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chapter three

Asikhulume!

African languages for all,
a powerful strategy for
spearheading transformation
and improvement of
the South African
education system

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¹

The research behind this paper was conducted during the later part of my stay as a research fellow at IFAS (2001-2004) and subsequent research trips, all supported by IFAS and, from 2005 onwards, also by Llacan. The contents certainly fail to do justice to the many people to whom I owe directly or indirectly any insight I gained in the understanding of the South African education system and its evolution. They are too numerous to mention. Jako Allan and Thomas Blazer reacted to an earlier French version (to be published separately), Stephanie Rudwick, Innocentia Mhlambi and Lilly Prerorius commented on an advanced draft. To all I wish to express my gratitude. Special mention for Mrs Vilikazi, principal of Thabisile Junior Primary in Diepkloof (Soweto, Gauteng) and Mr Nzimande principal of Mzwamanda secondary school in Mlazi (Durban, KZN), who opened their schools to me. The opinions expressed, some controversial, are naturally my own. I bear sole responsibility for all shortcomings.

To address the overall high failure rate experienced by African learners in the South African education system, the recommended use of African languages as ‘*languages of learning and teaching*’ (LoL/T)² in the name of mother-tongue education was strongly re-emphasised in 2006 by Minister of Education Naledi Pandor, for the first three years of compulsory schooling. But the positive effect of this otherwise healthy move is, arguably, thwarted by its self-inflicted limitation. In a setting that does not detract from the previous dispensation, the recommended use of African languages as LoL/T remains *de facto* restricted to underprivileged schools located in townships and rural areas³. It does not apply elsewhere, particularly in the schools the Minister qualified as “*servicing multi-lingual learner populations*” (speech at Unisa on 5/10/2006 from DoE website, visited November 2007) which have been construed as referring to formerly white and Indian schools, although, in a growing number of cases, black learners now constitute the majority of the enrolment. To that extent, some have indeed turned into authentic “black schools”.

We contend that, for ‘the greater good’, all government and state-aided schools should at least be compulsorily aligned in terms of language policy. Such a move is a condition to break the association of the use of African languages as LoL/T with poverty-stricken communities, low quality education and failure, and hence pave the way for an effective transformation of the whole system which would be in the interest of the majority and pursuance of equity.

If it were combined with a new approach to language requirements for the senior certificate and in higher education, this principled unitary LoL/T policy would contribute to levelling the field amongst all learners at exam time, regardless of their linguistic background. It might then prove to be an efficient lever to overcome the quagmire in which South Africa finds itself as regards language in education. Beyond education proper, it might help to create the condition for a measure of interaction between schools and learners across racial and social boundaries, and lead to a more integrated society.

² The expression *Language of Teaching and Learning* is more encompassing than the previous *Medium of Instruction* (MoI). However, its systematic use may give credit to the fallacious notion that the language is automatically one and the same for both activities. When it differs from mother tongue, this is not necessarily so, for the early grades at least (Alexander 2002). We will therefore make a distinctive use of either MoI or LoL/T, giving full meaning to the acronyms. Some now prefer the possibly less committing *language of study* (LoS) but we have not adopted it here for this very reason.

³ These correspond closely to schools formerly under the Department of Education and Training (DET), the last avatar of Bantu Education & those under Bantustan or homeland administrations.

To make the issue explicit for readers unfamiliar with the South African education scene, we start with a short excursion into history, to recall successive policies in the field and situate the present-day situation, before turning to the challenging policy we advocate. It is all the more necessary as in SA the question of the medium in its relation to the global history of the country makes it a contentious issue.

LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION: THE SOUTH AFRICAN 'PARADOX'

The centrality of language and literacy in the education process hardly needs elaboration, at least not in the formal Western education system at stake⁴. The cognitive superiority of learning in a language familiar to the child – ideally his/her mother-tongue or home language- has been proved extensively. If learners do not have sufficient knowledge of the medium, they will constantly stumble in their learning, not necessarily on the concepts or ideas or knowledge to be imparted, but on linguistic representations and expressions. Even less can they freely and creatively participate in the educative process. The reliance of Western education on literacy all but increases the role of language as the main or only vehicle of learning. "*Literacy is the key to the curriculum. Virtually all schooling after the first year or two assumes pupil literacy*" underlines Hannon (in Bloch 2000: 4). As has been observed worldwide, the scholarly achievement of learners whose mother-tongue differs from the medium is finally dependent on their linguistic skills. In that context, in order to be able to fulfil his/her potential in any discipline, a learner need firstly to be good in language⁵. This principle informed the milestone UNESCO 1953 declaration on the right of children to education in their mother-tongue, upheld in numerous documents.

Africa, however, is one continent often pinpointed for lagging behind tremendously regarding the implementation of this healthy principle, despite the many surveys confirming its validity (see inter alia the ADEA 2006 Africa-wide survey reported in Heugh 2007⁶) and an endless litany of commitments by national and continental authorities⁷.

4 Language may be less crucial in 'situated or contextualised education', where learners follow experts in their daily routine and learn by practicing with them (see Akkari & Dassen 2004).

5 Could the language gap be an explaining factor beyond the overall weakness of African South African learners in scientific disciplines, recurring over the years (inter alia, Botsis & Cronje 2007: 30)? It is known that many European learners are either good at language or science. In that line, science-oriented African learners would be particularly disadvantaged.

6 Heugh (2007) mentions the ADEA report by Alidou, Boly, Brock-Utne, Diallo, Heugh and Wolff posted at www.adeanet.org/ but the text was not available when the website was visited in February 2008.

7 Webb (2006: 131) lists the major conferences and declarations.

A TWO-FOLD LEGACY

In South Africa, the use of African languages in education has a long history, but its association with apartheid Bantu Education (BE) from the 1950s has triggered its rejection by the very ones for whom it would appear to be pedagogically beneficial. Still, prior to BE, the use of African languages in education and in the written domain at large had reached a level which was promising and almost unrivalled on the continent. It is necessary to keep this complex legacy in mind when approaching the subject of medium of instruction in this country.

The Missionary Period: the Heydays of African Languages in Education

In South Africa, Western-type formal education for Africans was introduced by missionaries from the beginning of the 19th century onwards. Many missions relied on African languages to convey the divine message, and some African languages were duly 'reduced to writing'. As missions (and colonialism) expanded, the scope of the written use of African languages, initially limited to religious domains, gradually came to encompass primary education - albeit with wide provincial discrepancies in coverage and scope⁸. As an aspect of the Shepstonian reserve system devised to regulate and manage the African population in colonial Natal, the use of Zulu as a medium of instruction became entrenched as early as 1885, but in the Orange Free State it was only in 1928 that the local African language (Sesotho) was made compulsory (Behr 1978: 162). In the 1920s, language committees were established to set orthography rules, one for Nguni languages and one for Sotho-Tswana. They were composed mainly of White missionaries and administrators, but included also few local educated individuals⁹. Still, beyond significant differences regarding state role, support and monitoring between the British provinces of the Cape and Natal and the two Boer Republics (Nyaggah 1980: 61), African education up to the 1950s remained essentially a missionary undertaking (Behr 1978: 162).

Even though this type of education, equated with conversion to Christianity, was initially offered mainly as a means towards a breakaway from 'heathen' traditions, as time passed, the syllabus in mission schools evolved and "*except in the matter of language, there was not much difference between black and white education*", recalls chief Albert Luthuli (2006: 20) on his experience as a staff member at Adams College on the outskirts of

⁸ There were also differences in approaches, if not rivalries, amongst the missionaries and individualities played a role.
⁹ Dube, political activist, educationist-cum-writer, founder and editor of Zulu newspaper *Ilanga laseNatal*, played an important part in the adoption of a conjunctive spelling system for Zulu.

Durban^{10,11}. Es'kia Mphahlele, the Africanist scholar and educationist par excellence, has willingly acknowledged the merits of missionary education in spite of its narrow-mindedness. It is worth quoting him at length:

“let us recognize the vigour of the pioneers of missionary education (...). Missionary education (...) provided space for students to create their own learning environment, and a starting point from which several of us continued to re-educate ourselves and explore the outer reaches of self-development in relation to the community. The more progressive amongst the alumni of mission schools were able to use that same education to rethink the narrowness of the church-going religion the scripture lessons had pumped into them.” (Es'kia Mphahlele 2002: 13)

Moreover, beyond utilitarian objectives, a writing tradition soon emerged in the languages developed by the missions¹². A first generation of pioneers such as Soga, Mqhayi, Sol Plaatje, Mofolo, Sekese, followed by the likes of Jordan, Vilakazi, Dube, Dhloho, to name but a few, amply shows that writing in African languages was appropriated by early African intellectuals, who were in the process of “weaning themselves” gradually from their mentors (Mphahlele 2004: 35)¹³. The same author notes that, *“By the beginning of World War 2, missionaries press had begun to liberalize their endeavours”* (Mphahlele 2004: 385)¹⁴.

The value of this first modernisation and intellectualisation of African languages – to copy a modern phrasing (Alexander 2003) – was acknowledged by African intellectuals of the time. Jabavu (1921) saw merit in the literature written in African languages and Albert Luthuli himself is on record to have pronounced himself in favour of mother-tongue education in 1934 (in Rich 1995), even if later, with hindsight, after BE was imposed, he was to nuance his position on this matter (Luthuli 2006: 21).

¹⁰ I.e. before the focus on manual skills brought about when Loram was appointed Chief Inspector of Native Education (Luthuli 2006: 20).

¹¹ Adams's college was created and managed by the American Zulu Mission.

¹² The identification and instrumentalisation of the languages, conducted as they were by non-native speakers, were not without problems, and these have been raised in recent years after the pioneer work of Nhlapho (1944, 1945): see *inter alia*, Alexander (1989), Makoni (2003), and, for Tsonga, Harries (2007). These limitations however did not prevent the emergence of African writings.

¹³ The importance of these early intellectuals has been recently emphasised (see Ndletyana 2008 for a focus on some of them).

¹⁴ See Maake (2000) for a general assessment of that early literature.

*The Drawback: Bantu Education*¹⁵

From 1954 onwards, instruction in African languages was highjacked by the imposition of Bantu Education, which constituted a crucial part of the apartheid policy implemented by the Nationalist Party after its 1948 electoral victory¹⁶. Education for Africans was separated from the “main stream”, in terms of syllabus and language. The syllabus was conceived to correlate with perceived ‘cultural specificities’ and designed for an education appropriate and “useful” for Blacks in their own communities (Nyaggah 1980: 65) with, initially at least, a narrow utilitarian design, in stark contrast with the potential openness and humanism of the late missionary period. It was based on the notion of ‘an ordained hierarchy of races’, as the regime spin-doctors saw it, and aimed “to isolate [Africans] and convince [them] of their permanent inferiority” (Luthuli 2006: 35).

During that period, African languages became further entrenched as MoI during the whole primary band (8 years) for African people. The use of African languages drew upon the pioneering missionary work¹⁷, but it was also a biased echo of the promotion of Afrikaans that had garnered support in the context of the political and ideological rivalry between Boers and Britons in the 1920s, and reflected the philosophy of Christian National Education that had inspired Afrikaans schools. Language was becoming a slave of politics: in 1961, the previously united language committees were split into separate boards, and the development of each language was henceforth conducted in an isolated way. The development of African languages as LoL/T was constrained within a pedagogy that has been characterised as ‘uncreative literacy’.

From what was then standard 5, and later from standard 7 (now Grade 9), regarding MoI, except for the teaching of the African languages, there was a sudden shift to English and/or Afrikaans, which were then the only two official languages at national level¹⁸. This strategy was later referred to as subtractive bilingualism¹⁹.

¹⁵ For an in-depth study on some of the major aspects of Bantu Education, see *inter alia* the contributions in Kallaway (2002).
¹⁶ Africans had no real say in the election since the franchise that still allowed non-Whites to vote in the Cape and Natal had little impact in terms of numbers. It is worth noting that, in 1948, the NP did not obtain the majority of votes but the system was designed to advantage rural constituencies. Later elections proved, however, that the NP had gained in popularity amongst the enfranchised and, henceforward, exclusively white electorate.

¹⁷ This link is embodied in Eiselen himself, chairman of the Commission that was named after him and that produced Bantu Education. Eiselen was born from German missionaries posted in the Pedi-speaking area, where he grew up. He became a “*Pedi Linguist and Anthropologist*” (see Kross 2002).

¹⁸ English and Afrikaans were to be used in parity – the 50-50 rule – but that remained unevenly implemented for a long time. It is the brutal decision taken by the Southern Transvaal Department of Education and Training to implement it that triggered the 1976 Soweto protests (for an insightful analysis of this turning point in the evolution of language in education policy, see Heugh 2000).

¹⁹ Some African learners, however, recall the use of African languages in certain subjects, particularly in the teaching of English grammar, further up the educational ladder.

Bantu Education met with strong resistance from various sectors of society, especially black teachers and some missionaries, but political domination allowed the government to have the upper hand. Government took over most mission schools and teacher-training facilities, with only the Catholics and some minor denominations able or willing to keep their independence but at the cost of being excluded from state aid (Behr 1978: 181). Attempts at creating independent African-run schools did not succeed in the face of funding shortage and government hostility²⁰.

This also impacted on the heretofore bulging African language literature. Schools constituted *the* market for books in African languages, and this market, economically potentially rewarding due to sheer numbers, became heavily monitored by apartheid civil servants. African language literature was prevented from addressing pressing issues such as “*politics of resistance, generally portrayal of real life issues that candidly reveal adult concerns, sexual life, etc.*” (Mphahlele 2004: 385), and from adapting linguistically, as language boards adopted a conservative stance. Even if African language literature produced significant works in the main languages (Ricard 2004), the constraints it faced channelled it into perceived irrelevancy. “*The development of adult literature was arrested*” to quote Mphahlele again. In the apt words of Swanepoel (1998), African language literature was henceforth both “*smothered and sponsored*”. As a response, many African writers – including Mphahlele himself – opted for English exclusively in their work, if only to avoid censorship and to target a wider audience, inside and outside South Africa.

A LASTING LEGACY OF INEQUALITY

Bantu Education, in various garbs, controlled and determined African education for almost 50 years, i.e. over three successive generations of African learners. The curriculum was not the only aspect that set it apart. The discrepancy between the racially segregated school systems – besides Whites and Blacks, Indian and Coloured were also classified as separate racial groups – involved all parameters, from administration to funding.

Spending on white learners per capita was several times superior to that provided for Blacks, resulting in further widening the gap already existing. According to Carpentier (2005: 48), between 1969 & 1976, for every R1 of state money spent per black learner, R15 were spent per white learner.

²⁰

Soudien (2002) looks at the ways African teachers responded to BE, from resistance to unwilling acceptance.

Although there was a significant increase in physical access to education during the Bantu Education period, this occurred largely at the cost of quality. Low qualified and poorly paid African teachers were appointed (Nyaggah 1980: 72) to fill posts while white teachers were gradually phased out of African schools. This broadening of enrolment also resulted in further spreading the vicious system to all corners of the country.

During most of BE period, the government was reluctant to create secondary schools in the townships, as it argued that black people belonged to the so-called Bantustans (or homelands). This policy led to a significant shortage of educational facilities in highly populated areas, which proved self-defeating when, in the 1980s, for political and utilitarian reasons, the Government sought to increase access to secondary education for Black learners. The learners had to contend with overcrowded classrooms and inadequate or altogether inexistent facilities, such as libraries and laboratories. To date, many secondary schools in townships are still nothing more than 'upgraded' primary schools.

For many Africans, BE was equated to second-rate education – if not 'slave' education – and came to embody the apartheid regime, as much as influx control, pass laws and segregated housing, among others. As segregation was implemented and Bantustans established from the late 1960s onwards, every black person had to fit into a given 'tribe' or 'nation', and this was at times based on the language narrowly identified as that person's mother-tongue. This process negated the evolving character of language varieties and ethnic identities, especially in urban areas.

This whole set up led to deeply engrained negative attitudes towards the use of African languages as MoI, seen as part and parcel of the apartheid policy of downgrading the African population, as well as a shrewd divide and rule strategy. So unpopular was the use of African languages in the BE framework that homeland governments, after the Transkei lead in 1965²¹, took advantage of their (very) relative autonomy and decided to use English as medium of instruction from standard 3 (Grade 5) onwards, much to the dismay of apartheid educationists. In spite of its negative context, as part and parcel of Bantu Education, the use of African mother-tongues for a full 8 years of schooling until the 1979 changes yielded positive results, as Heugh (2002: 4) courageously remarked: "*despite serious discrepancies in expenditure between white and black children, there was surprisingly significant education success for black South Africans before 1976*". She further notes that the matric pass rates for African learners were at their highest in 1976

²¹ The Transkei decision was based on the Cingo Commission Report (Behr 1978: 178).

and started to decline steadily from 1979 onwards. Indeed, in 1979, in the wake of the 1976 Soweto revolt and as a placatory measure, the compulsory use of African languages as MoI was reduced to the first three years in DET schools. For Heugh (2000: 18), the reduction of the mother-tongue period heralded “*a cycle of ever-decreasing educational competency*”.

To make matters worse, schools that, from then on, were identified as advanced positions of Afrikaner or White domination, were often targeted by the rebellious youth, and classes, especially in the townships, were largely disrupted²². Even when, in the later period, as a last (and belated) attempt to woo Africans, significant improvements in African education were made, marked by an increase in expenditure and a gradual narrowing of the racially-based per capita spending – down from 1 to 4,4 in 1989, to 1 to 3,4 in 1991 (Carpentier, 2005: 48; MacKenzie, 1993: 289)²³, syllabus improvement and extensive work in African language terminology, these changes failed to reverse the dominant negative perception of Bantu education, including the use of African languages as languages of learning and teaching.

LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF THE PRESENT SITUATION

A bimodal system

The unification of the education system – during apartheid, educational bodies in what is now South Africa, numbered up to 18 or possibly 19 (Umalusi²⁴) – was one of the main demands of the ANC and white liberals; it was undertaken during the transition from 1991 onwards.

In 1991, as a forerunner, state-run white schools (under the House of Assembly) were required to choose between four options, labelled A, B, C, and D, differing mostly by the degree of self-management and funding (MacKenzie 1993: 290; van Rooyen & Rossouw 2007: 24). By 1992, most of these schools opted for so-called model C²⁵, whereby they were given free rein to levy fees, as public subsidy was to decrease.

²² A motto of the period was “*No education before liberation*”

²³ In 1991/92, the per capita spending was R1 248 for black learners, R2 701 for coloured learners and R4 448 for white learners (SAIRR 1992/3, Race Relations Survey: 575).

²⁴ The racially separated facilities within South Africa proper were further divided on provincial lines; independent Bantustans and most non-independent ones had their own education department.

²⁵ In fact, in 1992 the Minister coerced schools into adopting model C which became the default option. It included 95% of the formerly white schools (van Rooyen and Rossouw, 2007: 24).

If the administrative unification was completed successfully under the democratic dispensation with the construction of a single national Department of Education, financial equity proved more difficult to implement. Such was the inertia of the system that in 1993 the state spent an average of R5500 per learner in privileged schools but only R1700 per learner in ex-DET schools (Motala & al 2007: 3), i.e. still an unequal ratio of over 1 to 3.

It is fair to note that priority was given towards extending schooling. For the first time in the history of the country, schooling was made compulsory for children of all racial groups, and for a full 9 years. This was implemented. Whilst in 1996 there was still 11% of children not attending schools (Lehohla 2001: 1), by 2003 only 3% of school-going age children were not attending school (Lavinia Mahlangu, *SA becoming more educated*, www.southafrica.info, visited Feb 2008)²⁶. Brick-schools were gradually substituting schools under the trees and mud-schools, and dilapidated ones were upgraded, with priority given to ensure minimal facilities (electricity connection, water adduction and toilets)²⁷.

Schools were eventually distributed in socio-economically defined quintiles and a greater proportion of state-funding was to be directed towards the lower strata. The system however failed to eradicate intra-country inequalities, as quintiles were, until 2003, determined on a provincial level: a school which in Gauteng (the wealthiest province) would feature in the lowest quintile and be eligible for increased funding, would feature in a higher category in, say, Limpopo, and therefore not benefit from the same degree of state support²⁸.

More crucially, although government reversed the public expenditure ratio in favour of underprivileged schools, schools were allowed to continue charging fees much as they pleased. The impact of fees can be illustrated by the following example provided by Carpentier (2005): given 2 schools in 1999, each with a population of 1000 learners; school A (privileged) levies R2500 yearly per pupil, while school B (underprivileged), R50; government differentiated funding (excluding teachers) will amount to R28 000 for school A and R196 000 for school B. All in all, the resources of privileged school A will exceed those of underprivileged school B by over R 2 millions²⁹. Government tried to address the issue. In 2005, a number of schools belonging to the two lowest quintiles

26 As a result, the proportion of persons aged over 20 with no education was reduced from 14% to 10% between 1998 & 2005 (Botsis & Cronje 2007: 10).

27 In 2006, out of a total of around 29 000 schools, around 8 000 were still without electricity, 3 000 without water and 1 500 without toilets (address by the Minister 28/09/2007 at Thengwe Secondary School, www.education.gov.za/dynamic/).

28 This factor contributes to the fight around the proposed redefinition of provincial borders, that took place over the years.

29 Assuming that all pupils in school B pay the fees.

were made ‘non-fee paying schools’, a measure that was extended to all of them by 2007, with a financial compensation drawn from state coffers to the tune of cer R500 per learner, raised to 700 in 2007. But this is not likely to bridge the gap. Within the logics of liberalism, state resources are no match, In education as elsewhere, the mere logic of crude liberalism allows for the haves to get every opportunity to have even more, while the have-nots are essentially confined to their conditions, and hence for initial inequalities to be reproduced and extended³⁰. The widely superior endowment benefiting privileged schools pays for more teachers, which allows the schools to keep class sizes small, to maintain and improve infrastructure, equipment, etc³¹. Still, such a trend is not written in stone. As Shannon Walsh (2006: p. 158) aptly observes about the city of Durban’s inadequate response to shacks and shack dwellers: “*the budget is limited only by what it [the city] has chosen to prioritise*”³².

Today’s South African school network thus still largely reflects this legacy, contrasting by and large – beyond discrepancies within each category – “*dysfunctional and impoverished schools, used by the majority of South African children*” (Botsis & Cronje 2007: 50), which happen to be ex-DET schools and other ‘Black’ schools (i.e. homeland schools), on the one hand, with “*a small number of well resourced schools used by the privileged minority*”, including former white schools and, to a varying degree, Indian and Coloured schools, on the other, now often commonly lumped together under the label ex-model C. Jensen & Amsterdam described this situation eloquently:

“Consider an elite public high school with expensive grounds, high technology facilities, highly qualified teachers, and school fees in excess of R10 000 per annum (...) and a recognised public school in which some of the classes are conducted under a tree (...). Of both entities it could be said that government has equalised funding (...). But no analysis can even begin to anticipate reasonable, let alone comparable, educational outcomes (...). In other words, while discrimination has ended, inequality has not” (in Motala & al. 2007:37).

This deep socio-economic divide translates into a ‘bimodal system’ in terms of results (Elisabeth Pretorius, this volume & personal com.). It is also reflected in school language

30 Swimming pools (and other fancy equipment) in township schools would still have to wait, giving further credence to the apartheid-old notion that ‘Blacks can’t swim’.

31 For reference, it may be observed that, in Zimbabwe, in the late 1990s, some ‘A’ schools [corresponding to SA model C] provoked the ire of government by the amount of fees charged, since the level of fees was seen as a strategy to keep black learners out. The government was on the point of legislating against these schools. Situations like these formed part of the resentment built up against ‘things that don’t change’.

32 The huge infrastructural investment country-wide, including some of the major townships, in the run-off to the 2010 tournament, testifies to the capacity of the State to mobilise funds for the priorities it has set on its agenda.

policies: the use of African languages as LoL/T is restricted to underprivileged schools whilst the privileged schools invariably and regardless of their population will have English (more and more rarely Afrikaans) as LoL/T. The continuing systematic association between these two parameters is crucial. The use of African languages as LoL/T is clearly construed by African parents and the public at large as embodying poor quality education.

The Rush Towards English for Better or Worse

As early as 1990, in a decentralisation process led to its furthest end, schools were allowed to choose their language policy, including their preferred MoI. In line with the 1996 Constitution which elevated 9 African languages³³ to a position on a par with English and Afrikaans, the 1996 School Act offer theoretical provision for any of the 11 official languages to be LoL/T during primary and secondary education. In a more realistic manner, the 1997 *Norms and Standards for Language Policy in Public Schools* recommends initial literacy and numeracy in the mother-tongue, and ‘additive bilingualism’ later on. It also vested the choice of language in the individual.

Simultaneously, racial regulations regarding schools were scrapped; the responsibility for the admission of learners was transferred to each school “*within the provisions of the Constitution*” (MacKenzie 1993: 294). A number of former white schools, especially those under model C³⁴, admitted learners from other racial groups, provided they could meet the school requirements, spelt out essentially in terms of residence and finance and, possibly, English language proficiency measured in a test (Murray 2002: 436).

This signalled a rush towards English. African parents did not necessarily run away from African languages *per se*, but, understandably, they wanted better quality education and better equipped schools for their children, and this, given the legacy of BE, led them to enrol their offspring in former white, English/Afrikaans-speaking schools.

On the one hand, more affluent families left the townships altogether for the (former White) ‘suburbs’, where ex-model-C schools were located³⁵; and on the other, many middle

³³ The very ones that had been recognised at local level and developed under apartheid. See Lafon 2006 for an analysis of the language situation and many more references on the issue.

³⁴ In fact racially integrated schools had been in existence since 1986, when the Catholics were allowed to group all learners in the establishments under their aegis (Macdonald 1990: 96). These schools were known as “open schools”.

³⁵ In the same period, influx from rural areas to townships increased, with many ‘rural’ children schooling in the townships.

or even low-income families, while staying in the townships, ‘voted with the taxis’ (as the Cuban emigrants voted with their feet)³⁶ and sent their children to English medium schools – former white schools in towns, and, especially in Natal, former-Indian schools in Indian townships. For parents with a modest income, this represented a great sacrifice. Among them, one cannot fail to notice the many black teachers from underprivileged schools, a fact which can be construed as a (negative) assessment of the system by insiders...³⁷ – maybe partly as a response to the disruptions that had overrun township schools during the last decade of apartheid, which they witnessed more than any other category of the population. Subsequently, in order to retain or attract learners, in a number of townships, with Gauteng leading the way, primary schools – the very schools that had been compelled to use African mother-tongues under apartheid – opted formally for English as MoI. Since its inception, this movement has not slowed down. Out of 25 736 SA schools under the DoE in 2004, only 6 542 had an African language as primary medium of instruction, against 16 796 having English (Minister reply to question in national Assembly, 9/3/2007, DoE website)³⁸.

From Multi- to Mono-Racial ex-Model C Schools

Moving away from township schools proceeded unabated³⁹, giving rise to a new phenomenon: a number of ex-model C schools, usually belonging to the lower rung in terms of fees, have become mainly, if not exclusively, African schools in terms of their learner population^{40,41}. White parents –followed by financially stronger black families – flock to more expensive schools, either upper crust ex-model C schools or totally independent ones, where the level of fees and/or geographical access remain an effective barrier to social (and racial) mixing⁴². However, due in part to the inherent stability of contracts and, possibly, the lack of employment opportunities elsewhere, staff, including teachers, have remained. They

36 Taxis, in South African English refers to private minibuses doing collective passenger transport particularly between townships and cities.

37 76% of KZN black teachers wish for their children to attend ex-model C schools, according to a survey conducted by Ngcobo (2001: 27).

38 The source does not specify the respective enrolment. Let us recall that over 78% of South Africans are first language African speakers (census 2001).

39 With some of them now lying empty... (Botsis & Cronje 2007: 52 and visit to Soweto, January 2008); Cer. 40 schools in Gauteng townships are not utilised, according to Gauteng Education Policy Unit researcher Mario Pillay, (personal com, April 2008).

40 From anecdotal evidence, the same occurs in KZN ex-Indian schools. In the Western Cape however, it seems that the former racial distribution of learners has undergone few changes; Black learners tend to join Coloured schools in higher proportion than they do white schools, but Coloured learners globally remain in their formerly reserved institutions (Carpentier 2008: 41).

41 In part as an acknowledgment of this new situation, from 2008, quintiles are defined according to the socio-economic status of the learners’s families, regardless of the infrastructure (Mario Pillay, personal com, April 2008).

42 In a dynamic not unlike that of residences, it seems that, when African learners reach over 40 or 50% in a school, the exodus of white children accelerates until hardly any are left.

are mostly Whites or Indians, who seldom have any competence in the African language(s) spoken by their pupils. In a new twist, independent schools are now being opened in the townships, with racially mixed staff – that is, a number of non-Black teachers (see Pretorius in this volume for an example in Atteridgeville township, Tshwane)⁴³. Indeed, according to Botsis & Cronje (2007: 24), independent schools which have increased by 94% between 1995 & 2006, came partly as a response from middle class Black parents unhappy with the standard of public education⁴⁴.

Regarding the LoL/T, these schools use English only (occasionally Afrikaans⁴⁵). African languages, if present at all in the school curriculum, feature as mere subjects of study, sometimes even – again a legacy of the past - as second or third additional languages and taught by non-mother tongue teachers as second language⁴⁶. Many of these schools, faced by a growing demand, have maintained an English proficiency test to restrict entry to those African learners who have some knowledge of English⁴⁷ – even if such measures fall outside of the legislation as they are deemed ‘unfair discrimination’ (interview with Prince Masilo, Umalusi, Pretoria, May 2007). In a ripple effect, an ever growing proportion of African parents have resorted to sending their children to English-medium pre-primary schools, which have mushroomed in townships and towns, with some parents even attempting to make English the language of the home⁴⁸, thus *‘raising little foreigners in their home’* observed sadly the famous Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiongo (Time of the Writer Festival, Durban, 2007).

In South Africa, a combined phenomenon occurs to entrench English as the *‘unassailable’* (Alexander 2000) stepping stone to upward mobility: the legacy of apartheid BE, which still taints negatively the use of African languages as LoL/T and equates English with quality education, is reinforced by the ongoing globalisation process which stresses the importance of English in all professional domains.

43 This situation dispels the alleged systematic danger of township posting for white teachers.

44 The category ‘independent schools’ is broad. Some have emerged as a response to lack of facilities in new informal settlements and feature amongst the poorest and less endowed.

45 Afrikaans-medium schools are on record for using their language policy to deter African parents (interview, R Finlayson, 2001, Unisa). Over the years this has led to various litigations by African parents, often supported by provincial departments of education, arguing, on the basis of regulation on classroom space and language choice, that their children should be admitted, and have English as LoL/T. This trend has led to the gradual disappearance of single-medium Afrikaans schools: by 2006, there remained only 300 of them out of 2 500 in 1994 (Smit 2007: p. 64). Many have turned into dual medium schools, while others have foregone Afrikaans as LoL/T. For more information on the legal aspects of this process, see Smit (2007: 65) and van Rooyen & Rossouw (2007).

46 This is now changing.

47 In such a school in Durban, there was a 20% failure rate (interview principal, August 2007).

48 Maybe, as in Tsarist Russia, where native-speaking French child mentors were regarded as essential status-markers in well-to-do families, such Black families, in a savoury reversal of history, will end up hiring native English-speaking nannies.

It is difficult to assess the pedagogic effects of this linguistic dispensation on the learners in question. Beyond individual specificities, it would probably depend on interrelated factors such as social and racial integration or the lack of it in schools, the social origin of the children, the language(s) spoken at home, the pedagogic support received from parents, etc. What is clear though, is that in schools with a large majority of black learners, and contrary to common wisdom, English is seldom used outside the classroom: therefore, conversely to parents' expectations, children do not gain the proficiency in the language which can come only from regular and everyday use, in small talk and gossip⁴⁹. This contrasts these schools with what was (and still is) happening in effectively multiracial schools where the necessity of communication leads African children to use English to speak with their non-African classmates.

In this setting, a number of African learners are at a growing risk of failing to acquire any elaborate knowledge of their own language and of becoming alienated from an integral part of their cultural environment, while they do not necessarily gain fluency in English – thus turning into 'bilingual illiterates', as the victims of ill-thought Arabicisation were known in post-independence Algeria. The dissatisfaction of some parents and educators with this situation has led a number of township schools which had opted for English as MoI, to return to the use of African languages in the first years, even before it became a recommended policy⁵⁰. In privileged schools, it explains the new emphasis on the teaching of African languages as additional languages and the anger when teachers are not deemed competent enough⁵¹.

High Failure Rate in South African Education: Accused: Language Discrepancy

The South African education system is characterised by a high failure rate, distributed largely along racial lines, with black learners topping the list. In 2002, only 10% of black candidates obtained a 'pass with matric endorsement' (i.e. access to higher education) as

49 Schools may have an English-only rule, in apparent contradiction with the philosophy of the Language in Education Policy which promotes diversity. The principal of a Durban ex-model C school clearly admitted that it was un-enforceable. However, in an English-medium primary school in Atteridgeville (Tshwane), learners who have been "caught" speaking "vernacular" on the premises are singled out; as an act of contrition, they have to read in front of their class from an English book (interview deputy principal, April 2008).

50 This was the case in Thabisile Junior Primary, Diepkloof, Soweto, from 2002 to 2006. Bowing to parents' pressure, the school however has now become a 'dual medium school' with Zulu and English (interviews with the principal, Mrs Vilakazi, March 2005 & January 2008).

51 The Minister of Education and other officials are on record for having come down heavily on schools (still) employing non-native African language speaking teachers for the teaching of African languages.

opposed to half the Whites (Carpentier 2005: 279), for a national average of 17%, a figure that showed a slight decrease in 2006 (16%) (Botsis & Cronje 2007: 26).

The limited command of the MoI by the bulk of non-MoI native speakers has long been identified as a major contributor to this sorry situation. Van Dyk (1993: 185) writes:

“although there are many other variables involved in the failure of African children to progress at schools and afterwards, not the least of which are unequal funding and general disruption, it is perhaps the problems that scholars experience with MOI that have the most wide-ranging and debilitating effect on them”

and in 2004, an Umalusi document comments ([Lolwana] 2004: 47):

“There is an increasing weight of evidence that, after poverty, language, and in particular proficiency in the medium of instruction, is the largest single factor affecting learner performance at school”.

The high failure rate among African learners makes a mockery of the stated policy of equal education opportunities. For many of those whose home language differs from English, language clearly remains a barrier to success at school. The issue undermines the whole system, fostering inequality between learners according to their background, i.e. mostly along ethnic lines, and is obviously a waste of public resources and learners’s time and energy. The Government could no longer delay tackling this issue.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION FOR UNDERPRIVILEGED AFRICANS

In an apparent attempt at addressing the issue at its very root, in her Unisa speech alluded to above, the Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, strongly recommended the use of African languages as LoL/T for the first 3 years (grade 1 to 3)⁵² (www.education.gov.za, visited July 2007), implying that initial literacy and numeracy should now be imparted in the (African) mother-tongue⁵³, as long as it is one of the 9 official African languages of the

⁵² Reception is not considered as yet. The Department of Education aims to make Reception part of compulsory schooling by 2010, but execution seems to be lagging behind (Botsis & Cronje 2007: 47).

⁵³ Interestingly, mother-tongue in South African education parlance seems to be implicitly assimilated to an African language.

country. Further up the ladder, English and Afrikaans remain the only LoL/Ts in place and the African language is maintained as a discipline. This renewed focus on African languages is strengthened by the language stipulation in the Senior Certificate that substitutes matric from 2008 that requires a pass in one's mother-tongue taken as a subject. It seems that the DoE is considering extending the use of (African) mother-tongues up to grade 6, i.e. for the whole first band⁵⁴. An indication of its earnestness in tackling the language issue, the Department conducted an interesting experiment in 2006: exam papers for 4 subjects in the *matric* trial exams were translated in all 9 official African languages, emulating what is done for Afrikaans⁵⁵. In the experiment schools, learners received two versions of the papers, one in English, and one bilingual, with a translation in the African standard variety. Only English however was accepted as the language used in learners' answers⁵⁶.

The recommendation for the use of African languages as LoL/T at primary level was a rather bold move in the South African context considering the prevailing attitudes, even though it does not go further than the 1997 Language in Education policy. It is certainly a step in the right direction, grounded as it is on the indisputable superiority of mother-tongue education. However, the socially limited scope of the recommendation is self-defeating. For African children, mother-tongue instruction applies only in underprivileged schools. In privileged schools (ex-model C or similar), as things stand, implementing the mother-tongue principle for African learners is not taken into consideration, mainly due to their alleged multilingual character. In such environments, it is argued that English is the only possible LoL/T. This however does not take stock of the growing number of African (near) monolingual ex-model C or even private schools.

Thus, in better-endowed schools, mother-tongue education remains restricted to those learners for whom English (or Afrikaans) is a home language – i.e. mainly Whites, Indians, Coloured and possibly a few Africans, children of foreign nationals or the local elite, sometimes nicknamed “oreo” or “coconuts” (Rudwick *in print*).

54 The Minister's declaration or its reporting created some confusion: in a reply to a question in Parliament, on 9 February 2007, Naledi Pandor confirmed that the 1997 language policy was not altered, implying that the choice of language(s) remains with each school. A number of principals in African schools however seem to have taken the declaration on mother-tongue as an official policy orientation.

55 In the interest of uniformity, exam papers in Afrikaans are translated and not elaborated from within the language (Prince Masilo, Umalusi, interview, 2006).

56 I am indebted to Vic Webb for information on this experience, as *CentRePoL* was commissioned to assess the whole process. I witnessed the presentation of the preliminary conclusions to the DoE officials in April 2007.

In this context, as could be expected, the recommended reintroduction of African languages as LoL/T has been met with mixed feelings, especially by African parents. It may even have added to the flight away from township schools.

The new requirement for mother-tongue at senior certificate has the potential for preventing African languages from oblivion, but much will depend on the modality of its implementation.

THE CRUX OF THE MATTER: IMPLEMENTING A TRANSFORMED LANGUAGE POLICY IN SCHOOLS

African languages will never be accepted as mediums of instruction as long as their use remains a feature of underprivileged schools. In the name of fairness, equity and the interest of the majority, and for the sake of maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity, for “the greater good”, there is a need to adopt a more embracing policy regarding language in schools across the whole social and racial spectrum. This is no new idea. It has been advocated earlier⁵⁷, it is even part of the intentions of the Minister (see Unisa statement) but the population change that occurred in a number of ex-model C schools stresses its urgency, as does the continued drive towards English.

Taking into account the necessity to improve learners’ school achievements and the full recognition of the African nature of the country, the strategy regarding language in education should be based on the extensive implementation of the mother-tongue principle coupled with the promotion of African languages, in a manner that would create a momentum for a change of attitude and help nurture a more racially-mixed society. We briefly discuss crucial features of such a strategy.

*i) Mother-Tongue Education for All*⁵⁸

Mother-tongue education, for the first years at least, should be the case for every learner, irrespective of the type of school, with flexibility to accommodate diverse situations, and

⁵⁷ Notably by Cape-Town NGO Praesa in various publications as well as experiments in classes (see <http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/praesa/pru.html>).

⁵⁸ We assume – as is a tenet of mother-tongue education - that initial literacy and numeracy should be acquired in the mother-tongue. It has been shown that the longer the MT period, the better the cognitive results. It is not however our aim, and it falls outside our competence, to discuss the various bilingual models which have been experimented world-wide.

that includes in our mind the pre-primary stage⁵⁹. For non-English mother-tongue speakers, English would be introduced as a subject of study, after literacy and numeracy are acquired through the primary language. Books in African languages for pre-primary schools are being developed⁶⁰.

When school population is linguistically diverse, as is often the case in Gauteng but not so frequently outside the province, initial literacy in the various mother-tongues could at least be provided as long as they are shared by the relevant number of learners⁶¹. Moreover, various innovative projects have shown that language diversity can be turned into an advantage, with the children themselves playing an active part in the linguistic coaching of their peers who speak other languages, even if English is retained as a common MoI⁶².

Whatever the case, the African language(s) should be maintained as a subject taught as L1 to its speakers, until Grade 12.

It might be objected that this would run counter to the right of parents to the free choice of MoI, as stipulated in the existing policy. That may be so at a superficial level, but it should be kept in mind that the decision was taken as a reaction against the compulsory use of Afrikaans and in the context of the necessary undoing of Bantu Education; the situation has now changed. Besides, can it be said that there is a free choice when African languages have become synonymous with poor quality education? Only if there were African language-medium schools on the same level as English- and Afrikaans-medium ones, could we speak of a meaningful choice. In fact, there have been calls to ‘reassess the policy that allowed school governing bodies the power to choose their own language policies’.

*ii) Compulsory Indigenous African (Bantu) Language*⁶³

An indigenous African language (by which we mean a Bantu language) should become compulsory up to Grade 12 for all learners⁶⁴. Besides being a vindication of the current situation, it would contribute to levelling the field between all learners, as non-African

⁵⁹ There seems to be no language stipulation for pre-primary.

⁶⁰ See Biblionef project, under www.sasix.co.za/projects/

⁶¹ In terms of regulations, a school is supposed to cater linguistically for learners as soon as they number 40 in primary and 35 in secondary. So far, this has been applied merely to force Afrikaans-single medium schools to have English as MoI.

⁶² *Inter alia*, the home language project in Gauteng.

⁶³ The term *Bantu* has acquired a negative connotation in South Africa which still forbids its use. Its replacement by the phrases ‘African languages’ or ‘indigenous languages’ however has proved counter-productive (in the perspective of Bantu language promotion) as Afrikaans has a claim, debatable though it is, to such qualification.

⁶⁴ The Minister stated “*compulsory achievement of communicative competence in an indigenous language by all learners*” (Unisa statement, *passim*). It remains to be known however what is meant here by indigenous language.

language speakers would be, for one, linguistically challenged. So the language requirement for the senior certificate would read, “when the language of learning and teaching is the mother-tongue, the second language should be one of the official Bantu (or indigenous African) languages”.

In South Africa, through personal and potentially inter-active exposure, most ‘non-Africans’ have every opportunity to learn an African language. With African language-speaking nannies and gardeners at hand in many White and Indian homes, it is disturbing that White and Indian children do not acquire competency in the ‘helpers’ language - as was the case years past for a significant number of European settlers⁶⁵. In contrast, besides school, African children have to rely mostly on TV and media programmes to learn English, as they rarely benefit from the physical presence of a native speaker.

iii) True Bilingual Education

In a country such as South Africa, true bilingual education whereby, beyond the initial mother-tongue stage, some disciplines would be taught in an African language, others in English and/or Afrikaans, seems a way worth exploring. That could be implemented as soon as relevant material becomes available in African languages and teachers are trained in their use.

This, we feel, should concern all learners – rather than only non-native English speakers – if only as a way to make it accepted⁶⁶. A white learner having learnt Sotho from grade 1 should be able to follow a history class in Sotho as much as a black learner a science lesson in English. Again, beyond cultural enrichment challenging white learners, it would also prepare the ground for bilingual universities.

Let us now look at what could be the possible impact of such measures when implemented specifically in privileged schools.

⁶⁵ The new importance of African home-helpers in white children’s success at school might even result in re-assessing their status in the family - which would be no mean achievement.

⁶⁶ For an experiment of dual-medium education using Xhosa and English in a township environment, see Pluddemann (2002)

UTOPIA REVISITED: TRANSFORMED EX-MODEL C SCHOOLS

Privileged schools have a pivotal (and perhaps compensatory) role to play in the revalorisation of African languages in the education system. They should align with the bulk of public and state-aided schools in terms of language policy. We look at some of many effects the aforesaid measures might trigger.

Teacher Mobility

Privileged schools would need teachers qualified in the African language(s) at stake, as LoL/T for the first grades, as well as for other subjects later on, for both speakers and non-speakers. These openings might contribute to reverse the trend whereby there is a decline of candidate teachers for African languages, as it would broaden their work opportunities⁶⁷. It could also facilitate teacher mobility across racial and social boundaries. As African teachers would be transferred from townships to urban schools, White and Indian teachers would become available for townships and rural schools. The presence of English native teachers in the latter could have only positive consequences on the level of English whilst African teachers posted in privileged schools would certainly benefit from a more study-oriented environment⁶⁸. The security situation has sufficiently improved in most townships to make it now a reasonable prospect, as confirmed by the above-mentioned Atteridgeville example⁶⁹.

Such a measure should probably go hand in hand with a levelling of salaries strictly according to qualifications.

African Language Development

Because African languages would be used in all schools, regardless of their social status, they would emerge from the chains of poverty where they have been confined and sever the enduring linkage with poor education and the lower social stratum of society. The Bantu Education stigma still so strongly attached to the use of African languages in education would

⁶⁷ This shortage comes on the backdrop of a general dearth of teachers (see *Sunday Independent*, 30 Dec 2007, p 5, commenting on low matric examination pass rates).

⁶⁸ Such deployment of white teachers in township schools was put in place in the 1980s. It triggered a mixed reaction from learners, teachers and parents, fuelled by the prevalent political tensions. Since then, the environment has changed drastically.

⁶⁹ In the 1990s, many white teachers refused to teach in townships, arguing on the lack of security. This does not appear to be justified anymore, at least not in most places. This writer has himself visited schools in Mlazi (Durban township) and Soweto on a regular basis, in 2006 & 2007, driving to and fro, without any sense of impending danger.

fade away and the process of their intellectualisation, stalled by apartheid policies, would be rekindled. This is crucial.

To foster the use of African languages as LoL/T and as subjects of study, they need to be (re)developed into literary languages. However, for this to happen, they need to be considered in an innovative manner. It is not possible to return to the languages as they were before and during apartheid. Even though the literary achievements some had attained previously should not be discarded, the social and human context has undergone considerable changes. To stimulate readership among the youth of today and tomorrow, there is a clear need to depart from the linguistic and moral norms established a century ago. Revisited literacy in African languages has to take into account modern varieties, those spoken in today's life, those that shape the identity of present-day youth, with their heavy borrowings from one another, as well as from English and Afrikaans, and their frankness about all issues.

The inclusion of African languages up to Grade 12 level in better resourced schools, would encourage genuine authorship, as it would create a market for enticing books in African languages, from school manuals to accompanying textbooks through novels, short stories, cartoons, magazines, etc., to fill shelves in school libraries and, hopefully, people's homes.

Promoting Educational and Social Transformation

The possible consequences for society at large of such changes in the education system cannot be overstated, as one aspect would bring forth another, in a ripple effect.

Because African languages would be compulsory up to Grade 12, non-African language speaking learners would have no choice but to acquire a real command of them, thus giving more substance to their oft repeated claim of being 'White' Africans. Interaction across racial boundaries would then be encouraged⁷⁰.

Innovative exchange formulas could be set in place between schools belonging to different universes, whereby a class or part of a class could for a period be transferred to a different environment, in the way of twin cities across continents. That would allow underprivileged learners to benefit – if only occasionally – from better facilities, without a budgetary revolution, and privileged learners to have at an early stage first-hand knowledge of the real conditions in which the majority of the population live in South Africa⁷¹.

⁷⁰ The day when township and rural schools, overwhelmed by demands from white parents to enrol their children, will set Zulu or Xhosa entry tests, the goal of equality in education will have been achieved.

⁷¹ And, one would like to add, to whose destitute state they owe to a large extent their own present endowment.

African people, realising the potential of their languages for social upliftment, would regain pride in them and in the values they carry, gradually reducing their objections to their use and abandon their excessive focus on English as the only medium worthy of scholastic efforts and attention. Thus, too, the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of the country would be maintained and promoted.

CONCLUSION

The population shift in privileged schools offers, we feel, a significant opportunity for revisiting the policy on South African languages in education and deliberately promoting African languages. Former white schools are duty-bound to help reverse negative language attitudes among African people towards their own languages, in particular as literary mediums. The use of African languages as LoL/T in privileged schools and their systematic teaching as subjects, both to speakers and non-speakers, is a chance to extend their domain and enhance their status. As a result, the bulk of African learners would be keen to receive instruction in mother-tongue, enabling them to focus on the content. One is anxious to read in the news that parents have demanded, on the basis of the legislation, that tuition in, say, Venda or any other African language, be made available for their children in secondary school. Furthermore, it could favour a degree of integration between all government-funded schools by stimulating teacher mobility. The impact on school efficiency could only be positive.

On the social level, school exchanges across racial boundaries could help foster a better understanding among the SA society, fostering the idealistic vision of a Garieb nation⁷² and promoting the “*communication across barriers of colour, language and religion*” set as a goal in the LiEP (art 3).

More broadly, in the context of the African Renaissance, the reclaim of Africa’s own languages is on the agenda⁷³. Education is at the bottom of it all. South Africa is in an ideal position to lead the way, since, almost alone on the continent, it has the human and material resources to promote and implement significant and far-reaching changes. The numerous initiatives from both civil society and government amply prove it. May they be inspired and succeed!

Phambili nezilimi! Phambili neleli!

⁷² The image of the nation as a powerful river – *Garieb* is the original name for the river Christened *Orange* by the European settlers - was advocated by Neville Alexander, in lieu of the *rainbow nation*, on the grounds that it suggests the merging of streams rather than their mere juxtaposition.

⁷³ The African Parliament has just added Swahili to its otherwise mainly ex-colonial working languages.

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