Reclaiming indigenous languages for posterity

Two pieces of legislation and one policy framework inform the language policy in South Africa: Constitution of South Africa (1996); SA Languages Bill (2000); National Language Policy Framework (2003). All provide visions for a multilingual landscape in post-apartheid South Africa and aim at promoting and advancing linguistic and cultural diversity, because indigenous languages are closely tied to the richness of human diversity and indigenous knowledge (Tuhus-Dubrow 2002).

## Reality in conflict with policy intention

Progress in the development of South African indigenous languages has lagged behind since the 1950s, after a reasonable start compared to most other indigenous languages on the continent. However, the progress of standardisation, codification, regularisation and modernisation of the indigenous languages remains slow and this has severely impaired the development of these languages, particularly in the contemporary context (Alexander 2001; Finlayson & Madiba 2002; Foley 2002; Janks 2010; Mesthrie 2008).

Data from the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) show a negative enrolment growth for the discipline of languages, linguistics and literature, in contrast to the substantial growth of total student enrolment for all disciplines in post-apartheid South Africa. In fact, this is the only discipline, among all 22 major disciplines identified by HEMIS, in which enrolment has declined at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Pillay & Yu 2010).

Figure 1 (using HEMIS data) shows the enrolment trend for studying South African official languages as a major at undergraduate level by three groups: English, Afrikaans and all indigenous languages. The figure illustrates a substantial fall in enrolment for indigenous languages. It also shows that the combined enrolment for all nine indigenous languages amounts to a diminutive numerical figure: in 2009, it reduced to less than that of one single language subject – Afrikaans.

Figure 1: Undergraduate enrolment in Afrikaans, English and all indigenous languages as a major at all SA higher education institutions
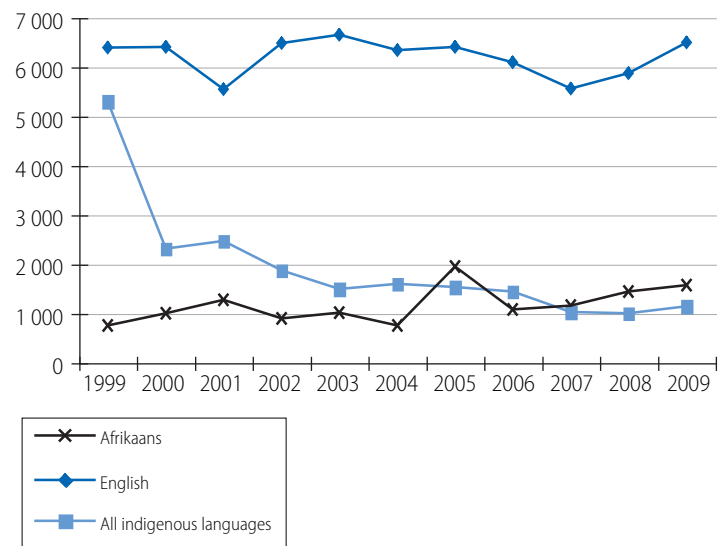
Using the graduation/enrolment ratio as an indication for throughput rate, Figure 2 shows that the throughput rate for all South African official languages has worsened over the years, with fewer students studying languages, and even fewer graduating. Although the throughput rate for the indigenous languages seems to have been better overall than that for Afrikaans and English, its deteriorating trend is no real comfort.

Figure 2: Undergraduate graduation/enrolment ratio for Afrikaans, English and all indigenous languages at all South African higher education institutions
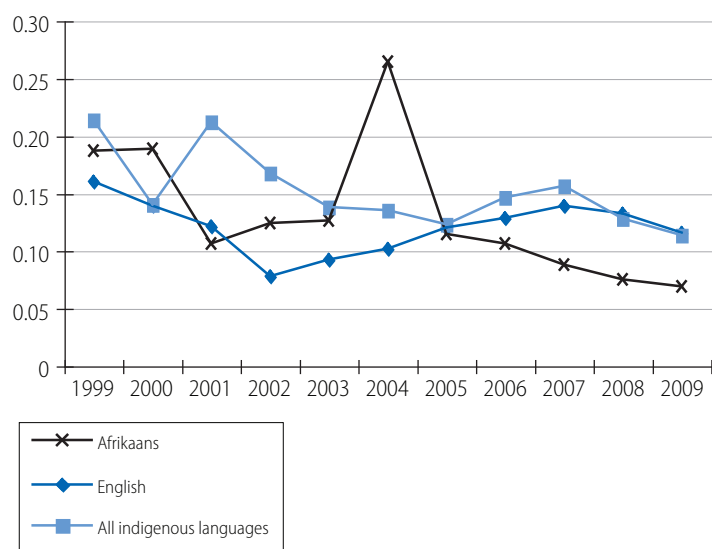
The sharp numerical decline in language major graduates, particularly for indigenous languages, could further hinder the preservation and cultivation of the human capacity needed to develop these languages. It could also cause a vicious circle: with fewer university graduates who are qualified to teach these language subjects at schools or to train language teachers, there would be fewer students able to take these subjects at school level and to go on to major in languages in universities. This scenario is in direct conflict with the vision provided in the language policies of South Africa.

Why are indigenous languages under-studied?

• Perceived low value of indigenous languages at home: Many African parents prefer English-medium schools over schools that provide mother-tongue instruction (Barkhuizen 2002; Webb 1994; Webb 1995). This perceived message could have obscured undergraduate students' interest in studying indigenous languages.

• Lack of reading culture among many African communities: The result of this has been small and often unsustainable markets for books or other texts written in indigenous languages and few potential employment opportunities for indigenous language major graduates.

• Increasing career alternatives: HEMIS racial disaggregated data show that African students account for the vast majority of the indigenous languages enrolment (Yu & Pillay 2011). The decline of the discipline is to a large extent a result of the 'flight' of African students. This loss of African enrolment could represent an 'automatic' correction to the apartheid era in which African students had little effective choice and were forced into the vernaculars during

apartheid. However, the decline of the discipline remains a grave concern.

• Increasing consumerism and market ideology in the higher education (HE) arena, coupled with the perceived low demand of language majors in the current labour market: There is an overall pessimistic view of future demand and employment opportunities for humanities majors from both the university leadership and students (Maharasoa & Hay 2001; Marks 2000).

• Unintended consequence of government-driven policies that promote science and technology: There is a perception that better African students are now directed towards natural science faculties, and unintentionally away from humanities disciplines such as languages (Maharasoa & Hay 2001; Marks 2000).

• Unfavourable conditions within the humanities faculties: There is a lack of adequate channels linking external bursary funders and students of humanities majors (Maharasoa & Hay 2001) as well as a lack of awareness and of deliberate marketing efforts from humanities faculties (Pillay, Yu & Esakov 2009).

• Limited support to language faculties (Maharasoa & Hay 2001): Indigenous languages are not listed as scarce skill subjects by either the Department of Labour or the National Research Foundation. According to the national research and development survey, the higher education sector's research and development (R&D) spending on language as a percentage of spending on humanities continued to decline from 34.44% in 2002 to 17.9% in 2007/2008, despite the fact that language constitutes one of the core disciplines in the humanities. R&D spending on language relative to spending on social science and humanities as a whole continues to decline too and is overall diminutive (Table 1).

Table 1: Spending on language discipline in HE as a percentage of total spending on social science and humanities

2002	2003/ 2004	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007	2007/ 2008
6.49	4.64	5.53	4.87	4.71	3.93

How to reinvigorate the indigenous languages

Minister Nzimande's recommendation to make one African language compulsory at HE level for non-speakers is an encouraging gesture to further promote indigenous languages in South Africa. In addition, the following could be considered to reinvigorate these languages:

• Promote a wider use of indigenous languages in political/ social spheres to elevate their perceived status.

• Promote reading/writing contests at school level to

encourage a stronger reading/writing culture among the indigenous language communities, to cultivate early exposure to and interest in these languages and to encourage potential markets for products in indigenous languages.

- Provide incentives to authors and publishers to produce the following in indigenous languages to promote their wider usage: literary works such as novels, drama and poetry; textbooks and other teaching resources; popular magazines, journals and newspapers; dictionaries and other works such as glossaries to standardise terminology; other electronic written material.

- Provide support to the language discipline and inject funds into language faculties:

  - Provide favourable bursary schemes for students who major in indigenous languages.
  - Create a chair of linguistics and provide research funds for indigenous language topics.
  - List indigenous languages as a scarce skill subject.
  - Facilitate opportunities to participate in international exchanges and dialogue on indigenous language, culture and knowledge.
  - Encourage language faculties to establish direct communication with prospective employers.
  - Assist language faculties in their marketing efforts.

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