

SOCIOLINGUISTIC PRACTICE AND POLITICAL CHANGE: CRITICAL
APPRAISAL OF THE LANGUAGE ATLAS OF SOUTH AFRICA

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The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) research on the sociolinguistic profile of South Africa - and the central research done on language by the council - has recently taken the form of language atlases. It has led to the first Language atlas of South Africa: language and literacy patterns, published in 1990. (Grobler et al, 1990). It is an important project at a time of transition, as discussions of regional and political demarcation, representation and the practicalities of educational transition and potential transformation are on the historical agenda.

The project was long overdue, given the need for such research in the South African context. It is largely based on the data from the 1980 census, which controversially excluded a mapping of the Transkei and other "independent" homelands. The reason given for this omission was that separate censuses were compiled for those regions of the country and no attempt was made to consolidate any information. In addition the so-called "self-governing territories" are added in a patchwork style and treated as single entities. At the outset, therefore, the cartographic sketch is flawed by an apartheid census, a data base with an ideologically skewed demographic image of the country.

Further, neighbouring countries with languages in common with South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Mozambique and Namibia, have been omitted from the atlas. As a result, the endeavour is further truncated by an artificial sense of languages being contained in political borders. Clearly with landlocked Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana on South Africa's borders and sharing much common history, this is an inadequate conceptualisation of the speech communities to which people belong. For example, there are problems where overlapping orthographic considerations need to be taken into account. Migrancy and the resultant close socio-economic relationship which the three countries have with South Africa invites a broader initiative.

This article shall argue that a useful critical sociological perspective of language cannot simply accept the current empirical quantitative information which has been made available to us in the HSRC'S language atlas of South Africa. The origins and genesis of what the editorial classifies as a 'geolinguistic' endeavour need to be carefully assessed. The editorial asserts that the analysis

of the metropolitan areas, patterns of literacy and the study of diachronic language shift are still to come. It strikes the reader that the publication needs a different title, perhaps the "Language atlas of rural apartheid South Africa: an ideological construction"?

It is a very weak feature of this project that the whole apartheid baggage should be included in a social research endeavour of this expense and importance in a document dated 1990. Why was this project not held back to deal with the 1990 census data? The answer must lie in the ideologically driven nature of the HSRC's sociolinguistic research. The country has been left without a qualitatively constructed and developed empirical investigation of language and its demographic distribution at a time when it is most crucial to be available.

Reasons offered in the articles accompanying the maps are revealing of the ideologically driven nature of the research. For example, a senior HSRC researcher explains the dominance of the Zulu language and specifically its penetration into the eastern Free State as a result of differences in "national character". The national character of the Zulu is held to be "prouder and more spirited" because of "the influence of Shaka" than that of their linguistic neighbours, the Sotho. Another example of this reasoning by the same researcher is "the Tsonga are innovative people who are not afraid to trek over long distances and settle in new areas"; their linguistic distribution is evidence of this "trekking habit". (Grobler et al, 1990: 25-32.)

This stereotypical ethnographic description bears all the hallmarks of the ideology adopted by the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs in the 1950s. There has been no fresh turn in the emphasis offered in this area of social research, tightly controlled by the HSRC since the Verwoedian era.

The political and ideological significance of the endeavour is more clearly revealed by K.P Prinsloo, who refers to the importance of language maps in explaining cultural diversity. Effectively, the focus on rural areas for the analysis of language distribution creates a significant cartographic icon as to how the ethnic groups of the country could interrelate with political boundaries. (Grobler et al, 1990: 52.) As noted above, the numerous urban centres throughout South Africa are omitted: we are left with a vision of only half the population. If we remember the history of apartheid cartography, this is more likely to have been omission by grand design than mere oversight or a lack of resources. As a result the full multilingual nature of our society is obscured and the areas of apparent linguistic homogeneity are given an enlarged emphasis.

The map on the distribution of literacy omits the question of literacy in different social contexts. A foreigner reading this atlas could conclude that English in its spoken and written forms played very little role in South Africa. This self-limiting presentation of the information takes place despite the empirical evidence gathered in 1978 by the HSRC that English assumed overwhelming dominance as the written form of communication in South Africa, particularly in the form of print matter such as newspapers, books and magazines consumed across the language spectrum. (Hauptfleisch, 1978: 68.) The insignificance of the role of English which the authors wish to convey is visually reinforced by the map depicting the distribution of Afrikaans and English across the country's census districts.

The assertion that the maps may assist in the development of educational policy is unsatisfactory. One reason for this is that one of the most complex tasks for educationists is the development of valid policies in the metropolitan areas' which have multilingual schools, set against the currently unrealistic policies. Clearly a map concentrating on the incidence and distribution of mother-tongue can only form a small part of the information needed on bilingualism and multilingualism. Hence an artificial vision of how South Africa communicates is embedded in this HSRC project. One is reminded of the primitive maps drawn by early navigators to depict a profile of the African continent.

As we are concerned in this conference to serve the needs of the language professions, we must conclude that our most heavily funded empirical sociolinguistic research, monopolised by the HSRC, does not serve us adequately. In order to underpin a study in multilingualism we need to develop the following empirical understandings at present: firstly, the various forms of bilingualism, trilingualism and quadrilingualism etc. and their demographic distribution in the cities as well as the rural areas. Secondly, the distribution of language in working contexts needs clear contemporary description and so too does the sociolinguistic profile of South Africa's school-going population as it is distributed through actual educational institutions. The extent to which such profiles coincide with and diverge from the regional and area approaches must be provided by sociolinguistic research before it is valuable to policy makers. Here what I would envisage would, in addition, involve full surveys of the Southern African countries which form a communication bloc. This would probably be best conducted by professional associations, such as LASU (Linguistic Association for SADC countries) with regional sponsorship. Hopefully, full integration at this level will soon be possible for South African professionals. This would allow for a more complete research agenda to be established for the region. Education, publishing and policy development

would benefit from such an approach, which goes well beyond the vision of the blinkered bureaucratic researchers in Pretoria whose dominance and control of research funding in this crucial area of social research has gone on too long. Such an approach could perhaps also invite international participation.

In South Africa, as is true throughout Africa, the former colonial languages have played an important part in social stratification and social inequality. Linguistic assimilation continues to be a feature of the elite in much of contemporary Africa, some thirty years after independence. The HSRC, as the South African Bureau of racial affairs in the 1950s, has portrayed this reality largely to bolster an ideological conception of race and ethnicity and to portray an equal social significance for Afrikaans and English. Even in states with one official language, the penetration of the former colonial language is not sufficient to provide a means of communication for more than 20% of the population. Even though South Africa has been independent for much longer, political conditions seem to provide the basis for a similar trend to emerge here. English is often popularly suggested as the lingua franca or language of wider communication; its international position is cited as one of the reasons. However, in reality, its use is not spreading in proportion to the growth in population - present projections suggest that approximately 22 million South Africans by the year 2000 will not have access to either of the present day "official" languages of English and Afrikaans in South Africa. This the HSRC has been at pains to portray as a foil for the portrayal and protection of the significance of Afrikaans. Thus manipulating a conundrum from which African societies cannot escape. Descriptions and sociolinguistic research of language and social stratification need to be enhanced by more critical empirical study to advance our understanding of language in educational and work contexts. (Brown, D. 1989:33-46.)

Controls over social mobility in any society but more particularly in South Africa, are exercised through employment practices and educational policy. As a result employment with certification linked to language will need description and critical discussion in order for South Africa to provide a socially just order. No such critical research is currently being entertained by the HSRC.

Only a few African societies have the gross manifestations of language engineering that have occurred in South African political, social and educational contexts. A patchwork of policy exists: politically, the establishment of the Bantustans gave an official status to many African languages, although these were effectively confined to ethnic bureaucracies that these pseudo-states spawned. Educationally, under National Party rule, schools were

divided rigidly on racial and linguistic lines (English and Afrikaans) in the white, Indian and coloured communities. In accordance with apartheid ideology, language was the cornerstone of the National Party's development of Bantu education in the 1950s (the very term "Bantu" derived from the language policies pursued) and aimed ostensibly at the fostering of African languages for a more authentic learning environment than that offered by the Anglophone missionary-dominated schools and teacher training colleges. The ideological emphasis on the mother-tongue was based on purist notions of language and its interrelationship with educational development, yet in very many cases African children are not offered their "mother-tongue" as their language of enlightenment. This has been the case wherever the child finds the language unavailable in his or her school. The extent to which this occurs and more especially is likely to occur with the development of non-racial educational policies has never been clearly described and documented on a nationwide basis by the HSRC. It is antithetical to the ideological construct developed by the HSRC for language and education and the ethnic ethos of the society that they have fostered with their research since the 1950s.

Much of the research coming from the HSRC even the more "enlightened", such as the "Threshold" project has to be seen as an attempt to underpin minor policy reform rather than provide a fuller and much needed critical sociolinguistic profile, so necessary to understand the crucial role played by language in our society. (Macdonald C. and Burroughs E. 1991:26.)

The sociolinguistic practices of the largest and best funded research grouping are going to have to change if it is to serve the needs of a changing South Africa and in turn the needs of the language professions.

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