Language and Education

Language and social justice in South Africa's higher education: insights from a South African university

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Language and social justice in South Africa's higher education: insights from a South African university

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The paper interrogates the issue of language and social justice in South Africa's higher education using quantitative and qualitative data collected at the University of the Free State (UFS). Data were collected using questionnaires. Through purposive sampling based on South African and UFS demographics, 120 questionnaires were administered to UFS students. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. The results show that language is a critical component in the conceptualisation and actualisation of social justice in South Africa's higher education. The results further indicate that language continues to play the role of privileging access to higher education for some, while curtailing access to higher education for others, in South Africa. The paper concludes that this reality is contrary to the principles of social justice and recommends a radical overhaul of the language dispensation in South Africa's higher education within the framework of social justice.

Keywords: language-in-education; educational policy; dual language; social justice; South Africa's higher education; Parallel Medium Policy

Introduction

This paper is anchored on a thesis advanced by Gewirtz (1998, 469) that:

> within recent studies of education policy, social justice has been an under-theorised concept. Some work simply marginalises or rejects social justice concerns, either because of a sceptical postmodernist denial of the tenability and desirability of universalistic principles, or because of an uncritical, problem-solving orientation, or because of a commitment to 'value-free' research. However, there is also a significant group of writers who are unambiguously committed to social justice in education, as evidenced in the growing number of empirical studies which draw attention to the ways in which inequalities are produced and reproduced by post-welfarist education policies.

The South African education system, caught in a cusp of rapid transformation, has been a theatre in which all the above concerns have played out. On the one hand, there are postmodernist undercurrents in South Africa's policy circles that undercut the tenability and desirability of universalistic principles in education and seek to develop a localised model of education. This position is fuelled by an often uncritical, problem-solving orientation couched as empowerment interventions that seek quick-fix solutions to otherwise systemic weaknesses in South Africa's education sector. On the other hand, this policy and

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programme conundrum is further complicated by a South African research community that, for successive generations, on the basis of either guilt or obligation, perfected the art of carrying out 'value-free' research that did not seek to challenge or disrupt the status quo. Effectively, 'value-loaded' issues such as social justice in education have been eschewed within the South African research community.

Like elsewhere on the African continent, issues of social justice are imperative because of their close relationship to the dialectics of exclusion (cf. Bamgbose 2000). However, in South Africa, issues of social justice are more pronounced because of its history and the peculiar manner in which this history played itself out here. After centuries of colonialism, some of it under the Dutch and some of it under the British, and decades of Afrikaner-led Apartheid, South Africa is marked by deep structural inequities. In the words of former (Deputy) President Thabo Mbeki:

> . . .South Africa is a country of two nations. One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. This enables it to argue that, except for the persistence of gender discrimination against women, all members of this nation have the possibility to exercise their right to equal opportunity. . . . The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. It has virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity, with that right being equal within this black nation only to the extent that it is equally incapable of realization. This reality of two nations, underwritten by the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid white minority domination, constitutes the material base which reinforces the notion that, indeed, we are not one nation, but two nations. (Mbeki 1998, Extract from the Statement of Deputy President Thabo Mbeki at the Opening of the Debate in the National Assembly, on 'Reconciliation and Nation Building', National Assembly – Cape Town, 29 May 1998)

Given South Africa's peculiar history, the notion that the education system has been central in systematically perpetuating the structural inequities described above and consequently social injustice is beyond question. Nonetheless, this general assertion and the clamour for reform that accompanies it often obscure the extent to which South Africa's education system remains unreformed and continues to perpetuate social injustice(s), especially in its higher education sector. But even in instances when South Africa's higher education reform is put under focus, one issue seems to always fly under the radar, namely the language question and how language perpetuates a system of social injustice in South Africa's higher education. Language has always been topical in South Africa's contemporary history. This is occasioned by the fact that in South Africa, probably more than in any other polity, language has effectively been used to serve the ends of social exclusion for some and social inclusion for others. The cumulative effect of this dialectic is that language in South Africa has repeatedly been deployed to serve ends that neither entrench nor deepen social justice. This is particularly evident in the dynamics attendant to language in higher education in South Africa – a sector that remains largely unreformed and untransformed deep into the second decade of democracy. Effectively, there is a hiatus of research on language and social justice in South Africa's higher education.

To fill this hiatus, the paper interrogates the issue of language and social justice in South Africa's higher education using empirical data collected at the University of the Free State (hereafter UFS). Data were collected using questionnaires. Through purposive sampling based on South African and UFS demographics, 120 questionnaires were administered to UFS students (20 Black females, 20 White females, 5 Coloured females, 5 Indian females,

20 Black males, 20 White males, 5 Coloured males, 5 Indian males, 5 Black foreign fe-
males, 5 Black foreign males, 5 non-Black foreign females and 5 non-Black foreign males).
Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. The results show that lan-
guage is a critical component in the conceptualisation and actualisation of social justice in
South Africa's higher education. The results further indicate that language continues to play
the role of privileging access to higher education for some, while curtailing access to higher
education for others. The paper concludes by positing that this reality is contrary to the prin-
ciples of social justice and recommends a radical overhaul of the language regime in South
Africa's higher education. The discussion is presented in three parts: the first seeks to contex-
tualise the entire paper with an overview of social justice – and higher education and social
justice; the second discusses the question of language and social justice in higher education,
first from a general perspective, before addressing the question of language and social justice
in South Africa's higher education; and the final part presents the results of the study that was
conducted at the UFS. The results are presented in two formats: tabulation and discussion
of empirical data, and a categorisation of the narrative accounts that explain why respon-
dents offered either YES or NO responses to the questionnaire questions. Insights from the
narrative accounts link the respondents' preferences as captured by the YES/NO dyadic to
the larger questions of social justice, language rights and social and cultural reproduction.

The discussion of social justice in this paper, especially as it relates to education gener-
ally and higher education specifically, draws in no small measure from the work of Pierre
Bourdieu, as elaborated on by Corson (1996). Corson (1996, x) acknowledges the influence
by Pierre Bourdieu, as well as influence by Roy Bhaskar, Jim Cummings, Viv Edwards
and Dell Hymes. The discussion of language rights in the current paper acknowledges the
considerable work on linguistic human rights by scholars such as Kymlicka and Patten
(2003), May (2005), Phillipson (2000), Skutnabb-Kangas (1999, 2000, 2001), Skutnabb-
Kangas and Phillipson (1994) and Skutnabb-Kangas et al. (2009). However, in the current
discussion, language rights are understood within a reconceptualisation of language rights
as elaborated by Bruthiaux (2009, 73) that:

> challenges the view that language rights constitute entitlements based in moral imperatives,
> to be provided by a proactive state regardless of costs. This framework argues against the
> very concept of language rights by suggesting that language-related assistance is qualitatively
> equivalent to other aspects of social policy aiming at promoting the public good through
> systematic evaluation of costs and benefits. From this perspective, 'rights' are in fact claims
> on public resources, to be negotiated along with all other claims.

In effect, language rights as currently entrenched in South Africa's higher education are
apparently designed to protect Afrikaans and in the process bestow competitive advan-
tages on Afrikaans-speaking students, with concomitant social and economic benefits. This
arrangement comes at a very high opportunity cost to non-Afrikaans-speaking students,
i.e. a curtailing of equal access to higher education with the attendant exclusion from
social and economic benefits. The discussion argues that this unequal access to higher
education premised on language generally and a presumed entrenchment of language rights
specifically is contrary to the principles of social justice.

Social justice: an overview of the concept

The concept of social justice has preoccupied social theorists for centuries. In a detailed
overview of the epistemology of social justice, Zajda, Majhanovich, and Rust (2006)
document that social justice has fascinated many thinkers around the world, including Plato

(427–347 BC), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). However, the term 'social justice' was first used in 1840 by a Sicilian priest, Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio, and given exposure by Antonio Rosmini-Serbati (1948) in *La Constitutione Civile Secondo la Guistizia Sociale*. Subsequently, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) gave this anthropomorphic approach to social justice an almost omnipotent status in his book *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*. At the end of the nineteenth century, the term 'social justice' was used by social reformers as an appeal to the ruling classes to attend to the needs of the new masses of uprooted peasants who had become urban workers, or dispossessed. The meaning of social justice may vary according to different definitions, perspectives and social theories. Most conceptions of social justice refer to an egalitarian society that is based on the principles of equality and solidarity, that understands and values human rights and that recognises the dignity of every human being. In this sense, it reflects the three values and symbols of the French Revolution (1789–1799): liberty, equality and fraternity (Zajda, Majhanovich, and Rust 2006, 9–10).

Zajda, Majhanovich, and Rust (2006, 10–11) further document that globally, the most frequently quoted expression of the founding principles of social justice is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was endorsed by the international community in 1948. On this basis, a social-justice-oriented government – if it is to reflect its ideology of egalitarianism and move beyond the level of policy rhetoric – has to ensure a more equitable and fair access to resources and socially valued commodities. One of the key factors in achieving social justice, however, is the emergence of a consensus that society is working in a fair way, where individuals are allowed as much freedom as possible given the role they have within the society. Hence, true social justice is attained only through the harmonious cooperative effort of the citizens who, in their own self-interest, accept the current norms of morality as the price of membership in the community. In recent years, the concept of social justice has been associated with the moral and political philosopher John Rawls. Rawls draws on the utilitarian principles of Bentham and Mill, the social-contract ideas of Locke and the categorical imperative of Kant. A synthesis of these philosophical traditions leads Rawls to propose a conceptualisation of social justice that holds that each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason, justice denies the loss of freedom for some made right by a greater good shared by others.

Gewirtz (1998) cited earlier, based on the work of John Rawls, provides a detailed exposition of the concept of social justice. In doing so, Gewirtz (1998, 470–1) identifies two major dimensions of an expanded conceptualisation of social justice – the distributional and relational dimensions. Distributional justice refers to the principles by which goods are distributed in society. This is the dimension that is commonly thought of as synonymous with social justice. A society perceived to be just clearly cannot exist without a fair distribution of resources, both material and non-material. However, social justice cannot exclusively be about distribution alone, because doing so severely limits the conceptualisation of social justice. The relational dimension seeks to further expand the conceptualisation of social justice; it refers to the nature of relationships which structure society. A focus on this second dimension helps in theorising about issues of power and how people treat each other, both in the sense of micro face-to-face interactions and in the sense of macro social and economic relations that are mediated by institutions such as the state and the market. One way of distinguishing between the distributional and relational dimensions is by thinking of them as rooted within two contrasting ontological perspectives. The distributional dimension is essentially individualistic and atomistic, in that it refers to how goods are distributed to individuals in society. By contrast, the relational dimension is holistic and non-atomistic,

being essentially concerned with the nature of inter-connections between individuals in society, rather than with how much individuals get.

According to Jackson (2005, 360), the concept of social justice can be distinguished on two main grounds. First, justice is conceptualised as a virtue that applies to a 'society' and not simply to individual behaviour: social institutions that distribute material resources and social positions are open to assessment as just or unjust. Second, social justice also has a substantive political content: it recommends the alleviation of poverty and the diminution of inequality (or at least certain dimensions of it) as a matter of justice rather than charity. Various principles of justice may be invoked in order to defend this commitment. Appeals to the ideas of need, equality, a right to a decent minimum, equal opportunity and many others can all be made under this broad heading, identifying the economic unfairness generated by unregulated market forces and recommending state action to ameliorate or remove it altogether.

The preceding overview of social justice is to a larger extent philosophical and/or theoretical. This orientation should however not be construed to imply that there is no tangible programme work being undertaken in the sphere of social justice. Such work abounds. A leading organisation in social justice programmes has been the United Nations (UN). In a report entitled: *Social Justice in an Open World*, the United Nations (2006, 15) declares that to give justice among individuals and nations a more tangible character and contemporary relevance, the United Nations has used the language of rights, and of equality, equity and inequity, in reference to both positive objectives to be pursued and negative situations to be corrected. To this end, the United Nations has identified six important areas of inequality in the distribution of goods, opportunities and rights. These areas need correction so as to engender a culture of social justice. According to the United Nations (2006, 17–19), the six important areas of inequality in the distribution of goods, opportunities and rights that need to be corrected so as to engender a culture of social justice are: inequalities in the distribution of income; inequalities in the distribution of assets; inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for work and remunerated employment; inequalities in the distribution of access to knowledge; inequalities in the distribution of health services, social security and the provision of a safe environment; and inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for civic and political participation.

From the foregoing discussion, it is apparent that the social justice ideal remains elusive for many societies. The elusiveness of social justice is crystallised by a pointed synopsis of what social justice is all about by Furlong and Cartmel (2009, 3–4), who observe that essentially social justice relates to the principle that every effort should be made to ensure that individuals and groups all enjoy fair access to rewards. It is about creating a more equitable, respectful and just society for everyone. However, social justice is not necessarily about equality; it can be about providing equal opportunities to access an unequal structure. All advanced Western societies pay lip service to the principles of social justice, even though most have consistently failed to provide the basic preconditions for a socially just society. In a society committed to the ideals of social justice, it is recognised that fair treatment and equal opportunities for everyone can only be brought about by imposing restrictions on the behaviour of some individuals or groups. And this is where the problem lies: the provision of opportunities to members of less advantaged groups is uncontroversial; restricting the opportunities of the middle and upper classes has proved to be a political bullet that few governments have been prepared to bite – not least because it would involve the imposition of restrictions on opportunities of the families of politicians and on those with whom they identify and may alienate a large segment of the electorate. There is possibly nowhere else where the contradictions inherent in the discourse on social justice, especially in the

so-called advanced societies, are more apparent than in the higher education sector. The higher education sector, with its accompanying prestige and rewards, is usually a site in which successive acts, anchored on lip service and which are symptomatic of social injustice in the whole society, are played out. The next section provides an in-depth, albeit brief discussion of higher education and social justice.

Higher education and social justice

The relationships between higher education and social justice are best understood within the context of the role of higher education in society. A corpus of literature on the role of higher education in society exists. In this literature, there is a convergence of opinion that higher education plays fundamental economic and social functions in society. One such piece of literature is the 1994 World Bank publication entitled *Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience*, in which the Bank observed that higher education is of paramount importance for economic and social development. Institutions of higher education have the main responsibility for equipping individuals with the advanced knowledge and skills required for positions of responsibility in government, business and the professions. These institutions produce new knowledge through research; serve as conduits for the transfer, adaptation and dissemination of knowledge generated elsewhere in the world; and support government and business with advice and consultancy services. In most countries, higher education institutions also play important social roles by forging the national identity of the country and offering a forum for pluralistic debate. The development of higher education is correlated with economic development: enrolment ratios in higher education average 51% in countries that belong to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), compared with 21% in middle-income countries and 6% in low-income countries. Estimated social rates of return of 10% or more in many developing countries also indicate that investments in higher education contribute to increases in labour productivity and higher long-term economic growth, which are essential for poverty alleviation (World Bank 1994, 1).

The preceding observations were further reinforced by the World Bank Task Force on Higher Education and Society in its 2000 report entitled *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*, in which the Task Force noted that higher education serves the greater public interest by simultaneously improving individual lives and enriching society. From the public interest perspective, higher education is important in unlocking potential at all levels of society: helping talented people to gain advanced training whatever their background; creating a pool of highly trained individuals that attains a critical size and becomes a key national resource; addressing topics whose long-term value to society is thought to exceed their current value to students and employers (for example the humanities); and providing a space for the free and open discussion of ideas and values (World Bank 2000, 37–8). This line of reasoning on the role of higher education in society is evident in Cortese's (2003, 17) submission that higher education institutions bear a profound, moral responsibility to increase awareness, knowledge, skills and values needed to create a just and sustainable future. Higher education plays a critical but often overlooked role in making this vision a reality. It prepares most of the professionals who develop, lead, manage, teach, work in and influence society's institutions. Higher education has unique academic freedom and the critical mass and diversity of skills to develop new ideas, to comment on society and its challenges and to engage in bold experimentation in sustainable living.

In a study on higher education and economic development in Africa which further supports the view that higher education plays fundamental economic and social functions in

society, Bloom, Canning, and Chan (2006, 15–16) document that higher education can lead to economic growth through private and public channels. The private benefits for individuals are well established and include better employment prospects, higher salaries and a greater ability to save and invest. These benefits may result in better health and improved quality of life, thus setting off a virtuous spiral in which life expectancy improvements enable individuals to work more productively over a longer period of time, further boosting lifetime earnings. Public benefits are less widely recognised, which explains many governments' neglect of tertiary schooling as a vehicle for public investment. But individual gains can also benefit society as a whole. Higher earnings for well-educated individuals raise tax revenues for governments and ease demands on state finances. They also translate into greater consumption, which benefits producers from all educational backgrounds. In a knowledge economy, tertiary education can help economies keep up or catch up with more technologically advanced societies. Higher education graduates are likely to be more aware of and better able to use new technologies. They are also more likely to develop new tools and skills. Their knowledge can also improve the skills and understanding of non-graduate co-workers, while the greater confidence and know-how inculcated by advanced schooling may generate entrepreneurship, with positive effects on job creation. Tertiary schooling can also have less direct benefits for economies. By nurturing governance and leadership skills, it can provide countries with the talented individuals needed to establish a policy environment favourable to growth. Setting up robust and fair legal and political institutions and making them a part of a country's fabric call for advanced knowledge and decision-making skills. Addressing environmental problems and improving security against internal and external threats also place a premium on skills that advanced education is best placed to deliver.

After outlining the generic role of higher education in society, the question that arises is how does this role tie-up with the notion of social justice. Fundamentally, higher education, true to its rarefied status in society, plays a critical gate-keeping role in society. Through its training, research, consultancy and community engagement undertakings, higher education is important in the actualisation or otherwise of distributional and relational dimensions of social justice. By producing the most skilled professionals in society, higher education places its graduates at a marked advantage in the distribution of societal resources, both material and non-material. However, it is from the relational dimension of social justice that the pervasive relationships between higher education and social justice become more apparent. Higher education produces a substantial majority of the decision and policy-makers in any polity. Effectively, higher education constitutes a core through which power relationships that structure society are nurtured and reproduced. It is also easy to relate how higher education is related to the six areas of inequality identified by the UN in the distribution of goods, opportunities and rights that need to be corrected so as to engender a culture of social justice. Access to higher education and the accompanying prospects of gainful employment are some of the surest ways through which individuals and households gain access to income and consequently acquire the capacity to make choices and gain immediate access to a number of amenities. Access to income has strong positive correlation to distribution of assets. Effectively, individuals who have access to higher education and thus greater chance to get into gainful employment that guarantees them a steady flow of income are likely to have a better portfolio of assets. With skills and gainful employment, which are resultant from higher education, individuals and households enjoy a better access to knowledge, health services and social security as well as access to a safe environment. It is also highly likely that individuals with access to higher education will exhibit higher levels of civic and political awareness. In a gist, and in the words of Furlong and Cartmel (2009, 16), higher education is a key institution in the efforts to establish a more socially just

system in which all are able to develop their potential and pursue their interests, unrestricted by social-economic disadvantage.

Language and social justice in higher education

With the relationships between higher education and social justice established, the discussion turns its focus on establishing the relationships between language and social justice in higher education. To establish these relationships, the discussion locates the question of language and social justice in higher education within the broader discourse of language, education and power. As Corson (1996, 5) rightly observes, the process of schooling is a form of 'social and cultural reproduction' that is linked openly to other structures in society, especially economic structures, which reproduce social relations. In this way, the schooling system: selects and certifies the workforce; maintains privilege by taking the form and content of the dominant culture and defining it as legitimate knowledge to be passed on; is an agent in the creation and the re-creation of an effectively dominant culture; and legitimises new knowledge, new classes and strata of social personnel. In short, as part of its *raison d'être*, the schooling system allocates people and legitimises knowledge, or legitimises people and allocates knowledge. As a result, in many of its practices, the schooling system looks after the interests of some social groups better than the interests of other social groups. Language is the vehicle for this routine activity of power distribution through education.

The fundamental premise that links language to social justice in higher education is *access*. Language to a greater extent determines who has access to higher education. In virtually all higher education institutions the world over, language proficiency, as determined either through a national qualification examination or by a national and/or international language proficiency examination, is a requirement for general admission. On the face of it, this language proficiency requirement for admission into higher education institutions is a germane procedural requirement because higher education studies out of necessity require advanced language proficiency. However, what this seemingly legitimate expectation masks is the dynamics attendant to acquiring advanced language proficiency before joining higher education institutions. Advanced language proficiency usually comes at a steep price in often middle-class and upper-class patronised pre-university learning institutions. Effectively, for economically challenged and socially vulnerable sectors of society, advanced language proficiency is often a mirage.

The complexities of the relationships between language and social justice in higher education when analysed from this perspective of *access* become even more evident when the analysis is stretched to include the question: *which language?* Altbach (2005, 2–3) provides insights into this question by observing that the language of instruction and research is key to understanding the political economy of higher education. English continues to dominate as the language of scientific communication worldwide. English functions as the language of instruction in a number of the world's most important academic systems – including the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada and others. These academic systems account for the bulk of research and development expenditures and scientific publications. Some non-English speaking countries – including most of South Asia, Anglophone Africa, the Philippines and others – have instituted English as a key language of instruction. In a growing trend, some programmes now allow studies in English in China, Japan, many of the countries of the European Union and elsewhere. English also functions as the main language for Internet-based academic communications and research. Major international websites operate in English, and a significant proportion of scientific communication takes

place in English. It is also the world's most frequently studied 'second language'. Language involves the dominance of ideas. Not simply a tool of communication, language affects the content of curriculum and the form and substance of methodologies, approaches to science and scholarly publication. English has become a major determinant in accessing higher education. This development portends exclusion for those sectors of society that cannot afford an English-medium pre-university education. This is what may be referred to as the distributive dimension of language in social justice in higher education – language plays a critical role in determining the principles by which higher education goods, namely advanced knowledge and skills as well as progressive attitudes, are distributed in society.

The relational dimension of language in social justice in higher education would refer to the role that language plays in (re)producing relationships which structure the higher education sector, especially the role of language in issues of power in higher education as they manifest themselves in the way actors in higher education treat each other in micro and macro domains. This dimension implies that in pragmatic higher education settings, language plays a critical role in the establishment and sustenance of networks. Virtually all sectors of society are replete with examples of *old boy networks* that were established when their members were undertaking higher education studies. It is hard to contemplate how an old boy network can be established and sustained without the strong bond provided by language among its members.

Language and social justice in South Africa's higher education

A consideration of the historical context within which South Africa's higher education evolved casts the question of language and social justice in South Africa's higher education in clear perspective. Reddy (2004) provides a detailed overview of this historical context by submitting that the striking feature of higher education in South Africa is that its provision evolved and reproduced itself along racial and ethnic lines, prompted in large measure by deliberate state policy. It is imperative therefore to acknowledge that the emergence, roles and cultures of universities in contemporary South Africa relate quite directly to the history of white political, economic and cultural domination and consequently higher education reflects the history of unequal relations of power perpetuated during colonial and Apartheid rule. Governments prior to World War II considered higher education to be a privilege exclusive to white society (Reddy 2004, 9).

Reddy further documents that:

> nearly a hundred years after the establishment of the first universities for whites, a university for black South Africans, Fort Hare, was established in 1916. The University of the Cape of Good Hope, the first white higher education institution, functioned as the administrative examining board, similar to the University of London, for the colleges of the Cape. These colleges were preparatory high schools for the colonial elite who went to Europe for university education. These early colleges inspired the establishment of universities. The South African College founded in 1829 evolved by 1918 into a fully recognised university, the University of Cape Town. Afrikaner elites determined to establish their own university as part of their nationalist cause and conflict with the English, opened Victoria College in 1865, renamed Stellenbosch University in 1918. Following the settlement of English immigrants in 1820, Rhodes University was established in the Eastern Cape. A School of Mines University in Johannesburg followed the mining revolution on the Rand. It opened in 1895, and became in 1922 the University of the Witwatersrand. The federally organised University of South Africa (UNISA) had branch colleges around the country, these serving as the examining board, and from the 1930s onwards these affiliated colleges became independent universities, resulting in the Universities of Natal, Pretoria, Potchefstroom and Free State. All of these institutions, save for Fort Hare, served the white ruling classes. (Reddy 2004, 9–10)

Instead of denying university education to blacks by relying on the admissions policies of the established white universities, the Apartheid state embarked on a determined policy to create universities for the variously state-defined ethnically classified black groups. These new universities, the 'bush colleges', were designed to serve as valuable instruments in the over-arching 'grand Apartheid' political project based on the creation of pseudo-independent states in the African 'tribal' reserves. For Zulu and Swazi speakers, the government created the University of Zululand. The University of the North was created for Sotho, Tswana, Venda and Tsonga speakers and the Transvaal Ndebele. The universities of the Western Cape and Durban-Westville were created for those classified Coloured and Indians by the state (Horrell 1968, cited by Reddy 2004, 10). By the early 1970s, universities were established in the Transkei, Bophuthatswana and Venda Bantustans. These institutions were expected to legitimate, reproduce and constitute, especially among the elites, identities and social relations of race and ethnicity. If successful, this project would divide the black majority into minorities, weakening both the physical majority and the political, moral argument for democratic majority rule in an undivided South Africa. The racial differentiation of universities comfortably replicated the racial organisation prevailing in society. Society resembled an inflexible hierarchical structure, modelled like a pyramid with a minority classified as whites at the top and a large majority of blacks categorised by state policy into Africans, Coloured and Indian 'groups' at the bottom. The Coloured and Indian groups were deliberately and controversially positioned to constitute 'middle-man minorities' (Van den Berge 1987, cited in Reddy 2004, 11). Notwithstanding the verbal claims of administrators at the English language universities to have opposed Apartheid policies, the application of racially restrictive admissions criteria established by state policy and vigilantly policed at university level helped produce universities for Whites, Africans (divided into separate language groups), Indians and Coloureds (Reddy 2004, 11).

The link between university education in South Africa and the politics of race and ethnicity as perpetuated by a succession of colonialism and Apartheid ensured that over several centuries, university education in South Africa was an exclusive enterprise. In this dynamic, language has been a central catalytic force for several reasons. Fundamentally, the Eurocentric idea of the analogous relationship between language and nation was a core concept in the construction of the colonial and Apartheid ethic. South African universities were founded on this warped and tenuous idea. It is for this reason that there were English universities for the 'English nation' in South Africa and Afrikaans universities for the 'Afrikaner nation' in South Africa. However, the warped and tenuous nature of this idea – the analogous relationship between language and nation – becomes exposed when the language question is extended into the logic behind the establishment of universities for the 'Black nation', 'Coloured nation' and 'Indian nation' in South Africa. Rather than following through with the logic of the analogous relationship between language and nation in the establishment of universities for these latter nations within South Africa – a logic that possibly could have seen the so-called universities for the black nation operating in a myriad of indigenous languages, universities for the Coloured nation operating in a different form of Afrikaans and universities for the Indian nation operating possibly in Hindi – the colonial and Apartheid establishment sought to impose their language(s) on the university systems of these nations, thereby undermining the very logic of having designated English and Afrikaans universities. Effectively, language was used as a double-edged sword: first, as an easy excuse to perpetuate exclusion to arguably the best universities in the country; and second, as a tool to extend cultural domination over the Black, Coloured and Indian nations in South Africa. Further, the creation of universities for the various black ethnicities in South Africa primarily on the basis of language as a marker of ethnicity failed to capture

an interesting dynamic that has been afoot in much of Africa and the developing world for the better part of the last two centuries, namely the ability of people, especially indigenous people, to have multiple identities, even when these identities are ironically defined on the basis of language.

From the foregoing discussions, it can be deduced how language has played a central role in the distributional and relational dimensions of social justice in South Africa's higher education. Over successive generations, language, especially from the perspective of the dubious relationship between language and nation, has been critical in determining access to South Africa's higher education. Effectively, language has played and continues to play a critical role in determining the principles by which higher educational goods, namely advanced knowledge and skills as well as progressive attitudes, are distributed in South African society. From a relational dimension of social justice, language plays a critical role in (re)producing relationships which structure the higher education sector, especially with regard to issues of power as they manifest themselves in the way actors in higher education treat each other in micro and macro contexts. An example will suffice to illustrate this argument. However persuasive the arguments for the retention of parallel medium of instruction in some of South Africa's universities may be, the long and short of it is that this system, within the peculiar South African context, serves to entrench and perpetuate power relations from a by-gone era – power relations that are largely inimical to the vision of establishing a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights.

The study at the University of the Free State

To fully appreciate the results of the study at the UFS, a context is provided through a note on historically Afrikaans-medium universities in South Africa and an overview of the language policy of the UFS. The study was carried out in July and August 2010.

A note on historically Afrikaans-medium universities in South Africa

Du Plessis (2006) provides a detailed overview of the repositioning of historically Afrikaans-medium universities in South Africa from monolingual to bilingual higher education institutions. In a statement that underscores the magnitude of social change in South Africa since the end of Apartheid and its impacts on historically Afrikaans-medium universities, Du Plessis (2006, 87–8) documents that in contrast to the position of the historically English-medium universities in South Africa, the country's historically Afrikaans-medium universities are being faced with the dilemma of having to undergo a socio-linguistic metamorphosis from monolingual higher education to bilingual higher education. Whereas the *Language Policy for Higher Education* (Ministry of Education 2002) acknowledges the *status quo* regarding languages of instruction in higher education, where English and Afrikaans are the dominant languages (par. 15.1), it does not ascribe to the belief that the sustainability of Afrikaans in higher education requires specifically designated Afrikaans universities (par. 15.4.1). Instead, it upholds the view that such sustainability could be attained through a range of strategies in terms of which Afrikaans could be used as the primary, but not the sole, medium of instruction (par. 15.4.4). In fact, the policy rules out the continued existence of 'Afrikaans' universities as such a notion 'runs counter to the end goal of a transformed higher education system' (Ministry of Education 2002, par. 15.4.3).

The evolution of historically Afrikaans-medium universities in South Africa can be traced back to 1919 inasmuch as the University of Stellenbosch had been established a

year earlier. By 1919, the Department of Education had issued a directive to introduce bilingual higher education using English and Dutch as the media of instruction. According to Steyn (1993, 250, cited in Du Plessis 2006, 96), Afrikaans soon replaced Dutch as the second medium of instruction, especially since it was given recognition in the same year (1919) as a school language and subject until the final school year. The Department required all South African universities (including UCT) to introduce dual-medium instruction. Du Plessis (2006, 97) further documents that the bilingual universities (where bilingual Afrikaans-speaking students were in the majority) slowly evolved into monolingual Afrikaans-speaking universities fundamentally because of three factors, namely: the demand for Afrikaans higher education (among students and the public in general), the language competency of students (especially bilingual Afrikaans-speaking students as opposed to monolingual English-speaking students) and language loyalty among Afrikaans speakers. The development of Afrikaans as a medium of higher education in South Africa unfolded against the background of the growth of Afrikaner nationalism, especially after the mid-1930s, the period when the Afrikaans movement gained ground and the language was established as a viable option for medium of instruction.

However, the ascendancy of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in South Africa's education system was dealt a fatal body blow by the events of June 1976 in Soweto. Since then, and despite all the concerted policy and programme interventions aimed at propping up the language in South Africa's education, it has been a question of *when* rather than *if* the language will cede ground in South Africa's education system. Probably conscious of this dynamic, Du Plessis (2006, 106–7) submits that historically Afrikaans-medium universities have generally opted to concentrate on arrangements regarding institutional language, both in terms of the medium of instruction and the medium of administration. It is very striking that, without exception, the historically Afrikaans-medium universities do not describe themselves as bilingual universities, nor do they consider their language policies to be promoting bilingualism, which suggests that parallel bilingualism (or double monolingualism) is the preferred (and even default) option when using two languages as media of instruction. It would thus appear that integrated bilingualism, as manifested in the dual-medium education, is not being considered by the historically Afrikaans-medium universities as an alternative to parallel-medium education (or to single-medium education). The preference for parallel-medium education creates the impression that the historically Afrikaans-medium universities are more interested in survival than in the notion of bilingual higher education.

It is this notion of *survival* that places the language question in historically Afrikaans-medium universities into sharp focus, especially from a social justice perspective. The parallel-medium education in which students are segregated on the basis of language in historically Afrikaans-medium universities is not founded nor anchored on any known social justice principles. Rather, it is a vestige of what Terreblanche (2002, 4) refers to as the false trails on which White South Africa travelled for so long, and the phantoms it pursued with such conviction and enthusiasm, while failing to acknowledge the evils of colonialism, segregation and Apartheid, and the fallaciousness of the arguments used to legitimise those forms of oppression.

Language policy of the University of the Free State

The current language policy of the UFS was approved by the University Council on 6 June 2003. The language policy declares that it respects, and is founded on the UFS's vision and commitment to quality and equity; its mission as a university and an academic institution; its values; its socio-political, cultural and geographical environment; and its statute and its

legislative environment (University of the Free State 2003, par. 1.1). Further, the policy declares that it acknowledges, proceeds from and is directed at pursuing the notion that intrinsically and in terms of its statute and composition, the university is a multilingual and multicultural institution within a multilingual and multicultural country, region and province (par. 1.4). The language policy respects and promotes specific values – including academic freedom and autonomy, equity, integrity, excellence and a service orientation – and principles – including non-marginalisation, non-discrimination, empowerment, cooperation, human dignity and respect (including mutual respect for and an appreciation of differences, traditions and preferences) – along with a culture of sensitivity, politeness, an accommodating attitude and tolerance (in contrast to entitlement) (par. 1.5). The language policy stipulates that the main languages of the UFS are Afrikaans and English (par. 2.1). The UFS maintains a system of parallel-medium teaching in Afrikaans and English (par. 3.1.1) and that the additional use of Sesotho, in teaching situations where there is a need and this is reasonably practicable, is encouraged (par. 3.1.2). The language policy also stipulates the UFS's commitment and sensitivity to multilingualism and diversity in research (par. 3.2), community service (par. 3.3) and management, administration and operations in faculties and support services (par. 3.4). The language policy addresses itself to arrangements with respect to inclusive language use in which it stipulates that UFS office-bearers, staff and students avoid language use that is discriminatory or humiliating in nature, in particular as far as gender, race, disability and minority status are concerned (par. 4.1). In clauses that may be interpreted as seeking to cushion the language policy from amendments and to entrench it into the UFS institutional culture, the language policy stipulates that since multilingualism is a critical and constitutive element of the nature and basis of the University of the Free State, amendments to the language policy that imply substantive changes to its objectives, the main languages, parallel-medium teaching and the multilingual system in management and administration, are subject to approval by a two-thirds majority of Senate, Executive Management and Council (par. 8.1) and that in case of any dispute over the interpretation of clauses in the language policy, be these in Afrikaans or English, the Afrikaans formulations of the policy are decisive (par. 8.2). Whether these two clauses serve to entrench a culture of multilingualism at the UFS, or whether they serve to entrench and perpetuate certain linguistic cultures at the institution, is subject to persuasive critique.

Results

The results of the study on students' perceptions of language and social justice at UFS are given in Table 1 and discussed in the next section.

Discussion of results

The study was organised around a set of eight questions. The discussion of results follows the same logic.

Home language

Apart from purposive sampling that sought to capture South African and UFS demographics within the student population, the study sought to establish the home language of the respondents. Home language data served as control data in ensuring representativeness of the sample. Home language data were critical to the study on the basis of the hypothesis that home language determines the attitudes of speakers towards other languages. The study

Table 1. Students' perceptions of language and social justice at the University of the Free State.

Demographic group	Black		Indian		Coloured		White		Others				Totals – % where applicable
									Black foreign		White foreign		
Gender	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	
Sample size	20	20	5	5	5	5	20	20	5	5	5	5	120
Home language	1 (A); 1 (B); 5 (D); 8 (E); 3 (H); 1 (J); 1 (K)	1 (B); 2 (C); 11 (D); 3 (E); 1 (I); 2 (J)	5 (B)	5 (B)	1 (B); 4 (A)	2 (B); 3 (A)	16 (A); 4 (B)	16 (A); 1 (L); 3 (B)	1 (B); 4 (L)	1 (B); 4 (L)	2 (B); 3 (L)	1 (B); 4 (L)	40 (A) – 33.3%; 27 (B) – 22.5%; 2 (C) – 1.7%; 16 (D) – 13.3%; 11 (E) – 9.2%; 3 (H) – 2.5%; 1 (I) – 0.8%; 3 (J) – 2.5%; 1 (K) – 0.8%; 16 (L) – 13.3%
Second language	2 (A); 18 (B)	19 (B); 1 (L)	5 (A)	4 (A); 1 (L)	1 (A); 4 (B)	2 (A); 3 (B)	4 (A); 15 (B); 1 (L)	3 (A); 17 (B)	4 (B); 1 (L)	4 (B); 1 (L)	3 (B); 2 (L)	5 (B)	21 (A) – 17.6%; 92 (B) – 76.6%; 7 (L) – 5.8%
Question 1: Was UFS your first choice of university?	YES (12); NO (8)	YES (9); NO (11)	YES (3); NO (2)	YES (3); NO (2)	YES (3); NO (2)	YES (3); NO (2)	YES (14); NO (6)	YES (16); NO (4)	YES (2); NO (3)	YES (4); NO (1)	YES (4); NO (1)	YES (3); NO (2)	YES (76) – 63%; NO (44) – 37%
Question 2: Preferred medium of receiving instruction?	19 (B); 1 (D)	20 (B)	5 (B)	5 (B)	3 (B); 2 (A)	4 (B); 1 (A)	12 (B); 8 (A)	10 (B); 10 (A)	4 (B); 1 (D)	5 (B)	5 (B)	5 (B)	97 (B) – 80.83%; 21 (A) – 17.5%; 2 (D) – 1.67%

Question													Total
Question 3: Preferred language for reading materials?	19 (B); 1 (D)	20 (B)	5 (B)	5 (B)	3 (B); 2 (A)	4 (B); 1 (A)	12 (B); 8 (A)	10 (B); 10 (A)	5 (B)	5 (B)	5 (B)	5 (B)	98 (B) – 81.66%; 21 (A) – 17.5%; 1 (D) – 0.84%
Question 4: Is language important in entrenching fairness in UFS?	YES (17); NO (3)	YES (19); NO (1)	YES (5)	YES (5)	YES (3); NO (2)	YES (5)	YES (17); NO (3)	YES (17); NO (3)	YES (5)	YES (5)	YES (5)	YES (5)	YES (108) – 90%; NO (12) – 10%
Question 5: Does the PMP give some students unfair advantage?	YES (15); NO (5)	YES (16); NO (4)	YES (3); NO (2)	YES (0); NO (5)	YES (4); NO (1)	YES (6); NO (14)	YES (6); NO (14)	YES (4); NO (1)	YES (5)	YES (5)	YES (4); NO (1)	YES (4); NO (1)	YES (72) – 60%; NO (48) – 40%
Question 6: Is PMP socially just?	NO (17); YES (3)	NO (15); YES (5)	NO (3); YES (2)	NO (4); YES (1)	NO (0); YES (5)	NO (2); YES (3)	NO (5); YES (13)	NO (7); YES (13)	NO (4); YES (1)	NO (4); YES (1)	NO (4); YES (1)	NO (3); YES (2)	NO (68) – 56.8%; YES (52) – 43.4%

Key: F, Female; M, Male. Language codes: (A), Afrikaans; (B), English; (C), Sepedi; (D), Sesotho; (E), Setswana; (F), IsiNdebele; (G), IsiSwati; (H), IsiXhosa; (I), IsiZulu; (J), Tshivenda; (K), Xitsonga; (L), Others.

established that 33.3% of students have Afrikaans as their home language against 22.5% with English, 1.7% with Sepedi, 13.3% with Sesotho, 9.2% with Setswana, 2.5% with IsiXhosa, 0.8% with IsiZulu, 2.5% with Tshivenda and 0.8% with Xitsonga, while 13.3% listed 'other' (a reference to languages other than South Africa's official languages) as their home language. These results indicate that the UFS, like South Africa, is a multilingual space. It is logical therefore that the language dynamics attendant to the wider South African society will play themselves out to an appreciable degree within the UFS.

Second language

The study sought to establish the second language of respondents. These data were sought on the basis of the hypothesis that in bilingual/multilingual settings, second language often acts as a lingua franca that is deployed to establish, mediate and sustain relationships and networks, as well as to access 'goods' that lie beyond the ambit of home language. Data on second language indicate that 17.6% of students have Afrikaans as their second language whereas 76.6% have English as second language and 5.8% listed 'other' as second language. These results indicate that within the multilingual milieu of the UFS, English is the lingua franca that would most often be deployed by students to establish, mediate and sustain relationships and networks as well as in accessing goods that lie beyond the reach of their home language.

UFS as a study destination

An interesting question in the study sought to find out whether the UFS was a student's first choice of university. This question was meant to tease out the perceptions of students of the university, especially after the negative publicity that the university attracted after the Reitz 4 incident of 2008. It was hypothesised that the language question (which formed the core of the study) at the UFS, as is the case in the wider South African society, is inextricably related to race – the intractable motif that continues to haunt contemporary South Africa. Of the total, 63% of respondents indicated that they had chosen the UFS as their first choice of university whereas 37% had not. These results indicate that in spite of the negative publicity that the university received in the 30 months preceding the study and the tensions at the UFS, some of which could be traceable to its language policy, it remains a relatively popular study destination. Another interpretation of these results would indicate that the exclusive underpinnings of the negative publicity that the university received, coupled with its language policy, could account for its popularity as a study destination for some. However, this scenario does not distract the considered view that the university should strengthen the fundamentals that attract students to its programmes, while continuously engaging with those aspects that may not do so.

Preferred language of receiving instruction/learning materials

Data from the study indicate that English is the preferred medium of receiving instruction for 80.83% of the respondents whereas 17.5% preferred Afrikaans and 1.67% preferred Sesotho. Data also indicate that English is the preferred language for learning materials for 81.66% of the respondents whereas 17.5% preferred Afrikaans and 0.84% preferred Sesotho as the language for reading materials. The question that arises from these results is: what do these results indicate in the face of intra- and extra-UFS dynamics? The simple and straightforward answer would be that there is an apparent language shift with regard to language of instruction/language of learning materials towards English. However, this

language shift points to a deeper and far-reaching process that has been afoot globally for the better part of the last century, namely the increasing desirability of English. This observation is traceable to what Kachru (1990, 13) famously branded as the alchemy of English – the notion that contemporary English does not have just one defining context but many – across cultures and languages. From this perspective, it can thus be posited that the English preferred by students at the UFS, as the language of receiving instruction and for learning materials, is not necessarily 'English–English' but a non-native variety of the language – one that could loosely be referred to as 'South African English'. This form of English bestows on students several advantages, including freedom from historical baggage usually and legitimately associated with Afrikaans, and the latitude to belong to and to consummate global intellectual, scientific, social, cultural, political and economic networks that for now operate in English.

Language and the entrenchment of fairness at the UFS

To 90% of the respondents, language is an important factor in entrenching fairness whereas 10% of the respondents do not consider language an important factor in entrenching fairness. It is important to note that this question did not seek to establish whether particular languages are important in entrenching fairness. Rather, it sought to establish whether students consider language from a general standpoint as being important in entrenching fairness. From this perspective, an overwhelming majority considers that language is important in entrenching fairness. Undoubtedly, this majority includes students who consider Afrikaans-medium instruction as a legitimate right, as well as those who consider English-medium instruction as a legitimate right.

Does the Parallel Medium Policy (PMP) grant some students unfair advantage/ is the PMP socially just?

This set of questions set out to establish the perceptions of students on whether the Parallel Medium Policy (PMP) grants some students an unfair advantage in their studies and whether the PMP is perceived to be socially just. To 60% of the respondents, the PMP grants some students an unfair advantage whereas to 40% of the students the PMP does not do so. To 56.8% of the respondents, the PMP is not socially just, but to 43.4% of respondents, the PMP is socially just. These split perceptions on whether the PMP is socially just are indicative of two conflicting forces in contemporary South African society; namely, disenfranchisement and entitlement. These forces are manifest in all sections of South African society: to the formerly marginalised sections of South African society, there is a lingering perception that the new democratic dispensation has not delivered the benefits that it promised, and which in the new dispensation should be legitimate entitlements; whereas to the formerly advantaged sections of South African society, there is a growing perception that the new democratic dispensation diminishes their benefits, which they perceive as legitimate entitlements. However, the results from these two questions indicate that for a majority of students the PMP grants some students an unfair advantage and they do not consider the PMP to be socially just.

Narrative accounts from the research

The narrative accounts from the research can be categorised into three broad categories, namely disenfranchisement, entitlement and opportunity. The following subsections highlight the thematic threads of each of these categories.

Disenfranchisement

Narrative accounts from the research indicate that across all language groups represented in the sample, there is a deeply entrenched feeling of language-based disenfranchisement at the UFS. For non-Afrikaans speaking students, the PMP is a policy and programme mechanism designed to deny them a level intellectual competing ground with Afrikaans-speaking students. From their perspective, the PMP is a continuation of the segregationist policies of the Apartheid era with their associated disenfranchisement of the non-white population in South Africa. For Afrikaans-speaking students, the PMP represents an 'ideal' of language-in-higher-education, i.e. wherever possible, education should be in one's mother tongue for as long as possible. For this group, there is a sense of history to the PMP, i.e. the place of Afrikaans in South Africa's higher education was secured through a protracted struggle of a people, and therefore it shouldn't be ceded easily. From this perspective, Afrikaans-speaking students perceive any attempt at tinkering with the PMP as an affront to their language rights. To them, interference with their language rights constitutes disenfranchisement.

Entitlement

Narrative accounts also point to a deep-seated sense of entitlement across all language groups, the only difference being how various language groups conceptualise entitlement. To non-Afrikaans-speaking students, they are entitled to a 'good' education and to them good education is axiomatically an English-medium education. The merits of this reasoning aside, its basis is traceable to the asymmetrical resourcing of higher education institutions during Apartheid – a system which ensured that universities designated as 'white' universities were more resourced, more prestigious and of higher international standing. Non-Afrikaans-speaking students target these universities for their training not only because qualifications from them are more prestigious, but also as a way of claiming their space in these national institutions. To them, the PMP of these institutions notwithstanding, it gives a sense of entitlement to be in these institutions. For Afrikaans-speaking students, they feel entitled to use their language at the university level.

Opportunity

Narrative accounts that indicate a sense of opportunity cut across all language groups in the sample. An overwhelming majority of respondents are cognisant of the forces of globalisation and internationalisation that define the modern work-place. These forces are axiomatically associated with English. To these students, an English-medium education provides greater opportunities than an Afrikaans-medium education.

Conclusion

The fundamental question posed in this conclusion is: what lessons can be learnt from the discourse on language and social justice in South Africa's higher education when this discourse is read against the results from the UFS? Fundamentally, these results indicate that language is a critical component in the conceptualisation and actualisation of social justice in South Africa's higher education. The results further indicate that language, among other factors, continues to play the role of privileging access to higher education for some sections of society, while curtailing access to higher education for others, in South Africa. In a society founded on the principles of transformative constitutionalism – i.e. a

long-term project of constitutional enactment, interpretation and enforcement committed (not in isolation, of course, but in a historical context of conducive political developments) to transforming a country's political and social institutions and power relations in a democratic, participatory and egalitarian direction (Klare 1998, 150) – and which acknowledges the role of higher education in this process, language regimes in higher education that are contrary to the principles of social justice require an urgent overhaul.

Acknowledgements

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