

'Linguicism alive and thriving'

By THEO DU PLESSIS

Shift away from bilingual approach

A RECENT Unisa linguistics department conference, on teaching translators and interpreters, signalled a shift away from the current bilingual (Afrikaans/English) practice to a more multilingual practice where African languages are more prominent.

One of the important conclusions of the conference was that this requires a major shift in training programmes and that existing training agencies cannot accommodate these new needs.

To address these new demands the progressive language workers, practitioners and academics at the conference established a preliminary trainers' forum. Its first objective is to organise a national training convention, to be held during June and July, to work out a future training strategy.

International experts who presented papers on training included Prof Albrecht Nuebert (Leipzig University), Prof Peter Newmark (University of Surrey) and Mr Robin Trew (University of Westminster). Also present was Mr Albie Sachs of the ANC's constitutional committee who presented a brief orientation talk.

Translator/interpreter experts from southern Africa attended, as well as academics from all the major tertiary institutions in South Africa that offer training, language practitioners and language workers from various backgrounds. This combination of participants created an interesting blend of practice and theory.

The two most important and immediate needs identified were training for community translators and interpreters and court interpreters.

An appeal was made for more tertiary institutions to become involved in such training programmes. It became clear that non-governmental organisations do not have the same status as tertiary institutions and should not carry the burden of training. It was felt that tertiary institutions should accommodate community training needs. The court interpreter training programme jointly implemented by the Natal Technical College, Natal Technikon and the University of Natal offers a worthwhile training model.

Participants emphasised the need for an overall shift in focus from training Afrikaans/English translators and interpreters to African language translators and interpreters.

The most notable aspect of the conference was the widening gap between the actual language needs of marginalised communities and attempts to address the perceived needs of such communities by the current translator/interpreter fraternity. Some delegates, apparently for the first time, were confronted with the idea that Afrikaans and/or English are no longer regarded as the only languages of the nation and some more conservative participants struggled with the prospect of a more multilingual future where African languages will feature prominently.

If one cannot speak 'proper' English in South Africa one cannot opt for quality education, find good employment, participate in decision-making, negotiate one's future, be kept posted on latest developments and so on. In fact, without English one's hopes for a bright future are dim. Perhaps these are just the perceptions of the many South Africans that continually demand 'access to English', but they do in fact reflect the reality in terms of our language situation.

The quest for English has resulted in the fast growing English language industry in South Africa: there are literally hundreds of English language programmes, English literacy programmes (apparently literacy in one's own language does not count), English enrichment programmes and English cultural programmes. They all seem to have one common goal, namely to teach English to as many South Africans in the quickest time possible. The two architects of anglicisation, Lord Somerset and Milner, would not have been able to improve on these efforts. In fact, it has now become politically kosher to support such programmes rather than anything that doesn't smell or look English.

A new form of 'linguicism' is thus replacing that of the apartheid regime which involved Afrikaans.

'Linguicism' has contributed significantly to the failure of democracy throughout our continent. As it always results in the unequal distribution of power and resources (favouring only those that know the dominant language - English or French), it becomes the very basis for non-democratic rule.

It has therefore become vital for language workers dedicated to democracy to consider strategies that will counter the effects of English 'linguicism'. It is unrealistic to believe that English will succeed in South Africa where it has failed elsewhere in Africa together with French.

The Language Facilitation Programme (LFP) was initiated during 1992 by Idasa and the University of the Orange Free State to develop programmes that will enhance democratisation. Idasa raised funds to finance the establishment of such a project in the university's linguistics department and Dr Theo du Plessis was contracted as consultant for the project. He now coordinates the programme.

One of the first priorities of the LFP is to establish a mobile language facilitation unit that involves simultaneous interpreting apparatus and a network of trained interpreters.

This unit will be available to facilitate multilingual meetings in the region. Negotiations regarding the establishment of such a unit are still under way but will hopefully succeed.

During the past year, the LFP assisted Idasa on four occasions in organising language facilitation services and the results on these occasions were encouraging.

The results of a LFP survey on the need for language facilitation in the region, involving the major actors in the region, confirm that it is not in the interest of either the outgoing or incoming ruling elite to erode the hegemony of English (and, in the Vrystaat, Afrikaans). Respondents were thus relatively ambivalent in their attitudes regarding the need for language facilitation. However, the survey does indicate an awareness of the complexity of our language situation, a sensitivity towards language rights and an underlying willingness to address language problems in a meaningful way.

Overall, the findings underline the need for the envisaged training programme at the UOFS.

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