

**POLITICS OF DOMINANCE: THE SUPPRESSION AND REJECTION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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# **POLITICS OF DOMINANCE: THE SUPPRESSION AND REJECTION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES IN SOUTH AFRICA**

## **Abstract**

After decades of neglect, suppression and divide-and-rule policies, African languages in South Africa have reached the final phase of conquest, characterized by their rejection by Africans. This is despite the interventions, mainly through legislation, to reverse the process and effects of conquest. The process of dominance and suppression, through colonization under the settlers and the missionaries, to the apartheid system from 1948 to 1994, served as a precursor to the ultimate conquest, which will be the extinction of these languages. Since this is a political issue, a political solution and political will could prevent the extinction, but alas, these are lacking from the powers-that-be who should drive the political agenda. I argue in this paper that the conquest of the African languages is thus done, and extinction is inevitable.

## **Introduction**

In this paper I address the seemingly inevitable disappearance of African languages, and the seeming ineffectiveness of the interventions to save the languages from extinction. I argue in the paper that the conquest of the African languages is done, and extinction is inevitable. To advance this argument, the conquest of these languages is traced to colonization through to the apartheid policy, demonstrating the lasting effects colonization and other forms of dominance the speakers of these languages have gone through, have had on these languages and their speakers. The dominance and suppression of the African languages is inextricably linked to racial domination, which has played a big role in the history of South Africa.

The central theory and literature on which this paper is based are those on politics of dominance, power over, language inequalities and overall effects of colonization. Analysis is made of how the African language speakers have responded to colonization, suppression, and to interventions to elevate and empower their languages. To illuminate the role of historical dominance and oppression in this discussion, comparison is made between the ways the African language speakers<sup>1</sup> on one side, and Afrikaans-speakers<sup>1</sup> on the other, have responded to the Constitutional provisions and the emergence of one language as the dominant language after 1994.

Having established that the dominance and suppression of the African languages in question is not a unique or isolated phenomenon, or a linguistic problem, but typical of existing inequalities in the world and the politics of dominance, it becomes clear that solutions to the problem cannot be sought from the linguistic field but from political means of addressing dominance and inequalities. I conclude by referring to important elements crucial to saving

languages from extinction, and which seem to be utterly lacking in the South African, African language situation, hence the seemingly inevitable disappearance of these languages.

### **Politics of Dominance**

Simply defined, dominance means the situation whereby one group or person has power over another. The dominance in question here is also referred to as hegemony, which means “political, economic, ideological or cultural power exerted by a dominant group over other groups, regardless of the explicit consent of the latter” (Upton et al. 2001). This dominance involves a prize to be won or claimed.

Hegemony . . . *dictates* the politics of the hegemony’s constituent subordinate states via cultural imperialism – the imposition of its *way of life*, i.e. its language (the imperial *lingua franca*) and bureaucracies (social, economic, educational, governing), to make formal its dominance – thus transforming external domination into an abstraction, because *power* is in the *status quo* (“the way things are”) not in any leader(s). (Kissinger 1994: 137-8; 145).

This *power over* is usually possible because of one group having large numbers while the other has few numbers, as one of the universal laws is that there is power in numbers. However, historically there have been a number of cases in the world of demographic minorities having power over the demographic majorities because the dominant minority has excessive political, economic and cultural dominance. According to Little and Smith (2006:229), dominance in the world systems manifests itself in “. . . fundamental inequalities arising from differences of

wealth, of access to resources and of cultural cleavages.” This is especially true of the dominance in languages, also referred to as ‘linguistic imperialism.’

Phillipson (1997:239) describes linguistic imperialism as “a sub-type of linguicism, a term [used] to draw parallels between hierarchisation on the basis of ‘race’ or ethnicity (racism, ethnicism), gender (sexism) and language (linguicism),” and whose studies focus on “how language contributes to unequal access to societal power and how linguistic hierarchies operate and are legitimated.” Further, “ ‘Linguistic imperialism’ is shorthand for a multitude of activities, ideologies and structural relationships. [It] takes place within an overarching structure of asymmetrical North/South relations, where language interlocks with other dimensions, cultural . . . economic and political” (Phillipson 1997:239).

The emergence of linguicism is traced to the early 1970s, though the coinage of this term is accredited to Skutnabb-Kangas in 1986 (Ricento 2000:204). During this phase of language policy and planning which Ricento (2000:200-203) identifies as “The second phase: Failure of modernization, critical sociolinguistics, and access,” the effects of language contact on the social, economic, and political arenas became the focus of linguistic studies. It was during this period that influential work in this field was published, for instance work by Hymes, Skutnabb-Kangas, and the collection of papers on language inequality, edited by Wolfson and Manes (1985). Evidence from recent studies and publications, however, shows that language equality is not being achieved, despite the body of knowledge that has been accumulated over the last 40 decades, illuminating the crisis of language inequality as another form of social inequality in the modern world. In the next section of this paper I analyze politics of dominance in and through language.

### *Silenced and invisible*

A notable characteristic of the dominated, the disempowered and dispossessed is voicelessness. The disempowered lose their voices and their languages, as a result of years of not being listened to, heard, or understood, and years of repression. bell hooks (cited in Walsh 1991: xx), who sees empowerment in “coming to voice,” writes, “Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless . . . our beings defined and interpreted by others.” Fanon (1967:17), articulating the power of language, states: “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation.” Being silenced or voiceless, therefore, means the culture associated with those without a voice is not practiced, and therefore suppressed, and ultimately extinguished.

### *Replaced with dominant language*

The tendency is to replace the languages of the minority (in status) with the languages of the powerful majority. Examples where languages of weaker groups were suppressed and replaced with languages of the powerful groups may be found all over the world. Ostler (2000:3) reports that “[p]ressure to abandon a language in favor of a more dominant one has been direct and forceful.” She then gives examples of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Australia, the United States, and the English Government where native children (Aborigines, Native Americans, and Celtic language speakers respectively) were punished for speaking their languages in the schools which were set up to assimilate them into the major culture and language. Ostler (2000:3) explains the repression of minority languages “as a first step toward repressing the minorities themselves.” In modern



societies, multilingualism gets suppressed while monolingualism is promoted in the name of economic viability or promoting unity.

### ***War with words***

Someone “wages war on others by means of words ... [and] seeks adversely to affect the conditions of other people’s lives, to obtain power over them, to rob them of their human dignity or, in the extreme case, of their physical existence, using among other means words, statements, texts” (Brekle 1989:81). This is often demonstrated by the names used to refer to one another where the dominant and the dominated occupy the same territory.

What’s in a name? In this case of politics of dominance, naming is often instrumental in the war with or through words. “Naming has always been an important issue . . . because of its link to the exercise of power . . . those who name also control, and those who are named are subjugated” (King 1990:1). This is achieved by the use of descriptors and classificatory terms in reference to the powerless, dispossessed and the minority (in status), to distinguish them from the powerful groups who often do not get a qualifier, which suggests that they are the norm, and therefore it is the “other” that needs to be specified. In the USA, for instance, the qualified groups are: Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans, but no qualifier is applied to the majority group of European origins, as in “European Americans.” Also, there is not necessarily an equivalent term for the people in power as in: non-natives (vs. natives), immigrants (vs. indigenous or Aboriginal), Second or Third Nations (vs. First Nations), non-visible minorities or visible majorities (vs. Visible Minorities in Canada), non-Kaffirs (in South Africa) (vs. Kaffirs), and European/Immigrant South Africans (vs. Indigenous South Africans).

In naming the disempowered/dispossessed minorities (by those with power), there is noticeable incongruence between the name and the status of the groups. Being classified as the original group or the predecessor, for example, the North American “FIRST Nations” and “NATIVE Americans,” “Natives” or Indigenous population (in South Africa) does not give the group a privileged status. In this regard, the irony is that it is the powerful immigrants (therefore newcomers) who grant the predecessor status, “First” or “Native,” even though just in name. The naming powerful group, however, does not in turn classify itself as “Foreign,” “Settler,” or “Immigrant” nation.

Regardless of what the disempowered called themselves they get renamed by the powerful settlers. Often the new names for the indigenous dispossessed groups are not linked to the names given to the geographical areas or countries. The groups have, for instance, been named the Aborigines, the Red Indians, and the Kaffirs, while their areas have been named Australia, America and South Africa respectively. In South Africa, the terms or names that have been used for the oppressed minorities in question are: the natives, Kaffirs, non-Europeans, non-whites, Plurals, Blacks, and Bushmen, where the term African or South African would have sufficed. Not only did the new names replace the terms or names the groups called themselves, for example, *abaNtsundu* (Xhosa term for indigenous Africans), *amaHlubi* (Hlubi people in reference to themselves), *Barwa* (Sotho term for Khoisan people), *Basotho* (Sothos), but, most importantly, effectively delinked the dispossessed from their land.

Another consistent incongruence in politics of dominance, between the name and status of a group, is that, instead of the distinction being made between Indigenous/First Nations/ Non-immigrants, and immigrants/foreigners/new nations, the divisions are always according to color and the status held in society. In Canada, for instance, instead of grouping Blacks/African

Canadians, an early immigrant group in Nova Scotia, with other immigrants, such as Scot Canadians or European Canadians, they are grouped with the vanquished First Nations in Canada, while the recent European immigrants and the Far East, light-skinned Asians generally enjoy the same privileged status as the majority White Canadians of European origins. In South Africa, Indians, who are celebrating 150 years in South Africa in 2010, have never been grouped with immigrants from Europe or North America but with the people of mixed race, the “Colored” population, and Africans, because of the color of their skin, while White immigrants and foreigners, for example, Germans, French and Australians, enjoy privileges of the White minority, however late they migrated to this country.

### **Dominance in South Africa**

The written history of South Africa starts from the colonization of South Africa by the Dutch, after Jan van Reibeeck and his Dutch East India Trading Company arrived in 1652 and settled in the Cape. The British seized the Cape from the Dutch in 1795 but their final conquest of the Cape was in 1806. British sovereignty of the area was recognized at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

While the interest of the Dutch had been agricultural (to get products for trading), the British “...took far more interest in controlling the colonies and the people who lived in them” (Christie 1991:33). As part of colonization, the British paid a lot of attention to the education of the natives/indigenous population. The intention was to spread the British language, culture and traditions as a means of social control. To that purpose, English was declared the official language; the church, government offices and schools anglicized, and teachers brought over from

England to teach in the schools the British had established in the English tradition (Christie 1991).

During this period of British control, groups of missionaries from different countries arrived in South Africa from 1799. The missionaries represented different denominations and group interests (Christie 1991; www.country-data). Christie (1991:72) reports:

Mostly, the missionaries taught basic reading and writing, along with Christian doctrine. It was easier for literate people to absorb religious ideas by reading the Bible and taking part in hymn-singing. Basic education became an important means for conversion. A short period of basic reading and writing, together with Christian doctrine, was the most common education provided by mission schools.

Since the interest of the missionaries was in converting the Africans into Christianity, there was no interest in developing the African languages, beyond the functional use of reading the Bible. The African languages were, therefore, neglected as languages of instruction and as subjects, in favor of academic learning, and the English and Dutch languages (Mda 2004).

During the apartheid period (1948 until 1994), the different groups in South Africa were divided according to race, ethnicity, culture and language. This was achieved through policies such as the Population Registration Act of 1950 and the Group Areas Act of 1950 and of 1957. The Population Registration Act of 1950 “required that all inhabitants of South Africa be classified in accordance with their *racial characteristics* as part of the system of apartheid. Social rights, political rights, educational opportunities, and economic status were largely determined by which group an individual belonged to” (Body-Evans 2010:1). The Population Registration Act in turn determined the implementation of other racially based laws such as the

Group Areas Act (EconomicExpert.com 2010) which mandated each racial group to reside in an area exclusively designated for the group, with amenities and services for the group all within the area. These included schools, hospitals, stadiums, administrative offices and universities, if any. Universities were further classified by ethnicity and language so that there were universities for: White Afrikaners; White English; Indians; Coloreds; Xhosas; Zulus; and one for Sothos, Tswanas, Shangaans and Vendas.

Through the Laws mentioned above and others such as the Bantu Education Act of 1953 (No.47) and the Bantu Homelands Citizens Act of 1970, language became a cornerstone of the apartheid ideology (Mda 2004). Racial domination was tied to language domination, as those who had power belonged to a particular race, and so their language(s) became the language(s) of power, and vice versa for the Africans and the African languages as the dominated and powerless groups. Language-based homelands were created and African language speakers were then allocated to the various homelands according to the languages they spoke even if they had never been to those regions/areas. As mentioned above, even universities were classified according to language, hence the University of Zululand for *amaZulu*, and University of Fort Hare for *amaXhosa*. Teachers were trained in teacher colleges for their own language groups, and in the urban areas, where there were multiple ethnic groups, schools were classified according to language. Two languages, English and Afrikaans, were declared South Africa's official languages, and both of them were the languages of the powerful minority race. As for the African languages, since the homelands were language-based, these languages were automatically official languages of the respective homelands, but not in "South Africa."

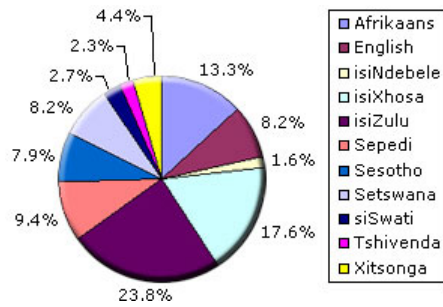
While the apartheid Nationalist government could be credited for promoting the use of African languages and mother-tongue education, this was not for altruistic reasons. There was no

correlation between the promotion of the use of African languages and the creation of African language-based areas and facilities on one side, and the resources allocated to the Africans' education and the development of African languages. In fact, as Alexander (1998:4) states, during apartheid time the "African languages [were] deliberately underdeveloped and neglected." Even the aggressive promotion and legislated use of African languages had its downsides. The increased use of African languages in the education system of Africans effectively limited the access of the African learners to the languages of power, the two former official languages, English and Afrikaans. In the momentous collection of papers by Wolfson and Manes (1985), Spencer (p.392), drew attention to the danger of this situation, as it made ". . . people linguistically self-sufficient through the sole use of their mother tongue" and led them "towards a linguistic and cultural ghetto, with all the economic and political disadvantage [that this] entails" (1985:392). Thus, as Ricento (2000:204) illustrates, "language becomes a vector and means by which an unequal division of power and resources between groups is propagated . . . thwarting social and economic progress for those who do not learn the language of modernity - English – . . . ."

The domination of South African languages is not a result of big numbers dominating a few, that is, languages with the majority speakers dominating languages with few speakers, but a case of dominance by languages whose speakers possessed the political and cultural power. Even today the speakers of the African languages are still in the majority, but it is the languages of the minority, English and Afrikaans languages, that are the languages of power. Table 1 below illustrates the distribution of the national languages in South Africa.

**Table 1- The languages of South Africa**

**Language distribution**



Home language	Black	Coloured	Indian or Asian	White	Total
Afrikaans	0.7%	79.5%	1.7%	59.1%	13.3%
English	0.5%	18.9%	93.8%	39.3%	8.2%
isiNdebele	2.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.1%	1.6%
isiXhosa	22.3%	0.3%	0.1%	0.1%	17.6%
isiZulu	30.1%	0.3%	0.2%	0.1%	23.8%
Sepedi	11.9%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	9.4%
Sesotho	10.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	7.9%
Setswana	10.3%	0.4%	0.0%	0.1%	8.2%
siSwati	3.4%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	2.7%
Tshivenda	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.3%
Xitsonga	5.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.4%
Other	0.3%	0.2%	3.8%	1.1%	0.5%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	35.42m	3.99m	1.16m	4.29m	44.82m

South Africa.info 2010

The languages of concern to this paper, those under threat of extinction, are the African languages in table 1 above, which form 78.5 percent of languages spoken in South Africa. The explanation for this incongruence is the politics of dominance which is the premise of this paper.

### **South African Languages after 1994**

In 1996, a new Constitution was adopted (RSA 1996). The Constitution, which propagates principles and values of multilingualism, redefined the status of African languages. In the Constitution (Chapter 1, Section 6), the nine local African languages are added to the previous two official languages to make eleven official languages in South Africa. According to Chapter 2, Section 29 (2):

Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where the education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account

- (a) equity;
- (b) practicability; and
- (c) the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices.

Chapter 2, Section 30 provides “... the right to use the language and participate in the cultural life of one’s choice ...” while Chapter 2, Section 31 ensures that:

...persons belonging to a cultural, religious or linguistic community may



not be denied the right, with other members of that community (a) to enjoy their culture, practise their religion and use their language; and (b) to form, join and maintain cultural, religious and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society.

In addition to the declaration of eleven official languages, the provisions regarding the promotion of all languages and the Bill of Rights, a statutory body, the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB), was established by national legislation to promote and create conditions for the development and use of all eleven official languages, as well as the Khoi, Nama and San languages, the sign language and all languages commonly used by communities in the country (RSA 1996:4-5). In 1995 the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology also appointed a Language Plan Task Group to advise him “on a framework for a coherent language policy and plan” (RSA 2002:3).

As a result of the Constitutional provisions and recommendations of structures and Bodies tasked with devising a language framework, the multilingual Language in Education Policy (LiEP) for schools was announced in 1997, while the policy framework for Language Policy for Higher Education was distributed in 2002.

Constitutionally, therefore, multilingualism and multilingual education were legislated. In LiEP, for instance, it is stated:

Where no school in a school district offers the desired language as a medium of learning and teaching, the learner may request the provincial education department to make provision for instruction in the chosen language ....

The provincial education department must make copies of the request available to all schools in the relevant school district. (RSA 1997)

Despite the change in legislation and the interventions described above to elevate and empower the African languages, African languages seem to be inevitably destined for extinction. The damaging effects of dominance and suppression are manifested in the attitudes the speakers generally have towards their languages and how they use them.

Even though constitutionally there are eleven official languages in South Africa, in reality there are two official languages, the two former official languages. The continued bilingual system or policy (English and Afrikaans / English or Afrikaans) which forces people to choose between two languages, even though there are eleven official languages in South Africa, invalidates the other nine official languages, which, in fact, are the languages of the majority. Even today African language speakers are forced to choose between English and Afrikaans when filling in official forms, or at medical doctors' offices. African language speakers who often choose English (because of having received education through that language) then get classified as English-speakers, and so get addressed and receive official correspondence in English. This is similar to the practice of classifying Africans, in the African continent, not according to their African languages but as Franco-phones, Anglo-phones, or Lusophones, in a continent where Africans, and by implication African languages, are in the majority.

The inequalities among the languages and the lingering superiority of the former official languages are also illuminated in that when the African language-speaker meets a White, Indian or Colored person, they speak in English or Afrikaans, but mainly in English, but almost never an African language. English, therefore, has assumed the position of lingua franca in South Africa. The African language-speaker understands and accepts that (s)he is expected to switch to the other's language. According to Vilakazi (2000:198), that the majority of these groups can neither speak nor write any African language, in a country where the African languages are the

languages of the majority, results in “...serious distortions and errors into policies in the sphere of culture and education” because “knowledge of its languages is the prime portal to any culture.” When the African in interactions with others, switches to the other’s language, in Fanon (1967)’s words then, the African assumes the other’s culture and supports the weight of the other’s civilization. This also emphasizes the voicelessness of one in this unequal relationship where only one of the two gets to be heard, and therefore known and understood.

***Government’s lack of will to implement multilingualism which would elevate and empower African languages***

South Africa is no longer governed by the powerful minority but by the historically-oppressed majority who are African language speakers. The latter include the Minister of Arts and Culture, and the Minister of Basic Education. Yet, there are no discernible efforts to ensure equity of languages, especially empowerment of African languages. African politicians display no interest in pushing the development and uplifting of the African languages. There seems to be a need by African language-speakers generally, including government officials, to impress others that they have mastered English (the symbol of civilization and sophistication) and that they have outgrown African languages, the symbol of the “linguistic and cultural ghetto” to which they were assigned (Spencer 1985).

Vilakazi (2000: 197-8) laments:

The tragedy of African civilization is that Western-educated Africans became lost and irrelevant as intellectuals who could develop African civilization further. Historically, intellectuals of any civilization are the voice of that civilization to the rest of the world . . . . The tragedy of Africa, after conquest by the West, is that her intellectuals, by and large,

absconded and abdicated their role as developers, minstrels and trumpeters of African civilization.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1997:23), in reference to alienation and dislocation of African leaders, wrote:

In their wilful narcissism, to use Frantz Fanon's phrase, [some] leaders came to believe that it was they as a social group who constituted the new nations. Instead of empowering the languages of those who had given them power, they came to believe that their power lay solely in their capacity to interpret, to talk to the West, and among themselves, about the fate of the nation. 'Tribal' languages would tear the new nation apart.

Fanon's description of the leaders above seems to explain why the African political leaders in South Africa are seen on television using English, while supposedly addressing their constituencies who speak African languages. One might argue that not all the party members speak a common African language. Still, how does one decide to speak English if in a gathering of one thousand people in KwaZulu-Natal twenty to fifty do not understand isiZulu, while maybe, more than five hundred are not competent in English? It is in such instances that it becomes obvious, as Ngugi says, that the leader is not speaking to the followers but to the West, which is represented by the media people.

Another area, in which the lack of vision and leadership in promoting the official languages in the country is demonstrated, is the naming and renaming of places in South Africa. What we observe is opportunism by, usually, the populists and youth groups in the current ruling

party, whereby buildings, streets, and towns named after Afrikaner heroes and even Black heroes who were not from the ruling party are targeted for renaming after the ruling party's heroes. This is neither a redress nor a nation-building measure, but an opportunistic behavior, which often, in fact, reflects meanness and vindictiveness of those who push this agenda. While there is a Geographical Names Council, there is no evident policy or monitoring of the naming of new housing and industrial developments, residential areas, and streets, to ensure they reflect all the official languages. Whereas much effort is spent on replacing Afrikaans names of towns and streets with African names, new (post-1994) residential areas, roads, residential complexes, shopping centers and so on, in metropolitan areas like Pretoria city, are named almost exclusively in Afrikaans and English. The self-appointed renaming sheriffs pay no attention to this naming practice. The Heritage Council and the Arts and Culture Department do not seem to see this as an issue, or an area to be legislated, as the exclusion of African language names in naming new areas is not treated as a problematic practice. The result is that African languages are again excluded from the hub of the metropolises and relegated to townships and rural areas.

According to Delpit (1995), those with power are frequently least aware of, or at least willing to acknowledge, its existence, while those with less power are often most aware of its existence. "For many who consider themselves liberals or radicals, acknowledging personal power and admitting participation in the culture of power is distinctly uncomfortable ... those less powerful in any situation are most likely to recognize the power most acutely" (Delpit 1995:26). Those participating in the culture of power in South Africa post-1994 include the decision-makers in the post-1994 Black Government; the Black middle and upper class whose daily interactions entail use of the two still powerful languages, English and Afrikaans, either as first language or language(s) of choice; and the first language English and Afrikaans speakers. The African

language speakers from this privileged group underestimate the effects of linguistic inequality in the South African society, and the predominantly Black South African Government specifically, is not doing enough to address the problem of linguistic inequality in South Africa as another form of social inequality. This is despite the overwhelming evidence from studies of how success in institutions, schools, and workplaces is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power, which includes acquisition of the languages of power (Alexander 1998; Delpit 1995; Spencer 1985).

### ***Rejection of African languages by African language speakers***

Some features of being oppressed that are evident in the conquest of Africa and its languages are fatalism, attraction towards the oppressors and their ways, self-deprecation and dependence. As early as four decades ago, Fanon (1967:25) expressed dismay at the situation of Africans who were displaying “dislocation” and “separation” from their groups. In modern Africa we observe and listen to Africans rejecting African languages and Africanness. The reproduction of the power imbalances between language groups is, therefore, assisted by the disempowered language groups.

In present-day South Africa, suburban children born to African language-speaking parents begin their schooling in nursery schools and crèches where the language of instruction is not the home language. This is not an imposition on the learners but the reality of suburban living. Suburbs or residential areas in close proximity to the cities were formerly areas reserved for White people, and even the new middle to upper middle class housing developments are mainly in the suburbs, inside the city, or in exclusive residential areas such as the gated communities. Otherwise, the national LiEP gives learners, especially at Foundation stage, the right to be taught

in their home language. Ideally, the neighborhood schools would have the local/indigenous languages as languages of learning, so that parents could send their children to the relevant schools.

Apart from the suburban Africans, many African parents in Black townships and even in rural villages send their children to former White, Indian or Colored schools. In these schools there are very few, if any African teachers. So, the student population may be multicultural or multilingual, but the staff population is almost always monocultural, monolingual or bilingual (meaning English and/or Afrikaans-speaking) (Mda 2004). Despite the Constitutional provisions and the Education Language policies, languages of learning are still exclusively English and/or Afrikaans in mixed schools. African languages are usually not part of the curriculum, but sometimes are taught as third, additional or foreign languages. The problem is that the African language, for example, *isiZulu* or *Sepedi*, chosen to be taught as an additional language in a school in Gauteng Province, may be as foreign as Afrikaans and English to the African learner. The result is that an African learner may study three languages, all of them foreign. While the multilingual objective may be achieved, if the learner's home language is not one of those studied, the home language is therefore not affirmed. That then defeats the purpose of multilingualism whereby all languages are affirmed.

Many African children from upper socio-economic families, and those who attend school in the city or suburbs, speak English to one another and with their parents. Their parents believe that if their children speak only these languages they have better chances to succeed at school. One of the reasons why English is fast becoming the preferred language of second or third language English speakers, is advanced by Tuhus-Dubrow. She states, "English, as the linguistic branch of the mighty American Empire, has run rampant across the globe, in perhaps the most

insidious form of linguistic imperialism: seduction. People want to speak English, because it is the language of advertising, blockbuster movies and pop music, as well as a **vital tool for success**” (emphasis added) (2002:10).

The replacement of African languages by English in African homes, where children cannot speak their parents’ language(s), and cannot hold a conversation in African languages even to give their names or to say ordinary greetings, is the indication that these languages are destined for extinction. Ostler (2000:1) in her analysis of disappearing languages, states that “a healthy language is one that acquires new speakers. No matter how many adults use the language, if it isn’t passed to the next generation, its fate is already sealed.”

Another observation about Africans’ ambivalence about African languages and English, is that while Africans are always on the guard to make sure no other African language dominates theirs (as evidenced by the difficulty in African societies to choose one African national language), English, and other colonizers’ languages such as French or Portuguese, are welcome. This contradiction has been true for decades and still persists. Ricento (2000:202) observes:

The choice of European languages as ‘neutral media’ to aid in national development tended to favor the economic interests of metropolitan countries, often with negative effects on the economic, social, and political interests of marginalized minority language speakers. The de facto privileging of certain languages and varieties in national language planning had the effect of limiting the utility and, hence, influence of thousands of indigenous languages and their speakers in national (re)construction.



### *Constructed/Defined*

As already illustrated under the section “War with words”, naming is a powerful weapon in dominance. Even in the new South Africa, the words used to refer to African languages, for example, reveal the attitudes towards these languages. The word *vernacular*, for instance, could apply to any world language if we take the dictionary meanings, “native language of a country or region, not of foreign origin, common everyday language of ordinary people in a particular locality; language of a particular class or group; homely speech” (*American Heritage Dictionary* 2000; *merriam-webster online dictionary* 2010; *Thesaurus* 1995). Yet, we scarcely ever hear of the English language or German language being referred to as a vernacular. Somehow the word, in South Africa at least, just like the phrase *mother tongue*, has become almost synonymous with African Languages. A complete definition of the word *vernacular* in the dictionaries includes “... distinct from literary language,” and “not of learned formation” (*American Heritage Dictionary* 2000). So, while the literature, phonetics, morphology, and prosodics of the African languages are being studied up to doctoral level at university, the African languages are referred to as vernaculars (“distinct from literary language” and “not of learned formation”), while in the languages of power, distinction is made between the vernacular and formal language. This reference to African languages as vernaculars is used by African language speakers as well who are none the wiser.

Another anomaly in South Africa, reflective of its racial politics, is that African languages are frequently referred to as “Black,” “Ethnic” or “Indigenous languages.” The linguistic formula that prescribes that people from Europe are Europeans who speak European languages, or those in Asia to be Asians, speaking Asian languages, is not applied to Africans and their languages. When it comes to the African languages, the race or racial qualities of their

speakers are used in reference to the languages, a practice only reserved for the Africans. African language speakers tend to internalize this relegation of their language to some form of communication that is racially-based as they too are frequently heard referring to their languages as “Black” languages.

The tendency to racialize Africa and African belongings was also observed by Mensah in Canada. Mensah (2002:22), points out the inexplicable exclusive racialization of Africans, as he refers to the definition of the group, “visible minorities,” a Canadian classification term:

The [Canadian Employment Equity Act of 1986] specifies the following groups as visible minorities in Canada: Chinese, South Asians, Blacks, Arabs and West Asians, Filipinos, Southeast Asians, Latin Americans, Japanese, Koreans, and Pacific Islanders. Clearly, of all the categories listed, “Blacks” is the only one that is based on skin color and not on geographic location.

Of course, had the definition been consistently applied in the Canadian Act above, the list would have “Africans” instead of “Blacks.” This consistent reference to Africans and all things African in terms of their race or color strips them of their history, geographical location and culture. The implication is that these people have no land of origin, and thus do not belong anywhere, and are distinct only in terms of their color, and as a result, their languages are given a color for classification, instead of geographical and historical classification. This is a classical example of politics of dominance.

As discussed earlier under the heading “politics of dominance,” war gets waged on others by means of words. Africans in this case, together with their languages, are associated with a term and color that is not neutral, but one with a negative connotation. While Africans, therefore, interact with others and among themselves in the English language, they must be internalizing the distortions and insults about them embedded in the language. Dominance in this case is achieved with words.

### *Comparison between African language speakers and Afrikaans*

What has happened since 1994 and after the adoption of the Constitution, regarding the language policy, has been a very lukewarm response to the needs of the previously marginalised language groups. English is instead emerging as the dominant and preferred language, seemingly with the blessing of the government. On a lower scale than that of English, Afrikaans continues to enjoy a privileged language status, and the Afrikaans speakers enjoy, practise and use their language, and continue to form, join and maintain the Afrikaans language associations as provided for in the Constitution. The privileges enjoyed by Afrikaans, a local language, and its speakers, are not a result of preferential treatment by the government, but a result of the determination, resilience, conviction and strong will of the Afrikaners. Of course, the Afrikaners are assisted by a privileged history and the culture of power (Delpit 1995).

In March 2010 an Afrikaner group took the South African government to court to force it to honor its constitutional obligations to ensure that all 11 official languages enjoy parity. The attorney who brought the application to court said that “... as things stood, all other languages had to stand back for English” (*Pretoria News*, March 09, 2010:4) which was contrary to the constitutional provisions. The Government was referred to the National Language Act which was

published as a Bill in 2003 but was never implemented. The judge ruled in favor of the Afrikaner group.

What is striking about this case is that the group that took the government to court through this attorney is a group whose language is fairly privileged and still plays a significant role in South African society, not the majority South Africans whose languages have not been elevated as decreed in the Constitution. The differences between the two language groups in response to the emergence of English as a dominant language reflect the opposite ends at which these two groups have been in the history of dominance and suppression in South Africa. As stated before, Afrikaners have historically been privileged and have a culture of power [over]. The African language speakers, on the other hand, as a result of being historically-dominated, seem to be easily capitulating to the dominance of English over their languages, which, constitutionally, have the same status as English. It seems evident then that the African languages are destined for disappearance, because, unlike Afrikaans, they have no history of privilege, no historical rights that have to be protected and preserved, no culture of power, and no usefulness to many of the African middle class, elite and decision-makers. As Haugen (1985:14) stated:

If inclusive language policies such as bilingual education fail, the source of the problem does not lie in the classroom, but in the policies, overt and covert, public or private, of the society in which education is taking place. If the language of the home . . . is looked down upon and is not supported by the prestige of an elite, then the acquisition of a second language which does have prestige may be disastrous to the pride and cohesion of the pupil's ethnic group.

## **The destiny of African languages**

The situation of disappearing languages in the world is a concern to linguists as well as some communities. Some of the reasons for the disappearance of languages are:

- colonization through which some linguistic communities are wiped out in their entirety;
- legislation introduced against use of minority languages in schools and workplace;
- pressure by government on minority languages to assimilate to the majority language (Tuhus-Dubrow 2002);
- the high prestige associated with “speaking an imperial language” (National Geographic 2010); and
- the Allee effect (usually in animals) whereby a species declines to small numbers, when applied to languages the result being that people “just don’t want to learn them because there are so few others who can speak [the language]” (Connor 2003:1).

Though all the above reasons are applicable to the African languages in South Africa, the main contributing factor to their seemingly inevitable disappearance is colonization, which was the first big threat, and the one which has had the biggest impact and lasting effect on the African language speakers. Exclusive official language policies have also had a detrimental effect. Lastly, as a result of the repression of the African languages through colonization, legislated assimilation, and exclusive official languages, the African languages are losing their appeal amongst their speakers, while there is an allure in speaking the power languages.

### ***Models from around the world***

Below are some models and practices from around the world to save endangered languages.

*Language nests/immersion in language* - The “‘language nests’ [are established] for children in instances of generation-skipping” (Tuhus-Dubrow 2002:1). Children are sent to schools where they use their ancestral languages, and taught by elderly native speakers in a cozy and playful atmosphere. Examples of these are language nests in New Zealand for Maori children, and Navajo speakers in the USA. In both instances the languages were already dead or dying. The nine official African languages in South Africa still have a chance of thriving and escaping these resuscitation strategies, if they are nurtured today and empowered. The South African Khoisan language group, however, would benefit from this practice as these languages are already disappearing. Ostler (2000:5) refers to the application of the language nests’ strategy to the Welsh and Navajo languages, as being nursed in a “cultural sickbed to new life.”

*Complete documentation* - Another measure used to reverse the trend of disappearance is complete documentation of the languages. As reported earlier on the history of South African languages, the African languages have been written since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (isiXhosa being the first one to be written in 1823), and these languages have been developed to such an extent that they have been studied up to doctoral level at university. However, considering the dwindling number of the African language courses in South African universities, and the young people who do not speak them, these languages may ultimately exist only in records.

*Re-introducing endangered language as taught language at school; Introduce mother tongue medium education* - This measure is one that may save the African languages. The languages exist in written form; they still have millions of speakers; there are still teachers who were trained to teach these languages up to higher education; the current Constitution and the education policies encourage and advocate use of mother tongue education as well as promotion of multilingualism. Money and advocacy could then be directed towards this cause.

Finally, all the money and other resources thrown at this problem will not help if there is no will, and that seems to be the biggest challenge facing these African languages. Aina (2010: 24) in an expression of frustration on the endless reforms in African higher education<sup>2</sup> with no visible progress, advises, “ What is needed is ... to go beyond the reforms – seen as managerial or tinkering and modification of formal policies, practices, and structures – and instead carry out a more fundamental and inclusive reengagement with vision, mission, structures, and values, reclaiming the political will and organization to mobilize and accomplish the necessary changes and reconfigurations.” The same is needed for the African languages.

### ***Why should the languages be saved?***

While African languages are an endangered species, this does not attract as much attention from society as some aspects of civilization and history. Sutherland is cited by Connor (2003:1) as saying, “The threats to birds and mammals are well known but it turns out that languages are far more threatened.” Further, “...when comparisons were made to threatened animals, there was a substantially higher proportion of languages that could be considered ‘critically endangered’, ‘endangered’ or ‘vulnerable’ ” (p.2).

The linguists, who are also advocates for the saving of languages, explain that saving languages is not just a sentimental issue for the language communities concerned, but a matter of concern to human development. Ostler (2000:2) refers to language extinction as “Fewer languages, fewer thoughts,” and that “language diversity is as important in its way as biological diversity.” Diverse languages provide insights into the diverse histories and experiences of the world’s peoples. This is possible because each language has an opportunity to contribute vocabulary and introduce nuances to world communication at large.

Tuhus-Dubrow (2002:1) argues: “... the disappearance of languages including entire language families could undermine the discipline’s efforts to assess limits and possibilities of linguistic cognition.” This is because language disappearance is tied to loss of indigenous knowledge. For instance, Tuhus-Dubrow (2002) cites the example of assistance provided to scientists by the Australian Aboriginal languages in the research on the area’s ancient plant life. The Aboriginal people are credited for possessing invaluable knowledge of medicinal plants through their languages and traditional cultures.

Making an appeal for the preservation of all the world’s languages, Tuhus-Dubrow (2002:1) argues that “language embodies the spectrum of human vision, and its varieties provide unparalleled insights into the diversity of human experience and perception ....” She continues, citing Whalen of Yale who argues that, “[language] helps preserve a record of the value system that’s intrinsic to any language. Any culture can be expressed in any language in some way, but the native language is most efficient. Language does not merely represent a culture, but is its own contribution to that culture” (Tuhus-Dubrow 2002:1). Ostler (2000:6) concurs as she outlines two possible scenarios for the future, depending on the choices we make today. In one scenario “...the world becomes increasingly homogenized as minority cultures and their



languages are swept away in the oncoming tide of standardization. The accumulated knowledge of millennia disappears, **leaving the world a poorer place**” [emphasis added].

From the declared benefits of keeping diverse languages and their varieties, may be extrapolated the wealth in the African languages that needs to be preserved. The histories and the experiences of the African people from the pre-civilization period are bound to be captured through the language and the expression of the people who lived them. Each African language is also a container of indigenous knowledge. The contribution the African cultures have made to the world cultures and the influence they have had on the cultures and languages in close proximity to them, including the dominant languages and cultures may not be underestimated.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion above has demonstrated that colonization has a lasting effect on those upon whom it has been imposed, including the languages of the colonized. Yet, there are examples where the languages have emerged from being trodden, and arose from near extinction. Saving languages depends on, amongst other factors, the political will among the leaders and those with the power to effect changes. The discussion in this paper has demonstrated that there is very little if any political will in the South African Government to elevate the African languages, protect them, and ensure they thrive for generations.

Ultimately, for the efforts and interventions to save languages to succeed, the speakers of the language must feel it is worth saving. Afrikaans-speakers have demonstrated the will, determination, passion and commitment to ensure their language survives. African language speakers on the other hand, seem to have succumbed, after years of suppression and forced

silence, and are now rejecting their languages in favor of the power languages, especially the imperial language, English. With the rejection of the African languages by their speakers, and the absence of political will to save them, the conquest of the African languages is now complete, and their destiny is extinction, together with the more than 3500 languages expected to disappear by year 2100 (Connor 2003; National Geographic 2010; Tuhus-Dubrow 2002).

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## Notes

1. References to language-speakers – African language-speakers, Afrikaans-speakers, and English-speakers – are in terms of groups, not individual speakers.
2. I found Aina’s analysis of the politics of higher education in Africa, uncannily applicable and transferable to the situation of language policies in most of Africa, and especially in the South African situation. His reference to African higher education as “resembl[ing] a thick forest of institutions, systems, and practices lacking clear and distinct tracks, values, and goals, or a mission and vision that connect the institutions and systems sufficiently to the major challenges of their contexts (whether global or local),” could easily be a description of the African language policies, with [language policies] replacing higher education; [policies] replacing institutions; and [African language speakers/majority population] replacing contexts. His blame of non-progress on “years of colonization, inept and corrupt postcolonial leadership, and different types of collective servitude – and . . . economic adjustment programs that were neither internally debated nor owned by the citizens . . .” as equally relevant and applicable to the non-transformation of language policies in South Africa.