

Discourses of language activism: the Green Movement and Afrikaans

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Abstract

This article argues that the language activism witnessed over the past decade in the white Afrikaans-speaking community constitutes, in essence, a nationalist movement. Here an attempt is made to illustrate that the South African constitution as well as certain trends in sociolinguistic literature has opened the door to nationalist opportunism. Preliminary comments are made about the nature of this movement, its underlying rationale and its principal agents.

Introduction: champions of multilingualism in sociolinguistics

Judging from the lengthy official language clause in its interim and final constitution,¹ there can be no doubt that the post-apartheid South African state has committed itself to a policy of linguistic pluralism (as opposed to one of assimilation).² It is a policy that goes far beyond mere recognition of multilingualism as a fundamental characteristic of the South African people. In terms of the final constitution, 11 languages have official status at national level, and the state is required to 'elevate the status and advance the use' of 9 of them: the indigenous or African languages. The language clause even prescribes mechanisms, such as the Pan South African Language Board, for the development of these historically marginalised languages and for the promotion of multilingualism in general.³

Among South African linguists (especially sociolinguists) the country's new language policy has come to enjoy strong support. Like most of their colleagues at universities elsewhere in Africa, they seem to be unanimous in their conviction that the solution to the language-related problems of sub-Saharan African states ultimately lies in the 'revalorisation' of the continent's autochthonous languages and in their use in public life (Webb 1994:182).⁴ African scholars are not the

only academic champions of multilingualism. Compare, for example, the introductory sentence to Stephen May's (2001:1) work on language and minority rights: 'This book attempts the unenviable and increasingly unfashionable task of defending the ongoing relevance and importance of minority languages in the modern world.'

The author may be mistaken in one respect: defending minority languages does not seem to be unfashionable, at least not within the sociolinguistic community. On the contrary: it might have become the dominant academic paradigm at international level. In what has been described as a powerful, 'absolutely stirring ... superb and compelling' book (Joshua Fishman),⁵ a 'pathbreaking text ... of international significance' (Kathleen Heugh) and a 'substantial, important, and creative contribution' (Timothy Reagan), Skutnabb-Kangas makes her aim (2000:xxxiii) (one is tempted to say her mission) very clear:

It might [...] be necessary to remind the reader that I of course have nothing against people learning any languages, including English. Learning dominant languages *additively*, including English for everyone, is OK [sic]. It is *subtractive* dominant language learning (where for instance English is learnt at the cost of the mother tongues, not in addition to them) that kills other languages. This is what I hope my book might make people aware of. That is a starting point for action for diversity [original emphasis].

Skutnabb-Kangas is no exception. More and more authors on the topic of multilingualism seem to take a similar position, albeit not as strongly and overtly. In a recent publication where Theo du Plessis (2001:x) pays homage to the Flemish sociolinguist, Kas Deprez, he describes his late colleague as a 'fellow language activist'.

What I would like to argue with specific reference to Afrikaans, is that this trend in the scholarly world provides strong support for language activists in the world in general. What is more, it can provide nationalists with a convenient disguise as it has done, I think, for at least some activists for Afrikaans whose current 'struggle' will serve here as a case in point. Afrikaner nationalism may be notorious for its brutality and be a label to avoid, but the morality of language activism has been put (by highly rated scholars of linguistics) above suspicion.

The 'green' approach in sociolinguistics and Afrikaner identity politics: a critique

The vigorous pre-election campaign for the continued official status of Afrikaans at national level in South Africa was followed after 1994 by an equally intense language rights campaign. Activists for Afrikaans now arguing that they are operating within their constitutional rights and that the promotion of multi-

lingualism is their responsibility made it clear that they will not be satisfied with a diglossic distributions of functions between their language and English in South Africa. Official status was not enough – Afrikaans had to retain all its functions. Initially, the new political dispensation was believed to pose the most serious threat to the language, and the African National Congress (ANC) government is still regularly blamed for its demise in the public sphere. However, prominent exponents of the language movement increasingly tend to emphasise the homogenising forces of globalisation as an even more powerful enemy. The claim is often made that linguistic and cultural diversity is threatened by globalisation in a similar way as biodiversity.

Someone who has been at the forefront of the Afrikaans movement all through the nineties is poet, author and playwright Breyten Breytenbach.⁶ He has become well known for his rather poetic comments on the intimate relationship between language and identity, and the importance of the mother tongue. ‘[I]t is the language that makes me,’ his character says in *Dog heart*, a travel memoir (Breytenbach 1998:182). Like many others, Breytenbach has occasionally justified his cause by comparing it with environmentalism: ‘The loss of any language is an impoverishment of the experience potential of the people. It is similar to a loss of biodiversity’ (*Beeld* 14 Dec. 1993:17; own translation).

Another prominent figure in the language movement, philosopher, author and translator Johann Rossouw,⁷ is more explicit when he draws the same comparison. He refers to global culture as a ‘monolithic or homogenous culture that establishes itself on top of all cultural differences’. The effect of this monolithic culture on the variety of languages and cultures, he too maintains, ‘is comparable to the extinction of species in the biological order. Languages disappear like species’ (Rossouw 2000:4–5; own translation).

This ‘green’ approach is strongly supported in sociolinguistic literature. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:63–99) devotes a whole chapter to ‘connections between biodiversity and linguistic and cultural diversity’, and goes so far as to argue that the relationship between linguistic and cultural diversity, on the one hand, and biodiversity, on the other, is not only correlational (where linguistic and cultural diversity is high, biodiversity is too, and vice versa (2000:83), but maybe even causal (‘linguistic and cultural diversity may be decisive *mediating* variables in sustaining biodiversity itself, and vice versa, as long as humans are on the earth’ (2000:91). One can expect this kind of reasoning to be met with varying degrees of scepticism, yet the ecological metaphor is widely accepted among linguists and language activists alike. This, in my view, may be damaging. Not only do biological metaphors obscure our understanding of language by turning it into a living organism with a life of its own, but they may also obscure the rationale of nationalist movements. Thanks to a metaphor

solidly established in academic discourse, the maintenance of linguistic diversity – and, by implication, the ‘survival struggle’ of any individual language – has become as righteous a cause as the maintenance of biodiversity.

Arguing from a Marxist point of view, Hardt and Negri (2000:44) reject both the argument that ‘the global entails homogenization and undifferentiated identity whereas the local preserves heterogeneity and difference’ and the metaphorical language in which this view is repeatedly couched:

Often implicit in such arguments is the assumption that the differences of the local are in some sense natural, or at least their origin remains beyond question. Local differences preexist [*sic*] the present scene and must be defended or protected against the intrusion of globalization. It should come as no surprise, given such assumptions, that many defences of the local adopt the terminology of traditional ecology or even identify this ‘local’ political project with the defence of nature and biodiversity. This view can easily devolve into a kind of primordialism that fixes and romanticizes social relations and identities. What needs to be addressed, instead, is precisely the *production of locality*, that is, the social machines that create and recreate the identities and differences that are understood as the local. (Hardt & Negri 2000:44–5; original emphasis).

Within the limited scope of this article it is not possible to look at the production of locality around Afrikaans, the commodification of the language and the social machines responsible for the recreation of an Afrikaner identity over the past decade or two. These are, however, important and much neglected topics for investigation.

Language activism, or covert nationalism?

The threat – real or perceived – posed by globalisation to cultural and linguistic heterogeneity is regarded by Manuel Castells as the reason why the age of globalisation is also the age of nationalist resurgence. He (1997:81) observes that the new nationalist movements are very often language-based, and explains this as follows:

If nationalism is, most often, a reaction against a threatened autonomous identity, then, in a world submitted to cultural homogenization by the ideology of modernization and the power of the global media, language, as the direct expression of culture, becomes the trench of cultural resistance, the last bastion of self-control, the refuge of identifiable meaning.

The social movement for the promotion of Afrikaans in South Africa the newspaper editorials and letters, the *LitNet* Website, the *kykNET* television channel, the arts festival mania, the proliferation of organisations founded ‘to promote Afrikaans’ – fits Castells’s characterisation of contemporary nationalist

movements. It would, of course, not be possible to argue that the language movement is essentially a nationalist movement if one were to accept as a working definition that of Gellner (1983:1) who regards nationalism as ‘a principle which holds that the political and the national [read: cultural] unit should be congruent’. Not all activists for Afrikaans are *Volkstasters*, that is, supporters of territorial secession and political self-determination for the Afrikanervolk ‘Afrikaner nation’. Yet, according to Castells, nationalism need not be orientated toward the construction of a modern, sovereign nation-state. He (1997:30–1) feels that nations are (historically and analytically) entities independent from the state, and that contemporary nationalism ‘tends to be more cultural than political, and thus more oriented toward the defence of an already institutionalised culture than toward the construction or defence of a state’.

If, as Castells puts it, a language is the direct expression of its associated culture (a debatable point, cf. Fishman 1991:20–4; 1994:84–8) and the refuge of identifiable meaning for its speakers, why should attempts to save, maintain or promote it be frowned upon as nationalism? In terms of the South African Bill of Rights,⁸ all people, after all, have the right ‘to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice’ (section 30) and to ‘form, join and maintain cultural, religious and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society’ (section 31(1)(b)). Leerssen (2002:76) argues that ‘it may be useful, in current debates, to realize that someone who vindicates his or her right to use their own language *vis-à-vis* the authorities need not by the same token be a “nationalist” let alone one of the modern, racist-xenophobic kind’. He illustrates that “[t]he affirmation of linguistic rights, though it has fallen under the shadow of nationalism, has older, and far more democratic, antecedents’.

Why then label those Afrikaners who fight for their language rights as nationalists? One reason, I think, is that they are fighting for much more than the right to use Afrikaans. What is at stake is the survival of an Afrikaner identity. The fear is not an uncommon one (though it may be an unfounded one): If we lose our language, we shall lose our cultural identity, our roots. Wishing to preserve a certain identity may be a real psychological need and as such a justifiable cause, not necessarily nationalist in nature, yet in the case of the Afrikaners a more cynical view would be that the group leaders – the intellectual elite or the intelligentsia – ‘have an advantage in fostering and sustaining the group’ (Tabouret-Keller 1997:321), hence their fierce campaign against emigration, be it to Perth or to England. The prominent figures in the social movement for the promotion of Afrikaans fit the profile of nationalist leaders in general. The Groep van 63 (‘Group of 63’) established in May 2000 with the aim of furthering Afrikaans and Afrikaans interests on the whole, has been described in the *Mail & Guardian* (9–25 May 2000) as ‘[a]lmost the entire Afrikaner

intellectual elite’, ‘a who’s who of Afrikaans-speaking writers, philosophers, economists, political scientists, futurologists, educationists, lawyers, historians and classicists’. The advantage that the leadership has in fostering and sustaining the group is, in part, an economic advantage. Hobsbawm (1992:117–18) warns against the danger of reducing linguistic nationalism to a question of jobs, ‘as vulgar-materialist liberals used to reduce wars to a question of the profits of armaments firms’. Nevertheless, he says, ‘it cannot be fully understood, and the opposition to it even less, unless we see the vernacular language as, among other things, a vested interest ...’ However popular Afrikaans arts and music festivals may be, I do not think the new wave of Afrikaner nationalism emerged from the bottom up, from sharing linguistic attributes as Castells (1997:28) suggests is possible; in this case manipulation of the masses by the élite for the self-interest of that élite cannot be ruled out as a possibility. The comment made by Hobsbawm (1992:119) about the Flemings and Québécois of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century seems to be equally true of contemporary Afrikaners: ‘[w]hat was under threat was not their language but the status and social position of the [...] middle strata’. What is being protected is not Afrikaans *per se*, but Afrikaner middle class interests.

Conclusion

The argument, then, is that we have witnessed in the Afrikaner community, particularly in its newspapers of the past decade, the rise of a nationalist movement, sometimes disguised as linguistic environmentalism, sometimes blatant in its rhetoric. The following metaphorical call to arms from a newspaper editorial can hardly be described as *covert* nationalism. It appeared in *Die Burger* as recently as 9 May 2000, but can easily be mistaken for a political speech from the early twentieth century:

Laat elkeen vir wie Afrikaans hom [sic] of haar erns is, opstaan en 'n volkome niuwe stryd aanknoop vir hul taal – en ander minderheidstale – se oorlewing. Dit is 'n waardige ideaal. Word wakker! (p. 6).

Let everyone who is earnest about Afrikaans, stand up and embark on a complete new struggle for the survival of his [sic] language – and other minority languages. It is a worthy cause. Wake up!

The attempt to form alliances with other minority languages (i.e., all languages except English) is a new (patronising?) feature of Afrikaner nationalism, as is the (unsuccessful?) effort to involve black (or what they call ‘brown’) speakers of Afrikaans in the movement. Such language activism, it is maintained, is not only allowed but required by the constitution.

The constitution requires, for example, that ‘practical and positive measures

[should be taken] to elevate the status and advance the use of these [indigenous] languages' (section 6(2)) and that 'each provincial government should use at least two official languages' (section 6(3)). This minimum number of languages to be used for purposes of government at provincial level was interpreted by Afrikaans-speaking language and legal experts (cf. du Plessis & Pretorius 2000) to be three and not two: English and Afrikaans, because the spirit of the constitution precludes that their status be diminished, plus at least one African language, because the State must, in terms of section 6(2), promote the indigenous languages. A critical view would be that it is opportunistic nationalist reasoning.

It seems that the official language clause of the South African constitution, however democratically sound the principles upon which it is based, opens the door to linguistic nationalists to secure and exploit public and private sector resources through a process of ethnic mobilisation.

Notes

- 1 Interim Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1993 (Act 200 of 1993): Chapter 1, section 3. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996): Chapter 1, section 6.
- 2 In one of the first serious attempts, dating from 1968, to standardise a sociolinguistic typology for characterising cases of national multilingualism, William Stewart (1968:532) distinguished between two fundamentally different language policies that multilingual states may adopt:
 - a 'The eventual elimination, by education or decree, of all but one language, which is to remain as the national language'; or
 - b 'The recognition and preservation of important languages within the national territory, supplemented by the adoption of one or more languages to serve for official purposes and for communication across language boundaries within the nation'.

The first of these policies, Stewart explains, usually aims at eliminating not only linguistic but also cultural diversity, whereas the second is generally part of a broader policy of recognising cultural pluralism (the idea of many cultures, one nation). In the literature on language planning the terms *linguistic assimilation* and *linguistic pluralism* are used to describe the divergent ideologies underlying these policies (Cobarrubias 1983:63).

- 3 Section 6, Act 108 of 1996. It should be noted that there are more stipulations about language elsewhere in the constitution dealing, among other things, with language in education, language in the judiciary, language and culture as well as language and self-determination.
- 4 According to Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000:4), language-based problems in African countries include 'restricted access to knowledge and skills; low productivity and ineffective performance in the workplace; inadequate political participation by the public, manipulation, discrimination, and exploitation by the ruling powers, national division and conflict; linguistic and cultural alienation'.

- 5 These comments have all been taken from the back cover of Skutnabb-Kangas (2000).
- 6 A marginal note about Breytenbach may be necessary here. For a movement that did not want to be labelled *nationalist*, let alone *anti-democratic*, *illiberal* or *parochial*, Breytenbach was an invaluable asset. He had the right credentials. Yet for *The Star* journalist Mathatha Tsedu Breytenbach's involvement in the Afrikaner movement came as a disappointment (as did the involvement of people like Rian Malan, Hermann Giliomee and Johan Degenaar):

Breytenbach is not only an Afrikaans poet and writer of world renown; he has ditched his tribe and committed class suicide to join the ANC as a fighter. For this he was detained, tried and sentenced. He is not the kind to be found in the company of people demanding minority rights. (*The Star* 15 November 1999:8).

It was Breytenbach who promoted the idea of white and 'brown' Afrikaners. Apart from rejecting the term *brown* as an apartheid category and even more offensive than *coloured*, most black commentators viewed this as a transparent and opportunistic attempt at co-optation – too little too late.

- 7 Rossouw is on the editorial board of the Afrikaans philosophy journal *Fragmente* which organised the (by-invitation-only) founders meeting of the Group of 63. Early in May 2000, 63 speakers of Afrikaans – predominantly white men, regarded by the organisers as prominent opinion-makers in the Afrikaans community – attended this meeting at Hammanskraal north of Pretoria. On the third and last day of the get-together the 63 people present decided to form the Group of 63. Rossouw was elected as the first chairperson. Afterwards he summarised the outcome of the discussions at the meeting as follows: 'Concern was expressed over the current condition of Afrikaans and Afrikaans interests on the whole. Group 63 plans to address these issues and keep its community informed' (*Business Day* 8 May 2000:4). The envisaged projects included, among other things, an Afrikaans Internet magazine which would 'look critically at language, minority and globalisation issues' (*The Citizen*, 10 May 2000:9). According to Rossouw, the group's aim was not only to promote multilingualism and mother-tongue education, but also to create economic empowerment for poor and unemployed speakers of Afrikaans (*Business Day* 8 May 2000:4).
- 8 Chapter 2, Act 108 of 1996.

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