Develop indigenous languages

Discarding Afrikaans as the language of the oppressor is misplaced as its use is widespread in the country among a variety of people.

Analysis

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WHAT does it mean to be in conversation with others and getting to know them well? In part, the answer lies in wanting to know their culture and their language without which all forms of conversations will tend to limp and be given to flippancy.

Three weeks ago the University of the Free State took a decision to banish Afrikaans from all its campuses and in doing so appeared to buckle under the students’ demands to adopt English as the medium of instruction, consequently, to paraphrase the words of Leon Trotsky, relegate Afrikaans to the ash heap of history.

The university council, in adopting this language policy argued, among others, the policy would take effect in 2017 and that henceforth all first year students would be taught in English.

The same language struggle to do away with Afrikaans had been raging at the Stellenbosch University, the University of Pretoria and the North-West University, previously known as Potchefstroom University.

What causes students to show antipathy towards Afrikaans? In part, the rebellion against the language is historical and may largely relate to 46 years of subjugation and oppression of blacks since 1948 until the onset of democracy in South Africa in 1994.

The Afrikaans-led National Party government had overtly oppressed and mistreated black people, creating unbearable discriminatory laws that saw even mild-mannered and Christian leaders like the ANC’s Oliver Tambo resorting to the promotion of an armed struggle and guerrilla tactics in reply to the atrocities of injustice heaped on his people.

During the long years of Afrikaans oppression and domination that lasted from 1948 until 1994 when the democratically elected government of the ANC ascended to power, blacks began to associate the Afrikaans language with the oppressors as represented by the National Party.

In the 1960s and the 1970s as a form of indirect control the apartheid government instituted a policy of forcing down the throat of Afrikan pupils Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. Subjects such as mathematics, physical science, history and geography, were in most schools taken through the medium of Afrikaans. In large part, the Soweto 1976 student uprisings were in response to the Afrikaans language policy and its unilateral imposition on the African child.

Today, the turmoil continues and has taken a different form, and manifests itself in the unrest and protests that have rocked institutions of higher learning.

The students demand all sorts of things – that statues that represent the colonial past be removed from universities and other public spaces, that the exorbitant fees charged by the universities be scrapped, that the Minister of Higher Education act swiftly to address their demands and that the language of the oppressors be done away with, among others.

But should students who wish to receive instructions in Afrikaans in a constitutional democracy be barred from exercising their right to do so? Why should in a democracy Afrikaans be singled out as the language of the oppressor when millions of South Africans are not white use it as their first language?

According to statistics, Afrikaans is spoken by about 7 million people as a first language, and 11 million as a second language. It is the third most widely spoken language in the country and widely spoken and understood as a second or third language by several million more South Africans.

In the western half of the country – the provinces of Northern Cape and Western Cape – Afrikaans is the first language used by about 76% of coloured South Africans. About 60% of whites use the language.

In other parts of Southern Africa, Afrikaans is spoken by more than 20 000 people in Botswana and 90 000 in Namibia. A sizeable number of Zimbabweans, Zambians and Lesotho nationals use Afrikaans as a language of commerce and business.

As figures indicate, the language is widespread and widely dispersed in southern Africa. The view that it is the language of the oppressors, given these factors, may simply be misplaced, and may even lack validity.

The country’s historical factors to do with political hegemony of injustice underpinned by the discriminatory apartheid policies have unjustly contributed to the negative perceptions around the language.

But to suggest that the English language, the language of the British colonisers, who first came into contact with the indigenous people in 1795, later in 1806 and then through the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, should be seen as less blameworthy for the ills of injustice and colonisation is to misunderstand historical events of colonisation.

The oppression and exclusion of blacks in political and economic affairs started way back before the arrival of Jan van Riebeek in 1652.

Various Western and colonial powers must shoulder the blame for dispossession and various forms of injustice that became the lot of black people. It would historically be inaccurate to place all the blame for colonisation and exclusion and dispossession squarely on the lap of the Afrikaners. The English must also take a fair share of culpability.

The council of the UFS rather than banning Afrikaans, should engage in a more nuanced programme of developing African languages.

Key points

- What does it mean to be in conversation with others and getting to know them well?
- In part, the answer lies in wanting to know their culture and their language without which all forms of conversations will tend to limp and be given to flippancy.
- Three weeks ago the University of Free State took the decision to banish Afrikaans from across all its campuses and in doing so appeared to buckle under the students’ demands to adopt English.
- The university council, in adopting this language policy, argued, among others, the policy would take effect in 2017 and that henceforth all first year students would be taught in English.
- What causes students to show antipathy towards Afrikaans? In part, the rebellion against the language is historical and may largely relate to 46 years of subjugation and oppression of blacks since 1948 until the onset of democracy in South Africa in 1994.

HISTORICALLY HATED: The rebellion against Afrikaans is historical and may largely relate to 46 years of subjugation and oppression of blacks since 1948 until the onset of democracy in South Africa in 1994.