems.

In South Africa, more especially in the 1970's, the enforcement of Afrikaans in black schools sounded the death knell for the apartheid system precisely because the planners of the language policy got it all wrong. What they failed to reckon with was that the Afrikaans language was strongly associated with oppression. So, implementation of the language in black schools was the last straw. The black man could force himself to live with the language on the job front but the black child had very little to lose by revolting against the language.

On the other hand, the language of the deposed, former dominant group can be retained by the new government for the purpose of uniting a country. One of the reasons is that since a formerly colonized country has many indigenous languages, it is usually best to retain the language that

was used in administration and education. This also helps in preventing the different languages competing for a superior status. The process of choosing a language is called selection. When a language is selected it is formalized as an official language through policy and the subsequent planning. Mozambique is a case in point. The Mozambicans retained Portuguese as an official language despite the language having been the language of the oppressor. The Tanzanians chose Swahili and developed it into a formidable national language.

Appel and Mysken (1981), list four stages and activities in language planning:

1. Initial fact finding;
2. Actual planning takes place;
3. Implementation, and
4. Evaluation.

They also list factors influencing language planning such as:

1. Social-demographic;
2. Linguistic;
3. Social psychological;
4. Political, and
5. Religious.

When all these have been carefully considered, language planners normally recommend to a government a language policy that enjoys wider support from the majority of society. This happens only if the government in power is credible and legitimate.

In conclusion, a language represents a people's social values. Their identity is strongly linked to the language they speak. The huge diversity of human languages and dialects is part of, or due to the human condition. The evolution of mankind goes parallel to the development of language. As man's environment changes, so does he adapt his language in order to express himself within that environment. That is why language policy and planning of necessity is an institutionalized programme. Correct language policy and planning must take into consideration the attitudes of the people whom a particular language is planned. Language can also be used as a mobilizing tool. In the colonies the language of the colonizer was used to whip up emotions against the

colonizers because it alone could be understood by the different indigenous groups whose indigenous languages were different.

In societies where several languages are spoken it is imperative that a common language be chosen and instituted as an official language to cover the country's domains. Even so, indigenous language cannot be left to fade, as this would mean the eradication of a people's identity. Hartshorne (1987:63) points out that language is a repository and means of articulation of values, beliefs, prejudices, traditions, past achievements and history. It is the distinguishing characteristics of the human being, it is what makes people see themselves as different, and it is related to issues of identity, position and power. In this regard, South Africa is faced with a mammoth task of bringing nine previously disadvantaged languages on par with Afrikaans and English. For this task to succeed much will depend on policy, planning and implementation.

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