

LANGUAGE IN CONTROL AND RESISTANCE:  
THE EDUCATION OF A BLACK COMMUNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

by

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The introduction of European-style education has always been seen in the colonies as necessary for the "civilization" of the natives - and at the same time as introducing ideas which are potentially dangerous. The long history of formal schooling in South Africa, extending back to the first small mission school set up by Dr van der Kemp of the London Missionary Society in 1799, was attended by debate on the wisdom of providing such facilities.

The men and women who manned the mission stations in the Cape Colony in the early nineteenth century, and those who moved into the interior of the country, had different perceptions of their tasks. They all meant to bring the word of God to the heathen, and they all meant to inculcate the teachings of the church as they understood it. Many undoubtedly agreed with Dr Philip, also of the LMS, that "scattering the seeds of civilization" extended "British interests, British influence and the British Empire", and brought to the "savage tribes" a new confidence in the colonial government and the fostering of "industry, trade and agriculture". (1)

Amongst the settlers there were many who disagreed. They saw danger where Philip saw sobriety, industry and contentment. The missionary view prevailed, and, with government backing, schools were set up in the mission centres. By mid-century the pattern had been set, and the schools had introduced a programme of "industrial education" alongside the standard "academic" courses available for the more talented (or fortunate) pupils. The general intent of the schools, says R. Hunt Davis, "was to 'civilize races emerging from barbarism' ... Thus, a suitable education would be one which inculcated Christianity, taught habits of self-control and moral discipline, imparted a knowledge of English, provided training in proper diet, cleanliness, and other aspects of personal health, and gave lessons in household care, agriculture, and handicrafts. Instructions in reading, writing, and arithmetic would be sufficient to meet the needs of a working class". (2)

The schools were also to "teach 'the mutual interests of the mother-country and her dependencies ... and the domestic and social duties of the coloured race'", the ultimate design of the education being "a docile and efficient labour force which would accept European religious and political authority and social superiority. At most some of its members might aspire to join an indigenous middle class and participate in 'that humbler machinery of local affairs which minister to social order'". (3)

From 1799 through to 1953 almost all the schooling provided for Africans in South Africa was in the hands of Church or Missionary bodies, with ultimate control in the hands of the government, by virtue of the small grants they provided for education. However, supervision and control was perfunctory. The schools were seen to be performing their allotted task, despite occasional warnings from government sources that some changes were needed. After the first (recorded) riots in African schools in 1920 (4), General Smuts said in Parliament that the existing system of education was "wholly unsuited to native needs, and positively pernicious, leading the native to a dead wall, over which he is unable to rise, and becomes a ready prey to the agitator". (5)

Smuts was not alone in fearing that schooling might produce men and women who might refuse to accept the values inculcated in the class-room. Colonial history was filled with examples of men who imbibed ideas which were designed for their "betters", and which they came to believe should apply to all. The solution, as Smuts saw it, lay in altering the content of education, so that the young black pupil would learn to accept his subordinate position in society. The schools, organized as they were, were still charged with the task of preparing a minority of natives for the "humbler machinery of local affairs", for the clergy, for clerical duties, and also as teachers in the growing network of African schools.

It was not intended to spread the schools too widely, nor was it intended that many pupils would spend more than a few years at such schools. By the turn of the twentieth century the total enrolment of Africans in the mission schools reached some 70,000. With a few notable exceptions, the schools were poorly endowed, poorly equipped, overcrowded, and incapable of providing more than a rudimentary education. Or at least an apology for education. In the 1920s, two-thirds of those who entered school stayed for no more than two years, most dropped out before completing four years, and one-tenth of one per cent succeeded in entering secondary school. That applied to those who gained entry to the schools - over 80 per cent of children never entered a schoolroom. (6)

Amongst the aims of educators, as stated in the middle of the nineteenth century, was the imparting of a "knowledge of English", and this seems to be the first explicit reference to a problem which was eventually to contribute to profound disturbances in the black schools of South Africa.

The missionaries who started and staffed the schools for Africans came initially from Great Britain. Many learnt the local vernaculars, and were later to develop orthographies and translate the bible into African languages, but initially they could only teach in the tongue they knew. The oldest and best established schools in the Eastern Cape continued to teach in English, and it was mainly in the outstations (in the interior of the country) that tuition was provided in one of the African languages. Even when it was eventually decided that mother-tongue education was more effective, instruction in the higher primary classes, and in the secondary school, was always provided through the medium of English.

The pupils who did not stay beyond the second or third year of schooling were not functionally literate, and left the classroom with a rudimentary (spoken) knowledge of English. Only a tiny minority succeeded in acquiring some ability to read and write - and an even smaller number were able to read or write in English.

There might have been some discussions in local communities about the advantages or disadvantages of acquiring a working knowledge of English, and there must have been opinions on the merits of learning the local language, but any documents in which this is discussed have not become available to me. The preference shown by parents who had themselves been educated was for the more prestigious schools, where English was employed in the upper primary school for instruction. That could only be expected. The gateway to better paid employment, where this was available to Africans, would obviously be opened to those who were literate - and more particularly to the few who could demonstrate some competence in the use of the

language used in government and commerce. Dutch was never considered as a language of instruction for Africans, and the Afrikaners (who constituted a majority in the white population) were themselves engaged in a long and bitter struggle to get Afrikaans recognized as an official language. It was only in 1926 that Afrikaans was recognized as the second language of the country, and although this became a school subject it was not used as a medium of instruction in African schools until 1976.

The few Africans who continued through secondary school, and the handful who travelled overseas to acquire a professional training, were fluent in English and were proponents of English-medium education. Without a training in the English language, the few Africans who travelled to the USA or Great Britain would never have had the opportunity of gaining a college education and obtaining the qualifications which allowed them to practise as teachers, lawyers and doctors when they returned to South Africa. The University College of Fort Hare was opened only in 1916, and henceforth Africans were able to train for some professions in South Africa - but for the next fifty years instruction there remained exclusively in the English medium, and every young person who aspired to professional training sought proficiency in that medium.

The political structure of the Cape also lent support to those who advocated the use of English as a medium of instruction. Africans had a right to be entered on the electoral roll if they possessed the necessary qualifications, and this gave the voters some stake in the parliamentary elections. A group of "liberal" whites established a newspaper in 1884, and invited John Tengo Jabavu to act as editor. This paper, the Imvo Zabantsundu, was issued with articles in English and Xhosa, and supported the electoral aspirations of the liberals. The dismal story of this alliance does not concern us here. What was important was Jabavu's propagation of the idea that the British Crown would ultimately set matters right (7), and this pointed to English as the necessary medium of communication.

The use of English as a vehicle for African political aspirations was further noted in 1912, with the founding of the South African Native National Congress, later known as the African National Congress. The organization aimed to unite the African population around a set of democratic claims, and to weld the African people into "one nation". At meetings and conventions it was always necessary to translate all proceedings into Zulu or Sotho, and the one language which could be understood nationally was English. There was no other lingua franca, and English was almost always used at meetings. At a later stage, when Africans were joined by Coloureds, Indians, and even some Whites at meetings, rallies and Conferences, the need for a common language was obvious.

The problems experienced inside the African communities, urban and rural, were by no means simple. African groups always tended to use one or other of the two main language groups - Sotho and Nguni - and were far more at home in these languages. The language that was used in the shops and factories, in the schools and amongst professional men, on the railways and in government offices, was either English or Afrikaans, and most Africans had to acquire a working knowledge of one or both of the official languages. In the smaller villages, and some towns, the predominant language was Afrikaans, and the Africans living in these areas were required to respond to instructions in this language. In the larger cities the common mode of communication was in English, and this fact, taken in conjunction with the instruction in schools and the practice of using this medium at political gatherings, reinforced the desire for English instruction.

One further factor must be added. Afrikaans was the language most commonly employed by the police (and in the prisons), in the government offices, and it was the language of the Nationalist Party. Afrikaans was therefore seen to be the language of the more oppressive section of the whites. It is not necessary to question here whether this appraisal of the Afrikaner was correct - nor necessary to ask whether most English speaking South African whites were "liberal". The low wage structure in the mines and factories, the slum housing in the black townships, the poor amenities provided for Africans, and the denial of all political rights for blacks were



primarily a question of class oppression; but the results were perceived in racial terms, and inside the black-white divide the Afrikaner was thought to be the greater evil.

The ideologies of the contending groups in South Africa were all enveloped in racial myths, and this predisposed the African to seek solutions mainly on grounds of race. English was preferred to Afrikaans as the language of communication in the political movement, at the same time as English was preferred as the means to economic or professional advancement.

The perceived need to acquire a knowledge of English was shown by the response of African workers to the night schools, first started by the Communist Party in Johannesburg in 1925, and later extended by Socialists and liberals in the main urban centres of South Africa. These schools, staffed by English-speaking school or university students, or other young socialists and communists, in turn reinforced the tendency towards building a literate group of Africans who used and read English texts. Edward Roux, who founded the original schools, produced readers in basic English and tried subsequently to popularize a basic vocabulary for use in leftist literature. (8)

#### The African Parents and Language

... economic considerations make it absolutely necessary that the Bantu child should obtain a knowledge of one or both official languages while he is still at school. The Bantu population is indeed so alive to this that they consider it the main object of the child's schooling.

Report of the Commission on Native Education, 1949-51.

From 1916, through to the late 1930s, the University College of Fort Hare provided the only tertiary education available to Africans - except for those who studied as external students at the University of South Africa. The few Africans who served on the academic staff became leaders of the two African political bodies - and they were followed by their students as they graduated. One of the staff, Professor Z. K. Matthews, devoted part of his attention to problems of education, and from his papers it is possible to obtain some idea of attitudes in the inter-war years.

In May 1934 Professor Matthews wrote an essay on education for Africans, and posed one of the major problems of the time: Should education be geared to the needs of the vast majority of the black population, those "who still live under tribal conditions in the purely native areas", or to those he termed "the progressive minority of detribalised Natives" who had left the Reserves and lived in the towns? (9)

Surveying the education given to Africans, Matthews wrote:

the serious defect of early native education was the use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction. It was believed - as it is in many respectable quarters today - that the Native child had to learn English as early as possible [if] its future education was to be successful. The Natives themselves aided and abetted this attitude by insisting that they sent their children to school, not to learn the vernacular, which they claimed could best be learnt at home and from themselves rather than from the representatives of a foreign culture, but to learn to read and write English and to assimilate some of the white man's ways of doing things. (10)

What the African did not realize, he continued, was that the new education was bound to subvert any influence they (the parents) had on their children.

However, even if it was a "serious defect", and furthermore "subverting", to employ a foreign language in "native education", Professor Matthews, after some equivocation, decided that it was better to use English in the classroom.

In marshalling his arguments, the Professor was beset by a number of doubts which he mentioned, but ultimately decided to put aside - albeit with some reservations.

Professor Matthews was unable to accept any denigration of African culture, and, although he maintained that there was no longer any "hope for a pure [sic] Bantu culture", he believed that in the future there would be an admixture of "western civilization" and the cultural heritage of the majority. On the other hand, he could not accept a continuation of what he called the "diversion" of "hunting and stick fighting" - the pastime in the fields of the young herdsmen. Education had to fit the African "better to take his place in the body politic of South Africa", and to prepare him "as a prospective worker and producer as well as consumer". That is the African had to acquire "new ideals, standards and occupations". (11)

In the early 1930s the overwhelming majority of Africans were still in the rural areas of South Africa - some on the white-owned farms, and the rest in the Reserves. While Matthews was penning his essay, the government of the day was about to launch legislation which would finally restrict the amount of land available to Africans, and also introduce more stringent measures to control those who entered the towns to work in the white-owned establishments. Final preparations were also being made to remove those Africans who were on the electoral roll in the Cape. Nevertheless, Professor Matthews still hoped that the whites would accept a policy of a united country in which "the point of view of the most intelligent of both groups as well as the highest welfare of all concerned, must be taken into account". (12) It is in this light that he could argue that:

It is by no means a foregone conclusion that the majority should be accepted as our guide, for after [all] the history of civilisation is not the history of mass developments, but rather that of torch bearing minorities that have themselves seen the light ... (13)

Professor Matthews found other reasons for proposing that education be provided in the English medium. Those persons who entered the larger towns to be "worker and producer as well as consumer" came from many tribes, and for these "it would be absurd to insist upon mother tongue instruction".

Ultimately, as the writer knew, the matter would not depend on such empirical arguments, and his standpoint really rested on his desire that the educated African be allowed co-optation in the existing polity. He wanted "common ideals in a common country [least development] ... run along lines of bitterness and antagonism". (14)

The ideal of co-optation remained alive in the philosophy of Professor Matthews, and it was a blow for him to realize that there was little place for the educated African in the overwhelming majority of job placements in the country. Writing in the days before the advent of the Nationalist government, about the position of the youth who have completed primary education (or higher), he reported that a questionnaire sent by the Education Department at Fort Hare to all Government departments, the mines, and commercial firms revealed that only "the lowest grades of employment" were available to Africans, with no provision "for promotion to positions of greater responsibility". (15)

The writer was resigned. Segregation, he wrote, was the accepted policy, whether the African agreed with it or not, and therefore the "situation is perfectly understandable in European areas, and what may be regarded as European services". He consequently argued that:

The only thing that can make the policy of segregation tolerable as far as the Native is concerned is if it is coupled with, not only the expansion of Native services, but also the development of the Native himself by opening as rapidly as possible every branch of those services to him. (16)

Manning African services would be difficult, he continued, but, if put into effect gradually, ought not to prove impracticable, and this "would incidentally give a fillip to the development of Native education on sound lines". (17)

Ironically, the Nationalist government, elected in 1948, set as its aim precisely this policy, of manning African services (in the Reserves, obviously) by Africans. Professor Matthews, equally obviously, stood in the forefront of those who opposed the "new" policy.

There are further documents on education in the Matthews papers, and all reiterate points already quoted. One final citation must suffice, underlining the predominant thought of the writer. In an exchange of letters in 1944, in response to an appeal on the matter of vernacular as a medium of instruction in the schools, Professor Matthews wrote to the Natal Congress leader, W. G. Champion:

It is up to the African people to express their views on this new move (to introduce the vernacular in school instruction) in no uncertain terms. Of course it will be argued that any opposition to this emphasis upon Bantu Language is based upon a disrespect for our languages. Nothing is further from the truth. The fact of the matter is that in our position in this country, we cannot afford to live as if the white man is not present in this land. He is here and has made his culture the dominant culture of the country. As long as this is the case, we as a people must become proficient in those elements of his civilisation which will enable us not only to understand him but to compete with him on equal terms in every field of life. This question is not merely an educational question, but it is also a political question. Our political future is bound up with it. (17)

The voices of other Africans in the 1940s were similar to that of Matthews. Selby Ngcobo, a teacher at Adams College, for example, wrote an article in 1944, in which he stated that Africans had "a passionate belief in education" and he believed that

They feel it raises their status, helps them solve their problems, makes them partakers of a new civilisation ... (18)

There the matter rested. There seemed to be no debate, and no new ideas on the function of education in the black community. The older generation all looked to eventual assimilation, and sought the best ways of easing the African population into a greater South Africa, currently dominated economically, socially, politically and culturally by the whites. It would be a gradual process, they thought, in which the educated minority would find acceptance first, and, with the spread of education, others would follow.



The terms of reference of any discussion on education altered as the second world war drew to a close - when a group of black nationalist youth organized as the Congress Youth League injected a new note into the debate on the meaning of African Nationalism. They never made their ideas on education (or language) explicit, but they rejected the prevailing idea of co-optation, and this led some of them to propose that a universal language was needed on the African continent.

The shift in mood amongst Africans, which was reflected by the militant stance of the Congress Youth League, led to changes in the African National Congress, which brought leading members of the Youth section into the national leadership of the mother body. Here they confronted the new government of the Nationalist Party, and had to find answers to the Apartheid programme, in the Reserves, in the towns and in the schools.

One of the first acts of the Nationalist Party, after its success at the polls in 1948, was to introduce the Bantu Education Act, as part of the overall Bantustan plan for dividing the tribal groups and re-establishing the local hegemony of the Chiefs. The state was to take over control of all African schools, and the education was to be redesigned on a tribal basis, with mother-tongue instruction. The African child was also to be taught that there was no possibility of equality with the whites, and that only certain forms of labour would be open to blacks. (19)

The Congress Youth League (CYL) took up a stand against Bantu Education and mother-tongue instruction on two main grounds: firstly, that it would be inferior education, and secondly that it was designed to divide the African people tribally. A campaign was mounted to boycott the schools, and parents were urged to keep their children at home.

The campaign failed, and except for a few regions where the CYL was able to organize the parents, the schools were not closed. The parents did not necessarily approve of the new system, but they wanted their children to secure an education - and with both parents in many families at work, parents who were fortunate in having secured entry for their children at a school were reluctant to stop them attending sessions. In terms of the legislation alternative education was forbidden, and attempts by sympathizers to form "Cultural Clubs" for those who did stay away from the schools failed to survive owing to police harassment.

There were parents who were prepared to follow the boycott campaign, and some of their children were excluded from all subsequent education. Others were able to beat the government dead-line, and return their children to the schools before exclusion became effective.

Under the new regime more children were accepted into the schools, but the education was even inferior to that provided by the independent schools - and could not be compared to the schooling provided previously by the better educational institutions. The new syllabuses and text books were even more biased than before, and instruction throughout the primary schools was in one of the mother tongues by 1959. Ideally (by government standards) schools were to accept pupils of one tribal group only, but this was never achieved in the larger towns, if only because the government never provided the resources for buildings, equipment or teachers. Even donations offered by commerce or industry to build more classrooms, or for the purchase of equipment, were vetoed by the Minister, and there were many cases of departments inside existing schools, and even entire schools, being closed down on government instructions, in order to fit the government strategy.

The CYL was caught in a dilemma which proved insoluble. The boycott was not effective, and it was not possible to switch tactics and demand that the government stop closing down departments (or entire schools). The boycott campaign just ran out of steam, and the schools continued as planned by the Department of Bantu Affairs. Parent bodies voiced criticisms, but these tended to be on immediate

issues of management, rather than on overall policy. There were also pupil protests which took the form of petitions, verbal protests, boycotts of lessons and abstention from all classes. Some were related to particular complaints, but others were more directly political: protesting against some aspect of government policy, boycotting an assembly to meet a government official, and so on.

When pupils did protest the authorities invariably expelled the offenders or summoned the police (or both). The entire student body was sent home after certain "offences", and only those acceptable to the staff were allowed to return - often after signing a pledge of obedience. In the circumstances, it would seem that any debate on educational policy, or on language, would be fruitless.

### The Language Debate Reopened

For a period of just over two years, commencing August 1953, there was a debate inside Congress circles on the language issue. It would be more accurate to say that there were a series of contributions on the subject, each starting on radically different premises - and none able to evoke a response from the parents.

A former headmaster, Dr J. M. Nhlapo, opened the discussion. He had once been active in the African National Congress, but more recently he had propagated the ideas of the Moral Re-Armament Movement. In 1953 he was appointed editor of the Bantu World, but, choosing to write in the ANC journal Liberation, raised anew the question of language used by African communities.

Dr Nhlapo stated that he was concerned by the multiplicity of languages in use in the country. Instead of a lingua franca being developed, he saw the language groups moving further apart, and this was reinforced by the lack of uniformity in the orthographies in use. He claimed that there were two main language groups in the country, and that these could be grouped together. The new Nguni language, he suggested, would unify Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, Ndebele, Baca, and so on, while the other language would be based on South Sotho, Tswana, Pedi, Kgatla, etc. He called for the encouragement of this project and the summoning of a conference to agree on a process of unification.

He maintained that it was essential that the African people be united and that even his proposal for two languages was only a partial solution. Perhaps, he mused, English was "our Non-European Esperanto", or, put another way, "Should English be among us in South Africa, what Swahili is in East Africa?" (20)

It was admitted by Dr Nhlapo that he had made the same proposal a few years back, and it had been rejected as "preposterous and impracticable". He felt, however, that since then there had been signs of new bridges in localities where new syntheses between languages could be found.

His scheme was certainly impracticable, as in fact other attempts to foster artificial languages (including Esperanto) had proved. Local dialects had a remarkable resilience, and were only reluctantly surrendered (and this rarely) over extended periods of time, in the process of migration or physical absorption. The unification of languages at a conference was indeed preposterous.

The unification of a people was a political question, as Nhlapo had said, and the use of a common language could assist the process. It was therefore from the political groups that some response was to be expected and the few who did write on the subject approached the matter from their own particular understanding of the relationship between language medium and political objectives. The fact that so few found it necessary to take up the topic suggests that this was not a problem which



agitated many people at the time, and that even those who might have ideas on linguistic diversity did not believe that there was any purpose in discussing the matter when they were powerless to effect any change.

The first reply came from Peter Roboroka, a proponent of radical nationalism in the CYL, and at a later date one of the founders of the Pan-Africanist Congress. He was in favour of a common language - not for South Africa, but for all Africa - and he believed that this would be Swahili. This, he maintained, would become the "auxiliary Language" of every child in Africa.

The problem, he wrote, was connected with the major social and political problems faced by the African people, and he believed that the rulers would see any attempt at language change as "subversive and dangerous". He added:

They [the rulers] would prefer to perpetuate tribal linguistic and other divisions, and instruct us in European languages only to the extent that would enable us to receive our orders and report on their execution. Therefore the language question can only be seen properly as one aspect of our struggle for emancipation from white imperialism. (21)

The same point of view was expressed shortly thereafter in a mimeographed journal of the CYL, and could have come from the same pen. The writer suggested that Swahili would become the continental language, with Xhosa, Sotho, Ganda, Kikuyu, and so on, as regional languages. These regional languages and Swahili would be taught at schools, and European languages would be offered as optional courses. Nevertheless, students would be encouraged to study them, and, "for the purpose of international intercourse it would be wise to retain English, which seems destined to be used for long as an international language". (22)

The writer (or writers?) had not addressed himself to the problem raised by Dr Nhlapo - and presumably thought it did not warrant discussion. Roboroka looked to some distant future, and although he concluded his article in Liberation by declaring that "the language question must be taken up as part of the national liberation movement", he was not able to suggest how this could be effected. None the less, his observation that European languages were taught to enable blacks to receive orders and report on their execution was to receive some confirmation in the events that led to the confrontation in Soweto in 1976.

The next article came from the pen of a leading member of the clandestine Communist Party, writing under the name Alan Doyle. What he wrote then must be seen in the context of a debate which had been initiated by the writings of Professor I. I. Pothekhin, director of the Africa Institute in Moscow.

Pothekhin maintained that every ethnic community went through stages in its development which led from tribe to narodnost (meaning "nationality", or perhaps "pre-nation") and then to nationhood. He maintained that the Zulu people, for example, had reached the stage of narodnost in the nineteenth century, and were united in a common territory, language and culture. (23) Professor Pothekhin provided an extended discussion of what he meant by a narodnost, claiming that it was a territorial community with class formations, formed by the mixing or merging of tribes under a central authority based on armed force.

The closest adherent of Pothekhin's ideas in South Africa was Lionel Forman, editor of New Age. In 1954 he wrote an article in his paper, together with psychologist Kurt Danziger, suggesting that it was timely to discuss the possibility of future self-determination for the many ethnic groups in the country. This led to some acrimonious discussion in left circles in Cape Town, in which Forman was accused of providing support for the proponents of apartheid. He

maintained his position, and argued that in a future free South Africa the existing narodnosts (a term he had adopted from Potekhin), freed from colour bar restrictions, would blossom out into nations, keen to develop their own cultures and their own languages. (24)

Forman argued that eventually every "nation" would wish to develop its own language, and that this was a natural process. This he contrasted with the situation in the country at the time:

While it is perfectly true that the present economic set-up makes it essential for Africans to have the opportunity to learn in English - because text-books are in English, because the economy of the country is conducted in English, it is hard to see how it can be argued that when these conditions are changed by a people's government, national groups should not have the right to study their own language. (25)

The reference to a "people's government" was made more explicit by Forman. The Africans, he said, suffered oppression at two levels. The vast majority were proletarians, and were oppressed as a class; all Africans also suffered national oppression. (26) This, he maintained, was the first issue on which there had to be agreement. He then advanced an argument on which he felt there might be disagreement. He believed that since the war it had been shown that the national liberatory movement in South Africa was not led by a native bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie, and although he felt constrained (by existing legislation) in discussing the class consequences, he conceived of the movement being led by the working class, and pointed to a future socialist society in South Africa. Under such circumstances he saw the Soviet model, as he understood it, as applying to South Africa. That is, there would be a socialist federation of peoples in which each national group would have the right to self-determination. (27)

For Forman, the language question was merged with the larger political questions confronting the African people, and self-determination, nation-building and language were seen as connected issues which needed discussion.

The sharpest critic of Forman's ideas came from those who were otherwise closest to him politically, and from Dr H. J. Simons in particular. He, too, saw the link between the political problems facing a movement such as the ANC and the question of language. In his contribution to the debate he suggested that it was necessary to see the difference between the struggles which had once existed in Tsarist Russia (where the "national question" was so hotly debated), and the colonial situation. The demands in South Africa, said Dr Simons, was not for "cultural autonomy" or "self-determination" but for "a common society with the Europeans on a completely equal basis". He maintained, furthermore, that in South Africa there could only be an "inter-class nationalism", with the possibility of the political movement acquiring "a definite working class character". (28)

Dr Simons rejected Forman's arguments on three grounds. Firstly, he claimed that the Africans, Indians and Coloureds did not wish to drive the Whites out of the country, and did not aim to divide the country "along racial lines into distinct 'cultural communities'". Secondly, he believed that the workers, who would constitute the largest group in the national movement, were not particularly interested in the development of "national cultures". This was something which stemmed from such persons as teachers and ministers of religion. Finally, he argued that the task in hand was to build a nation, and the old tribal culture would only act as a brake on that process. (29)

Despite differences in stress, Dr Simons's position bore many resemblances to that of Professor Matthews. The political programme as both saw it was to be based on a demand for incorporation into the existing society - and on those grounds

there could be no question of self-determination or of fostering local languages. (See addendum, p. 14.)

The contribution to the discussion on language by Alan Doyle did not address itself to the ideological questions raised by Forman. His article appeared before the symposium from which the above extracts were taken, and it is not certain whether he knew of Forman's arguments, even though they belonged to the same left group in the country. Doyle took his stand on organizational problems facing the ANC. He maintained that the Congress failure to support the "people's right to use their mother languages" reflected the leadership's failure to find "their way to the ordinary workers and peasants". Nor had the leaders paid proper attention to language as an "essential feature of a national movement". (30)

Commenting on the ANC aim of uniting Africans into one nation, Doyle maintained that Congress "must not confuse undesirable tribal conflicts, which are harmful to the people, with their own dear languages, which they love and which are part of their cultural heritage". He urged that Congress establish a newspaper with articles in the vernacular, and that it encourage and produce literature and good text-books in African languages.

There seems to have been only one further contribution to the discussion inside Congress ranks. In December 1955 W. B. Lockwood criticized a lecturer in Bantu languages at the University of the Witwatersrand for saying that there were too many languages in South Africa - and that as a consequence there was no viable market for vernacular literature. The lecturer had apparently proposed that two major languages be created, and that these be offered official status.

Lockwood took exception to this, and argued that if the populations were literate they would be large enough to sustain publication in the separate languages. If, furthermore, there was democracy in South Africa, local languages would be used in the running of local government, and this would lead to their development. (31)

There were no further significant additions to the discussion. The campaigns against apartheid, and the Bantustan policy, and against the extension of apartheid through the school system and the universities, militated against any further debate on self-determination and mother-tongue development. It was just not politic to raise the subject of national separation when Nationalist separateness had to be fought.

The issue of mother-tongue instruction in schools took a new turn when the Transkei was given its own "government" in 1963. One of the first acts of the new Minister of Education was to reinstate English as the medium of instruction throughout the Transkeian territory. Xhosa might be the language of the street, the shops, the government offices and the farmsteads - but English was the international language, the financial language, and the source of information from the outside world. The new ruling group knew that its purposes could best be served by training its acolytes in the language which offered the best returns.

### The Soweto Revolt

Except for the reversal on mother-tongue instruction in the Transkei, the government persisted with its policies for African education, and took no heed of consistent criticisms from financiers and industrialists, who feared that the country faced a shortage of personnel and that this would slow the rate of expansion.

When eventually changes had to be effected, they were hurried and unplanned. Within the course of two years, 1974-5, it was decided to quadruple the numbers entering secondary school. There were adequate preparations for the alterations



which were introduced. No extra classrooms were built, no new equipment was purchased, no further teachers were trained (although some primary school teachers were given an in-service training), and nothing was done to raise the standard of those pupils who were previously judged to be of too low a standard to proceed to secondary education.

The schools, long known to be functioning poorly - with overcrowded classrooms and too few teachers - were brought to the point of collapse. In many instances all formal tuition ceased, and pupils met with teachers to debate the future of the country. (32)

With time and added resources the situation might have righted itself. The pupils who had entered the secondary schools wanted more schooling, and better schooling, and a sympathetic administration might have contained much of the dissatisfaction. But a new instruction to teachers brought many of the schools to the point of rebellion.

The Minister of Bantu Education announced that as from the beginning of 1976 there would be changes in the language medium of instruction in African schools. Commencing with the last year at primary school, and the first at secondary school (and extending through the second to fifth forms in successive years), from 1976 half the subjects were to be taught in English and the others in Afrikaans. It was further stipulated that arithmetic and mathematics, and social studies (history and geography), be taught in Afrikaans.

There was an immediate protest from teachers, parents and pupils. Very few African teachers in the Transvaal were proficient in Afrikaans, and all teacher training colleges, bar one, were conducted in the English-language medium. There were some with a working knowledge of Afrikaans, but they were unable to handle the intricacies of mathematics, for example, in Afrikaans. None the less, the Minister announced that there could be no exceptions to the new ruling, and the only concession offered was that schools could apply for a deferment for one year. In effect, very few deferments were allowed.

The teachers argued on grounds of ability. The parents and pupils rejected the ukase on several grounds: they wanted English-language instruction because it was the main language of industry and commerce (at least in the major industrial centres), and it was the one lingua franca in the large towns. English was also the international language, and the language used in the more sympathetic newspapers. There were also the usual negative, but nevertheless important reasons, against using Afrikaans. It was the language of the ruling Nationalist party, and of the majority of government officials. It was the language most commonly heard at labour bureaux, in the police stations, and in the prisons.

The first recorded incident in the schools in 1976 was in February when third form pupils (who were not immediately involved) protested against the introduction of Afrikaans tuition at their school. By May the protest had spread to most of the schools of Soweto (the African dormitory township adjoining Johannesburg, and containing an estimated population just short of one and a half million). A demonstration, called for 16 June by the school student organization, the South African Students Movement, brought 15,000 youth on to the streets, carrying hastily prepared banners, which read: "Down with Afrikaans", "Afrikaans is Oppressors Language", "Abolish Afrikaans", "Blacks are not dustbins - Afrikaans Stinks", and others in a similar vein.

The column of marchers was stopped by a detachment of police before they could reach the stadium, which was their objective. The police fired, and the youth responded with a shower of stones, and the revolt which shook South Africa had started.

Within weeks the revolt spread across the country, and was eventually to affect nearly every town and village throughout South Africa. And by so doing demonstrated that the language question was only a minor factor in the year-long revolt. The Coloured youth of the Cape who joined their African peers in the streets were Afrikaans-speaking - and the instruction had not been directed to their schools. Nevertheless, they showed the same determination to hit at the entire apartheid system, and they had their own specific complaints against discriminatory measures in their schools.

The slogans of the revolt were also altered in Soweto. There were campaigns which affected the entire community, and which were enforced by the schools' committee. There were campaigns against alcohol, and there were stay-at-homes which closed commerce and industry in the main centres, and finally, before the revolt wound down, the Soweto students forced the government-inspired Bantu Council to resign. They were even able to lead a protest against rent rises in the township, and to prevent its implementation.

The language issue was important to the youth (at least in Soweto), but it was only one more factor in a series of events in the 1970s which brought first the youth and then the entire black population into the streets. Events outside the country, including the victories of Frelimo and the MPLA in the former Portuguese territories to Mozambique and Angola, and the fighting in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and Namibia, had been keenly followed in the townships. The long strike wave, which extended from 1973 through to the events of Soweto in 1976, had brought fresh confidence to the African proletariat, and this had been accompanied by community actions, including bus boycotts. The effect of the Black Consciousness Movements which came to life in the 1970s is less certain - but there can be no doubt that they were both the product of the ferment and contributors to the mood which grew in the townships.

The situation was explosive, and the language instruction raised the lid off the turbulent school situation. And in raising the lid the youth, frustrated and discontented, were not prepared to sit quietly and acquiesce any longer.

Why, then, had the government officials decided to introduce new language instructions, when the increased enrolment had been so disruptive? The South African government is not in the habit of explaining its motives, and consequently had never explained the factors which led the Minister of Bantu Education to issue his instruction. The only statement made by a government official on the subject that has become available is that of a school circuit inspector on 20 January 1976. He told the school Board of a Soweto school that all the taxes paid by Africans were used for paying for education in the Homelands, and he continued:

In urban areas the education of a Black child is being paid for by the White population, that is English- and Afrikaans-speaking groups. Therefore, the Secretary for Bantu Education has the responsibility towards satisfying the English- and Afrikaans-speaking people. (33)

If that statement had been made by an opponent of the regime, it would have been called simplistic. In fact, it is hard to believe that this is the complete story. But in its very crudity it carries a certain conviction, and does link the whole question of language-medium to the needs of the economy: for those who control commerce and industry, from the boards of directors down to the shop managers and foremen, the communication of instructions depends on the ability of the worker to comprehend. For the worker, there is the reciprocal requirement. He or she will acquit himself/herself satisfactorily only if the instruction is understood, and in a competitive society promotion will go only to those who are able to use the socially acceptable language in order to improve performance.

If that is not the whole story, it is at least an important ingredient in language performance.

The problem becomes more complex in a society where class and ethnic oppression are inextricably bound together. The need to conform, for purposes of economic advancement, and the need to raise the demands for basic change (which also carried the possibility of economic advancement for the same or different groups), point to different approaches to issues such as language medium. The rejection of Afrikaans in favour of English is, at least in part, an indication of the class aspirations of the tiny minority who had managed to enter the secondary schools in Soweto. Some of the events known to us do point to undercurrents of conflict between those at school (who led the revolt) and those who have been so colourfully described as "push-outs" because of their total exclusion from the education system.

The language in common use amongst the tsotsis of Johannesburg, and of many of these push-outs, had little in common with the language of the school graduates. The argot used an Afrikaans base (34), and probably drew heavily on the slang used by inmates of the South African prisons - but that is a subject which needs further study.

The problem of language has still to be confronted by the liberation movement, and the debate opened in 1953/4 will undoubtedly be reopened when the time arises to integrate the schools, change the syllabuses, and take a new look at the development of languages in the cultural life of the people. The choice of a lingua franca might lie with English, or ultimately with Swahili when links are made meaningfully with East Africa, but there can be no doubt that the major problem will lie in developing the people's languages - and that will be a major task when the liberation movement sets about transforming the country.

#### Addendum

##### A Zulu Case History

One recorded case of attempts to foster a national language in contemporary South Africa indicates the complexity of the subject, and the political influences that are brought to bear on those involved.

In the late 1930s a body known as the Zulu Language and Cultural Society was founded. Albert Luthuli, at that time a teacher, and later appointed as one of the Zulu chiefs, claims in his autobiography (35) that he launched the organization as an auxiliary to the Natal African Teachers Association, of which he was then secretary. The aim of the Zulu Society, according to its charter (first issued in 1937 and reissued in 1939), was to preserve the heritage of the Zulu people "apportioned to us by Divine Guidance of the Almighty, the Creator, Who gave people their several Languages, Customs, Traditions and Usages". The objects of the Society included the preservation and modernization of the Zulu language, the production of literary works, and the preservation of traditions, laws, usages and customs.

The 81 clauses of the Charter indicate that a number of interests (or interest groups) were represented in the Society at the time. There were strong appeals to the restoration of the past traditions of the Zulu people, and there can be little doubt that the Zulu Regent (who was patron to the Society) and his supporters hoped to use the body to back the claims of the Royal House to paramountcy. There was also an appeal to Zulu nationalism which could satisfy the aspirations of both traditionalists and the young intellectuals, and numerous references to whites which were little less than ingratiating.



Luthuli wrote in retrospect that he believed in 1937 (and in 1962) in the growth of an "authentic, comprehensive South African culture", and that this might be influenced by cultural societies. He thought that the African teachers ought to play a part in the process. (36) He continued, saying that the Society thrived for some time, and then accepted a government grant. It then "lost its independence, became involved in the Native Affairs Department and Zulu Royal House politics, went into decline, and (after withdrawal of the teachers) collapsed". (37) But the Zulu Society had become involved in Royal House politics almost from its inception, and co-optation by the government was inevitable after it was seen that government interests could best be served by recognizing the Paramountcy of the Royal House.

None the less, the activities of the Zulu Society (or of its members) did not always incline to collaboration with the government. The teachers who supported the Society were, with a few exceptions (including at the time Luthuli), opposed to the moves to introduce mother-tongue instruction in the Natal schools in the 1930s.

The Chief (as Albert Luthuli was called) was President of the ANC when the campaign against Bantu Education and mother-tongue instruction was launched in 1954.

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#### Notes

- (1) John Philip, Researches in South Africa (London, 1828), preface.
- (2) R. Hunt Davis, Jr, "1855-1863: a dividing point in the early development of African education in South Africa", The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Vol. 5 (1974), Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, Collected Seminar Papers.
- (3) Ibid., quoting from a despatch from Earl Grey to the Governor of the Cape Colony, February 1847.
- (4) B. Hirson, Year of Fire, Year of Ash: Soweto - Roots of a Revolution? (Zed Press, 1979), pp. 30 ff.
- (5) Second reading of the Native Affairs Bill, 26 May 1920, Parliamentary Debates.
- (6) B. Hirson, op. cit., pp. 22 ff.
- (7) C. C. Saunders, "The new African elite in the Eastern Cape and some later 19th and 20th century origins of African nationalism", The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Vol. 1 (1970), ICS, London, CSP.
- (8) Betty Lunn, "African Adult Education", Socialist Review, Vol. 3, No. 1, January 1946.
- (9) Z. K. Matthews, "Certain considerations anent Native Education in South Africa", May 1934, typescript, Karis and Carter microfilm, Reel 18A, 2:XM66:83/1 (hereafter, K & C mfm).
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Ibid.
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Z. K. Matthews (nd), "The educated Native in South Africa", typescript, K & C mfm, Reel 18A, 2:XM66:77/17.
- (16) Ibid.

- (17) Z. K. Matthews, letter to A. W. G. Champion, 3 June 1944, K & C mfm, Reel 17A, 2:XM66:41/84. See also the accompanying correspondence, from Champion (2:XM66:41/83 and 2:XM66:41/85), and letter from Don, Adams College (2:XM66:41/86), stating that the regulations applied only to the junior primary schools and were educationally sound. Matthews concurred, and did not visit Natal as requested by Champion (2:XM66:41/87).
- (18) Selby Ngcobo, "What Africans want now", Common Sense (Johannesburg) May 1944.
- (19) B. Hirson, op. cit., Chapter 2.
- (20) J. M. Nhlapo, "The problem of many tongues", Liberation, No. 4, August 1953.
- (21) Peter N. Roboroka, "The linguistic revolution", Liberation, No. 5, September 1953.
- (22) Anonymous, "The problem of languages in New Afrika", Afrika (c.1954), mimeo. K & C mfm, Reel 2B, 2:DA16:85/1.
- (23) I. Pothekhin, "The formation of nations in Africa", in two parts, translated and printed in Liberation, No. 34, December 1958, and No. 35, March 1959.
- (24) Lionel Forman, "Self-determination in South Africa", Liberation, No. 37, July 1959.
- (25) L. Forman, "Comments made following part of the discussion", in Symposium on the National Question, published by the liaison committee of the South African Club and the Forum Club (Capetown, June 1954).
- (26) L. Forman, "Nationalism in South Africa", Symposium on the National Question (1954).
- (27) Ibid. I have tried to retain Forman's argument, while removing the Aesopian allusions.
- (28) H. J. Simons, "Nationalism in South Africa", Symposium on the National Question (1954).
- (29) Ibid.
- (30) Alan Doyle, "Languages: another View", Liberation, No. 6, November 1953.
- (31) W. B. Lockwood, "The future of the Bantu Languages", Liberation, No. 15, December 1955.
- (32) B. Hirson, op. cit., passim.
- (33) Ibid., p. 100.
- (34) D. P. Kunene, "Who is your Whiteman?", The New African, June 1962.
- (35) A. J. Luthuli, Let My People Go (Gollancz, 1962).
- (36) Ibid., p. 37.
- (37) Ibid., p. 38.