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The use of plain language — not that simple

ABSTRACT

The inception of democracy in South Africa in 1994 also saw the birth of a new language dispensation granting 11 languages official status. This, as well as the fact that English is often claimed to be the de facto lingua franca despite the fact that it is not by far the largest language in terms of mother tongue speakers, carries with it concerns relating to successful communication. One solution that has been offered is the introduction of plain language. However, factors such as cross-cultural inference, specific discourse strategies and post-colonial discourse style seem to play an important role in this complex multilingual and multicultural society. These aspects should also be borne in mind in the debate concerning the use of BSAE in the English L2 classroom.

Key words: second language speakers; English; language proficiency; plain language; cross-cultural inference; discourse strategies; post-colonial discourse style

1. Background

The majority of the users of English in South Africa are second language speakers with a varying degree of proficiency in English. Although the debate on the practical implementation of multilingualism is still rife and political lip service is paid to it, politicians in particular do not adhere to the call for the implementation of multilingualism. This should be regarded as rather short-sighted on their side, considering that research indicates that 46% of South Africans under-stand very little (if anything at all) when leaders use English only (PANSALBnews, 2000: 8).

In an article on English language proficiency in South Africa, De Kadt (2000: 31) concludes (that) "the type of English-language proficiency appropriate to South Africa (should) involve the ability to communicate with speakers of a range of varieties of English". She suggests that such proficiency will pose challenges to both native and non-native speakers of English, and will require considerable input from educationalists. In my opinion, registers and domains should also be taken into consideration as successful communication generally depends on discourse strategies and conventions that are also register and domain-specific.

Criticism relating to the use of 'bad' English is not limited to politicians and is rampant in both the public and private domains. This is evident from letters in the daily press where "complaints" regarding the use of "bad" English on radio and television are numerous (also see Ridge, 1995: 48; Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000: 19). However, the impression one gets from reading these letters indicates that the so-called "bad" English might simply be different varieties of

English and to be more specific, Black South African English (BSAE). Smit (2000: 135) defines BSAE as "the English of ESL (English Second Language – MP) speakers whose first languages are Bantu languages" and points out that "this description already includes the two factors that account for the extreme heterogeneity of BSAE: firstly that it is a second language and, secondly, that there is a range of first languages to be considered". In other words: varying degrees of language proficiency and competence as well as varying degrees of first language have a role to play. In the past, BSAE was generally associated with a relatively low social status, particularly when compared to White South African English (WSAE) (see, Smit, 2000: 135). It is therefore not surprising that politicians who are speakers of BSAE are especially prone to criticism. They are often considered to be incoherent, not to the point and evasive.

This could well be true of politicians elsewhere, as the historical and procedural nature of language within a legislative context should be viewed as a specialised register with its own conventions, which may be inaccessible to the uninitiated. In the light of the above, the National Parliament of South Africa set out to implement the use of plain language within the national and provincial legislative context. Research indicates that emphasis should be placed on documents generated on committee level, as these often form the basis for debates in the legislatures and also for the drafting of legislation.

However, as pointed out above, the use of inaccessible language is not limited to written texts. When spontaneous speeches by politicians are assessed, it seems as if the extent of their use of vague language, unclear or imprecise formulation also warrants a call for the use of plain language. In a study conducted to formulate a suitable interpretation and translation model for the Gauteng Legislature, all the members interviewed indicated that some of their colleagues who are BSAE speakers, lacked proficiency in English and expressed a need for a training course in plain language use. (Pienaar & Slabbert, 1999: 20).

2. Plain language

The immediate questions that arise are: What is plain language use and what are the perceived benefits of implementing it? On first impression it seems as if the use of plain language is generally aimed at written texts. It involves aspects such as vocabulary, sentence structure, text organisation, tone, readability, etc. Within the South African context, plain language is used for instance, when new legislation is rewritten with a view to distributing the information to the larger community. The plain language (English) version is then translated into the official indigenous languages. The translated version might take the form of a summary or in some cases might even be reduced to a comic strip as was recently done with the Labour Relations Act (66 of 1995) and the Domestic Violence Act (Act 116 of 1998).

The rationale behind this is that the jargon and terminology, which characterize legal and legislative texts, are of such a nature that it they generally inaccessible to the lay person. Furthermore, the legislation would typically be drawn up in English only and given the limited proficiency levels in English in this country, it cannot be assumed that the content of the legislation will become widely known.

LEAP, the Legal Entities Assessment Project, also pointed out that simply translating Legalese from one language to another does not mean that the text would be more accessible to speakers of other languages. They even go as far as saying that any development or training in translation that might lead to a form of Legalese in any language that does not yet suffer from this unnecessary complication, should be resisted! (PANSALBnews, 2001: 8) Ultimately, plain language seeks to ensure intelligible texts. LEAP assesses texts according to the following criteria: clarity, logical

arrangement, flow of information, economy of language and consistency in terminology. "If the given texts are to be rendered intelligible, all these factors must be taken into account. It is a process of simplification and rearrangement rather than merely rewording: excising repetition, grouping related concepts, defining words where they first appear, cutting down over-elaboration and avoiding unnecessary cross-reference." (PANSALBnews, 2001: 8)

From the above it should be clear that the use of opaque language does not necessarily relate to a lack of proficiency. On the contrary, one of the ironies of Legalese is exactly the fact that it became opaque through a long process of trying to be as clear as possible. However, what is also true, is that most attempts at the use of plain language have been aimed primarily at written texts. It is possible to apply the principles of plain language, for instance, to speeches read by politicians. In contrast, the nature of debates in parliament, the provincial legislatures as well as in television and radio interviews, requires spontaneous speech and off-the-cuff responses. It is in this area particularly, that accusations relating to "bad" English are rife. Although limited proficiency may be a contributing factor in some instances, this article would like to suggest further factors which might go a long way to explain why the use of plain language in oral texts is not that simple in South Africa.

3. Factors influencing the use of plain language

3.1 Cross-cultural inference

It is generally accepted that Grice's co-operative principle (Grice, 1981) might well be more or less applicable to some languages, but is not necessarily representative of all. The maxims of quality, quantity, relevance and manner might also be interpreted differently by different speech communities. While these maxims might be applied differently by various communities, it is also true that the maxims of quality and relevance are particularly prone to manipulation in political discourse (see Wilson, 1990: 10 on truth, linguistics and pragmatics). However, it is also true that quantity and relevance in the strict Gricean sense of the word are not applicable to discourse conventions in many African communities. This can be illustrated by amongst other things, greeting, thanking and leave-taking conventions (see Ndoleriire, 2000: 279) which are relatively long and could therefore be seen as flouting the quantity maxim. Many African communities also consider it inappropriate to "get to the point" too quickly as this could be interpreted as impolite given the convention that important information should be held back until the setting is adequately established. In this sense the maxim of manner is also not adhered to. In short: not making your contribution more informative than required (quantity), making your contributions relevant (relevance), avoiding obscurity and being brief (manner) should be considered as relative and applicable to some speech communities only.

This argument is also supported by Roberts and Sayers (1998: 28). In a study on the application of Grice's maxims in interviews in Britain, they stated: "in interethnic encounters what constitutes cooperativeness will be even more difficult to tie down since principles of cooperation will be encoded differently in different languages and cultures." According to them, the flouting of the cooperative principle is regularly interpreted negatively in terms of wrong attitude, incompetence or inadequate socialization into the white majority culture.

In the light of the above, it could be argued that perceived opacity in the speeches of South African politicians may therefore well be typical of political speeches per se but also a reflection of linguistic conventions in the African languages. The voiced irritation could therefore be seen as an example of cross-cultural miscommunication or misinterpretation.

3.2 Discourse strategies in trade unions

Research indicates that the use of long incoherent speeches followed by a direct appellative, is typical of a discourse strategy used in trade union negotiations in South Africa. Given the fact that many politicians in South Africa started their political careers in trade unions, the use of opaque language can no longer solely be contributed to a lack of proficiency in English, (or for that matter inference of alternative discourse conventions) but should also be seen as a carefully developed discourse strategy. In a study done by Slabbert and Finlayson (2000) the conclusion is drawn that the strategies used by speakers of WSAE and BSAE differed substantially in a negotiating situation. BSAE speakers seemed to make use of strategies in which meaning was deliberately confused and tentativeness was high. In essence this strategy entailed a semantic power play where long, incoherent speeches was followed by short to-the-point suggestions. This strategy often resulted in the BSAE speaker turning the discussion to his/her advantage in that the recipients (WSAE speakers) literally grabbed on to what they understood and therefore allowed the change strategy. Slabbert & Finlayson indicated that this seemed to have been a deliberate strategy that could be traced back to negotiation training in trade unions.

3.3 Post-colonial discourse style

The fact that African countries opt for the use of colonial languages after independence does not mean that the colonial variety is kept intact (Webb and Kembo-Sure, 2000: 38). A new variety generally replaces the colonial variety. In this sense a new identity is associated with the specific use of a former colonial language. The perceived opacity of BSAE might well also be a marker of identity and social power.

In an assessment of high school pupils' attitudes towards the pronunciation of BSAE, Van Rooy, Van Rooyen and Van Wyk (2000: 187) concluded that the attitude towards English in South Africa has changed dramatically in recent years. Sotho-speaking participants revealed the most positive attitude towards acrolectical, or Educated BSAE. Researchers over the past three decades had previously found that black South Africans are more favourably disposed towards Standard White varieties of English. The changing socio-political milieu is seen as the probable cause of this change. They argue that "an acrolectal variety of BSAE probably performs two functions for its speakers. Firstly, in maintaining its difference from WSAE, it serves as a marker of cultural identity within the complex, multilingual and multicultural identities of black users of English in South Africa. Secondly, it is probably close enough to WSAE as far as its linguistic properties are concerned to ensure that effective communication takes place. As BSAE is the selected variety of the New South African elite, it might increasingly come to serve as an idealised target for language acquisition by BSAE learners in secondary education, even if it is not the language of their teachers", Van Rooy, Van Rooyen and Van Wyk (2000: 205–206).

This change in attitude towards BSAE was also reiterated at a conference held in Johannesburg in 1997 during which a young black South African delivered a paper entitled 'English? Yes. But whose English? Your English or Mine?' According to Webb and Kembu-Sure (2000: 19) his message could be summed up as follows: "We are governing this country now, and we will decide what English is acceptable. If you don't like our decisions, you can leave the country quite easily. There are no lions at the Johannesburg International Airport, and an air ticket to London is relatively cheap". Although Webb and Kembo-Sure also indicate that this attitude is rather extreme, they do however point out that this does illustrate the intensity of the debate which, in their opinion is understandable, given the colonial history of the country.

4. Can plain language bridge the gap?

In a discussion on effective communication, Gudykunst (1994: 26–28) lists the following as reasons underlying misinterpretation between members of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds:

- messages may be transmitted in a way that cannot be understood by others (e.g. pronunciation or accents may hinder understanding)
- the communication rules of the countries from which the communicators come may differ and influence how messages are interpreted
- one of the communicators may not be able to speak the other's language (e.g. one person is just learning the other's language and is not fluent)
- one person may not understand how to accomplish a certain task or interpret a specific utterance within a social context
- one person may make errors in attributions because of his or her group identity
- the communicators may not be familiar with the topic being discussed.

When the production and reception of political speeches in South Africa are measured against these indicators, they all seem to apply. Indeed a variety of accents exist that might hinder communication (a common example relates to emphasis – BSAE-speakers typically shift emphasis pronouncing "category" as "cetAgory"). Communication rules (or discourse strategies) differ among the various speech communities. The levels of proficiency in English varies dramatically. The political arena has very specific conventions associated with it. Different varieties of English act as specific markers of identity and lastly a lack of adequate background knowledge of political topics would clearly contribute to a lesser understanding.

It is clear that the call for plain language use probably stems from a situation that is, on the one hand, typical of a cross-cultural communication process and on the other variety, register and domain specific. It is unlikely that the principles of plain language could be successfully applied in spontaneous political speeches. It is improbable that the underlying discourse strategies associated with the BSAE speakers' mother tongues as well as the variety of English spoken by them would be affected by WSAE speakers' insistence that the way they speak is "bad".

5. Conclusion

Van Rooy, Van Rooyen and Van Wyk (2000: 206) are of the opinion that WSAE and BSAE are relatively close to each other as far as linguistic properties are concerned. They also state that "this closeness should go a long way to allying the concern expressed by commentators such as De Klerk (1999), Titlestad (1996) and Wright (1996), namely that the adoption of a non-standard variety of English may pose a severe threat to intelligibility".

In view of the above, the criticism relating to the use of BSAE should therefore be seen against the background of a changing socio-political situation, in which the speakers of one variety of English, in this case WSAE, have become aware of the challenge (threat?) posed by another variety. Intelligibility is not really at stake. The real difference between the varieties relates instead to cross-cultural discourse where discourse strategies typical to African languages are used in BSAE. This is experienced as inappropriate linguistic behaviour and equated with a lack of proficiency in English.

As politicians often are in the public spotlight, conventions typical in political rhetoric and trade union negotiation style also contribute to change in conventions thus far considered appropriate by WSAE speakers. However, as role-models for other speakers of BSAE, these alternative

non-Gricean conventions have become markers of identity and will probably contribute to their acceptance as norms by BSAE speakers in particular.

It is clear that the use of plain language is a complex issue which entails more than simply adhering to conventions of one particular variety of English.

This state of affairs could also have interesting implications for the use of BSAE in the English L2 classroom.

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