Between Coercion and Choice: English(es) and Multilingual Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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‘In a sense, all language rights are rights against English, which in the modern world is such a powerful language that it needs no protection at all.’
— Albie Sachs (quoted in de Klerk 1996, 7)

1. Introduction: Framing Questions

Following the end of the apartheid system in South Africa brought about by the defeat of the Nationalist government in 1994, the possibilities for revising – indeed, wholly re-imagining – the South African national community seemed nearly limitless. An essential component of the project of building a new democratic society without the terrible degradations of structural racism has been the restructuring of the educational system, accompanied by an attempt to reconceptualize the role of linguistic diversity in a newly pluralist context. The role of English in a highly multilingual society in which language and power have formed a complex knot of inequitable access to state and global resources has been and continues to be a central question fifteen years following the downfall of the segregationist regime, and may indeed be the most pressing question in the educational context today.

At base, the difficulty arises from the historic policy of deliberate elite closure that sought, among other racist practices, to deny black South Africans access to the benefits of English through the imposition of mother-tongue education; consequently, the end of apartheid brought with it the assumption on the part of the formerly marginalized that a step in reshaping South African power dynamics would be increased access to adequate English education for the country’s racially and economically dispossessed. This desire for English-medium education is in an important sense diametrically opposed to the stated government intention to foster multilingualism in the education system and the broader society at large, as well as the belief that multiculturalism requires the encouragement of diverse linguistic practices and that to do otherwise would not only be to fail with regards to the ideals of the new democracy but to risk the eventual loss of linguistic diversity.

Underlying this paper, then, is a fundamental question about the ideological work that English performs for post-apartheid South Africans and the extent to which that work differs from or extends the role of English during the apartheid era. In situating economic motivations
for language learning ‘between coercion and choice’, as Sue Wright does (2004: 116), can English (or any globalized lingua franca) ever be chosen freely? Put differently, is the desire for English always motivated by purely pragmatic concerns, such as access to educational or employment resources, or does English hold other connotations for South Africans, especially those formerly victimized by apartheid policies? Alternately, if apartheid linguistic policies were inherently coercive, does it follow that the new era of democracy signifies a greater degree of linguistic choice? What historical factors have influenced contemporary policy choices, and what gaps in the current debates around education may be usefully explored further? The intention of this examination is, therefore, to offer a contextualized summary of the current policy climate and offer a critical perspective on the decisions made and arguments advanced by educators, policymakers, and linguists alike.

2. English in South Africa: A Brief Overview

2.1 History: From Colonization to Post-World War II

Schneider begins his account of English in South Africa by noting that the country’s relationship to that language is notably difficult to classify; for instance, within Kachru’s circle model of postcolonial Englishes, South Africa could reasonably be situated as a member of the ‘Inner Circle’ given the long-term presence of English within its contemporary borders, or alternately as an ‘Outer Circle’ country considering the number of citizens for whom English is a second or foreign language (174). In other words, unsurprisingly, a linguistically complex present is produced by an equally complex past that will necessarily be simplified in the relatively brief account that follows.

The arrival of English is generally dated to 1806, the Cape having been the colonial possession of the Dutch since 1652 (Lanham 1996, 20; Schneider 2007, 175). British sovereignty was declared in 1815, and 1820 saw the first major wave of British immigration (approximately 5000 individuals, as per Lanham) and a policy of Anglicization is evident in the governor’s elevation of English to the position of sole official language in the Cape in 1822. The first distinct variety of local English developed during this period as a result of contact between the pre-existing Dutch settlement and the newly arrived waves of British colonizers and was “a non-mother-tongue variety: Dutch English, which was marked most distinctively by an accent” (Lanham 1996, 20). The primary African language to influence English at this time was Xhosa, which, as is typical of Schneider’s account of the development of postcolonial Englishes (2007, 35-36), primarily made its mark through loan words and phonological variation (Lanham 1996, 20-21).

The second significant influx of English speakers occurred during the colonization of the Natal region between 1848 and 1862. Notably, the second major group of newly arrived mother-tongue speakers was generally of a different regional and economic background than the first, putting the conditions in place for the eventual development of the two significant strands of (white) South African English, or SAfE. The Cape colonizers, whose speech came to be known as Cape English, were largely from northern England and, like most first-wave
settler-colonizers, were of a lower class relative to those who would follow; their speech and accent were the precursors of what would come to be known as ‘extreme’ or ‘broad’ SAfE, maintaining a certain amount of class-based stigmatization (Schneider 2007, 175-176). By contrast, the relatively wealthier Natal colonizers claimed southern British origins and deliberately sought to maintain the self-perceived purity of their speech, that is, a proximity to Standard Southern British English that is reflected in the contemporary association of that accent with the ‘general’ or ‘respectable/cultivated’ variety of SAfE and expressed in a preference for this accent in public speech contexts such as radio programming by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (Lanham 1996, 23-24). The earliest forms of Black South African English (BSAfE) also likely emerged during this time, primarily as a result of heavy missionary activity directed towards the indigenous population; further, the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers in 1860 laid the foundation for the development of South African Indian English (SAfIndE).

English was granted equal status with Dutch as an official language of the new country of South Africa following the 1910 Act of Union that brought together the Dutch-speaking former Boer republics with the English-speaking Cape Colony and Natal (then, as now, the mixed-race or coloured population were primarily members of the Dutch/Afrikaans speech communities, though not necessarily monolingual, especially today; see Dyers 2008 for an interesting discussion of coloured multilingualism in an urban context). Afrikaans replaced Dutch as an official language in 1925, and the next significant shift in the status of English occurred in 1948 with the implementation of apartheid governance, which, along with the more explicitly racist goals of ‘separate development’, aimed to increase both the usage and prestige of Afrikaans.

2.2 English under Apartheid

The effects on English were nearly immediate; as Lanham recounts, in 1953 ‘the Public Service commission reported a grave decline in standards of English revealed in Public Service entrance examinations – with standards in Afrikaans remaining unchanged’ (1996, 25). Moreover, a census conducted in 1960 ‘revealed that [for the first time] more Afrikaans than English South Africans had no ability to use the other official language’ (quoted in Lanham 1996, 26). 1953 also saw the implementation of the Bantu Education Act, which extended the policy of ethnic and racial segregation to all levels of the South African education system. Crucially, Bantu Education meant the imposition of students’ African mother tongue as the medium of education in place of English until they reached secondary school, at which time both English and Afrikaans would be used. Segregation was enforced not only at the level of the classroom but at the bureaucratic level as well, leading to a system Murray and van der Mescht characterize as ‘highly fragmented’, encompassing nineteen separate departments: ‘white education was controlled by four different provincial departments; there were separate departments for blacks, Indians, and coloureds; in addition each ‘homeland’ government was responsible for its own department of education’ (Murray and van der Mescht 1996, 251-252).

Elite closure with regards to English was a clear policy objective, and this was amply clear to those subjected to the far-reaching racism of the apartheid system. Not only did Bantu Education deny black students access to English-medium education, but ‘[nationalist]
government policy, rigorously applied, effectively removed authentic models of English from rapidly growing numbers of children in Bantu Education schools [and] confined the black child’s encounter with English to the classroom, which offered only non-native models’ (Lanham 1996, 27). The English education that was available was in no way designed with the provision of a meaningful communicative and educational experience for black students in mind, and ‘it soon became clear that English language lessons were being conducted almost entirely in the mother tongue and unrelieved rote learning was the main strategy’ (1996, 27). The famed Soweto uprising of 1976 came about in no small part in reaction to these linguistic impositions, as the government attempted to expand mandated African-language education during the first two to six years of primary school to the full eight years, after which students would be faced with a 50-50 split between Afrikaans- and English-medium studies during the secondary years; following the drawn-out confrontation between students and the apartheid government, 1979 saw a degree of backpedaling as mother-tongue education was limited to four years, after which time Afrikaans or English could be chosen as the medium of instruction, with English the strongly preferred choice for students and parents alike (Lanham 1996, 28, Murray and van der Mescht 1996, 252-253).

Following Soweto, which demonstrated the limits of governmental power in spite of an equal demonstration of willingness on the part of the state to respond to resistance with violence, increasing numbers of black students entered private English-medium schools, albeit only those students whose parents could afford substantial fees (Lanham 1996, 28). The Catholic schools were the first to desegregate officially in 1976, and it was another 14 years before the Nationalist government began to permit for white public schools to become multi-racial on a voluntary basis (Murray and van der Mescht 1996, 253). However, schools were allowed to implement their own selection criteria with regards to which students were admitted, which generally meant a preference for those with a higher pre-existing proficiency in English. Then, as now, the vast majority of English-medium schools offered instruction in English as a first rather than second or foreign language, a fact that has not seen significant alteration following the end of apartheid and, concomitantly, the end of Bantu Education in 1994.

2.3 Varieties of English

Another degree of classificatory ambiguity exists with regards to the multiple varieties of English spoken in the South African context, as is typical of the development of so-called ‘new Englishes’ or postcolonial Englishes. Though Schneider opines that ‘the overarching political conditions like statehood and language policy, with their ramifications for educational settings and norm definitions, tie them all together under the cover term of South African English’ (2007, 174), the purposes of this discussion would seem to require a more complex approach to linguistic divergence. While the contours of the different forms are not fully distinguished and scholars are not yet decided on which modes constitute new varieties of English and which are best considered locally or regionally specific dialects, to treat SAfE as a single form of English with divergent forms essentially ‘de-racializes’ the South African linguistic ecology and therefore overlooks a salient feature of the linguistic landscape and its attendant politics. At the
same time, to suggest that varieties of English are simply and consistently divided along racial lines in South Africa would be reductive; nevertheless, an amount of consensus on the importance of recognizing a distinctly Black South African English appears to exist (see Gough 1996, 59-70 for an overview of its distinctive features), as well as a South African Indian English (see Mesthrie 1992 for the same).

The benefit of distinguishing between varieties of SAfE is particularly evident when considering their origins and divergent paths of development. First and foremost, BSAfE and SAfIndE reflect fundamentally different roles for English in their respective communities of speakers. While the majority of black South Africans speak a language other than English as their first language, the South African Indian population largely speaks English as a first language (*Census in Brief* 2003, 18), which was reflected in apartheid-era education policies enabling English-medium education for the latter but not the former and remains a relevant distinction today when considering the development of the respective Englishes and their relationship to ‘standard’ SAfE. Indeed, Mesthrie further distinguishes between SAfIndE and a sub-variety, Natal Indian English or NIndE, following developments in his own research that indicated the features previously identified as defining SAfIndE were in fact reflective of the specific linguistic ecology of the KwaZulu-Natal region rather than automatically generalizable to the Transvaal or Cape speakers of SAfIndE (see Mesthrie 1996, 79 and 88-95 for specific features of SAfIndE generally, as well as Mesthrie 1992).

In the case of both BSAfE and SAfIndE broadly speaking, the communities out of which these ‘new Englishes’ developed were far from homogenous, without a single dominant substrate language. For SAfIndE, Mesthrie cites Bhojpuri, varieties of Hindi-Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Gujarati, Marathi, and Sindhi as languages brought by indentured Indian labourers from 1860-1911, following the abolition of slavery (1996, 80). In the case of BSAfE, any number of the African languages present in South Africa (outlined further below) have played various roles in its development; Gough characterizes research on BSAfE as ‘in its infancy’ (1996, 53). Also significant is the increasingly evident distinction in the post-apartheid era between vernacular BSAfE and the more prestige-laden ‘educated’ BSAfE that is an important identity marker of the growing black middle class (Wright 1996, 158). Other relevant forms of postcolonial Englishes in the South African context include regional varieties of SAfE, such as Cape Flats English (see Malan 1996, 125-145) and Englishes evolving out of encounters between specific African language communities and English, such as Zulu English or Xhosa English (see de Klerk 2006 for a book-length study of the latter) which differ fundamentally from BSAfE (as a broad contact-based hybrid influenced by, among other factors, rural-urban migration necessitating linguistic exchange amongst diverse groups of African-language speakers) by their clear emergence in particular linguistic contact situations, that is, the obvious influence of a single dominant substrate.

### 2.4 Demographics

Following the end of apartheid and the election of the first multi-racial democratic government, a new constitution granted official language rights to nine African languages along with English and Afrikaans. All nine belong to the Bantu language family, and can be further subdivided
into the Nguni cluster, made up of Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, and Ndebele, and the Sotho cluster, comprising Pedi (or Northern Sotho), Sotho (also called Sesotho or Southern Sotho) and Tswana; Tsonga/Shangaan and Venda are both Bantu languages but are not counted among the Nguni or Sotho clusters (Webb 2002, 68). Like the rest of the southern African sub-continent, the Khoe and San languages were the means of communication for the earliest inhabitants of the region and continue to be spoken in other countries, namely Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Tanzania, but are virtually extinct in South Africa itself (Webb 2002, 71).

The most recent comprehensive survey of language distribution in South Africa dates from the 2001 census and indicates that Zulu is the self-declared first language of a majority of South Africa’s population of nearly 50 million with over 9 million speakers, or 23.8% of the population. Xhosa is the African language with the second-highest proportion of speakers with approximately 7 million; by contrast, only 8.2% of the population – just over 3 million – identifies English as their first language, with Afrikaans at about 5.5 million or 13.3% (all figures from Census in Brief 2003, 14-19). Beyond these basic figures, Webb, citing the Language Plan Task Group (LANGTAG) Report, emphasizes that

about 70 more languages are used in the country. These include five Khoe and San languages [albeit in small numbers], three [additional] Bantu languages (Northern Ndebele, which is not included under ‘Ndebele’ in the constitution, Phuthi and Lobedu), 38 Bantu languages spoken by immigrants, migrant labourers and refugees from neighbouring countries, five Indian languages, four Chinese languages, two Eurasian languages, 14 European languages, five religious languages, Sign languages, and a variety of Augmentative and Alternative Communication Systems (AAC systems). (Webb 2002, 67)

Clearly, then, the linguistic landscape is both diverse and complex; as Webb further argues, the very idea of a mother-tongue or first/home language is far from clear-cut in a country where a multilingual environment is the rule rather than the exception (2002, 67); though I will continue to use such terminology for simplicity’s sake, it is done with an acknowledgement of the fundamental insufficiency of such distinctions. In urban environments especially, some measure of multilingualism will be present in the day-to-day life of most residents, for whom different domains such as ‘work, family, school and other educational institutions, circle of friends and wider communication [along with places of worship and casual social encounters such as when shopping]’ may offer or require various modes of communication for different purposes (Dyers 2008, 113). Further, given that English has long been the language of government and bureaucracy, never fully supplanted even during the Afrikaans-focused apartheid era, it is also necessary to take into account that most South Africans will have had some encounter with the language and therefore possess knowledge in different measures. Webb reports that an estimated 14.1 million South Africans in addition to the over 3 million first-
language speakers claim familiarity with English, though without specification with regard to degree or kind of knowledge (2002, 78).

3. Contextualizing English in Contemporary South Africa

3.1 Rethinking Demographic Data

What is invisible to basic statistical data, then, is the omnipresence of English regardless of home language orientation; as well, the 8.2% figure, though presumably referring to a self-identified population of English speakers, does not distinguish between forms of English. The gap between data and actual sociolinguistic practice is strikingly evident in survey results (from a primary school in the east end of Johannesburg) discussed by Dixon and Peake, where 302 out of 376 parental respondents identified English as a language of communication in the home (Dixon and Peake 2008, 82). Clearly, the results of such a small sample are not necessarily generalizable on a broad scale, but they do point to a major gap in how home language use is conceptualized in a context where a certain measure of bi- or multilingualism is necessary for basic interaction with the state (English or Afrikaans having been historically the languages of government during apartheid, a role that has not diminished for English in the democratic era).

A similar silence is evident in policy treatments of English, which are almost totally silent on the diversity of spoken and written Englishes in South Africa. The clear assumption underpinning this silence is that the desired English will be the ‘standard’ form, that is, ‘respectable’ or ‘cultivated’ SAfE. Given the breadth of the post-apartheid constitution in terms of languages granted national or officially recognized status, an expansion of the official role of diverse South African Englishes would clearly pose a number of practical difficulties; however, the fact that this question does not seem to have been even considered from a policy standpoint or indeed by Dixon and Peake in reporting their survey findings is illustrative.

3.2 Apartheid Education Legacies

Kamwangamalu describes the motivations behind the Bantu Education Act as follows: ‘(a) the dire determination by the apartheid regime to reduce the influence of English in black schools; (b) the imposition in these schools of the use of both Afrikaans and English on an equal basis as media of instruction; and (c) the extension of mother-tongue education from grade 4 to grade 8 purposely to promote the philosophy of Christian Nationalism’ (to which I would add, at the risk of stating the obvious, the intention of ensuring the reproduction of a population of unskilled labourers ill-equipped to challenge white hegemony in economic or discursive terms). As we know, this was accompanied by the imposition of mother tongue education, which leaves the South African linguistic ecology with a markedly different inheritance than contexts in which English was imposed at the expense of indigenous languages. The South African legacy is one in which elite closure has been, historically, an explicit policy objective, and as Dixon and Peake note with more than a little despair, the post-apartheid period has seen a demand for English from black parents that cannot be ignored: ‘Parents actively choose English
as the medium of instruction for their children in the belief that the earlier children learn the language, the more proficient they will be’ (2008, 78). The various literature on education policy deals with parental desire for English in more or less condescending terms, a point to which I will return later; in the meantime, suffice it to say that there appears to be a significant gap between parental expectations and policy objectives. In essence, having moved from a period during which mother-tongue education was imposed with the intent of subjugation to a democratic state in which the encouragement of multilingualism and multiculturalism is an explicit objective and indeed almost a fetish, parents are being asked to interpret what was once a gesture of oppression – the use of African languages in primary education rather than English – as, now, a form of empowerment.

3.3 Why English? Instrumental versus Integrative Motivations for Language Learning

In terms of how to conceive of the drive behind English-vectored language shift, Laurence Wright discusses the distinction between instrumental and integrative approaches to language choice. The desire to learn or to have one’s children learn English, he suggests, has been generally framed as instrumental, ‘whereas loyalty to the local language has been viewed principally as associative or integrative’ (Wright 2004, 176). In this formulation, the home language or mother tongue is viewed as the repository of culture, family, and affective connection, while knowledge of English serves an economic or material function but is not the primary linguistic identity carrier. However, as Wright goes on to observe, ‘in the case of English in South Africa this continuum straddles the rural-urban divide, with instrumental motivation dominating in deep-rural areas where there is a strongly embedded home language and little exposure to English; while associative attachment to English becomes more prominent in middle-class urban areas where linguistic complexity and the dominance of English in the formal sector undermine the socioeconomic value of a single home African language’ (2004, 177).

However, as Wright goes on to note, the idea that English is chosen for strictly instrumental purposes is oversimplified: the mere fact that English is perceived as the gateway to upward mobility means that is clearly associated with a particular socioeconomic position, that is, an identity, in this case of the newly risen urban black middle class that Alexander suggests is the only group to have unequivocally benefited from the post-apartheid transition to democracy (Wright 2004, 119). Put differently, the fact that economic considerations motivate parents to send their children to English schools is not a neutral or purely pragmatic choice but rather an attempt to access the ways in which possession of English signifies a particular subject position in terms that go beyond the economic (Wright 2004, 178). Further, even if it were possible to consider the acquisition of English as a value-neutral activity in no way altering the terms of the speaker’s subjectivity, any language will necessarily come to represent the aspects of a person’s life that incorporate that language and, therefore, become part and parcel of that individual’s identity. The desire for English on the part of parents would not be nearly as strong if not for precisely the ways in which English is understood to represent a particular position in the New
South Africa and the globalized social, economic and political networks to which English grants access.

Wright’s crucial troubling of any simple distinction between instrumental language acquisition and language’s integrative functions gestures towards precisely that locus of sociolinguistic meaning that critics seem least prepared to address. Though Kamwangamalu is certainly correct to suggest that a key measure in combating the stigmatization of African languages that is one of apartheid’s most pernicious legacies is to increase their cultural capital (in Bourdieu’s terms, as cited by Alexander 2004, 116), any effort to do so must take into account the ways in English connotes a different set of values from the indigenous languages, in both actual and discursive terms. While it is a well-known linguistic truism that any language can be expanded (whether naturally, over a period of time, or deliberately, through corpus planning) to encompass any functions required of it, it is nevertheless equally true that the current global financial and technological market is oriented towards English to no small degree, bolstering the discursive associations of English with modernity, global community, and economic progress. The case would be far simpler if it were merely a matter of convincing parents that English does not offer advantages unobtainable through other linguistic means, but such an argument is misguided at best and outright disingenuous at worst (particularly given the unquestioned dominance of English in South Africa’s tertiary education system, further discussed below).

3.4 Engaging with Parental Preference

In this vein, it is quite striking, especially to the reader situated outside these debates in geographical and scholarly terms (that is, as a non-South African and indeed a non-linguist) the extent to which commentators on the parental desire for English fail to engage meaningfully with how to address that preference non-coercively and without relying on a form of false consciousness argument that views parents as lacking the ‘proper’ perspective on the benefits of retaining African languages as medium of instruction (Webb grants this question only a brief paragraph [2004, 156]). Though most scholars at least gesture towards the necessity of taking parental views into account in the name of democratic decision-making (Wright 2004, 187-188, for instance), there is a general evasion of how to address the fact that English hegemony is not merely a question of perception but of reality as well and that, consequently, parents may make choices that do not accord with theoretical linguistic ideals. Certainly, this is not to suggest that the position of English is either inevitable or unassailable and requires immediate wholesale capitulation and abandonment of linguistic diversity, but rather that to approach the question with the assumption that parents need the ‘correct’ information – rather than approaching the issue as a question of competing value claims – is not particularly useful from a rhetorical standpoint; purely on the level of human nature, the majority of people do not particularly enjoy being told that their priorities are a misguided reflection of their own ignorance of the ‘true’ meaning of their mother tongue, for instance. The argument may be advanced in more sophisticated terms, such as Alexander’s deployment of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s famous discussion of ‘the colonized mind’ (2004, 121) as a deliberate process of inculcating self-hatred amongst the colonized culture – certainly a valid and accepted critical and psychological insight
into the effects of colonialism – but the ease with which this perception of the choices of actual individuals becomes condescending and in fact undemocratic is worth keeping in mind.

Again, it should be clear, this is not to deny the very real process of stigmatizing and undervaluing indigenous languages endemic to any colonial encounter, or to suggest that conceptualizing of colonialism in mental or psychological terms should be avoided. Instead, we might reframe this discussion to acknowledge the ease with which discursive practices that intend to oppose the psychological effects of colonialism may unwittingly reproduce its dynamics through an unthinking reification of prior hierarchies, only with the new postcolonial elite replacing the former colonizing outsiders. To the listening parent who is once again faced with a self-declared expert on his or her own best interests, whether this all-knowing policy-maker is a member of the ancien or nouveau regime may be of little relevance.

It does not seem unreasonable, therefore, to suggest that we should be wary of any position predicated upon ‘re-educating’ individuals with regards to their own best interests, without going so far as to discard the well-known benefits of mother-tongue education for individuals on the one hand and the importance of preserving diverse cultural and linguistic heritages on the other. Moreover, if we are to answer ‘yes’ to a question posed at the start of this discussion, namely, if the end of apartheid’s educational and linguistic coercion suggests that the new democracy’s policies will be inherently non-coercive, a model based on true and honest engagement with parents’ interests and concerns beyond the top-down assertions made by policy experts is essential. Neither does this mean acceding without question to the desire for English education; the point is rather that the way in which the collision of (perceived and real) economic self-interest and the broader goals of building a multicultural, multilingual democracy is discussed is itself an ideological and political question. The recourse to condescension and coercion (albeit in a ‘softer’ form) is, I would argue, reflective of the apartheid legacy itself, and certainly runs the risk of perpetuating its dynamics if the complex matrix of factors influencing English as a choice is not given adequate consideration and, on the individual level, respect.

4. Primary and Secondary Education

4.1 Current Policy on Paper and in Practice

The current education policy for primary school students, as it stand, dictates instruction in the home language or mother tongue until grade three, at which point a second language (English or Afrikaans) will be introduced. However, as Howie, Venter, and van Staden note,

In the majority of schools, the language of instruction changes, and in grade 4, more than 80% of South African pupils learn in a second language, English or Afrikaans, whilst they also continue to receive reading instruction in the language of instruction of the first 3 years of schooling. [Effectively,] most White, Indian, and colored children continue to receive their schooling in the same language of instruction from Grades 1 to 12, namely English or Afrikaans. However, most children speaking African languages
at home switch at Grade 4 to receive instruction in either English or Afrikaans, despite the current government language policy advocating learning to take place in their home language from Grades 1 to 12. (2008, 551-552)

The perpetuation of apartheid-era inequalities has to no small extent shifted from a deliberate policy objective to an unintended but undeniable outcome of the status quo; in other words, we might say that in terms of primary education, the structural disadvantaging of black students for whom an African language is their mother tongue has moved from a de jure position to a de facto one that is no less urgently in need of attention. Further, ‘black learners’ English-language proficiency in South Africa is often not adequate for using it as a language of learning’ (Webb 2004, 147). In spite of the well-known benefits of early education in a child’s home language in cognitive and sociocultural terms, these benefits may be easily neutralized by inadequate mother-tongue education in the first instance and an abrupt and total shift to another language as a medium of instruction in the second case.

4.2 Literacy: PIRLS and Beyond

In terms of tangible effects of this (racialized) distinction between languages of education, South Africa’s participation in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study for the first time in 2006 placed South Africa ‘significantly below the international mean score and that of all other countries [45 in total] in the study’ (Howie et al. 2008, 555). Literacy – how to define it, how to measure it, how to promote it – is a longstanding issue in South Africa: as Prinsloo and Breier observe, ‘[w]hereas [literacy] was an issue within oppositional political discourse before 1990, it is now an issue within a state-sponsored discourse of social development’ (1996, 12). The PIRLS results are of concern particularly because, as the authors note, the South African student sample had already been adjusted in consideration of low literacy levels (both grade 4 and 5 students were tested as opposed to only grade 4 students, as would have been the case in the other countries surveyed). Literacy was not tested only in English, but rather in the official language that had been the student’s language of instruction for the first three years of his or her education, which, according to the national education policy described earlier, would presumably have been his or her home language in the first place. Indeed, given the typical age of grade 4 and 5 students, the survey sample was presumably comprised of children born at the same time as South Africa’s democratic transition and who therefore began their schooling after the dismantling of the Bantu Education system and the implementation of policy reform (Heugh 2007, 197). Also notable is the relative scores of students tested in English versus those tested in African languages (grouped together), and again between English-tested students who spoke English at home versus second- or third-language speakers. Students whose home language was English and who were tested in English were the most successful by a significant margin, which no doubt did not go unnoticed by parents already eager for English education for their children.

Evidently, the spectre of apartheid – in the sense of separate but unequal – is not easily banished in spite of the ease with which mother-tongue education may be romanticized as a culturally effective pedagogical strategy (which, it is worth repeating, is not to say that there are
no benefits to mother-tongue education, simply that it is easy to overstate the case or to present
the debate as a question of home language in opposition to English). There are significant issues
to confront, not least of which is the lack of sufficiently fluent teachers to instruct pupils in the
African languages, the need for teaching materials and resources for educators (while African-
language textbooks were produced under the apartheid system, they were by no means
ideologically neutral and generally presented and participated in the replication of racist
imagery and systematic inequality; Clark and Worger, quoting Mphahlele, offer an Afrikaans
grammar-lesson example which translates as ‘the Kaffir has stolen a knife; that is a lazy Kaffir’
[2004, 52]), and of course the dramatic difference between historical funding formulas for black
and non-black schools that has lead to massive influxes of non-English speakers into schools in
which English is taught as a first language rather than a second or third (schools that, given
their apartheid-era designation as white or Indian, were the recipients of significantly more
reasonable funding). Given the dearth of primary schools offering instruction in English as a
second or foreign language, as well as the benefits for learners of spending at least the first three
years of their education learning in their primary home language, it is clearly not sustainable to
propose that the solution to this reproduction of differential access to education be solved
through implementing English-medium instruction for African-language speakers earlier than
the fourth grade.

4.3 Rethinking Pedagogical Practice: Code-Switching as Reflective of
Quotidian Multilingualism

A relatively unexplored pedagogical strategy in the (formal) South African pedagogical context
is the sanctioned usage and perhaps even deliberate encouragement of code-switching in the
English-medium classroom as a means of encouraging not only the valuation of students’
African home language(s) but a deeper comprehension and more critically-minded approach to
the process of acquiring knowledge. Moodley (2007) observes that while some policy
documents recognize the value of code-switching as an educational strategy (unfortunately, he
neglects to specify exactly which documents, but appears to be referring to a 1994 document
outlining ANC policy commitments by the soon-to-be democratic government [2007, 707]),
there has been no deliberate attempt to incorporate code-switching into the always-already
multilingual South African classroom. Code-switching, in simple terms, refers to ‘the alternate
use of two (or more) linguistic varieties (languages, dialects, registers of the same language) at
the intersentential level, i.e. at the word, phrase or clause, or sentence level within the same
speech event and across sentence boundaries’ (Moodley 2007, 709). Given the multilingual
nature of even the most average South African classroom, as well as the tendency to select
schools offering instruction in English as a first language exhibited by learners for whom
English is actually a second or third language, the potential accommodation of this polyglot
reality offered by code-switching is clearly promising.

Code-switching, according to Gough, is already an integral component of black South
African communication patterns: though the standard (that is, cultivated or respectable SAfE)
has traditionally dominated most media, including black-oriented productions, Gough finds
evidence that ‘[c]ode-switching and the use of black urban slang’ are present ‘in articles and
features relating to township life [employed] as a marker of the black urban identity’ and also observes that the accepted range of accents and pronunciation for television announcers has expanded in recent years, not only in the context of the historically black-oriented television channel, CCV, but white-focused networks as well (Gough 1996, 55-56). In other words, given that ‘English is only part of the total linguistic repertoire of black South Africans’, who may come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds themselves as a result the variety of African languages and communal groupings found in the country, code-switching is clearly a long-standing and accepted practice in the modulation of speech. In the educational context, since teachers ‘are overwhelmingly non-native speakers [of English] and products of Bantu education themselves, [...] the classroom input the children receive thus bears the hallmarks of black English’, and further, ‘[e]ven though English is de jure the medium of instruction, de facto there is extensive use of the vernacular with English. Typically pupils have little exposure to mother-tongue speakers of English, or varieties of English other than black English’ (Gough 1996, 54).

Gough and Moodley thus appear to agree on the presence of informal code-switching in the primary and secondary classroom, especially when the latter offers instruction in English as a first language (as is often the case); Moodley’s argument for the importance of code-switching is predicated on this prior habituation to the practice as well as the potential for a more deliberate, strategic use of differing linguistic registers, dialects, or indeed languages. In other words, if code-switching is already an unacknowledged norm (albeit, according to the author, one that is at best tolerated and at worst stigmatized [2007, 710]), it seems logical that explicit recognition of its role and further investigation of its pedagogical potential is warranted. Moodley’s preliminary research reveals that code-switching is already to some degree a reflexive practice rather than a random one and goes on to identify the most frequent motivations for students’ use of code-switching: ‘seeking clarification and providing explanations; elaboration; reiteration; group management and influencing peer behaviour; expressing learner answers and points of view; and claiming the floor’, underlining the author’s assertion that ‘no matter how spontaneous CS might appear to be, there exists the underlying characteristic of consciousness’ (2007, 713). In Moodley’s account, code-switching is a key mechanism for ensuring learner comprehension and the ability of all students to participate fully in the communicative and educational activities of the classroom, which alone warrants further exploration of its possible benefits for students. Code-switching also offers teachers who may be of a different linguistic background than their students a means of positive engagement, since ‘by resorting to some words in the learners’ NL [native language] for purposes such as jesting, teasing and chiding, [the teacher] is informing learners that their NL is of value in the classroom and not an inferior language when pitted against English’ (Moodley 2007, 719), a step that may go some ways towards the necessary process of destigmatizing African languages and vernacular (that is, non-academic or formal) speech such as BSAfE.
5. Postsecondary Education

5.1 The Monolingual University as Apartheid Construction

The university system in South Africa, divided as it was during apartheid between English-medium schools and Afrikaans-medium schools, has consequently not faced a wholly uniform set of challenges. The task for schools like the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where English has been the language of instruction since its inception, is to fulfill the official policy of additive bimodal or multilingualism through cultivating and expanding the role of African languages (or, more often, one regional African language; in the case of the UKZN, that language is isiZulu [see Balfour 2007]). The historically Afrikaans-only universities have a significantly more difficult task as they are faced with developing not only the presence of indigenous languages but English as well, in order to survive a post-apartheid linguistic sphere in which Afrikaans faces a crisis of social significance and indeed perhaps survival. Interestingly, du Plessis notes that in South Africa the very fact of a monolingually Afrikaans university is an apartheid-era construction (2006, 88). The first universities employed English as the language of instruction but added Dutch to the curriculum relatively early (the first university was established in 1873 and official bilingualism was mandated with the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910; Dutch was, we recall, replaced by Afrikaans as an official language in 1925). Monolingual Afrikaans universities evolved, as du Plessis puts it, by way of bilingualism: English universities that offered Afrikaans as a medium of instruction found, in some cases, that a high enough proportion of Afrikaans-speaking students made it possible (and following the establishment of apartheid, desirable) to eliminate instruction in English (du Plessis 2006, 97), with the inverse process occurring in schools that became primarily English-medium institutes.

Now, of course, monolingual Afrikaans universities are decidedly out of favour, and indeed cautioned against by official policy statements. Not only has Afrikaans faced a serious reconsideration of its status in the South African linguistic ecology post-democratic transition due to its historical role as a carrier of white Christian Afrikaner nationalist identity (as de Klerk discusses in Ridge et al. 2001, 105-108), but its imposition upon the marginalized non-white populations through its importance as a language of government and, crucially, education has meant that it has been staunchly resisted in the latter realm. The famed Soweto protests in 1976 exemplify this dynamic, as secondary students rebelled against the imposition of Afrikaans on equal footing with English, rightfully interpreting that decision within the broader apartheid-era principle of withholding access to meaningful English-language education from black and coloured students in favour of low quality mother-tongue education or the ideologically loaded enforcement of Afrikaans. Today, the University of Stellenbosch is more or less the lone post-secondary holdout in revising its language-in-education policies in the post-apartheid transition period, as it continues to offer the majority of instruction in Afrikaans and explicitly protects the centrality of that language in its policy statements (du Plessis 2006, 104-105; the university does accommodate English-medium instruction at the graduate level). Unsurprisingly, this move has been heavily debated and often condemned by both proponents of English as a medium of instruction and those committed to a revision of the national racial and linguistic structures of
power more generally as deliberately regressive and implicitly anti-democratic in the essential non-racial sense of the term in contemporary South Africa.

5.2 Afrikaans in the New South Africa

Concomitantly, Stellenbosch, already a source of pride for the Afrikaner community, has come to occupy an even greater symbolic and material role for that group, as a repository of linguistic and cultural history and present-day constant in an otherwise rapidly changing political and linguistic landscape. The spectre of the monolingually Afrikaans university is clearly a heavily loaded figure, overdetermined with meaning by those on either side of the language debate; for the purposes of this discussion, the two most relevant factors are, first, the question of what position Afrikaans will occupy in the multiracial future. Regardless of the role Afrikaans has played in the violent subjugation of South Africa’s black populations, it is patently undemocratic (and frankly impractical) to suggest the language and, necessarily, its speakers (who, it must be emphasized, generally number coloured South Africans among them) be wholly denied access to educational and social space for their language, and only the most extreme would advance such a suggestion in the (ostensibly) inclusive space of the ‘new South Africa.’ That being said, it is equally essential in understanding the role of Afrikaans today and considering how that position will and should be shaped in the future to consider the very legitimate resentment and negative associations non-Afrikaners may hold towards a language that, again (both) symbolically represented and materially enacted oppression and subjugation to racial violence. The proportionate over-dedication of resources to a relative minority is a fact of South African history that it is fruitless to deny and must necessarily be corrected, and this has meant and will continue to mean a reconfiguration of the role of Afrikaans in public life. Democracy can be meaningful only to the degree that it is capable of accommodating these difficult debates and grappling directly and honestly with sometimes-irreconcilable sets of needs and desires, and the fact that the majority of monolingual universities have made at least token attempts to confront the new linguistic and political realities of the contemporary era can only be seen as a step in the right direction, particularly given the previous section’s conclusion that fully realized bi- or multilingual education will be the first choice for the vast majority of South Africans in the majority of contexts.

5.3 The Multilingual University: Revising the Status of African Languages

At the same time, in the broader terms of our discussion, the post-secondary context offers difficulties beyond the complex role of Afrikaans. Current policy rejects Afrikaans-only university education but simultaneously acknowledges English and Afrikaans as not only the dominant but indeed the only languages of tertiary education in South Africa. The evident difficulties in establishing higher education in African languages (which is not an explicit aspiration of current policy, which seeks to expand space but not supplant the dominant media of instruction) may point to a predetermined limit to the possible success of an African linguistic renaissance. While it is logical in terms of national resources and the global linguistic economy to refrain from attempting to seriously revise the role of English, let alone endeavour
to eliminate it entirely, the tacit acknowledgement of the supremacy of Afrikaans and English as academic languages cannot be considered wholly unrelated to the various dilemmas regarding the language of primary instruction discussed previously. Parental desire for access to adequate English education – as well as the issues so far with the provision of a standard sufficient to actually grant access to all the advantages meant to be made accessible by English – gains an added urgency considering the necessity of English for tertiary education. In other words, the dangers alluded to with regards to, first, inadequate mother-tongue education and the consequences for literacy in both the home language and English are amplified when the inevitability of English in the post-secondary sphere is considered.

Despite the obstacles thus far to a meaningful revision of the linguistic ecology of South African colleges, universities, and technical schools, I am personally disinclined to argue against such attempts and indeed would strongly suggest that the single most significant change to be made in the tertiary educational sphere is a truly effortful commitment to addressing the realities of South African multiculturalism and multilingualism. If, in the case of primary education, the overview of current debates presented here suggests a direct engagement with lived linguistic realities as an essential starting point for reconceptualizing the effective implementation of bi- and multilingualism, a modified version of this suggestion is similarly logical in the post-secondary environment. If indeed we consider the most widespread success for the greatest number of students as the foundational principle of educational policy, then an increased role not only for African languages but diverse African social, historical, cultural, political and literary realities can only expand the benefits of tertiary education for South African students. It is essential that a careful balance be struck between a pragmatic awareness of the limits of revising the linguistic environment of these institutions (see Mesthrie 2008), as well the fact that a too-greatly diminished role for English is neither desired nor desirable.

That being said, there is an undeniably dangerous circularity to a wholly instrumental approach, which risks unintentionally reifying the role of English in the name of its inevitability; put differently, it would be fallacious to assume that because English cannot (and, again, in my view should not) be eliminated entirely that it is therefore not worth any efforts to revise or even reconsider its role. By the same token, it would be fundamentally dishonest to declare English the undisputedly dominant language of South African post-secondary institutions without a serious effort to imagine other possibilities, let alone provide sufficient resources to implement such alternatives. To return to an earlier point, it seems reasonable to suggest that one of the single most significant ways to convince parents, students, and indeed all South Africans of the importance of preserving and expanding educational opportunities in the country’s African languages is to ensure that these languages hold more than the most minimal of positions in tertiary education. If, in Peake and Dixon’s terms, the goal is to encourage parents not to run ‘straight for English’, the parents in question must have tangible evidence that the inclusion of African languages in formal education will not stop at Grade 4 or indeed at Grade 12 but remain useful and fully used media of education at the highest level.
6. Future Considerations and Provisional Conclusions

In spite of the significant changes in the South African landscape over the last fifteen years, the importance of English as both a national language and global *lingua franca* does not appear to have diminished and indeed has apparently increased, at least insofar as the role of English in education and other public spheres is now subject to democratic public debate. Given the global linguistic lines of power, the question of how best to accommodate both the need for English on the national and international level and the local, regional, and similarly national drive to preserve and expand the role for a diversity of indigenous languages and newer arrivals will evidently not diminish in importance either. In surveying the current terrain of policy debate, sociolinguistic research, and theoretical interrogations, it becomes increasingly clear that even to frame the issue as one of English *or* the mother tongue is to miss the multilingual character of the day-to-day reality experienced by many South Africans and to set the stage for approaching divergent interests as though language choice must be a zero-sum game.
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