Language policy for higher education in South Africa: implications and complications

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Abstract

This article offers a discussion of the recently finalised Language policy for higher education document (November 2002). After a brief account of the general background to the policy, the article focuses on the two main thrusts of the document: the need to develop (South African) African languages as academic/scientific languages for use in instruction; and the need to develop student proficiency in the currently designated language(s) of tuition, namely, English and, to a lesser extent, Afrikaans. In each case, this article argues that the processes entailed in meeting these needs are neither simple nor straightforward, but involve instead a number of complexities that need to be acknowledged and addressed. The bulk of the article, then, is devoted to clarifying the apparently unforeseen or unrecognised implications and complications of the policy document. Finally, the article considers the efforts made by one higher education institution to formulate an appropriate language policy as an example of the degree of difficulty inherent in such an enterprise.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to consider the much anticipated Language policy for higher education in South Africa, a document recently finalised and published in November 2002. More specifically, the purpose is to identify and discuss some of the possibly unforeseen or unacknowledged complexities involved in the practical implementation of the policy – what I have termed in the title of this article the implications and the complications.

The reason this language policy document has been so keenly anticipated lies in the manifest need to address a vital dilemma at the heart of higher education in South Africa today, a dilemma, moreover, which is essentially linguistic in nature. Put briefly, the dilemma is this: at the moment, English, and to a lesser extent Afrikaans, are the only languages capable of functioning fully as languages of learning and teaching at higher education institutions;1 yet many, perhaps most, potential higher education students are not sufficiently fluent in English and/or Afrikaans to be able to study effectively through these languages.

The Language policy for higher education document is to be commended, in
the first instance, for recognising this dilemma and for articulating it so plainly. Paragraph 5 of the document spells out the problem: ‘Language has been and continues to be a barrier to access and success in higher education; both in the sense that African and other languages have not been developed as academic/scientific languages and in so far as the majority of students entering higher education are not fully proficient in English and Afrikaans’ (Ministry of Education 2002:4–5).

The document then goes on to delineate the ‘challenge’ with which language policy-makers are confronted: ‘The challenge facing higher education is to ensure the simultaneous development of a multilingual environment in which all our languages are developed as academic/scientific languages, while at the same time ensuring that the existing languages of instruction do not serve as a barrier to access and success’ (Ministry of Education 2002:5).

The policy document thus outlines two rather different potential solutions which it somewhat tautologically contends must happen ‘simultaneously’ and ‘at the same time’. The first is to develop South African African (or more properly, Bantu) languages as academic/scientific languages for use in instruction at higher education institutions. The second is to develop students’ proficiency in English (and Afrikaans). For reasons both of clarity and argumentative strategy, this article will treat these issues separately.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTH AFRICAN (AFRICAN) LANGUAGES AS ACADEMIC/SCIENTIFIC LANGUAGES FOR USE IN INSTRUCTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Before addressing this issue, certain points need to be made clear. It goes without question that South Africa’s indigenous languages have been neglected in the past, and so it is obvious and necessary now that these languages should be thoroughly researched and studied; that multilingualism in general should be recognised and promoted as an integral part of South Africa’s material reality; and that all languages in use in South Africa should be respected and valued. All of this may be taken as a given.

The question at hand, however, is a rather different and more specific one. The question is whether South Africa’s indigenous languages can be developed and elaborated ‘as academic/scientific languages’ to the point where they are able to function fully as ‘media of instruction in higher education’ (Ministry of Education 2002:5,15). From a theoretical point of view, it is of course possible to develop these languages (like any other languages) in this way. From a practical perspective, however, the simple truth is that it is not going to happen, definitely not in the short term, and not even in the medium- to long-term. Such a statement may seem contentious and unhelpfully pessimistic and so some detailed explanation for this inevitable failure is required. Such an explanation may be
grouped under four different though interconnected categories: political, social, linguistic, economic.

Political

Politically, there seems to be no really proactive determination on the part of the general population (in marked contrast to Afrikaners) to bring about and sustain the necessary development and advancement of the indigenous languages, certainly not for higher education purposes.\textsuperscript{2} Nor has language ever been seen as a priority by the present government. On this point, it is worth remembering how South Africa came to have 11 official languages. The motive force behind this decision did not emanate from any large-scale language or cultural lobby for the promotion of the indigenous languages – there simply was none. Instead, what transpired was that at the negotiations both for the interim Constitution in 1993 and for the final Constitution in 1996 an eleventh-hour impasse arose over the question of the continued official status of Afrikaans (see Hartshorne 1995:314–316; Heugh 2002:459–463). The African National Council (ANC) coalition negotiators, on the one hand, had by and large accepted English as the necessary linking or common language of the country and, by extension, the national language. The National Party (NP) negotiators, on the other hand, categorically rejected the idea of the diminution in status of Afrikaans. As the talks threatened on both occasions to derail over this issue, the desperate and only half-considered compromise was reached to recognise eleven languages as official.

There is, moreover, insufficient capacity on the part of the government or the education authorities to bring this massive project (and it is massive) to any kind of successful completion. Although bodies such as the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) and the various residual language bodies continue to have as part of their brief the facilitation of a fully multilingual education system, they have proved themselves to be generally unable, in terms of organisational capability or logistical expertise, of meeting this brief. More recently, the Department of Arts and Culture earlier in 2003 launched its \textit{National language policy framework} (2003) and there is talk of the forthcoming South African Languages Act establishing a national department of language (Robinson 2003:10). However, while these may be welcome and apparently promising initiatives to promote the indigenous languages, they still fall a long way short of the Ministry of Education’s goal of developing these languages as fully functional media of instruction in higher education.

Social

In terms of the broader society, various theories have been advanced to explain the general lack of interest that exists when it comes to the promotion of the indigenous languages. One of the most compelling explanations may perhaps be
found in the richly amorphous nature of the term, ‘home language’. In the South African context it may be that ordinary people conceive of their home languages as just that, the language of the home. As Sarah Murray (2002:438) points out, ‘many parents believe that the home language is learnt quite adequately at home; it is the job of the school to teach the language of wider communication’. And she quotes a parent in KwaZulu-Natal to typify the attitude:

Izingane uma sizithumela esikoleni sisuke sikheke ukuthi zifunde izintho ezintsha. Isizulu lesi ingane isuke isazi isikipha ngamakha, ngakho ke asiko isidingo sokuba leyongane ibelokhu isina ndawonye.

(When we send children to school we expect them to acquire new knowledge. By school-going age a child is already a fluent speaker of Zulu . . . so there is no need for that child to dance on one spot . . . that child must learn English and be taught in English.)

From this perspective, the home language, or mother tongue, is utilised for the purposes of creating and expressing a sense of self-identity, of communal belonging, of cultural orientation. It is used for personal communication, for colloquial discourse, for localised everyday exchanges. And it may well be the language of initial instruction in school. There seems, however, to be little sense of the need to broaden the scope of the home language beyond these primary social functions. Instead, for the purposes of more general communication, advanced learning and education, formal economic involvement, and so on, the acquisition of English is viewed as a natural necessity. Nor does there appear to be any perceived threat of English acculturation as a result; the language is appropriated for instrumental use with minimal socio-cultural vitiation. Moreover, this form of stratified diglossia is by no means uncommon – in fact, it may well be the normal orientation of bilinguals in most parts of the world. As Francois Grosjean (1982:34–35) has perceptively noted, ‘in many countries, to be educated means to be bilingual’.3

Linguistic

From a specifically linguistic perspective, there exist multiple obstacles beyond the socio-political pragmatics of the situation. In the first place, even to talk of there being nine African languages in South Africa is to underestimate in an extremely simplistic fashion the linguistic complexity of the country. In actuality, the various African languages are not spoken across the country in any consistent, regularised form (as is the case with more established languages elsewhere). Instead, unsurprisingly, people speak a wide diversity of dialects, often very loosely associated with the standard form, and at times displaying a low degree of mutual intelligibility either with the standard or with other non-standard forms (see
Herbert & Bailey 2002:59f). Some of these dialects may enjoy a predictable regionalised particularity, while others exist in various stages of evolutionary flux. Again, some may represent a peculiar group identity, while others are mixed or hybrid forms as a result of various kinds of interlinguistic contact. And yet others have developed out of necessity as a lingua franca, such as the various forms of Iscamtho, particularly in the townships and cities. Gerard Schuring (1993:11–13), for example, cites 85 separate dialects in the traditional regions, with many more varieties proliferating in the urban areas. The situation is then infinitely complicated by the fact that the written standard languages, developed first by the missionaries (often for purposes of evangelical and political expedience rather than linguistic fidelity) and then substantiated by the old apartheid language boards, tend to be based on a particular rural dialect which may be utterly alien to many actual speakers of the language.

The idea of developing all nine of the classified African languages (perhaps dialectal groupings is a better phrase) to serve as fully-fledged media of instruction in higher education is clearly thus to undertake a mammoth task of linguistic and social engineering. Ironically, moreover, such an undertaking may well have exactly the opposite effect to the multilingual ideal articulated in the constitution. After all, what it would very likely entail is to take a person speaking his or her own home language/dialect (the very basis of his or her personal and social identity), force him or her to abandon this in favour of an artificial and unfamiliar standard (often with negative political associations), and then to use this new form exclusively. Far from promoting multilingualism, the net result might be another version of language death in which actual, meaningful dialects are destroyed by the superimposition of a single, hegemonic standard. From a different perspective, however, the Canadian linguist, William F Mackey (1992:52), reminds one that ‘the lack of standardisation jeopardises the potential status of a language’ and that a language which lacks a well-established written form cannot become empowered. The whole question of standardisation remains an acutely difficult one in the South African context.

Economic

Apart from any other considerations, the project has some very obvious economic implications. If nothing else, the sheer financial cost of the undertaking is prohibitive. The Language policy for higher education speaks of the need for ‘the level of resourcing [to] be comparable to the investments that were made, in the past, to develop Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in higher education’ (Ministry of Education 2002:10). This statement alone should disqualify the project at the outset. The original Afrikaner nationalist political movements, and later, apartheid governments, were mobilised and motivated by a relentless determination to develop their own language as a marker of identity and thus as an instrument of self-sufficient separateness and domination. Huge financial and
human resources were dedicated to this enterprise, which was carried out at the direct expense of other cultures and languages in this country. Apart from academics appointed specifically at universities and parastatal organisations to develop and elaborate the language, a vast array of boards and committees were set up in virtually every sector in the workplace to create terms and phrases relevant to that sector. And all of this had the full economic backing of a government whose very *raison d’être* depended on the maintenance and expansion of the language.

Four contrastive considerations help to illuminate the impediments involved in developing the African languages in the same way. One: none of the African languages serves to amalgamate and animate the interests of any fiercely resolute cultural nationalism the way that Afrikaans did. Two: Afrikaans derives from, and remains closely affined to, Dutch, one of the oldest and most established academic and scientific languages in Europe, so that it was relatively easy to expand Afrikaans into a scholarly language. Three: if the costs of developing Afrikaans were astronomical, one can only imagine what the costs would be of developing not just one but nine different languages to the same degree. Four: as the Afrikaans language historian Abram Cluver (1995:7–8, 21) points out, even at the height of the attempt to elaborate Afrikaans as a scientific and academic language, it was falling behind English at the rate of thousands of scientific and technical terms per annum, and thus effective higher learning and research has always required, and will always require, advanced levels of proficiency in English. Today, moreover, after all that effort and all that expense, Afrikaans has become, and will continue to become, an ever-diminishing language – in the media, in public life, in politics, and, most pertinently, in education, where, for instance, student numbers in Afrikaans language courses at English-medium universities are almost nil, and where even at nominally Afrikaans-medium universities, the use of the language as a medium of instruction has been drastically eroded by English.⁵

From the foregoing discussion, it must be concluded that the idea of developing the nine indigenous languages into fully functional languages of instruction in South African higher education is most unlikely to succeed. Indeed, the very discourse of the policy document itself is so tentative and hedged about with qualifications that it remains unconvincing. For example, directly after announcing itself as the first ‘genuine attempt . . . to ensure that all of our official languages are accorded parity of esteem’ (2002:9), whatever that vague phrase means, it goes on to note that such an attempt ‘will, in practice, be in tension with other imperatives and considerations such as the need for financial affordability and the rights of others’, and that it is also subject to questions of ‘practicability’, a word which generally sounds a death-knell to any proposed policy implementation.

If the indigenous languages are not going to be developed as full media of instruction in higher education, then serious attention must be paid to the idea of developing students’ proficiency in the current languages of tuition, a question to which this article now turns.
THE PROMOTION OF PROFICIENCY IN THE CURRENT LANGUAGES OF INSTRUCTION

One of the most unfortunate aspects of the Language policy for higher education is that it constructs the use of English in higher education as a problem rather than an extremely valuable national resource. (For purposes of brevity and focus, this article will not deal with the question of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction: this is a rather different and altogether more contentious issue which would require an entire article on its own.) The language policy document does not recognise (or admit to recognising) the immense usefulness of having not just an international language, but the global language of the twenty-first century, as a medium of learning and teaching in higher education. The benefits and potential advantages are manifold and hardly need stating here – access to the international literature, the lingua franca of global research, the language of cutting edge science and technology – but these receive no mention in the document. Instead its single focus rests on how English (and Afrikaans) should ‘not serve as a barrier to access and success’ (Ministry of Education 2002:5). While it is indisputable that not all students are sufficiently fluent in English to succeed in tertiary study, and this is an issue which this section of the article will address, to ignore bluntly and wilfully the value of English as a vital national asset is to present a radically incomplete and distorted picture of the local linguistic landscape.6

Having noted the need to improve students’ proficiency in English, the Language policy for higher education disposes of this crucial question in a single sentence: ‘The Ministry would like to encourage all higher education institutions to develop strategies for promoting proficiency in the designated language(s) of tuition, including the provision of language and academic literacy development programmes’ (2002:10–11).

And that is it.

Academic literacy development is an area of urgent need and most if not all tertiary institutions have put programmes in place to address it, independent of the Ministry’s encouragement and long before the composition of the Language policy for higher education. There are, however, a number of limitations to such programmes which render them less than ideal in resolving the problems attendant upon students’ lack of proficiency in English. Firstly, such programmes do not address the issue of students falling below minimum entrance requirements because of linguistic deficiency. Nor would a relaxation of such entrance requirements do anything except increase the already high first-year failure rate. And independent access tests usually serve only to confirm current access inequities.

More directly, as anyone who has designed and facilitated such academic literacy programmes knows, their success rate is frequently low. Many students start from too low a base level of proficiency to achieve quickly what the linguist Jim Cummins (2000, for example) termed cognitive academic language
proficiency (CALP), as opposed to basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS). Students often find these programmes, over and above the normal curricular demands, to be too onerous and, therefore, even counter-productive. Some students have simply reached an age where their ability to improve their language skills is minimal. The harsh lesson revealed by such programmes is that the task of improving students’ language proficiency to academically acceptable standards is a long, arduous process. It cannot be achieved quickly; it requires a great deal of effort on the part of both the learner and the institution; and even then there are no guarantees of success.

If these are the problems, what are the solutions?

One interim solution, already established by some higher education institutions, is to create pre-university bridging courses to prepare under-educated students for tertiary study. But this has cost implications. Not only does the student have to pay for one or more additional years of study (usually without bursary assistance), but they also forfeit those years of earning potential. In any event, such pre-university bridging courses are really only doing the work which should have been accomplished by the schools – and here is the crux of the matter.

The real solution lies with the South African schooling system. In order to produce students who have the ability and skills to access and succeed in higher education, it is the schools which need to provide the requisite language proficiency. This is where the real focus and attention should be concentrated. Rather than vaguely encouraging higher education institutions to offer last-minute intervention strategies, the Ministry and Department of Education should be directing massive amounts of energy and expertise to improving proficiency in English at all levels of the schooling system, so that by the time learners matriculate, they have sufficient ability in English to succeed.

For this to materialise, however, a number of things have to happen. Firstly, there needs to be a significant change of attitude on the part of the authorities towards language planning in general, and towards English in particular. Secondly, there must be an explicit, official acknowledgement of the vitally important role of English in education. Thirdly, there must be an abandonment of the current disingenuous pretence that English is just one arbitrary language among eleven for educational purposes.

Of course multilingualism must be promoted; of course the other South African languages must be researched and developed; of course they must be respected and valued. But equally it is imperative that an intensive, nation-wide campaign be launched to make all South Africans proficient in English (in addition to whatever other languages they speak). There is unfortunately no scope here to provide detailed proposals for how this might be achieved, but a brief synopsis of possible projects may suffice: 7

- mandatory English proficiency programmes for pre-service student teachers
- incentive-based proficiency programmes for in-service teachers
establishment of on-site language laboratories and other self-help facilities
provision of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TESOL), (TEFL), and other English second-language acquisition materials
programmes of English language acquisition, development, guidance and reference in the print and electronic media (including the internet if economically feasible)
incentives for educators proficient in English to be located in the township and rural schools
community service programmes for senior students and graduates in areas of need
Corporate-funded Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) English proficiency programmes for workers and their families

These proposals are both practically manageable and sustainable. There are readily available material resources, both from within South Africa and abroad, where the business of teaching English as a foreign language has developed into a huge international growth industry. Indeed, the field of English second-language acquisition represents one of the most fecund areas of research in the humanities today. There are also relatively plentiful human resources in the form of English first-language speakers (both white and, increasingly, black), as well as proficient second-language speakers. And the entire endeavour is, comparatively, a reasonably inexpensive one.

Most importantly of all, however, this enterprise would be enthusiastically supported by the general community, whose desire for English is founded upon demonstrable reasons of practical access not simply to higher education as such, but also to job opportunities; to social and geographical mobility; to international media, culture and the arts; to world-wide information; to the global lingua franca; to the language of the world economy and geopolitics.8

Given such compelling support for the need to prioritise access to English, it might have been expected that the government would have already implemented some sort of plan of action. Yet little if anything has hitherto been done. Indeed, the Language policy for higher education is the first official document even to acknowledge, however reluctantly, the need for English proficiency. Until it is properly acknowledged and addressed, however, South African education in general, and higher education in particular, will continue to be characterised by inequality and exclusion, and will fail to realise the rich potential which it undoubtedly holds.

THE RESPONSE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

As a means of testing the practicability of the Language policy for higher education, it may be instructive to consider how one higher education institution, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), has responded to the document.
According to *The Language policy for higher education*, ‘all higher education institutions are required to develop their own language policy subject to the above policy framework’ (2002:15), which had to be submitted to the Minister of Education by 31 March 2003. Wits duly responded in an initiative hailed by Thami Mseleku, the Director-General of Education, as ‘the first of its kind’ (quoted by Monare 2003:3). Whether or not the initiative is worth hailing, however, is the subject of the final section of this article.

*The Language policy for higher education* acknowledges that the cost of offering studies in all 11 South African official languages by individual institutions would be ‘prohibitive in relation to current student demand’ (2002:13) and so it suggests that such studies be offered on some form of ‘cost-effective regional/national platform’ (2002:14). Taking this at face value, Wits has taken the step of selecting seSotho as its dedicated language of development (in tandem with English, and with French as its dedicated foreign language). The aim is to have seSotho elaborated into a language of tuition within ten years to be used alongside English in a bilingual-medium of instruction policy. Though isiZulu would have been a more popular choice, it is felt that institutions in KwaZulu-Natal are more suited to its development. The idea, then, would seem to be something like this: isiZulu developed in KwaZulu-Natal; isiXhosa in the Western Cape; seSotho in the Free State and in southern Gauteng (in conjunction with Lesotho, presumably); Setswana in the North-West (with Botswana?); Northern Sotho in Pretoria and the northern provinces. Rather less clear is who is going to take responsibility for siSwati (Swaziland?) or isiNdebele, tshiVenda or xiTsonga. No doubt some kind of regional agreement could be worked out, however.

In some senses, seSotho is not a bad choice for Wits. It is one of the more homogeneous of the African tongues. Of the respondents in a Wits survey, 28,7 per cent supported its selection, 11,3 per cent of students speak it as a first language. It is one of the foundational languages of township Iscamtho (along with isiZulu), and so Wits could offer a perspective on the urban form of the language as spoken in Gauteng. Moreover, the strategy of focusing on a single language such as seSotho seems practically viable.

Yet, the more one interrogates this option, the more illogical and contradictory the whole enterprise begins to seem.

Firstly, to select only seSotho to be developed as a medium of instruction undermines the very notion of language equity and the promotion of multilingualism. Why should the university effectively choose to serve the interests of only 11 per cent of the student population? Is Wits going to be perceived as an institution that favours seSotho speakers above others? Will it develop in time into a site of Sotho ethnicity? At the very least, as many colleagues suggested, the university should accept isiZulu also as a medium of instruction in order to provide a more fully multilingual teaching and learning environment.

Secondly, although the Wits *Language policy* foresees seSotho being developed into a medium of instruction, it also asserts that it is a ‘requirement’
of all staff and students to ‘achieve full competence in written and spoken English’ (2003:3). There is clearly something odd about this confluence of ideas. Students will arrive at Wits and will be required and enabled to reach full competence in English. At the same time, seSotho will be used as a medium of instruction. But if students have mastered English, how many of them would need or choose seSotho as a medium of instruction? Would even seSotho first-language speakers elect to learn through the medium of seSotho as opposed to an international academic language such as English, in which they would have full competence? More particularly, why should 11 per cent of the student population be advantaged over the rest by the sheer accident of being seSotho speakers? Far from achieving greater inclusivity, the policy as it currently stands would seem ironically to be perpetrating a new and even more divisive system of linguistic discrimination.

The first part of this article discussed how difficult it would be to develop a language such as seSotho into an academic/scientific language for use in instruction, especially since the standard form of the language derives from a rural dialect which may be quite alien and unfamiliar to most students. Even in the rural areas, standard seSotho, based mostly on the Kwena and Fokeng dialects, differs both from other local varieties, such as seKgolokwe, seTlokwa, seKwena and seRotse (seLozi), as well as from the seSotho used in Lesotho (Olivier 2002:1). In places like Gauteng, a fortiori, the majority of nominal seSotho students speak some form of urban dialect or koiné which is even further removed from the standard. They would then presumably have to go to some lengths to unlearn their own version of the language and adapt to a standard form which they might consider to be otiose and irrelevant.

Indeed, one of the salient features of seSotho as a language (as with all of the Sotho language groupings) is how difficult it has proved to be to agree upon an acceptable modernised written medium. Apart from some quite considerable lexical variation, seSotho is an agglutinating language and hence it is at times problematic to define what counts as a discrete word. Numerous morphemes are run together seamlessly in speech, and to separate these out into individual words can be a fairly arbitrary and artificial exercise. Another reason lies in the fact that seSotho, like most Bantu languages, is a tonal language, where tone often differentiates otherwise indistinguishable homonyms. Unfortunately, there is little agreement on the most suitable or accurate means of marking tone without making the transcription extremely cumbersome.

Furthermore, much of the agreement undertaken by Wits to develop seSotho as a fully-fledged academic language is dependent on a variety of other factors: government financing to produce the necessary teaching resources, materials and courses at other levels of education; the support of the Department of Education to modernise primary and secondary school seSotho courses; costing and time frames yet to be provided by the Ministry of Education and the Department of Arts and Culture and, of course, the overall success of the government’s National language policy framework as a whole. So tenuous is the entire project, in fact, that Wits will
only decide finally whether or not to ‘expand seSotho as a medium of instruction in 2010’ (according to the university registrar, Derek Swemmer, quoted in Monare 2003:3), with the actual implementation of bilingual instruction of necessity several years after that.

However, the real anti-climax comes at the end of the Wits Language policy document. At the outset, the aims of the policy are stated in terms of some ambition: ‘Once Sesotho has been developed for use as a language of instruction in Higher Education, the university will . . . prepare staff and students for the introduction of English and Sesotho as a bilingual medium of instruction’ (2003:2).

The policy document lays out in some detail a four-phase implementation plan under the following broad headings (2003:Table 1):

Phase 2: developing the linguistic abilities of staff and students.
Phase 3: development of the Sesotho language (for use in instruction in higher education).
Phase 4: bilingual medium of instruction.

It is only at the very end of the document, however, that all these grand plans are thrown into practical, bathetic relief, as step by step the document explains what is really meant by bilingual education (2003:7).

Firstly, ‘the University rejects dual medium of instruction – where some subjects are taught through the medium of Sesotho and some through the medium of English – as all students need access to the international literature in English’.

Secondly, ‘the University also rejects parallel medium of instruction – where all courses are repeated in each language – as this is both costly and likely to separate students along lines of language preference’.

Instead, all these plans and aims add up to . . . code-switching! ‘The aim in choosing a bilingual-medium policy is to enable staff and students to attain sufficient bilingual competence to manage oral code-switching in their disciplines’.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the Wits Language policy formed part of an elaborate April Fools Day joke (it was released shortly before the first of April). To think that all this time, money and effort is going to be spent to enable code-switching between English and seSotho, especially when a stated aim of the university is to ensure that all staff and students ‘attain mastery of oral and written competence’ (2003:5) in English anyway. If they have mastery of English, why would they need to code-switch? And if they do need to code-switch, why should
this be limited to seSotho, the language of only 11 per cent of the student population? Even allowing for all of this, the benefits of code-switching, especially at tertiary level, are far from established, and may even retard language development in English. Finally, how does the necessarily arbitrary and *ad hoc* nature of code-switching amount to seSotho serving as a fully-fledged language of tuition? The concluding vision is one taken directly from the theatre of the absurd: the multilingual university community, all of whom are fully or very nearly fully proficient in English, develops a new standard form of a single African language that everyone must learn in order to switch from the code – English – that they already know and are using anyway.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the purpose of this discussion has not been to denigrate the attempt by the University of the Witwatersrand to formulate a genuinely appropriate response to the *Language policy for higher education*. The intention, rather, has been to identify and explore some of the particular complexities and even contradictions implicit in such an enterprise. More generally, the aim has been to utilise the Wits response as a means of testing the overall feasibility of the higher education language policy as a whole.

As this article hopes to have shown, the entire project is fraught with numerous unforeseen or unacknowledged implications and complications which fatally undermine it. There is no doubt that higher education in South Africa is in crisis. But the *Language policy for higher education*, as it stands at the moment, is not the way to resolve it. The real solution, as this article has argued, lies partly in developing the indigenous languages, but more urgently in providing quality access to English proficiency throughout the education system, and indeed throughout the society generally. Therein lies the difference between a world-class higher education system, and the well-intentioned, but tangled imbroglio that currently exists.

**NOTES**

1 In this article, terms such as *‘languages of learning and teaching’, ‘media of instruction’, ‘languages of tuition’,* and so on, are used interchangeably and without any implied judgement regarding methodological approach.

2 An index of this lack of enthusiasm may be found in the fact, as the *Language policy for higher education* itself concedes (2002:8), that *‘enrolments in [African] language programmes have declined in recent years resulting in the closure of several departments’*.

3 For further discussion of this perspective on bilingualism, see Gough (1994) and Barnes (1999).

4 This argument helps to explain why the notion of harmonising the Nguni and Sotho language groupings (as suggested by Neville Alexander (1989), for example) has proved so unpopular among speakers of those languages.

5 The very fact that the *Language policy in higher education* spends such a disproportionate
amount of time on the question of preserving Afrikaans ‘as a language of scholarship and science’ (2202:6) is indicative of the language’s decline (see sections 10, 11, 15, as well as their numerous sub sections).

6 For a fuller discussion of the benefits of, and the necessity for, English in education, see Titlestad (1998).

7 For a more detailed discussion of the issue of language proficiency in the schools, see my article, ‘South African Education and the Dilemmas of Multilingualism’ (2002).

8 Apart from one highly contentious report by PANSALB (2001), every survey conducted in South Africa confirms that people actively desire to become proficient in English and, more pointedly, that parents want their children to become proficient in English.

9 Ironically, no sooner has the Ministry of Education, through the Language policy for higher education, committed itself to ‘the promotion of the study of foreign languages’ (2002:16), than the Minister of Education announces, in June 2003, the culling of 12 of the 18 foreign languages currently taught in schools, including Latin, Hebrew, Tamil, as well as two languages explicitly listed in the policy document, Greek and Hindi. The only foreign languages that will continue to be taught are French, Arabic, German, Portuguese, Italian and Spanish.

10 Although the Wits Language policy does suggest that the university will provide a major in both seSotho and isiZulu (2003:3), the idea of including isiZulu as a medium of instruction was rejected.

11 Standard South African seSotho and standard seSotho as used in Lesotho have markedly divergent orthographies, for instance.

12 As just one example, though there is no scope to explore the idea here, language planners would have to consider what to do about the traditional concept of hlonepha, or women’s language of respect, where certain words or syllables have to be avoided if they form part of the husband’s family names.

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