

# TO TALK LANGUAGE IS TO TALK POLITICS

Department of English, Johannesburg College of Education.

This article cannot purport to be a full discussion of so blunt an assertion, but it is an opportunity to describe what is hoped will emerge from the English Academy's Silver Jubilee Conference in September this year.

The organizers of this conference — the theme of which is English language and literature in South African society over the last twenty-five years — are aware of two recent conferences which, for different reasons, are significant to their present plans.

The first, is the national conference of 1974, 'English-speaking South Africa Today', which addressed the identity of English speaking South Africans. Among the published conference papers of the eminent speakers who addressed the conference on a wide variety of issues, is the contribution of a single Black person, Siphso Sepamla, who at the very end of a three-day conference, introduced and read his poems. Sepamla remarked at the time that

*I think it is unfortunate that every time the White man arranges things, he always thinks of the Black man as a sort of afterthought. (1)*

As this makes clear, the conference organized then by the 1820 Foundation was concerned only about the interests of White English-speaking South Africans.

It is highly unlikely that such a conference would be organized today. Although insular attitudes are still manifest in many areas in South African society, only the most wilful of groupings — such as racially exclusive teacher associations, cultural organizations sub-serving particular ethnic or ideological interests, government-sponsored policy making gatherings, and obsolescent business banquets — are likely to adopt so crass a stance towards South African society. Multiracialism is now a vogue and a necessity, and gatherings of South Africans are increasingly seeking a 'representative' quality and nature. This in itself, however, is not nearly enough.

It is interesting to note the observations of Lusiba Ntloko, general secretary of the National Forum, in his letter to the *Weekly Mail* when he points out that the main issues for the NF are:

*the class struggle, independent working class organization, the role of liberals (whites and black) and democracy. The constituents of the National Forum have no problem with the phrase 'nonracialism' if it signifies genuine non-racialism and not multiracialism. (2)*

For anyone to suggest that the contemporary multiracialism of current fashionable practice, or the nonracialism of the National Forum, as examples, are indicative of a shedding of the effects of three centuries of ideology currently known as apartheid, would be absurd.

## EVIL

Any conference or gathering organised today cannot but reflect in its every aspect the ravages of the evil which riddles all facets of South African life. This has to be acknowledged at every level of any conference's conception and organization. Furthermore, a conference such as the one being planned by the English Academy needs to make a number of specific provisions to expose and to counter the insidious presences of apartheid.

In the first instance, a model is offered by the degree to which the Soweto Parents' Crisis Committee and, more recently, the National Education Crisis Committee have sought to consult with parents, teachers, students, community organizations, churches, youth groups and mass political movements. This essentially democratic and consultative process is in absolute opposition to the main features of the hierarchical and autocratic bases which apartheid has consolidated in South Africa.

A second concern must be a primary interest in those groups and organizations which have a concern with English in South Africa but which also have as a fundamental principle a commitment to democratic and non-racial practices. The most 'representative' of conferences which is dominated by the powerful poise of monopoly-capital representatives; by the forcefulness of professional organizers (of teachers, workers, sports people and the like); or by the public relations operators in the media, government departments, industry and the church will not reflect with any degree of adequacy what the truth of the present situation is.

## DECISION

And this raises the complex question of experts and intellectuals in a conference of this kind. A decision was endorsed by the Academy's executive not to invite 'overseas experts' to offer papers at the Silver Jubilee Conference. Such a decision did not spring from an aggressive insularity or from a desire to evade the issue of cultural boycotts. In the first instance, the conference is intended to be as participatory as possible for all who attend. Few formal papers will be delivered. Instead, discussion groups will be led by two or three people who have an informed grasp of the significant features of the topic, and those who are part of the group will have the opportunity to express their views and concerns. Thus the thrust of the conference will be upon the quality of the experience gained in exchanges which the conference makes possible, rather than upon the collection and compilation of a set of papers thereafter.

Focus on topics such as language and labour, language and education, language and theology, literature and society, English and people's education, the semantics of liberation and apartheid, and applied linguistics and South African needs, locates the interests of the expert and the intellectual after those of the community — the workers, the parents, the students, the citizens, the people.

### GABORONE CONFERENCE

The second notable gathering which has been influential in the conception of the Academy's conference, is the 'Culture and Resistance' conference in Gaborone in 1982. At this conference, the political significance of all cultural activities was stressed. The notion of artists, poets, musicians and teachers as 'cultural workers' was firmly endorsed there. The emphasis which the organisers of the Academy's conference have derived from this is that the political implications — as defined by the entire nexus of developments in our present society — of all cultural manifestations need overt attention. Language is obviously central to all social and communal activity and its political significance, especially at this stage of South Africa's history, cannot be over-estimated. Far from imposing a limited perspective on either language or politics by that assertion, both are extended and enhanced by it. The particular nature of the relation between language and politics in each instance needs most precise attention and analysis, but to ignore the role of either at any moment of consideration is to omit an essential dimension of the central concerns of people.

The Gaborone conference emphasised the need for art to be non-elitist. What this implies and what it can really mean to writers, scholars, educators, students and critics requires persistent scrutiny and consideration. Readership, education, the conditions for writers to work under, as well as the dissemination of plays, poetry, novels and critical articles are significant factors in the linguistic state of a society. This is not to reduce the central linguistic concerns to mere sociological measurement or description: the forces

which impinge upon a society's languages must be acknowledged and understood.

### ENGLISH

Although the Academy's conference will be concerned with English, it cannot do so as if English is the only significant language in South Africa. That would be to place the conference back in 1974. T.S. Eliot's observation that poetry should not stray too far from the ordinary language of people is clearly illustrated by the most vital poetry written in South Africa in recent times. Furthermore, the real language of people — instead of standardised, internationalised, corporate, mass-media homogenized language which passes for the verbal expressions of human beings — is what an assessment of a language in South Africa needs to attend to. How language is expressed on factory floors, in shops, at resettlement camps, within urban and rural slums, in city centres, at political rallies, on buses and trains, and on school playgrounds ought to be audible to the ear that the conference turns to the speech of the entire South African community.

There are many other concerns which such a conference must acknowledge, such as vested interests, political and organizational sensitivities, as well as the expectations of very diverse sectors of society. Interest groups and individuals with strong convictions and persuasions should ensure that their views are heard, not merely discussed by others. Then the conference will have truly served the interests of South African society. □

### NOTES:

(1) de Villiers A. (ed). 1976. *English-speaking South Africa Today*. Oxford University Press (Cape Town), page 377

(2) *The Weekly Mail*, Vol. 2, No. 15, 18-24 April, 1986.

N.B. The views expressed here are not necessarily the views of the English Academy of Southern Africa, but those of the writer of this article, the Conference organizer.

By Gary Baines

## REVIEW ARTICLE

D. Ncube, 'The influence of Apartheid and Capitalism on the Development of Black Trade Unions in South Africa' (Johannesburg, Skotaville Publishers, 1985) 176 pp., illus., bibl.

This is the first publication in a new series by Skotaville Publishers entitled "Izwi Labasebenzi" (We are the workers). The book is based on a M.Sc. (Manpower Studies) dissertation for the University of Manchester, Institute of Science and Technology. There can be no doubt that the development of black trade unions is an important topic and it is commendable that the writer has set himself the task of relating his study to the ongoing theoretical debate in South African social studies and historiography.

The writer sets out "to analyse the historical development and ideological disposition of Black trade unions with reference to the Unitary, the Pluralist and the Marxist frames of reference" (p.xiii). While he identifies these three theoretical frameworks at the outset, his utilisation of them as analytical tools throughout the text is arbitrary and uneven. He falls back on a description rather than an analysis of the factors which influenced the development of Black trade unionism. Although one or other perspective is often implicit in the text, they are not clearly delineated so that there is no progression from the abstract to the particular. The theoretical frameworks only receive substantial treatment in an epilogue which is appended to the main text and, accordingly, reads like a postscript.