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LANGUAGE AND POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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1. Introduction

In June 1976 a protest of African school children from SOWETO, a Johannesburg township, triggered a series of bloody riots that spread to several other South African cities. The children were protesting a government decision to replace English with Afrikaans as the medium of instruction for certain subjects in African secondary schools. Although the language issue did anger the students, the underlying cause of the riots was the racial policy of the white minority government, a policy in which language has played a crucial role.

2. Cultural and Lingistic Situation

South Africa is a multi-cultural society, and to properly understand the linguistic situation, it is best to first look at the peoples that constitute that society and what part each plays in the present social system.

South Africa has a population of about 21 million people, of whom 83% are non-white. The following is a breakdown of the population by race: African, 70%; White, 17%; Coloured[1], 10%; Asian[2], 3%.

The two official languages of South African are English and Afrikaans. Afrikaans is a Dutch-based language that developed among the whites of Dutch descent (called Afrikaaners) and the coloureds. It has borrowed from both African and Malaysian languages. An understanding of the importance of this language to the Afrikaaner in his striving for political power and cultural recognition is essential if one is to comprehend the present situation in South Africa.

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[1]"Coloured" is a term used in South Africa to describe those of mixed blood, particularly between Whites and Hottentots.

[2]The Asian population is mainly Indian, the descendants of workers brought to South Africa in the 1800's to harvest sugar cane.

About 53% of the white population speaks Afrikaans as a first language. English is the mother language of 37%. The remaining whites speak Greek, Portuguese, German, etc. as first languages. Less than 2% of the whites come from homes in which both official languages are used, a figure which serves as a good indication of the strictly limited relationship between the two white communities.

The linguistic situation among the non-whites is more complex. The mother tongue of 90% of the coloured South Africans is Afrikaans. As a first language, more than 80% of the Asian population speak Indian languages, the most prominent ones being Tamil, Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu.

Most Africans speak Bantu languages as their mother tongues, and these languages can be divided into two main groups: Nguni and Sotho. About 60% speak Nguni languages while speakers of Sotho languages number 35%. The following is a list of the languages that make up each group:

1)	NGUNI	SOTHO
	Zulu	Tswana
	Xhosa	Pedi
	Swazi	Southern Sotho
	Ndebele	

Although the two language groups are structurally related, they are not mutually intelligible. No such problem exists, however, within each group. A Zulu speaker has no trouble understanding a Swazi speaker, and a Tswana speaker can easily understand a speaker of Pedi or Southern Sotho.

3. Historical Sketch of South Africa

The Bantu people were living in what is now South Africa when the first Dutch and French Huguenot settlers arrived in the 1600's. These settlers came to South Africa at a time of religious oppression in Europe, and they left their motherland to escape from such oppression. The nature of their first constitution, which is indeed a democratic constitution, clearly indicates their purpose. In those early years, the Africans and the settlers lived peacefully together. However, this peace was eventually shattered as the population grew and demand for land increased.

The British first arrived in the late 1700's and from the very beginning, they were at odds with the Afrikaaners, whom they found there. There followed a long series of wars that ended in the 1870's with the white settlers' final subjugation of the Africans. The English-Afrikaaner conflict, however, steadily increased. In the early 1900's a war broke out between the two groups, largely because of British interest in discoveries of gold and diamonds. Britain achieved a pseudo-victory in this war and shortly afterwards, the two groups united the British and Afrikaaner colonies and declared their independence.

The basically rural South African society changed rapidly after the discovery of gold and diamonds in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. These discoveries and the rapid industrialization that they triggered created a great need for unskilled labour, a need that could easily be filled by the vast number of African labourers. To get Africans into the labour force, the government passed a number of bills such as the hut tax. To obtain money to pay such taxes, Africans sought work in gold and diamond mines and in the cities that sprang up around them.

4. Group Conflicts

As already noted, Afrikaaners have been at odds with the English since the latter arrived in South Africa. This feeling of resentment is still an important factor in South African society. Besides opposing what they regarded as "British imperialism," Afrikaaners have felt the pressure of the Africans, who greatly outnumber them. As a reaction to such insecurity and as a defense of the Afrikaaner culture, (one that had developed its own distinctive social structures, religious institutions and language), a strong Afrikaaner nationalism developed. This nationalism has centered around the recognition of Afrikaans as a national language of equal status with English.

The English-Afrikaaner language debate began in earnest at the time independence was granted in 1910. When representatives met to draw up the constitution, the Afrikaaners were successful in getting Afrikaans named as an official language. In the 1920's numerous political and cultural organizations sprang up whose main purpose was the promotion of the Afrikaans language and culture.[3] The creation of these organizations reflected the surge of Afrikaaner nationalism, a nationalism whose cornerstone was the Afrikaans language. Although the Afrikaans-speaking whites far outnumber the English-speakers, the Afrikaaners did not get control of the government until 1948, a date that marks a turning point for South Africa. From that time, the segregation and racial discrimination which has always been present in South Africa in various forms, became official government policy known primarily under the name of separate development, or "apartheid".

5. Apartheid

The Afrikaaner political party (National Party) came to power in 1948 with a promise to strengthen and safeguard the white supremacy that had been built up over 300 years of white settlement. Apartheid, the policy devised to maintain that supremacy, is described in the 1947 election Manifesto of the National Party as follows:

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[3]One of these organizations, the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA), is responsible for developing the principle of separate development.

> In general terms our policy envisages segregating the most important ethnic groups and subgroups in their own areas where every group will be able to develop into a self-sufficient unit. We endorse the general principle of territorial segregation of Bantu and whites...the Bantu in urban areas (white areas--BR) should be regarded as migratory citizens not entitled to political or social rights equal to those of the whites...The process of detribalization should be arrested."

In keeping with the policy, South Africa has been divided into white and African areas. The whites who make up 17% of the population have control of 85% of the land, while the African majority are left the remaining 15%. To promote the government's policy of retribalization, whose purpose is to counteract the unifying effects of urbanization, the African area has been further subdivided into eight homelands--often called Bantustans --one for each group within the African population: Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, etc.

All Africans are citizens of their homeland regardless of their place of birth or residence. A Zulu, born and raised in Johannesburg, is a citizen of the Zulu homeland, even though he may never have set foot in it. Citizens of the homeland are not guaranteed any benefits or rights outside their homeland.

In establishing the homelands, the government has consolidated and reconstructed mono-ethnic areas with a political structure modeled on traditional chieftainship. The homeland governments have been set up over the last 10 years in a step-by-step fashion. They have been granted rights to control taxation, education, agriculture, and public works within the homeland. All other powers remain in the hands of the white government, so that the most a homeland can attain is a quasi-independence.

The Asian and coloured peoples have not been given homelands, and the government has made no plans for such homelands in the future. These two groups constitute such a small percentage of the population that they pose no serious threat to the system.

6. The Role of Language in Apartheid

Keeping in mind the fact that Afrikaaner nationalism was based in considerable measure on resistance to British culture and language, and on concern for the rapidly growing African masses, we can now examine how language policies fit into the program of apartheid.

6.1 Education. The South African educational system is organized in the following way: 7 years of primary education, 3 years of junior secondary and 2 years of senior secondary. As in the British system, to move from one level to another, a child must pass a comprehensive exam.

Africans, Asians, coloureds and whites are all educated as independent groups within the population, a separateness emphasized by differences in financing, differences in syllabus, and differences in levels of achievement deliberately related to different employment needs. For example, the priorities in the government's Bantu education programme are placed on mass literacy and widespread primary education, priorities which prepare the majority of Africans for a future as unskilled workers.

There is a separate government agency to administer each educational system, but they are essentially controlled by whites. The national government claims that each homeland will have control of its own education. Just how complete this control is can be questioned. At the present time in South Africa, Bantu education is controlled by two bodies: the homeland governments control it within the homelands and the ministry of Bantu education controls it within the urban and white areas, where so many Africans live as labourers.

Prior to the Afrikaaner rise to power, an African child received the first 4 years of primary instruction in his mother tongue. Both official languages were introduced as a medium of instruction. By the end of primary school, all instruction, with the exception of religious and Bantu language studies, was in this official language. As the Afrikaaners introduced their concept of separate development, things changed. Mother-tongue instruction was continued throughout the 7 years of primary education. Instruction in one of the official languages did not begin until secondary school level, although both English and Afrikaans were studied as subjects throughout the primary school. In the light of the aims of apartheid, the motivation behind this change would seem to indicate an attempt to isolate each language group from each other and from the rest of Africa and the world at large. The common consciousness that had developed among the Africans as a result of urbanization and industrialization would then be diminished, leaving room for divisions, based on tribal feelings.

During the years of change, the government launched a program to adapt and update the Bantu languages for use in the educational system. Comprehensive lists of 8,000 words were prepared in each language and placed at the disposal of teachers. About 70% of the words on the word list already existed in the languages and the remainder were created by 'bantuizing' English or Afrikaans words. Also the government encouraged African writers to publish textbooks in their own languages.

For the most part Africans were against the change, but were powerless to do anything about it. Often it meant that children, especially those of minor language groups, had to travel great distances to attend a school that taught their own language or a language near enough to their own. Also many Africans felt that such a separation fostered mistrust. Among the outspoken critics of this policy have been African authors, who feel a need to communicate to an audience larger than their tribe,

and it is only through English that they can do this. It is in their interest, therefore, to have as many people literate in English as possible. Since most African children don't get past primary school, proficiency in English must be started at an early age.

As the homeland governments were given partial control of education, most of them went back to the old policy of beginning instruction in an official language at primary school. In today's South Africa, therefore, there are two policies on mother-tongue instruction, one in the homelands and one in the white areas.

In the homelands, the mother tongue is used for the first three or four years. Both official languages are introduced as subjects in the first year. After the fourth year, English becomes the medium of instruction. English has been chosen for two reasons: (1) many Africans consider Afrikaans the language of the oppressor, and, (2) because of its international status, English gives Africans a bond with other parts of Africa and the rest of the world. Consequently, in the homelands English remains the medium of instruction throughout secondary school, with a Bantu language and Afrikaans being taught as subjects. In white areas however, the official government policy states that half of the instruction should be in Afrikaans and half in English.

The riots in SOWETO, Johannesburg, started when the government tried to enforce instruction in Afrikaans in certain subjects. The students rejected this change, and riots broke out. After bloody riots involving the death of many school children, as well as a number of other Africans, the government backed down. That was one of the first times involving a crucial issue that the South African government has bowed to African demands. Why did the government back down if they were convinced that Afrikaans was the right language for the Africans? Was it an admission that what they were doing was wrong? Or was it the result of pressure from the outside world? The government's reaction should be regarded as important because, if the regime realized its mistake, then the time is ripe for a revision of the entire language policy in South Africa.

Language in the coloured schools is not so much an issue. More than 90% of the coloured speak Afrikaans, and this is the language used in primary and secondary school levels as a medium of instruction. English is taught as a subject in primary school.

Although only 20% of the Asians speak either English or Afrikaans as a first language, one of these languages is used as a medium of instruction at both levels. Which language depends upon the area in which the child lives. If he lives in an Afrikaans-speaking area, it will be Afrikaans, and vice versa, for English.

The government policy of cultural isolation applies even within the white population. Afrikaaner children attend Afrikaans schools, and English children attend English schools. The other official language is introduced after primary school in some schools.

Until the mid-50's the non-whites who qualified could attend white universities. Now there is a separate university system for each racial group. The coloured and the Asian each have a separate university; there are three African universities. All instruction in these universities is done in one of the official languages. For the whites there are eleven universities: 6 English-speaking and 5 Afrikaans-speaking.

The policy of separate development has effectively divided children and isolated them in mono-lingual schools during the most impressionable years of their lives. Language and cultural differences have been stressed, and the opportunities for young people to associate with and learn to understand children of other cultures have been diminished. To the Africans, it has caused a decline in competence in the school subjects.

6.2 Media. There are about 21 daily newspapers in South Africa, 16 published in English, and 5 in Afrikaans. There are numerous African papers, most of them published in English. A few attempts to publish in African languages have been made, but usually they are not successful. Either the paper dies a natural death due to lack of funds, or it fails to attract enough readers because of a high rate of limited literacy.

Until early 1976, South Africa had no television service. Radio was, and indeed still is, the most important means of communication. T.V. has 37 hours a week, half in English and half in Afrikaans. Radio service throughout South Africa is controlled by the government under the auspices of South African Broadcasting Corporation. There is broadcasting in 9 languages: English, Afrikaans, and 7 Bantu languages.

6.3 Mining. Mining is the most important sector of South Africa's economy. The gold and diamond mines employ workers from all parts of South Africa and from neighboring countries like Malawi, Swaziland, Rhodesia, Botswana and Mozambique. Most of the labourers speak languages that are for the most part not mutually intelligible and very few of them speak English or Afrikaans. Communication in the mines has therefore been a problem.

A pidgin called Fanagalo has developed as a solution to this problem. It is a simplified form of a Bantu structure that has vocabulary, limited largely to terms relevant to miners' work. The language can be learned in a short time. Before a new recruit is sent into the mines, his first orientation includes learning Fanagalo.

Contact due to urbanization has resulted in the formation of a contact language called Tsotsi. Originally, it was a jargon of criminals (in Sotho, tsotsi means criminal), but now it has grown to the status of a pidgin. A lot of the vocabulary is from Sotho, but it has also borrowed heavily from the Nguni languages and Afrikaans.

7. Creole

In the struggle for recognition of their language, many Afrikaaners have transferred their ideal of racial purity to the purity of their mother tongue and its history. As a result, a number of Afrikaaners advocate keeping their language free from the corrupting influence of foreign words, especially English words. In treating the history of the language, advocates of the purity movement have insisted that Afrikaans developed directly from Dutch and is singularly free from the taint of foreign influence. In doing so, Afrikaans linguists have rejected the idea that Afrikaans developed through a creolization of Dutch spoken by the early 17th century settlers. This creolization was the result of the mixing of several different peoples and languages: Dutch, Malaysian (or a Malayo-Portuguese Creole), and African languages. Those Afrikaans scholars who want to see their language as being as pure as their race, quite naturally reject any concept of creolization.

Afrikaaner linguists tend to confine the study of their language to the usage of the whites. In historical studies, only when a linguistic phenomenon occurs among whites is it regarded as being a legitimate part of the language.

8. Multi-lingualism

Many Afrikaaners speak English, but not vice versa. English has long been a language of commerce and international contact, while Afrikaans has mainly been associated with rural life. To be successful elsewhere then, it has always been necessary for the Afrikaaner to know English. Many Afrikaaner farmers are able to speak African languages through contact with farm labourers, and a few other whites claim knowledge of African languages.

However, for the Africans, multilingualism is a necessity for survival. Most civil servants and police are Afrikaaners, and when dealing with Africans, they insist on being addressed in Afrikaans. Since there are countless laws and regulations that affect Africans in white areas, an African must constantly deal with those officials. For better or worse, those Africans working in white areas, try to know some Afrikaans. But to be able to succeed economically, an African must generally be able to speak some English, the language used in commerce. Urban Africans are also usually proficient in at least one other Bantu language.

To some extent, Asians find themselves in conditions similar to those of Africans. They must speak Afrikaans in order to deal with the white officials, and English in order to exist economically.

9. South Africa in the Context of Africa

The language problems in South Africa are not peculiar to that part of the world. Before independence, certain other parts of Africa had similar problems. From observation of independent Africa, we can draw certain generalizations.

Even in the presence of one trans-tribal language, an African language that is tribally neutral, it has been the case that a foreign language was chosen by Africans as one of the weapons to conquer internal strife and to encounter the colonizer. The foreign language in Africa has always been a language of a small elite, and it is from this elite that African leadership has come. The presence of a foreign language has served to unify the people, at least temporarily. A common war is fought, and independence is achieved. Then the language questions arise anew. The turn of events now brings about the question of a national language. The intense desire for a national language in independent Africa is aimed at casting away the colonial master's language and regaining lost identity by nationalizing an indigenous language. It is at this stage that a trans-tribal language is sought, but when there is no such trans-tribal language the foreign language is almost inevitably retained.

9.1 Some Comparative Facts. The Africans in South Africa have generally rejected Afrikaans. Afrikaans could potentially be a trans-tribal language in South Africa, like Swahili in East Africa. But the case for Afrikaans shows that even a potential language can lose its potentiality if it is tainted with certain traits.

Let us take a look at Swahili in connection with the above observation. Swahili in Tanzania has always enjoyed a popular position among the masses. The German rule encouraged Swahili. Swahili was widely spoken in Tanzania even before independence. But what was the position of Swahili in so far as matters concerning the education, and economic world of Tanzanians was concerned? There was no connection. Swahili, in other words, was used by colonial powers tc keep the people ignorant about themselves and their surroundings. The non-elite in English believed that they did not have anything to offer to their country's development, neither did they know what criteria were used for running their own country. Yet at the same time, Swahili thrived and spread among the Tanzanians. It is in such a case that we can draw an example of an elite--in a foreign language, who could see the colonizer's calculated aims and use the colonizer's language as a tool to fight against the system. A system that regarded Swahili as generally inferior.

At one stage in Kenya's history, Swahili was rejected by Africans. The major issue here was that, Swahili was used as a master-servant language of communication. Tribal languages were used in the early part of education, and Swahili was used in the later part of education. There was no proper educational material in Swahili. Neither was Swahili used as a language of the government's administration or economic world. This was a clear indication that education in Swahili would continue to keep the African ignorant about himself and the world around him.

After independence, Tanzania is a living example of how the leadership, an English-speaking elite, has raised the status of Swahili among Tanzanians. Kenya, too, has taken to the same step of re-establishing Swahili, even though at a slower pace. The question of a national language in these two African states is an important issue, because the people themselves have a choice to make without being allocated a language.

9.2 South Africa. The Africans in South Africa view Afrikaans as the oppressors' calculated means to keep them ignorant of everything except what the present ruling regime can offer them. As seen from the facts in this paper, the present regime offers them poverty, ignorance and other ways of oppression. We noticed that English is dominant in higher education, economic fields, and the mass media. From these, we can infer that English is dominant in the political field. For the Africans in South Africa to fight this system of oppression and segregation, they need more than a South African 'trans-tribal' language. They need a language of much wider communication, in this case, English.

10. Future of South Africa

Assuming that in the future, South Africa becomes a truly independent plural society, and that South Africa follows the steps of other African countries, whereby the question of a national language becomes a burning issue, which language will be the most likely choice? It is unlikely that Afrikaans will be the choice, for history cannot be forgotten so easily. Swahili in East Africa is a language that the masses can claim allegiance to, though the colonial system was using it to ridicule the masses. In South Africa, Afrikaans is the language of the oppressor--and it has never been a language that could be isolated from the regime of oppression.

It is also unlikely that any of the African languages in South Africa will succeed as a national language. Most of them are small, and with the system of homelands, the spread of these languages has been greatly limited. People who move to other places learn other languages, rather than spreading one language, as evidence on this has been shown by looking at language in homeland schools, formation of contact languages and languages in the mines.

English, though a mother tongue of only a small percentage, seems to be the most neutral choice. Our guess is that English will be the national language of South Africa, despite all odds. It might be the case that even after English succeeds, it will still be the language of the elite. Those that won't have official education will remain ignorant in English, as is known about countries that have been faced with a similar choice, Nigeria for example.

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