

# Plugging into SABC language tangle



The SABC is in the unenviable position of having to be the first, as well as the most visible and audible, agency to define a plan for implementing the principle of equity of 11 official languages.

KATHLEEN HEUGH reports.

**T**HE SABC's lengthy deliberation and hesitancy over language policy formulation in recent months must be seen against the background of the national language policy set out in the interim Constitution. Also important is the historical context of a *menage a trois* involving an obsessive identification of language and culture by the powerful Afrikaans language lobby; a non-existent lobby for African languages; and the powerful hegemony, both hidden and explicit, of English.

The language clauses of the interim Constitution reflect a statement of good intent in terms of policy formulation. They do not provide any guidelines for implementation. Language policy has not yet been translated into a coherent implementation strategy by any sector. From the public's point of view, the SABC's plan will determine how much time is to be allocated to each language and on which channels.

The SABC's task would have been made much easier had the negotiators at Kempton Park been able to produce a strong language policy focusing on the resources which the South African languages can offer this country. Instead, we have a weak policy which is difficult to implement.

There was an understanding that, for symbolic reasons, 11 languages had to be afforded official recognition in the Constitution. The practical application of this arrangement was never entertained as a serious option. So we have a situation in which language is seen as a right yet it is not clear who, if anyone, has the responsibility of effecting it. In other words, it is not clear

whether language rights are to be treated in a passive manner or whether they are to be taken more seriously and proactively. This is the primary dilemma of the SABC.

The second issue it faces relates to the fact that policy is not cast in stone and that creative policy makers understand that it needs to change as social conditions change. On the one hand, the interim Constitution may alter in the near future, and language clauses may change accordingly. In addition, the Independent Broadcasting Authority has yet to determine its language policy.

Consequently, any SABC language policy articulated now will have to be dynamic and flexible.

The public furor around the perceived threat to Afrikaans represents an aspect of the third issue facing the SABC, namely, the historical and unequal relationship between Afrikaans, English and the other South African languages.

An inseparable relationship has been nurtured over the years between Afrikaans, the identity of the *volk* and its culture by the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings and the Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns. More recently, the Stigting vir Vriendelike Afrikaans has tried to bring a new more inclusive dimension to this process.

The net result is that a powerful lobby backed by large Afrikaans-owned corporations has been established to protect the privileged position of Afrikaans. This lobby functions on a number of levels to pressurise the SABC board. Firstly, it has an historical grip within the inner sanctum of Auckland Park in terms of the composition of staff and existent language policy. Secondly, the financial might of advertisers tapping into the Afrikaans-speaking market, so necessary to the cash-strapped SABC, cannot be discounted and is acknowledged by board member Fatima Meer. Thirdly, this lobby has ample access to the print media and has successfully drummed up massive press campaigns to preserve the position of Afrikaans.

For reasons of historical inequity, there is no effective lobby representing either individually or collectively the African languages and they certainly do not have any financially powerful backers either. At this point they only have the language clauses in the Constitution which may ultimately prove to be too weakly symbolic to effect genuine equity. Without a clear language plan to effect an elevated status for African languages, it is likely that only lip service will be paid to establishing equity for these languages. Since the Afrikaans lobby has done little to court African languages interest groups in order to shore up resistance to the growing dominance of English, it is unlikely that there will be a strong enough lobby representing African languages to insist on equity for these languages.

The consequence is that Afrikaans is undoubtedly going to lose ground across all sectors of South African life, not so much because of the rise in stature of African languages but because of the more intangible ways in which English is on the ascent. Whatever the language policy statements of the SABC, its practice of language use will reflect the power dynamics operating among our languages in the wider context of the country.

Thus the third factor in this unhappy language relationship is the uncontested position of English. While English does not have a visibly organised lobby per se, its international position has made it possible for a number of popular misconceptions to take root about this language in South Africa. These relate to the belief that most South Africans understand English, or that English is widely used as a lingua franca. Discourse during the negotiations at Kempton Park did, and now in parliament does, largely take place in English. This creates an impression that English is a viable language for widespread communication.

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These misconceptions have been reflected by recent comment emerging from the SABC. For instance, the SABC has considered a survey on language use which suggests that 69 percent of South Africans can understand English. While it is possible that 69 percent of people may have very limited and rudimentary social language skills in English, only 34 to 40 percent have sufficient English language skills to make sense of news broadcasts and political debates in English. There is a vast difference between being able to understand and utter a few perfunctory greetings in a language and being able to engage in a more complex conversation.

When the SABC's Wynand Harmse argues that the language of politics in the country is English and that television debates on political issues therefore have to be in English, he is both correct and incorrect. He is reflecting popular thinking about the role of English. Political discourse among the leaders does take place in English. No amount of angst from the Afrikaans lobby will change this. But at least 60 to 65 percent of the population cannot understand this discourse in English.

So the question becomes, who is the SABC's audience? If it is the entire population, the perceptions around the communicability of English needs to be revisited.

The overt process of formulating a language policy within the SABC has been to work with the principles outlined in the interim Constitution. In addition, it has received more than 4 500 submissions from the public on the matter. Thirdly, there has been a democratic internal process of deliberation among the staff. Fourthly, the board has had to contend with the lobby around Afrikaans and, lastly, it has been influenced by the more covert pressure towards English.

The draft language policy of the SABC recognises the following principles:

- that the policy is an interim one;
- that there has to be a commitment to the equity of languages;
- that the 11 official languages will be treated with due regard to fairness in terms of allocation of resources and time of broadcasting;
- that the SABC will both protect the languages and reflect the changing use of languages.

Translated into practice this means that there will be at least 11 national public broadcasting service (PBS) radio stations. Board members recognise the problems around keeping languages discrete and separate, but this reflects to a certain degree where the public's wishes lie at present as well as an overt demonstration of the principle of equity. In order to finance the cost of this programme, commercial radio stations will also be run by the SABC and their language profiles will be market-driven.

There will be two PBS channels which, for financial reasons, will focus on shared language use although greater linguistic variety will be possible on a regional basis at certain times of the day. The third television channel will be a commercial channel and the languages in use will be entirely market driven.

What this means is that since English and Afrikaans are the two primary languages of the advertising market at present, these two languages are likely to dominate on the commercial channels although Zulu, understood by two-thirds of the population, is a viable third option.

English will effectively get the lion's share of time, Afrikaans will have a less but still disproportionately large amount of time, and African languages will enjoy a greater share than before, varying according to perceived numbers of speakers.

The new SABC policy then reflects the first stage in an ongoing process which parallels the slowly changing status and use of languages in wider society.

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