

# LANGUAGES: ANOTHER VIEW

By ALAN DOYLE

"In actual fact, languages did not develop by the destruction of existing languages and the creation of new ones, but by extending and perfecting the basic elements of existing languages; the transition of languages from one quality to another taking the form not of an explosion, not of the destruction at one blow of the old and the creation of a new, but by the gradual and prolonged accumulation of the elements of the new quality, of the new language structure, and the gradual dying away of the elements of the old quality."

**L**IBERATION has performed a real service by opening its columns to a discussion of the language question. To any oppressed nationality this is a matter of considerable importance — a fact which our leaders do not seem fully to have appreciated.

It is disappointing however that both contributors, thus far, have by-passed and overlooked the really dynamic and important aspect of this issue as a matter of practical politics.

"Dr. Nhlapo's approach to this question, his formulation and treatment of it, show a failure on his part to grasp the essentials of the situation. This failure emanates from his inability to appreciate the fundamental fact that the language problem is, on both the national and international level, a part of the social question, which is the central problem of our day." is the perfectly correct comments of Mr. Raboroko. Later in his article ("Liberation," September, 1953) he writes:

"The language problem in Africa can only be seen properly as one aspect of our struggle for emancipation from white imperialism."

Mr. Raboroko is well aware of the mistaken approach of Dr. Nhlapo. It is a pity, therefore, that instead of dealing with the implications of these correct statements, he falls into the same error as Dr. Nhlapo and occupies himself with idealistic speculations about a future "common language" for Africa. In speculating about what language may be adopted one day in a free Africa, he overlooks the very real and major language question which today, immediately, faces all the people of unfree Africa as we know it.

That question, in a nutshell, is the blatant suppression of the mother-tongue of the people throughout our continent. This characteristic feature of imperialism is not the least of the burdens which Africa has to bear. It goes without saying that without the winning of their language rights by the people, emancipation from colonialism is unthinkable.

Mr. Raboroko confuses the proper and progressive demand for the rights and status of the mother-language with "tribalism." This profoundly mistaken attitude lies at the roots of his incorrect approach. It is not "tribalism" but a universally democratic hu-

manism that leads us to demand for Zulu and Sesotho, Xhosa and Setswana, Shangaan and Tshivenda, the same status, legally, educationally and in every other way, that are at present enjoyed exclusively by English and Afrikaans in the Union.

We may share his desire for the ultimate merging of these local languages into an all-African and indeed ultimately a world wide means of communication. But we shall fail utterly in an understanding of the basically dialectical processes of history unless we see that such merging is impossible except through the full and free development of the mother-languages of all peoples. Only after the removal of all artificial barriers to the development of present languages can we hope to attain the voluntary union of languages which the future holds.

To the African, who is made a "foreigner" in his own country by the fact that government commerce, industry, education, court proceedings, public information (the press, promulgation of laws, the radio) etc., are all conducted and transacted in languages other than his own, the language question appears in a very different light to that in which it appears to Dr. Nhlapo and Mr. Raboroko. It means that he has to battle in a strange tongue, at work and in every sphere of his life. His boss swears at him in English, the policeman in Afrikaans, because he cannot understand their languages. His children at school have to battle with textbooks on difficult subjects in languages other than his own. It is true that in South African society, the basic handicap of an African is his skin and other racial characteristics. But even if every "colour-bar" in the land were lifted tomorrow, the African would still labour under a tremendous handicap if his language were subject to an unequal status.

Pride in and love for one's mother tongue is common to all self-respecting people. It is bitterly painful to every African patriot to see how our languages are despised by the oppressor, and even, alas, by our own "intellectuals." This is a mark of their isolation from their own people. It must be overcome if our educated African young men and women are to be of use in the struggle of the people for emancipation. They must learn to think in "the vernacular" — to use the contemptuous expression of the "educated" Latinists of the middle ages referring to the dialects of the common people.. Our politicians must demand the people's rights to use their mother Xhosa, Setswana, Zulu etc., in all walks and fields of life. Our poets and writers must glorify and enrich our languages.

Dr. Nhlapo and even Mr. Raboroko, their eyes fixed on some distant goal, are blind to the crying problem before their noses. This blindness, however, is merely a reflection of the failure of the African National Congress itself to pay proper attention to this essential feature of a national movement.

There are reasons which explain, but do not excuse. this