


Chapter 17

Exploring the Traces of Linguistic Imperialism: Towards the Decolonisation of South African Sign Language

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous languages in South Africa including South African Sign Language (SASL) are still undermined and neglected, underpinned by a traumatising history of oppression, ethnic divide and colonialism. The study reviewed literature concerning the decolonisation of SASL as a meaningful way of reclaiming Deaf communities' identity and their sign language. An Afrocentric paradigm that places the interests of African people at the centre of the analysis was employed in this study. This chapter further discusses the strategies being established in South Africa and other parts of the world to decolonise SASL for the benefit of Deaf communities. It was recommended that decolonial strategies and language development policy be implemented and be the subject of authentic Deaf-led training and awareness-raising programme for community members.

INTRODUCTION

It is clear that we must find an African solution to our problems, and that this can only be found in African unity. Divided we are weak: united, Africa is the greatest force for good in the world.

- Kwame Nkrumah

Unlike other African countries, South Africa has a mixed ethnical population and it is rich in culture boasting 12 official languages of which 10 of these are considered indigenous languages, namely: Sepedi, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho and South African Sign Language (SASL). Indigenous languages fulfil the goals and aspirations of an individual, the entire

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community and society at large, and it is through these languages that the self and identity are known and expressed (Higgins, 2019). However, it took rigorous language planning to enhance the status of these Indigenous languages. Alexander (2004) notes that in South Africa, language planning was inextricably linked with the racist social engineering of the apartheid era, particularly given the damaging impact of Bantu education. Indigenous languages are essential for expressing self-identity and cultural values, external forces such as globalization, Western culture, and cultural assimilation threaten these foundations. South Africa continues to experience traces of colonial oppression (Jeewa & Bhima, 2021), and these ongoing challenges underscore the importance of Indigenous languages in reclaiming self-expression and identity by revalorizing, restoring and reclaiming these languages within a society that is still grappling with the remnants of apartheid and colonialism. Marjorie (2010) also stated that South Africa is a multilingual society with distinct linguistic challenges resulting from its apartheid policy. As noted by Ouedraogo (2000) the complexity of the language question in Africa has been compounded by factors such as the commercial importance of the colonial language, the perception that multilingualism is a problem, the political value of English and French, parental demands, globalization, structural and cultural factors, technological changes, wars and riots, and economic cycles. Ouedraogo (2000) further argues that for the sake of political expediency, many African states chose colonial languages as lingua franca and media of instruction. The Deaf community does not exist in isolation and this marginalized community also forms part of the broader society, and as stated by Aarons and Akach (1998:2) social, political, and cultural factors (equally) shape the evolution of their language and identity.

Historically, due to South Africa's political context, all the languages have acquired socio-political meanings, and English and Afrikaans have become highly dominant languages even among Black people with no economic or educational value (Mekoa, 2020). Historically, language such as Afrikaans has been used as an instrument of oppression or domination, as evidenced during the apartheid and colonial era (Van Heerden, 2017). Language issues in South Africa have since become the centre of politics and a victim of political onslaught (Mekoa, 2020). In post-apartheid South Africa, multilingualism is a core value in the Constitution of the country (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The democratic government has devised a language policy development framework that encompasses various aspects, including the South African Schools Act (1996), which recognizes SASL as a medium of instruction, the Language in Education Policy (1997), and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015). Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen (2010: 127) asserted that "SASL has a lower status than English and Afrikaans", reflecting the broader linguistic inequalities rooted in South Africa's history.

In Oyedemi's (2021: 214) view, "the struggle for political decolonisation (freedom) was such a long and painful journey that the wounded still bear the scars," which is also reflected in the ongoing efforts to achieve linguistic equality and elevate the status of SASL. In South Africa today, the colonial pain is continuous, and cultural decolonisation is still an ongoing struggle (Oyedemi, 2021: 214). Oyedemi (2021) further reported 40 years have passed since learners protested against Afrikaans used as a medium of instruction in schools, because of the perception that the language was used as a tool of oppression. However, black tertiary students continue to feel socially and culturally isolated in historically white universities through the language of academic instruction (Oyedemi, 2021: 224). These feelings are echoed in the South African Deaf community, where students at tertiary institutions are often isolated from the mainstream learning and teaching environment due to the limited number of qualified signed language interpreters available (cf. WASLI, 2013).

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