

Is South Africa a role model for other multilingual countries? A translator's perspective

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South Africa now probably has the most progressive Constitution in the world, at least as regards language rights. Since South Africa's democratic transition in April 1994, the government has taken up the challenge of moving from two official languages to eleven, which means that more than 98% of the home languages spoken by the total population of 46.9 million people are now accounted for - in contrast to the two-language policy during apartheid, which favoured the white minority. South Africa's Constitution (Act No. 108 of 1996) recognises not only the eleven official languages (English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, isiNdebele, siSwati, Xitsonga and Tshivenda) but also South African Sign Language and the various "heritage" languages (such as French, German, Gujarati, Urdu, Arabic and Chinese).

Despite its seemingly cumbersome nature, the eleven-language policy does make sense - all eleven languages are languages of limited diffusion; no language clearly dominates over any other language, and seven of the languages fall into two cognate groups - the Nguni language group (comprising isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele and siSwati) and the Sotho group (Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana). English, despite being the language of commerce and the educated elite, is only the fifth most spoken language in the country. In addition, the geographical distribution of the various languages makes it impossible to adopt only one language as official (Wallmach 2000:200).

Currently most provinces have no more than three regional official languages, which means that provincial and local governments need only accommodate three languages - for example, the Western Cape caters for Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa. But Gauteng, the country's smallest but richest province, is home to the largest immigrant population from Africa and Europe as well as the most diverse indigenous population. Gauteng's two main cities, less than 50km apart, are Johannesburg, with its 'gold rush' get-rich-quick mentality and a metropolitan area the size of Los Angeles, and Pretoria, the administrative capital of the country, where all the national government departments and embassies are situated. Despite having four official regional languages, Gauteng's administration would have to make provision for all eleven South African languages as well as numerous African and, to a lesser extent, some European languages in order to serve its people adequately.

Is South Africa a role-model for other multilingual countries? Perhaps, but as always, implementation is the key, and increasingly, South African linguists and language planners have begun to refer to the government's "forked tongue of multilingualism" (Kaschula 2001) - one part of the tongue makes the right noises, whilst the other part remains mute, resulting in little practical implementation of policy, limited status

planning and little use of indigenous languages when it comes to technology, except in the arena of radio and television. It is true that community radio provides for the official languages as well as the tiny Khoe and San languages, and television has now expanded to include all eleven languages and a number of multilingual programmes, but the dominant language on television is still English. Certainly, the state employs over 2500 full-time court interpreters and numerous part-timers to cover the Department of Justice's considerable language needs, but the Department of Health has made no such provision. Patients' relatives and nurses act as ad hoc interpreters, and if one takes into account that there are 3749 South Africans for every doctor and 255 for every nurse in a state hospital (*SA 2002-3: South Africa at a glance 2002: 54*), the additional burden of language provision on the nurses and on a health system struggling to cope with the AIDS pandemic as a whole is untenable. The Department of Arts and Culture's National Language Service functions as government's official support system, responsible for translating official documents, advising on language policy and assisting with terminology development and modernisation in the official languages. But with only a few language practitioners per language, its reach is limited.

And so, despite the 'feel-good rainbowism' of the Constitution, in prominent linguist Rajend Mesthrie's (2006: 153) words, it is English that has consolidated its position at the expense of the other languages. English is the *de facto* lingua franca of the state, despite the fact that the majority of the 'clients' of the state are unable to access information through this language. Alexander (2002: 122-3) warns:

Language planning processes in South Africa today have a surrealistic aspect to them as a result of the tension between what the governing elites are obliged to do constitutionally and what they prefer to do based on their interests and the convenience of inertia. On the one hand, there are extremely progressive and radical moves being planned and explored by official commissions, advisory panels and statutory bodies dealing with the language issue. On the other hand, there is the never-ending chain of procedural impedimenta used by the bureaucracy in collusion with the political leaders (...) to retard and obstruct the implementation of the language policy."

Perhaps one reason for the bureaucratic blocking of certain moves is that these moves are so radical and far-reaching in their implications. The most significant move of all, and therefore potentially also the most terrifying one, is the South African Languages Bill, 2000, which was ratified by Parliament in 2001, but has yet to be accepted by Cabinet and signed into effect by the President. However, some progress has been made: the National Language Policy Framework (NLPF), which contains a number of provisions included in the South African Languages Bill, was approved by Cabinet in 2003. The NLPF stipulates that all national government structures and public institutions must adopt one or more working languages. Official government publications must also appear in all eleven languages, or failing this, in six languages on a rotational basis.¹ And finally, official correspondence and oral communication with members of the public must occur

¹ The six-language policy requires that translations should be carried out in at least one language from the Nguni group (Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, Swati), one language from the Sotho group (Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho and Setswana), plus Tshivenda, Xitsonga, English and Afrikaans.

in the language of the citizen's choice. Translation and/or interpreting have been explicitly acknowledged as obvious tools to facilitate implementation of this policy - "every effort must be made to utilise language facilitation facilities such as interpreting (consecutive, simultaneous, telephone & whispered interpreting) where practically possible." Within three years after the commencement of the Act, each department of national government and each province must establish a language unit which will be responsible for inter- and intradepartmental communication. The National Language Service received a once-off amount of R11,9 million in 2004/5 to implement the National Language Policy Framework and the Department of Arts and Culture has to date spent R9 million to establish nine centres, hosted mainly at tertiary institutions, to develop the indigenous languages. (*SA Yearbook 2005/06*) Implementing the National Language Policy Framework will significantly increase the demand for translation and interpreting services, especially in the African languages. Already, some national departments have begun appointing language practitioners to fledgling language units tasked with establishing departmental language policies and assessing the need for translation services.

In my view, if one looks for implementation of multilingualism in post-apartheid South Africa, one has to look at the increase in actual translation and interpreting services, not just at the passing of language policies into law. Translation has always played a pivotal role in South Africa², from the first Bible translations which codified the African languages and Afrikaans, to the massive state-inspired increase in translation activity that permitted Afrikaans to take its place alongside English as an official language from 1925 onwards. Translation was equally significant during the apartheid era: not only was Afrikaans actively promoted, but the publication of government-approved translated textbooks in the African languages was used to support the policy of 'separate development' – including separate (and unequal) education systems for different races and primary education in the mother-tongue. Translation into the African languages was also vital to state television broadcasting, as well as to the administration of the 'homelands' and the various courts of justice (Trew 1994:74).

So, to return to the present: as a translation agency owner, my view of multilingualism in South Africa is a lot more rosy than those of sociolinguists. Almost immediately after the new dispensation came into office in 1994, the country began to see a boom in translation into the local languages: from legislation, educational materials, public health information and annual reports to mobile phone technology. Translation in the major European languages, Swahili and Arabic has also flourished, and the recent establishment of the African Chinese Translators' Association, with over 50 members in Johannesburg alone, is testimony to the importance of Chinese.

The story of interpreting into local South African languages is even more amazing if one considers all that has been achieved in just ten short years, from 1996 to 2006. For just as the Nuremberg Trials after World War Two marked the first use of simultaneous interpreting equipment, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission could not have operated at all without the work of the first simultaneous interpreters ever to

² Afrikaans is derived from 17th century Dutch, with Malay and African influences.

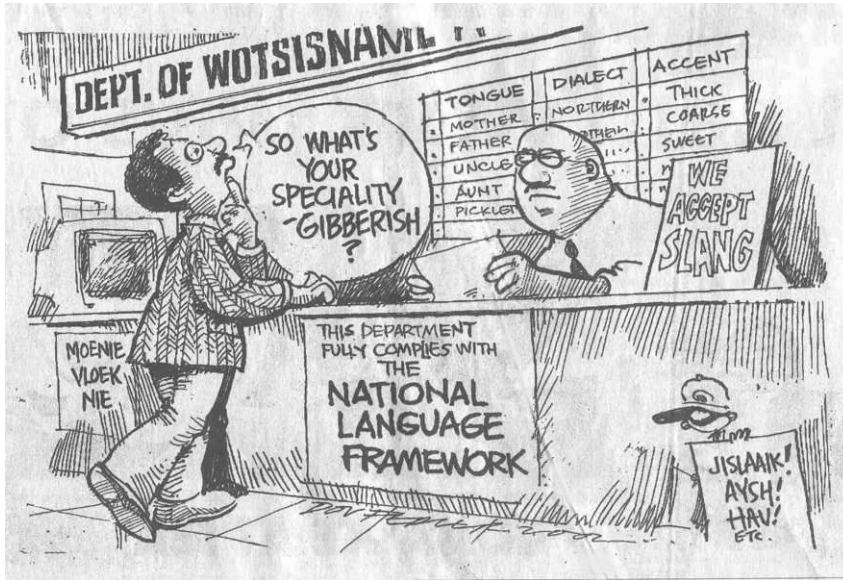
interpret into and from local South African languages. These interpreters produced more than 28,000 hours or 3551 days of simultaneous interpretation from April 1996 to October 1998 (Du Plessis & Wiegand in Lotriet 2002: 96). Since then, conferences of a number of national departments and national parliament and provincial legislatures have begun to cater for the regional languages as well as for South African Sign Language. The municipalities of Tshwane (which serves the Pretoria area and environs) and Johannesburg also utilise interpreting services at Council and City Planning meetings, and other municipalities in other provinces have followed suit. Other innovations include the launch of a permanent telephone interpreting service for South Africa, the first of its kind in Africa, on 9 May 2005. And now, some historically Afrikaans universities have even begun to find innovative ways of solving the problem of parallel mediums of instruction. Where previously university lecturers were required to deliver lectures twice – once in Afrikaans, and once in English, they now use interpreters and mobile simultaneous interpreting equipment, a world first. Over 250 lectures a week dealing with topics ranging from pharmacy to engineering are now being interpreted at North-West University, for example (Blaauw 2006).

There are also a number of localisation initiatives underway. A project to translate open source software into the eleven official languages is being undertaken by the non-profit organisation translate.org.za. Morphological parsers, part-of-speech taggers, spell checkers and speech recognition systems in various languages are currently being developed by a number of universities.

In the area of mobile phone localisation, Nokia has introduced an African-language menu option which allows customers to read their phone menus in Afrikaans, Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu or Swahili. Sony Ericsson first offered an African-language menu in 2002, with Zulu and Sotho being supported. Samsung also has an African language option on its phones. Together with subsidised mobile phones, booming subscriber growth and the launch in October 2004 of low-cost bank accounts and cellphone banking services, this has meant that 13 million previously ‘unbanked’ citizens living in rural areas can now conduct business in their own languages (Mantu 2004).

These initiatives are potentially very significant indeed – there is some evidence that mobile phones, and not the internet, might be the most effective means of closing the ‘digital divide’ in Africa. An article in *The Economist* (March 12, 2005:78) suggests that in a typical developing country, an increase of 10 mobile phones per 100 people boosts GDP growth by 0.6 percentage points. Africa’s mobile phone customer growth rate is the highest in the world - and the scope for growth is enormous, since the 82 million GSM customers in Africa represents a mere 9.25% market penetration into the African population (*Vodaworld magazine* 2005: 28).

Of course, enormous linguistic challenges remain, the greatest being that the technical registers of the African languages are underdeveloped, and the languages themselves are not yet fully standardised. But, in the words of Nelson Mandela himself - “No matter what challenges lie ahead, none are as great as those we have already overcome.”



The Star, Johannesburg, 10 December 2002

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