Ideologies and Attitudes of Foundation Students at a Multilingual University Jane-Francis Afungmeyu Abongdia

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Abstract

This paper explores the different language ideologies and attitudes of foundation students of the Economics and Management Sciences Faculty (EMS) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa. It offers a critical examination of the different ideologies and attitudes that students from a multilingual university hold towards English as the sole medium of instruction. It further examines why the students hold the different ideologies and attitudes and how the analysis of these attitudes could inform and improve the teaching and learning in the classroom. By so doing, the lecturers could be informed of the different approaches that they could use in teaching and learning. In addition, the paper presents the factors that appear to play a role in shaping their ideologies and attitudes towards English, a language that many of the students appear to find difficult to use in academic learning. Thus, being aware of these ideologies, a lecturer should be able to motivate the students to study English (integrated and instrumental motivation). Central to these factors are the prevailing language ideologies in this multilingual and multicultural university. This is to suggest that the diverse participants in terms of culture and linguistics hold different ideologies. The findings from this qualitative study are examined using studies on language ideologies by linguistic anthropologists like Kroskrity (2000) and Ricento (2006). After discussing the theoretical framework, the paper then focuses on the ideologies and attitudes of the students based on their linguistic and socio-political backgrounds.

Keywords: South Africa, University of the Western Cape, language ideologies, language attitudes, English, multilingualism, sociopolitical factors.

1. Introduction

South Africa is a linguistic and culturally diverse country with 11 official languages. It has the most diverse and accommodating language policy in the world. Despite the large number of official languages, English is the dominant language in South Africa (Dyers, 2008), and consequently, many parents do their best to ensure that their children are educated in English. However, the use of mother-tongue education through high schools can adversely affect students at tertiary level especially in institutions like UWC which use English as the medium of instruction. This influences the different ideologies and attitudes held by these students in general and foundation students (who are often educationally disadvantaged) in particular as will be explained later. The term "disadvantaged" in this paper or foundation students refers to students who had inadequate access to quality educational services leading to a lack of adequate preparation for tertiary education.

1.1 Background: UWC

As indicated earlier, UWC is a multicultural and multilingual university with staff and students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Having both local and international staff and students, one can describe it as a microcosm of a macrocosm (a reflection of South African diversity in terms of culture and language). There are many different languages spoken on this campus some of which are: English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Setswana, Sotho, French, and Chinese etc. Despite this diversity in the number of languages, the medium of instruction (MOI) is English.

1.2 Problem statement

The students' unwillingness to use English couple with their poor performance and lack of confidence to participate in classroom activities seems to be influenced by their negative attitude towards English. Secondly, schools do not appear to prepare these students adequately for tertiary education. Another very disturbing factor is the language policy and Bill of rights which sound very good in principle but not in practice. With this in mind, the study might be able to shed some

lights to the existing body of knowledge of ideologies and attitudes towards English as the medium of instruction in tertiary education.

1.3 UWC language policy

The language policy at this university aims at "ensuring equity, social development and a respect for South Africa's multilingual heritage" (UWC Language Policy, 2003). Given the multicultural nature of the university, lectures are delivered in English, the exception being the different language departments like the departments of isiXhosa, Afrikaans and Nederlands, and other foreign languages. However, lecturers of other departments who are competent users of Afrikaans and isiXhosa are "encouraged to use the language in addition to English if it is going to ease understanding" (UWC Language Policy, 2003). Students are also allowed to use the language they are most competent in during tutorials but must give feedback in class only in English. Lecturers and tutors are also encouraged to use the students' first language during consultation if they are competent speakers of that language. As for assignments and other tasks, students are expected to use only English apart from the departments of Afrikaans, isiXhosa and other foreign languages. Note should be taken of the fact that a majority of the academic staff interviewed saw no reason why any other SA language should be used for teaching, but many undergraduate students do not have the competence in English required for academic achievement (Dyers, 2010). This may somehow justify the different ideologies and attitudes held by the students towards English as a language in general and a medium of instruction (MOI) in particular.

1.4 Foundation students: A case study

The focus of this paper is on the foundation students in the Economic and Management sciences (EMS) faculty at UWC. It investigates the language ideologies and attitudes of these students with the intention of improving the teaching through the use of a second language (English). The idea of a Foundation programme originated in South Africa in the 1980s when the government noticed the high failure rate among white males in tertiary institutions (Kioko, 2010) and came up with this programme. Note should be taken of the fact that no matter how the foundation programmes evolved, most of the students in these programmes tend to be educationally and academically under-prepared (Kioko, 2010). It is not meant for a particular race as was the case in the 1980s. Currently, in South Africa, being educationally disadvantaged goes hand-in-hand with socio-economic status rather than race (Boughey, 2005) and these are the students that are admitted in to this programme. This programme is financially supported by the government in order to gain "current social imperative of equity, transformation, skills development and economic empowerment" (Kioko, 2010:76).

1.4.1 Admissions into the foundation programme

According to the 2008 criteria, admission into this programme in the EMS faculty required at least 27 points calculated according to the University's point system, as well as following specific subjects:

- Level 3 (40-49%) in English (home or 1st additional language)
- Level 3 (40-49%) in another language (home or 1st additional language)
- Level 3 (40-49%) in Mathematics
- Level 5 (60-69%) in Mathematics Literacy

In addition to the above, the students are required to write a National Benchmark Test (NBT) (EMS 2011 University Calendar, part 4) to qualify for admission. However, some of the students receive discretionary admission if they are missing some of these criteria, like for example adult learners.

2. Methodology

This study makes use of a qualitative research method. It focuses on interviews, written essays as well as observations. The sample population is made up of 40 first year students; weak (those that are underperforming in most if not all of their first year modules) and strong (those performing well and above 60% in most of the modules), 15 males 25 females. All 40 students wrote essay on "*English as a language of teaching and learning at UWC*". Twenty of them were interviewed, and the class observed throughout the semester (four months). Five lecturers in the foundation program were also interviewed. The research population is made up of students from different races with English, Afrikaans

isiXhosa and isiZulu as the first home languages of the students and the languages they used through school. The data is analysed through the use of critical discourse analysis.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the works of Ricento (2006:44) and Kroskrity (2000). Ricento holds the view that ideologies do not only apply to the "situation 'out there' in the 'real world', but also to intellectual constructs and conceptual frameworks which may be invoked in applied research on language status and use". He looks at the historical aspects that make up part of the language ideologies which most of the students in their essays referred to. Also, Kroskrity's (2000:8-21) four intersecting dimensions of language ideologies fit in to this study.

Before addressing the issue of language ideologies, an understanding of the concept *ideology* is useful. Irvine (1989:255) defines ideologies as "the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with the loading of moral and political interests". In this definition, I clearly see the emphasis on 'moral and political interests' that underpin societal ideologies. In other words, ideologies cannot exist outside of the power relationships in any society. This aspect, viz. the power relations, is emphasized in Fairclough's definition of ideology:

Ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination and exploitation. They may be enacted in ways of interaction (and therefore in genres) and inculcated in ways of being identities (and therefore styles) (Fairclough, 2003: 9).

Fairclough adds that if ideologies are primary representations, they can nevertheless also be 'enacted' in ways of acting socially, and 'inculcated' in the identities of social agents. It is to this effect that Fairclough (2003) suggests that textual analysis needs to be framed in respect of social analysis which can consider bodies of texts in terms of their effects on power relations. He further adds that if ideologies are primary representations, they can nevertheless also be 'enacted' in ways of acting socially, and 'inculcated' in the identities of social agents. Thus ideologies can also have durability and sustainability which transcends individual texts or bodies of texts.

On the other hand, Schieffelin (1998:358) contends that ideologies about language are not just about language alone but about identity, aesthetics, morality and epistemology. Language ideologies therefore do not only refer to language, but also to the notion of the person, the social group, and social institutions such as religious ritual, child socialization, gender relation, the nation-state, schooling and law.

Kroskrity (2000:8-21) in his first dimension, reveals how people's notions about languages are rooted in their social experiences and often tied to their political and economic interests. This dimension comes out strongly in studies (cited in Milroy 2000) conducted by Lippi-Green (1997), Cameron (1995) and Milroy and Milroy (1998) on the type of language-based discrimination that takes place in the United States and Britain against marginalized social groups who do not speak the 'standard' language. In the setting of UWC, we have the dominant use of English, which leads to similar patterns of discrimination. Blommaert (2006) argues that language ideologies are not attributed to one person or located in a particular site (political party/government) but it penetrates the whole fabric of societies or communities and results in normalised, naturalised patterns of thought and behaviour. Thus, ideology is seen as common sense, the naturalised activities that sustain social relation and power structures and the patterns of power that reinforce such common sense (Bourdieu 1991).

Kroskrity's second dimension reveals that social experiences are not uniformly distributed but differ in terms of the divisions in particular societies. Men and women, older and younger people, for example, may have very different perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about language. In this way, different ideologies can become contentious within the same group and lead to tensions between what are often state-endorsed dominant ideologies and their opponents. In South Africa in general and UWC in particular, we find contrasting views on the perceived shift towards English from Afrikaans and Xhosa based on its socio-political and economic strength.

At the core of the third dimension is how *conscious* members of a society are about their attitudes towards languages. Kroskrity (2000) contends that those who are most conscious of their ideologies are the ones likely to be most vocal about the value of different languages. But ordinary people's ideologies are more likely to be reflected in their actual language usage – the languages they prefer to use as opposed to the languages they avoid using (Kroskrity 1999: 19; Dyers 2008).

Finally, Kroskrity's fourth dimension (2000: 24) shows how people use their ideologies about language as a bridge between their 'sociocultural experience and their linguistic and discursive forms as indexically tied to features of their sociocultural experience.' In other words, people are quite *selective* about the features of language and the role of particular languages in society when expressing their language ideologies. Certain features stand out, for example "I

don't like the sound of that language/language variety – it sounds too coarse/common/disrespectful" or "My language cannot be used at university level". In the first example quoted here, the language or language variety has somehow become associated with unpleasant social experiences and in the second example there is recognition of the absence of 'my language' in a tertiary setting.

Another concept that needs to be understood is language attitude. Myers-Scotton (2006) defines attitudes as "...subjective evaluations of both language varieties and their speaker, whether the attitudes are held by individuals or by groups." She thinks that political and socio-economic forces can change a community's attitude toward a particular language or a variety of a language. This also illustrates the influence of prevailing ideologies on language attitudes. People will want to learn a language of prestige, as is the current situation in SA.

As far as South Africa is concerned, Dyers (2000) holds that most black South Africans maintain pride in their rural roots and cultural traditional values but this is somehow diluted by urbanization since it has to do with people coming in close contact with speakers of other languages, culture and tradition. In South Africa, the attitude held towards English is a very positive one. However, it is for instrumental reasons as it is said to have a strong market value. Some parents think that English is the key to success. In light of the argument above, I argue that it is needful to know the different language varieties or to be multilingual in order to always find a place in the society. Thus, such an ability can aid an individual to be able to negotiate their identity since identity is dynamic.

4. Discussion and analysis

Kroskrity's (2000) first dimension on people's notions about languages their social experiences come out strong in this study:

"English as a language of teaching is hard because the whole 12 years of my learning, I received teaching in Afrikaans. My grandmother always told me that English is the language of the white people...I think that Afrikaans should also be used as a language of teaching and Afrikaans students will feel more comfortable" (Afrikaans female)

"In Eastern Cape, everyone knows that English is the white man's language, and if you speak it all the time they see you as white and will hate you because they hate the white people"(Xhosa male)

Both students see English as a language of oppression that should not be used because of its historical past for the country. It is for such reasons that Ricento (2006: 50) posits that the beliefs people hold about others and their culture is determined by the different ideologies they hold about "language and thought, language and culture and patriotism" In this case; English is the "language of the white people" which indicative of oppression and domination. A very strong ideological stand point is held by the second student as far as English is concerned. It is a community's view and this is / might be because of their experiences in the past.

With such ideologies and attitudes towards English, one would not expect the students to be motivated enough to learn this language. Thus, it becomes a challenge for the institution and the lecturers to be able to motivate them enough to be willing to acquire the language of teaching and learning (language of oppression and domination). Secondly, these students are not living with the times as the world is first becoming a global village with English as the language of the era.

Kroskrity's second dimension reveals that social experiences are not uniformly distributed but differ in terms of the divisions in particular societies. Men and women, older and younger people, for example, may have very different perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about language. In this way, different ideologies can become contentious within the same group and lead to tensions between what are often state-endorsed dominant ideologies and their opponents.

- "Learning in English is good to have a job, but I think I will like Zulu because this is my language and I can speak to my people and they will understand me better. My culture is Zulu I can't do culture in English. All my school was in Zulu you see. Zulu is good for your children" (Zulu male)
- "I think all other languages must be respected or maybe the university use English because most of the top people are English speakers so what about us. I must be given a chance to use my language everywhere at any time I want to." (Xhosa Male)
- On the contrary, a female student in an interview says:

"I could not wait to go to English varsity and perfect my English. When I am home and speak English, my parents are cross that I have abandoned my culture and my language and going to the white man's language and this white people suffered them and took everything from them. Now that I am here I speak English all the time and nobody stops me. I

will have a good job when I finish my degree because all jobs, they ask for English and another language"

It is evident from the first respondent that he does not align with the period where he lives. The second is aware that there is need for change but still makes an effort to resist in favour of his language, but the third reflects the change that the second dimension hammers on. The first two respondents are aware of the change but they prefer to stick to what they may refer as their culture which contributes to their negative attitude towards English. Unlike the third respondent, the former two refuse to live with their times which also affects their studying in English.

It is interesting the kinds of argument put forward by the students when it comes to the medium of instruction (MOI) at this university. It is worthy of note that language is one of the fundamental means by which we can establish our identity and shape ourselves. Social groups and communities use language to identify their members and establish their boundaries (Myers-Scotton 2006 and Thomas *et al.*, 2004). The first student tries to uphold his cultural identity as a Zulu man. He thinks that his cultures and identities will be tampered with if he shifts from his home language to English while at university. Thus language is an important instrument for the construction of individual and social identities. Like dress codes that display people's membership of a social group, there are also certain kinds of linguistic behaviours that signal people's identity in relation to a group as well as their positions within it (Thomas *et al.*, 2004). There is therefore no doubt when Baker (2006:136) says that when we speak a language, it often identifies our origins, history, membership and culture. For him, "our identity is conveyed in our language, in our expressions and engagements, predilections and preference. Language is a symbol of unity, conveying our preferred distinctiveness and allegiance". Thus, identities are reframed, developed and sometimes challenged as situations change. This is because we do not establish our identities by ourselves but as we communicate with others (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004).

The second student feels that there is discrimination in the policy as her own language is neglected for English only medium. Asking if it is "because most of the top people are English speakers" already shows some sense of dominance or undermining one group (minority). This again takes us back to Baker who says that some people hate to be called members of a minority language group because, like the concepts 'minority ethnic group' and 'cultural minorities', it carries a negative stigma, implying somehow that the language and its speakers have less status than those of the majority group, who will also be less inclined to learn the minority language. Thus, the issue of identity may also explain why some students are happy to learn English as well as some are reluctant to learn in their home languages.

The third student unlike the first and the second likes English but she is under pressure from her parents who hold the views of first two students. Her interest in English is mainly for instrumental reasons (Gardner and Lambert 1972). "I will have a good job when I finish my degree because all jobs, they ask for English and another language". This again shows the power and dominance of English in SA. To have a job you must be competent in English and another language and not just any two languages. Hence, the other languages are relegated to a second class position.

On account of language, identity and culture, these students are so ethnocentric that they fail to see tertiary education as a culture which requires its own language. It is a fact that the languages that they talk about are not properly standardised and would pose a serious problem for teaching and learning. Put differently, these languages would require a lot of resources to be developed as languages of teaching and learning and so something needs to be done to motivate these students into using English as the default language of teaching and learning.

At the core of the third dimension is how *conscious* members of a society are about their attitudes towards languages. Kroskrity contends that those who are most conscious of their ideologies are the ones likely to be most vocal about the value of different languages. This could be seen in the above examples where the students wish to uphold their own languages as well as their cultural values.

I am of the opinion that this is just a belief held by these respondents for it is possible to learn, understand and behave like a member of a given community without the use of the common language used by that community. Hence, any given language can therefore be used to uphold any culture. Thus, the respondents see English as the language of oppression just because it is a former colonial language influenced by their apartheid past.

Kroskrity's fourth dimension (2000: 24) shows how people become quite *selective* about the features of language and the role of particular languages in society when expressing their language ideologies.

- "I don't like learning in English because my language can also be used at university level. Zulu and Xhosa have big population and there are books in this language. I even become very afraid to ask questions that I face when I study because of the language that I do not understand which is used.
- "The other thing is that all other 10 languages which are recognised in the constitution of this country are like being not respected in this university, since when I came here there is no lecture which allowed us to use our

language except for the living and learning where we are allowed to use our language even though the lecturer do not know the language that that particular person is speaking" (Zulu, male).

- "I like English because I can communicate with people who do not speak and understand my language"
- "English is the language of wider communication"

The first two students and others are very selective when it comes to their language choices. They believe in their language rights and posit that the policy put in place should respect this. Webb (2002) postulates that the main SA languages are rooted in the political history of the country. He sees English today as is a very high prestigious language, while Afrikaans and the other Bantus languages have very little educational and economic value in the country. This is justified by the fact that most job adverts require English and one other South African language. This gives room for most South Africans to think like these students who say that "people who cannot speak English are considered as uneducated, traditional, or primitive"; "...Fellow business men and women might view you as inadequate, illiterate or unqualified". Their views tie in with what Webb (2002:8) says that the indigenous languages are viewed by their speakers as symbols of "uneducated, traditional, rural culturally backward people with lower mental power". Thus this ideology held by some of the students in particular and South Africans in general push them to shift from their indigenous languages to English. It leaves them with a positive attitude towards English as a prestigious language and language for development.

Based on the above, I strongly believe that the problem in this case is the fact that although the respondents are in a way influenced by their language rights as postulated by the Bill of Rights and the South African Constitution, they fail to see that these are just window dressings as seen in the mismatch between policy and practice (Baldauf and Kaplan, 2006; Brumfit, 2006).

It is important to note that the language policy put in place also gives room for the different ideologies held by the speakers of the said language. Having 11 official languages in SA and only having one as a MOI becomes problematic to many some of whom feel that all these languages should be used, others feel that the three Western Cape languages be used at least in consultations and tutorial and lastly one thinks that extra classes be organized for translation of lectures or for the least summary of lectures on their different languages. The language policy of UWC allows for all three Western Cape Languages to be used but the unfortunate thing here is that most people are not aware of this policy, and thus do not practice it. The poor implementation of the policy therefore leaves room for some of the different ideologies held by the students, especially when it comes to their indigenous languages being minimized or undermined.

Considering Baldauf and Kaplan's (2006) argument that language policy and planning occur in an environment circumscribed by language ideologies coming from historical and material situations; socio-political and historical framework of power caused by discrimination and nation building, one would better understand the stand point of these students. It is obvious like Baldauf and Kaplan posit that language in education is one of the major areas where the language policy of a country is seen. If this truly is the case then there will be not possible reason for a sole English MOI at this university (UWC). One can clearly see that there is a discrepancy between the language policies put in place and reality (Baldauf and Kaplan, 2006; Brumfit, 2006). This is because in most cases the policies are utterly opposite to reality especially as they are mainly politically-driven than by linguistic forces. This is further supported by Kamwangamalu (2001) who says that there is a mismatch between language policy and language practice. Policy promotes multilingualism and practices shifts towards English monolingualism in all higher domains in SA. This was echoed by two students in the essays and a host of them in the interviews. They feel that the policy should rather promote multilingualism than monolingualism. To them, the policy should add in some if not all of the 11 official languages as a means to promote diversity and democracy in the country. There is therefore no doubt when Ricento (2006) says that because ideologies are commonly shared, they have great effects on the language policy of a country. Brumfit (2006) supports Ricento when he says that language rights are promoted over individual rights as individuals do not have the right to use the language they are most comfortable in (irrespective of the fact that they are official language(s) but that of the person in position of power. This thus tallies with the view of the student that English is used because most of the top ranking people are English-speaking at this university.

5. Conclusion

It is worthy of note that it is the sense of identity that makes students to develop such negative ideologies towards English. This is because studying in a language that is not their mother tongue can be quite challenging. The study suggests that students have different ideologies and attitudes towards the use of English as the MOI at UWC and these ideologies of course shape their different identities as well as affect their learning. Many of these students perform poorly in their studies not because they cannot do better, but because of the ideologies they hold about the language they use

as a MOI. The students holding the negative view cannot succeed because of the MOI or that they do not understand the language is already a very big barrier to learning and or accessing knowledge. Thus a change of attitude and or ideology will play a very big role in the success of the students, especially positive attitude.

On account of the above argument; failure for most students does not come as a result of the use of English but rather because they are resistant to the negotiation of their identities. That is, they need to understand that the acquisition of any language does not have any effect on an existing identity. Moreover, they need to realise that for them to succeed in the culture of academia, they need to acquire the language of that culture. It is obvious that their languages are not well developed to be used as languages of teaching and learning and if they were to be used, these languages would require a lot of resources which I do not think the government is ready to put in. In light of this, it is needful to motivate these students to use English at least for instrumental reasons.

In addition, given that the ideologies they hold are constructed in the interest of a specific social or cultural group: i.e. they are rooted in the socio-economic power and vested interests of dominant groups (Abongdia, 2009; Dyers and Abongdia, 2010), it will be very important for the policy makers to make it clear that the language policies are politically inclined and not linguistically as they are always implied (Brumfit, 2006). This is because when attempt is made to change public opinion on issues pertaining to language use, status and varieties, it is commonly considered to be political opposition and thus opposed. Hence, because ideologies are commonly shared, they have great effects on the language policy of a country in general and an institution in particular.

It would be important to note that the policy put in place at UWC is not being implemented. It is justifiably evident that most students as well as lecturers are not aware of the policy and thus do not know their rights as to when and what language to be used. Students could have received better assistance from their tutors and or lecturers in their first languages if they understood that it is part of the policy or their rights to consult in the language(s) or discuss with peers in tutorials and only feedback the class in this language. Therefore, a lack of this information leads to a poor implementation of the policy at UWC. Thus my suggestion is that the policy be made available to all staff and students. This could be made as part of the university calendar that is handed out to students during registration. It should be given to staff when they are recruited to work at this university. This I think will reduce the different beliefs and attitudes held towards English as the language of teaching and learning by the foundation students in the Economics and Management Sciences Faculty at UWC and other universities.

As a result, there is need for a shift from the ideologies and attitudes held against English as a language of slavery and oppression because English language appears to be the only language that can unite diversity in UWC in particular and South Africa at large. In short, English is the language that opens doors in South Africa and if one was to avoid it, thus it is making it almost impossible to work in public service. That is, it might be impossible to handle such diverse classrooms in terms of linguistics- which language to be used as the language of teaching and learning. In view of this, English second or additional language should not be seen a problem but rather as a resource since it can open economic doors, expose individuals to wider interaction and open up the global world for its learners.

6. Note

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