All South African languages are alive and clicking

On OCTOBER 17, Asikhu lame on SABC1 had a debate about whether South Africa's indigenous languages are dying or not. Most participants suggested they are dying, and I want to take issue with that. If a language has mother tongue speakers at all socio-economic levels, that language cannot die. If a language is taught at school as a first language up to Grade 12 and taught at tertiary level either as a subject or a degree, that language cannot die. If a language is used in different forms of media, that language cannot die. A language with published literature cannot die. If speakers of a language are still practising their cultural activities and are protective of their cultural identity, that language cannot die. If a language has academics specialising in it, that language cannot die. Each of the South African indigenous official languages has all of these, and are therefore not dying – rather, these languages are challenged by English hegemony.

English hegemony makes it difficult for any other African language spoken in South Africa, including Afrikaans, to develop to the status of English. We have naturalised colonisation and apartheid in our minds.

For example, when we talk of multilingualism in South Africa we mean English must be included. If one speaks all the other South African languages but lacks English, one is not accepted as multilingual.

Most of the "educated" mother tongue speakers of African languages in South Africa send their kids to English-only schools. And on the other side, parents who can't afford to send their kids to these schools also make it clear that they don't want their kids to be taught in their mother tongue, they want them to be taught in English.

They lack the correct information about what mother tongue education can bring for their kids. For example, they think it is natural for a black language child not to get a symbol for subjects such as mathematics and science; they think it is natural for black language schools to contribute higher percentages to the low matric pass rate; they think it is natural for a black language child to finish last in the exam room, if he/she finishes at all. They can't link these with the language of teaching and learning.

We can develop these languages to the status of English, but that needs commitment from all the parties involved and affected.

Xhosa language practitioners in the Western Cape recently had an Imbizo yesiXhosa to discuss issues affecting development of their language in the province, and this conference will be held every year.

The Eastern Cape will be also having the second SEK Mqhayi Xhosa Conference next month. Afrikaans and Xhosa language practitioners in the Western Cape have also started the so-called "XhosAfrika", which is aimed at developing isiXhosa with the assistance of Afrikaans in the province.

The first issue of a magazine called Ibhutho has also been published in the Eastern Cape.

There are lots of different projects to keep these languages alive and kicking. They are not dying but challenged.

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