

Chapter 31

Language Policy Execution: The Case of South African Universities

Paul Hendry Nkuna

University of South Africa, South Africa

ABSTRACT

South Africa is a multilingual country with 11 official languages. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, provides that every learner may use the official language of his or her choice in any public institution of the country. The Language Policy for Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 2002) requires all South African universities to develop and execute language policies. This chapter focuses on language policy execution by South African universities. The emphasis is on the execution of language policy in relation to the promotion and development of the nine official indigenous languages, namely isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda and Xitsonga.

INTRODUCTION

It has been 13 years since the adoption of a language policy for higher education by the South African Ministry of Education. Section 20 of the policy reads: “All higher education institutions are required to develop their own language policy subject to the above policy framework, which should be submitted to the Minister by 31 March 2003. The Ministry will continue to monitor the impact of language policy in higher education” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 15).

Today “the status of languages is a political hot potato on South Africa’s university campuses. The country’s minister of higher education and training believes that all university graduates in South Africa should have learned at least one African language during their studies” (Rudwick, 2015, p. 1). Not one of the country’s universities is truly executing the language policy. Where have the South African universities gone wrong? Why have the South African universities failed to implement their language policies?

Many academics respond emotionally to questions such as the above and offer self-evident excuses. They mention the impracticability of using the country’s indigenous languages in the light of their historically diminished utility and status. They say the country’s indigenous languages have not been developed to a level where they may be used for all higher education functions.

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The truth is that so much time has passed since the adoption of the *Language Policy for Higher Education* by the Ministry of Education that the country's universities have lost the impetus to execute their language policies as the result of their own failures. Historical powers have indeed affected the universities' fate, especially regarding the execution of their language policies.

This chapter focuses on language policy execution by South African universities. It is divided into an introduction, a background, a case study on language policy execution by South African universities, integration and a conclusion.

BACKGROUND

In South Africa we often talk as though this is the only country in the world where “a language problem existed. Yet there are nearly a hundred different parts of the world which have to face similar problem, and any study of the conditions in this countries leads us to the conclusion that the difficulty in South Africa is exaggerated” (Mckerron 1934, p. 119). Before 1994 there were widespread fears among white people in South Africa, and the University of Stellenbosch “moved swiftly and orchestrated the passing of the University of Stellenbosch (Private Act), 1992, through the last white parliament. Section 18 of this Act entrenched Afrikaans as the medium of instruction” (Verwoerd, in press, p. 17). It was 58 years after Mckerron's (1934) publication. Four years after the promulgation of University of Stellenbosch (Private Act), 1992, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, was published. Subsection 29(2) of the Constitution provides the following:

Everyone 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. 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 (Parliament of South Africa, 1997, 16).

Subsections 6(1) and 6(2) recognises 11 official languages, as well as the historically diminished status and use of the country's indigenous languages.

The language problem in South Africa is genuine. There has been a three-fold seed of language policy execution troubles in the country. The first part of the three-fold seed of language policy execution troubles involves a power struggle between the speakers of English and Afrikaans¹. Kamwangamalu (2007, p. 265) says for example that the history of English and Afrikaans is “known to be one of a constant struggle for power – one where at some point in their tense coexistence ‘white’ speakers of each of these two languages have sought to impose their own language on the speakers of the other”. Table 1 below outlines the first part for the three-fold seed of language policy execution troubles in South Africa's education system.

The second part for the three-fold seed of language policy execution troubles in South Africa's education system was the transfer of the struggle to the education of indigenous people. The 50–50 rule for Afrikaans and English was a case in point. Table 2 below outlines the second part for the three-fold seed of language policy execution troubles in South Africa's education system.

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