Afrikaans must Fall and English must Rise

Ironies and Contradictions in Protests by South African University Students

Bevelyn Dube
Senior Lecturer and HOD at the University of Venda, South Africa

Abstract

The 2015/2016 student protests at former Afrikaans-medium universities in South Africa challenged, among other matters, the status of Afrikaans as a language of teaching and learning at South African universities. Inspired by the #RhodesMustFall protest movement, which called for the decolonisation of curricula at tertiary institutions in the country, movements, such as Open Stellenbosch and similar movements at Pretoria, Free State and North West universities, demanded that Afrikaans be replaced by English to allow more access for the formerly marginalised population groups in South Africa. Since neither Afrikaans nor English is the first language of most South African university students, and since both languages were largely imposed on black Africans through acts of colonial and apartheid violence, it would be interesting to explore the ambivalence inherent in the students' choice of English over Afrikaans. The contradictions or ambiguities inherent in the language protests are explored through Ngũgĩ's thesis of decolonising the mind and Bourdieu's concepts of the 'linguistic habitus' and 'linguistic market'.

Introduction

Almost 22 years after democratisation in South Africa, former Afrikaans-medium universities,[1] such as Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Free State and North West, were hit by student protests against the use of Afrikaans as a language of learning and teaching at those institutions. Inspired by the Rhodes Must Fall movement at the University of Cape Town (UCT), students at these institutions started protest movements (such as Open Stellenbosch at Stellenbosch University (SU) and the Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command (EFFSC) at the University of Pretoria (UP)) to

demand the replacement of Afrikaans with English as a language of instruction.[2] The protestors argued that Afrikaans limited access to the university for non-Afrikaans speaking people and that its influence extended beyond the classroom into the social fabric of residences and other shared spaces, resulting in the continued marginalisation of black students.[3]

At UP, protesting students demanded the removal of Afrikaans from the university's curriculum, arguing that Afrikaans-speaking students were being given preferential treatment because they were being taught in their mother tongue, but also that retaining Afrikaans as the main language of instruction was indicative of the lack of transformation at the university.[4] The anti-Afrikaans movements also argued that the use of Afrikaans perpetuated the cultural supremacy of the Afrikaners and undermined other cultures on campus.[5] These language protests were reminiscent of the June 1976 Soweto uprising, which saw thousands of black students protesting against the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of instruction at black schools. At the time, black learners expressed a preference for English as a language of instruction, as did the university students at the former Afrikaans-medium institutions during the recent protests.

The call by students to make English the main, if not the only language of tuition at South African institutions of higher learning, is, however, not without complications. It raises many interesting and pertinent questions, especially considering that English, like Afrikaans, is not the first language of black students and that both were largely imposed on black Africans through acts of colonial and apartheid violence.

This paper, therefore, explores the contradictions, ironies and complexities that are inherent in the students' demand to have Afrikaans replaced by English in the curriculum. The paper interrogates the linguistic and legal landscape, as well as the decolonisation of the African university discourses within which the language protests are located, with the aim of highlighting the complexities of these language protests. The paper also problematises the notion that replacing Afrikaans with English will improve access to universities for formerly disadvantaged and marginalised people. Finally, the paper questions why protesting black students, knowing well that English is also a language of colonisation, still choose it as a language of tuition over and above their own indigenous languages. Fanon[6] and Ngũgĩ's[7] theses on decolonising the mind, as well as Bourdieu's[8] concepts of the linguistic habitus and linguistic market are used to explore the complications, ironies and ambiguities of these protest movements.

South Africa's Linguistic and Legal Framework

To fully understand the meaning behind the student language protests, it is critical to locate these within the linguistic and legal landscape in which they occurred. South Africa is a linguistically diverse nation, with 11 constitutionally recognised official languages, namely Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga.[9] The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) also recognises several other African, European and Asian languages that are spoken in the country, for example, the Khoi, Nama and San languages, sign language, Arabic, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hindi, Portuguese, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu.

Thus, multilingualism and the right of every individual to choose the language in which they want to be educated, are major values enshrined in the South African Constitution. Section 30 of the Constitution stipulates:

> Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights (Section 30 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa).[10]

Further to that, Section 29 (2) of the Constitution states, 'Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable'.[11] This means that, since Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Free State and North West universities are all public institutions, students at those institutions have a right to choose to be taught in any of the official languages stipulated in the Constitution. This could be Afrikaans, English or any of the indigenous languages. However, as both sections specify, exercising this right should not infringe on the rights of others, as provided for in the Bill of Rights. These rights are also recognised by the Language Policy for Higher Education,[12] which stipulates that equity, practicability and the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices should underpin language choices. This is clearly the right that AfriForum youth, an Afrikaner cultural group, is evoking to defend their right to be taught in their mother tongue, Afrikaans. AfriForum, for example, threatened to take legal action against the University of Pretoria if it officially abolished Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, claiming that Afrikaans-speaking students, like any other students in the country, had a constitutional right to be taught in their mother tongue.[13]

While it can be argued that AfriForum is within its rights to demand tuition in Afrikaans, the Constitution is clear that exercising this right should not be done at the expense of the rights of others. The use of Afrikaans as a language of tuition has, for example, been implicated in maintaining linguistic apartheid in former Afrikaans-medium universities.[14] In a study carried out by Greenfield[15] at a dual language university, the respondents (who were students) lamented the tendency by some lecturers to code-switch to Afrikaans in courses that were supposed to be taught in English, even though students taking those courses did not understand Afrikaans. This disadvantaged non-Afrikaans speakers in the classroom and had a negative impact on their performance in some courses.[16] The documentary *Luister* (Listen), which documented the lives of students of colour who attended Stellenbosch University, also highlighted how the use of Afrikaans has led to several students dropping out of university because the language barrier makes it very difficult for students to take certain courses required for their degrees.[17] Students interviewed in the documentary pointed out the numerous ways used by lecturers to prevent them from accessing vital information that would help them complete their degrees successfully. This exclusion of non-Afrikaans speaking students from some courses is an infringement of the rights of those students, as spelt out in the Constitution of the country. It is quite ironic that almost 23 years after the democratisation of South Africa, former Afrikaans-medium universities continue to perpetuate the inequities of apartheid at their institutions, making it difficult for non-Afrikaans speaking students to access knowledge at those institutions.

Access to universities: Afrikaans versus English

While, to a certain extent, it is within the legal rights of universities to use Afrikaans as a language of learning and teaching, language laws and policies are unlikely to succeed if they are deeply resisted or resented by the people.[18] A major rallying point of the protest movements is the belief that the use of Afrikaans in teaching and learning at Afrikaans-medium universities is a major barrier for black students who want to access university education.[19] For example, the protesting students at these universities claim that Afrikaans limits access to higher education for non-Afrikaans speaking people and also perpetuates the supremacy of the Afrikaner culture at the expense of other South African cultures.[20]

Mbembe[21] defines access as the 'democratisation of access'. This means taking down barriers to entry and opening doors of institutions of higher learning to students who want to study at the institutions. The Council for Higher Education (CHE)[22] refers to this kind of access as the 'equity of physical access,' which involves allowing many formerly disadvantaged people of South Africa to enrol in institutions of higher learning. Statistics show that, since 1994, there have been massive growth (80 per cent) in the number of African students accessing universities.[23] While this might be the case, it is important not to lose sight of a different kind of access, the kind that only those who have been admitted to university education experience. Mbembe[24] refers to this type of access when he broadens the definition of access to mean not only physically gaining admission to the university, but also accessing the full gamut of experiences and knowledge in the university environment, in order to unlock the full potential of the students. He describes this as 'the possibility to inhabit a space to the extent that one can say, "This is my home. I am not a foreigner. I belong here". This is not hospitality. It is not charity'.[25] Some students who were interviewed in the documentary *Luister,* for example, referred to this type of access when they argued that they felt unwelcome on campus because of their race and language.[26] Thus, being admitted to the university is one form of access and being able to gain the knowledge that the university has to offer is another.

According to Mbembe,[27] universities should not only remove the obstacles that make it difficult for students to enrol and study at them, but they should also make their campuses welcoming and conducive to learning for students of all races. CHE[28] acknowledges that the use of a language that a student was not raised in could make university life daunting for those students. By demanding that Afrikaans be replaced by English, the protesting students are suggesting that the former is a hindrance to their success at the university, while the latter (in their view) would make higher education accessible to the formerly marginalised populations of South Africa and also that other cultures would enjoy equal growth and development on campuses.

While that might be true to a certain extent, the burden of access is, however, more complex. Blaming Afrikaans for all the problems of access that black students have to contend with in higher education is likely to camouflage some of the systemic problems that plague higher education in South Africa and which thus perpetuate the problem. Painter,[29] for example, while conceding that the use of Afrikaans in Afrikaans-medium universities could impede non-Afrikaans speakers who want to study at those institutions, refuses to see Afrikaans and English in terms of binaries. He rejects the argument that English would solve the problem of access if it replaced Afrikaans. In his

view, 'Afrikaans does not pose a problem that can be resolved simply by replacing it with English',[30] meaning that there are many deeply entrenched structural problems that need to be attended to, to enable black students to access university education.

CHE,[31] for example, concedes that some of the problems are systemic and, thus, cannot be blamed on Afrikaans. For example, CHE notes that underfunding of universities and inadequate financial aid have made it difficult for many formerly disadvantaged students to enrol in universities or even to complete their studies. Mbembe[32] also partly blames the South African government's failure to invest in higher education as a major factor in perpetuating the problem of access for black students. He points out that, currently, the South African government is investing as little as 0,6 per cent of its gross domestic product in higher education, which makes it difficult for many of these universities to open their doors to many formerly disadvantaged black students.

Kamwangamalu[33] and Prah[34] also believe that higher education could easily be accessible to black students if the government invested in the development of African languages. According to the Language Policy for Higher Education,[35] most students who enter universities in South Africa are not fully proficient in both English and Afrikaans, which means that their full potential is compromised by poor literacy. The hostile linguistic environment that black students are operating in has contributed to making the whole learning experience unproductive and the knowledge inaccessible to them. Thus, the use of English and Afrikaans as languages of tuition is partly to blame for the large number of students who either drop out before completing their studies or take too long to complete their degrees.[36]

While acknowledging that Afrikaans is a major barrier to the student learning experience at higher education institutions, it has been proven that English is equally a barrier to learning for the majority of learners who enter university in South Africa.[37] Even though most black students spend at least 12 years studying at English-only schools, they struggle with their learning because of their lack of proficiency in the language, which results in performing poorly and dropping out of school.[38] Thus, Painter[39] rejects the idea that English is a panacea to problems of access at South African institutions of higher learning when he observes that English is equally as exclusionary as Afrikaans. He points out that the argument that English is universal is an illusion because most students on campuses in South Africa find themselves unable to access the full range of the learning experience because they are not fully literate in English. Prah[40] estimates that only 10 per cent of the population can boast of literacy in a colonial language. The rest are excluded, making the learning experience in higher education institutions an unpleasant one for them.

According to Painter,[41] the argument that English can take the place of Afrikaans perpetuates an 'exclusionary ethnic agenda, an artificially depoliticised English' and hides the fact that, ideologically, South Africa's universities have not transformed at all. For Painter, transformation does not mean getting rid of either English or Afrikaans but getting rid of the 'logic of monolingualism', which promotes the interests of one ethnic group, as well as class interests. Investing in higher education, in particular in the development of other languages, therefore, appears to be the most logical way for South Africa to ensure access for all. Thus, while it is claimed that Afrikaans prevents many non-Afrikaans speakers from accessing higher education in South Africa, lack of resources has also contributed to preventing many from accessing university education.

The importance of developing African languages to enable access to learning for many Africans was recognised as early as the 1980s by the Organisation of African Union (OAU),[42] which stated that 'the adoption and practical promotion of African languages as the official languages of the state is dependent primarily and is a matter of absolute imperative on the political will of each sovereign state'. This means that governments should be willing to invest in African languages to develop them into languages of science and technology to enable black students to fully access all the knowledge available to them at institutions of higher learning. Luckett[43] underlined the importance of governments investing in higher education, in general, and African languages in particular as follows:

> '[U]ntil educational resources are developed in the African languages to a higher conceptual level and unless these languages are perceived to facilitate access to the wider society and economic advancement, the attraction of English (and other former colonial languages) as opposed to the African languages will continue to be overwhelming.'

One could, therefore, argue that the onus is on the government to address the structural problems that are preventing black students from fully accessing higher education in South Africa, rather than lay the blame on Afrikaans.

Besides, trying to solve the problem by replacing Afrikaans with English is to completely misunderstand the underlying problems that plague the post-1994 South African higher education landscape.

Choice of English language amidst decolonisation of the university narratives

Another major irony of these current language protest movements is their location within the discourse of the decolonisation of curricula in the South African higher education landscape. The genesis of these protest movements is closely linked to the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which was spearheaded by students at the University of Cape Town. The Rhodes Must Fall movement inspired similar movements at other tertiary institutions in South Africa, for example, the Open Stellenbosch movement, which is one of the cases referred to in this paper; and the #FeesMustFall movement at Wits University.[44] What started off as a simple demand for the removal of the statue of Rhodes from the UCT campus grounds, soon morphed into a fully-fledged decolonisation movement, which set its sights on decolonising both the curricula of that university, as well as its spatial boundaries, such as halls of residence. So powerful was this protest movement that it became the face of decolonisation debates, both nationally and at other South African universities.[45]

The movement drew attention to different critical issues affecting higher education institutions in the country, for example, outsourcing of jobs and patriarchal practices on campuses.[46] This forced South Africans from all walks of life to question whether any substantial transformation had taken place in the curricula of higher education since South Africa's democratisation in 1994. The Rhodes Must Fall movement thus became an iconic movement that is synonymous with

decolonisation and the fight against all forms of social injustice on campuses around the country, as well as the struggle against white supremacy and privilege on campuses.[47] It is within this context that the language protests emerged at former Afrikaans-medium institutions.

However, the call to replace Afrikaans with English is ironic in the sense that Rhodes, who is a symbol of everything colonial in South Africa, and whom the students would like to obliterate from history, is an iconic figure of the English culture in the whole of Southern Africa – a culture whose language is English. It is interesting to note that students see Rhodes, whom they want to consign to the dustbin of history, and the English language, which the students want as a substitute for Afrikaans, as being divorced from each other, and yet the two are two sides of the same coin. In fact, one could coin the phrase, 'English is to Rhodes as Rhodes is to English'. Rhodes brought British rule to Southern Africa, and also ushered in the English culture, of which the English language is a central cog. It is thus ironic that the protesting students, who are unhappy about the Afrikaans culture being privileged on their campuses, appear not to be averse to having the English culture dominate the university landscape in South Africa.

Behind this call for English to substitute Afrikaans seems to be an assumption that English is an innocent and benign language. However, like Afrikaans, English is not a neutral or impartial language. According to Willinsky,[48] during the colonial era, English 'was made an instrument of domination and silencing; it was used to regulate and police access to authority and knowledge among the colonised peoples'. Phillipson[49] also argues that 'wherever colonial or imperial overlordship is established the culture and language of the conqueror is invariably imposed on the conqueror'. A good example is that of Japan's colonisation of Korea between 1910 and 1945. According to Hatada,[50] the Japanese imposed their language on Koreans: all newspapers and magazines in the Korean language were closed and the Korean Language Society was shut done. Speaking Korean at school was a punishable act and Koreans were forced to speak Japanese and adopt Japanese family names.[51] Prah[52] also points out how the English, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, attempted to get rid of the Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic languages by outlawing them or marginalising speakers of those languages. In South Africa, when the English conquered the Cape in 1795, they imposed English as the language of administration and the courts, even though 90 per cent of the colony spoke Dutch.[53] In their language policies of the time, all other languages, including indigenous languages, were marginalised and not given consideration.

While one can understand why students have an aversion for Afrikaans, because of its links to the policy of apartheid, it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that English is not without its own historical baggage. Historically, English is associated with colonialism, which Fanon[54] describes as a violent institution. According to Fanon[55] colonialism represents 'violence in its natural state and [that] it will only yield when confronted with greater violence'. This violence is not only physical, but also epistemic and psychological in nature.[56] Epistemic violence is the kind that targets the knowledge and language(s) of the colonised,[57] while psychological violence refers to the injury or harm done to the human psyche of the colonised to decrease their sense of self-worth and integrity, as well as to disempower them.[58]

Gupta[59] extends the argument further when she notes that the direct and visible colonisation that existed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has given way to new forms of colonisation, which are indirect and invisible in nature. Formerly colonised people, in the twenty-first century,

continue to perpetuate the stranglehold of the West by continuing to privilege Western ways of knowing and culture, as seen in the choice of English as a language of choice. Prah,[60] for example, declares that the students' demand to replace Afrikaans with English was merely an act of changing one slave master for another. In his view, the use of English continues to keep the creativity of Africans in bondage.

To Ngũgĩ,[61] 'the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation, language was the means of spiritual subjugation'. Ngũgĩ further argues that language is the most important vehicle used by the coloniser to imprison the colonised's soul. This means that when colonisers imposed their language on the colonised, they were, in fact, destroying an integral part of the culture and identity of the latter.[62] This, in turn, resulted in the creation of a 'mimic man', who saw the world through the eyes of the coloniser, constantly rejecting his own culture, lauding the coloniser's values, language and mannerisms and upholding them as universal.[63] According to Gupta[64], this attitude and blind mimicry, as well as the acceptance of Western ways of knowing, are fatal to the growth of the individual and the nation as a whole. This prompted Benson[65] to argue that the linguistic habitus and market (discussed below in detail) make the formerly colonised subjects passively contribute to their oppression. Bourdieu[66] describes this passivity as 'dispositions which are impalpably inculcated through a long and slow process of acquisition by the sanctions of the linguistic market'.

What this implies is that the British imposition of English on indigenous populations should not be taken as a benign process meant to benefit the colonised. Thus, while one can understand why Afrikaans is disliked because of its link with apartheid, one should not lose sight of the subtle, but still violent imposition of English on the psyche of the colonised. The strategy of imposing English on the colonised was well calculated to benefit the British colonial enterprise.[67] Instead of using weapons of war, which provided a faster way of subjugating the colonised, the British, in many instances, chose a subtle strategy of 'cultural co-optation' to impose their culture and language on the colonised, because it was considered a 'more benign […]and [a] strategically favoured method of imperial overlordship and "pacification"'.[68] The British developed a class of colonised people, who spoke English and adopted British mannerisms in order to participate in the colonial administrative enterprise and who also acted as a buffer between the coloniser and the colonised.[69] Ashby[70] describes how Macaulay, in India, sought to create 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'. In colonial South Africa, the British also introduced English to a selected class of black people, whom they used as a buffer between themselves and the rest of the population.[71] These educated elite, according to Prah,[72] are so alienated from their cultures that they have become 'the main players in the game of the destruction of African languages', making it impossible for the masses to progress to 'modernity'.

It is important, therefore, to understand that the influence of English on the colonised is both insidious and long-term and that it has the potential to retard the development of modern states. Prah[73] concludes by saying:

> We do not want to be slaves neither do we want to compete with Shakespeare in his language … If we try to do this, we will be perpetual second-rate Englishmen not Africans … 'unfit men and beaten races'. We want to move forward with our belonging and our own cultural steam. To do this, we must lay down once and for all, the burden of English.

One is also reminded of the words of the former president of the Orange Free State, Martinus Theunis Steyn (1896-1902), which he used in his campaign for Afrikaans to be fully recognised in the Union of South Africa: '… the language of the conqueror in the mouth of the conquered is the language of slaves'.[74] Implied in these words, is that Afrikaners and, by extension, Africans can never consider themselves free until they begin to develop and use their own languages. It is also worth noting that throughout their protests, very little mention is made of indigenous languages, which, according to Mbembe,[75] are central to a decolonised university. Mbembe[76] argues, 'A decolonized university puts African languages at the center of its teaching and learning project […]. The African university of tomorrow will be multilingual. It will teach (in) Swahili, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Shona, Yoruba, Hausa, Lingala, Gikuyu'. The students' call for English, rather than African languages to replace Afrikaans could thus be seen as going against the very tenets of decolonisation.

The next section interrogates the reasons why protesting students insist on English becoming the main language of instruction at South African universities despite its many limitations.

The linguistic habitus and linguistic market of the protesting students

The perception among protesting students that English is a better language than Afrikaans could be explained using Bourdieu's thesis of the linguistic habitus.[77] Bourdieu describes habitus as a set of dispositions that one acquires in society as one grows up. People's perceptions of the world around them are shaped by their experiences, the history they are taught, their culture and basically what they consider to be of value. Similarly, linguistic habitus refers to a set of dispositions that we acquire as we learn to speak within a particular context.[78] This means that the way people are raised, the context within which they grow up and the value they put on the languages of their society, will determine how they view the languages being used in their society.

Bourdieu's thesis, applied to the South African context, could explain why South African students (especially those from formerly disadvantaged societies) detest Afrikaans and would rather see English used in its place. Scholars[79] argue that the roots of this dislike for Afrikaans lies in its association with the policy of apartheid. Van Rensburg,[80] for example, points out that when the National Party came to power, it embarked on a programme to firmly entrench its much-hated policy of apartheid. This policy, according to Giliomee,[81] disenfranchised coloured voters, banned sex across racial lines and segregated people along racial lines. Through this policy, Afrikaans was forcibly imposed on all socio-economic and cultural institutions of the country, thus making Afrikaans a hated symbol of Afrikaner nationalism.[82] Most National Party representatives spoke Afrikaans, which resulted in a strong link between Afrikaans and apartheid being formed.[83] Afrikaans became a symbol of the people's oppression and a 'medium used when white policemen arrested black pass offenders or when white civil servants ordered blacks or coloured people out of their houses in racially mixed slum areas'.[84] Jakes Gerwel, a black professor of Afrikaans stated that 'Afrikaans has become the defining characteristic [of the state] which the greatest part of the population knows, particularly by its arrogance and cruelty'.[85]

So unpopular was Afrikaans amongst black people that a 1972 survey done among young Sowetans revealed that 98 per cent of them did not want to be taught in Afrikaans.[86] Half of those

who participated in the survey described Afrikaners as 'the most cruel and the least sympathetic people in South Africa' and, because of that, they preferred English, which was considered the language of commerce and industry.[87] In 1976, attempts by the National Party led government to impose Afrikaans as a language of instruction in black schools backfired when black students in Soweto took to the streets to protest this imposition.[88]

Thus, it would appear that the seeds of hatred for Afrikaans were planted in the minds of the indigenous populations of South Africa early on during apartheid, because the language symbolised the oppression and the indignities they suffered at the hands of the apartheid government. This could explain why black students today have an aversion to Afrikaans. The linguistic habitus of the students has been influenced by growing up in a South Africa that associates Afrikaans with oppression and inequality. The hatred for Afrikaans is deeply embedded in the psyche of South Africans and can also be seen in the decline in the number of people who speak Afrikaans as their mother tongue: from 18 per cent of the population in the 1970s to 15 per cent in 2000 and 13,5 per cent in 2011.[89] Giliomee[90] argues that even mother tongue speakers of the language are abandoning it for other languages.

The same linguistic habitus that inculcated the belief that Afrikaans is a language of oppression also promoted the perception that English is a language of success and upward mobility. In colonial South Africa, for example, in the early years of the nineteenth century, the British introduced English to black people in the Eastern Cape, and later Natal, through missionary education.[91] By the end of the century, the British had created an influential educated elite of black educators, writers, ministers and political leaders who were fluent in English, for example, John Tengo Jabavu, Sol Plaatje, Gwayi Tyamzashe and John Knox Bokwe.[92] English thus became the language of the educated social elite – a language of economic empowerment and upward social mobility, which black people aspired for.[93] Through this small class of elites, who, according to Prah,[94] made up about 10 per cent of the colonised population, the hegemonic power of the English language was established in British colonies.

Thus, historically, the linguistic habitus of black South Africans fostered the belief that English is a language to be aspired to if one is to advance economically in society, while Afrikaans was labelled as a language of oppression. That English has an instrumental value for students and their communities is something that cannot be wished away overnight. Students often choose a language based on their needs and interests.[95] This resonates with Bourdieu's[96] thesis on the linguistic market, in which he argues that one's choice of language is usually informed by one's interests. There are several languages on the linguistic market and students choose the languages that they believe will assist them in their quest to move up in mainstream society.

In South Africa, English is largely perceived by many formerly disadvantaged people as a language of commerce and industry that could unlock doors for them in the labour market.[97] During the colonial era, as is the case in the twenty-first century, English was a requirement for upward social mobility in the colonial hierarchy for black people – if you wanted to prosper in the colonial world, you had to be proficient in the language of the coloniser.[98] According to Prah,[99] the roots of contemporary preference for colonial languages goes back to colonial times. In a public lecture that he delivered at the University of Venda, Prah[100] noted that the notion that African languages provide little or no economic reward or social mobility is shared by many black people in society.

Students who study African languages in many African universities are derided and ridiculed because these languages are dismissed as being of no consequence to the economic and social progression of people.

In a study carried out by Dube[101] at three major journalism education and training institutions, lecturers at one institution indicated that transforming the languages of that institution was proving difficult because students wanted to be taught in languages that would ensure that they got jobs in the labour market. The introduction of indigenous languages in the journalism classroom was rejected by students because they believed that these would not enhance their marketability in the job market. It is, therefore, not surprising that students at Afrikaans-medium universities are insisting on being taught in English rather than Afrikaans. English is perceived as being more global in nature and thus has more potential to open more doors for students than Afrikaans, which is spatially limited to South Africa.

However, according to Kamwangamalu[102] and Prah,[103] indigenous languages could also enjoy the same instrumental value of English if a huge investment is made in developing indigenous languages so that they become languages of science and technology. Noting the examples of Afrikaans, Bahasa Malaya and Modern Hebrew, Prah[104] posits that it is possible to develop indigenous languages to the extent that they can become languages of science and technology in the same class as English and Afrikaans. When that happens, indigenous languages will then become more competitive in the linguistic market. In his collection of essays on decolonising the mind, Ngũgĩ[105] argues that, without cultural control, Africans can never hope to control their economic and political institutions. To Ngũgĩ,[106] unless there is linguistic decolonisation, which puts African languages at the centre, Africans will remain beholden to Western powers – both economically and politically. Linguistic decolonisation will, therefore, empower people and enable them to attain self-realisation.

Conclusion

This paper examined the student language protests at Afrikaans-medium universities. It highlighted the contradictions, ironies and complexities of the students' demands that Afrikaans be replaced by English. The paper discussed the conflicting rights of Afrikaans-speaking and non-Afrikaans-speaking students. In trying to claim their constitutional rights, both sets of students should guard against the danger of denying some sections of the student body those same constitutional rights that they are claiming for themselves. Just as the Constitution provides for the rights of Afrikaans-speaking students, so it protects the rights of non-Afrikaans-speaking students. This reveals the complexities regarding the issue of language of instruction at South African universities. Universities, therefore, have a delicate task of balancing the linguistic interests of all students on their campuses.

The paper also interrogated claims that Afrikaans makes it difficult for black students to access higher education in South Africa. To a certain extent, this is true. However, studies have shown that there are also structural problems in the higher education landscape that make it difficult for many potential black students to be admitted to institutions of higher learning. For example,

government's failure to adequately fund higher education, Afrikaner separatism (which continues to disenfranchise black students), the commercialisation of universities and poor pre-university education have all been blamed for the failure of formerly marginalised students who enter universities. Thus, putting all the blame on Afrikaans would result in more serious systemic problems not being addressed.

Besides this, the English language that the students are calling for as a panacea to their problems is equally exclusionary, especially when it comes to accessing knowledge. This paper argues that many students who enter higher education in South Africa are not proficient in English and, therefore, struggle to acquire the full range of knowledge that it is their right to get. The paper appreciates that English has more value, globally, in the linguistic market, which explains why students would rather be instructed in English than in Afrikaans. However, it is vital that government invests in the development of indigenous languages, so that they can become languages of science and technology. The paper argues that the development of indigenous languages is what will truly give many formerly marginalised people access to universities. Both English and Afrikaans are not the mother tongues of many black students in South Africa, which means that as long as the two are used as languages of instruction at universities, the majority of students will always struggle in their learning.

Notes and References

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