



Monolingualism in a historically Black South African University: A case of inheritance

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ABSTRACT

The advent of the 11 official language policy in South Africa presented institutions of higher learning with opportunities to become multilingual universities in line with trends elsewhere. On the one hand, a number of Historically White universities (HWUs) started introducing university-wide language policy initiatives and discussions, which are, however, still in their infancy. On the other hand, Historically Black universities (HBUs) seem to have almost regressed by going for English-only default policy practices, regardless of the widely reported low literacy rates among their student populations. In this paper, we present a case study of a Historically Black university with a specific focus on its non-policy situation to draw generalizations that apply to other HBUs in South Africa. Using the concept of “multilingual universities” and its typologies that are grounded in Bourdieu’s cultural capital framework, we show disparities between what is feasible under the university’s linguistic profile and the present monolingual default practices. While highlighting the literacy “costs” of missing the multilingual capital, we argue for the benefits of a trifocal language policy practice where the university can serve as a catalyst for best multilingual development practices. In conclusion, we offer recommendations for multilingual development in higher education and possible areas for further research.

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1. Introduction

Although the use of more than one language is a universal practice at universities worldwide, fully-fledged multilingual universities are very few and largely uncommon in most parts of the world. More recent research developments in this domain only surfaced as an aftermath of the multilingual universities conference at the University of Fribourg (Beillard, 2000; Jernudd, 2002; Langer & Imbach, 2000). On the whole, there is still a paucity of research and understanding of the complex conditions of university multilingual practices, especially in African countries (Brock-Utne & Prah, 2009).

In the South African higher education context, multilingual universities have increasingly become topical since the major restructuring of the whole sector was promulgated between 2000 and 2002 (Alexander, 2000; Du Plessis, 2006; Hill, 2009; Jansen, 2004; Praxton, 2009; Van der Walt, 2004). These broad changes brought about by the Higher Education Plan (Department of Education, 2001) saw a reduction and merger of 36 universities into 23 institutions of higher learning either as traditional universities, comprehensive universities or universities of technologies (Hill, 2009; Jansen, 2004). The idea was to transform a system that was previously segregated on the basis of ethnic, racial and linguistic affiliations into one that is unitary, inclusive and complementary. Under the aegis of the 11 official language policy and the Language Policy

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for Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 2002, LPHE, hereafter), South African universities were in a position, theoretically, to transform into multilingual universities. Many scholars then believed that South Africa would become a leader in championing the use of indigenous African languages in higher education and the development of literacy traditions in the languages of the majority of its people (Heugh, 1999; Smithermann, 2000; Webb, 1998). According to these scholars, this new epoch also provided an opportunity to assess cross-pollination of literacy skills between previously marginalized languages and English while enjoying ‘parity of esteem’ in all domains of high prestige (RSA, 1996). The LPHE specifically decreed that higher education institutions should promote multilingualism by, among other things, establishing language policies that should be submitted to the Minister of Education (Ministry of Education, 2002). However, transformation deliberations were often fraught with tensions between emotional and rational choices, and there was a general lukewarm response to the language policy question, which left the situation to drift almost into a morass of monolingualism.

Varied responses to the LPHE showed a stark contrast between Historically Black universities (HBUs) and Historically White universities (HWUs). Within the group of HWUs, Afrikaans medium universities were, notably, the most progressive in this regard. First, there have been attempts to include African languages in their names (e.g., University of North West and University of Pretoria) and, increasingly, translation services are being used to include Setswana, for example, for learning and teaching purposes. These universities have also evolved from being Afrikaans monolingual to Afrikaans–English bilingual institutions due to motives such as the need to maintain Afrikaans, which was not preferred as the sole medium of learning and teaching in the Higher Education Act of 1997, and to survive (Du Plessis, 2006, p. 109). Historically Black English medium universities, on the contrary, retained monolingual practices in both wider communication and teaching contexts, with virtually no visible changes despite some of the promising submissions of language policy plans to the Ministry of Education (Kamwangamalu, 2000).

HBUs have not only retained the English only default practice, but they have also regressed on the promotion and development of African languages as subjects of study and research. In response to size and shape transformation directives from the Council of Higher Education in 1996, these universities reduced their programmes of African languages due to the small numbers of students they attracted. This situation has unwittingly consolidated English monolingualism both for instruction and wider official communication. Of note, there has never been a multilingual university where African languages were used as the languages of learning and teaching, save for a single BA degree programme where Sepedi and English are trialled at the University of Limpopo (Hornberger, 2010). In this paper, we seek to carry out a case analysis of developments at a HBU since the 2002 higher education changes, so as to discuss the theoretical apparatuses underpinning policy and planning developments, and highlight gaps or “missed opportunities”, as generalizable to other historically monolingual Black universities in Africa.

2. Multilingual universities in global context

The concept of “multilingual universities” is relatively new and under-theorized in the literature on language policy and planning even though in practice, the use of more than one language on university campuses is a universal practice. According to Du Plessis (2006), it was only in the early 2000s that the concept multilingual universities became commonly used. A catalyst role was played here by a conference at the University of Fribourg, which is renowned for its successful German–French bilingualism (Hill, 2009). Universally, a multilingual university encompasses all situations where administration, teaching and research, to some extent, are conducted in more than one language in an institution of higher learning (Mansour, 1993). Although this concept is often used interchangeably with that of a bilingual university, there are some differences worth noting. The latter is exemplified by the case of Fribourg University which offers instruction in both German and French whereas the case of thirteen Indian universities that include Bombay, Osmania and Shrimati provides a model of a multilingual university that offers multilingual media instruction in more than two languages: English, Hindi, Gujarati, and Morathi (Jayaram, 1993). In this paper, we adopt a more encompassing concept of “multilingual university” as an umbrella term to include all bilingual universities and the possibility of using more than 2 languages within the ambit of South Africa’s 11 official language policy.

Another important aspect prevalent within the literature on multilingual universities is the institution’s orientation towards multilingual practices. In some universities, multilingualism is used as a condition for entry into programmes or admission to the institution of higher learning whereas, in others, it is used vocationally; i.e., as the product or outcome expected at the end of the university education. Two further typologies are well known in the literature. The first one is called institutional multilingualism, which refers to a language dispensation of an institution and not the sociolinguistic output of the institution’s programmes (Garcia, 1998). The most common approach under this typology is referred to as parallel medium, in situations where two or more languages are used to teach different study programmes and to some extent, used separately to conduct university business. The University of Ottawa, which is a French and English parallel medium university in Canada, has been cited extensively as the model of this kind of multilingualism (Beillard, 2000; Du Plessis, 2006; Hill, 2009). A corollary to this typology is individual bilingualism. Unlike the former, this model is oriented towards the sociolinguistic output of the institution’s study programmes under the general model of dual medium or integrated bilingualism (Du Plessis, 2006; Langer and Imbach, 2000). This model applies to situations in which students are expected to learn the same content in more than one language. Sociolinguistically, the students who undertake study programmes under this model will be expected to have multiple competencies and operate in more than one language in their respective work

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