

## RATTLING THE BAG: LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA AND INDIA

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*Susa lo-mtunzi gawena. Hayikona shukumisa lo saka*  
Move your shadow. Don't rattle the bag.

— JD Bold, *Fanagalo Phrase Book, Grammar and Dictionary, the Lingua Franca of Southern Africa, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1977*

*Dilip Menon argues for a pedagogy and scholarship of multi-lingualism given the pressing need for transformation at South African universities.*

In the bad old days in South Africa, whites spoke English or Afrikaans, the languages of command. When they did engage with those that did not speak English, there was Fanagalo, a pidgin based on Zulu peppered with English and some Afrikaans, developed in the mines, which allowed directives, if not conversation. The struggle against apartheid produced its freedoms, its heroes and heroines and new dreams of equality. Twenty years down the line the sheen has worn. Unemployment, xenophobia, violence, crime and a seemingly entrenched inequality dog our dreams and we live with the constant premonition of becoming an ordinary country, a nation like any other. There are many battles to be fought on this landscape. The bosses of the mining industry pay themselves unconscionably large salaries while denying a raise in wages to miners. The

economy is still controlled by big capital and small entrepreneurs struggle to find a niche. The ruling sign of South Africa's economy are the strictures against street trading in the cities: the space of enterprise and generational mobility within the global south. And at the Universities, prohibitive fees still govern entry as much as continuance within the educational establishment. I want to look in particular at the question of knowledge and the Universities. A struggle is afoot to change the racial composition of the faculty and students at our Universities to move towards transformation. It is a moot question as to whether equal attention is being paid to the questions of both the language of instruction as well as the content of syllabi in the South African University. English still dominates instruction at the major universities as does Euro American knowledge. So not much has changed. Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa, Tswana do not cast their shadows on a University education. As the distinguished South African intellectual Neville Alexander said, "we have to change radically the inherited linguistic habitus in terms of which English is the only feasible candidate for language of high status".

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The University of Witwatersrand, where I work, recently tabled a multilingual policy that will incorporate Sesotho and isiZulu as co-languages, along with English as an official part of campus life, in and outside the classroom. Meanwhile on the western coast, the University of Cape Town was involved in a battle where students launched a month long campaign to bring down the statue of Sir Cecil



Wiki commons, NH209-Bannari Road Sign.

Rhodes on campus. The statue was finally toppled in early April bringing to the mind of many the fates of Lenin statuary after 1989 and Saddam Hussein after 2003. However, the beheading of kings has never been attended by social transformation and has in fact been a substitute for change. The alacrity with which the administration of the University of Cape Town agreed to the taking down of the statue is in direct contrast with the glacial pace of actual transformation of the composition of the faculty or syllabi. Statues all over South Africa bore the brunt of this symbolic politics; a random assortment of figures ranging from missionaries to the Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa were drawn in. The statue of Mohandas Gandhi in the centre of Johannesburg was defaced with white paint, supposedly as a reaction to his early views on Africans as being inferior to Indians in South Africa. Whether

these random attacks on pigeon perches are connected in any way to the present xenophobic attacks on “foreigners” in Kwazulu Natal and Johannesburg is not clear as yet. However, as South Africa struggles towards decolonizing its mind (and the idea of the migrant as foreigner certainly is an inheritance from darker times), the question of language and the content of knowledge at the University will be of crucial significance.

Are there any lessons to learn from India, considering that from the very moment of independence, there was a debate about the landscape of language in the University? The three language formula-mother tongue, regional language, English - was hammered out in 1956 and represented a whittling down from the original six language formula in which the learning of Sanskrit, Persian/Arabic, and a European language was envisaged. As a child with a father in government service, our family moved across the Indian landscape from south to north, east to west and over the years of schooling, apart from Malayalam, my mother tongue, I acquired a smattering of Tamil and Marathi, and a working knowledge of Bengali and Hindi. Because of the three language policy of the government, schoolchildren learnt English, Hindi and the language of the region they grew up in. If their mother tongue was different from the above three, they could enrol in schools run by the community where they could also learn their mother tongue. In effect, a child was nearly always trilingual, and more often than not knew four languages. In many schools Sanskrit was compulsory till high school and if a student wanted to pursue learning the language till the school leaving examination, it was possible to opt for Sanskrit as a subject. Which meant another language in addition to the four already being taught at school

and home. Broadly speaking, the languages deriving from Sanskrit, or influenced by Sanskrit shared some linguistic terrain but not enough to allow for an easy transition. Knowing Hindi was no guarantee that one could learn Bengali or Marathi easily. And Tamil being a Dravidian language was another story altogether. However, the landscape of languages meant that while English had cachet, it was domesticated so that one could tell the mother tongue of the person who was speaking English by the inflection they put on words. Unless, of course, the student had attended what were the posher English medium schools (curiously called convent schools after the fact that a majority were set up by Christian missionaries), in which case they spoke a register that aspired to the BBC or at least the accents of the Anglo Indian teachers at schools. Not that this policy produced polyglots, nor indeed that it diminished the cultural value of English, but a landscape of language was made available to the learner. A cynic might say that all that the policy achieved was that Indians now speak four languages badly, but it remains a fact that Universities are not dominated by English as much as an elite would like them to be.

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In Universities run by the state governments, one had to learn the language of the region within the period of probation or risk losing one’s job. Even at the Central Universities while English was the medium of teaching, lecturers always had to allow for the fact of the sheer diversity of the educational backgrounds of the students who came from a variety of linguistic

landscapes. Of course, there were inequities. Hindi was the assumed default national language in north India, and when I taught at a Central University in Hyderabad, Telugu was the fall back option. Students coming from regions like the north east of India, if they were not familiar with English, they were not familiar with Hindi either, or languages of other regions. In communicating in the University a certain economy of language emerged in which English was one among the many languages of instruction as much as sociability. While I was teaching in Kerala, formal lectures in English were supplemented by after class conversations in Malayalam; in Delhi, formal lectures were sometimes bilingual, but after class interactions were nearly always bilingual, if not trilingual. While students who spoke English well dominated the discussions in class, the opportunity at Delhi University, for example, of answering the examination in Hindi meant that the best students were never disadvantaged, though they had the additional burden to bear that nearly all of the readings were in English. The playing field of course, was not levelled, but everyone in theory, could play together.

However, all of this never meant that any of the regional languages acquired the epistemological status that English possesses. While Universities set up Hindi language translation bureaus, these were often poorly funded and irregularly staffed. What got translated also reflected in many cases, the patronage systems within Universities so that academics with local heft were translated into Hindi but not international social science and humanities staples. Within languages like Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam, Telugu and Tamil to name a few, where social and political movements made arguments about accessibility of knowledge, a

commentary-in-translation industry did come about outside of the academic realm. In Malayalam, for example, there are books discussing post modernism, Derrida, Levinas et al but they function at the level of popular access and promote a semblance of engagement while being not of very high intellectual quality. Texts like Ranganayakamma's exposition of Marx's *Das Kapital* in three volumes in Telugu, are rare exceptions as with K Damodaran's ten primers on Marxism in Malayalam. There is little social science being done in the regional languages of India.

However, that is the tip of the iceberg. Indian academia is very much in thrall to the Euro American paradigm as most developing nations are. Our most prominent academics are those who know their Marx, Foucault and Derrida or depending on their intellectual concerns ranging from environmentalism to feminism and the history of science the relevant icons and academic literature from Europe and America. We have hitchhiked very well on the grand narratives of European theory. While most Indians of a certain age came of age in an era that invoked the imagination of the Third World and decolonization, the mind remained colonized. Ranajit Guha once said that there was one battle that the English never won and that was the battle for the Indian mind. Arguably, that indeed, is the battle that they comprehensively won. Indian languages and Sanskrit or indeed Arabic and Persian were seen as the repository of a literary imagination and at Universities, one could opt to study these languages but not as repositories of concepts and a social imagination. The engagement with Sanskrit has had a fractious history given the obsessions of a decolonized liberal elite as much as radical subalterns with the language being seen as the refuge of the Hindu fundamentalist; an antediluvian

imagination; or merely the language of classicism. We have had engagements with the political and ethical language of Islam, but as history. There has been a sustained scholarship on Sanskrit poetics, ritual and political concepts but within the realm of Indology. Whether it is the Arthashastra or *akhlaq* literature it has been denied contemporaneity and has not fed into a language of social theory or the temerity to forge a social science vocabulary derived from indigenous concepts and experience. There are other Asian models before us, as in Wang Hui's magisterial four volume study on the rise of modern thought in China interpreting a wide temporal swathe through Confucian categories. Or Japan's example where even "universal" science is studied in Japanese originating in the impulse of the Meiji Restoration where western knowledge was translated into Japanese. Whether it was Hegel and Kant or physics, they were read and researched in Japanese. Macaulay sought to produce a vast clerkhood in India working in the service of empire, with a knowledge of English that would allow Indians at best to become mimic men excised from their intellectual past. And indeed, when the intellectual class revolted it was only inevitable that they would turn to another European inheritance, that of Marxism. And Marxism has become the opium of the decolonised intellectual. As Walter Dignolo would say, it is decoloniality that we need, an emancipation of the mind, rather than the mere fact of decolonization.

So there has been a robust engagement with the question of languages in the university but not an equally vigorous engagement with the politics of knowledge. To think through categories of experience, ethics and politics from indigenous concepts has been an enterprise abandoned even before it was begun. Indeed, as GN Devy put it we live after amnesia: in

the realm of what we have forgotten or perhaps not even known that we have forgot. This experience stands before us as warning in South Africa even as the University of Witwatersrand moves towards a deeper politics of broadening the landscape of language in the University. To quote Alexander again, "at undergraduate level, there ought to be absolutely no hesitation on our part: let the local languages be used to inculcate the habits of mind and the fundamental concepts and approaches of the different disciplines at the same time as the students are exposed to the relevant knowledge and registers in English..." Instead of a mere functional multilingualism, that is but a higher version of Fanagalo, all academic faculty must be supported to become bilingual and translation funds set up for creating a corpus of social science and scientific literature within local languages. It must be remembered that Afrikaans, the world's youngest language, developed a literary and academic register as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> century assisted by a concerted policy.

If making the University multilingual addressed merely the question of communication this may amount to little more than the toppling of yet another metaphorical statue, this time of English. The politics of knowledge needs to be addressed, in a way it never was in India. The desire to be among the top 100 universities in the world compels universities in the global south to jump the hoops and show that we are capable of reproducing Euro American social theory competently. It is not without significance that the most radical intellectual initiative to emerge from India in the last generation—the subaltern studies collective— did not address the question of the politics of knowledge at all. It was the moment of arrival of the third world intellectual who showed that they could perform a western tradition of intellection as well as

the European could. The very act of provincialising Europe was done through an assiduous engagement with European thought and a studied indifference to Asian or African modes of thinking. This cannot be a merely sentimental enterprise. What does it mean to think with traditions of intellectual inquiry within Africa- and not just through a notion of *ubuntu* that is little more than a Readers Digest version of everyone getting along fine with each other? What would it mean to think a decolonised imagination drawing upon Islam, Confucianism, or the different and radical modernities of the Caribbean and Latin America? What would it mean to impose our shadow on an intellectual world that has created an abbreviated sense of time for us? In our universities we think with and teach a theoretical tradition forged in Europe in the last 400 years, rather than affirming that questions of self, community, politics and ethics have been the marrow of traditions of intellection in our spaces for a few thousand years. We need to rattle our bags to begin with and not just caddy for those who play.

#### **FURTHER READING**

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A Mazrui and A Mazrui, *The power of Babel: language and governance in the African experience* (Oxford: James Currey, 1998)

Paulo Freire, *The pedagogy of the oppressed* 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996)