

"Unnecessary Noise" - Language and Struggle in SA

by Jeremy Cronin

In South African prisons, the home of 5 out of every 1000 South Africans, there is a very interesting book. The book is entitled "The Prisoner's Handbook". One of the most interesting features of this book is that, despite its helpful title, it is virtually impossible as a prisoner to ever get to see it. But, if you are a prisoner (and the statistical probabilities are higher in our country than anywhere else in the world), and if you ever happen to secure a copy of the Handbook, you will come across an interesting sub-clause. This sub-clause bans, and I quote: "the writing and/or reciting of poetry, singing, whistling, or the making of any other unnecessary noise."

In this paper I want to delve a little into this category, "unnecessary noise". In doing so I will be considering very briefly:

- i. how language is involved in national oppression;
- ii. how, in active political mobilisation over the last period, our people have begun to wage struggle on the terrain of language itself; and
- iii. some issues concerning a future language policy in a liberated South Africa.

i. Language and oppression

There are many dimensions across which language is used as a means of oppression in apartheid South Africa. I would like to outline a few of these.

Who owns the word?

We are familiar with the phrase: "Being deprived of a voice in the land of one's birth." In many ways that phrase has more than a metaphorical meaning. In a great variety of social institutions and practices in apartheid South Africa people are, literally, deprived of words, they are disqualified as speakers. The prison "Handbook's" categorisation of a number of written and verbal acts as "unnecessary noise" is one of the more explicit cases.

But on the production line in factories the bosses also attempt to enforce their own code of silence. Talking at work to your fellow worker is taken as a sign of shirking. Replying to a supervisor or to management is "terugpraat", and is classified as indiscipline which can lead to warnings and dismissals.

In many DET class-rooms a similar code of language restraint is enforced. Pupils are allowed to repeat after the teacher like parrots, but any linguistic creativity, any speech that is more than the trailing echo of the teacher's voice is liable to be classified as noise and punished accordingly. This is in marked contrast to elite white schools where pupils are encouraged to speak up for themselves. Where questioning is seen as a sign of intelligence, of imagination and of a budding (to give it its real name) entrepreneurship.

In many official situations where black people encounter the regime - the pension queue, the unemployment queue, the ticket office, the housing office - again language restraint prevails. But it is not just in the relations of boss to worker, teacher to student, authorities to the oppressed that codes of silence are enforced.

In a profoundly sexist society like our own, women, especially black women, are all too often silenced as women. Those who do not know their place, which is a silent place, are cut out of conversation, their words are belittled or disregarded.

The oral and the written

Another form of language oppression is the favouring in a multitude of contexts of the written and printed over the oral. In South Africa this has devastating consequences considering that an estimated 60% of adults (mostly black adults) are illiterate in any language whatsoever. For them a printed text is a frightening, foreign and authoritative reality that seems to confirm their own ignorance and inferiority. Knowledge, culture, literature that is expressed orally tends to be downgraded in the dominant cultural values of our society.

This is not to say that we should romanticise illiteracy, or have an anarchistic attitude towards printed texts which obviously are able to accomplish numerous functions that the oral cannot. But, while campaigning for mass literacy, we need also to be sensitive to forms of communication and the enabling or disqualifying implications they may have.

Official and non-official languages

The official status of the two major "white" languages (English and Afrikaans), and the non-official status in the greater part of the country of the mother-tongue languages of the overwhelming majority of our people, is an important factor in reproducing their colonial oppression. It contributes directly to that characteristic

colonial experience - being made to feel a foreigner in the country of your own birth. The non-official status of the mother-tongue languages of our people deepens their exclusion from speech, it enforces the silence we have already noted.

Dominant and downgraded dialects

Even in those situations where your mother-tongue is indeed "official" in the greater part of South Africa, the particular dialect that has come to be codified as the standard is likely to be very foreign to you if you happen to be black. An obvious example of this is the Coloured community, the majority of whom have as their mother-tongue a dialect of Afrikaans sometimes referred to as "Kaaps". Ironically, it was precisely this Coloured community that was the prime nurturer of the indigenous patois of Dutch that came to be standardised as Afrikaans. But a Coloured student, articulating in an Afrikaans class the language he or she has spoken from childhood, is likely to be disqualified for being "ungrammatical", for "mispronunciation", or for using "anglicisms".

Divide and rule

The question of the standardisation of particular dialects and the implications of this for oppression also need to be considered when we turn to the indigenous African languages of our country. What have emerged in many cases as separate standard languages - South Sotho as opposed to North Sotho, Xhosa as opposed to Zulu - represent, in fact, more less arbitrary carvings out and standardisations of particular dialects that belong to a continuum of dialects within a single language family (Sotho, Nguni, etc.). The standardisation of a particular dialect has often had to do with the vagaries of history, like the location of the major mission stations that undertook the original codifying of African languages into the written form.

Apartheid colonialism has used linguistic diversity, and it is sometimes (although not always) a very arbitrary diversity, to reinforce its policies of ethnic divide and rule. The linguistic cynicism of this divide and rule has often been commented upon. FW de Klerk, who continues to espouse "group rights", would consider the white community in South Africa as a single ethnic group, despite the existence of two major language communities (Afrikaans and English), and at least one other relatively substantial minority language (Portuguese). But in the case of the African majority a minor dialect difference between one person and another is often enough to have them classified into separate, so-called "nations".

These, then, are some of the dimensions across which oppression is exerted in and through language. But this oppression is now under intense challenge.

ii. The struggle and language

In the case of Frelimo, PAIGC, or MPLA, for instance, it was the rural liberated zone that became the laboratory for the unfolding cultural and linguistic policies of these national liberation movements. In our case, we cannot speak of liberated zones in this sense. But our mass democratic movement, which has grown in size, unity, and combativity over the 1980s, and which is unique in its level of development, certainly among African national liberation struggles - this mass democratic movement has forged around it in the industrial zones, in the townships (both urban and rural), in the school class-room and university lecture hall, in places of worship, our own equivalents of the liberated zone. And it is within this space that has been opened up, in these sites of struggle, that a contest around and for language is occurring. These struggles are having a direct impact upon the various dimensions of language oppression that I have already enumerated.

In the face of the attempts to disqualify speech on the shop-floor, the collective organisation of trade unions has begun to give workers, literally, a voice. Who can say what is now a much more radically contested issue. The racist taunts and insults of white foremen and management are now no longer taken for granted. Collective "terugpraat" has become a possibility.

In the class-room student organisation has begun to impact upon codes of language conduct. The radicalisation of teacher organisations, the direct result of student militancy, has begun to offer possibilities of students and teachers interacting as more than the silenced and the silencers. It is now possible, in joint People's Education workshops, for teachers to listen to highly articulate students saying (and I quote verbatim from the record of a recent meeting) :

"Comrades, die struggle vra 'n groot sacrifice van elkeen van o's. Dit is net deur commitment en struggle dat o's uiteindelik o's vryheid sal kry."

As an utterance that would have been disqualified as sub-standard Afrikaans in a class-room. But the teachers remain silent in the face of the articulateness and maturity of their students. The educator is being educated.

Through the mass democratic women's organisations, women are acquiring the confidence, among other things, to speak in collective situations, overcoming the silence imposed upon them, not just by the regime, not just by the bosses and the madams, but also all too often by our own organisations.

The political culture of the mass democratic movement, while it has spawned dozens of media projects, is also thoroughly oral in character. Many of the most important forms of mass mobilisation

and organisation rely on songs, speeches, chants, questions and answers. At the same time, running in tandem with the mass democratic movement, there are a number of adult literacy programmes. As long as state power remains in the hands of the oppressing colonial bloc it will be well nigh impossible to launch a mass adult literacy campaign that will make a major dent in this problem. Nevertheless, the various MDM aligned literacy projects have already amassed considerable skills and expertise on the ground. Our future language policies will have much to learn from their experience. A project like Learn and Teach, with its exemplary use of a politically relevant, but simple and accessible English, is already a model that ANC cadres can fruitfully study.

The mass democratic movement tends to use English as its major lingua franca, but in many cases (though still not in enough) care is taken to ensure that nobody is disqualified from using his or her mother-tongue. In the trade union sector, in particular, collective meetings frequently involve the use of several languages with running translations provided. This can certainly be wearying and cumbersome, but the imperatives of democratic enablement far outweigh the drawbacks. The Cosatu national congresses have used modern conference technology to ensure simultaneous translation in half a dozen languages over earphones for all delegates.

While allowing for, and empowering the diverse languages of our people in many of its forums, the mass democratic movement is also a major factor for consolidating a unifying national culture. People drawn from a great diversity of cultural and language communities find themselves united behind common national slogans, songs and banners. This emergent cultural and linguistic unity sometimes assumes, of course, its own idiosyncracies - like the Coloured SANS workers on strike in Bellville South in 1985 emulating their African comrades singing of "Manyanani Basebenzi" with their own translation: "Money - Not Mercedes Benzes".

Many of the numerous progressive service organisations and community newspaper projects aligned with the mass democratic movement are now also increasingly using indigenous languages in print. These are throwing up a wealth of lessons. My own experience with a political education project directed at workers in the Western Cape region highlighted some unforeseen features pertaining to the question - which is preferable, use of a lingua franca or mother-tongue languages in educational resources? A series of booklets on the basic facts and concepts of our struggle - the history of the ANC, the Freedom Charter, Organisational Discipline, the National Democratic Struggle, etc. - were translated from English into Afrikaans and Xhosa. The translations were well received, and all the feed-back indicated that many workers found they had, for the first time, grasped certain basic concepts which had eluded them in English. In addition, those more literate and politically developed, who were using the booklets as lecture notes, were unanimous that the translations enabled them to explain

what they were teaching to fellow workers much more easily than ever before.

All of this we had hoped for and expected. But there was a further common reaction which we had not anticipated. The enthusiasm for the translations was invariably accompanied by a demand for the English version as well. The comrades wanted to go back over in English what they had now assimilated in their mother tongues. They wanted to be able to hook into national discussions and debates. A great number of linguistic lessons like this are being learnt daily on the ground at home.

I have tried to map out, very sketchily and at times anecdotally, some ways in which the emergent mass democratic movement has begun, necessarily, in its struggle to grapple with language. This is all very much a process, it is uneven, incomplete. Gains are made, and reverses are suffered. The space opened up is always tenuous. But despite the regime's successive states of emergency, despite the detention of some 40 000 mass democratic comrades in the past four years, the regime has failed in its major objective. It has not been able to fundamentally reverse the tide of the mass democratic movement, on all its many fronts of activity, not least on the front of language itself.

iii. A few considerations for a language policy in a liberated SA

If the struggle for liberation is, as I have tried to illustrate, always already a struggle in and for language, then the achievement of liberation will inevitably also be a major linguistic event. But in a liberated South Africa we will not be able to rely simply on spontaneous developments. A clear, well elaborated language policy will be needed. I would like here simply to offer some thoughts on the issue of whether and how we should develop a single, national lingua franca.

As far as I know, with the exception of some East African countries (where Swahili is the national lingua franca) and many of the North African countries (where Arabic is the national language), most independent African countries have opted for the former colonial language (French, Portuguese, English) as their national lingua franca. There are two obvious advantages for doing so:

- * this avoids having to choose one of the indigenous languages over all the others, thus potentially fanning ethnic rivalries and resentments;
- * the possibilities that the former colonial languages offer in terms of international communication - and this international

communication includes, of course, communication between African countries.

Already, in a great variety of ways English has emerged within our country de facto (and not just because it is one of the two official languages) as the major national lingua franca. If, however, English is to be consolidated purposefully as our future national lingua franca, then there are a number of very important points to be considered.

i. Such a consolidation will only achieve its desired goal - namely the fullest development of national unity - if it is part of a general language policy that diverts considerable resources at the same time into the development of all indigenous languages. The question of a lingua franca must be distinguished from the issue of official and non-official languages. All the languages of our people must be considered official, in the sense that they will all have an official standing in the institutional practices of a liberated South Africa, none should be disqualified.

ii. The consolidation of a single national lingua franca will depend above all on making this lingua franca truly available to all South African citizens. A language policy must be an integral component of an educational policy in which priority is given to overcoming illiteracy. There are a number of inspiring examples (among them Cuba in the years immediately after the revolution) in which countries with even higher illiteracy rates than our own have been able to more or less totally eradicate this social inequality.

iii. However, and this underlines the first point made above, linguistic and pedagogical research confirms the importance of first acquiring literacy in one's own mother-tongue. This applies to literacy acquisition in both childhood and in adult years. The speed and depth of literacy acquired in one's mother-tongue far outstrips literacy first acquired in a second language. Mother tongue literacy provides a much sounder basis for subsequent literacy in other languages, which might then include a national lingua franca.

iv. If indeed a policy for fostering a single lingua franca is adopted, then attention will also have to be given to regional clusters of languages, for example Zulu and English in Natal, Xhosa, Afrikaans and English in the Western Cape, etc. Such clusters may often possibilities for developing coherent regional language policies in regard to education and media. However, a great deal of care and caution will be needed, and certain more polyglot regions, like the crucial PWV area, may prove less amenable to such a policy.

Finally,

v. If, indeed, English gets to be consolidated as a single

national lingua franca then, as revolutionaries committed to a democratic South Africa, we shall have to practise regicide. The Queen in Queen's English will have to be dethroned and beheaded. The English that we standardise and promote will have to be the English in the mouths of the majority of our people. It will have to be an English whose pronunciations, whose syntactical tendencies, and whose vocabulary will not be dismissed in queenly tones as "unnecessary noise". Instead these national features will be valued for the reflection they provide of the realities of our land.