

English

A Changing Medium for Education

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2 What Counts as English?

Mastin Prinsloo (roughly scanned copy)

There is something going on when policy statements from national government and the Education Ministry set out one policy direction for language in education and practice takes a different direction. This chapter examines the divergences between what educational policy calls for in South African schools with regard to language and learning and what takes place in schools. Drawing on an examination of language policy statements in South Africa and on school-based ethnographic data I develop an analysis that starts to account for the difference between language policy imperatives and schooling practices.¹

I suggest that South African education policy is a good example of how constructs to do with language in education policy rely on familiar but problematic ideas about language, development and nation building. The post-apartheid South African Constitution and ensuing policy statements from the Education Ministry employ an idea of languages as autonomous, bounded entities and combine this understanding of languages with discourses on language rights and of language endangerment. However, evidence of language practices in schools and in the wider society suggests both a popular disregard for, as well as an institutional ambiguity over, these ideas about bounded languages and language endangerment/protection.

I draw on interactional sociolinguistic and ethnographic research (Blommaert, 2005; Heller, 2007; Makoni & Pennycook, 1997) that has raised questions about current policy formulations of language and argue that South African policy for schooling provides a good example of the sorts of problems that follow the use of popularised but essentialised and reified constructs of language. That research variously suggests that these constructs of language have social origins, and specifically European origins, from 19th-century nationalist movements that linked 'a language' to 'a nation' and then defended that language through political means. The contrasting perspective developed in interactional sociolinguistics is that users draw on linguistic resources that are organised in ways that make sense

under specific conditions (Heller, 2007: 1). This approach studies language as situated social practice. From this perspective the term 'English', or any other named language, is misleading shorthand for a diverse range of language varieties, genres, registers and practices. Such resources are not equally distributed amongst users of these resources and they carry different social weightings or valuations. A social practices perspective starts from the assumption that what counts about language and literacy is how it is done: what one does with it (Austin, 1975; Duranti, 2010; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Street, 1984). There are different ways of doing language and of linking (sometimes new) language forms to culturally meaningful and socially significant practices, in stratified social conditions where language resources carry social value for reasons that are not simply to do with their functionality (Bourdieu, 1991).

In the policy statements that I first examine here there are numerous examples of a conception of language as an autonomous object in its own right, monolithic and homogeneous, where languages are conceived as systems rather than practices. I start with a typical example from policy statements of how an idea of language is summoned and then endorsed: the introduction to the *Language Policy for Higher Education* statement produced by the South African Ministry of Education in 2002 describes South Africa as a country of many languages and tongues' but notes that these have not always been 'working together'.

In the past, the richness of our linguistic diversity was used as an instrument of control, oppression and exploitation. The existence of different languages was recognised and perversely celebrated to legitimise the policy of 'separate development' that formed the cornerstone of apartheid. However, in practice, all our languages were not accorded equal status. The policy of 'separate development' resulted in the privileging of English and Afrikaans as the official languages of the apartheid state and the marginalisation and under-development of African and other languages. (Ministry of Education, 2002: 1)

The policy statement goes on to point out that

the use of language policy as an instrument of control, oppression and exploitation was one of the factors that triggered the two great political struggles that defined South Africa in the twentieth century – the struggle of the Afrikaners against British imperialism and the struggle of the black community against white rule. Indeed, it was the attempt by the apartheid state to impose Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black

schools that gave rise to the mass struggles of the late 1970s and 1980s.
(Ministry of Education, 2002: 1-2)

The statement proceeds to identify a 'role for all our languages working together to build a common sense of nationhood' that is consistent with the values of 'democracy, social justice and fundamental rights', which are enshrined in the Constitution. The statement therefore endorses the recognition by apartheid ideologues of the distinct characters of separate languages, tongues and groups but accuses them of perversely entrenching those distinctions under laws of separation, rather than celebrating diversity. The view of language is the same, then, for both apartheid and post-apartheid policies – in both cases languages are frozen in time, and the discourse foregrounds the languages themselves and sidelines the actual users of these language resources. In reality, of course, it is the language users who interact, struggle, compete, dominate and cooperate with each other, rather than the languages. It would not be such a problem to present social struggle in this way if the languages did effectively stand for distinct groups of people whose group identities and languages emerged straightforwardly from the past and proceeded unproblematically into the future, but this is, of course, not the case. This approach also avoids the difficult issue of what the contrasting contemporary reach, scope and scale of operations of these several languages are, perhaps because, like elsewhere in Africa, these questions of scale follow historical (colonial) tracks, where the language of status is an ex-colonial language. Insisting on parity amongst 11 rather arbitrarily drawn sets of linguistic resources does not change the fact that there are linguistic hierarchies operating, here and everywhere else. The assumptions around boundedness, authenticity and language equality are ideological, in that they erase linguistic complexities and assume linguistic homogeneity where there is diversity. The strategy for equalising the designated languages works on the assumption that language operates normally as a neutral social medium, and that directed social planning can 'level the playing fields', whereas sociolinguistic research shows that language always operates as a non-neutral medium in stratified social contexts of all kinds (Bourdieu, 1991; Duranti, 2010). These inequalities operate just as much within designated languages, in terms of the varieties and their uses within that language, as across them.

The problem with these language policy statements starts with the Constitution. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa sets out the case for the equal status of the languages of South Africa. In its opening chapter, under the heading 'Founding Provisions' the Constitution first names the 11 'official languages of the Republic' (Constitution of South Africa, SA Govt Act 108 of 1996, clause 6.1). Second, noting the 'historically diminished use

and status of the indigenous languages of our people', the Constitution stipulates that 'the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages' (clause 6.2). The same section of the Constitution goes on to set out areas of flexibility that the government has regarding local use of selected official languages, but insists that 'languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably'. It is quite clear that there is no parity even amongst the 'African' languages of the 11 official ones, because some are smaller regional resources and others are 'larger' in their spread and value (Tshivenda, for example, as compared to isiZulu). And, 'within' these resources called official (African) languages, there are some ways of use that are considered authentic and some that are considered corruptions, despite the inherent fluidity and dynamism of all social resources and practices, language included. Such categories of good and bad, it turns out, are really ones of social value, not of linguistic merit, *per se*.

Patrick (2007) and Mufwene (2006) have spelt out some of the problems with 'language endangerment' and 'language rights' discourses, summarised as follows: Such discourses tend to romanticise and reify language and cultures; language issues get cut off from the historical, political and economic context in which speakers find themselves; the mobility and social complexity of speakers gets sidelined; and such unifying and homogenising processes risk excluding and marginalising minorities or mobile people whose identity is not defined through older categories of ethnicity or speech community. If we drop the notion that languages are separate, living, bounded beings, species or objects, they suggest, we make the study of language speakers and bilingualism a more complex but richer one, where they are situated by local and global forces, in particular socio-cultural, historical and economic environments. Patrick points out that linking language to a people and a tradition is often not in the interests of all speakers (2007: 124). Mufwene (2006: 137) asks whether there are 'language rights' independent of human rights. He points out that, as practice, languages are constantly being reshaped by their speakers and are not static. Where 'language shift' takes place, people have exercised the right to use the language resources of their choice. Why would people give up a resource that serves their communicative needs the best, he asks (Mufwene, 2006: 131). The rights of individuals and groups to pursue their interests under specific social conditions prevail over those of languages 'in themselves'. Governments cannot, in the end, control the day-to-day language practices of their populations. Education, however, is a 'border' or in-between zone, as far as language use goes, because it absorbs official policies around languages but is also subject to civil society influences regarding the different statuses of available linguistic resources. For example, that imagined bundle of linguistic

resources that is commonly referred to as 'Standard English' usually has higher status than others in schooling and other formal settings but often not in other, less formal settings (Gee, 2007).

Language in Education Policy

Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution is a Bill of Rights, and in that chapter it stipulates that '(e)veryone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable' (Section 29). The operationalisation of these values first took place through the 1997 policy statement (Department of Education, 1997: 2) produced by the Ministry of Education that set out the direction for post-apartheid educational policy and curriculum development. There, the 'main aims' for language policy are described as being:

to promote full participation in society and the economy through equitable and meaningful access to education; to pursue the language policy most supportive of general conceptual growth amongst learners, and hence to establish additive multilingualism as an approach to language in education; to promote and develop all the official languages; to support the teaching and learning of all other languages required by learners or used by communities in South Africa, including languages used for religious purposes, languages which are important for international trade and communication, and South African Sign Language, as well as Alternative and Augmentative Communication; to counter disadvantages resulting from different kinds of mismatches between home languages and languages of learning and teaching; and to develop programmes for the redress of previously disadvantaged languages.

The last five words of the quote pinpoint the 'language rights' claim, as well as its fragility – the idea of a language as a 'previously disadvantaged' persona is a very odd claim indeed, in the light of my earlier point that it is people, not languages, who compete and cooperate with each other, claim rights and experience advantage or disadvantage. The policy statement briefly reviews arguments for 'single medium', 'home language' education and 'dual medium' (or 'two-way immersion') programmes, and then says:

Whichever route is followed, the underlying principle is to maintain home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition

of additional language(s). Hence, the Department's position that an additive approach to bilingualism is to be seen as the normal orientation of our language-in-education policy.

The policy statement confirms the constitutional right of individuals to choose the language of learning, but cautions that this right has to 'be exercised within the overall framework of the obligation on the education system to promote multilingualism' (Department of Education, 1997. Preamble, p. 1; clause 2.6).

The Working Group on Values in Education that contributed closely to the formulation of the policy on language in the 1997 document, in their report to the Minister of Education entitled 'Values, Education and Democracy', identified

two main values we wish to promote in the area of language, which are, firstly, the importance of studying through the language one knows best, or as it is popularly referred to, mother-tongue education, and secondly, the fostering of multilingualism. We do believe that an initial grounding in mother-tongue learning is a pedagogically sound approach to learning. We also believe that multicultural communication requires clear governmental support and direction. (Section 4: Multilingualism)

The 1997 statement presents its language in education policy as being 'an integral and necessary aspect of the new government's strategy of building a non-racial nation in South Africa'. It is intended to facilitate 'communication across the barriers of colour, language and region, while at the same time creating an environment in which respect for languages other than one's own would be encouraged' (Department of Education, 1997: Preamble, p. 1, clause 3). 'Mother tongue' education as a 'values-based strategy is thus presented as a reactive strategy to the segregated and discriminatory history of South Africa leading in to the 1990s. The statement assumes that people speak a language at home (say, isiXhosa or Afrikaans) which is the same as the standardised version of that language that counts at school, but this is even less the case for smaller African languages than it is for English, because they are less visible than English in formal and bureaucratic contexts and their standard versions are thus hardly visible at all outside of school settings.

These statements of policy and principle rely on a set of linked constructs such as 'home language', 'mother tongue', 'additional language', 'an additive approach to bilingualism' and 'additive multilingualism'. To these are added the terms that become ubiquitous in later policy statements and discussions,

namely 'language of learning and teaching' (LOLT), 'dual' and 'single' language mediums of education. They all draw on what Heller (2007) has called a 'common-sense' but in fact highly ideologised view of bilingualism, where the conception is that of the co-existence of two (or more) linguistic systems. Heller and others (Lin, 1997; Martin-Jones, 2007; Michael-Luna & Canagarajah, 2007) bring into question the monodiscursive-monolingual norms implicit in such concepts. In a review of debates about bilingual education Martin-Jones (2007: 167) points out that a good deal of the policy-driven research has shown a strong preference for the construction of parallel monolingual spaces for learning, with strict monitoring of those spaces for their monolingualism. A major research direction in bilingual education has been around what kinds of programmes using language separation approaches or concurrent language approaches produced what kinds of successes for student learning and achievement. She points to what she calls a 'container metaphor of competence' manifest in terms like 'full bilingual competence', 'balanced bilingualism', 'additive bilingualism' and 'subtractive bilingualism', in effect all conceiving of languages and linguistic competencies as separate containers, side by side, that are more or less full or empty.

These influences surface strongly in the commitment to an 'additive bilingual' approach in the 1997 education policy statement for South Africa. That, in turn, drew from the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) group working on language. The NEPI researcher who summarised the proposal for an additive bilingual education model for South Africa, drawing on the Canadian work of Cummins (e.g. 1981), defined additive bilingualism as 'a form of bilingualism in which the person's first language is maintained while adding competence in another language' (Luckett, 1992: 4-5, quoted in Heugh, 1995: 334). She went on to advocate a 'transitional bilingualism model' 'in which, though the aim is to produce competence in a foreign language, the indigenous languages are used for initial education and are to some extent maintained'. As Heugh (1995: 334) pointed out, this model, despite Luckett's intentions, is very close to the 'subtractive model' where 'home language' is dropped altogether after a while in favour of the dominant language, and this is the interpretation given to her recommendations in the final NEPI report and implemented most commonly in educational practice since then. It is ironic, then, that policies which start from the position of celebrating diversity produce policies that institutionalise separation. These policies are helpless in the face of widespread social consensus that 'English' is a dominant set of linguistic resources in South African society, as it is in many other parts of the world, in 'English-speaking' societies, as well as many 'non-English speaking' societies, as other authors in this volume testify.

English Language Dominance and 'the English They Can Get'

English is indeed the elephant in the room, only obliquely referred to in these policy stipulations. It is English that is predominantly the preferred language of learning across schools and universities in South Africa, notwithstanding small but innovative African-language educational initiatives developed in Limpopo province, the Western Cape and elsewhere. The stipulation in the policy documents for 'learner choice' (or parental choice) in identifying their chosen LOLT allows for English to be selected ubiquitously as the LOLT and for regional education departments to proceed with the wide use of English language resources (with Afrikaans-medium instruction fighting for survival in tertiary education and with small pockets of experimentation providing instruction in other regional languages at school level). There is a second problem regarding the relationship between, on the one hand, so-called 'home languages' or 'mother tongue' as the language that is actually spoken in homes and local neighbourhoods, and, on the other hand, what counts as 'mother tongue' in schools and classrooms. Research undertaken in primary schools in the Western Cape shows students and teachers communicating by way of language forms that diverge from the standard isiXhosa in which the students will be tested (Xhalisa, 2011). My focus here, though, for the remaining discussion, is on the question of the dominance of English as the language of choice in schooling and higher education. Having argued that there are mistaken assumptions in policy outputs about languages and their use, when seen from a social practices perspective, I turn to an examination of classroom language. My focus is on an 'English' which is a form of bounded monolingual practice, endorsed and sustained in schools. My aim is not to show English as dominant but to examine how what counts as English is in fact both diverse and specific. The data reported on here is taken from a series of linked qualitative, ethnographic-style studies on post-foundation phase classroom literacy and language practices. The data comprises recorded instances of classroom interaction and detailed fieldnotes, and the methodological orientation has been that of interpretative linguistic and literacy ethnography (Heath & Street, 2008).

The following presents a typical scenario from a school where the teacher and students struggle to work with resources that are barely available to them. The teacher had copied a maths exercise from a book onto the blackboard and was now trying to help students with the problems they were having with the task. Neither the teacher nor the students had specialised English language resources that were appropriate for the task but nonetheless persevered by way of a particular, localised, monolingual English.

it was not an everyday term that the students might have picked up elsewhere. He struggled to find the language resources to explain that the farmer would not need to spend money on fencing the side where there was already a wall (he won't have money, he won't have money, he doesn't won't have money to spend for my side' – his attempts here to find an appropriate verb phrase to explain the point falter and fail, ending with the incoherent and ungrammatical 'doesn't won't' conclusion).

Despite their struggles to absorb and understand, the students observed the rules of engagement and responded by attempting English themselves. Similarly, in their discussion of a case study of language in a similar township high school in the same locality, Blommaert *et al.* (2005: 392) reported that almost without exception 'the students expressed a great desire to learn English'. In support, they cite one piece of student writing as follows:

the language that I like at school to learn English because that Everybody they learn English because is a very nice language to Everyone that they want to speak English.

Blommaert (2007: 14) claims that

the situation is tragically clear: the township pupils – overwhelmingly black or 'colored' and poor – pin their hopes for upward social mobility on English; but *this particular English* (the one they *have* and the one they *can get*) is not going to allow them to achieve that goal. It is indeed the English they can get: their teachers also had no mastery of the elite varieties of English.

Blommaert's argument is that English exists in such post-colonial contexts on 'different scales'. The elite and their children have access to prestige varieties of spoken and written language while the mass of students have access only to 'sub-standard varieties that are only valid locally'. He concludes that 'the "world" language, in other words, exists in at least two –scaled – forms: one, a genuinely "globalised" English that connects elites worldwide, and another, a very local variety that offers very little translocal mobility' (Blommaert, 2007: 14-15).

English and Social Mobility

I would suggest, however, that while Blommaert accurately identifies the extent of the desire for English language education in certain urban settings

(but not shared amongst all youths in less urban settings), the 'local' is itself layered into more complex scales of access and influence than is suggested by a simple juxtaposition between two scales. Fataar's (2009) research identifies the high levels of mobility that characterise students' movements across the city of Cape Town and surroundings, as they go in search of affordable and quality education. He examines the complex ways that township students access both suburban and township schools from beyond the confines of their immediate neighbourhoods. He suggests that the community school, 'the one nearby' has come to be seen as inferior and to be shunned in favour of schools *elsewhere*, suggesting a gap between official planning and the 'popular energies' which evade them. He describes a complex dispersal of students every morning on diverse paths from township to suburban schools and across township schools, in search of better schools. He talks of 'an affective disconnection between their places of living and their spaces of schooling' (Fataar, 2009: 3). His discussion points us to the observation that, as far as language goes, 'the one nearby' is similarly seen as inferior, as urban students and parents see quality education as happening in the prestige language varieties which they do not 'have'.

'English' In-between

In-between the scales of English language middle-class schools and failing township schools are a range of differently positioned schools, responding to the new demands and mobility that characterise the schooling terrain in the city. The excerpt below is from one of these repositioned ex-elite, suburban schools and shows a different kind of English-medium instruction to the struggling township school referenced above, but also very different from the middle-class schools near it. Like many other similar schools, this suburban school was formerly an all-white, middle-class 'Model C' school. It has become a relatively low fee-paying school that attracts working class black and coloured students who are dropped off/bused in by their parents from the townships and from the Cape' Flats. There is also a small number of immigrant/refugee students from the Congo, Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Africa. The language of learning and teaching is monolingual English, but it is not the relaxed, at-home kind of English spoken in the more expensive middle-class schools near it. Most of the teaching happens at this school on the assumption that the children bring almost nothing with them to the school by way of linguistic resources and background knowledge. The lesson extract presented here is from a Grade 6 class. The teacher focuses on surface features of language and literacy coding and decoding

and on surface features of language meanings. She carefully takes students through a reading aloud exercise and then makes them look up the meanings of words. There is no sense here that there is anything from the students' own worlds that might have relevance and the sole focus is on surface levels of comprehension.

(...) indicates a phrase that is inaudible on the recording

- 1 = TEACHER:** Right. Ehm, we going to read this story. What can be so interesting about it? OK, I'm gonna, eh – Siphon starts, eh, then Marita, then Mishali, then Lorato. OK? Just three lines. Ok I'll tell you when to stop. [Starts reading]
- 2 STUDENT:** A turtle is a member of the reptile family. It is covered by scales and flakes. It is cold-blooded and breathes air. The outstanding feature of the turtle is its hard shell. This shell can be up to a metre long and is made from ribbed bones, covered with flakes or scales.
- 3 TEACHER:** Thank you. Who was the next one that I Marita. [Reads] A turtle cannot pull its head into the shell like
- 4 STUDENT:** the tortoise, which is a close relative. There are seven types of marine turtle in the world, but most live in the warm tropical islands.
- 5 TEACHER:** OK. Thank you. No – finish that sentence. where they feed on algae and sea grasses.
- 6 STUDENT:** OK. Right. Go on.
- 7 TEACHER:** Turtles will spend nearly all their time in the water,
- 8 STUDENT:** but the female will crawl onto a beach to lay the rubbery shell eggs in a hole in the sand and lays the eggs and covers -
- 9 TEACHER:** Shuh! You know what is wrong here? You know what is wrong here? Same thing that happened when we read that first that was so badly done. OK? The sentence is written and on the other side in the middle is a picture, and the sentence goes on, on the other side. OK? So, we will start there again.
- 10 STUDENT:** Turtles will spend nearly all their time in the shell –shell – (Recording: R school, Grade 6, 11 August 2009)

Students took turns reading aloud in this class and the teacher did all the 'filling in' – clarifying the content matter and providing background

information. There was almost no evidence of any engagement with the material on the part of the students, and the teacher clearly saw her role as gently inducing children to gain familiarity with the language resources which they did not have. The teacher's intervention in Turn 9 is about a reading error where the student misread because the sentence jumped across a picture on the page. The student was apparently simply reading the words rather than the sense of the writing and so did not notice that 'and lays the eggs and covers' (Turn 8) does not follow grammatically from the earlier sentence fragment. The attention to reading as print-based produced a focus which rendered the image of the turtle laying her eggs as redundant and also produced a misreading. This is closer to what Williams (1996) called a 'reading-like' activity than to a reading activity because of the focus on surface features of language and text rather than on meaning. Language and literacy approximate here to the high status resources that are on display in the elite classrooms but they do not set an effective basis for the making and taking of meanings and understandings in other contexts, because they are cut off from the requisite that meanings are made in contexts of relevance and exchange, if they are to link up to or provide bridges for related activities in other contexts. They are, however, of a different order of social indexicality to the township classroom interactions – they provide limited access to the high status resources sought, whereas the township classroom examined provided almost no access at all. Thus, while the learning and teaching do not provide a direct version of the high status resources associated with the privileged versions of the elite schools, they promise at least access to greater mobility at the local and regional level.

In contrast, we can look at the following extract taken from a school in the suburbs where the students are predominantly middle class and mostly, but not exclusively, white. The school charges fees which are high but not at the same level as the handful of 'top' schools nearby which excel every year on the national league tables of school-leavers who attain distinctions in their examinations. So this is a comfortably middle-class school but not in the first league of such schools.

As can be seen in the data I examine below, there is no bridging of in-school and out-of-school language resources for these students because there is not assumed to be a gulf. In the sense that Heath (1983) made this argument, the school is an extension and elaboration of their home community's ways of knowing and being, and this is reflected in the language of the classroom. In the following extract the teacher has enriched the Silent Uninterrupted Reading Exercise (SURE), where students engage in quiet novel reading every day for 15 minutes, by bringing in a hot drink in response to the cold weather, on a day when an unusually high percentage of students are absent during a seasonal flu outbreak.

- 1 **TEACHER:** ... I've decided today is Hot Chocolate day while we
 have ... um ... SURE reading ... but the deal is that
 this is a privilege. I went to the shop and took my
 own money and bought this for you because I love
 you so much, so don't abuse them. (...) alright?
- 2 **STUDENT:** (noise and all talking simultaneously) Thank you miss!
- 3 **TEACHER:** (...) And thank you to Jean and Claire who helped in
 the background.
- 4 **TEACHER:** O.K. guys, please don't burn yourselves and please
 don't mess.
- 5 **STUDENT:** Is there sugar in?
- 6 **STUDENT:** I'm not supposed to drink hot chocolate and sugar ...
- 7 **STUDENT:** It makes you hyper (...)
- 8 **STUDENT:** (Various talking simultaneously) Is this is an experi-
 ment miss?
- 9 **TEACHER:** The experiment is to see how brave you children are
 when there's teachers present (...). (A reference to the
 researcher at the back of the classroom)
- 10 **STUDENT:** (Various talking simultaneously)
- 11 **STUDENT:** What is this?
- 12 **TEACHER:** This is LO.
- 13 **STUDENT:** LO?
- 14 **TEACHER:** Developing the skill of being grateful
- 15 **STUDENT-** How about we do an experiment to see how hyper I
 can (be) with 3 cups of coffee... . (Recording: P
 school, Grade 7, 5 August 2009)

The chatty and interactive nature of the exchanges suggests a common ease with the setting and form of communication. There is a sense that things are being negotiated and there is room for students to talk amongst themselves while the teacher maintains a loose authority through the exchanges. In Line 1 the teacher adopts a nurturing, intimate familial tone (... 'because I love you so much') together with the teacherly warning about 'not getting out of hand'. Notably, only one student actually carried out the task of reading a novel during the whole period, whereas the others chatted amongst themselves without upsetting their teacher. So the 'literacy work' was not an issue for the teacher. She seemed more concerned that the students relaxed and interacted within the boundaries that she set. The student question in line 8 ('Is this an experiment miss?') started a joking dialogue where teacher and students played with words in a relaxed way: The teacher's answer about it being an experiment `to see

how brave you are' (line 9) was both a reminder to the students that they and the teacher were under observation from the researcher but also an invitation to them to be assertive and entertaining. In response to a similar question (line 11, What is this?) the teacher makes an 'Insider' joke about it being LO. Life Orientation (LO) is a school subject on the new curriculum, intended to be about developing 'life skills'. (Teachers are sometimes uncertain about LO as a school subject, finding it too 'unacademic' or too 'personal' in its focus or not convinced as to its place on the timetable – at thi& school boys and girls are often separated into separate LO classes to discuss sex education, HIV/AIDS, 'body-care' and related topics.) The last exchange (line 15) is an example of an intertextual moment where the student playfully ventriloquates (or double-voices, in the Bhaktinian sense) parental/medicalised conversations about youthful activity as sugar-induced hyperactivity. This last joke closes the circle started by the teacher expressing her (*in loco parentis*) love for her students as the student now invokes the parental 'voice' directly and maintains a teenagerly 'attitude' of her own.

For students at the school from social backgrounds that are not white or middle class the language of the school is gently assimilationist. Fataar (2009: 7) described teachers at a similar school in Cape Town as seeing it as 'their morally ordained duty to educate for middleclass civility'. In their own words, he says, they are 'race blind', or they 'don't see race'. Fataar suggests that 'this stance prevents constructive mediation of racial and cultural difference from becoming part of the school's reference world, which precludes the productive incorporation of difference into the school's functional culture'. He suggests that 'assimilation into the pre-existing culturally white ethos of the school is as much facilitated by the white teachers at the school as by the non-engagement of parents who are spatially (they live elsewhere in the city) and conceptually distant'.

The language of the school is, of course, English, and the teacher moves fluidly in and out of more formal genres and registers and 'everyday English'. The excerpt below shows a teacher at Grade 6 level familiarising children with 'rap' as a poetry/performance genre which, however, has been cleaned up, is monolingual and shorn of any youth- cultural/oppositional/gangsta credentials'.

T. Rhyming. Okay. So it says: 'Everybody rap.' If you look at the pictures here of the two guys, right, that would obviously have been 'cool' about twenty years ago, when they rapped, right? {pupils laugh.} Rappers today don't look like that. They wear these funny sunglasses. Their hair's all funny and that but that's only their stage

personality, right? If you see them in the street or when you see them going out with their friends, they are dressed normally. Right? But for this particular, ehm, for their stage persona they have, (.) a certain rapping style. The way they dress. The way they walk. Rappers don't walk onto the stage, wait, they have a ... {The Teacher demonstrates the way the rappers walk. The whole class laughs. The Teacher has to raise the level of her voice. 1 ... you know what I'm saying? Okay, Karl , /../ ja. 'Everybody rap. Can you do a rap? Can you do a rap? Can you make a rhyme? Can you make a rhyme?' {The Teacher addresses the class. I What are we doing there?

PP: They're repeating themselves.

T. Repeating. A rap song is all about? (.) repeating. Why do you remember rap songs, or even pop songs? Because they sing the same thing over and over again. The chorus they sing a few times. The (.) they use the same, eh, words in different, eh, verses. Right? So it's easy to remember. Also the tune, it's very catchy. It's got a funky beat. Right. I'll go through the next few lines.
 Can you link up words? Can you link up words? To help me blow my mind. To help me blow my mind. Poetry is a thing we can do to show that there is no difference. Between me and you.
 Black and White are all the same and those who say different are mad insane.
 Do you agree? Do you agree? If you agree, say Ja to me.
 So I want you. (.) to think of ways that you in your pairs can rap this out. (..) Okay? You going to, eh, work through it now.
 Brainstorm ideas. Ehm, you can write on the page. You can say who's going to say which lines, etc. and then, ehm, you can have it ready for me for next week. That's, (.) this will be your final assessment mark for this term (.) (Recording: P school, Grade 7, 30 July 2009)

On one level the teacher's language is fluid and dialogical. She loots stereotypes from popular culture to draw the children in to engaging with her theme. She uses her body and models what she wants the children to do. But rap music gets stripped of any alternative, oppositional potential and becomes just one kind of simple poetry display, and the topic for an examinable piece

of writing. The teacher locates rap in a context-free limbo from 20 years previously. It is worth noting here that there is a vibrant rap/hip hop, primarily township musical tradition in South Africa, known as *kwaito*, that meshes African language resources with English, Afrikaans and *escallito* or *tsotstitaal*, but it is precisely their mobile mix that disqualifies them from classroom use.

My argument in this discussion of data from three different classrooms has been that 'English' is something different in different school settings, depending on the situated resources and intentions of social actors. On the basis of these examples we can concur with Martin-Jones (2007: 174) that children (and teachers) who already have knowledge of prestige varieties of English from out of school are positioned advantageously in comparison to poorer students who do not have that access. From this perspective, the language practices of schooling can be said to reproduce existing relations of dominance as the interactional routines of classrooms link to the wider social and ideological order. But English does not operate simply as either a 'standard' variety, which the children of the elite have access to and practice in school, or a 'sub-elite' version, which the children of the poor have to assimilate. Both the social conditions and the language resources used are more variable and complex than that two-tiered model would allow.

Conclusion

From language policy documents we read the intentions and hopes of the policy writers that language will serve as an instrument that will help to bring about more equal access to greater resources and a 'levelling of the playing fields'. From the classroom exchanges examined here we see the vulnerable underbelly of these policies. As Mufwene (2006) pointed out, governments cannot control the day-to-day language practices of their populations. Nor do languages go extinct the way plant or animal species die out. Instead, they change and shift in relation to the social context – the economic, cultural and political milieu in which language users find themselves. Rather than existing as policy instruments that can be employed to bring about social objectives, languages are barometers, in their relative statuses, scales of uses and productivity, of the character and ranges of inequalities and contests that characterise the wider social setting. Effective policy-making should be based on a closer understanding of how language is practiced, rather than relying on projections onto particular 'languages' of romanticized and essentialised notions of language-culture and indigeneity.

Notes

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- (2) They are, of course, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. The 2001 population census was the last national report on language distribution. Based on a question which asked respondents to name the language they spoke predominantly at home, the breakdown was as follows: In a then population of 44.8 million in South Africa, 23.8% spoke IsiZulu; 17.6% spoke IsiXhosa; 13.3% spoke Afrikaans; 9.4% spoke Sepedi; 8.2% spoke Setswana; 8.2% spoke English; 7.9% spoke Sesotho; 4.4% spoke Xitsonga; 2.7% spoke SiSwati; 2.3% spoke Tshivenda; 1.6% spoke IsiNdebele. The census data has since been criticised for the essentialist construction of language it utilised, which assumed that people were monolingual speakers at home. Evidence of language shift and the widening of existing linguistic repertoires have been described since then, showing a more complicated breakdown and distribution of linguistic resources in multilingual settings (Deumert, 2010).

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