

## **Another Type of Language Attitude**

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When I read Prof. Rosemary Gray's article "Language Attitudes or Food for Thought", I immediately thought of writing this sequel to tell another type of language attitude, as a way of ending English Language Awareness month.

Sometime in 1993, a woman got a 16-page letter from her daughter's father making a case for why his two-year-old should acquire English as her first language rather than his mother tongue. The letter had been written against the background of the "embarrassment" and "shame" he felt for a Chinese father whose daughter could not speak English nor understand a word of English in an international hotel in Swaziland, now Eswatini. Fearing that he might one day be exposed to such public shame and embarrassment, he decided to make the case for his daughter.

At seven, the daughter left Nigeria for Swaziland with the ability to speak, read and write in English, but with limited knowledge of speaking, reading and writing her mother tongue Yoruba, having been encouraged to try different languages in her primary school in Nigeria. Unfortunately, even this limited knowledge of Yoruba was lost during 13 years of international schooling in which the daughter learned French and Spanish. On occasional travels back to Nigeria, she was unable to talk with her grandmother, uncles and aunties who only spoke Yoruba, although she was still able to discern some meaning in what they said to her.

Then, she went on to college in the USA and for the first time in her life felt confronted by her identity. She was proud to introduce herself as Nigerian and Yoruba but couldn't speak her language and was completely uninformed about her culture. During her first summer holidays, she challenged her parents about her identity crisis, accusing them of disadvantaging and alienating her from her mother tongue, as well as the cultural heritage and world view expressed in the language. She lamented the loss of creative resources she could have tapped into if she had continued with Yoruba. She alluded to how the creative abilities of Nigerian writers such as Soyinka, Achebe and Adiche were boosted by their ability to explore their world in Yoruba, Igbo and English. She conceded that while her parents might have been well intentioned in making English her sole language, the competitive advantages enjoyed earlier in life was nothing compared to the loss of identity and displacement she suffered.

I am sure this story resonates with some of us or even speaks directly to the decision we have made for our children or have seen other parents make for their children. The decision by parents to choose English over their mother tongue is informed by a number of factors. The first and most predominant is the global status of English and its use as the language of teaching and learning in the educational system of most countries in western and southern Africa. With this in mind, parents often make the erroneous judgement that their mother tongue will limit their children's future. The second common factor is the desire by some parents to give their children the opportunities they never had. Such parents tend to overcompensate by putting their children in private schools where English is the sole language of instruction. They make this decision against the background of their own lived experiences and the challenges they had in school speaking, reading and writing in English

compared to peers with educated parents from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. A third factor, stems from the erroneous perceptions in the 60s, 70s and the 80s that the acquisition and learning of English is hampered by learners' mother tongue. This perception informed the unfortunate practice of calling mother tongue languages vernacular in secondary schools and of punishing, humiliating or shaming students who spoke their mother tongue at school. Those who were at school during these decades had their minds colonised.

We now know from the literature available on Mother Tongue Education, Second Language Acquisition, Learning English as an Additional Language and Bi/Multilingualism that none of the perceptions expressed above are true (Cook, 1995; Garcia, 2009; Makalela, 2015a).

Unfortunately, we still have parents who vehemently oppose Mother Tongue Education at all the three phases of education in favour of the English language. Such parents especially those from poor socio-political backgrounds see the Mother Tongue Education policy as a ploy to keep their children disadvantaged, especially when they see government officials and even teachers who are entrusted with the implementation of the policy take their own children to private schools where English is better taught and learned. The lack of trust in government policy, and between government and parents, has continued to advance the preference for English language over mother tongue languages. This is particularly so, when public schools are bereft of good English and mother tongues teachers who can positively impart the knowledge that learners need to succeed with language learning.

Ironically, in spite of the preference for English, it is not always taught to a standard where all learners in public high schools can gain access to tertiary institutions or retain their studentship once they have gained admission. Michelle Joubert addressed this disturbing reality in her article 'Bridging the Gap: English as a Lingua Franca in Higher Education.' This reality has created another form of attitude towards the English language as the language that impedes success. This attitude is further accentuated by the push to decolonise the language of education. The question to ask is whether it is the English language in itself as a language that is an impediment, or the poor quality of its teaching at primary and secondary school level? This is an area of English language teaching and learning that needs urgent attention and critical evaluation more than the labelling of English language as an impediment.

To conclude, I want to go back to the young woman and her advice to parents. Children must never be denied their mother tongue, because it is their identity and their heritage. They should also be exposed to learn as many languages as possible. The exposure to languages will not only enrich their world view, but will place them in a position to tap into multiple resources for critical thinking, real-world problem solving and establishing their identity in a cosmopolitan and global context. She wants parents who choose the English language over their children's mother tongue to know that while her high standard in spoken and written English gave her a temporary competitive edge over classmates who came from public schools and who spoke and wrote in their mother tongue, those classmates eventually attained the same level of proficiency in English and are now not alienated from their extended family, culture and heritage, and do not find themselves without an identity on the global stage.

Our attitude to languages must change to reflect the known fact that no one language is better than any other. As Antony Goedhals puts it in his succinct history of the English language ('English: a brief history'), we should feel free and comfortable with all our languages, and develop them for good purposes and the advancement of human capital.

Works referenced.

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