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CONFERENCE PAPER

**Language, Education
and Race Relations**

Neville Alexander



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Language, Education and Race Relations

Neville Alexander

Paper prepared for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)
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The point of departure of this paper¹ is that what are called race relations are at bottom power relations. The corollary to this proposition is that a change in race relations in any direction necessarily implies a change in power relations. The distribution and maintenance of power depend on a network of historically evolved structures, institutions, processes and practices in all domains of social life. One of the most important domains of social reproduction, which is seldom foregrounded as such is that of language policy and language practice. Yet, it ought to be obvious that, oppressive, exploitative and discriminatory relations generally are always reflected in language policy and practice since, in the striking formulation of Halliday and Martin (1993:10), “the history of humanity is not simply the history of socio-economic activity, it is also the history of semiotic activity”. There are many reasons for the continued silence in regard to what is on reflection an indispensable lubricant for the functioning of any human community. Most important among these is the susceptibility of language to the masking effects of hegemonic practices precisely because it is one of the main sites of the generation of ideology and thought. It is, consequently, one of the objectives of this paper to show up the fact that language policy, especially in the educational institutions, is one of the most effective strategies for both the entrenchment and the negation of racist practices and racist beliefs.

Although the paper focuses on the effects of language policy in education as an anti-racist strategy, two rather trite propositions have to be stated clearly at the outset. The first of these is that no single aspect of social policy can in and of itself bring about anything more than limited change within a social formation taken as a whole. Under favourable circumstances, transformative initiatives having their origin in one or other sector of society, whether intended or not, can have catalytic effects but these usually derive from the peculiar historical conjuncture in that society. Any attempt, therefore, to abstract from the overall social policy environment, is bound to give rise to approximations that are so remote from the real situation as to be completely meaningless. It has to be stressed, secondly, that there are no universally valid formulae for the solution of global problems such as racism and racist practices. The peculiarity of the historical development in each social formation influences decisively which options are more likely to be successful in any given case. At best, we can hope to indicate the range of possible approaches based either on first principles or on the experience of people in other places and at other times.

In regard to the subject of this paper, I take it for granted that at the dawn of the 21st century, linguistic rights are inalienable human rights and that cultural diversity, which includes linguistic diversity, is an intrinsic positive value of a sustainable humane and civilised, i.e., democratic, society. These statements have gained axiomatic status among the vast majority of language scholars the world over and have found legal recognition in various international instruments². Similarly, it is no longer necessary to canvas the status of “race” in biological science since there is now overwhelming

¹Paper prepared for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) *Conference on Racism and Public Policy*, September 2001, Durban, South Africa.

² Among the more important of these are the United Nations Charter of Human Rights, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the Draft Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights.

agreement that this is a non-question. Given the findings emerging from the human genome project, only flat-earthists can deny that “racial classification systems do not represent homogeneous genetic categories - that is, they are not rooted in biological difference” (Brown 2001:16). There is well-nigh 100% agreement among scholars that race is constructed socially and that “...because of the long history of racial discrimination, the social meaning of race is real, and can have real consequences for health”[for example, NA] (Brown 2001:16).

A raceless society?

The relevant overall social question that does arise in our context is whether a “raceless society” is possible. This is, to begin with, a question of definition. However, a simple way of putting it is to ask whether, generally speaking, physical differences (such as skin colour, hair texture, lip, eye and nose shapes) which trigger racial perceptions and under certain circumstances also racist responses, can ever become as invisible as, for example, differences of stature on a continuum between the extremes of dwarfism and gigantism, or differences in body mass between the extremes of obesity and anorexic gauntness. The simple fact is that unless we revert to some primordialist explanation of why racial identities are so tenacious, this question posed in this manner translates into asking what it is that we have to do in order to render invisible the phenotypical features that stimulate racist responses. To put the question in terms of Pierre Bourdieu’s analytical framework: is it possible to conceive of a humanity where a non-racial habitus has come into being and come to stay? The corollary question is how such a habitus differs from the opportunistic “colour-blind” discourse of dominant (usually white) majority or minority groups who oppose current affirmative action policies not so much because they might have the effect of perpetuating racial identities but merely in order to entrench their historically derived power, advantages and privileges. In the current debate over race and racism in South Africa, there is much pussyfooting around this issue of racial identities. Xolela Mangcu (2001:9) in an audacious move has tried to argue that we should simply accept racial identities in the same way that most people accept ethnic identities based on language, religious or other cultural differences that have acquired significance over time. He distinguishes between non-racialism as an “empirical concept” and non-racism as a “normative concept”. With reference to the dilemma confronting the post-apartheid South African government, he poses the problem we are examining here as follows:

From a purely empirical standpoint the reality of racial identities was just too powerful to ignore. From a normative standpoint there was a need to create a society in which differences in phenotype did not determine our individual and collective fate.... This indeed seemed like a powerful vision for a society founded on racial oppression. On the surface nothing would seem objectionable about such a stance.... The difference lay in the extent to which the black consciousness movement saw race as a cultural concept that gave people their identity and the extent to which the non-racists saw race as a problematic physiognomic concept, a burden that had to be transcended in a broader search for certain universal values such as freedom and justice (Mangcu 2001:9).

Tové Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:137) in a discussion of the relationship between mother tongues and ethnic identities, poses the question in a manner that is most relevant to the concerns of this paper. She believes that it is necessary to study the circumstances under which people’s ethnicity and languages can become positive forces and strengths that can help to empower them. It is against this background that the following exposition of the relationship between language policy in education and race relations has to be understood.

Before we proceed to discuss this relationship, however, it is appropriate to point to two other paradigmatic moments that frame such a discussion. The first is the realisation that in general, there

are four necessary conditions that have to be met if the salience of racial consciousness in any society or in the world at large is to be reduced and even negated. These are, stated baldly,

equitable distribution of material resources among the significant social units (individuals, historically evolved groups, strata, etc.);

democratic transparency in respect of all social policy issues;

critical citizenship based on free access to all relevant information;

a world government (or its dedicated agency) and an associated international network of civil society organisations which can function as a global watchdog to ensure that international and regional legal instruments prohibiting all forms of discrimination are strictly adhered to by all states.

The second moment relates to the emerging paradigm shift from assimilationism to what in this paper, I shall refer to broadly as multiculturalism. As the forces of industrialisation, modernisation and globalisation have intensified, transcontinental migrations of people in search of work and better life chances have accelerated. Societies, especially in the economic North of the globe, that were traditionally perceived as stable, cohesive and homogeneous by virtue of being allegedly monocultural, monolingual and homogenous, have suddenly woken up to the fact that they are countries of immigration in which, increasingly, people from many different cultural backgrounds interact as a matter of course and ostensibly on a permanent basis. In this situation, we have on the one hand racist, xenophobic responses couched in terms of a segregationist “multiculturalism” and on the other hand integrationist, democratic and even nation-building or “nationist” responses which emphasise intercultural and pluralist networks (see, for example, Rex 1996). For the former groups, notions of purity, including so-called racial purity, constitute the inarticulate major premise of their discourse whereas the discourse of the latter groups is informed by the assumption that hybridity is the normal human condition. What is becoming progressively untenable is the classic “melting-pot” assimilationism of the period before World War II where one dominant cultural tradition forces anything that comes into contact with it into the existing mould and discards everything that does not “fit”.

Of course, in most countries of the economic South, these issues have been, and are, usually posed in quite a different mode. Because their state boundaries were determined relatively recently by inter-imperialist competition, the populations of most ex- or post-colonial states in the South are extremely heterogeneous. In most of them, what we might call a multilingual and multicultural habitus exists as a result of patterns of interaction that have both pre-colonial and colonial origins (see Gupta-Basu 1999, Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, among others)³.

Contradictory tendencies in the rainbow

In view of such differences, it is paradoxical that the power relations in both North and South present themselves in identical ways. This has to do with the fact of a single world economy and its global-village effects based on the control of investment and financial markets by some 200 trans-

³ Choudhry (1998:12), citing Pattanayak (1998:139) gives an excellent, if perhaps romanticised description of the situation in which this multilingual/multicultural habitus evolved in the course of India’s “unbroken tradition of 3,000 years of the oral transmission of knowledge.” and continues: “In a multilingual and multiethnic country, this tradition ensured (a) maintenance of group identity within an interdependent network of cultures; (b) maintenance of small communication zones within a broad communicational matrix through a gradual merging of borders and a shared common core; (c) maintenance of group autonomy and resistance against incursions by empire builders into the affairs of the people, and (d) awareness of individuals and groups comprising the Indian cultural area, the various linkages and balances at the micro and macro levels and participation in the maintenance and furtherance of tradition in the face of constant changes. Mother tongues held the key to this unique delicate balance....”

national giant corporations. In this connection, the hold which the modernisation project and the supposed imperatives of globalisation have on the minds of post-colonial elites is decisive for the explanation of the symmetry as well as the complementarity of power relations. What tends to happen in practice is that the global economic and social conjuncture shapes the political tactics of the giant corporations and of their political representatives in all parts of the world (see Castells 1998). The invariable outcome is that minorities in the North and majorities in the ex-colonial South are the victims of discriminatory policies that originate in the metropolitan centres. A simple example is the manner in which the very same owners of big capital who had supported the racist ideology of the apartheid regime in South Africa, once this became untenable on both political (the collapse of Soviet communism) and economic (financial sanctions) grounds, had no difficulty in performing a perfect somersault and, today, support the “non-racial” ideology of the African National Congress government. That government, for its part, has jettisoned virtually all the pro-socialism elements in its ideological baggage and has adapted with a minimum of *angst* to the dominant neo-liberal orthodoxy. Besides reminding us of the infinite flexibility of the capitalist system, this fact points to the difficulties inherent in the implementation of educational policies which are calculated to set up counter-hegemonic or transformative trajectories rather than merely to reproduce the existing social, economic and political relations within a given society or region.

By way of illustrating the contradictory tendencies that have been set up through the globalisation process, let us consider briefly the dynamics relating to language policy in general and to language policy in education more specifically within the evolving European Union. On the one hand, for both economic and cultural reasons, the individual countries of the EU insist on the complete equality of the 11 official languages of the current Union. In effect as well as in intention, this amounts to a policy of promoting multilingualism and, consequently, multilingual education. Thus, we have the paradox of a relatively successful policy of multilingualism driven by the historically determined domestic linguistic market which is based on the monolingual habitus (Gogolin 1994) and the dominant national language in each of the countries of the EU. This has had the possibly unintended effect of bringing about a renaissance of the languages of regional minorities⁴ in Europe (see Extra and Gorter 2001). On the other hand, with very few exceptions (see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000 and Extra and Gorter 2001), minimal provision is made for accommodating the languages of immigrant minorities educationally or otherwise. This is a question which is inescapable, however. In the words of Manuel Castells (2000:7)

Europe is fast becoming a continent of ethnic minorities. The proportion of foreign-born population in Germany is already almost the same as the African-American population in the U.S., at about 12%. And, as... [in the case of] African-Americans, most people from ethnic minorities concentrate in the largest metropolitan areas, thus increasing their visibility. Because of the differential birth rate vis-à-vis native populations, the coming two decades will bring a spectacular increase of multiethnicity throughout Europe. If we add the future integration of Eastern European[s] and Turks in the European Union, Europe must design from now on specific policies of cultural integration, based on equal rights, and respect...[for] differences, that should be applied throughout the continent.

⁴ We deal with three categories of “minorities” in Europe. Traditional “regional minorities” have lived as minorities on the territory of their respective states in most cases for centuries and are usually derived from populations that predate the arrival of the majority populations. Well known examples are the Welsh in Britain and the Basques in Spain and France. “National minorities” refer to people who, because of historical conflicts and the vicissitudes of war find themselves under the legal jurisdiction of states that border on their original homelands. The Albanian population in Macedonia or the Hungarian population in Slovakia are cases in point. “Immigrant minorities” denote those people who have been pulled to Europe after World War II by the desire to find work and security from persecution in their home countries. Most of these people have come from the South, mainly from Africa and South East Asia. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, many recent immigrants originate in Eastern Europe.

For Castells (2000:6), language policy is one of the most important of these integrationist policies. Busch (2001:11-12), indeed, makes the point that it is precisely the linguistic diversity of Europe that has compelled the Union to open itself to a multiculturalist paradigm as opposed to the assimilationist paradigm of the individual nation states. Like Castells, therefore, she places particular emphasis on a multilingual language policy as a defining feature of a new European identity. With reference to the strong anti-Slovenian Austro-German nationalism in Carinthia, she says that the imminent integration of Slovenia into the E.U. (Austria has been a member since 1995), the widespread Austrian/Carinthian stereotypes of Slovenians as “enemies” have become obsolete and a much more Euro-orientation is taking root among the youth:

Identity constructions among the younger generation point ...[in] the direction that there might be another possibility between assimilation and ethnic affirmation, a construction that reaches beyond the monolingual “imagined” community in including bi- or multilingualism as something perfectly “normal”, a construction that does not comprehend affiliation to a particular group as something exclusive.... (Busch 2001:12).

The real development of language policy in the E.U. has been complex and contradictory because of the impact of assimilationist, alternatively multiculturalist, push-pull factors on both the immigrant and the native populations. Extra and Gorter (2001:29-30) have described the typical evolution of policy in respect of immigrant minority languages in most European Union member states. It is a path that began in some countries with the languages of these minorities being taught as a subject to the children in the primary school for purposes of facilitating family remigration (repatriation). However, because remigration failed to materialise on any significant scale, this approach was mostly replaced in the 1970s by the classic deficit paradigm where the language of the home is treated as a problem because it is not the same as the (national, or dominant) language of teaching and learning at school. In this phase, the immigrant minority children were subject to different variants of compensatory and remedial education in order to bring them to “the same level” as their native European peers. Because the permanence of the “immigrant” populations was becoming increasingly evident, some of the smaller, more xenophile countries such as the Benelux and the Nordic states began reforming their curricula on the assumption of their being multicultural societies, along the same lines as Pierre Trudeau’s government had pioneered in Canada in 1971 (see, among many others, Leman 1999; Extra and Gorter 2001). Despite some progress in these countries in regard to the peaceful integration of foreign workers and their families, there was hardly any movement in this direction in the more powerful larger countries, especially in Great Britain and France. Indeed, the overall conclusion of these authors, whose findings are based on a wide-ranging study, is quite negative.

It should... be noted that cultural-political arguments for IMLI [Immigrant Minority Language Instruction - NA] have not led to an educational policy in which the status of IM languages has been substantially advanced in any of the countries involved in this study (Extra and Gorter 2000:30).

In an earlier article (Broeder and Extra 1999:109-110), the authors demonstrate clearly that the status of immigrant minority languages originating in non-EU countries is extremely low and that the process of setting aside the restrictive interpretations placed on the concept of “minority languages” in the individual member states of the EU is strongly entrenched and will require energetic advocacy.

In Eastern Europe, on the territories of the former Hapsburg, Ottoman and Russian empires, the question of the status of national minorities and the treatment of their languages arises in addition to those of regional and immigrant minority languages (see, e.g., Busch 2001, Gstettner and Larcher 1985, Reisigl and Wodak 2000). Because of the post-Berlin Wall civil and international wars that broke out in Eastern Europe, the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for National Minorities

and the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages became vitally important documents that served to provide guidelines for finding solutions to such conflicts, however reluctantly the warring factions may have made use of them. An eloquent example of this influence is the series of events around the use of the Albanian language as a language of tuition at university level in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (see AIM 1996). The language question is one of the central issues in this conflict and the Macedonian government at the time (1995) went through a most intricate dance in order to avoid jeopardising the acceptance of Macedonia into the EU⁵.

The influence of these instruments is also evident in the recent (draft) Vienna Manifesto emanating from a conference on “the costs of multilingualism”, which was held in Vienna on 7-9 June 2001. One of the crucial clauses of the Manifesto states simply that

It is a *sine qua non* for building a European identity to assure citizens that their mother tongues will form part of it. In some cases understanding will not be possible without a lingua franca (e.g. English) but European communication processes should not rely exclusively on it. The introduction of a “leading” European language would mean to favour the native speakers of this “single language” politically and economically. This fact would result in political conflicts and unforeseeable consequences. (Anon. 2001:1)

Language policy in education as a component of an anti-racist strategy

The Vienna Manifesto also stresses the role of the educational institutions, especially of the universities and the schools, in the promotion of multilingualism and the maintenance of the linguistic wealth of all these societies. Given the many thousands of books and articles on the question of language policy in education, it is essential to repeat that in this paper, the focus is on language policy in education as a component of an anti-racist strategy. At the most general level, it should be said that in any multilingual society at the beginning of the 21st century, it ought to be axiomatic that all children - and all learners - have the right to be taught and to learn in the language of their choice. For most people, it goes without saying that if they had the opportunity, they would choose to be taught through the medium of the mother tongue⁶. However, the power relations in any given social formation make this almost impossible for most children and other learners beyond the phase of primary or basic education. Because of the paramount importance of the ruling strata of Europe in the history of the modern era, it is appropriate to consider briefly the relationship between language practice in education and the development and the reproduction of capitalist (free-market) social relations. This question has been dealt with in great detail by many different scholars in Europe and in the non-European world, in recent scholarship most notably by Pierre Bourdieu. His analytical framework which explains how uniform linguistic markets give rise to an uneven distribution of linguistic capital, i.e., a high degree of competence in the dominant language(s), is essential to an understanding of the role of educational institutions as one of the main sites in which the appropriate linguistic habitus, i.e., structurally induced but largely unconsciously imbibed dispositions, is cultivated. Those social strata and individuals who possess this (dominant) linguistic capital which many acquire in part through inheritance and all through specialised training usually in institutions of higher learning are able to impose it as the only legitimate one in the formal markets (the fashionable,

⁵ Tragically, these and other manoeuvres have not prevented the outbreak of civil war. At the time of writing (July 2001), recognition of the rights of the language of the Albanian national minority continues to be one of the main sticking points in the search for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in that country.

⁶ Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:105-115) discusses the different approaches to the definition of mother tongue. She opts for the position that most people have several different mother tongues, depending on the criteria in terms of, and the context within, which the term is employed. Elegant variations, such as L1, main, primary or home, language are all acceptable in particular contexts.

educational, political and administrative markets) and in most of the linguistic interactions in which they are involved The position which the educational system gives to the different languages (or the different cultural contents) is such an important issue only because this institution has the monopoly in the large-scale production of producers/consumers and therefore in the reproduction of the market without which the social value of the linguistic competence, its capacity to function as linguistic capital, would cease to exist (Bourdieu 1992:56-57).

Those who do not have command of this legitimate competence "... are de facto excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence" (Bourdieu 1992:55).

Generally speaking, it is clear from the many different case studies that have been written up that whether we are dealing with numerical or social minorities, the language policies in education of colonialist and imperialist European countries tended to lead to what Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1995) have called "linguistic genocide"⁷. In its mildest form, this refers to what in the professional literature is called transitional or subtractive bilingualism, i.e., the use of the mother tongue for initial literacy, usually for a maximum of four years and its gradual or abrupt replacement by the dominant (or national official) language as the language of teaching. The overall effect of the monolingual habitus, from which all such policies stem in the final analysis, has been that such "minorities" have had to accept that they and their children will be schooled and educated in a second or third language for most of their lives. For most people thus affected, this has meant that avenues for personal development and upward social mobility are virtually by definition restricted or non-existent. In a nutshell, what I have dubbed Tollefson's paradox has manifested itself in most modern industrial states to a greater or lesser extent. James Tollefson(1991:7) put forward the view that language competence remains a barrier to employment, education, and economic well being due to political forces of our own making. For while modern social and economic systems require certain kinds of language competence, they simultaneously create conditions which ensure that vast numbers of people will be unable to acquire that competence. A central mechanism by which this process occurs is language policy.

In multilingual societies, where the dominant language is the mother tongue of a particular social category, the uneven distribution of the favourable linguistic capital has generally been determined by supposed ethnic or racial features. This historical fact can be demonstrated in the case of virtually all the colonial empires of the recent past (see Ngugi 1994, Chatterjee 1997, Calvet 1987, among others) in the ex-Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (a good general source is Connor 1984), Austria-Hungary (Busch 2001, Reisigl and Wodak 2000, Gstettner and Larcher 1985, etc).

If we turn to positive examples of the use of language policy in education for the purpose, among others, of reducing inter-group conflict and promoting social justice, we find that there are very few but none the less important examples of success which can be built upon in the next period. The work of a relatively small group of research workers and practitioners in many different parts of the world (see, among others, Lambert and Tucker 1972, Cummins 1981, Skutnabb-Kangas 1988, Ramirez et al 1991, Pattanayak 1998, Baker 1996) has made it possible to sketch a typology of the different approaches that seem to work under different conditions. *The key to unlocking this question is the understanding that the teaching medium for all affected communities, the vast majority of people in the world, consists of a range of possible combinations of the mother tongue and a global language, increasingly understood to be English.* However, an even more important insight is the understanding that we will have arrived at the solution in principle to the problem of linguisticism once native speakers of dominant and especially of global languages have come to accept that they, too, should as a matter

⁷ Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) is a detailed study of this question.

of course learn one or more of the low-status languages relevant to their normal living environment. That is to say, bilingual (or multilingual) education should become the norm throughout the world.

This is much more easily said than done. In post-colonial Africa especially, the degree of colonisation of the mind is such that the universally accepted principle of mother tongue, i.e., L1-medium, education has to be rehabilitated. Parents as well as many teachers are convinced that the indigenous languages of the people cannot be used in order to get their children good jobs or to elevate their status in society. Consequently, the introduction of L1-medium education beyond the first three or four years of schooling requires all the language-planning capacities of the state and of private sector or NGO and community initiatives. Parents in particular have to be convinced of the pedagogical validity of the claim that mother tongue education will in fact help their children to acquire the kind of competence in the (additional) language of power and market value. This is a social pathology which I have called a static maintenance syndrome from which most African people “suffer” (see Alexander 2000). In simple terms, this means that the people consider their indigenous languages worthy of maintenance (through use in family and community contexts) but incapable of development (through use in high-status functions) (see Baker 1996). This attitude perpetuates feelings of inadequacy and inferiority since most people never acquire native-speaker competence in the hegemonic language or variety. In this way, language attitudes and the empiricist policies which take them as their point of departure reinforce racism and racial discrimination.

A few examples of successful approaches

Together with tackling this intractable problem goes the equally difficult question of the will of the political and cultural leadership to transform their societies. The existence of this commitment is one of the most important conditions for the success of an educational system based on these insights. It also highlights the fact that it is not enough to treat the language issue as though it were simply a technical problem; it is always a political question and unless the speakers of the languages concerned are mobilised, stagnation and inertia will make all movement in the desired direction of empowering the affected groups impossible. An excellent example is the Basque country. Grin and Vaillancourt (1999: 50-72) is a recent study which shows clearly how important the political moment is. From having been a proscribed and endangered language under the dictatorship of Franco, Euskera, after the passing of the 1979 Statute of Autonomy by the democratic Spanish parliament, is being revitalised and has become a fully-fledged language of teaching in both bilingual, i.e., dual-medium, and mother-tongue (L1-) medium schools. The study, which focuses on the cost-effectiveness of multilingual educational systems, shows the increase in the numbers of learners studying Euskera and in Euskera between 1982 and 1997 and concludes that a steadily increasing share of pupils is schooled partly or wholly in Euskera, and given the voluntary nature of enrolment in one or another model, the establishment of the current system can be interpreted as a response to social demand (Grin and Vaillancourt 1999:63)

The fact that Euskera-medium education in formal state schools has increased from zero to almost 75%, in spite of the generally negative environment in which most educational institutions are functioning today, provides ample proof of what is possible under optimal conditions⁸. The authors point out that competence in Euskera is highest among the very old and the current school-leaving generation. They are convinced that

⁸ The political tactics of certain factions among the Basque nationalists is a subject we cannot consider in this context.

Schools have certainly played a major role in this evolution, since the 16-24 age group is the first one that has been entirely schooled in the current system, and hence had access to education through the medium of Basque (Grin and Vaillancourt 1999:66).

In the context of the theme of this paper, it is also important to note that both Euskera-speaking and most Castilian-speaking people in the Euskadi are positive in regard to the promotion of Euskera, also as a language of teaching.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:432) refers to the progress of language policy in the new Ethiopia. Citing Salih, she stresses that the regime has realised that ethnic consciousness has to be confronted and addressed directly since "... it is the refusal to recognize ethnic claims for political recognition that leads to conflict".

Bulcha (1998) is a detailed treatment of the manner in which the Oromo language in Ethiopia was suppressed in the interests of "Amharisation" and "nation-building". Both the imperial and the subsequent military regimes followed oppressive strategies of homogenisation, including linguistic homogenisation. Language became one of the central sites of struggle. He traces the political and cultural transformations which have made it possible for this language to be developed to the point where it is the medium of instruction and the language of administration and mass communication in the region of Oromia. While the change in the language policy did not, of course, eliminate social tensions, there can be no doubt that the revitalisation of the language, *afaan Oromoo*, by affirming the status of the largest ethnic community in Ethiopia, has reduced the conflict potential in the country. From an ecology of languages point of view, as in the case of Euskera, this policy change has helped to maintain an important national resource of the Ethiopian people.

In a matter of only few years, it [*afaan Oromoo*, NA] has established itself as a fast-growing working language. A number of dictionaries have been published and new vocabularies and expressions that fit the demands of modernity have been added; attempts to standardize dialectal (sic) variations of the different Oromo communities are being made and basic grammatical rules are also being established. On the whole, requirements needed for transforming *afaan Oromoo* into a language of the arts and literature are being met and Oromo publications are proliferating (Bulcha 1998:121-122).

In an important paper, Choudry (1998 and 2001) has summarised the conclusions of the most forward-looking Indian language scholars. He underlines the fact that the reorganisation of the federal Indian state on the basis of dominant regional languages in 1956 was undertaken in order "... to reduce conflict between the major minority language speakers of India and to imbibe (sic) a spirit of nationalism amongst its people" (Choudry 1998:1). Ironically, this reorganisation created new bases for conflict among groups, which previously had coexisted peacefully. State governments have tended to neglect minority languages in favour of the dominant language(s) of the state. Moreover, with reference to the continuing hegemony of English in India, he emphasises the fact that this habitus "... is detrimental not only to the growth of Indian languages but also the growth of Indian society in a normal manner" (Choudry 1998:3). The profound controversies in India about the language of teaching have not been resolved in spite of widespread agreement among scholars and practitioners that mother tongue education is critical for the national development, industrialisation and modernisation of India. In most situations, a subtractive policy is implemented and the dominance of English is such that even the 1993 Report of the Education Commission was compelled to state that "... we have restrained ourselves from repeating the recommendation that mother tongue alone should be the medium of instruction at the primary stage" (Choudry 1998:7). It remains to be said that in India, the issue of religious caste though different from that of race in its historical and cultural dimensions is similar when we approach it as a sociological phenomenon. The literature on this

question is vast but recent studies on North India and Nepal by Professor Selma Sonntag (1995; 1996; 2000) demonstrate convincingly the correlation between the vested interests of the modernising (pro-English) and the traditionalist (pro-Sanskritised Hindi) elites and the linguistic hierarchies that these create or reinforce.

The South African case, in spite of a surface-level atmosphere of intractability and desperation, represents in fact one of the more optimistic scenarios. This has both historical and sociological reasons. The struggle against the racial caste system of apartheid and other forms of discrimination sensitised most South Africans to the dangers of racist discourses and rendered them amenable to radical attempts at moving away from racist practices, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. All the main political formations of the oppressed people as well as the main organisations of civil society, including most of the churches (after about 1970) and the trade unions that represented the interests of the black working class (after 1973) paid allegiance to a non-racial ethos or advocated a non-racial destination for a free Azania or South Africa. Sociologically, the fact that the majority of the population, as oppressed people who had been classified as belonging to one or other category of “black” by the apartheid social engineers, meant that after apartheid, the political and other prominent representatives of this majority would not be able or willing to advocate anything that smacked of racist or even racialist⁹ ideology. What is happening in reality, however, is a very different kind of practice. It would be fair to all of us in South Africa if one were to say that we are poised to break through all the most deeply held cultural and racial taboos but are simultaneously faced with the ominous threat that failure to do so would catapult our country into one of the worst communalist wars the world has ever seen. This view is not the result of some melodramatic crystal-ball gazing; facts on the ground compel any serious person to raise the alarm. The so-called South African miracle does not mean that we are immune to the genocidal disasters that tarnished the record of the 20th century.

The social inequality that continues to characterise South African society¹⁰ is reflected in the statistics on educational inequalities. The full record of these can be read up in the timely report¹¹ of the Education Foundation, which is to be published soon. The draft report shows that the emerging pattern is one of largely “uniracial”, i.e., “black”, state schools except in the Western Cape, the Northern Cape and Gauteng provinces, and similarly uniracial, increasingly “white” independent, i.e., private, schools. Middle-class and some working-class people labelled black, coloured and indian, try by all means to send their children to former “Model C”, i.e., semi-private, largely white schools, or to the independent schools. From the point of view of the focus of this paper, it can be said that the entire system is shot through with the hegemony of the English language and that the two- or three-tier school system is an accurate reflection of the hierarchal pattern of the linguistic market. Even though the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, has recently spoken out strongly in favour of mother-tongue instruction in the foundation phase followed by “incremental bilingualism” (dual-medium education) in the subsequent phases of schooling¹², this approach is to be found only in a handful of pilot project schools. All the state schools that cater for children who have one of the nine official African languages as their home language follow the typical subtractive approach where the home language is jettisoned as the language of teaching and learning as soon as possible but no later than the fourth or fifth grade¹³. Paradoxically, but predictably, the only South Africans who have the

⁹ The essential difference between “racialist” and “racist” ideologies and practices is constituted by the factor of exploitation based on economic and military power. Racialists are simply prejudiced people whereas racists are (not even necessarily) prejudiced people who prey on racialist prejudice in order to subjugate categories of people who are perceived to be different.

¹⁰ Even now, South Africa has the second highest Gini coefficient in the world, i.e., after Brazil.

¹¹ *Macro-indicators of Racism in the Schooling System* (compiled by Monica Bot, Adele Gordon and Firoz Patel).

¹² See his Budget Speech 2001.

¹³ Ironically, classroom observations reveal that most teachers in the intermediate and senior primary phases as well as in the secondary schools, predominantly but unsystematically use the mother tongue for teaching. Written assessment, however, is in English in most cases! (See Bloch, De Klerk and Plüddemann 1996)

full advantage of home-language medium education from the cradle to the university are first-language English- and many first-language Afrikaans-speaking children. The Report of the James Commission on *Values, Education and Democracy* (2000) as well as the subsequent Kirstenbosch Conference of February 2001, where it was discussed, show that the political class in South Africa is very clear about the nation-building significance of the constitutionally prescribed obligation on the state to promote multilingualism and of the fact that the schools are one of the main sites for the execution of this task. After the conference and in subsequent speeches, the Minister has consistently stressed the need to learn African languages, especially by those South African children who have either English or Afrikaans as their home language. At the time of writing, the language policy for higher education is being finalised. The draft policy framework encourages the development and promotion of the use of African languages as languages of tuition at universities and technikons. This is consistent with the rhetoric of the African Renaissance, which President Mbeki has made one of the rallying calls of his administration. Alas, it has to be said that unless drastic steps are taken to turn all these positive noises into something significant, they will remain what they are at the moment, i.e., nothing more than sound and fury¹⁴. The alarm bells are ringing loudly; Bot et al (2001: 36) refer to a statement made by the then deputy chairperson of the Pan South African Language Board, Professor Zubeida Desai, according to whom the tendency for urban township schools to bring forward the use of English is backfiring; it is retarding learners' literacy and numeracy. Poor matric results among African learners are partly the result of the failure to allow prolonged mother tongue instruction and of the poor quality of English taught in many township schools....¹⁵

Conclusion and recommendations

Language policy, it is clear, is an integral part of social transformation since language does not simply reflect "reality" but is a necessary factor in the structuring or shaping of our diverse realities. It is the formative capacity inherent in language that is at the heart of the discussion about language in education policy especially in modern industrialising societies, which are almost without exception multilingual. The individual psychological and identity effects of language practices are the *raison d'être* of the demands for linguistic human rights. People who are unable to use the languages they know best in their normal environment because of social and political restraints are unfree in every sense of the term. Linguistic communities whose mother tongues are proscribed even minimally are unable to participate fully in their societies and this is detrimental not only to themselves but to the larger social entity as well. Racial and other communal conflicts deriving from past and present conquest, invasion and exploitation are exacerbated and entrenched by linguistic policies, which are perpetrated by ruling elites either knowingly or by default. At the level of the educational institutions, there are two fundamental beacons that should guide us in the struggle to reduce or to negate these linguistic policies. These are the practice of mother tongue medium education as far as the system will allow, preferably throughout the educational career of the learner. The second is the promotion and practice of bi- or multilingual education where the first additional language is a regional link language or, if this is not necessary, an international language.

Tové Skutnabb-Kangas has suggested with remarkable acuity that in the struggle against racism and linguisticism, we should beware of too much "tolerance". What we need, instead, is a policy of zero-tolerance against all manifestations of these attacks on human dignity and human rights (See

¹⁴ At the recent conference of the African Languages Association of South Africa (ALASA), held in Port Elizabeth, there was a sense of desperation and crisis, since the participants were conscious of the fact that their profession was in danger of vanishing before their very eyes (Personal communication). The enrolment of students in African language courses at South African universities has plunged dramatically and numerous retrenchments or redeployments of staff have taken place. This is a direct result of the perceived lack of market value of these languages.

¹⁵ Useful sources for the study of multilingual education in South Africa are Heugh et al 1995; ELTIC 1997; Niedrig 2000; Heugh 2001. Young (1986) gives a good picture of the views held by scholars on the eve of the transition.

Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:663-664). I agree with this stance and suggest that the following policy recommendations are worthy of wider discussion.

Language planning should be integrated as a conscious factor into overall national planning.

The basic propositions of the draft Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights should be adopted by all states, with due account being taken of the reasonable criticism levelled against any attempt to void it of meaning by confusing “necessary” with “enrichment-oriented” rights (see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:497-499)¹⁶.

The range of additive bilingualism approaches and models should be elaborated for all states to study with a view to determining which of these is most likely to be relevant to the particular situation in the given country or region. These approaches range from single-medium schools accompanied by the best possible teaching of additional and foreign languages as subjects, at one end of the spectrum, to fully-fledged dual medium schools, where all subjects except the language and literature subjects themselves are taught through the medium of the two (sometimes three) relevant languages, at the other end¹⁷.

Universal Primary Education, Universal Literacy, Education for All, and all the other slogans and laudable aspirations of the global village will not materialise until there is a firm commitment on the part of the overwhelming majority of political leaders, education policy makers, education planners and educational professionals to the “simple” policy and practice of mother-tongue education in the context of a bilingual or multilingual educational system in all parts of the world. And, until these goals are attained, racial prejudice and racist practices will continue to have a fertile soil in which to thrive.

Baker (1996:385) makes the important point that we do not know to what extent schools are able to combat racism and reduce racial prejudice.

The preconceptions and attitudes of children and teachers, of politicians and policy makers, the message of the hidden curriculum and the material of the formal curriculum may make difficult the winning of hearts and minds. So widespread, brutal and ingrained is racism in the school and street, that some argue for skill training rather than liberal education. Explicit racism may be combated in liberal education by a careful and conscious selection of teaching resources, the language of teaching, school organization and grouping in the classroom. Increased knowledge and greater understanding are sought as outcomes....

There are both optimistic and pessimistic stances on the question. My own position tends towards the optimistic. However, regardless of one’s stance, we have to be clear that unless language policy is embedded in a set of transformative social policies, it will either fail altogether or effect no more than limited change, depending on the historical context in which it is implemented.

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¹⁶Also see her suggestions for the educational provisions of a Universal Covenant of Linguistic Human Rights (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:501-502).

¹⁷ For a thorough discussion of the available researched models, see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:600ff. Also see Baker 1996.

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