

RECOGNISING SOUTH AFRICAN SIGN LANGUAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL MUNICIPALITIES

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Abstract

This article posits that the implications of Sign Language within the South African local municipalities, remains a challenge, notwithstanding existing attempts by language policies to promote multilingualism. Thus, guard against the use of other spoken languages to perpetuate inequalities which were entrenched by the history of the country. In this article it is argued that the use of other spoken languages as the only communication between South African local municipalities as the only languages of communication, impedes access to effective communication with residents. South African government has recognised eleven plus official languages, inclusive of Sign Languages. For this study, three Free State local municipalities were approached to help with data on the topic, wherein officials involved in an open-ended interview, with a voice-recorder used. Only one local municipality had a translator/ interpreter, and who does not know South African Sign Language. The other two local municipalities do not have a translator or an interpreter at all. Thus, implying that only 33,3% (only one local municipality) partially comply with the regulations as enshrined in the South African Constitution (1996); and the other two with 66,4% (two local municipalities) of the selected municipalities do not comply at all. The findings suggest that most South African local municipalities do not comply with regulations regarding the introduction and development of South African Sign Languages. Thus, this implies that South African Local Municipalities do not communicate with all its residents. Local municipalities are therefore expected to employ people who will help deaf people when they visit their offices to enquire or attend to other problems. The article poses recommendations as to how the apparent linguistic imperialism, which is a human rights violation, can be turned around to linguistic diversity that is based on linguistic justice.

Keywords: *South African sign language, local municipalities, multilingualism, communication, South African Constitution.*

1. Introduction

This article discusses the lack of or absence of South African Sign Languages at South African local municipalities to effectively communicate with their residents, despite the availability of supportive legislative frameworks, such as the Constitution of South Africa (1996), Use of Official Languages Act (2012). South African Sign Language appears to be a smallest recognised language in South Africa. Although some of South African organisations representing the deaf communities claim that more than one million South Africans use this language. Statistics South Africa (2011) survey records only shows 234,655 citizens who use Sign Language and regarded as first spoken language. It should be noted that this number could include naturally hearing children of deaf parents. The key question that this article seeks to answer is: Is it important to promote South African Sign Language at all spheres of government (especially at local municipalities)? The article then poses recommendations as to how the apparent linguistic imperialism which is a human right violation can be turned around to linguistic diversity that is based on linguistic justice.

2. Aims

This article aims to: (1) Situate the South African Sign Language within the transformation of the country. (2) Recommend a multilingual approach by local municipalities when communicating with residents (especially deaf residents).

3. Theoretical framework

Jernudd and Das Gupta (1971) posited that the concept of 'language-as-a-resource in which language choices are made on strictly economic grounds in much the same way as any other resource in

the nation's economy are planned and consumed. Theoretical foundation of this article is based on the concept of *language-as-a-resource orientation* which stresses the importance of multilingualism, not only as a facilitator of access to different cultures and literature, but also as a door to economic and other related opportunities. Further-more, Ruiz (1984) concurred that the language-as-a-resource orientation was used in the language planning model. Braam (2004; as cited by Ndimande-Hlongwa et al., 2010) argued that language policy as enshrined in the South African Constitution (1996), and Language Plan Task Group Report (LANGTAG, 1996), assumes a particular paradigm, namely, that South Africa is characterised as a country of diverse languages (inclusive of Sign Language), which are a resource that should be developed like any other economic resource. Cluver (1996) postulated that multi-ethnic could be unified into a single political state through linguistic freedom, and added that language should not be viewed as an impediment but a linguistic resource that facilitates successful business transactions. Hornberger (1991) mentioned that language-as-a-resource approach is designed to stimulate and build upon the skills and resources that individuals from different linguistic backgrounds bring to the world.

4. Qualitative analysis

This study adopted a qualitative approach or analysis. Punch (2013) refers to qualitative analysis as a collection and analysing of non-numerical data (e.g., text, videos, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. Further-more, qualitative analysis is about emotions or perceptions of people, what and how they feel. It is concerned in gaining insights, reasoning, and motivations. The interviewer used the voice-recorder, to conduct the interviews with respondents. For this study, the interview was informal and unstructured-conversational, wherein most open-ended questions were asked spontaneously.

5. Population and sample

Polit and Beck (2017) defined population as the complete combination of cases in which the researcher is interested, wherein a population is not chosen for the purpose of generalisability, but rather to establish the kinds of individuals that are suitable to take part in the study. For this study, the target population comprised of South African local municipality officials mostly. Polit and Beck (2017) refers to sampling as the procedure of selecting a subset of the population to represent the whole population. This study managed to interview three officials responsible for languages in the three selected local municipalities from the Free State Province, South Africa.

6. Ethical considerations

Mark (2015) referred to ethical considerations as a branch of philosophy that deals with the conduct of participants and guides norms or standards of behaviour of participants and relationship with each other. Moral behaviour must be considered upon conducting research. The researcher indicated that at no stage will his participants be known to any person and their rights and privacy will be considered and protected, permission will be obtained to record the session and hence they will have an option of disclosure or non-disclosure of their identification. Should they feel offended at any point, they are free to discontinue the research, as they took part willingly. Participants were also requested to fill in the consent forms. The ethical considerations are not limited to the above-mentioned only.

7. Data analysis

Wiid and Diggins (2013) defined data analysis as how the researcher spells out the purpose and logic of analysing, explaining the way gathered information will account for variations in some quality of responses. Further-more, Saris and Gallhofer (2014) maintained that data analysis is a process conducted to sift, reduce, organise, and give purposeful meaning to data, helping to respond to research questions. The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 19 was used to perform the analysis of the data.

8. The value of sign language

Approximately 25 different languages are spoken in South Africa, of which 11 have been granted official status in terms of section 6 of the Constitution (Act No. 108 of 1996), on the grounds that their usage includes about 98% of the total population. The 11 official languages are isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, and siSwati (referred to as the Nguni language group); Sesotho, Sepedi, and Setswana (referred to as the Sotho language group); Tshivenda, Xitsonga, English and Afrikaans. South Africa is therefore a multilingual country. A striking characteristic of multilingualism in South Africa is the fact that several indigenous languages are spoken across provincial borders; shared by speech communities from different

provinces. To-date, management of linguistic diversity in post-apartheid South Africa has been made problematic by the lack of a clearly defined language policy, leading to the use of English and Afrikaans as the most dominant languages in the socio-economic and political domains of our society. The indigenous languages and language varieties of the African people and of other marginalised groups, including the Deaf and the Blind – enforcing negative stereotypes of the African languages, which are held not only by English and Afrikaans speakers, but even by many of the speakers of the African languages themselves. The situation is compounded by the fact that, owing to short-sighted and bureaucratic attitudes against implementing multilingualism public and private institutions tend to take ad hoc language decisions that negate the Constitutional provisions and requirements relating to languages. A person's language is in many ways a "second skin": a natural possession of every normal human being, with which we use to express our hopes and ideals, articulate our thoughts and values, explore our experience and customs, and construct our society and the laws that govern it. It is through language that we function as human beings in an ever-changing world. The right to use the official languages of our choice has therefore been recognised in our South African Bill of Rights, and Constitution acknowledges that the languages of our people are a resource that should be harnessed.

9. Barriers in language policy implementation

Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1996) argue that the role of language is seldom considered when policies are agreed upon. Kamwangamalu (2004) postulated that, interestingly so, South Africa decided to opt for multilingual policy in 1996 as enshrined in the Constitution, during its language policy planning process to avoid any possible long-standing ethno-linguistic strife among custodians of the various Indigenous African Languages, while on the other hand, and English and Afrikaans-speaking white communities on the other hand. Surprisingly, it is saddening to note that the same languages that were used as languages of instruction during the colonial era, are still dominant languages in the democratic dispensation. In South Africa language policy implementation has progressed at a snail's pace, and in some cases, nothing has been embarked on at all. In this regard, Beukes (2008) argued that it seems as if government lacks a commitment to its own language policy framework, and this reflects a disjunction between policy and delivery. The implementation of language policy has been characterised by a lack of progress since the introduction of the new constitutional dispensation. Heugh (2006) asserted that the government is to blame for slowing down and stalling progress in implementing this potentially empowering policy. Thus, this failure has impacted negatively on the achievement of many Indigenous African Languages (especially the South African Sign Language). Colonialism and apartheid played a key role in creating an official space that inferiorised Indigenous African Languages through policies that promoted languages that aided the oppression. Beukes (2008) posited that despite efforts by the democratic government to redress the colonial ills, evidence shows that the elevation of indigenous languages remains in its infancy. It becomes evident that the democratic tone of language policies which suggests practicality and choice rather than enforcement, the acceptance of the English language as the official policy language, and government's move to reform rather than deconstruct apartheid language policies are key obstacles to policy implementation.

10. Multilingualism and legislative context

Section 6 of the Constitution provides the principal legal framework for multilingualism, the development of the official languages and the promotion of respect and tolerance for South Africa's linguistic diversity. It determines the language rights of citizens, which must be honoured through national language policies. The Constitution emphasises that all official languages must "enjoy parity of esteem" and be treated equitably, thereby enhancing the status and use of indigenous languages, with government taking "legislative and other measures" to regulate and monitor the use of disadvantaged indigenous languages. The Constitution mandates change to the language situation throughout the country, giving social and political recognition to hitherto disadvantaged language groups based on the expressed needs of communities and interest groups. Section 6(2) of the Constitution requires mechanisms to be put in place to develop these indigenous languages. Section 6(3) and (4) contain language-related provisions for national and provincial governments, whereby government departments must use at least two of the official languages. To promote linguistic diversity further, Section 6(5) provides for the establishment of the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) to promote multilingualism and see to the development and use not only of the official languages, but also of the Khoi, Nama, and San languages, as well as SA Sign Language(s). Other relevant provisions pertaining to language matters are made elsewhere in the Constitution. Section 9(3) protects against unfair discrimination on the grounds of language, while sections 30 and 31(1) refer to people's rights in terms of cultural, religious, and linguistic participation and enjoyment. Section 35(3) and (4) refer to the language rights of arrested, detained and accused persons, with a particular emphasis on the right to fair trial with proceedings conducted or interpreted into the

language of that individual's choice. The Constitution and related legislation clearly advocate the promotion of multilingualism in South Africa. Thus, the Constitution of South Africa caters adequately for the harmonisation of language policy at all three levels of government and articulate clear policy positions on the status and use of the indigenous official languages in all nine provinces in South Africa. The language policy takes cognisance of the constitutional provisions on multilingualism and is in concert with government's goals for economic, socio-political, and educational growth.

Multilingualism aims to:

Promote the equitable use of the 11 official languages. Facilitate equitable access to government services, knowledge, and information. Ensure redress for the previously marginalised official indigenous languages. Initiate and sustain a vibrant discourse on multilingualism with all language communities. Encourage the learning of other official indigenous languages to promote national unity, and linguistic and cultural diversity; and promote good language management for efficient public service administration to meet client expectations and needs.

11. The promotion of multilingualism entails the following:

Promoting multilingualism in South Africa requires efforts that do not discount the knowledge that exists in societies where indigenous official languages are prominent. This will be facilitated by the use and involvement of communities as participants in the processes of language development. It will be expedient to engage language specialists to assist the process of developing functional multilingual programmes through research and the dissemination of findings. Facilitating cooperation and the sharing of responsibilities among SADC member states will accelerate language development. It will be necessary to conduct policy reviews at reasonable intervals to monitor progress towards a fully multilingual South African society. A community-based approach to the promotion of multilingualism is the most viable one, given South Africa's highly pluralistic society. There must be a decentralised and participatory approach to language planning and policy implementation, which harnesses technical expertise for the transfer of knowledge and skills.

12. Local government and language preferences

Local governments will determine the language use and preferences of their communities within an enabling provincial language policy framework. Upon determination of the language use and preference of communities, local governments must, in broad consultation with their communities, develop, publicise, and implement a multilingual policy. The official languages will be used in all legislative activities, including Hansard publications, as a matter of right as required: provided that in the case of provincial legislatures, regional circumstances will determine the language(s) to be used. **Working language(s)/language(s) of record:** By consensus, each government structure must agree on a working language(s) (for both intra and interdepartmental communication purposes); Provided that where practically possible no person will be prevented from using the language(s) of his or her preference. For the purposes of conducting meetings or performing specific tasks every effort must be made to utilise language facilitation facilities such as translation and/or interpreting (both consecutive and simultaneous, as well as whispered interpreting) where practically possible. **Communication with members of the public:** For official correspondence purposes, the language of the citizen's choice must be used. All oral communication must take place in the preferred official language of the target audience. If necessary, every effort must be made to utilise language facilitation facilities such as interpreting (consecutive, simultaneous, telephone and whispered interpreting) where practically possible. **Government publications:** A publication programme of functional multilingualism should be followed by national government departments in those cases that do not require publication in all 11 official languages. Where the effective and stable operation of government at any level requires comprehensive communication of information, it must be published in all 11 official languages and, in the provinces, in all the official languages prescribed in the province. In cases where government documents will not be made available in all 11 official languages, national government departments must publish documents simultaneously in at least six languages. **The selection of languages will be made as follows:**

1. At least one from the Nguni group (isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, and siSwati);
2. At least one from the Sotho group (Sepedi, Sesotho, and Setswana);
3. Tshivenda;
4. Xitsonga;
5. English;
6. Afrikaans.

A principle of rotation must be applied when selecting languages for publishing government documents in the Nguni and Sotho groups.

13. Recommendations / implications

Considering the purpose/ aims of this paper, the researcher recommends the following: (i) Local municipalities are encouraged to create a Language Unit (probably to be headed by a qualified and professional language practitioner). (ii) This Language Unit should be responsible to ensure multilingualism (inclusive of Sign Language) at local municipalities. (iii) South African local municipalities are expected to allocate funds to implement and promote multilingualism. Funding should not be used as an excuse not to implement multilingualism. (iv) South African local municipalities need to encourage language advocacy and litigation that will seek to promote multilingualism. (v) Advocacy and litigation are important, as implementation of multilingualism is not going to happen all by itself.

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