

The Language Struggle in the New South Africa

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In the context of threatened languages in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa may be seen both as one of the worst-hit victims of the linguistic genocide of colonialism, and as enjoying a privileged position, due to its progressive new language policy. When Europeans first landed, it has been estimated that several hundred indigenous languages were spoken in the region. Today, alongside English and Afrikaans, the only official languages during colonialism and apartheid, there are now nine African languages with that status. This paper will briefly account for the fate of the original languages, and outline the trajectories of the Bantu languages now endowed with official status. There is a cursory comparison of the terms of the new language policy as laid down in the 1996 Constitution with those of the interim constitution of 1993. Other languages of South Africa are mentioned, including urban creoles, in a society where multilingualism prevails. The main thrust of the paper will concern social, political and economic issues impinging on implementation of the language policy in a country where the wealth gap is even greater now than in the apartheid era, and where the legacy of separate communities still lingers. The majority of the population perceiving English as the language of opportunity, the demand for English as the first language of instruction far outstrips the country's capacity in terms of trained English-speaking teachers. The axiom that mother-tongue education produces the best results means that the high drop-out rate among school-goers has been partly blamed on this vexed question. The paper foregrounds the efforts of the province of Western Cape to instigate a programme of trilingual education. It also examines how the indigenous languages are faring on two more major axes of language development – modernization and literary production.

Data sources: the working papers of PRAESA (Project for Alternative Education in South Africa) dir. Dr.NevilleAlexander, University of Cape Town; research by other African and South African linguists, sociolinguists and educationalists; and the *Linguistic Atlas of South Africa: Language in Space and Time* (ed. I.J. & J.H. Van Der Merwe, University of Stellenbosch Sun Press, 2006).