

Master one language before tackling another

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I applaud the University of KwaZulu-Natal for introducing isiZulu as a course for first-year students. But I wonder why this otherwise progressive move was made compulsory.



Tara-Lee Strydom and Carlyn Strydom dressed up to represent the Zulu Women heritage.. 24 September last year Photograph by: The Times/Moeketsi Moticoe



*Prof Jonathan Jansen
Photograph by: Times LIVE*

" Will this choice by the university encourage Zulu cultural nationalism"

This is not the same as a common core in physics for all science students or a compulsory module in some level of computer competency for all computer science students. Nor is this the same as an interdisciplinary undergraduate core curriculum providing all students with an intellectual foundation for learning in all the disciplines.

IsiZulu is certainly a strong regional language also spoken in other pockets of the country, such as Johannesburg. But if the logic is to recognise indigenous languages - which I fully support - what does this move mean for a student from Harare, Cape Town or Thohoyandou who came to Durban for a specific qualification, and will return to their home town to practice actuarial science or teaching the foundation phase in a language other than Zulu?

In other words, since almost all South African universities exist in areas with different regional languages, can one university really make compulsory its area language for all its students? We know, further, that unless a new language is continuously spoken by new adult learners, especially, the speaker soon loses capacity in that language.

While non-Zulu speaking students practising in some professions in KwaZulu-Natal and some other places will benefit from a basic facility in this beautiful language, many will not - either by choice of occupation or place of work.

But there is another reason why the "compulsory" element should be a concern. Do people really learn languages by requiring it of them? Language is not chemistry or geology; it is an explosive symbolism in so many countries, and our recent history makes that abundantly clear.

Surely the task of my colleagues should be to make the language so exciting and interesting from a curricular and pedagogical point of view that more and more students would want to take isiZulu for its literary, historical and cultural richness rather than because it is compulsory. In purely practical terms this is a gamble anyway as the university might lose whatever diversity it has left in its student body, thereby losing an important audience for living our languages in the learning commons.

Given our tribalist history there should be another concern. Will this choice by the university in fact encourage a kind of Zulu cultural nationalism that very often lies just below the surface of this very conservative region of the country?

By exempting mother tongue speakers this is the impression that could be left among the exempt students; why not, to counter any threat of ethnocentrism, have Zulu-speaking students learn Shangaan or Sotho for that would open all students to the love and learning of indigenous languages other than "their own"? This is an important concern since too many South Africans still tie language to ethnic and racial identity rather than to a more progressive sense of language resources which should be open and accessible to all.

The arguments by some "experts" in the wake of these announcements that this decision by one university will somehow trickle down to schools, where teachers will feel compelled to teach indigenous languages, sounds like an unhealthy dose of political correctness combined with naïve thinking about how curricula change. This will not happen, in part because we do not have enough teachers, let alone competent teachers, who can teach the range of indigenous languages in our country.

For indigenous languages to flourish, the late Neville Alexander used to argue, we need more official recognition of neglected tongues, such as in public addresses in parliament. Then, of course, there is that other political elephant in the room: would Afrikaans pass as an indigenous language in the Northern or Western Cape?

I raise these questions because of the absence of complexity in the media debate and the usual quick hardline positions for ("our languages have been oppressed") or against ("our history teaches us, you can't force people to learn a language") the learning of isiZulu.

One could also argue that this inward turn is itself a regressive move within the global 21st-century university. While universities across the world are teaching Mandarin and Spanish to counter-penetrate (as Ali Mazrui might call it) a global economic world, we close in on ourselves in an almost cultural protectionism around indigenous languages. The truth is many of our students are very weak in the official language of almost all our universities, which is English, and so we could end up spreading incompetence (or limited competence) in more than one language rather than investing in high competence in one of them first.