

The right to die: Standard Afrikaans in Namibia

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Introduction

Prior to independence on March 21 1990, Namibia had two official languages, Afrikaans and English with English playing an insignificant role in the administrative and educational systems of the country while German functioned as a partial official language, medium of instruction and was used in the domains of commerce and agriculture. Namibia also has 21 indigenous languages of which 9 were codified and developed as educational languages up to the primary school level. This means that speakers of indigenous languages had less rights than speakers of Afrikaans and English since their languages could not be used in all domains and particularly not in court where untrained interpreters had to be used.

The Republic of Namibia now has a new language policy which is enshrined in the Constitution. Article 3 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia states that:

The official language of Namibia shall be English.

With the acceptance of the new Constitution in Namibia a language that is known by less than 10% of the population became Namibia's only official language. This was the language of the liberation organisation (SWAPO), and the United Nations Institute for Namibia which was situated in Lusaka taught this language to Namibian refugees. This means that that the returning refugees and resistance fighters know English better than many of their countrymen who were taught in Afrikaans under the South African regime.

Article 3 of the Constitution is clearly not a language policy, but the departure point for one. A language policy should derive certain implications from such a legal departure point and should identify how

these implications could be transformed into objectives and methods and how to achieve these methods. Some of these implications have been spelled out in various other documents by SWAPO (eg. UNIN 1981). I will identify only two at this point:

- To unify Namibians in one nation.
- To enable Namibians to have access to the world community via a world language.

A third implication is more implicit and therefore more difficult to formulate. There can be no doubt about the frustrations and animosity towards the apartheid regime and its symbols amongst Namibians. Those who were exiled or who participated in the war against South Africa would particularly like to see Afrikaans disappear.

But, as Afrikaans has shown earlier this century, its speakers seem to have a tenacity and language vitality that enables the language to survive under difficult conditions (e.g. the successful resistance against attempts to germanise the Boers in Namibia at the end of the previous century and attempts to anglicise the Boers in South Africa by Lord Milner at the beginning of this century). In contrast to its earlier history, the main area of resistance to decline now seems to be its black and brown mother-tongue speakers. However, Afrikaans is not the only national language in Namibia that is threatened by the new language policy.

The new government of Namibia inherited three destabilised languages, Nama/Damara, Otjiherero and the San varieties. These languages were underdeveloped by the previous regimes and many of their speakers were in continuous contact with German and Afrikaans. It is predictable that a minority language will begin to decline under these circumstances. The high priority that is now given to the spread of English is accelerating the decline of these languages. One cannot introduce a new official language in a multilingual country and stress that its function is to unify the people in one nation without at the same time creating the impression that the minority languages are not necessary. Villacorta (1991:36) points out that "the national language and an adopted foreign language cannot develop with equal quality and at equal pace." If these languages are not actively promoted this impression spreads and language decline sets in.

The problem that I wish to address here is not new to Africa. The question is what are the language rights of the speakers of national (minority) languages in a multilingual country in which the creation of national unity is of the utmost importance? Do the minority cultures and languages have a moral obligation to die if they are seen as obstacles in the achievement of the national objectives or if there is no money to promote them? Conversely, do governments have the duty to actively promote these languages when the finances could be used in other urgent domains? A second question that I wish to address is: how does the language system adjust to the implementation of a new language policy? I want to analyse this question by looking at how the Namibian legal system (temporarily) adjusted to a situation in which the accused cannot understand the court proceedings.

I will begin by outlining what language planning is and then I will briefly look at some views of language rights. I will then analyse the language situation in Namibia and look specifically at the language problem of the Namibian courts. I will try to identify some of the conflicting trends in language development in Namibia. The overall objective is to show how language planning in one domain (the introduction of a new official language) can lead to unplanned changes in other domains (e.g. the minority languages) of a complex multilingual society.

Language planning

The selection of an official language is usually seen as the "choice among competing languages or language varieties for various roles ..." (Cooper, 1983: 18). The problem of selecting an official language for a nation is one that clearly belongs in the domain of language planning which can be defined as follows:

Language planning is a government authorized, long-term, sustained, and conscious effort to alter a language's function in a society for the purpose of solving communication problems (Weinstein, 1980: 56).

From this quotation it is clear that these changes are usually introduced by politicians. However, this definition does not reveal the political nature of language planning objectives by governments. Governments of multilingual and multicultural countries try to unify people and language planning seems to be one instrument in this process.

Scotton (1978: 730) justifies the introduction of English as official language in a multilingual developing community as follows:

Choosing English as the official language is 'unfair' in that it is foreign and must be acquired by every citizen outside his home. But the key point is that choosing English is *uniformly* unfair; no one ethnic group is favored. Therefore, no one ethnic group can feel that it is a more integral part of the nation than another group because of official language policy.

In reality some members of the population are better situated than the rest to take advantage of such a policy. Those who are living in the cities probably already know some English and are therefore at an unfair advantage over those who will never come into contact with a mother tongue English speaker. The children of city dwellers also have easier access to higher education. In Namibia the returning expatriates are at an obvious advantage over many of the Namibians who had to learn Afrikaans (cf. Villacorta 1991:37 on reasons why the elite defend the retention of a foreign language as official language). It is clear that the introduction of a foreign official language in Namibia is not uniformly unfair and one wonders how such a policy will help to foster feelings of national unity.

Arguments against the idea that one language will promote national unity are now being voiced. Kashoki (1982:287) states explicitly: "National integration is not achieved by the mere mastery of the official language of the state." Adegbija (1989:25-26) states the argument against the use of only English as official language in developing countries directly:

Nigeria's continued predominant use of the English language at almost all levels of education as the language of instruction as well as the absence of a functional language policy, dwarf our growth as a nation, cripple the creative initiative of the citizenry, belittle and ridicule our supposed national independence.

This quotation shows that language planning that attempts to unify people or to give them access to the world community can easily be counterproductive and infringe on the language rights of minority communities. These communities have unequal access to the official language and therefore unequal access to power.

Language rights

These are formulated in official statements (often in the form of laws) determining the situations in which a particular language may be used. Language rights may refer to

- the right to use a language at home, but not in public;
- the right to use a language in public, but not with officials or in the government schools (e.g. the Indian languages in South Africa);
- the right to use a language as medium of instruction in primary schools but not in secondary schools (e.g. the black languages in South Africa);
- the right to maintain a language or create institutions to do so;
- the right to use a language in all domains and to elaborate and modernise it as necessary.

In the legal domain language rights would include (cf. Scweda-Nicholson 1992:39, 42):

- the right for equal treatment of accused who do not speak the language of the court;
- the right to participate in one's own defense;
- the right to communicate with counsel;
- the right to confront witnesses against oneself.

Each of these rights include a language right, i.e. the accused should be able to participate in his own defense in a language he/she understands. From this discussion it is clear that language rights usually only concern minority languages such as the language of immigrants.

UNESCO and the United Nations have stated that all ethnic groups have the right to maintain their languages. Tollefson (1991:187) points out that this right is often granted only to those who have the power to insist that these rights be granted. However, the language rights of immigrant communities remain one of the central issues in this domain. It is not clear

whether one abandons all language rights by immigrating to another country, nor is it clear how large an immigrant community must be before the government must acknowledge their language.

Szépe (1988:184-185) distinguishes between:

- Territorial language rights which allow speakers to use their mother tongue in education, work and public life in a particular territory where the speakers are concentrated in large numbers or where they can claim to have been the first settlers or where their language enjoys the highest prestige.
- Personal language rights which are attached to the individual irrespective of where he lives.
- Community language rights which cover the rights of individuals in the community but also of those living outside the main group.

Language rights are aimed at minimising linguistic inequality and form part of more general group rights or human rights that include the right to organise people in ethnic organisations, to practice certain group customs, to practice religion, to govern the area in which the group lives and to have representation in the central government.

Article 3 (2) of the Namibian constitution seems to guarantee certain rights for the national languages:

Nothing contained in this Constitution shall prohibit the use of any other language as medium of instruction in private schools or in schools financed by the State, subject to compliance with such requirements as may be imposed by law, to ensure proficiency in the official language, or for pedagogic reasons.

However, guarantees are not enough to prevent speakers of minority languages to get the impression that their languages are of no importance and that they best join the majority speech community. A constitution cannot prevent a language from declining.

Language decline

The opposite of language rights can take the form of an outright ban on the use of a language. One could call this type of legislation language genocide or linguicide (Kloss 1969:177). This does not occur very often. However, more frequently languages are subtly encouraged to die by stigmatising them or by consciously underdeveloping them. In Namibia the German missionaries stigmatised Nama/Damara as a language of turkeys with "smack tones" and wondered if such a language could ever express so-called "higher concepts". The result of this stigmatisation was that the Nama chiefs refused to allow the missionaries to teach or preach in Nama - the missionaries had to teach in Dutch. The underdevelopment of the Namibian languages by the South African regime (many of them could, until recently, only be studied as subjects at primary school level) helped to confirm the predictions of the missionaries that these languages could not function in the modern world. Today Nama/Damara, Otjiherero and the San varieties are declining languages. They show influence of massive borrowing, also for concepts for which they have adequate terminology, they have limited access to the media (the San varieties are not used at all in the media) and many urban speakers have switched to Afrikaans as their main language.

But the wheel of fortune of languages changes and after independence Afrikaans has joined the club of declining Namibian languages. Prior to independence Afrikaans was stigmatised as the language of the oppressor although it is the language of the oppressed as well, for Afrikaans is also a mother tongue of brown and black Namibians. Afrikaans has been labelled as a restrictive language that denies Namibians access to the world although it gives direct access to the knowledge and expertise of the most advanced country in the region and gives easy access to Europe via Dutch. The success of this stigmatisation can be seen in the decline in the number of students who enroll for Afrikaans at the University of Namibia. A few years ago there were 300 students in the Department of Afrikaans - today there are fewer than fifty students.

Once stereotypes such as these spread amongst the population, we are at the beginning of a process of language decline. Linguists have shown that language decline, once it has set in, is just about impossible to stop (Fennell 1981:39). In a small economy with extremely limited linguistic resources the implementation of the new language policy in Namibia could

well place all the Namibian languages on the declining list because there seems to be not enough money or expertise to develop the national languages. Without this development the chances are good that the population will stigmatise their own languages as "restrictive" and "unable to express higher concepts".

The question is why was Afrikaans not selected as the official language?

The problem with Afrikaans

The linguistic reality of Namibia dictates that Afrikaans should be the official language of that country. More than 85% of the population have some knowledge of it (Prinsloo et al. 1982). It is furthermore, a fully developed standard language, there is a strong Afrikaans press, all state documents are in Afrikaans, the education system is Afrikaans oriented and there is a strong Afrikaans mother-tongue community that count as part of the original (brown) settlers in this country.

One variety of Afrikaans was brought into the country by the Oorlam at the beginning of the previous century. The Oorlam were acculturated Khoekhoe of mixed origin who fled from the expanding white Cape farming community and who spoke a variety of Afrikaans (cf. Elphick and Gilomee 1979:326) that is now known as Orange River Afrikaans (Van Rensburg 1989). Because of their superior weapons the Oorlam soon dominated the southern and central parts of Namibia and imposed their language on the indigenous Nama and Herero tribes. By 1850 Orange River Afrikaans was widespread in use by traders, missionaries and the indigenous population of the central and southern parts of the country. Peace treaties between warring Nama and Oorlam groups and between the Ovaherero and the Oorlam were concluded in a creolised variety of Dutch (Ohly 1987:6). The constitution of the Rehoboth Basters of 1868 was written in Cape Dutch (Carsten 1983:139). Orange River Afrikaans was further strengthened in the southern and central parts of the country by the gradual influx of migrating farmers ("Trekboere") towards the end of the previous century.

The German occupation disturbed the expansion of this language and closed the more formal domains of language use for this language. However, another variety of Dutch was still kept alive by the missionaries who, as pointed out earlier, used it as school and liturgical language. The

South African occupation after 1915 brought a new variety of Afrikaans into the country, namely Standard Afrikaans thereby closing the more formal domains of language use again for Orange River Afrikaans.

Although Standard Afrikaans soon spread throughout the country, its very explicit link with apartheid and the role it played in the underdevelopment of the indigenous languages made it an easy target for stigmatisation. The fact that white Afrikaans speakers totally ignored the Afrikaans language movement of the seventies of this century of their black and brown countrymen also helped to alienate brown and black Afrikaans mother tongue speakers of their own language. Some of Namibia's best poets, such as Kameeta who started off in Afrikaans, now publish only in English.

SWAPO used language planning in their attempt to oust the South African regime and branded Afrikaans as "the language of the oppressor" thereby forgetting that one variety of Afrikaans, Orange River Afrikaans, is the language of the oppressed. At the same time English was relabelled as "a language of national unity" and as a "language of economic and social upliftment". Nevertheless the antipathy of the elite towards Afrikaans increased to the point where all political parties with the exception of the "Aksie Christelik Nasionaal" (a conservative white-oriented political party) were prepared to accept that English would be the new sole official language of the Republic of Namibia.

SWAPO's language policy is, as far as Afrikaans is concerned, a very good example of the language as a problem approach. Thus, instead of exploiting the advantages of Afrikaans it was stigmatised as the language of the oppressor and a restrictive language designed to keep Namibians ignorant (the last argument is valid for all minority languages in the world).

Within a few years an exiled movement undid the careful language planning of the South African government by using the one weapon that language planners have no answer for: language stigmatisation. The South African language policies were labelled as divisive: they divided the Afrikaans speech community into two and attempted to increase the ethnic differences between the other speech communities thus thwarting any attempts at nation building. The other effects of apartheid are well described in other sources such as Wellington (1967) and Moleah (1983).

The problem with English

In the euphoria of independence there was talk of giving "a blow to Afrikaner pride" (Harlech-Jones 1989:12) by reducing Afrikaans to the status of a national language. However, two years after independence the realities of the new language policy are making themselves felt. A small economy not only has to replace all school and reference books but must also introduce a new medium of instruction, reorganise and upgrade the education system. As pointed out, the limited resources are clearly being stretched to the limit and the slow progress in the spread of English is not helping to increase its popularity.

One of the main problems holding back the spread of English is the shortage of competent English teachers and the scarcity of suitable English teaching material. Apart from this, there is no English-speaking infrastructure (such as shopkeepers or administrators) outside the main city.

This is a dangerous situation: if English is not spread quickly and efficiently, it runs the risk of becoming stigmatised as well. In such a case the speakers will drift back to the national languages and Afrikaans. There are some early indications that this might well be taking place.

The present situation

An obvious problem is that the majority of the population cannot, at the moment understand the English broadcasts of the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation nor can they understand the proceedings of parliament. Villacorta (1991:37) states that under these circumstances "the citizenry who are most handicapped in that language, are unable to fully participate in national decision making because of their inability to comprehend the proceedings and to articulate their needs and interests through the appropriate channels."

However, since each of the major Namibian languages has its own broadcasting channel, information can be disseminated via their own languages. One problem on this level is that the translators have all been trained to translate from Afrikaans into a national language and very few know enough English to translate efficiently from English to an indigenous language.

At the middle and lower levels of government administration Afrikaans is used as a spoken language and it is the main language of shop assistants. Thus the country is slowly moving to a new type of diglossic situation in which English is used in the top government and business echelons while Afrikaans is used in the middle and lower echelons. English also seems to be the language that is used when any Owambo is addressed. It must be remembered that the Owambo are the power base of the present government and that the movement to English was more explicit amongst them than amongst other groups. This picture clearly shows that the domains in which Afrikaans and German are used are gradually shrinking and that English is replacing them in these domains.

The heavy emphasis on the introduction of English and the downgrading of Afrikaans has, however, taken the attention away from Namibia's other languages - as predicted in UNIN (1981:41). The limited official development of these languages that was done under the previous regime seems to have come to a virtual stop. This cannot but add to the destabilisation of these languages and detract from the language rights of these speakers.

Language rights in Namibia

Article 19, Culture, of the Namibian Constitution states:

Every person shall be entitled to enjoy, practise, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion subject to the terms of this Constitution and further subject to the condition that the rights protected by this Article do not impinge upon the rights of others or the national interest.

This article allows the development of the national languages but does not prescribe it. Communities with no expertise in modern language development and no financial resources to hire such expertise are unlikely to develop their languages in any significant way. The effects of underdevelopment of minority languages have been outlined. Van Dyken (1990:43) points out that in many African countries "the minority languages got lost in methodologies and approaches for teaching the more dominant languages (for example French) as second languages."

The promotion of English is actually progressing in a way that seems to clash with the intention of Article 19. All schools (including the private German and Afrikaans high schools) are required to use English as the medium of instruction after the fourth grade. The national interest is now clearly concerned with unifying Namibians, spreading English and providing a more equitable education for all Namibians.

Language in the courts

The reaction of the Namibian society to the new language policy can be seen by analysing the language use in the Namibian courts. The Constitution of the Republic of Namibia contains at least two Articles that are directly relevant to language used in arrest and trial procedures:

Article 3 (1):

- (1) The official language of Namibia shall be English.

Article 11: Arrest and Detention

- (2) No persons who are arrested shall be detained in custody without being informed promptly in a language they understand of the grounds for such arrest.

One of the implications that follow from Article 3 (1) is that the language of the courts is English. Since a high percentage of the population do not know English there is an urgent need for court interpreters. Alternatively, the officers of the courts should be competent in various Namibian languages.

Article 12: Fair trial does not refer to language although **Article 12 (d)** gives the accused "the opportunity of calling witnesses and cross-examining those called against them." This would clearly be very difficult for a San speaker who is accused by an English-speaking Namibian since there are no competent San - English interpreters.

At the moment there are very few interpreters available and young attorneys are sometimes used as interpreters in the more serious cases. Since the remuneration for this task is very low, these attorneys may need some explicit encouragement from their senior partners to do this task. There are obviously not enough qualified interpreters and serious communication problems occur in some of the cases.

About 70% of all cases fall in the domain of criminal procedure. Private practitioners are usually not used in criminal cases. As in all other cases, the court must be sure that the accused understands the nature of the trial. If the accused does not understand the language of the court (English), an interpreter must be provided.

Most of the indigenous accused cannot speak English. Many of the court translators or interpreters also do not speak English. Thus about 25% of the trials are still conducted in Afrikaans with translations into the indigenous languages. With one or two exceptions, the prosecution and the judges all understand Afrikaans. The witnesses and the accused usually also understand Afrikaans. In this situation the court has little choice but to use Afrikaans. The trial might start in English but then the prosecution will state that the accused and the witnesses speak indigenous languages while the interpreter can interpret only from an indigenous language to Afrikaans. The court is then asked to hold the case in Afrikaans. In this way justice is done since the case is held in languages that everyone understands. The final verdict must, however, be given in English, since that is the only recognised language of the court.

It would seem that the Namibian legal system uses Afrikaans as a resource rather than viewing it only as a problem. This is also the case in the shops and lower echelons of the government where the realities of the Namibian language situation dictates that one should use the language that serves as effective means of communication.

This system is obviously not conducive for the promotion of English and the revisionary court has refused to accept verdicts in Afrikaans. This situation is not an attempt to revive Afrikaans, but an attempt to function in a situation that the language planners did not foresee: without well-trained translators, interpreters and lexicographers the implementation of the new language policy of Namibia will necessarily suffer setbacks.

Conclusion

An important initial objective of language planning in Namibia was to generate resistance against the South African regime. This meant stigmatising Afrikaans and changing the status of English so that it became one of the symbols around which people could rally against the South African oppression. After independence English was to be used to unite

Namibians into one nation. The problems associated with the spread of this new language in Namibia clearly form a major obstacle that prevents achieving this important objective.

The stigmatisation of Afrikaans might not have been intended to lead to its death, but it might well turn out to be the case. In this case Namibian language planners have lost an important resource in the implementation of the new language policy. Afrikaans can easily be used as a "bridge" to English, but it is clear that Afrikaans is seen as a problem rather than as a resource. An implicit message underlying language planning in Namibia is that Afrikaans seems to have a right to decline so that the other Namibian languages may live. Unfortunately it seems that the less developed languages might die before Afrikaans. The introduction of a new official language has contributed to the destabilisation of at least three indigenous languages and could contribute towards their decline.

Social engineering is always a dangerous activity. When attempted by politicians it often gets out of hand or they fail to see the full consequences of their plans. For instance, major changes in a language policy is dependent not only on teachers, but also on translators, editors, lexicographers, terminographers, and journalists (collectively known as 'the language professions'). The members of the language professions need to be fully trained and informed of the goals of the new language policy before its implementation begins. Politicians generally do not seem to be aware of the language professions or their role in language planning as the Namibian example clearly illustrates. The result of partial planning can be seen in Namibia where a very large group of Namibians have become linguistic foreigners in their own country thereby losing the ability to appeal to language rights.

The language situation in Namibia has the potential that all its national languages may become declining languages despite all the goodwill reflected in the Constitution. What is needed is a vigorous effort to spread the new official language while at the same time developing the indigenous languages. Ohly (1987:76) identifies at least three institutions that are necessary to achieve some form of language equalisation:

- A Ministry of Culture and Youth dealing with language promotion.

- A National Herero Council (and one for each of the other languages) dealing with the development of terminologies and literature (in each of the national languages).
- Selected schools with each of the indigenous languages as medium of instruction up to standard 7 so as to prepare a staff of language promoters.

At the moment there seems to be neither the expertise nor the finance available for such a project. Minority languages have the right to exist and to develop and this also holds for Afrikaans in Namibia. If this language is given the opportunity, its indigenous speakers can play an important role in reconciliation in Namibia.

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