

**Afrikaans as medium of instruction within a transformed higher education system
in South Africa with special reference to Stellenbosch University**

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Abstract:

A key element in curriculum delivery is how knowledge is conceived, constructed and transmitted. It could be argued therefore, that the language by which the curriculum is transmitted is at the heart of the curriculum process. This is evident in the changing landscape of the South African higher education system. It has been a major concern that large numbers of students are academically unsuccessful. This has especially been the case at Stellenbosch University (where I teach) where the percentage of black students compares unfavourably with that of other South African universities. This is in spite of the Language Policy for Higher Education which stipulates that language should not act as a barrier for access to universities. The role of language is therefore critical to higher education as it impacts on access and success, and affirms diversity, while the right of students to “instruction in the language of their choice, where it is reasonably practicable” is afforded by the Constitution (RSA 1996). In this paper I will reflect on language policies of four historically Afrikaans South African universities. Research suggests that there is a strong correlation between mother-tongue instruction and success in academic performance (Heugh, 1999; Webb,2010). Yet, in most South African universities, English is the default language of instruction whilst Afrikaans as a language of higher education is increasingly coming under pressure. I will argue that this is a basis for unfair discrimination, as many students are not first-language English speakers and that South African universities need to manage language diversity in a functional manner.

Keywords: higher education, academic success, language of teaching, language policy, parallel-medium education, multilingualism.

Introduction

The term ‘transformation’, a current buzzword, is often used loosely. According to Le Grange (2011:1) it might be understood usefully as a process that has no beginning and no end. In the context of higher education it is a term that has been used with reference to changes that the modern university is undergoing in a rapidly globalising world and also with respect to challenges such as language, access, diversity, equity and (e) quality. Osland (2006:134) wrote that “building community is an essential part of the change process”. Thus, managing the change process well, so that it results in a stronger community, is just as important as coming up with a good analysis of the situation and an idea about what needs to be changed. So when one reflects on what changes need to be made to language policies at university level and whether teaching in languages other than English in South Africa is important or not, one also has to reflect on what education really means and what role language can play in this education process.

In this regard it is worth noting that the higher education sector has shown major progress in transformation in the past decade: more than 90% of all undergraduate students are black, of which 82% are African, and in 2007 more than half of all Master’s degrees and almost 50% of all PhDs were awarded to black South Africans. With regard to staff equity almost 41% of all academics are black and the number is still increasing (Soudien et al., 2008). But some educationalists and researchers might argue this is not true transformation. According to Eloff (2008) this kind of transformation is merely social engineering and does not acknowledge language and cultural realities.

As far as transformation is concerned, the modern university in South Africa has been described as an institution in crisis. Jacobs & Hellström (2000:1) note that “[a]fter years of battering from without, the walls of the ivory tower are finally crumbling” and Readings (1996) argue that the modern university is “in ruins”. Traces of these developments are evident in the changing landscape of the South African higher education system. These concerns are especially evident when they refer to the continuous use of Afrikaans in the higher education sector (De Villiers, 2011:2) as portrayed in media reports and various discussions platforms.

It has been a major concern that unacceptably large numbers of students are not successful academically at higher education level, more so as the majority of these students are black. Furthermore, the percentage of black students at Stellenbosch University compares extremely unfavourably with that of higher education institutions elsewhere in South Africa (De Stadler, 2010:118) especially as the Language Policy for Higher Education stipulates that language should not act as a barrier for access to universities (DoBE, 1997).

In this article I will reflect on these issues by assessing the language policies of four historically Afrikaans universities, i.e. Pretoria (UP), Stellenbosch (SU), the Potchefstroom campus of the Northwest University (NWU) and Free State (UFS). The aim is to see if any evidence exist that language, and Afrikaans in particular, act as a

barrier to academic success at these universities. At the same time I will examine various language models before recommendations are made.

Transformation and higher education

Following the dismantling of apartheid, it was imperative to transform the higher education system in South Africa so as to overcome the legacies of apartheid. The vision of such a transformed landscape is captured in a series of policies that were developed to address this need, culminating in the *Education White Paper 3: a programme for the transformation of higher education*, which expresses this need as follows:

[Higher education] must lay the foundations for the development of a learning society which stimulate, direct and mobilize the creative and intellectual energies of all people towards meeting the challenge of reconstruction and development.
(DoBE, 1997: 7)

The White Paper also summarises the requirements for the transformation of higher education in South Africa as “increased and broadened participation, responsiveness to societal interests and needs, and cooperation and partnerships in governance” (DoBE, 1997:10). These requirements include the need to “increase blacks, women, disabled and mature students” and to develop “new curricula and flexible models of learning and teaching, including modes of delivery” (DoBE, 1997:10). However, more than a decade later issues of language, access, equity and quality in relation to the core functions of higher education still remain challenges in the South African context. The main reason is because, as Eloff (2008) puts it, in practice equity and affirmative action became the main, and in some cases the only, expression of transformation resulted in quick fixes and window dressing, just as long as things looked and sounded differently. At the University of Cape Town (UCT) there has been a debate recently as to whether race remains the best surrogate for admitting historically disadvantaged students to the university, or whether other categories such as class might be more appropriate (*cf.* Soudien 2010).

This and various other issues relating to transformation led to the minister of education announcing in March 2008 the establishment of a Ministerial Committee on Progress Towards Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (hereafter referred to as the Ministerial Committee) to “investigate discrimination in public higher education institutions, with a particular focus on racism, and to make recommendations to combat discrimination and to promote social cohesion” (Soudien et al., 2008:8). This is also in line with the South African Constitution, which defines discrimination to include “race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth” (DoBE, 1997:8). In this sense the curriculum is inextricably intertwined with the institutional culture and, given that the latter remains white and Eurocentric in the historically white institutions, the institutional environment is not conducive to curriculum reform (Soudien et al., 2008:102).

A key element in the broad interpretation of transformation is epistemological

transformation, i.e. how knowledge is conceived, constructed and transmitted (Hall, 2006). It could be argued, given that the primary function of higher education is the production and transmission of knowledge, that epistemological transformation is at the heart of the transformation agenda. And at the centre of epistemological transformation is curriculum reform – a reorientation away from the apartheid knowledge system, in which the curriculum was used as a tool of exclusion, to a democratic curriculum that is inclusive of all human thought. In this context, the two key questions are:

- whether the curriculum has been transformed to play its role in contributing to the socialisation of students in accordance with the values of the Constitution, and
- whether the *language* by which the curriculum is transmitted is suited to enabling a transformed curriculum to play its role effectively.

These two questions are the focus of this article.

Language transformation

Linked to the abovementioned two research questions, this article will try to prove that as Wolff puts it: “*Language is not everything in education, but without Language everything is nothing in Education*” (2006:49). Eloff (2008) goes further by stating that language is a very emotional issue – especially if your language is ignored or if you cannot understand the language in which you are being addressed. It is therefore concerning to note a tendency to be dismissive or sceptical of the seriousness of the language question:

The language issue is ... at the heart of the education crisis in our society. Language is the gateway to culture, knowledge, and people. The more languages one masters, the more one has access to other cultures, to more knowledge, and to more people ... [It] must be stress[ed] that the mastery of [the] language in which the subject is taught is the prerequisite to the mastery of subject matter. To this extent, the Eurocentric character of our education, at the heart of which has been the use of European languages, has constituted a barrier to the successful education of the masses of African people. The African student has to make the acquaintance of the subject through a language [that is] not his or her mother tongue. If the African student did not master the particular foreign language in childhood, alongside mother tongue, then the foreign language in which instruction proceeds becomes a tension-generating factor, for most students, which interferes with the mastery of the subject matter.

(Vilakazi, 2002: 50)

The role of language is therefore critical to higher education transformation, as it impacts on access and success, and affirms diversity, while the right of a student to “instruction in the language of his or her choice, where this is reasonably practicable” is afforded by the Constitution (RSA 1996). It is no wonder then that language policy is the subject of contestation in higher education institutions. In this regard, all institutions are committed to multilingualism in one form or another: “We don’t want to be an exclusively Afrikaans university, nor an exclusively English university (Botman, 2010). In fact at SU

multilingualism is regarded as an asset (cf. Fourie-Malherbe, 2011). This includes the development of indigenous languages as academic languages and the introduction of indigenous languages as languages of communication. Unfortunately, more often than not, this commitment remains symbolic, as a range of factors, such as the availability of qualified staff, finances and student interest, influence the full implementation of multilingualism. It should be noted though that there is also opposition, at different levels and of varying intensity, to the acknowledgement of the significance of mother-tongue mastery in academic success (Guptha, 1997). There is a substantial body of research that suggests that there is a strong correlation between mother-tongue instruction and success in academic performance (Alexander 2009; Heugh 1999; Ramphele 2008; Webb 2010).

The hegemony of English

In historically English-medium and black institutions, English is the default language of instruction. It could be argued, as indeed UCT acknowledges, that this may be a basis for unfair discrimination, given that many black students are not first-language English speakers. This impacts on both the academic performances of black students, as well as on their social integration into the institution because being an English first-language speaker definitely is an advantage (UCT, 2008:5).

A noticeable development in the last two decades, as pointed out by De Varennes (2010), has been the large number of universities offering international courses or programmes in English or some other international language. He continues to say that the survival of a language as academic language is predicated on the degree it is used in universities, as medium of administration, instruction and research. Regardless of the particular model adopted, the growing pressures stemming from the internationalisation of higher education make it clear that some programmes – particular in scientific or postgraduate areas – are increasingly offered in an international language. More about this later.

On the other hand, those who want to see Afrikaans continue to be a medium of instruction often argue that many Colouredⁱ and white students who come from rural areas, are not fluent in English and therefore will not be very successful should they be required to study through the medium of English. There is a misperception that because most white and Coloured students can speak English, they can also receive their lectures in English. It is just as discriminatory to expect them to study in English as it is to force Afrikaans down Xhosa-speaking students' throats. In short, it is not true transformation to follow the route of least resistance and switch to English as the only language of instruction. Eventually it will destroy language diversity, and it is still discriminatory.

The use of indigenous languages at higher education level

Based on the above it is clear that there is general recognition that those who are not first-language English speakers are at a disadvantage, both in the academic sphere and in dealing with administrative tasks and social situations. This is addressed through a variety of mechanisms, including: (i) the provision of support in the form of English language courses; (ii) the introduction of an African language – usually the dominant

regional language, as a language of communication; and (iii) the provision of African language courses for communication purposes for staff and students.

Batibo (2011:16-18) elaborates on the advantages of using African languages at higher education level. First, the students are exposed not only to new information, but also to new concepts and ideas. The students will strive to fit the new ideas within their conceptual and intellectual framework and experience in order to comprehend and internalise the information. Carell (1988) refers to this process as the schemata-theory. Second, it is a well-known fact that no country has developed on the strength of a foreign language. Third, indigenous languages allow students and graduates to connect with the communities they are going to serve in various professions as most community members will not be fluent in ex-colonial languages. Fourth, in many higher education institutions, particularly cultural, anthropological and medical research centres, there is a lot of effort to infuse indigenous knowledge into the educational systems. Most of the items, concepts and world view can be best captured in indigenous, rather than ex-colonial languages. Fifth, any education is expected to be life-long and to ensure that the indigenous languages contribute to the process of life-long education, we need to empower them and intellectualise them. Lastly, the use of students' own language at higher education level, which is close to the relevant community, make the community feel that it has a close relationship with the students and that they are not in an ivory tower enclosure.

It is also worth taking note of the fact that prominent Afrikaans institutions supported the minister of higher education, Dr Blade Nzimande, in his initiative to make a course in an indigenous language compulsory for all university students. The South African Academy of Science and Arts urged "Universities to accept the challenge put to them by the minister to enhance the use of African languages at Universities" (De Villiers, 2011:2). In his response the Afrikaanse Taalraad, expressed their satisfaction: "African languages were for many years in a subservient position and we now have the opportunity to rectify the matter" (Carstens, 2011:2).

From the examples cited here it is clear that more and more universities are beginning to realise that "reasonably practicable" – as stated in Education White Paper 3 – should also include indigenous languages. However, Eloff (2008) is of the opinion that this process should be done with credibility, and should go hand in hand with the promotion of the higher functions of our indigenous languages. He is supported by De Villiers: "We need a huge effort that will turn things around to one where our indigenous languages are used at our universities" (2011:2).

Parallel medium, dual medium and simultaneous translation

In historically Afrikaans-medium institutions, excluding Stellenbosch (see the discussion of SU below), either a parallel-medium, a dual-medium or a simultaneous translation language policy is in place. The problems with dual-medium education are numerous and well documented. Suffice it to say the following: lecturers and students may not be equally fluent in both languages; less fluent students are disadvantaged when one language is used more extensively; lectures ultimately may be conducted mainly in the dominant language (English); speakers of the less dominant language are often pressured

to be 'reasonable' and to accept the erosion of their language which invariably leads to the gradual displacement of the less dominant language. It is obvious then why in most countries single-medium or some form of parallel-medium education (PME) is privileged over dual-medium education (De Varennes, 2010). Parallel-medium education is also nationally acknowledged. Giliomee and Schlemmer (2006, xii) support the idea but points to the fact that it goes with some sacrifices: classes are repeated, lecturers are not paid extra, and research outputs are negatively affected. However, research by UFS shows that lecturers caught up with the backlog within four years (Du Plessis, 2010:142). With regards to the issue of costs, universities at which PME has been implemented, such as UFS and UP, stated that the cost of implementing PME is less than 1% of the university's total budget (Du Plessis, 2010:143; Webb, 2010:161).

University of the Free State (UFS)

A parallel-medium language policy - teaching in both Afrikaans and English in separate classes - is used at UFS. It has been suggested by one member of staff that this policy discriminates against black students, as the English classes are usually held late afternoon and on Saturdays. The University, on the other hand, claims that this is only true for Law and Commerce, which are targeted at working adults. Another criticism to the policy of UFS is that, in cases where lecturers presents in English only, because Afrikaans students are in the minority, the latter are provided with translation services, which are not provided to black students for whom neither English nor Afrikaans is a first language (Soudien et al., 2008:106). It is also interesting to note that in 2010 only 26,3% of all enrolled students chose Afrikaans as medium of instruction whilst 32,2% in the same year indicated their mother tongue to be Afrikaans. According to Du Plessis (2010:131) this means that there is a move away from parallel-medium education towards English. Hence Du Plessis (2010:143), who is also the director of the UFS Language Centre, states that increasingly the UFS will shift to a model where English will become the dominant language of instruction with Afrikaans only as an alternative. The danger of this is that it will have a negative impact on the diversity profile of the university, which is in contrast to what Education White Paper 3 expects.

University of Pretoria (UP)

With regards to the UP, the report of the Ministerial Committee suggested that there is no doubt that the language policy at UP was largely responsible for the university's inability to expand access and increase the diversity of its students, and to some extent, staff profiles. Hence it was found that faculties, schools and departments at UP experience difficulties with regard to language: Some lecturers cannot teach in both languages, which leads to an overburdening of staff members who can. At the same time, while there is a need to appoint academics who can teach in both languages, there is an employment equity plan which may in effect mean there are not enough people in the designated groups that can teach in Afrikaans. Furthermore, the language policy is not evenly and consistently applied across faculties, which impacts negatively on students' success rate (Soudien et al., 2008:111). UP responded with a new language policy, which was accepted on 12 May 2010 and in short entails the following:

The languages of instruction will be Afrikaans and English, subject to academic and economic sustainability; Afrikaans is retained as academic language of instruction in selected core programmes at undergraduate level; lecturers and students will be supported with communication skills in Afrikaans and English; other indigenous languages will be enhanced whilst the university will also contribute to cultural diversity on campus.

(Webb, 2010: 154-155)

The policy further states that all teaching will be conducted within a PME model, that dual-medium teaching will only take place if both student and lecturer have a good understanding of both languages, and where neither of the abovementioned two options are possible, interpreting services will be used (Webb, 2010:162). Dit blyk egter dat hierdie taalbeleid nie die gewenste uitwerking gehad nie, en dat Afrikaans aan die UP agteruit gegaan het (Kruger, 2011:10) omdat daar volgens Webb nie behoorlik begryp is hoe 'n tweetalige-voertaalbeleid in werking te stel nie. Webb voer ook swak inwerkingstelling en monitoring van die UP-besluit om Afrikaans as voertaal te behou, as redes aan vir die agteruitgang (Kruger, 2011). More research is required to determine what the impact of this policy is.

North West University (NWU)

NWU uses Afrikaans as language of instruction at its Potchefstroom campus together with a simultaneous translation service in English. On the Mafikeng campus English has always been the default language of instruction. According to dr. Theuns Eloff, the vice-chancellor, the use of simultaneous translation in more than 1 200 periods per week, and in 17 modules on the Potchefstroom and Vaaldriehoek campuses, is testimony to the fact that NWU did not opt for the easy way out, that of single-medium instruction (Eloff, 2008). He continues to say they rather took a decision to manage language diversity actively in a pragmatic and functional manner. By doing so, NWU successfully managed to de-politicise the language issue. Like the other four historically Afrikaans universities, the NWU also embraces multilingualism. Verhoef (2011) states at NWU multilingualism goes further than teaching. It also includes administration, meetings, official notices, the website and notice boards. The cost of implementing this language policy is like at UFS less than 1% of the university's total budget. Research done with students who have over the years graduated from NWU indicates that translation services contributed to diversity: "The question is not whether we can afford to do it, but whether we can afford *not* to do it," Verhoef (2011) said.

However, the language policy at NWU did not escape criticism. The use of Afrikaans and English as languages of communication with translation services at NWU has been called unfair discrimination. Staff members at the Mafikeng campus of the NWU complained to the Ministerial Task Team about racism on the NWU campus and the fact that simultaneous translation services in Setswana are not offered at all meetings (Soudien et al., 2008:107). NWU responded to this matter by initiating simultaneous translation from English and Afrikaans to Setswana in four modules on the Potchefstroom Campus as well as the Mafikeng Campus as an empowering tool for Setswana-speaking students and to

prepare them for a multilingual education environment. Eloff (2008) admits, however, that NWU should (as should all other universities) do more to establish and promote indigenous languages as languages of science and research.

I shall now turn my attention to what has been labelled in the media the “taaldebat” (or language debate) at SU, i.e. the future of Afrikaans as language of teaching at SU.

Afrikaans as language of teaching at Stellenbosch University

The enrolment of students with little proficiency in Afrikaans highlighted the limitations that the current language policy – especially dual-medium instruction, also known on the SU campus as the T-option – imposes on the delivery of quality teaching and learning. The underlying rationale for the SU language policy, which is linked to the institutional culture and its impact on transformation, seems to be the subject of contestation between internal and external constituencies. The so-called ‘taaldebat’ has often been labelled as a struggle about the poor diversity profile of SU rather than language *per se*. The impression lately is that issues of institutional renewal, openness and diversity have been paramount in the internal debates at SU (Soudien et al., 2008:112).

Volgens Viljoen (2011) sentreer die argumente om te verengels hoofsaaklik rondom drie kategorieë: Eerstens, die paternalistiese benadering wat wil hê dat Engels ’n wêreldtaal is; dat dit goed vir jou is om in Engels te studeer omdat dit jou vir die wêreld van werk voorberei. In dié argument is Engels die panasee vir die bereiking van uitnemendheid en vir die bereiking van diversiteitsdoelwitte. Tog is daar talle voorbeelde van oud-Maties wat hul onderrig in Afrikaans, ontvang het en wat internasionaal uitmuntend gepresteer het. Dan is daar die regstegniese standpunte. Die grondwetlike reg van studie in Afrikaans word onder meer bevraagteken en die argument is dat ’n inklusiewe Afrikaanse universiteit ongrondwetlik is. Derdens is daar die morele argumente: Stellenbosch het, as gevolg van sy apartheidsgeskiedenis, ’n plig om taalregstellende aksies te pleeg. Laastens is daar die vals verwyte dat Afrikaans as ’n uitsluitingsmeganisme gebruik word; dat daar gepoog word om Stellenbosch eksklusief “wit” en Afrikaans te hou.

The university has embarked on a transformation trajectory in all three core function areas (especially in relation to equity and access) in what seems to be an irreversible journey. The medium of instruction has been a key issue in this regard, not only because language is in itself a fundamental component of the teaching and learning process but also because the issue of the language of instruction has had such a polarising effect among SU’s constituencies. Underpinning this view is a conception of a university which still sees SU as a ‘volksuniversiteit’, i.e. as a higher education institution reserved for a particular cultural, linguistic and ethnic group.

In wat beskrywe word as ‘n laagtepunt in die taaldebat (Viljoen, 2011) noem Pierre de Vos, bekende in regskring en hoogleraar aan die Universiteit Kaapstad, in ’n skrywe aan die Sondagblad, *Rapport*, dat daar baie dinge in Suid-Afrika is wat van meer belang is as ‘n taalbeleid: “Baie mense gaan slaap snags honger terwyl korrupsie seëvier, leiers steel ons geld en van die eertydse onderukkers rol in die geld” (De Vos, 2011). De Vos eis dat die voorstanders van ‘n eksklusiewe Afrikaanse universiteit kan begin deur te erken dit

is onregverdig en onverskoonbaar dat 'n nasionale bate soos die US 'n taalbeleid volg wat dit vir die meeste swart Suid-Afrikaners onmoontlik maak om daar te studeer.

In reaksie hierop het Marie Heese wat as raadslid bedank het as gevolg van die voortslepende taaldebat, sterk standpunt ingeneem teenoor diegene wat beweer "...[dat] ons nie regtig net as 'n minderheid taalregte opeis nie, ons wil die US spierwit hou" en "As 'n mens hom [de Vos] glo, sal jy dink ons wil terugbeur na die verlede, 'n eksklusiewe volkstaat uitroep, almal deporteer wie se hare krul, ..." (Heese, 2011:1). Sy gaan voort en wys op verskeie voorbeelde wat, volgens haar, dui op die agteruitgang van Afrikaans aan die US: Dit is nie moontlik om aan die US basiese B-grade in al die fakulteite in Afrikaans te voltooi nie (uitgesluit krygkunde); die aanbod van Afrikaans op die US het konsekwent en drasties gekrimp van 2004 tot 2011; Engels neem oor in die T-opsie-klasse; Einste T-opsie is strydig met die US-raad se voorskrifte, maar dit het toegeneem; daar is etlike departemente waar Engels heeltemal oorheers, soos byvoorbeeld by aktuariële wetenskap, sielkunde en wiskunde; en die huidige bestuur se optrede boesem geen vertroue in ... om hierdie kreeftegang te stuit nie (Heese, 2011).

The language debate at SU has been characterised by a few fundamental reasons why Afrikaans should be maintained as language of higher education: Firstly, the legality is situated in section 29 of the Constitution: the fact that teaching must be reasonably practicable, fair and not discriminatory against anyone. In fact, according to Wiechers (2010, 11) the Constitution gives no legal rights to the minister. The university's language policy is an autonomous affair that is guaranteed in section 16 (1) (d) of the Constitution. Secondly, there is a pedagogical reason: research (Alexander, 2009; Heugh, 1999; Ramphela, 2008; Webb, 2010) has shown that the use of mother-tongue education, is better than second- or third-language education. Thirdly, **multilingualism will also enhance diversity as an asset to the university**. Fourthly, 80% of the students expressed their desire for Afrikaans to continue as an academic language at higher education level (De Stadler, 2010:118). Finally, the Afrikaans community has the inner strength and ability to establish the higher functions of Afrikaans that will justify Afrikaans' position as language of higher education (Eloff, 2008).

It came as no surprise therefore when the **Konvokasie van die US by hul jaarvergadering van 2011 'n resoluie aanvaar het wat kortliks as volg lui:**

"...ons... eis dat die Universiteit Stellenbosch dringend 'n volwaardige plek vir Afrikaans in alle fakulteite verskaf en indien daar desnoods ook 'n Engelse aanbod gedoen word, dit deur tolking of parallelmedium geskied; en dat daarmee die kommerwekkende agteruitgang van Afrikaansmedium in verskeie fakulteite omgekeer word." (Heese, 2011:1).

Onmiddellik hierna het die US-rektor, prof. Russel Botman, in 'n TV-onderhoud met Freek Robinson kategorieë verklaar dat hy Afrikaanse ouers waarborg "dat hul kinders onderrig in Afrikaans op Stellenbosch sal ontvang" (Viljoen, 2011). Sodoende het die rektor die hand gereik na die konvokasie en is die grondslag gelê om die samewerking met die konvokasie te hervat wat twee jaar tevore opgeskort is.

Quo vadis for Stellenbosch University?

The SU management concedes that language is an intractable problem (SU, 2008:13), “serious frustration and mistrust are still simmering” (SU, 2008:29) and student surveys confirm that language is closely linked to success (SU, 2008:30). In die lig hiervan en in ‘n poging om alle studente sinvol te akkommodeer en ‘n beter balans te vind tussen toegang, ideale student profile en die US se verantwoordelikheid teenoor Afrikaans, is ‘n meertalige onderrigmodel ontwikkel wat volgens die destydse vise-rector (onderrig) ten doel het om (i) toeganklikheid te verbreed en billikheid te bevorder, (ii) studentesukses moontlik te maak en akademies verantwoordbaar te wees, (iii) meertalige gegradueerdes af te lewer en (iv) ‘n vaste plek vir Afrikaans te verseker (Fourie-Malherbe, 2012).

Die rektor is ewe-eens op rekord dat “Maties is lank nie meer uitsluitlik Afrikaans nie, en ook nie uitsluitlik Engels nie” (Malan, 2011). Volgens die rektor (Botman, 2011) sal die meertalige onderrigmodel vooriening maak vir: (i) ‘n sterker posisie vir parallel-mediumonderrig, veral in ‘n aantal groot fakulteite, met implementering daarvan in die eerste jaar en in sommige gevalle ook in die tweede jaar, met die moontlikheid van dubbel-mediumonderrig daarna; (ii) die beskikbaarheid van studiemateriaal in twee tale, (iii) verdere ondersoeke na en invoering van taaltegnologie, waaronder tolking - volgens ‘n voorlopige navorsingsverslag hieroor het 92% van die studente wat aan tolking blootgestel is, dit verwelkom - (De Stadler, 2011) en (iv) verbeterde taalbestuur deur taal-implementeringsplanne vir fakulteite en steundienste te aanvaar.

The rector of SU stated that the university’s point of departure in the language debate was from the outset to determine what minimum Afrikaans offering should be guaranteed (Botman, 2010:65). Die posisie van Afrikaans word gevolglik verseker deur die US se onderneming dat minstens 60% van die aanbod in voorgraadse programme in Afrikaans sal wees, en deur ‘n verbeeldingryke en dinamiese bevorderingsplan vir Afrikaans (Botman, 2011). Die besluit om ‘n meertalige onderrigmodel te volg is gemotiveer deur die standpunt dat elke student leer beter in een besondere taal. Success in life and in education is organically related to language mastery (Alexander, 1997; Vilakazi, 2002; Le Cordeur, 2011; Webb, 2010). Die tweede punt van motivering vir ‘n meertalige onderrigmodel is die studenteprofiel van die tipe student wat die US graag wil aflewer:

Die ideale profile van ‘n afgestudeerde Stellenbosse student sluit in dat daardie student in ‘nmeertalige konteks sal kan funksioneer, met die nodige gevoeligheid vir die belangrikheid van talige diversiteit. Daarom wil ons graag ons student aan meer as een taal blootstel, en dit word bereik deur ‘n gemengde taalmodel waarin dubbelmediumonderrig saam met parallelmediumonderrig plek kry (Botman, 2011).

Botman (2011) also stated that SU has been successful so far in attaining an offer of above 60%. Not everyone agrees: Le Roux (2010:77) argues that the utilisation of the T-option did not result in an increased enrolment of non-white students. It is thus clear that SU uses Afrikaans as “the default language of undergraduate learning and instruction” and as the “default institutional language” (SU, 2008: 3). The university claims that it is committed to a “pragmatic, flexible approach” through expanding “supplemental

programmes” in Afrikaans, English and [isi]Xhosa, and to providing support services in isiXhosa (SU, 2008:6-7), as well as supporting the development of isiXhosa as an academic language (SU, 2008:3).

Those in favour of Afrikaans as an academic language will, however, have to bear the following points of concern in mind about the continuation of Afrikaans at university level: (i) If only one or two universities have the responsibility to promote Afrikaans, as was recommended by the Gerwel Report (2001), it can lead to a concentration of Afrikaans-speaking students on one campus, which goes against the very grain of transformation. (ii) The idea of an Afrikaans university will undermine diversity and transformation in the higher education sector, because the aim is to create universities whose identities and culture orientation is neither black nor white, neither Afrikaans nor English, but unashamedly South African (DoBE 1997). (iii) Coloured and white students who indicate that their home language is Afrikaans or Afrikaans and English have shown a decline between 2004 and 2010. The only substantial increase in numbers was that of white English students (Le Roux 2010, 77). According to De Stadler (2010, 118), SU currently only boasts 61% undergraduate and 45% postgraduate Afrikaans students.

Afrikaans as a language of higher education will therefore increasingly come under pressure and universities that are committed to the use and sustained development of Afrikaans (such as SU) will, as cited by Eloff (2008), will increasingly experience political pressure from student organisations, labour unions and political parties – all with the narrow agenda by which transformation is limited to affirmative action.

Ultimately, those who are committed to Afrikaans can take heart from the fact that the Constitution allows enough opportunity to enhance Afrikaans as language of higher education. Wiechers (2010:12) warns that the offering of exclusively Afrikaans teaching is subject to certain conditions. To qualify as an academic language of teaching, it will have to be proved that Afrikaans creates optimal opportunities for learning, knowledge and excellence. Wiechers (2010:13) also points to the fact that Afrikaans, in line with section 37 of the Higher Education Bill as well as the admission policy of the university, should be able to affirm the inequalities of the past. Amongst others, universities should ensure that students are empowered to improve their knowledge and skills of Afrikaans (Wiechers, 2010:21). Eloff (2008) urges that the process must have maximum credibility. In this sense “reasonably practicable” should also include indigenous languages. Fortunately it seems as if most of the tension surrounding the language debate has subsided, albeit only for now.

Findings

The language issue operates at two levels: The first is the communication level, i.e. the means by which institutional information is distributed internally and externally, and meetings conducted. While most universities have formally adopted multilingualism policies, an examination of their modes of communication, internally and externally, indicates that the practice is not evenly spread across institutions. The second level, and aim of this article, is that of medium of instruction. This is where the most pernicious

epistemic violence is committed. The success of the transformation agenda in higher education will stand or fall, in the end, on the altar of epistemological transformation, as this speaks to the core function of higher education in relation to teaching and research. This author could not find any evidence that language, in particular Afrikaans, is denying student's access to higher education as many want us to believe. I am of the opinion though that for many students language is still a barrier to academic success.

Recommendations

Although there is general agreement that no university should be defined by language only, this opinion is based on the philosophy that language is the key to understanding oneself; it is the key to understanding others; and language mastery is the window to success in life – certainly in education. In essence, language affirms the individual and serves as a means of communication and, therefore, facilitates social cohesion (Soudien et al., 2008:112). With this in mind, the following recommendations are made:

- (i) SU should embrace the conception of universities as open spaces for intellectual and cultural exchanges, encouraging and supporting cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity which have a vital role to play in Africa and the knowledge society. It should be clear that the latter conception of a university is the only one that will allow SU to contribute to the development of South Africa and the African continent, and to build on its tradition of high academic achievement as stated in its Vision 2012 (*cf.* Soudien et al., 2008) .
- (ii) SU should place more emphasis on parallel-medium teaching. Not only will it secure a permanent place for Afrikaans at SU, it will de-politicise the language issue, it is affordable, provides for both Afrikaans and English and is also in accordance with the international trend (*cf.* De Varennes, 2010). Although most SU students are in favour of Afrikaans as future academic language, 70% indicated they also want exposure to English. Furthermore, increasingly more students indicate that they are multilingual and want to be in a multilingual environment (*cf.* De Stadler, 2010:118).
- (iii) The use of dual-medium teaching (or T-option) should only take place if both student and lecturer have a good understanding of both languages.
- (iv) As one of its main priorities, SU should focus more on the empowerment of the poor, rural, Coloured, Afrikaans-speaking student. A number of commentators (*cf.* Schlemmer, 2010:48; Smit, 2010:72; Webb, 2010; Wiechers, 2010:12) have cited the importance of this matter, amongst others, the rector of SU: “As Afrikaans nie met hulle slaag nie, gaan Afrikaans nie slaag nie” (Botman, 2010:65).
- (v) All universities should introduce a common and compulsory first-year course for all students, introducing them to the challenges of South Africa, Africa and the world. A common first-year course may well be best suited to the

introduction of a four-year undergraduate diploma and degree, as recommended by the Ministerial Committee.

Concluding thoughts

It has become clear that there are unacceptably large numbers of students who are not successful academically because of the ‘language problem’. They fail not because of a lack of intelligence but because they are unable to express their views in the dominant language of instruction. This leads to a great deal of frustration and alienation. “The cumulative consequences of all this is illustrated by the prevailing poor quality of relations amongst various constituencies in many institutions” and not only SU (Soudien et al., 2008:112). While good practices have been developed at some of the institutions, which might serve as models for change in the country, no one should underestimate the difficulties that still exist.

The lack of epistemological transformation is clearly reflected in the role of language in higher education. It is clear from this assessment of the state of language of instruction in higher education, that discrimination, in particular with regard to language, is pervasive in our institutions. Soudien et al (2008) warns that there is virtually no institution that is *not* in need of serious change as far as language policy is concerned. The observation that the language issue is at the heart of the education crisis in our society may be an overstatement, as there are many other factors that contribute to the education crisis. But the language issue is undoubtedly one of the main obstacles to academic success for the majority of black students.

Much work still needs to be done before we will be able to make people feel at home in an *ubuntu* of languages – it can only happen by means of an inclusive institutional culture which amongst others could be expressed in everybody’s language. Finally it is of the utmost importance that Afrikaans-speaking citizens find a constructive balance. Whilst we should continue to strive for the acknowledgement of our language and other indigenous languages, we must be realistic about the inclusiveness of communication in our country and the role English inevitably will play in this regard – and we should not lie to our children about this. Without the political will and tolerance of each other’s differences, the ideal of our country’s motto – *!ke e: /xarra //ke*, unity in diversity – will remain a long fought for dream.

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ⁱ Volgens Essack en Quayle (2007:73) is die klassifi sering van sosiale groepe volgens ras altyd problematies. Die term “Kleurling” (Coloured) verwys hier na mense wat onder apartheidswetgewing as “Kleurling” geklassifi seer is, en moet nie beskou word as die skrywer se goedkeuring van terme wat mense op rassegronde etiketteer nie.