

## Say it in plain (African) language

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**Pam Maseko**, a senior lecturer in African language studies at Rhodes University, tells **Peter Vale** about the fight for greater recognition of our African languages.

Excerpt from an interview in *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* (15:1), published in the *Mail & Guardian* on 8 January 2016.

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**PV: Why have students of African languages diminished so drastically in the post-apartheid period? Is this because of the dominance of English, coupled with the dynamics of globalisation?**

PM: First, I don't believe students are running away from African languages. Yes, student numbers have dropped compared to those just before 1994. But those pre-1994 students were not mother-tongue speakers; they were speakers of other languages who came to do African languages as additional languages. The perception at that time was that to prepare yourself for the new South Africa, you had to learn an African language.

There was a swell in numbers. I was still employed by the University of Cape Town, and I remember teaching a class of 300 to 400 students. But the numbers of mother-tongue speakers remained the same. And after 1994 the numbers of second-language speakers as well as mother-tongue speakers started to drop.

The reasons for this have not been thoroughly investigated, but I believe the numbers of second-language speakers dropped because society did not value the languages. Jobs did not require them in the same way that they required English and Afrikaans (and sometimes even an African language) during apartheid. There was no demand for universities to produce graduates capable of responding to our linguistic diversity. Many options of study opened up in higher education that had not been there before, and those options did not include African languages.

I also think some speakers of African languages did African languages simply because the one certain thing they could do was teach. Teaching was a major career option for anyone doing humanities.

The second reason for the drop in mother-tongue speakers was that these languages were taught in ways that did not relate to their own experiences, which meant that they were not interesting or exciting enough. Numbers are still dropping in many institutions of higher education.

**Could this loss of interest be related to the growing idea that English is the only relevant language? There seems to be a chain of events after the end of apartheid, marked by South Africa's global reintegration, the rise of market economics, the idea that students should seek knowledge for utilitarian purposes only, the global ranking of universities ... Did this have an effect on the teaching of African languages in the post-apartheid era?**

It's possible. The universities weren't even the most important institutional role-players. Instead, it was – and remains – the department of higher education. Through working with the ministry of higher education, I became aware of the funding formula used for subsidising institutions of higher learning, which places languages in the lowest category. So even the funding systems did not relate to the value supposedly placed on these languages in national legislation. There was no correlation between policy and what actually happened in practice.

University administrators, be they vice-chancellors, deans or heads of departments, respond to issues of funding, which is essentially determined by the state. If the state says it will put money into engineering and medical sciences, those areas become priorities for the universities as well. And I would think this approach is driven by global processes, which view English as the only language of higher education, and the language that will enable social mobility.

For most South Africans, if you are educated you are expected to work and earn as much as possible. I'm the first and only graduate in my family, and they expect me to work and earn money for everyone's benefit. So English plays an important perceived role in one's ability to access the job market and maximise one's earnings.

But having said all that, there is growing support for African languages by the state as well as university administrators. The challenge is for academic departments of African languages to offer courses that respond to present social demands.

**Were African languages in crisis after apartheid? And if so, was it a conceptual crisis? A numbers crisis? Caused by an absence of literature? Or all of these combined?**

Yes, African languages were in crisis, caused by a combination of all those factors. Scholars of African languages had not begun to redefine the role of African languages, or understand their use in higher education. We had not really begun to consider how they could benefit their speakers and those of the other languages, beyond their supposed utilitarian value.

The task, therefore, was to change our orientation to African languages and the roles these languages should play in society, including education. We needed to design courses that moved away from seeing African languages as a problem in higher education to those that

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value them as an integral part of nurturing meaningful linguistic and cultural diversity in all sectors of society.

So the first challenge was to redefine the space these languages occupied. The second was to address the absence of literature that talks to these new spaces and new possibilities. Even now, we are struggling to find literature that not only reflects the language itself, but also values the knowledge in the language.

Student numbers were part of the crisis, and still are, because they have dropped to the point where many universities have closed their African languages departments. When Russell Kaschula [professor of African languages and literature at Rhodes] and I came here, our main agenda was to turn this situation around, and fortunately, we had a dean who supported this objective.

### **What is the situation of teaching African languages in schools?**

It's not good at all. The formal curriculum for all home languages is the same, whether for English, isiXhosa or Afrikaans, but the exam papers for African languages do not seem to require students to apply themselves in the same way. The sad thing is that students pass very well; they easily get scores of 90% or more for African languages. But they get very poor marks in all their other subjects, and either fail matric or do not get university entry.

### **Are you suggesting that when those students have to study in other languages, they can't make the necessary conceptual shift?**

That's right. For the first three years, all learners are taught in their mother tongue. Then the medium of instruction is switched to English, and languages are taught as individual subjects. Obviously, it could be argued that this places English-speaking learners in a far stronger position than others. Those children grow up surrounded by English and learn everything in English, whereas isiXhosa-speaking children only learn English at school.

The argument in the literature is that you acquire your own language in the first seven years, that this only enables you to conduct basic conversations, and that you need to develop this further in order to master academic language and academic conversations. Put differently, you need to be instructed in your own language for another six or seven years in order to master it as an academic language, or a language of learning.

In South Africa, some learners are taught in their own language for only three years before being switched to another language. At that stage, they have studied the new language for only three years, and have not yet mastered it as a language of learning.

### **What should be done?**

It's really about understanding the value of mother-tongue education, while also appreciating the value of English. Children should be educated as far as possible in their mother tongues, but English should be promoted in the same way it was promoted

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alongside Afrikaans during apartheid. In those times, when people completed their schooling, went to university and started working, they were fully bilingual.

The literature tells us that you should ideally be educated in your mother tongue, but this doesn't mean you can't learn other languages. Actually, it improves your ability to learn other languages and other knowledge.

We also need to enhance the value presented by knowledge in African languages, not only for speakers of African languages but for other speakers as well. We need to be more conscious of what there is of value for us to share with others. When I go into multilingual classrooms and put up an isiXhosa concept, isiXhosa-speaking children say: "Oh, I know that."

But what is it you know? What value does it have? And what does it tell us about other things you know through this language? This knowledge needs to be lifted out, shared and communicated.

Also, what do we then do about this knowledge, and what do other people do about it? Because it's easy to say, "I see it's important, but so what? It doesn't do anything for me."

At this point in the South African context, we are definitely faced with this challenge. In other words, there is a lack of understanding that African languages are alive and relevant for people today, even though English is the dominant language.

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