The odd couple: Diverging paths in language policy and educational practices

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This paper examines the divergences between what educational policy calls for in South African schools with regard to language and learning and what takes place in schools. It argues that South African constitutional and education policy statements employ an idea of languages as bound entities and systems, and combine this understanding of languages with discourses on language rights and of language endangerment. An alternative view studied language as practice rather than system. From this perspective the idea of 'a language' is a misleading shorthand for a diverse range of language varieties, genres, registers and practices. Such resources are not equally distributed among users of these resources and they carry different social weightings or valuations. This paper argues that the language assumptions in language policy 'erase' linguistic complexities and assume a linguistic homogeneity and stability which is inappropriate. A view of language is developed where language operates as a 'non-neutral medium' in stratified social contexts of all kinds. These inequalities operate just as much within designated 'languages', in terms of the varieties and their uses within that language, as across them. The observed differences between policy prescription and language practice provide support for this alternative perspective on language.

Keywords: Language policy, ethnography, multilingualism, bilingualism, literacy.

Introduction

Something is amiss when policy statements from national government and the Education Ministry set out one direction for language in education, and practice takes a different direction. But do we know what it is? This paper examines the divergences between what educational policy calls for in South African schools with regard to language and learning and what takes place in schools. Drawing on an examination of language policy statements in South Africa and on school-based ethnographic data, I develop an analysis that starts to account for the difference between language policy imperatives and schooling practices. The data reported on in this paper is taken from a series of linked qualitative, ethnographic-styled studies on post-foundation phase classroom literacy and language practices.[1] The data comprises recorded instances of classroom interaction and detailed field notes. The methodological orientation has been that of interpretative linguistic and literacy ethnography.

I suggest that the South African education policy is a good example of how constructs concerning language in the South African constitution and in education policy rely on familiar but problematic ideas about language, development and nation-building. The Constitution and policy statements from the Education Ministry view languages as autonomous, bound entities, and combine this understanding of languages with discourses on language rights and of language endangerment. However, evidence of language practices in schools and in society at large suggests a widespread, but not universal irreverence and disregard for these views about autonomous languages and language endangerment/protection.

I draw on interactional sociolinguistic and ethnographic research (Heller, 2007; Makoni & Pennycook, 1997; Blommaert, 2005) that has raised questions about current policy formulations of language and argue that the South African policy for schooling provides a good example of the kinds of problems that follow the use of popularised but essential and reified constructs of language. That research variously suggests that these constructs of language have social origins, and specifically European origins, from 19th-century nationalist movements that linked 'a language' to 'a nation' and then defended that 'language' by political means. The contrasting perspective developed in interactional sociolinguistics is that users draw on

linguistic resources that are organised in ways that make sense under specific conditions (Heller, 2007:1). This approach studies language as situated social practice. From this perspective the term 'English', or any other named language, is a misleading shorthand for a diverse range of language varieties, genres, registers and practices. Such resources are not equally distributed among users of these resources and they carry different social weightings or valuations. A social practices perspective starts from the assumption that what counts about language is how it is 'done', what one 'does' 'with' it (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Austin, 1975; Duranti, 2010) and that there are different ways of 'doing language' and of linking (sometimes new) language forms to culturally meaningful and socially significant practices, in stratified social conditions where language resources carry social value for reasons that are not simply to do with their functionality.

In the policy statements that I first examine in this paper there are numerous examples of a conception of language as an autonomous object in its own right, monolithic and homogeneous, where languages are conceived as systems rather than practices. I start with a typical example from policy statements of how an idea of language is summoned and then endorsed. The introduction to the 'Language Policy for Higher Education' statement produced by the South African Ministry of Education in 2002 describes South Africa as "a country of many languages and tongues" but notes that these have not always been "working together":

> *In the past, the richness of our linguistic diversity was used as an instrument of control, oppression and exploitation. The existence of different languages was recognised and perversely celebrated to legitimise the policy of 'separate development' that formed the cornerstone of apartheid. However, in practice, all our languages were not accorded equal status. The policy of 'separate development' resulted in the privileging of English and Afrikaans as the official languages of the apartheid state and the marginalisation and under-development of African and other languages (Ministry of Education 2002:1).*

The policy statement goes on to identify a "role for all our languages working together to build a common sense of nationhood" that is consistent with the values of "democracy, social justice and fundamental rights", which are enshrined in the Constitution. The statement therefore endorses the recognition by apartheid ideologues of the distinct character of separate languages, tongues and groups but accuses them of perversely entrenching those distinctions under laws of separation, rather than celebrating diversity. The view of language is similar, then, for both apartheid and post-apartheid policies – in both cases languages are frozen in time, and the discourse foregrounds the 'languages' themselves and sidelines the actual users of these language resources. In reality, of course, it is the language users who interact, struggle, compete, dominate and cooperate with each other, rather than the 'languages'. It would not be such a problem to present social struggle in this way if the languages did effectively 'stand for' distinct groups of people whose group identities and languages emerged straightforwardly from the past and proceed unproblematically into the future, but this is, of course, not the case. This approach also avoids the difficult issue of what the contrasting contemporary reach, scope and scale of operations of these several 'languages' are, perhaps because, like elsewhere in Africa, these questions of scale follow historical (colonial) tracks, where the 'supra-language' of status is an ex-colonial 'language'. Insisting on 'language parity' among eleven rather arbitrarily drawn sets of linguistic resources does not change the fact that there are linguistic hierarchies operating here and everywhere. The ideological assumptions regarding 'boundedness', authenticity and 'language equality' 'erase' linguistic complexities and assume linguistic homogeneity where there is diversity. The strategy for equalising the designated 'languages' works on the assumption that language operates 'normally' as a neutral social medium, and that directed social planning can 'level the playing fields', whereas sociolinguistic research shows that language always operates as a 'non-neutral medium' in stratified social contexts of all kinds (Duranti, 2010; Bourdieu, 1991). These inequalities operate just as much within designated 'languages', in terms of the varieties and their uses within that language, as across them.

The problem with these language policy statements starts with the Constitution. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa sets out the case for the "equal status of the languages of South Africa". In its

opening chapter, under the heading 'Founding Provisions' the Constitution first names the eleven "official languages of the Republic"[2] (RSA 1996:clause 6.1). Secondly, noting the *"historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people"*, the Constitution stipulates that "the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages" (RSA 1996:clause 6.2). The same section of the Constitution goes on to set out areas of flexibility that government has regarding local use of selected "official languages" but insists that "languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably", while it is quite clear that even among the 'African' languages of the eleven official ones, there is not 'parity', because some are smaller regional resources and others are more varied in their spread and usefulness. And 'within' these resources called official ('African') languages, there are some ways of use that are considered authentic and some that are considered corruptions, despite the inherent fluidity and dynamism of all social resources and practices, language included. Such categories of 'good' and 'bad' are really ones of social value, not of linguistic merit, *per se*.

Patrick (2007) and Mufwene (2006) spelt out some of the problems with "language endangerment" and "language rights" discourses, summarised as follows: such discourses tend to romanticise and reify language and cultures; language issues get cut off from the historical, political and economic context in which speakers find themselves; the mobility and social complexity of speakers gets sidelined, and such unifying and homogenising processes risk excluding and marginalising minorities or mobile people whose identity is not defined through older categories of ethnicity or speech community. If we drop the notion that languages are separate, living, bound beings, species or objects, they suggest, we make the study of language speakers and bilingualism a more complex but richer one, where they are situated by local and global forces, in particular sociocultural, historical and economic environments. Patrick (2007:124) points out that linking language to a people and a tradition is often not in the interests of all speakers. Mufwene (2006:137) asks whether there are "language rights" independent of human rights. He points out that, as practice, languages are constantly being reshaped by their speakers and are not static. Where 'language shift' takes place, people have exercised the right to use the language resources of their choice. Why would people give up a resource that serves their communicative needs the best, he asks (Mufwene 2006:131). The rights of individuals and groups to pursue their interests under specific social conditions prevail over those of languages. Governments cannot, in the end, control the day-to-day language practices of their populations. Education, however, is a 'border' or in-between zone, as far as language use is concerned, because it absorbs both official policies on languages but is also subject to civil society influences regarding the different status of available linguistic resources. For example, that bundle of linguistic resources commonly referred to as 'standard English' usually has higher status than others in schooling and other formal settings but often not in other, less formal settings.

Language in education policy

Chapter Two of the South African Constitution is a Bill of Rights, stipulating that "(e)veryone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable" (Section 29). The operationalisation of these values took place, first through the 1997 policy statement produced by the Ministry of Education that set out the direction for post-apartheid educational policy and curriculum development. This statement describes the "main aims" regarding language policy as being:

> *to promote full participation in society and the economy through equitable and meaningful access to education; to pursue the language policy most supportive of general conceptual growth amongst learners, and hence to establish additive multilingualism as an approach to language in education; to promote and develop all the official languages; to support the teaching and learning of all other languages required by learners or used by communities in South Africa, including languages used for religious purposes, languages which are important for international trade and communication, and South African Sign Language, as well as Alternative and Augmentative Communication; to counter disadvantages resulting from different kinds of mismatches between home languages and languages*

of learning and teaching; and to develop programmes for the redress of previously disadvantaged languages.

The last five words of the quote pinpoint the 'language rights' claim, as well as its fragility – the idea of a language as a 'previously disadvantaged' *persona* is a very odd claim indeed, in the light of my earlier point that it is people, not languages, who compete and cooperate with each other, claim rights and experience advantage or disadvantage. The policy statement briefly reviews arguments for 'single medium', 'home language' education and 'dual medium' (or 'two-way immersion') programmes:

Whichever route is followed, the underlying principle is to maintain home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s). Hence, the Department's position that an additive approach to bilingualism is to be seen as the normal orientation of our language-in-education policy.

The policy statement confirms the constitutional right of individuals to choose the language of learning but cautions that this right has to "be exercised within the overall framework of the obligation on the education system to promote multilingualism" (DoE 1997:1, clause 2.6).

The Working Group on Values in Education that contributed closely to the formulation of the policy on language in the 1997 document, in their report to the Minister of Education entitled 'Values, Education and Democracy', identified

two main values we wish to promote in the area of language, which are, firstly, the importance of studying through the language one knows best, or as it is popularly referred to, mother-tongue education, and secondly, the fostering of multilingualism. We do believe that an initial grounding in mother-tongue learning is a pedagogically sound approach to learning. We also believe that multicultural communication requires clear governmental support and direction.

The 1997 statement presents its language in education policy as being "an integral and necessary aspect of the new government's strategy of building a non-racial nation in South Africa". It is intended to facilitate "communication across the barriers of colour, language and region, while at the same time creating an environment in which respect for languages other than one's own would be encouraged" (RSA 1996:1, clause 3). 'Mother tongue' education as a 'values'-based strategy is thus presented as a reactive strategy to the segregated and discriminatory history of South Africa leading into the 1990s.

These statements of policy and principle rely on a set of linked constructs such as 'home language'; 'mother tongue'; 'additional language'; 'an additive approach to bilingualism', and 'additive multilingualism'. To these are added the terms that become ubiquitous in later policy statements and discussions, namely 'language of learning and teaching' (LOLT); 'dual' and 'single' language mediums of education. They all draw on what Heller called a 'common-sense' but in fact highly ideologised view of bilingualism, where the conception is that of the co-existence of two (or more) linguistic systems. Heller and others (Martin-Jones, 2007; Michael-Luna & Canagarajah, 2007; Lin, 1997) question the monodiscursive-monolingual norms implicit in such concepts. In a review of debates about bilingual education Martin-Jones (2007:167) points out that a good deal of the policy-driven research has shown a strong preference for the construction of parallel monolingual spaces for learning, with strict monitoring of those spaces for their monolingualism. A major research direction in bilingual education has been about what kinds of programmes using language separation approaches or concurrent language approaches produced what kinds of successes for student learning and achievement. She points to what she calls a "container metaphor of competence" manifest in terms such as 'full bilingual competence', 'balanced bilingualism', 'additive bilingualism', and 'subtractive bilingualism'. In fact, all these conceive of languages and linguistic competencies as separate containers, side by side, that are more or less full or empty.

These influences surface strongly in the commitment to an 'additive bilingual' approach in the 1997 education policy statement for South Africa which, in turn, drew from the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) group working on language. The NEPI researcher who summarised the proposal for an additive bilingual education model for South Africa drew closely on the Canadian work of Cummins

(e.g. 1981) who defined additive bilingualism as "a form of bilingualism in which the person's first language is maintained while adding competence in another language" (Luckett, 1992:4-5, quoted in Heugh, 1995:334). She went on to advocate a 'transitional bilingualism model' "in which, though the aim is to produce competence in a foreign language, the indigenous languages are used for initial education and are to some extent maintained". As Heugh (1995:334) pointed out, this model, despite Luckett's intentions, is very close to the 'subtractive model' where 'home language' is dropped altogether after a while in favour of the dominant language. This is the interpretation given to her recommendations in the final NEPI report and implemented most commonly in educational practice since then. It is ironic that policies which start from the position of celebrating diversity produce policies that institutionalise separation. These policies are helpless in the face of widespread social consensus that 'English' is a dominant set of linguistic resources in South African society, as it is in many other parts of the world, in 'English-speaking' societies, as well as many 'non-English-speaking' societies.

English language dominance and 'the English they can get'

English is indeed the elephant in the room, only obliquely referred to in these policy stipulations. 'English' is predominantly the preferred language of learning across schools and universities in South Africa, notwithstanding small but innovative African-language educational initiatives developed in Limpopo province, the Western Cape and elsewhere. The stipulation for 'learner choice' (or parental choice) in identifying their chosen language of learning and teaching (LOLT) allows for English to be selected ubiquitously as the LOLT and for regional Education Departments to proceed with the wide use of English language resources (with Afrikaans-medium instruction fighting for survival in tertiary education and with small pockets of experimentation providing instruction in other regional languages at school level). There is a second problem, namely what is the relationship between so-called 'home languages' or 'mother-tongue' as language that is actually spoken in homes and local neighbourhoods, on the one hand, and what counts as 'mother tongue' in schools and classrooms, on the other. Research in progress in primary schools in the Western Cape shows students and teachers communicating with language forms that diverge from the standard isiXhosa in which the students will be tested. My focus in this instance, though, for the remaining discussion, is on the question of the dominance of 'English' as the language of choice in schooling and higher education. Having argued that there are mistaken assumptions in policy outputs about languages and their use, when observed from a social practices perspective, I turn to an examination of classroom language. My focus is on an 'English' as a form of bounded monolingual practice, endorsed and sustained in schools, but my aim is not to show English as dominant but to examine how what counts as English is both diverse and specific.

The following presents a typical scenario from a school where teacher and students find it difficult to work with resources that are barely available to them. The teacher had copied a maths exercise from a book onto the blackboard and was now trying to help students with the problems they are experiencing with the task. Neither the teacher nor the students had English language resources that were appropriate for the task but nonetheless, persevered by way of a particular, localised, mono-lingual English.
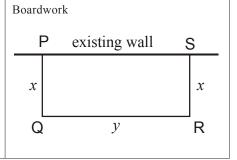
The background information for the exercise, taken from the textbook, copied on the blackboard, reads as follows:

> *A farmer wishes to build a rectangular enclosure PQRS to house his chickens. He wants the area to be 200 square metres. One of the sides, namely, PS is along the wall of an existing building. The remaining three sides must be fenced. Fencing material costs R100 per square metre. He wants to calculate the dimensions of the rectangle so that he spends as little money as possible on fencing.*

This is clearly not 'simply a maths problem' for students with limited resources in the designated language but also a problem of grasping what the practices are that are being signalled here and what the rules of engagement are. This is how the teacher's explanation went:

Teacher talk	Boardwork
Remember I gave you an example that if I (.) eh (.) my home, there's a fence that side and there's a fence this side, so if my neighbour wants to (.) eh (.) put a fence around his house, nê, he won't have money, (.) he won't have money, (.) he doesn't won't have money to spend for my side because I already have existing wall. So he will spend less money than I do, nê? Understand now? [(.) indicates a pause or a hesitancy]	P existing wall S x x Q y R

The teacher struggled to find the words in monolingual English to explain the point clearly to his Grade 10 maths class. For example, he did not make it clear to them what the phrase 'existing wall' indicated, even though this was not an everyday term which the students might have picked up elsewhere, and he struggled to find the language resources to explain that the farmer would not need to spend money on fencing the side where there was already a wall ("he won't have money, he won't have money, he doesn't won't have money to spend for my side" – his attempts in this instance to find an appropriate verb phrase to explain the point falter and fail, ending with the incoherent and ungrammatical 'doesn't won't' conclusion).

Despite their struggles to explain and understand, the students observe the rules of engagement and respond by way of attempts at English themselves. In their discussion of a case study of language in a similar township high school in the same locality, Blommaert *et al* (2005:392) reported that almost without exception "the students expressed a great desire to learn English". In support, they cite one piece of student writing:

> *the language that I like at school to learn English because that Everybody they learn English because is a very nice language to Everyone that they want to speak English.*

Blommaert (2007:14) claims that

> *the situation is tragically clear: the township pupils – overwhelmingly black or 'colored' and poor – pin their hopes for upward social mobility on English; but this particular English (the one they have and the one they can get) is not going to allow them to achieve that goal. It is indeed the English they can get: their teachers also had no mastery of the elite varieties of English.*

Blommaert's argument is that 'English' exists in such post-colonial contexts on "different scales". The elite and their children have access to prestige varieties of spoken and written language while the mass of students have access only to 'sub-standard' varieties that are only valid locally. He concludes that "the 'world' language, in other words, exists in at least two – scaled – forms: one, a genuinely 'globalised' English that connects elites worldwide, and another, a very local variety that offers very little translocal mobility" (Blommaert 2007:14-15).

English and social mobilty

I would suggest, however, that while Blommaert accurately identifies the extent of the desire for English language education, the distinction he draws between local 'sub-standard' and 'translocal mobile' oversimplifies the diversity of schools and contexts in this setting.

The 'local' is itself layered into more complex scales of access and influence than is suggested by a simple juxtaposition between two scales. Fataar's (2009) research identifies the high levels of mobility that characterise students' movements across the city and surroundings in search of affordable and quality education. He examines the complex ways in which township students access both suburban and township schools from beyond the confines of their immediate neighbourhoods. He suggests that the community school, 'the one nearby' has come to be considered inferior and to be shunned, in favour of schools *elsewhere*, suggesting a gap between official planning and the 'popular energies' which evade them. He describes a complex dispersal of students every morning on diverse paths from township to suburban

schools and across township schools, in search of better schools. He talks of "an affective disconnection between their places of living and their spaces of schooling" (Fataar 2009:3). His discussion points us to the observation that as far as language is concerned, 'the one nearby' is similarly considered inferior as students and parents view quality education as happening in the prestige language varieties which they do not 'have'.

'English' in-between

In-between the scales of English language middle-class schools and failing township schools are a whole range of differently positioned schools, responding to the new demands and mobility that characterise the schooling terrain in the city. The excerpt below from one of these repositioned ex-elite, suburban schools shows a different kind of 'English'-medium instruction to the struggling township school referred to earlier, but also very different from the neighbouring middle-class schools. Like many others like it, this suburban school was formerly an all-white, middle-class 'Model C' school. It has become a relatively low-fee paying school that attracts working class Black and Coloured students who are dropped off/bussed in by their parents from the townships. There are also a small number of immigrant/refugee students from the Congo, Zimbabwe and other countries in Africa. The language of learning and teaching is monolingual English, but is not the relaxed, at-home kind of English spoken in the neighbouring more expensive, middle-class schools. The children are bussed in early in the morning from the townships and from the Cape Flats. Most of the teaching happened at this school on the assumption that the children bring almost nothing with them to the school by way of linguistic resources and background knowledge. The following lesson extract is from a Grade 6 class. The teacher focused on surface features of language and literacy coding and decoding and on surface features of language meanings. She carefully took students through a reading-aloud exercise and then makes students look up the meanings of words. There is no sense, in this instance, that there is anything from the students' own worlds that might have relevance and the sole focus is on surface levels of comprehension.

1. Teacher: Here's a picture of the turtle. And we know – we see – can you see the tortoise in our mind's eye? What will they have in common?
2. Student: The shell.
3. Teacher: The hard shell. What will be the difference between the turtle and the tortoise? The main difference?
4. Student: The turtle (…)
5. Teacher: The marine turtle is a sea animal and the tortoise is a land animal.
6. Teacher: Right. Ehm, we going to read this story. What can be so interesting about it? OK, I'm gonna, eh – Sipho starts, eh, then Marita, then Mishali, then Lorato. OK? Just three lines. Ok I'll tell you when to stop.
7. Student: [Starts reading] A turtle is a member of the reptile family. It is covered by scales and flakes. It is cold-blooded and breathes air. The outstanding feature of the turtle is its hard shell. This shell can be up to a metre long and is made from ribbed bones, covered with flakes or scales.

(…) indicates a phrase that is inaudible on the recording.

Students take turns reading aloud in this class and the teacher does all the 'filling in' – clarifying the content matter and providing background information. There is almost no evidence of any engagement with the material on the part of the students, and the teacher clearly sees her role, in this instance, as gently inducing children to get familiar with the language resources which they do not have. The activity is what Williams (1999) called a 'reading-like' activity rather than a reading activity, because of the focus on surface features of language and text rather than on meaning. Language and literacy approximate, in this instance, to the high status resources that are on display in the elite classrooms but they do not set an effective basis for the making and taking of meanings and understandings in other contexts, because they are cut off from the requisite that meanings get made in contexts of relevance and exchange, if they are to

link up or provide bridges for related activities in other contexts. They are, however, of a different order of indexicality to the township classroom interactions – they provide limited access to the high status resources sought, whereas the township classroom examined provided almost no access at all. Thus, while the learning and teaching do not provide a direct version of the high status resources associated with the privileged versions of the elite schools, they promise at least access to greater mobility at both local and regional level.

Conclusion

Language policy documents set out the intentions and hopes of the policy writers that language will serve as an instrument that will help to bring about more equal access to greater resources and a 'levelling of the playing fields'. From the classroom exchanges examined in this article, tthe vulnerable underbelly of these policies is evident. As Mufwene (2006) pointed out, governments cannot, ultimately, control the day-to-day language practices of their populations. Nor do languages go extinct the way plant or animal species die out. Instead, they change and shift in relation to the social context – the economic, cultural and political milieu in which language users find themselves. Rather than existing as policy instrument that can be employed to bring about social objectives, languages are barometers, in their relative statuses, scales of uses and productivity, of the character and ranges of inequalities and contests that characterise the wider social setting. Effective policy-making should, therefore, be based on a closer understanding of how language is practised, rather than relying on projections onto particular 'languages' of romanticised and essential notions of language-culture and indigeneity.

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Endnotes

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2   They are, of course, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhoza and isiZulu.