

Multilingual education brings people together

Your mother tongue is the vital platform that enables you to learn the languages of other nations

YESTERDAY we joined the rest of the world in celebrating International Mother Tongue Day.

It is a pretty significant event – unlike those pesky reminders on the social media for anything from Friend's Day, Plum-Pudding and Single Awareness Day to National Cabbage Day. Everyone has a mother tongue, and therefore it should be celebrated by all.

The term “mother tongue” originated in France during the French Revolution. Similarly, cultures like the Tamil also have this notion captured in the word “tamir taay” (Tamil as mother). Tamil as mother is projected as being pure, quasi-divine and one that nourishes with her milk and must be protected at all costs. This is why mother tongue speakers feel strongly about their languages.

These languages have deep educational, cultural and sentimental value.

Mother tongues provide the basis for learning other languages and learning through other languages. A child with a good foundation in his or her mother tongue develops the underlying proficiency and transfer skills to learn, and learn through the medium of an additional language. Children who have a good grounding in their mother tongue normally do well at school. Ideally, pupils should have their first six years of schooling in their mother tongue to build up a sound foundation that will facilitate learning and academic success.

Languages have deep cultural value. A language like Arabic, for example, is spoken in the same way that it was 5 000 years ago.

There is also strict control over which words are allowed into the language. For example, you are unlikely to encounter the word bikini in Arabic, because it is a culturally-loaded word that portrays women and their bodies in a particular way – a way that Muslims would find particularly offensive.

Afrikaans is another example of a language

Analysis

JOHN RUITERS

that has deep cultural and sentimental value. Sociologists say that this is one of the few languages in the world where its speakers have built a monument in its honour.

Beyond culture, British linguist David Crystal offers two compelling quotes that I will use to frame the rest of this piece. The first is: “All languages are beautiful”.

All languages have a music and a rhythm, an idiom, an unique grammar and words and phrases that speak to this beauty. Take for example, the simple phrase “to cry crocodile tears”, in Afrikaans the idiom reads “hy huil asof sy blaas agter sy oë sit” (he cries as if his bladder sits behind his eyes) or when describing fear “jy kon hoor hoe klap sy derms teen mekaar” (you could hear his intestines smack against each other).

Spanish has a very compelling idiom for the line “be careful what you say”. It translates to “El pez muere por su boca”, or the fish dies because of its mouth! Locally, in the Xhosa culture those beautiful three words “I love you”, translate to “Ndiyakuthanda”. This is the type of beauty Crystal refers to in his quote.

Crystal's second quote is: “I don't know what the most spoken language in 2050 will be, but I know the world will be multilingual”.

This prediction is a no-brainer as the 21st century has shown how through migration, the notion of a nation state has changed considerably. Immigrants have flooded Europe due to wars and conflict, and virtually every country and every community in the world is diverse.

Diverse communities represent diverse cultures and languages. These multilingual communities show certain characteristics that

allow them to interact and live together in harmony. One characteristic is that no language is viewed as being superior to the other.

This has the effect of reducing power relationships among its speakers, and creating an environment conducive to risk-taking with different languages, where the interactions allow for languages to be used interchangeably, and where these languages are viewed as communal assets, not as tools of difference. Languages and the way they are used draw us closer together. There are other characteristics, like the multicultural nature of the group, the emergence of positive values – like respect for and valuing cultural and other differences – and the reduction of bias and discrimination.

Though these processes are largely organic – or not – in communities, they can also be developed as a broader approach to education.

What I would like to propose here is a multilingual education. Multilingual education is a contested term that on the one hand refers to the learning of different languages, and in its more dynamic form refers to the use of multiple languages that are drawn on in purposeful ways in the classroom. In its dynamic form, it emphasises the importance of languages as assets, simulates the practices of the multilingual community and encourages a cultural fluidity among its participants.

A multilingual education thus has immense value as a means of building tolerance for different languages and cultures. It should go a long way to reducing competition among languages and their speakers.

A multilingual education is also premised on the notion that languages are assets for learning, and its practices ensure that all languages are affirmed. It is an approach to education that ensures sustainability and shows that languages can bring people closer together. *John Ruiters is a lecturer in the department of curriculum studies at Stellenbosch University*