

COMMENTS ON SAAWK DOCUMENT ON THE RETENTION  
OF AFRIKAANS AS COUNTRYWIDE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

*Language planning, concerned with the management of change, is in itself an instance of social change. When established elites seek to extend their influence or to resist the incursion of rivals, when counterelites seek to overthrow the status quo, and when new elites seek to consolidate their power, we find pressure for language planning. We also find pressure stemming from ideological and technological changes, which sometimes motivate and sometimes reflect shifts in political and economic arrangements.*

— R.L. Cooper

To decide on which language or languages shall be official languages, and in which geographical areas, is to undertake the business of language planning. What we have in this document prepared by the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* is an embodiment of this "pressure for language planning" arising from an established elite seeking "to resist the incursion of rivals" as well as from ideological changes which reflect a shift in "political and economic arrangements". Coming from the quarter it does, the conservatism of that pressure is predictable. What is unexpected is the simplistic nature and manipulateness of a document which emanates from so august a cultural-scientific body.

- If "it is taken for granted that the present position of Afrikaans as a countrywide official language will be respected" (Introduction, SAAWK 1992), why then does the document go on tendentiously to list "(c)riteria for the countrywide official status of a language" (SAAWK 1992: 1) and to develop the case for Afrikaans "(a)gainst the background" (SAAWK 1992: 2) of these so-called criteria? What we have here is a crude attempt at intellectual sleight of hand.
- The implication that policy should be *determined scientifically* (SAAWK 1992: 1) and "based on fact and logic" (Dr Alberts's covering letter) is scarcely credible. That policy should be *informed* by scientific knowledge is desirable; but in the final analysis policy is no more nor less than that which is agreed upon by those in authority and on the basis of which decisions are made. Other considerations — moral, strategic, symbolic, and so on — may play as important a role in any given decision as scientific or logical ones: as Cooper rightly says, "Language planning rarely conforms to a rational paradigm of decision-making or problem-solving" (*op cit.*). And if one further agrees with Cooper that "(l)anguage planning is typically motivated by efforts to secure or maintain interests, material or nonmaterial or both" (*ibid.*), these should be spelled out and thus made amenable to negotiation. This imperative rests no less on the SAAWK than on the African National Congress.
- The description of the adequacy of Afrikaans for various functions solely in terms of vocabulary or terminology is a deep disappointment to those who would expect the *Akademie* — which must number some eminent linguists among its members — to see language in terms of its full compass of systems (phonology, lexis, grammar, semantics and pragmatics) and, above all, from sociolinguistic and "critical" ideological perspectives. One wonders, therefore, about the quality of the "international scientific literature" (SAAWK 1992: 1) consulted by the *Akademie* in determining its criteria.

- *Apropos* the criteria, "(t)he language must be able to function as an effective vehicle for management and administration on a countrywide basis" (SAAWK 1992: 4) and "(t)he language must have the vocabulary for the administration of justice" (SAAWK 1992: 4): the meeting of these criteria by Afrikaans is the result of an inequitable and artificial allocation of national resources to the language over a forty-five-year period<sup>1</sup>. That this unjust allocation of resources to Afrikaans has met with success is no argument for the retention of that language in that role in perpetuity. That would be to argue that injustice, once committed successfully, is irreparable. One cannot undertake language planning without proper consideration of the social context in which it will be implemented or in isolation from the history leading up to that context. This history has been one of *apartheid* oppression and deprivation, and the current social context is one of normalisation and reparation.
  
- There is a selective, even misleading, use of research findings. So in 4.3 we read, "From research done by the HSRC, it is clear that Afrikaans as a dominant language is spoken and understood throughout the whole area of the geographical state... As opposed to this, other South African languages are geographically restricted, each to a few districts" (SAAWK 1992: 3, citing the *Language atlas of South Africa* by Grobler, Prinsloo and van der Merwe). This is simply not true for English. Citing precisely the same source as SAAWK, Gerard Schuring, head of sociolinguistics at the HSRC, writes "*Afrikaans and English* are the most widely distributed languages in South Africa (see Grobler, Prinsloo and van der Merwe, in press)" (Schuring 1990, emphasis added).

It is also not in keeping with influential thinking within Afrikaans circles, cited with approval in HSRC research:

In an address to the Afrikaanse Taalfonds in 1990, Professor Olivier said, "Viewed realistically, there can be no doubt that South Africa will have only one official language: English. Thereafter, and on an equal footing with all the other languages, will come Afrikaans". In other words, English will be the universal official language, with all other languages being additional languages. This is a practicable solution... (Schuring *op cit.*).

It also fails to take account of the important aspect of attitudes towards the various languages. Schuring (*ibid.*) writes:

Up to the present, no countrywide investigation has been conducted to determine the population's preferences as to which language(s) should be accorded official status. Based on available data..., I would estimate that in 1990, between 37% and 50% of the total population would prefer English, between 18% and 27% Afrikaans, and between 23% and 46% African languages. I believe that there is sufficient evidence to support the contention that English is the most popular language, followed by Afrikaans and thereafter the different African languages.

Graham Walker  
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<sup>1</sup> *Vide* the boast that "there are at least 250 Afrikaans technical dictionaries", as well as the description of the asymmetrical, inequitable use to this end of a publicly-funded institution, the National Terminology Services, for the furtherance of the interests of just one of the country's languages (SAAWK 1992: 5, point 4.6).

## REFERENCES

Cooper, R.L. 1989. *Language planning and social change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schuring, G.K. 1990. *Language planning for a new South Africa*. Research lecture delivered at the Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 9 August 1990.

Dem.

Hein

Other  
lang groups

Lang,  
streetwise  
SA bag bed

akademie - censor.

within Brit - 2 pts.

a/ white

Green  
language  
varieties

b/ Journalist

Encourage deb. within Afrikan  
speakers. Sharper response

Doc,  
case  
criteria  
evidence

yourself - diplomatic. Not

allow

unloved -  
result  
Inclusive of  
Afrik -  
exclusive  
of Afrik lang

Academy  
of  
Languages  
of  
Africa

At same time - chance to  
present basic principles  
of AN & language policy.

Transl. into Afrik  
(and other lang.)

Show to Afrik sp.  
intellects - Angje.

Letter by  
Madiba -  
consulting.

André  
Consultation Before  
sending.