

South African Language Rights Bulletin



Welcome to the last issue in the third volume of the South African Language Rights Bulletin (SALRB). The aim of the monthly Bulletin is to provide the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) with an overview of the developments on the language front in South Africa, as reflected in the country's mainstream newspapers. English- and Afrikaans-language newspaper records are drawn from the SA Media database, while Zulu records are collected from the bi-weekly *Ilanga*, as well as the daily and Sunday newspaper, *Isoleswe*.

Although the main focus is on language rights, the Bulletin also covers other language-related problems. The contentious issue of name changes in contemporary South Africa, though related to the issue of language problems, is dealt with separately. Newspaper coverage of aspects of language promotion, language research and language (rights) activism also receives attention.

Owing to the complex data-processing system of SA Media, the collection of printed media records analysed in this Bulletin is not complete, and conclusions reached are of a preliminary nature. Adjustments will be made in the corresponding annual South African Language Rights Monitor (SALRM), which will be prepared for PanSALB once the data-collection process has been completed. In the meantime, the SALRB aims to help PanSALB to remain abreast of language (rights) developments in the country.

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On language promotion: Two letters to the editor

In a letter to the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* (03/08/09), Sabata-Mpho Mokae congratulated the Northern Cape Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC) on the release of a collection of Tswana proverbs and idioms. These expressions, he wrote, “are the carriers of ancient wisdom and cultural heritage”. Sociolinguists would agree, arguing that a language is an index or a reflection of the ethnic culture of its speakers, partly because domains of experience which are important to that culture become grammaticalised into the language (Romaine 1994:29).

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Responding to a remark by Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande to the effect that “English [is] the way to unity” in South Africa, Liz Gunner from the University of the Witwatersrand raised the following question in a letter to *The Weekender* (08/08/09): “Do we really want one language for the boardroom and the others for the streets and taxis, the valleys and the hills?”. She asserted that, in the interest of democracy, multilingualism should be promoted.

Campus news

Language continues to be a burning issue on the campuses of South Africa’s historically Afrikaans universities. Along with transformation and racial integration, language policy featured prominently in the campaigns of the various parties (Cope, the DA, the FF+ and Sasco) that participated in the recent election of a student representative council at the University of the Free State. As the party furthest to the right, the FF+ drew on the discourse of diversity and the discourse of rights to defend its position: “*Ons bepleit diversiteit sonder benadeling van individuele of groepregte [...] Praktiese uitdagings is veral die uitlewing van geloof en taal*” (*Volksblad*, 18/08/09; cf. also *Volksblad*, 20/08/09).

In Stellenbosch, the senate of the town’s university expressed their support for the way in which language matters had been handled by Prof. Russel Botman. In a motion that was passed unanimously, the institution’s most senior academics distanced themselves from “certain council members, individuals and external parties [who] question the bona fides of the rector and his management team in public” (*Rapport*, 30/08/09). The Vice-rector: Teaching, Prof. Magda Fourie, confirmed in a statement that an unspecified minimum amount of tuition at the University of Stellenbosch (US) would continue to be offered in Afrikaans, despite the planned introduction of parallel-medium instruction. The mission of the US, as summarised by the rector, is to become a medium-sized research-driven institution that produces completely bilingual students who have also gained experience in rural areas (*Beeld*, 12/08/09).

The development of Afrikaans that paralleled the rise of Afrikaner political power had lifted Afrikaners out of illiteracy, poverty and living in the shadow of the might of English.

A great tragedy of our time is that unlike the Afrikaners of the 20th century, the leaders of African language speakers have abandoned their languages as the driver of literacy, education and economic transformation. These fail because those who cannot measure up in English are excluded from the game.

The new English-speaking elite black leadership has set in motion a tidal wave of English language power that English educational institutions and business are happy to ride, just as business rode the back of apartheid with the same baleful consequences.

As a common language of communication English is important but we English speakers need to abandon our arrogant assumption that everyone must become English to participate and succeed in education, training and the economy.

Ed Coombe in the
Cape Times, 06/08/09

Before the Constitutional Court: The issue of single-medium Afrikaans schools

On 20 August 2009, the battle between the Mpumalanga education department and Hoërskool Ermelo (HE) reached the Constitutional Court. As *Business Day* (21/08/09) reported, the provincial education department had asked the Court to overturn a Supreme Court of Appeal judgement which stated that the “department’s withdrawal of the governing body’s function to determine the language policy of the school was unlawful; that the head of department’s appointment of [an] interim committee was unlawful; and that the decision taken by the unlawfully appointed interim committee [to change the school’s language policy from Afrikaans-only to parallel-medium] was invalid”. The department had taken these steps in January 2007 in an attempt to accommodate learners who wished to be taught in English at the school. An application by HE’s School Governing Body (SGB) to review the decision was dismissed in the high court (January 2008); but, as mentioned, it was upheld on appeal (March 2009).

According to Wim Trengove, SC for HE and its SGB, the only issue before the court was “whether the remedy adopted by the head of department to introduce the new language policy was lawful” (*Business Day*, 21/08/09). The department argued, contra the school, that it had indeed acted lawfully when it withdrew the competency of the SGB to determine the HE’s language policy: “By not taking into account that circumstances had changed, [the SGB] had failed to perform its functions in relation to the language policy” (*Business Day*, 21/08/09). The department’s advocate, Bantubonke Tokota SC, told the court that the school’s failure to revise its Afrikaans-only policy amounted to racial discrimination. Trengove, in turn, said that the department had done nothing to address the classroom shortage crisis in the Ermelo area, apart from forcing a single-medium Afrikaans school to change its language policy (*Beeld*, 21/08/09).

During the court proceedings, Justice Kate O’Regan expressed serious concern about the critical shortage of schools in Ermelo. While she conceded that a language-policy change at HE – the only school that was not overcrowded at the beginning of 2007 – would hardly have solved the problem, she told Trengove that his client’s attitude bothered her: “The school contends that they have a right to a 100% Afrikaans medium and are very proud of their pass rate, but they don’t care about everyone else down the road” (*The Times*, 21/08/09). According to Justice Albie Sachs, HE’s SGB failed to appreciate the educational value of diversity: “If there’s something of primary importance in this country,” he said, “it is to give children chances we didn’t have and to interact” (*The Times*, 21/08/09).

Judgement was reserved.

Number of single-medium Afrikaans schools in SA

According to the *Suid-Afrikaanse Onderwysersunie* (SAOU) (based on statistics obtained from the provincial education departments):
667 schools with a total of 392 450 learners
233 high schools with a total of 175 350 learners
434 primary schools with a total of 217 100 learners

According to the DoE:
1 767 schools (as opposed to 1 814 in 2002)

Number of parallel-medium (Eng/Afr) schools in SA

According to SAOU:
728
According to the DoE:
1 037 (unchanged since 2002)

Source: *Beeld*, 03/08/09

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Learners per classroom in three of Ermelo’s English-medium schools:

School 1	38
School 2	47
School 3	62

Source: *Beeld*, 21/08/09

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HE indicated that the 113 black learners who had been enrolled in the school since January 2007 would continue to receive tuition in English until the end of their school careers, irrespective of the outcome of the court case (*Beeld*, 21/08/09).

In other news on school language policy...

In future, schools might be compelled to offer all eleven official languages of South Africa as subjects. The *Star* (17/08/09) reported that proposed changes to the South African Schools Act included a provision that placed an obligation on SGBs “to ensure that there is no unfair discrimination among official languages offered at a school”. The proposals were made by a council of education ministers and sent out for public comment during August.

Jonathan Jansen on the Afrikaans language struggle

The debate [about] Afrikaans is limited to Afrikaans newspapers, festivals and academic circles. It is largely a “volkseie” discussion (to use an outdated term) with minor consequences for the country or for education. But one would not infer this from the intensity and fierceness of the language struggles on the campuses of the historically Afrikaans universities.

[...]

I have been asserting for a long time that this debate is fundamentally not a language debate but a political one; what is at stake for many (though not all) crusaders is not communication and interaction but the retention of power and the maintenance of culture.

[...]

As somebody who tries to promote the Afrikaans language through my conduct, I realise daily that [language attitudes] are perhaps the biggest stumbling-block on the road to the acceptance and growth of Afrikaans in school and university education. Consider the following example: A bulky letter with supporting documentation, all in English, is received from an external authority. Professor X of department Y receives the letter via email and returns it to the university authorities, refusing to read it [...] He insists that the 30 pages should be translated into Afrikaans. There is absolutely nothing wrong with Professor X’s English; it is his attitude towards English that bedevils human relations.

[...]

When Afrikaans is a banner for ethnic nationalist sentiment, it loses [...] the potential to promote harmony, consensus and social solidarity.

Source: *Beeld*, 14/08/09 (own translation)

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