Chapter 9

Language Politics in South Africa

Neville Alexander

The following thoughts are an attempt at a programmatic level to develop my views on the relationship between language and identity in South Africa during the present phase of the consolidation of a liberal democratic polity. For the moment I shall simply take for granted that certain fundamental propositions relating to the whole question of identity construction are common cause among us. I append a recent article which I wrote for a non-academic readership in which I tried to summarise these core notions.

In South Africa, the major social markers of difference, i.e. "colour" or "race", language, "culture", gender, religion and region, as well as "class", have at different times played a decisive role—either alone or in some combination—as determinants of group or social identity. In recent times, however, regionalism has not been a major force for social mobilisation.

The chequered history of Afrikaner nationalism and its umbilical connection with racial oppression and separatism have left an enduring stigma on all language-based social movements in a country where the unity and coherence of the inherited colonial state is an article of faith, one that has a very real basis in the political economy of post-colonial Africa. Although the Organisation of African Unity is very tentatively beginning to reconsider its long-held view that the "artificial" borders of the modern states of Africa should be left as they are, this is still its treaty position.

In my first attempt at addressing the national question in South Africa in a systematic manner, I demonstrated the connection between the theories of nationality (or "ethnicity", as this is now called) held by the apartheid ideologues, and the development of the idea of "independent homelands" (NoSizwe, 1979). "Language", as defined by them, played the central role in their conceptualisation of the Bantu or Black "nations"

which they, in their own terms, were guiding to "independent statehood". This historical fact has meant that for most of the post-war generation of black—as well as progressive intellectuals and activists generally—language-based social movements were suspect. Such movements were routinely dismissed or condemned as "tribalist". The reception originally accorded the Inkatha Cultural Movement in these circles, for example, is ample evidence of this assertion.

Even within the rigidities of the apartheid ideological grid, however, there were many contradictions. Of these, the most blatant were the fact that in that framework, "white" South Africans constituted a "nation" in spite of the fact that they were composed of at least two language communities, whereas "black" South Africans were identified and categorised in terms of so-called "language groups". Within these, again, two "Xhosa" nations were accommodated. The particular reasons for these inconsistencies are no doubt very interesting, but not relevant in the present context.

More relevant is the fact that for decades, Stalin's theory of the nation had a very strong influence among political activists in regard to their notions of nation building and the evolution of the nation in South Africa. Since that theory postulated "a common language" as one of the necessary attributes of a nation, it tended, ironically, to entrench, on the one hand, the middle-class notion that under South African conditions the universalisation of the English language was an essential precondition for the building of a modern nation in this country. Before the accession to power of the Afrikaner National Party in 1948, on the other hand, there were, especially in the ranks of the Communist Party of South Africa, many activists who believed that Stalin's ideas on this question meant that the different "tribal" (now "ethnic") languages could or should constitute the basis for the creation of different African nations in Southern Africa. These would eventually be united in a Federation of Soviet Socialist Republics (NoSizwe, 1979; Alexander, 1986). After 1948, of course, this approach represented the kiss of death to any political programme that hoped to find a positive response among the masses of the African people.

As against these historical positions, the African National Congress (ANC), the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) as well as the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) somewhat later, in practice pursued a nation-building strategy that was based on the assumption that nations are not necessarily monolingual. Indeed, the NEUM, in its relevant documents explicitly rejected the Stalinist prescriptions in this regard. All of these political formations objectively considered language communities to be valid sub-national identities. In other words, they espoused the construction of a national (South African or Azanian) identity and accepted that people would also identify themselves (or be identified as) Afrikaans-, Zulu-, Xhosa-, Tswana-speaking, etc., and that this was a completely normal phenomenon in any modern industrial state.

The practice of these organised political forces had many implications and contradictions. I have drawn attention to one of the main ones in some of my recent writings on the language question. I refer to the fact that in reality, all of these formations pursued an "English-only" or an "English-mainly" policy, thereby contributing to the hegemony of English in South Africa. In my view, because of the "class" position of their leadership, they were unable to arrive at a programme of action on the language question that would be consonant with the promotion of the interests of their social base, viz, the urban and the rural poor. The vast majority of these people did not speak or even understand English. At levels of empowering proficiency, only middle-class people in South Africa can be said to speak English. Yet, there was no thought of systematically encouraging and helping people to learn one another's languages on a significant scale. There was no equivalent to the kind of literacy and other cultural programmes started by the Afrikaner nationalists after the Anglo-Boer War. A cultural-political strategy that consequentially pursued the objective of facilitating communication among the masses of South Africa's workers in town and country, was never, as far as I am aware, even proposed. In my view, this was one of the most important mistakes of progressive political leadership in the South African movement, and I refer especially to the left-wing elements in the movement. Eddie Roux and

others attempted to promote English literacy, and the Night-School Associations certainly managed to spread the knowledge of reading and writing in some of the African languages, but all these efforts remained sporadic and none of them, in any case, was conceptualised as part and parcel of a larger cultural-political programme along the lines that Amilcar Cabral, for example, pursued for Guinea-Bissau.

This is the reason why there continues to be tension between the explicit constitutionally enshrined principles of the promotion of multilingualism in South Africa, and the concurrent practical commitment to the hegemonic status of English— among all South African politicians, except among the right and the left wings. For very different reasons, these two groups of activists are opposed to policies that effectively render the urban and the rural poor silent, voiceless and disempowered. Again, the details of this particular irony might be very interesting but they do not have to be explored in greater detail for the purposes of my argument.

On paper, we have now made the paradigm shift from the conception of the monolingual to that of the multilingual nation. This is, among other things, the historic import of the new constitution. In practice, however, most people are quite confused as to the practical meaning of this shift. Indeed, the fatal concession that was made to the Freedom Front (FF) on the question of religious, cultural and linguistic communities, indicates that the full significance of the commitment to multilingualism was not understood by the fathers and the mothers of the nation. Elsewhere (Alexander, in James & Maharaj, 1998). I have shown that this concession represents the beginning of the formal "ethnicisation" of politics in post-apartheid South Africa. Everything that has happened in the recent past demonstrates that this is in fact the danger we are facing. Lest I be misunderstood, let me state clearly that I am not opposed to identities constructed on the basis of linguistic affiliation as long as these are clearly sub-national in character and tendency. For political as well as philosophical reasons this seems to me to be the wisest position to adopt. Anything else infallibly leads to the oppression of one group by another. The concessions made to General Viljoen and his party, however, bear within themselves the seeds of the destruction of the South African polity

as we know it. The setting up of a separatist dynamic in South African politics, via the politicisation of the language question, i.e., the intersection of economic and power-political interests with language differences among the people, is an ever-present possibility. Hence it is crucial that the political and cultural leadership of the country recognise that the language question has to be treated consciously and consistently within the paradigm of the multilingual nation. Otherwise, we shall fall into the trap that John Saul revealed in the early eighties in his seminal article on "the dialectics of class and tribe".

Already, we have the purported leaders of all kinds of "language communities" knocking at the door of the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB), asking for recognition of their speech varieties as "official languages". In some cases, at least, the link between these requests and access to monetary and other resources, is quite obvious. (For a not dissimilar situation, see Mahmood Mamdani's recent description of the ethnic dynamic in Nigeria (Mamdani, 1998).) Hitherto, we have been spared the spectacle of language-based political parties appealing for votes to their alleged constituencies. This is so only because perceived racial issues are still the most salient ones in this society. But that can change very rapidly, especially if anti-racist strategies are effective.

In general, the salience of the racial factor in South African politics has indeed worked against the construction of language-based group identities that could be or have been politically mobilised. The cases of white Afrikaans-speaking people and, with many more qualifications, of black Zulu-speaking people, are exceptions that have proven the rule. It seems to me, therefore, that we have to take great care not to create frames of reference that will facilitate the political mobilisation of language communities in South Africa. It is essential that we conceptualise the existing and evolving language communities as tributaries of a Gariep nation constituted by many other tributaries that originate in linguistic, religious and other cultural and regional catchment areas. All together constitute the mainstream of the South African or Azanian nation. In the present era of globalising flux which has as its dialectical counterpart the generation of local (from village to continental) footholds of stability, it is

very important that we understand the fluid relationship between global, national, sub-national group and individual identities. One can do this without falling into the total relativism which some post-modernist discourses seem to imply. This is a relationship that requires much more exploration, reflection and debate, and it is one which we, in South Africa, should begin to take seriously, so that we head off any possibility of our country slipping into the abyss of tribal/ethnic warfare in future.

A few words are necessary about the *lingua-franca* status of English in South Africa. Given the fact that English has, during the past 50 years or so, become not merely *a* but in fact, *the* global language (Crystal, 1997), as well as the fact that South Africa has an entrenched English orientation because of colonial conquest, it would be merely quixotic were one to suggest that the English language should be downgraded in this country. English, it is widely agreed, is the *lingua franca* of the middle classes and of the intelligentsia in South Africa. There is no doubt that for the foreseeable future this situation will remain unchanged. Moreover it is clear that the fact that the present governing *elites* are able to communicate with one another across the barriers of colour and language by means of this bridging language, is critically important for the smooth running of public administration, and for decision making more generally. However, even at this level, it must be understood that first-language speakers as well as "co-ordinate bilinguals" who use English, are at a distinct advantage, as against those for whom English is a second or even a third language. This is one reason why a policy of multilingualism should be promoted in tandem with the promotion of English as the *lingua franca* for the entire population. For, and this is the crucial point: unless all South Africans have reasonable access to English so that all of them—including the urban and rural poor—have the possibility of becoming proficient in the language, we will do no more than to perpetuate the *de facto* post-colonial language policy of the rest of the African continent, a policy that has failed at every level (Prah, 1995).

That policy, as Pierre Alexandre (1972) pointed out more than two decades ago, transforms English (in this case) into a form of cultural "capital" by means of which the middle-class *elites* reinforce their power

over their compatriots. This is already happening in South Africa. Unless the Pan South African Language Board and other language-planning agencies begin to operate effectively, the almost ideal framework for a democratic language policy which is embedded within the new constitution, will remain a dead letter—and a historic opportunity will have been wasted. Retracing our steps some 30 or 40 years "later", as is now happening in many other African countries, will be extremely difficult and demoralising. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that it might already have become impossible. Instead of looking at some version of the Swiss model, we might then be staring at the disastrous wasteland of a kind of ex-Yugoslavia.

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APPENDIX

New identities for old

All people want to belong to a larger social unit; all of us seek a "comfort zone" which, in the best of all possible worlds, is usually conceived of as an extension of the family. Today, when the family has become a very problematic entity in most urban contexts, the same sense of belonging and security is sought, and often found, in other associations or "in-groups", ranging from religious communities to all manner of clubs. I do not have the space to trace here the psychological structures and mechanisms that are at play from before the birth of the individual, and by means of which s/he acquires various identities. It is enough to state clearly that all human beings need, as part of their survival kit, an ideological envelope, as it were, from within which they perceive and experience the world. How that envelope gets constructed is very much a matter of time, place and circumstances and necessarily differs from one individual to the next (even as between identical twins).

Identities are socially constructed. That means we are not born with an "identity", even though we may be predisposed by the circumstances of birth to assume a specific identity. Someone born into a Xhosa-speaking family is, all other things remaining the same, very likely to identify broadly with other Xhosa-speaking people. But, if by some accident the person were to be removed from the family within the first few months or years after birth, and grew up in a different linguistic environment, s/he will assume a quite different identity. This crude reference to time, place and circumstance ought to get us away from the mystique which extreme nationalists and other romantics graft onto the concept of identity ("Germans are born, not bred", and similar notions of primordial or divinely ordained identities).

We never have only one identity. All of us have multiple identities, i.e. we identify in different degrees with many different groups. For example, we may "feel at home" within a particular language group but the people who constitute that language community, in all probability, all

belong to different churches (in the Christian context). Afrikaans-speaking people, for example, may belong to the DRC, the Roman Catholic, the Methodist, etc., churches, and a minority adhere to one or other Islamic community. If we look at the same language community from the point of view of what sports teams they identify with, we would arrive at any number ranging from the local to the provincial and the national and different types of sports within those levels. In other words, identities are *situationally* determined and there is a hierarchy of such identities which each individual assumes. Under certain circumstances and for certain purposes, one identity will be more important to the individual than another; being Afrikaans speaking may be less important in the context of a visit to Rome for a member of the Roman Catholic community, for example.

We are most often "given" identities by others who act on the basis of stereotypes they have internalised. In a racially structured society such as South Africa, having a dark skin and being Afrikaans speaking, will almost certainly earn you the label "coloured", whether you like it or not. Any South African knows the infinite variety of such stereotypes in terms of which we classify and categorise fellow South Africans. These stereotypes are a kind of museum of past social categories. For this reason, ascribed identities are the most difficult to change. They represent in many different ways the stable, consolidated "social universe" of the dominant groups in a society. For, it is in the ideology of these groups that others are "placed" in their respective social categories or identities. It was, for example, the Dutch East India Company that decided who was a Dutchman, a slave, or a Khoi, etc. While the subordinate groups are not completely without influence on how they are stereotyped, the decisive categorising power lies with the dominant group or groups. It is in their interests that the social hierarchy (castes, classes, "races", gender categories, language groups, etc.) is established, and it is in their interests to keep it that way.

Identities are, therefore, contested. The categories, "coloured" and "bantu", to take but two recent examples, were (and are) rejected by many and even most of the people so labelled. This rejection is part of the larger

social struggle for equality, freedom, dignity and fair access to the resources of the country. Whether or not a particular identity is mobilised politically depends on many circumstances. Most often, the markers of identity such as language, colour, religion, region, are seized upon by ethnic entrepreneurs in order to use the energy and the power of the mobilised people for the purpose of gaining political and/or economic advantage. What has to be guarded against is the opportunistic and usually charlatan attempts to invent or to reinvent identities by power-seeking or aspiring *elites* who see the chance of catching the votes of their "captive audience". In the larger continental context, this phenomenon has given rise to devastating ethnic conflicts, and in post-colonial Africa, debilitating ethnic fragmentation.

In South Africa today we are faced with a situation that calls for rapid and often dramatic shifts in identity or, in some cases, for the consolidation of inherited identities. To mention only a few: the categories "African", "Afrikaner", "Coloured", "Zulu", amongst others, are being hotly contested. While this might sometimes resemble a game of words, it is a deadly serious game, the outcome of which may make the difference between decades of peace or war. The notion of the "rainbow nation" generated in a fit of excitement by Archbishop Tutu, is an attempt to gloss over the contradictions that characterise post-apartheid South Africa. The illusion of coherence and unity which it is intended to convey, dissipates at the first touch of the bitter reality of racial, class and caste divisions.

There is little point in trying to analyse the particular metaphor of the rainbow, but metaphors are powerful instruments of mobilisation and conscientisation, as every advertising agency will tell you. My own objections to the "rainbow" stem from the fact that its immediate source is the very different social and historical context of the U.S.A., on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that it highlights the question of colour and of groups conceived of as coexisting colour- or "racial" groups. Since the first critical voices were raised, there have been many other kinds of objections raised, but any metaphor can be analysed to death and I shall not get into that game here.

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As an alternative, I have proposed the metaphor of the Gariep, i.e., the Great River. This has numerous advantages in terms of describing the dynamic and the real variability or diversity of our society as it is structured at present. The image presents itself because of the historical fact that South African society, as we know it, has come about through the flowing together—mostly violently, sometimes in a relatively peaceful manner—of three main "tributaries"—carrying different cultural traditions, practices, customs, beliefs, etc. These currents or streams are the African, the European and the Asian. Today, we have to add, as most countries in the world have to do, the modern American, or "coca-cola", stream.

It is an indigenous image. The Gariep (Orange River) is one of the major geographical features of this country. It traverses the whole of South Africa and its tributaries have their catchment areas in all parts of the country. It is also a dynamic metaphor, which gets us away from the sense of unchanging, eternal and god-given identities. For this reason, it is appropriate for the transitional period in which we are living. It accommodates the fact that at certain times of our history, any one tributary might flow more strongly than the others, that new streamlets and springs come into being and add their drops to this or that tributary, even as others dry up and disappear; above all, it represents the decisive notion that the mainstream is constituted by the confluence of all the tributaries, i.e., that no single current dominates, that all the tributaries in their ever-changing forms continue to exist as such, even as they continue to constitute and reconstitute the mainstream.

This is very different from the notions of multicultural societies prevalent in Europe, North America and Australia—where a *main* stream (the Anglo-Saxon or the German, etc.) dominates while it "tolerates" the coexistence of other (minority) cultures. In view of the present debate about our "Africanness", this is an important way of seeing what we are trying to capture through the images and metaphors we use to express our intentions and our orientation.

Concretely, my position means that we have to accept that identities in South Africa today are subject to rapid change; we have to open

windows onto one another, allow as much mutual influence to happen as possible; we have to get away from treating any identity as though it is like some irremoveable skin without which we would be disfigured. We have to begin to see it more as an inescapable mask which can be changed as we acquire new knowledge or interests. In spite of the passions that are so easily inflamed when this or that "sacred" practice or belief is questioned, we have to begin to understand that what we want to bring about in the new South Africa is a cultural domain without boundaries. The notion of discrete "cultures", by which apartheid was justified, is a reactionary notion which cuts people off from one another, undermines any sense of national unity and deepens the prejudices and negative stereotypes we have inherited from our colonial and apartheid past.

In my view our primary identity should be that of "being South African", not in any exclusivist or national-chauvinist sense. The fact is that as long as the national state is the political and economic entity in terms of which international relations are structured, even if only on the surface, this identity is an inescapable one. Any other identities we assume should not undermine this sense of being South African. Finally, we have to become much more conscious of the stereotypes we carry around with us as being so much racial and ethnic baggage that makes it difficult, and even impossible for us to connect with fellow South Africans and fellow Africans.

These views are necessarily stated in abridged form. They are meant to stimulate discussion and to open the way for the serious business of positioning ourselves in a post-modern world where much has become uncertain and much more has become possible.