

rozhovor

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**Kateřina Mildnerov**

***Rozhovor s Mawatle Jerry Mojalefa  
a Philemon Buti Skhosana***

*Jerry, here in the Czech republic, when we say the South Africa, many people recollect a good wine, the football cup, but first of all Nelson Mandela and the history of apartheid, which started to decompose nearly at the same time as the communist dictatorship in the Czechoslovakia. Both countries thus have experienced two decades of progression towards democracy (Nelson Mandela became a president in 1994 – author's note). How this process is affected you and how personally you perceive it?*

Let me first give you this background. The apartheid era saw the teaching and associated research related to African languages taken over by mainly Afrikaans-speaking academics. The 1950s, 60s and 70s saw the growth of African languages being controlled by the apartheid structures. Homelands were being developed and the African languages were in fact promoted as official languages in these areas. In Lebowa homeland for example, Sepedi, then called Sesotho sa Leboa/Northern Sotho became an official language alongside Afrikaans/English in 1976 when 'pseudo-independence' was granted to that territory.

The apartheid era (1950–1980) saw the growth of African language teaching. What was being taught at most universities in South Africa was historical linguistics – the origins of Ur-Bantu and Proto-Bantu, etc. The work of Greenberg and Guthrie laid the foundation for these studies. Much of this work was comparative in nature, comparing different African languages in order to ascertain which language families they belong to,



etc. Much of this work was taught by non-mother tongue speakers of these languages to other mother tongue and non-mother tongue speakers of these languages.

At the same time, younger black scholars were being employed as teaching assistants. Even though they were instrumental in developing literary studies (alongside the historical linguistics offered by mainly white academics) they were never really recognized and failed to move beyond the level of teaching assistants.

From 1990 up to about the year 2000 there was a shift away from historical linguistics and the emphasis now became the teaching of structural linguistics. This was influenced by Chomsky's work and the fascination with the structure of African languages. Mother tongue speakers also emerged as scholars alongside the white academics.

There was also a move toward teaching African languages to non-mother tongue speakers, that is, beginners' courses. These were taught at the historically advantaged universities in South Africa, whilst in the homelands the emphasis remained on structural linguistics and literary analysis.

Since 1994 there has been a shift in the sense that most African language departments have been taken over by mother tongue speakers. This came at a time when most African languages were moving away from structural linguistics. The emphasis on pure linguistics that persists even today in many departments has led to the demise of African language departments. This demise has been part of a multifaceted process: the material that is being taught and how it is being taught; the shift toward English as a global bread and butter language; the attitude of students toward studying their mother tongue in mother tongue and how this attitude shift has been exacerbated by the former Model C schools; the trivialization of the teaching of African languages in the schooling system and so on.

Alongside the teaching of structural linguistics has also been the teaching of literature, also using a structural approach involving characterization, conflict, setting analysis and other structural analysis. It is mainly mother tongue speakers who have taken over this area as they are able to read the books, though there are a few white academics who have taught literature.

With the drastic drop in mother tongue students studying African languages at tertiary level, there is, therefore, also a concomitant need to strengthen undergraduate numbers, and incentivise (in the form of grants and bursaries) further study through appropriate first and second-language course development, thereby encouraging good teachers to emerge, as well as boosting postgraduate numbers who will do both first and second language research and implementation. This seems to be a wake-up call.

It has now become necessary for African languages to re-invent themselves and to re-position themselves in terms of teaching and research. Size of African language departments was drastically reduced. For example, staff at the University of South Africa was for example reduced from 80 academics down to its present 20 due mainly to

the sharp decline in the number of first language students registering for mother tongue African language studies. Mother tongue courses at the University of Pretoria currently are at the edge of collapsing. I see this as a challenge rather than a problem because there is already a space for developing and implementing a National Language Policy in the South African context.

***Jerry, you are a linguist and specialist on Sepedi language, as a professor and head of the department of African languages at the University of Pretoria, you are well acquainted with a problem of the role of African languages in the process of building of national pride in the new South Africa. By the constitution, there are eleven official languages which can be used by citizen dealing with public administration. Could you tell us how this "multilingual situation" looks like in everyday reality? Is it possible to expect that the native languages will maintain their autonomy in the future and will not yield to a pressure of English and Afrikaans, which actually serve as a lift to the upper society?***

In 1996 the South African Constitution was officially adopted. It is within Chapter 6 of this Constitution that respective language rights are enshrined. The Constitution states that there should be parity of esteem between the eleven official languages. However, to date, the main issue has been lack of implementation of this policy. The university departments of African languages would go some way to boosting the notion of parity of esteem between South Africa's national languages.

Developing integrated language policies in South Africa, indeed for the entire continent, is essential to the maintenance of cultural identity. This would ensure effective economic participation on the part of indigenous language speakers. Certain scholars believe that in the face of globalization the hegemony of English is appropriate if cultural identities are to be maintained. Arguably both indigenous languages as well as English should be taught effectively so as to facilitate transfer from the indigenous languages to English. The one holds the key to the other.

***Last but not least, are you not afraid of fragmentalization of linguistic borders which would possibly desintegrate the society (within the families and generations) in the post-apartheid South Africa?***

In both pre- and post-apartheid eras some South African scholars already tried to harmonize the indigenous languages of South Africa into two main groupings, namely Nguni and Sotho, but this standardization was not successful. This endeavour was rejected at hand by the speakers of the languages themselves. I still have a reason to believe that native people have to be encouraged to want to learn indigenous languages where it will benefit them economically. I have passion that the academic scholars will contribute significantly to determining a common agenda to counter the many threats

facing the African languages and to contribute towards making a greater impact in ensuring that the official languages of contemporary South Africa are recognized, valued and used to empower individuals to learn and grow.

*Thank you for your interview!*

*We have to announce with deep sorrow that professor Buti Skhosana has passed away on 28 October 2010 after a short illness. The Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of West Bohemia has lost a very good friend and academic community will miss an outstanding expert.*