

It is some months since multi-party negotiators agreed that there would be 11 official languages in the new South Africa. Little has been done since to make this policy a reality. SUE VALENTINE and FIONA STUDDERT explored the issues with Nigel Crawhall and Kathleen Heugh of the National Language Project.



GIFT OF THE GAB: The nature of South Africa is multilingual.

Why 11 languages? How many languages are spoken in South Africa?

CRAWHALL: There's an endless number of languages. What the new policy is saying is there are 11 recognised languages that have received status in the past in South Africa and are spoken by more than one percent of the population. If you're talking about smaller community languages then there are probably another 20, but you can't count exactly how many languages there are.

What do you think is the intended effect of this decision?

HEUGH: I think the first criterion was that all languages needed to be equalised in status. In the past high status and value were accorded to people who spoke English and Afrikaans and low status to people who were speakers of African languages. This is a symbolic gesture aimed at changing the status quo.

Do you think that the new language policy can work?

CRAWHALL: It depends what you mean by "work". No one is expecting the government to have an 11-language policy similar to our previous bilingual policy. So Parliament won't function in 11 languages and you won't be able to get services in 11 languages. What we're hoping for, and what needs to be worked towards, is a basic minimum of language rights, such that in any court situation, for example, you can be served properly in any of the 11 official languages – and also, hopefully, in whatever other language you may need. Also in other environments – filling in tax forms, applying to the government for permits – the government should have the capacity to cope in 11 languages.

Up until very recently the government did a fair amount of disguising of statistics about which languages are widely spoken. Whereas it is true that Afrikaans is very

widely spoken – much more so than English, or rather it has a much larger first language base – the thing that was not mentioned was that Zulu is understood by at least 60 percent of the country. It could be that as many as 75 percent of the population understand Zulu well, and that at least 30 percent of the population understand South Sotho well and can communicate in it.

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One thing that was unfortunate in the whole Kempton Park debate was that the functional idea of language was lost. The politics dominated. Although we're pleased that the 11 languages were recognised and it's a step in the right direction, the actual practicality could have been different. The Freedom Alliance closed the door on an option that might have allowed a status for Afrikaans and Zulu that could have challenged English – not removed it, but provided options.

The decision by Coca-Cola to remove Afrikaans from coldrink cans is an indication of how business is interpreting the policy of 11 languages. They take it to mean that they no longer have to be bilingual, and that

frightens us. If there had been the recognition – not for political reasons, but for functional purposes – that Afrikaans and Zulu between them cover one end of the country to the other, it would have had an impact on the business community's decisions. Our fear now is that the business community will take the policy of 11 official languages to mean English only – and we're seeing this emerging already.

What examples are there of other countries where multiple languages have had official status, and what have been the practical implications?

CRAWHALL: There are very, very few countries in the world that have more than three official languages – or even as many as three. One example is Malaysia, which recognises four languages (English, Malay, Tamil and Chinese). Also, you have to understand that a language policy doesn't emerge out of its own intelligence, but out of a political environment, a political context. I think it says a great deal about where South Africa is, that it feels the need to recognise 11 languages. I think our situation is quite similar to the Malaysian one where they had to recognise four. It was more a question of domestic peace than good sense.

Nigeria and Namibia chose at independence to make English their official language. What do you see as the

'More a question of peace'



them moving towards a more practical policy.

I think the key issue is what the choice of English meant for them: it meant linking into international donors and a place for the leadership in the international environment.

And in Nigeria?

HEUGH: While Nigeria officially adopted English as its language of government, it also designated three languages as national languages: Ibo, Hasa and Yoruba. Those languages function extremely well in the three major areas of Nigeria. They're used for regional levels of government; they're used in the educational sector; and they're used in the economy. It's not necessary for every Nigerian to acquire proficiency in English in order to feel empowered.

Nigeria is a particularly interesting case because it has the highest literacy rate in Africa. It also has the highest percentage of speakers of English in Africa and, on top of that, it's also got a very high percentage of

people who are entirely competent in one of the three national languages, so that they are

able to activate themselves within the economy or the regional political arenas.

This is entirely different from virtually any other country in Africa and it's largely attributed to the multilingual policy of Nigeria that this has come about. By contrast, countries like Zambia, for example, have a largely monolingual language policy.

So you're saying that high literacy rates and other positive effects have resulted from a multi-lingual policy rather than using English as the single official language?

CRAWHALL: I think a key issue, if you link Namibia and Nigeria back together again, is that the Nigerian policy has been an empowering one. You get the really decent education in your first language (or the regional language). This recognises the student, the student's experience, the student's cultural background; and it maximises the student's ability to participate in the education system.

Everything that we know about language learning indicates that if your first language skills are strong, if your academic skills are built up in that language, it's much easier to learn English at an older age. You don't need to learn it so early. And that's what the Nigerian experience is partly showing – a good quality first language education makes your English education better.

The Namibian policy is a much more disempowering one.

How are language and ethnicity linked, and what are the implications for language policy?

CRAWHALL: There are two issues. The NLP has been promoting the idea of multilingualism and now that has become a catchword. We understand multilingualism to mean, in relation to primary education, that you start with what the children have.

In the Western Cape, for example, it is quite normal for children to have exposure to at least three languages. Now, let's take an example of a school in Cape Town: it's a Sotho medium school, but the children actually speak Xhosa as their first language. Only a minority of the children speak Sotho, but they're ethnically designated by the apartheid system as "Basotho" and therefore must go to a Sotho medium school. The school then attempts to teach through the medium of Sotho.

You may say, "But that's good. These people are Sotho, they must be educated in Sotho." But the reality is that these people are more than just Sotho: they're also Xhosa speakers, they're also English speakers, they also speak Afrikaans. What we're looking for is an education system that recognises this reality; that says your identity is more complex than a single ethnic identity.

This is a big country, there are many people here, and by the time they are teenagers many South Africans speak two, three, four, five – six languages sometimes. We'd like that recognised.

The reason we say that it's important is that it doesn't overemphasise, in an unnatural way, the idea of a direct link between your language and your ethnic identity. We're saying there'll be more co-operation, integration and support for people as a result of such a recognition – but without denying ethnic differences, and without saying "You must all speak English", as I think a lot of the elite seem to wish.

We at the NLP are saying: "Do not force people into pigeon holes by saying they must speak this or that language because that is their ethnic identity. We're saying "share, work together". A lot of our work here at the NLP is about looking at multilingual teaching where, regardless of what the language is – maybe it's Spanish or Portuguese or Venda – it is important for other children to learn, even if only to recognise that a child who speaks Spanish/Portuguese/Venda is there in the classroom.

Although that child may not speak the language concerned at school, the point is that he or she represents a bigger culture; has something uniquely worthwhile to offer classmates. That's our kind of approach.

...than good sense'

disadvantages of choosing a single language as the official language?

CRAWHALL: The two cases are very different. In Namibia there are a number of indigenous languages – one is Afrikaans, which became the most widely spoken lingua franca, followed by Oshivambo, which in its various dialects is spoken by more than 60 percent of the country. Either of those languages – or both – would have been the logical choice for the internal language of the country. Neither was chosen, for obvious political reasons.

'Namibians don't speak English. You can't wish that the whole country spoke English overnight'

I think in the Namibian situation this was particularly unfortunate. The decisions were made by people who weren't even living there – the United Nations Council for Namibia, the British Council and British government, the Americans and aid agencies. I think the Namibians, despite their strong drive towards English – and by this I mean the elite rather than the population – have come to recognise that it is not possible. Namibians don't speak English. You can't wish that the whole country spoke English overnight. So in Namibia we're going to see