

The Diminished Use of Tamil in South Africa

Elliot Mthembeni Mncwango
University of Zululand,
Kwandlangezwa

Abstract

South Africa has eleven official languages: isiZulu, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, Sepedi, seSotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, English and Afrikaans. These are not the only languages spoken in South Africa. As a result of this fact, the South African constitution (1996) promotes and ensures respect for all languages spoken by minority groups. These include German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu, as well as languages used for religious purposes in South Africa, like Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and others.

The article argues that, while Tamil is a minority language, it serves very important functions among Tamil speakers and should, therefore, be preserved. A language identifies one with one's culture and roots.

Twenty people (of Indian origin) from the Tugela area (north of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal), and five schools in the Tugela, Darnall and Stanger areas were interviewed, and their responses are discussed. These confirm that some Asian languages are not used by the majority among Indian communities. In fact many cannot even greet using these languages. The languages are no longer taught in the schools where they used to be taught, for various reasons. This state of affairs, the article argues, is perilous and likely to bring about the demise of the language. It is clearly the case that speakers of Tamil are much fewer than there are of this ethno-cultural and linguistic group.

Introduction

Indian languages have existed in large numbers in South Africa, chiefly in the province of KwaZulu-Natal since 1860. The British-administered Indian government permitted the recruiting of labourers to a variety of colonial territories. This resulted in a great movement of hundreds of thousands of Indian labourers, first to Mauritius (1834), then British Guyana (1838), Jamaica and Trinidad (1844), and subsequently to various other West Indian islands, Natal, Suriname and Fiji (Mesthrie (2002)). Although Natal was a new colony that had not employed slave labour, the policy of consigning the indigenous, mainly isiZulu-speaking population to 'reserves' created a demand for Indian labour on the sugar, tea and coffee plantations (Bhana and Brain (1990)).

The languages spoken by the indentured workers were as follows:

Tamil and Telegu from the south of India, and in small numbers, Malayalam and Kannada;

- (a) A variety of Indo-European languages including Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Magahi, Kanauji, Bengali, Rajasthani, Braj, etc. These were from the north of India; and

- (b) About 10% among North Indians and slightly fewer among South Indians were Muslims. These would have spoken the village language of their area as well as varieties of Urdu. (Mesthrie: 1989).

Cole (1953), and also Adendorff (1987), cited in Mesthrie (1989), suggest that Fanakalo must have originated among indentured workers trying to converse with Zulus and English people. The article argues that the mingling of the Indian people with South Africans hampered the development and use of the Indian languages. This, to a large extent, was due to the compulsory acquisition of English, the language of power and business in South Africa. As labourers and also slaves, the Indian people had to toe the line and learn the master's language to increase their employment prospects. It is, therefore, no surprise that they now find it difficult to revert to the use of an 'Indian' language, even as a second language in the home and also in the neighbourhood. This will soon be true for indigenous languages, especially among middle class Africans living in urban areas.

Historical Background of 'Indian' education in South African schools

The first fifty years of Indian education in South Africa were characterised by a lack of system Kannemeyer (1943). In the early years European missionaries ran a few schools which admitted Indian pupils. The medium of instruction in these schools was English, with no Indian languages featuring at all. The first Tamil school was first established in Durban in 1899 Kuppasami (1946: 70). There were fifty private vernacular schools in Natal, ran by the Indian community on a part- or full-time basis Kichlu (1928). The majority of these schools were attached to mosques, using Gujarati as the medium of instruction, and in some cases Urdu.

Some full-time Gujarati-medium schools offered a variety of subjects at a level comparable to that of India up to the 1960s when emphasis shifted to language and cultural subjects only Desai (1992). For a long time Gujarati was used as a medium of instruction for arithmetic, the traders believing it to be superior to English in mastering methods of calculation Aziz (1988).

Language and the South African Constitution

Serote (1989), cited in Alexander (1989), had the following to write about the language question in South Africa:

The question of language is a very emotive issue which relates to the consciousness of the people. It is very important for people to be able to say what they want, not feel what they want is dictated to them or imposed on them. Yet, while it is important for us to promote the different languages, we should also understand that the question of language has been used to divide people. In South Africa, people who come from the Northern Transvaal, the Vendas, when they come to Johannesburg they hide the fact that they are Vendas, they don't speak in Venda. People who come from the same area, the Tsonga, they come into areas like Johannesburg, hide this fact.

In order to deal with the issue of languages, the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) was established. The sole aim of this body was to:

- (a) Promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of all official languages; the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and sign languages; and
- (b) Promote and ensure respect for all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa. These include German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu, as well as languages used for religious purposes in South Africa, like Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit, and others.

From the stipulations in the constitution (1996) it is clear that the South African constitution is progressive and empowers all language users to develop their languages. However, the question of implementation remains unanswered, especially considering that official languages also have not been fully developed to the same level as English and Afrikaans. This is despite the clear and unambiguous pronouncement and commitment by government to have every language developed, and multilingualism promoted.

The current language situation in South African schools

The old order lasted only until the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, after which all government schools became the responsibility of provincial departments. The separate legislative acts that had governed schooling were replaced, in 1996, by the South African Schools Act, which provided a 'uniform system for the organisation, governance and funding of schools' South Africa (1996:5).

In 1997, the then Minister of Education announced a 'new language policy in general and further education.' The minister gave his support to multilingualism, which he defined as 'the learning of more than one language rather than two languages' and also, to the maintenance 'of home language(s)' Bengu (1997:1). The choice of the language of learning and teaching, which learners had to make when applying to a particular school, then rested with learners. In terms of South African Schools Act (1996), if the school used that language and there was a place available, it had to admit the child.

School governing bodies (SGBs) were recognised as 'the key partner' in pursuit of the goal of multilingualism, as they were required under the Act to 'announce the school's language policy, and to state how it would promote multilingualism through a variety of measures Bengu (1997: 2).

It is worth noting that currently, in some schools learners still have a choice of languages. For example, there are schools that offer English medium, Afrikaans additional language and isiZulu as yet another additional language. While learners have a choice between Afrikaans and isiZulu, English is compulsory. This is not the case with all schools in South Africa, but where this is the case, learners either

have to put up with English medium or find another school with Afrikaans medium. There are, however, schools that are dual medium, where learners may prefer to be taught in the medium of their choice. The learners that benefit most in these schools are those who are first language speakers of English or of Afrikaans. In the case of other languages, like Tamil and indigenous African languages, parents lack commitment to ensure the preservation of their language. These languages are compromised for English proficiency, which is believed to open doors everywhere. Surprisingly, almost without exception, school application forms and other documents in South Africa have a 'Home Language' section. Ironically, despite the overwhelming evidence on multilingualism and government's additive bilingualism policy, it is still assumed and expected that South Africans are typically monolingual using a 'Home Language' in their neighbourhoods. The argument is sometimes used by a school to deny a child entry on account of his/her 'Home Language' if it is deemed to differ from the medium of instruction of the school, usually English or Afrikaans. In such a situation a child is 'encouraged' to enroll in another school. Banda (2000).

Some reasons for the diminished use of Tamil in South Africa

(a) The hegemony of English as a threat to minority languages

Alexander (1989) argues that English facilitates communication not only with neighbouring countries, but within the wider context of international discourse. Financial considerations make this language the most feasible medium of instruction after the initial years of primary education. These considerations include the cost of translating the existing texts into other languages, English and Afrikaans. These are languages in which texts are readily available.

(b) The lack of ownership of the language

As already mentioned, some 'Indian' languages cannot be associated with the people of Indian origin any more, since the majority of these people were born in South Africa among families who speak English at home. It is therefore against this backdrop that the paper argues that, for such languages to survive, they ought to be taught in certain schools – at least one school in the region to ensure their survival in the next generations in South Africa. Father Wallace, cited in Dave (1995: 124) writes:

When I realized that during my stay in India I would have to work in Gujarat, I decided to learn Gujarati before going. At the time I was studying in Madras for a mathematics degree. All communication was in English. Lecturers and students spoke English well. I noticed that although the students had a good grasp of English, as soon as they came out of class, they communicated with one another in their sweet Tamil language. So I had the idea that the real work of education is achieved through personal contact, guidance and friendship, and for this one needs the mother tongue of the students. From that moment I made the firm decision that whenever I went to Gujarat I would first learn Gujarati.

- (c) The lack of demand of the language by parents
What also emerged from the respondents (see also Mncwango, 2007) was that some parents had advocated for the teaching of Tamil in one of the schools in the area. Unfortunately this idea was quashed by some parents whose contention was that English is the language of global use and the language of power, which their children ought to acquire at all cost. Their submission was that there was little utility value in Tamil.

Data collected from the former Indian schools

All respondents in the former Indian schools stated that their schools had been founded to serve the Indian communities within which they were built. As a result, the languages that anyone of these schools offered included one Indian language. The Indian culture was preserved in all Indian schools, others still do even today. Tamil is one of the languages which were offered in most of these schools. Other Indian languages include Gujarati, Telegu, Malayan Kannada, etc.

The data collected from former 'Indian' schools showed that none of the schools still offers any of the Asian languages. The schools in the Tugela, Darnall and Stanger areas used to offer Tamil, but now none of them does. In fact, in all cases, interviewees reported that they do not speak the language at home and in the workplace. It was also said that there is no demand for the language in the schools, and that parents prefer that their children be taught in English. The reason given was that English is the language of power, and that which everyone speaks in the workplace and at home. Out of all the interviewees, only one could speak Tamil, but he also reported that only he and his parents could speak this language, his children could not, even at a rudimentary level.

Findings of the survey

Twenty people from the supposedly Tamil – speaking families were interviewed, with the intention to establish whether the language is spoken in the household, or at least if it is intelligible to some members of the family. Only one respondent out of twenty confirmed that he and his wife could speak the language, although very seldom. The respondent decried, especially the absence of schools in the Tugela and surrounding areas where their children could learn the language. Another concern was that there were no people in the area who spoke the language, as many families spoke English as their first language.

Nineteen respondents admitted that only English was spoken in the families, and that it was not possible for children in their families to learn the language as the parents also could not communicate in the language. The respondents also confirmed that the language was not spoken in the area, and that there was not a single school that offered the language. Some schools that used to offer the language had discontinued it.

Conclusion

Minority languages are becoming more and more marginalised. Among the reasons is the shift towards native-like competence in English which learners, especially in urban areas achieve easier than those in rural areas through interactions with first language speakers of the language, and the conducive environment which makes this feasible. Minority languages, like Tamil, steadily lose first language speakers as younger generations now grow up in families where only English is spoken. Indigenous African languages, in a way, suffer the same fate, especially among middle class families living in urban areas. In the case of the latter, although their indigenous languages have not been as marginalised as is Tamil, youngsters prefer the urban varieties of these languages. As time goes by, the standard varieties will be replaced by the urban varieties. Minority languages, on the other hand, will be in peril, unless something is done now to preserve them for the future.

References

- Adendorff, R. D. 1987. *The Origin of Fanakalo*. Unpublished Paper, Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Alexander, N. 1989. *Language Policy and National Unity in South Africa/Azania*. Cape Town: Buchu Books.
- Aziz, A. K. 1988. *An Investigation into the Factors Governing the Persistence of Urdu as a Minority Language in South Africa*. Unpublished MA Thesis: University of South Africa.
- Banda, F. 2000. *The Dilemma of the Mother Tongue: Prospects for Bilingual Education in South Africa*. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*. Vol. 3. No. 1. 51-66.
- Bengu, S. M. E. 1997. *Statement by the Minister of Education, 14 July (On the Internet: <http://www.polty.org.za/govdocs/misc/langpol/html>)*.
- Bhana, S. and Brain, J. B. 1990. *Setting Down Roots: Indian Migrants in South Africa, 1860 – 1911*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Cole, D. T. 1953. *Fanagalo and Bantu Languages of South Africa*. *African Studies*, 12: 1-9.
- Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Act 108 of 1996. Cape Town: Government Printer.
- Dave, J. 1995. *Colloquial Gujarati: A Complete Language Course*. London: Routledge.

- Desai, U. K. 1992. The Gujarati Language amongst Gujarati – Speaking Hindus in Natal. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Durban – Westville.
- Kannemeyer, H. D. 1943. A Critical Survey of Indian Education in Natal, 1860 – 1937. Unpublished M. Ed Dissertation, University of Witwatersrand.
- Kichlu, K. P. 1928. Memorandum on Indian Education in Natal. Presented to the Natal Indian Education Inquiry Commission, Pietermaritzburg, 17 April 1928. Pietermaritzburg: Natal Witness.
- Kuppusami, C. 1946. Indian Education in Natal, 1860 – 1946. Unpublished M.Ed. Dissertation, University of South Africa.
- Mesthrie, R. 1989. The Origins of Fanagalo. *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*, 4, 2: 211-40.
- Mesthrie, R. 2002. *Language in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mncwango, E. M. 2007. Schools as Fertile Ground for the Promotion of Multilingualism in South Africa. Unpublished D. Phil Thesis: University of Zululand.
- Serote, M. W. 1989. *Selected Poems*. Johannesburg: Ad. Donker.
- South Africa (Republic) 1996. *South African Schools Act No. 84*. Pretoria: Government Printer.