

## **The Adoption of South Africa's constitutionally-Mandated Indigenous Languages as Languages of Learning and Teaching (Lolt): A Multilingualism Approach**

Jozi Joseph Thwala

*University of Mpumalanga, School of Development Studies*

**Abstract:** *The objectives of this paper are to contextually define, describe and analyse the constitutionally-mandated languages of South Africa. These are approached from spatial, historical and cultural settings. The Constitution recognises eleven official languages; namely, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Setswana, Siswati, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans and English. Enhancement of multilingualism and multiculturalism is significant, to ensure the functionality of reconciliation and accountability. Each language has its deep historical background and attractive cultural practices. Languages are significant aspects of any educational system and unique human attributes that enable human being to genuinely learn, think creatively, define reality and share meaning.*

**Keywords:** *Accountability, Multiculturalism, Multilingualism, Non-racism, Non-sexism and Reconciliation.*

---

### **I. Introduction**

This research work provides a context within which the development of South African languages could be evaluated. The contention is that language development is essential for the attainment of full civil rights. A language defines the human essence. They distinguish human beings from animals. People are in fact 'talkative animals' (Prah 2007). Language develops in the process of making meaning out of man's experience in the process of being and becoming (Ngugi 1981). Human interaction is achieved mainly through language. It underpins acculturation, as the process of socialisation and dissemination of accumulated knowledge, wisdom and values. It facilitates assimilation of new ideas and concepts into an existing cognitive structure (Mutasa 2006). The development of languages on the other hand is multidimensional. It incorporates political, social, institutional and cultural factors.

Language is an essential precondition for social and economic development. Thus, a developed language is of instrumental value to its users. Language is human communication which is systematically organized into a specific structure. It is a combination of morphemes, words, phrases and clauses that are procedurally organized. Ndlovu (2013:13), posits that language plays an indispensable role in education as it enables human beings to be creative thinkers and transform them socially. As the role of a language is mainly experienced in teaching and learning, education, therefore, is perceived as a sphere in which language issues of a country can be generally understood.

The country's policy, enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996, deals with languages in various ways. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will only be on the section dealing with the indigenous languages as a focal point in Schools. The Constitution the following languages; Northern Sotho, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, IsiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. Section 29(2) of the Bill of Rights, which forms part of the South Africa's Constitution, is clear about the right of all to receive education in the official language(s) of their choice in schools.

### **II. Research Methods And Theoretical Underpinning**

Qualitative research method is adopted to capture people's own ideas, notions and meanings for their behaviour endeavour-specific contexts. This method uses participant observation and field studies. Two randomly selected linguists were interviewed per province to collect the required data on spatial, historical, cultural and linguistic settings. The development and implementation of language policies were highlighted to ensure that the objectives and research questions inform each other, for the total accomplishment of the aim.

The authors used a semi-structural interview guide or schedule as a mode of data collection. Questions were asked to allow the participants to express themselves. The questions focused on the research topic, to ensure that the interviews were giving specific and relevant information required for the purpose of the study. A multilingual approach is apparent when the focus on mother-tongue education or specific indigenous language teaching is asserted and practised.

### III. Results

Two linguists were interviewed from each province about the linguistic state of affairs, views and modes of operation of the languages within the spheres and across the boundaries of the provinces. Their response provided invaluable information which is fundamental in the development of languages and promotions of multilingualism. In the Eastern Cape, three languages were mentioned; namely, IsiXhosa, English, and Afrikaans. In the Eastern part of the province also use IsiZulu and Sesotho, especially on the northern part. The first respondent expressed a serious concern about an adoption of indigenous languages as a media for teaching and learning. He added that this will speed-up the development of marginalised languages. He insisted that language-specific strategies should be implemented to promote these languages.

The second respondent reiterates the advocacy of Bamgbose (1991: 109 – 111) on language issues as follows:

*There is an escalating consciousness on the impact of multilingualism, especially on the role of African Languages in advancing multilingualism in education. This is reflected in the language policies. They acknowledge the need for the teaching in, and acquisition of these languages at all levels of education. They include the involvement terminologists to coin new terms, as necessary, according to the new function required of the language, terms which might not be in existence especially in technical areas. They also require lexicographers to write dictionaries.*

It is however, noted that multilingualism can be achieved by using indigenous languages for learning and teaching. For example, the IsiXhosa language needs to strive for significant recognition within the province. The first respondent asserted that the Free State Province is dominated by Southern Sotho, Afrikaans and English. The trio is a fundamental communication tool within the province. These languages are read, spoken and written from basic to higher education. They share terminology, concepts and vocabulary. However, it was also noted that the Eastern part of the province enjoys IsiZulu language and cultural practices, while the western part is influenced by Setswana.

Southern Sotho is shared by two countries; namely, Lesotho and South Africa. Although the tradition and cultural practices are similar, the orthography and spelling rules are different. The history, culture and tradition of the Basotho are significant to all inhabitants because they shape the total life of all communities. The roots of the inhabitants' life are derived from the Kingdom. The second respondent expressed the idea of enforcing Sesotho language to be one of the main subjects, starting from Arts and Culture learning area. The development of terminology lists for all learning areas and subjects needs urgent attention. He believes translation and adaptation from source-language to target-language speed up the development and promotion of the language. The respondent further mentioned that in France, the language of teaching and learning is French, in Germany it is German in Japan it is Japanese and in China it is Chinese. Therefore, it is possible for every language to be developed.

The Southern Sotho language is uncompromisingly expected to be the language of learning within the province. In Gauteng Province, the first respondent emphasizes that there is no monolingual individual in the entire province. All languages that are endorsed by the Constitution of the country are utilized together along with the European, Asiatic and many languages from the north of Southern Africa. Gauteng is the linguistic hub of the country, where multilingualism and multiculturalism are evident. Multicultural education is defined Lemmer and Squelch (1993:3) as follows:

*...the transferring of the recognition of our culturally pluralistic society into our education system. Furthermore, multicultural education is the operationalizing of the education system in such as fashion that it appropriately and in a rightful manner includes all racial and cultural groups. Therefore, multicultural education must be regarded as process which guides the total education enterprise.*

Most schools throughout the world reflect the multicultural communities that they serve and the diverse ways of responding to these realities. The second respondent points out that in Gauteng, the people talk about multilingualism as the sole communication endeavour. It helps the linguists to highlight linguistic change, history, differences, resemblances and contracts. Multicultural dictionaries are utilised in the province for

convenient communication and comprehension. Most people can be fluent in one or two Sotho languages and in Nguni languages and vice versa. However, language is not separated from cultural traits, configuration, customs and institutions. Therefore, it is imperative and unavoidable to use a number of indigenous languages for learning and teaching in Gauteng, due to the multicultural and multilingual set-up. In KwaZulu-Natal the first respondent mentioned that IsiZulu and English are two major languages for teaching and learning. They are taught in all schools from foundation phase to higher education level. They are also considered as home, first and second additional languages. They perform the function of a *lingua franca* at various public and private, traditional and modern institutions. They are compulsory for all people in the province, for communication, reading and writing. All government offices are using these languages for formal communication and writing.

The second respondent highlights that although these languages are used as constitutional mandate, there are diversities and especially in Northern KwaZulu-Natal most inhabitants speak Siswati at home, but learn and are taught isiZulu at schools. It is further noted that there is isiThonga as a dialect in the area, which is noted for its unique vocabulary, idioms and terminology. In the Southern KwaZulu-Natal, there are prevalent isiXhosa and Siswati dialects, but they are all mutual intelligible. More words, phrases and clauses are interchangeably used to bring about the development in terminology and techniques in language planning. Furthermore, Afrikaans is taught and learned at some schools and have a major influence on other languages. Terminologists' lists are rich and significant in the language sphere. However, the IsiZulu language is expected to be utilised as a dominating within KwaZulu-Natal.

In Limpopo Province, the first respondent asserts that the language implementation of the policy will increase the demand for service in interpreting, translation and editing of official African languages. The increased need for these services has implications for capacity-building and improving the quality of services rendered by the fraternity of professional language practitioners. She further mentioned that capacity building would, therefore, be required for translating and editing documents design, interpreting, lexicography, language planning, human language technologies and linguistic theory. She indicated that language technology would be used to facilitate collaboration between practitioners and stakeholders. Computer software such as word processing programmes, machine-assisted translation, spellcheckers, translation software and memories, and terminology management systems, should be compatible, to encourage the harmonisation of terminology and information between all language units and collaborators, such as Hansard and lexicography units.

The second respondent emphasises the policy matters on language diversity, equity and redress. Tshivenda, Northern Sotho and Xitsonga are the indigenous languages that are spoken main languages spoken in Limpopo Province. Other languages are isiNdebele, Afrikaans and English. However, it is only now that languages-in-education policy points out that schools have a democratic right to choose the language(s) that should serve as medium of instruction.

The underlying principle of Language-in-Education Policy (LIEP) of 1997 is to maintain the use of home language as the medium of instruction from the early years of learning, while providing access to an additional language. During pre-1994 era, the language-in- education

Xitsonga is spoken, taught and read in South Africa, Mozambique and Southern Zimbabwe. On the other hand, Tshivenda language dominates in Vhembe District, in Limpopo Province and is also taught in Zimbabwe. IsiNdebele is commonly found in the Waterberg District, but differs to that of Zimbabwe in official orthography and spelling rules. As a result, Northern Sotho, Xitsonga and Tshivenda languages are inevitably expected to be used for learning and teaching within the province. Mpumalanga is also regarded as a multilingual province according to the assertions of our first linguistic respondents. For example, the Ehlanzeni Region is dominated by Siswati language; Kangala Region is noted for its isiNdebele and Northern Sotho, while Gert Sibande shares isiZulu and Southern Sotho. It is vital to highlight that the Highveld cosmos area towards Vaal River banks has Northern Sotho, Xitsonga and Tshivenda as well as IsiXhosa. The statement is supported by a school called Shapeve in the Govan Mbeki Municipality, which is an acronym: Sha – for Shangaan/BaTsonga, Pe – for Pedi/Northern Sotho Ve – for Tshivenda/BaVenda. The Northern part of Mpumalanga Province has Xitsonga and Northern Sotho languages, especially near Sabi and Bhalule Rivers.

The second respondent views Mpumalanga, where the sun rises, as a hub of languages, especially the broad classification; namely, Nguni – Siswati, IsiNdebele, IsiZulu and IsiXhosa. Sotho – Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho and Setswana or Western Sotho.

The two broad classifications are differentiated from one another because of their historical backgrounds, cultural and traditional practices. Their languages are noted by disjunctive and conjunctive writings, as well as tonal features. The Siswati language shares similar orthography in two countries; South Africa and Kingdom of Eswatini. All major research publications, such as bibles and dictionaries, are reviewed by the king before they are distributed for consumptions.

IsiNdebele language is of Manala and Ndzundza, with a long and rich historical background of heroism traditions and cultural practices. The language is taught, read and spoken in South Africa and Zimbabwe, especially in Matabeleland. Both countries share history and culture, but not its orthography and spelling rules. Afrikaans had an impact on all the languages in Mpumalanga Province from colonial era to contemporary period. In addition, Xitsonga shares cultural norms and values in South Africa and Mozambique, but differs in linguistic modalities, such as disjunctive and conjunctive orthographies. Siswati and isiNdebele are looking forward to attain the status of learning and teaching within the province. In Northern Cape, we find the following languages: IsiXhosa, Setswana, English and Afrikaans. The latter two languages enjoying the status of media of instruction. It is the biggest province in size but with a small population.

Cluver (1992: 34) observes that, in Peru, the use of Spanish has changed the status of the indigenous Quechua to that of a lower language and a vehicle of oppression. Cluver (1992: 34) further mentions that the introduction of a language of wider communication as medium of instruction lowers the status of the indigenous languages. On the other hand, the introduction of Mother-Tongue Policy (MTP) in South Africa gives no direction to science, technology, politics and economy. The second respondent expressed her concern that we need to this terminology: high – status languages and low – status languages'. She insisted that language is one of the components of culture; therefore, it is a significant aspect in multicultural education.

Multicultural education is also a reform movement, which involves changes in the total educational environment. It is not limited to curriculum changes. In addition, multicultural education is a process whose goals are always for realization. Therefore, educational equality is IsiXhosa and Setswana are two major languages that need to be inevitably considered for learning.

According to the first respondent, North West province is dominated by Setswana, Afrikaans and English languages. Setswana language is shared by both South Africa and Botswana. It is one of the oldest Sotho languages that has a deep historical background and attractive cultural practices. He added that he hoped the province afforded the opportunity to utilize Setswana as one of the media of instructions in schools. It can be said that a body like PanSALB, which is charged with protecting and promoting people's linguistic rights, is doing its best. However, Langa (2014) asserts that indigenous languages might be expecting different degrees of marginalisation, with some possibly getting a raw deal, but the fact is that they are all being marginalised. Although some black people may find this unacceptable, he believes that blacks are the architects of the destruction of their languages.

The second respondent expresses the notion that language is our primary means of exchanging messages. It allows us to think and review the past, and anticipate the future. It describes our experience of the society and transmits our culture. He reiterated the advocacy of Alexander (1992), that indigenous may be developed to the point that they become media of education, as it happened with Afrikaans. Alexander (ibid) cites the economy as the determining factor towards the promotion of a language, saying that:

*...we must promote and encourage the development of all the other languages spoken in this country. We have to find the resources to do this, whether it takes a century or only the next ten years. All these things determined by economics. We have to find the resources to develop this language as far as possible. We have to reach the point where if people want, we should be able to offer them at the Universities whatever subjects they wish to take in one or the other of the indigenous languages.*

He further illustrates that in other parts of the world, such as Germany, Japan and Denmark, everything is German, Japanese, and Danish, respectively. He argues, however, that this is because these countries, unlike South Africa, do not have a colonial past. Furthermore, these countries do not share the South Africa's linguistic diversity. The Western Cape Province uses three languages; namely, English, Afrikaans and IsiXhosa, as stipulated in the provincial language policy. However, the latter IsiXhosa is neglected due to the past inequality policies, which are contemporarily replaced to suit the current unity in diversity environment.

The second respondent reiterates the views of Heugh and Siegruhn (1995), in education theory relating to minority groups in South Africa. It advocates additive bilingualism as the only feasible model of language in

education as empowerment for the primary goal. An indigenous language should therefore share similar status with English. It is evident that a new plan for schools where all South African children would have access to regional languages; receive instruction in their home language; and no child denied access to an educational instruction on the grounds of race or language. IsiXhosa language should therefore be given the same status as English and Afrikaans within the province and be considered. In the preamble to the Department of Education (1997:1), it is stated that "both societal and individual multilingualism are the global norm today, especially the African continent." Although the department is aware of the benefits of using the mother tongue (or primary language) it still opted for a dual-medium immersion programme.

#### **IV. Mother-tongue-based education**

The question of mother-tongue education in South Africa remains a worrying one. It seems reasonable that learners should be able to receive education in their mother-tongue, if they so wish, but there are some very real difficulties in the implementation of the ideal of mother-tongue education. It has been found that bilingual learners perform better in their school education when the school effectively teaches the learner's home language and, where appropriate, develops literacy in that language (Cummins: 2001). Where the learners do not speak the language of instruction, authentic teaching and learning is a mystery. Such a situation largely account for the school ineffectiveness and low academic achievement experienced by learners. The effective use of the learners' first language or home language as the language of learning and teaching would be in line with the goals of education. Learning in one's own language holds various advantages for the learner, including increased access, improved learning outcomes and socio-cultural benefits.

Most researchers suggest that learners entering school are able to learn best through their mother-tongue, and that a first language, such as English, is more easily acquired if the learner already has a firm grasp of the home language. Indigenous languages are certainly able to function as media of communication: interpersonal conversation, descriptive, narrative and cultural practice. However, the standard written forms of the indigenous languages need to be developed to the point where they are able to carry academic discourse effectively and function as fully-fledged languages of learning and teaching.

#### **V. Exogenous and Endogenous motivation**

Exogenous motivation is political and socio-cultural in nature. For example, to build racial understanding and harmony, to construct a nation whilst being tolerant of the diversity of our society and to promote linguistic access and equity. Endogenous motivation is considered to be linguistic and pedagogic in nature. It encourages the internal and structural development of the language. This is of essence if these languages have to fulfil the official status placed on them to be equitably with the other highly developed and dominant languages, such as English and Afrikaans. It is acknowledged that although the previous system of education helped to facilitate the structural development of indigenous languages, this was done within the confines of the apartheid system (Maseko 2008: 10 -11).

Each tertiary institution in South Africa should identify an indigenous language of choice for initial development as a medium of instruction. The visibility of the indigenous languages could assist in all sector of the country. In addition, there should be a well-co-ordinated, long-range national plan that will work at national, provincial and local levels to provide adequate resources and support for indigenous languages. The success of such well-co-ordinated plans requires systemic underpinning by the entire schooling system and the enhanced public and social use of indigenous languages in the daily lives of the country. Where the language of choice is a particular regionally dominant language, the Higher Education Institutions in that region should utilise a regional approach (Pandor, 2006).

The state of indigenous languages has been of concern in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As result, there is a need to convert the policies from being sentimental pieces of legislation to seeing them work practically in a sphere where the empowered languages have been less dominant. Bamgbose (2002) and Alexander (2005) argue that languages that are not visible in the intellectual domains, especially in print form, are viewed negatively by language users. Thus, the marginalization of indigenous language had a negative effect on the cultural, educational, economic and political domains of the African continent (Bamgbose 2002: 3).

Unless meaningful and deliberate intervention is done, with the purpose of stepping up the process of their intellectualisation within the context of the national development initiatives, the use of the official indigenous languages will continue to be sentimental as languages of socio-cultural value. Language intellectualisation is a significant facet of language which has acquired a larger and expanded range of functions in their societies. All Indigenous Language Departments and Schools of Languages should be instrumental in promoting the use of previously marginalised languages. It is collective responsibility which should have a buy-in from the highest leadership. Language issue is a national responsibility rather than the responsibility of a single Indigenous Languages Department or a School of Languages. The more stakeholders are involved, the more likely it will be included in the language policy of the institutions.



## VI. Conclusion

It should also be mentioned that there are scholars who strongly believe that language policy formulations should be driven by the active participation of the ordinary people who are users of the language. This is also of essence if one has to ensure their success. What is in the policy formulations should be influenced by the intervention of the people from the bottom, to be completely connected to the real communicative needs and practices of users of the language. The education systems and institutions, as well as learning, need to develop sensible strategies for the integration of learning and teaching of indigenous languages. Language dissemination is the significant component of language implementation that the government structures can use in integrating indigenous languages at all levels. At the same time, it leads to language development. Indigenous languages should be used alongside other dissemination of African Languages of tuition. This is supported strongly by views that language develops as it is used. Languages such as a Chinese, Japanese and Spanish managed to be languages of learning and teaching through untiring efforts, positive attitudes, persistence and commitment from their speakers. Therefore, it is possible for other South African indigenous languages to follow suit.

## VII. Recommendations

It is recommended that language development should be left to the spontaneous creativity of its speakers' language practitioners to decide and determine the modalities of language development. The existing literary products as a basis for further development of indigenous languages needs to be revisited. There should be a shift of the mind-set that regards indigenous languages as incapable of conducting and sustaining sophisticated discourse associated with academia, science, commerce and technology. Repositioning indigenous languages at the centre of Africa's pool of tools for communication, instead of indigenous languages occupying the periphery, as is the case at present. Furthermore, the language bodies, committees, lexicographical translations and interpretation units need to work hard to coin words, translate documents, adapt and interpret texts for the development of languages. Finally, each indigenous language is expected to have the most vocabulary and terminology for specific subjects from the foundation phase to the higher education and training levels.

## REFERENCES

- [1.] Alexander, N. 1992. *Education and the Struggle for National Liberation of South Africa*. Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers.
- [2.] Alexander, N. 2005. *The intellectualization of African languages: The African Academy of Languages and the Implementation of the Languages Plan of Action for Africa*. Cape Town: PRAESA
- [3.] Bamgbose, A. 1991. *Language and the Nation: The Language Question in the Sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburg: University Press.
- [4.] Bamgbose, A. 2002. *Language and Exclusion: The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa*. Hamburg: LIT – Verlag.
- [5.] Cummins, J (2001). *Empowering Minority Students*. Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- [6.] Cluver, J.1992. *Language Problems and Language Planning*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company.
- [7.] Department of Education. 1997. *Language in Education policy. (LiEP) Government Gazette Vol. 443 no 18546. 19 December*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- [8.] Heugh, K and Siegruhn, A. 1995. *Towards Implementing Multilingual Education in South Africa. In Young D (ed) Language; Planning and Medium in Education. Southern African Applied Linguistic Association*. Cape Town. The Education Unit and SAALA.
- [9.] Langa, M. 2014. *Let Speak the Language We Dream*. Mail and Guardian: 17 October 2014.
- [10.] Lemmer, E. and Squelch, J. 1993. *Multicultural Education: Teachers' Manual*. Halfway House: Southern Book Publishers.
- [11.] Maseko, P. 2008. *Vocational Language of Learning and How It Relates to Language Policy Issues*. Grahamstown: Unpublished MA Dissertation Rhodes University.
- [12.] Mutasa, D.E. 2006. *African Languages in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Main Challenges the Main Challenges*. Pretoria: Simba Guru Publishers.
- [13.] Ndlovu, E. 2013. *Mother Tongue Education in Official Minority Languages of Zimbabwe: A Language Management Critique*. Bloemfontein: University of Free State.
- [14.] Ngugi wa Thiongo. 1981. *Writers in Politics*. London: Heinemann.
- [15.] Pandor, N. 2006. *Language Issues and Challenges. Speaking Khoe, South African Minister of Education*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- [16.] Prah, K.K. 2007. *Challenges to the Promotion of Indigenous Languages in South Africa. Review Commissioned by the Foundation for Human Rights in South Africa, October – November 2006*. Submitted in January 2007.

- [17.] Republic of South Africa. (1996). *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act No. 108 of 1996)*. Pretoria: Government Publishers.