

**South African Language Policy:
Minority over Majority**

Christopher Graham

Multilingualism: LIN182

Robert Bayley

University of California, Davis

June 4, 2008

A Linguistic Portrait of South Africa

South Africa is a hotbed for linguistic activity. Three language families are commonly represented in that country, namely Niger-Congo, Indo-European, and Khoi-San (Mesthrie, 2002). Language mixing, as well, is not uncommon in South Africa; in fact, one of the common languages, Afrikaans, is itself a product of language mixing between Dutch and indigenous languages of the region (2002).

The following chart (Figure A) is based on the 1996 South African census, and reflects the languages spoken in the home by South Africans.

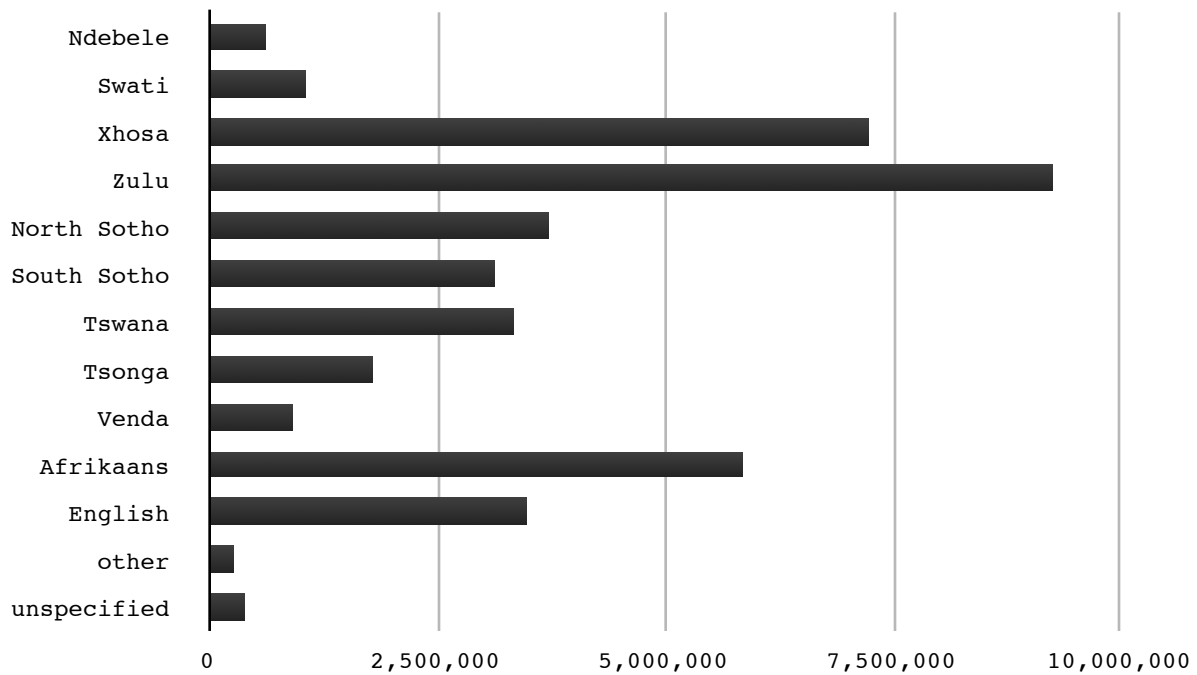


Figure A: Languages spoken at home in South Africa (Mesthrie, 2002)

As evidenced by the above, Zulu is the most common language spoken at home in South Africa, followed relatively closely by Xhosa. Afrikaans, the most common Indo-European language, is spoken at home by about 14.4 percent of South Africans. English, commonly thought of as the most common South African language, has roughly 3.5 million home speakers, comprising 8.6 percent of South Africans.

The section labeled "other" is comprised of approximately 70 other languages which are used in South Africa (Webb, 2002).

Language in the South African Constitution

As of 1996, the South African constitution recognizes 11 official languages (Mesthrie, 2002). According to the constitution, "the official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu" (qtd. in Mesthrie, 2002, p. 23). The constitution also recognizes "the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people," and promises "practical and positive" measures to attempt to correct the problem (2002, p. 24). The actualities of this clause will be discussed later.

The constitution also allows National and Provincial governments the ability to use a particular official language (or several languages) for government purposes, citing "the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in respective provinces;" however, the document makes no note of how these needs are to be calculated (2002, p. 24).

There are two other items in the constitution affecting language. The first states that "all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably" (2002 p. 24). Certainly, equal treatment of languages is an interesting component of this clause. Previously, the constitution allowed for specific languages to be used more than others based on the needs of the people, but now it calls for equality in the use of all official languages. Also, it seems remarkably difficult to control the esteem of one language over another using only government control.

Furthermore, the constitution states:

The Pan South African Language Board must a) promote and create conditions for the development and use of all official languages, the Khoi, Nama, and San languages, and sign language; b) promote and

ensure respect for languages, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, and others commonly used by Communities in South Africa, and Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and others used for religious purposes (2002, p. 24).

This final clause, while not attempting to guarantee equality of esteem, does recognize the use of other languages in South Africa, from the Khoi-San languages to other languages in the extreme minority.

Native languages in South Africa

As has been previously shown in Figure A, Zulu is the most common language spoken at home by South Africans. It boasts over 9 million home speakers, in a country with a population of roughly 40 million (Mesthrie, 2002).

When grouped together, the native languages spoken in South Africa show absolute dominance in terms of home speakers over languages from other families. The chart below (Figure B) illustrates this.

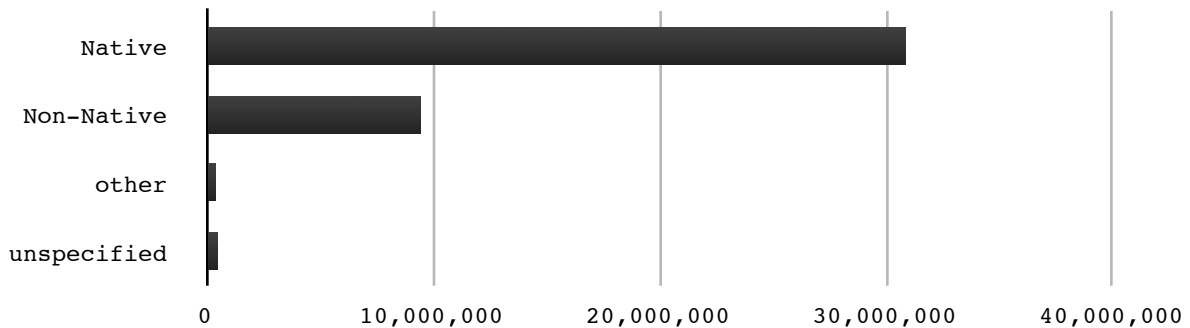


Figure B: Languages used in the home in South Africa (Mesthrie, 2002)

Note that the language group "other" does include some native languages, but the group contains a negligible amount of home speakers when compared to the native and non-native groups. Also, the non-native group consists solely of English and Afrikaans; all other non-native languages spoken in South Africa are contained in the "other" group. While Afrikaans

does not exist anywhere else but Africa, it is not a native language, as it is primarily Dutch with heavy native borrowings.

A more detailed look at native languages in South Africa yields further evidence of the dominance of these languages over English and Afrikaans. An examination of the nine South African provinces reveals that the vast majority of home speakers in nearly all of them speak some native language (Webb, 2002). The numbers can be truly staggering, as is the case with Northern Province; in that area, some 90.8% of the 4,929,368 residents speak a native language at home, namely Pedi, Tsonga or Venda (2002). Other, larger provinces, show similar results; the province of Eastern Cape, with 6,302,525 residents, has 5,250,524 people who speak Xhosa at home - nearly 84% - with the remainder of speakers using mostly Afrikaans (2002). The country's largest province, KwaZulu, has 79.8% of its 8,417,021 residents using Zulu at home (as the name would suggest), with the remainder using primarily English (2002).

This more detailed analysis illustrates an interesting fact: the use of native languages at home is spread throughout a large area, comprising the majority of the country (2002). The use of non-native languages, however, is quite dense in two particular provinces, Northern Cape and Western Cape, both of which are the only examples of provinces in which non-native language use at home is more common than native language use in the same domain (2002). Northern Cape, which is comprised of a relatively small 840,321 people and is the country's smallest province, has 69% of its residents speaking Afrikaans at home, with the remainder speaking Tswana or Xhosa (2002). Western Cape, which is more average-sized with 3,956,875 residents, has 79.5% speaking either Afrikaans or English in the home domain, and remainder speaking mostly Xhosa (2002).

To imagine citizens of South Africa being monolingual is almost certainly naïve. Mesthrie (2002) quotes a resident of Gauteng province, speaking of his experience with languages growing up:

My father's home language was Swazi, and my mother's home language was Tswana. But as I grew up in a Zulu-speaking area we used mainly Zulu and Swazi at home. But from my mother's side I also learnt Tswana as well. In my high school I came into contact with lots of Sotho and Tswana students, so I can speak these two languages well. And of course I know English and Afrikaans. With my friends I also use Tsotsitaal.

It is interesting that even someone who speaks primarily native languages, such as the young man quoted above, refers to English and Afrikaans almost as elsewhere-conditions; the way he speaks of them, one would think that it's common knowledge that perhaps everyone in South Africa speaks some non-native language, regardless of what they speak at home. This will be examined in more detail in the next section.

With the modern South African constitution making native languages official languages of the Republic, it is clear that language policy regarding these tongues is moving in a direction that is beneficial towards indigenous populations. Amazingly, the 1994 constitution of South Africa is the first one of its type; before 1994, there was never an official native language in South Africa of any kind, a fact almost certainly reminiscent of Apartheid rule (2002).

English in South Africa

With such protections for all official languages present in the South African constitution, the situation with English is most surprising and interesting. English has been spoken in South Africa since the end of the 16th century (2002). In the 19th century, the British colonial government

promoted English as a language for all domains (2002). Native languages were treated as inferior by British colonists (2002).

Even with a constitution calling for equality in availability and esteem of all official languages, English remains dominant in its status; although it is not the most commonly spoken language in South Africa (as has been illustrated in Figure A and Figure B, the latter when grouped with Afrikaans), English somehow is seen as more useful and more available by South Africans (2002).

English (and also to some extent Afrikaans) is still the predominant language used by the South African government (Kamwangamalu, 2000). That is not to say that government services are not available in official native languages (as that is now guaranteed by the country's constitution). However, written material is only part of the picture; when speaking with a government official (or anyone, for that matter) who doesn't happen to speak a given language, English is used commonly as a lingua franca (2000). With so many languages being spoken in the country, the use of English remains dominant in public, simply because it is easier to use it than to figure out which of the 70+ other languages are spoken by someone else (2000). English is dominant in the public domain, with native languages being dominant at home, as illustrated before.

It is interesting to think that English remains so dominant in public life in South Africa, even with a constitution that aims to treat all official languages with high regard. It seems that the citizenry of South Africa still does not match that country's language policy.

Race and Language Use

No discussion of language in South Africa can be complete or detailed enough without an examination of race. In South Africa, there are clear divides between race and language use (Beukes, 2004).

The following chart (Figure C) illustrates the aforementioned divides in the home domain.

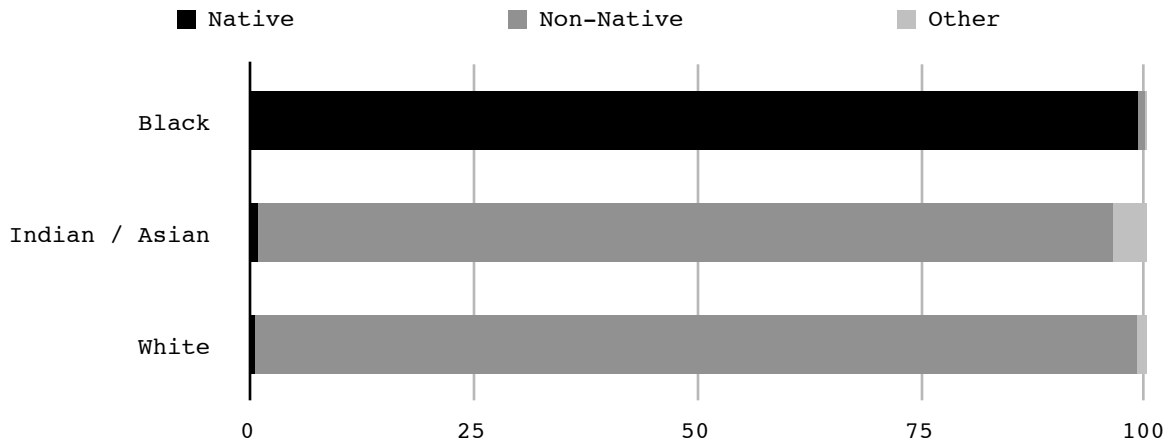


Figure C: Language use by race in South Africa (Beukes, 2004)

It is fairly clear that language use in the home domain is highly stratified between the race of the speakers. Black South Africans overwhelmingly use native languages at home, while white South Africans overwhelmingly use English or Afrikaans (2004). In fact, there are only .4% of white South Africans who use native languages at home, and only .9% of black South Africans who use non-native languages in the same domain (2004). The strata are staggering. In fact, for both white and Indian / Asian South Africans, the amount of people using an other language besides English or Afrikaans is larger than those using native languages (2004).

Implications

As has been illustrated, South Africa is an amazing mixture of languages in a relatively small amount of space. There are over 70 languages spoken in South Africa (Mesthrie, 2002).

Native languages, including Zulu and Xhosa, are by far the most common languages spoken in the home domain (2002). English, however (and Afrikaans to some extent), is used as a lingua franca in the public domain

(Kamwangamalu, 2000). The use of a particular language among a particular race is highly stigmatized, especially between native and non-native languages (Beukes, 2004).

Language policy in South Africa now reflects a desire to equalize the esteems of non-native versus native languages (Mesthrie, 2002). However, years of stigmatization among language groups and races are clearly still the dominant force. As a result, English and Afrikaans, the two most common non-native languages, remain dominant in South Africa regardless of their technical minority status.

Another issue of note is the fact that English is not just considered a lingua franca in South Africa, but also around the world. Communication skills in English are useful outside the boundaries of the country, which is more that can be said for Afrikaans and many of South Africa's native languages. It is this simple fact that gives English an edge by default; it is this fact that will continue to drive its popularity.

Works Cited

- Beukes, Anne-Marie. (2004). The First Ten Years Of Democracy: Language Policy In South Africa. [Online]. Available http://www.linguapax.org/congres04/pdf/1_beukes.pdf (May 31, 2008).
- Kamwangamalu, Nkonko. (2000). Language policy and mother-tongue education in South Africa: The case for a market-oriented approach. [Online]. Available http://digital.georgetown.edu/gurt/2000/gurt_2000_09.pdf (May 31, 2008).
- Mesthrie, Rajend, ed. (2002). Language in South Africa. Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, United Kingdom.
- Webb, Vic. (2002). Language in South Africa: The role of language in national transformation, reconstruction and development. John Benjamins Publishing Company; Amsterdam, The Netherlands.