



English: Language of controversy

Language choice in South Africa

NARRATOR

Despite his multilingual background, it was his experience in prison in apartheid South Africa that turned Neville Alexander into a campaigner for language rights.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

I grew up in the eastern Cape Province of South Africa around the city of Port Elizabeth. Essentially we grew up bilingually – Afrikaans and English. I heard and learned a lot of Xhosa but was never really compelled to use much of it with the result that when I came to Cape Town at the age of sixteen in 1953 to come and study at the university here I had a very skimpy knowledge of isiXhosa. I had an excellent, let's say grammatical knowledge of German which was a language I had studied as a subject. And of course I spoke and wrote English and Afrikaans fluently. I then learned some Xhosa at the university as a result of political activity more than academic activity. And it was only when I got to Robben Island in 1963 that I really got to learn Xhosa because I was then compelled to learn it in order to speak to people who weren't fluent in English or Afrikaans.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

It was only on Robben Island that I became aware of let's say the power dimension of language. Up to that moment, up to the time I went to Robben Island I think in spite of being an intellectual, an academic and all the rest of it – teacher – I think I had always taken language for granted. There was always some sort of technical qualification that people had to have. For example you had to know English if you wanted to get a good job in South Africa. You had to know Afrikaans if you wanted to work and live in the rural areas Afrikaans being the dominant lingua franca in the rural areas up to today and without those two languages you were lost in terms of employment and remuneration and so on.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

That was obvious. But I'd never linked it to power, to class, to inequality and so on and so forth it was only when I got to Robben Island and met not for the first time but certainly at close quarters for the first time people who were not able to read and write English or Afrikaans, more particularly English of course, that I realised the power dimension of language. And gradually began studying and really focusing on that aspect of the language question in South Africa. We taught people who were so called illiterates in prison, how to

read and write their own language, mostly Xhosa or Zulu or Sotho and then most of them obviously wanted to use it as a bridge to English for the obvious reason that English was the dominant language of power in South Africa.

NARRATOR

After leaving prison, Alexander was involved in setting up the National English Project, which promoted the use of English. However, it quickly became apparent that the linguistic situation in South Africa was much more complex.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

There's no doubt that the middle class elite believes that English is the way to go. They have their children sent to English medium schools. Basically they believe that through English, South Africa can be united and South Africa can be uplifted and economically developed. Now that is false in every dimension. English will not unite South Africa. Only multilingualism will unite South Africa, first of all. Secondly English will not develop the economy. It will develop the economy of those who own the economy, not those who are consumers and the poor and marginalised majority. That can only happen if people are themselves through their own languages, able to be part of that economy, understand the economic development programmes and so on which if it's packaged in English nobody understands.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

And then on a political level, from the point of view of democracy, it doesn't follow at all that English will make it possible for people to participate in decision making. For the vast majority it's irrelevant. They can only do that if it's done in their own languages, which means that we've got to equip the African languages, terminologically from a lexical point of view, from the point of view of publications, translations and so on, in order to be used in certain ways. If we go down the English only or English mainly route this is going to become another African disaster where the middle class and the elite are well off and affluent and wonderful and Europeanised. And the vast majority of the people are either in the under class or in any case a hopeless situation if that happens. It's not the fault of English, not at all. It's the fault of a particular language policy

NARRATOR

Having renamed the project the National Language Project, Alexander argues for a policy that promotes indigenous African languages alongside English

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

The way we put it was that any South African citizen has to be trilingual. We insisted more or less like everybody else but for very different reasons that English should be part of the package. But in addition to that South Africa is an African country. We live in an African

environment. People speak African languages. They cherish them. They value them. But these languages have no market value or very little and yet if the people, if this democracy is to become anything close to real it's got to be amongst other things through the languages of the people and for that reason the indigenous African languages have to be given market value. And to take a simple example, if you want to become a member of the civil service, get employment in the public service, you have to know an African language and knowing an African language doesn't simply mean speaking and understanding. It means reading and writing, even translating and interpreting, in some cases. So you have to know an African language. That is not yet compulsory but it is going to become that and automatically this gives market value to African languages, certainly in the public sector and the private sector will follow.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

We are saying that every South African should become as proficient in English as possible so that a job like that is open to any South African. But you must remember, even if you are a medical doctor or a lawyer or a social worker, you still have to talk to ordinary people in the language that they understand. That's not English. That's Xhosa, it's Afrikaans, it's other languages. So you've got to know both.

NARRATOR

Alexander does not accept that English should be used in official domains, while Xhosa or Zulu remain simply community languages.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

I do think the African languages, certainly the main African languages, can develop to very high levels of sophistication, nuance, analytical calibrated reasoning for that sort of purpose. It can be developed to that through translation mainly. It's something which governments don't understand. They think that English was born perfect. They don't realise that in the 1500's and 1600's English was never used for science or technology, anything of the kind. People used Latin or Greek and later on French and so on. And it takes time. Obviously because of technology software today ICT and so on, these processes can be accelerated for other languages. Not in competition with English or French or any other language for that matter but in their own right up to the point where they actually serve certain functions, occupy certain domains in society. Instead of the African languages losing domain all the time. They need to be gaining domain in order to enhance literacy, enhance democracy, enhance economic development and so on.

NARRATOR

A careful line needs to be maintained between creating opportunities for speaking other languages and enforcing a multilingual policy.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

English speaking people generally and English speaking middle class people in particular, tend to be averse to learning other languages unless they're forced to because they think they can do with English only. And in general sort of sense that's true but of course they miss out on many, many wonderful experiences when they do that. Any young student who has travelled in Europe you know done the European tour knows that. If you know some German, some French, some Italian you will get to know much more about life in these countries than if you only know English. So the point I am making is that there is that resistance. There is no compulsion. We've insisted, even against our better knowledge, we've insisted that there should be no compulsion to learn any language because of our own history. We've had two major conflicts in South African history around language. Anglo-Boer War wasn't fought about language but language became the iconic sign as it were of that conflict and of course the Soweto uprising in 1976. So we are averse to compelling people to learn languages. We rather want to create conditions where they feel they want to and they should learn languages. It's perhaps a little bit Utopian but I think it's better to be Utopian than to be tyrannical.