Linguistic diversity and literacy in a global perspective

The new linguistic world order

Colonial conquest, imperialism and globalisation have established a hierarchy of standard languages, which mirrors the power relations on the planet. The overall effect of this configuration has been to hasten the extinction of innumerable language varieties and to stigmatise and marginalise all but the most powerful languages. Above all, English, in David Crystal's coinage, is "a global language", indeed, *the* global language. From all parts of the world, including the continent where the English language originated, we hear the same complaint: *English is destroying our languages*. Tové Skutnabb-Kangas has taken the issue furthest by attacking the phenomenon of "linguistic genocide" which, as she explains, is the direct result of globalisation.

This particular usage implies a challenge to the orthodox conceptualisation of linguistic evolution as a natural process involving, among other things, the survival of the fittest – hence "extinction", as used above. In my view, this is an exceptionally important insight, one that has a direct bearing on the questions we are going to be deliberating on in the next two days [1]. For, viewed from the perspective of applied linguistics, it suggests an exploration of the potential of language planning as a discipline and as a practice for affecting, or even effecting, social transformation. It reminds us of the fact that as science increases our knowledge about and our understanding of phenomena, it also furnishes us with the tools to change them.

There is ample statistical evidence to demonstrate the current dominance of English in international trade, finance, world governance and in tertiary education, science and technology, the publishing industry and other domains. These can be easily accessed and, like all statistics, used one way or another. In our present context, the statistics pertaining to the Internet are most immediately relevant. According to globstats@global-reach.biz

(30 September 2004), 35.2% of all information on the world wide web is in the English language, 35.7% in numerous non-English European languages and 32.3% in non-English Asian languages. Non-English African languages do not warrant a mention because they can hardly be said to be "present" on the net at this stage. The yawning digital divide, specifically as it involves the peoples of Africa, could hardly be manifested more eloquently than by this statistical silence. According to Agnes Callamard,

> … while North America holds 6% of the world population and 41% have on-line access to the Internet, less than 1% of the African population, which is 10% of the world's population, has the same. Furthermore, the 29 OECD states contain 97% of all Internet hosts, 92% of the market in production and consumption of IT hardware, software and services, and 86% of all Internet users. …
> (Paraphrased in Unesco 2005:7)

In considering these statistics, it is important to bear in mind that at some level, the leadership of the peripheral areas of the world are complicit in maintaining this discriminatory status quo. The ultimate question, for those of us who are convinced of the need to plot an alternative route for the human species is what we, as language specialists and practitioners, can do in order to strengthen those social and historical forces which are running counter to the apparently unstoppable logic of globalisation. How do we assist in the decolonisation of the mind of the billions of people who are held in thrall by the demonstrable "superiority" of the global languages as propagated and prioritised by their own ruling groups and strata? How can we, through language planning and other interventions, initiate or reinforce changes in the patterns of development and in the dominant social relations. These are difficult questions that go to the very heart of the politics of social transformation and that raise all the imponderables about what factors determine, or at least influence, changes in individuals' attitudes and behaviour.

The clearest manner of indicating what is at stake for the people of Africa in a field such as language policy in education, for example, is to pose the question: *how can we make*

the move from the existing situation where the former colonial languages dominate to one where the indigenous languages of Africa become dominant? The answer given to the prior question, i.e., whether this is a desirable scenario, constitutes no less than the political litmus test of the democratic credentials of the government or of the regime concerned. This is so for the simple reason that the empowerment of "the people", who are after all the beginning and the end of a democratic system, is axiomatically only possible in and through a language, or languages, in which they are proficient. No government in Africa today can claim that the generality of the population has a sufficient command of the so-called "official", i.e., former colonial, languages such that they can conduct their essential daily transactions in those languages without assistance. I wish to stress, however, that this question does not derive from some narrow-minded national or ethnic chauvinist imperative. It is based firmly on the ground of (linguistic) human rights in a world where cultural diversity is slowly beginning to be seen as just as important for the survival of the human species as are biological and political diversity respectively[2].

By way of suggesting a useful approach to the analysis of the issue, it is important that we remind ourselves that the loss of domain by numerous strong languages in favour of English is not a new phenomenon at all. In European countries, for example, languages such as Latin, French and German occupied, indeed monopolised, high status or controlling domains of language for many decades and even centuries, right into the early 20th century[3] For this reason, the fact that, and the socio-historical conditions under which, what became the standard languages of Europe were able to conquer or, in some cases, recapture, the domains in question ought to be studied in detail with due regard to the very different dynamics of the information age and the network society.

Multilingualism: five insights into necessity

Cultural diversity
In order to understand the significance of our international commitment to the promotion and maintenance of multilingualism as a defining feature of modern life, it is essential to consider some of the more important implications of this social phenomenon. In my

view, the most far-reaching and wide-ranging insights come from the ecology of languages paradigm, which has been pioneered and popularised by scholars such as Maffi, Skutnabb-Kangas and others, even though many of the avenues it has opened up or pointed to remain controversial and unexplored. Suffice it to say that the proposition that cultural and, therefore, linguistic diversity is as necessary as biodiversity for the survival and perpetuation of the human species is one with which we have to engage[4]. It is a proposition, moreover, which gives strength to the arm of all those who are committed to the promotion of mother tongue based bilingual education and of multilingualism, more generally, regardless of how divergent their points of departure might be. The proposition pivots on the yet to be proven assumption that there is a direct causal, and not merely a correlative, link between biological and cultural-linguistic diversity[5]. This is no reason for rejecting it, since whether or not the hypothesis is disproved eventually will not affect the fact that all languages are depositories of knowledge and that some of the endangered languages constitute the only possibility of access to valuable indigenous knowledge that reaches far back into the history of the human species. The link between human survival on planet earth and the nurturing of multicultural and multilingual societies is clearly fundamental in every sense of the term. It is a consideration which, like ecology in the more obvious life-sustaining context of animal and plant life, can no longer be ignored by any modern state.

Language and the economy

If linguistic diversity has only recently come to be seen as an essential aspect of the survival of the human species, it is a long-established fact of modern life that language policy and language practice can either stimulate or impede economic efficiency, labour productivity, economic growth and development. Since human beings are dependent on one another for the production of the means of subsistence, they necessarily co-operate in the labour process and in order to do so, they have to communicate with one another. In this process of communication, language plays the most important role[6]. Hence, the development of linguistic markets, especially in the modern world of the capitalist mode of production, is directly related to the economic functions of a language or of a set of languages. These functions are automatically and objectively determined by the profit-

seeking interests of the dominant sectors of economic production and of those who control the means of production. As I shall point out presently, tendencies towards reification and mystification develop such that the owners of material wealth become afflicted with a kind of myopia that makes it almost impossible for them to discern the inappropriateness and even the counter-productiveness of their "tried-and-tested" language policy and language practice in the workplace[7]. In any case, the language(s) in which the major economic transactions of a society take place function like a key to power, money and status. In the field of Applied Language Studies in Africa, there is a growing appreciation of the fact that one of the reasons for the failure of so many economic development plans on the continent is the fact that development aid is invariably packaged in a foreign language (usually English) and that this fact necessarily excludes the vast majority of Africans from being integral participants in the development process (see, among others, Prah 1995). The most advanced analysis of the genesis and social-order functions of linguistic markets is that associated with the work of the late Pierre Bourdieu. In a multilingual polity, it is essential that the optimal balance be found in the deployment of relevant languages in order to maximise efficiency and productivity. One of the myths of "hands-on" as well as of most theoretical economics is that a single, usually a dominant, language is a critical feature of such a "balanced" policy. This is a legacy of the European provenance of modern industrial societies and does not correspond to the reality in most non-European countries. Indeed, given the universality of mass migrations today, it is no longer even characteristic of most European societies. In any case, it is counter-intuitive to claim that an entire nation will produce optimally in a second or third, not to say a foreign, language!

Language and democracy

The third implication of multilingualism as a policy issue is the specifically political objective of maximising the democratic potential of the social formations within which we live. It is unnecessary in the present context to spell out the details of the well known rights paradigm. Stated in the simplest possible terms: all human beings should have the right to use the language of their choice in order to conduct their essential transactions such as going to school, church (mosque, temple, meetings, etc.) or to the post office, the

bank, the supermarket, etc., if these languages are prevalent in the political entity in which they live[8]. If they are unable to do so, they are necessarily disempowered, unable to be part of the decision making processes of the society concerned and unable to make or to influence the concrete decisions that affect vital aspects of their lives. Such circumstances occur in every social formation on a random basis as the result of a lack of resources or because of the insensitivity of one or other bureaucrat. When this happens, the matter can usually be put right without too much trauma and humiliation. The object of our concern is the systematic denial of such linguistic human rights as a matter of political and social policy of the ruling groups in a society. This question, it is clear, is of exceptional importance in a country such as South Africa, where we are going through a period of transition and, in certain respects, of very real transformation.

Given the obvious importance of linguistic human rights for the expansion and consolidation of democratic polities and for the well-being of all individuals, it is significant that as yet there is not a single international rights instrument in which education of children in the mother tongue is guaranteed without qualification (see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:527-542). This is indeed ironic if we consider the fact that linguistic human rights are the aboriginal human rights, i.e., those rights derived from the need and the struggle to maintain the feature by which our very humanity is defined and made possible. Although we would have to reformulate it in various directions in order to bring it in line with the state of our knowledge of communications theory today, if we accept the Darwinian dictum: "No man without language, no language without man", we can arrive at no other conclusion.

A vital insight in this regard pertains to the implicit global contest between Anglo-Saxon dominance (the hegemony of English) and what we might dub the Global Alliance for the Promotion of Multilingualism. In this connection, the continents of Europe (the European Union), Africa (the African Union) and Asia (ASEAN) are of prime importance. Co-operation among the states and the civil-society sectors of these areas of the globe is essential for ensuring linguistic diversity as understood in the present context. The Power, not the Tower, of Babel is the vision that lights up this constellation.

We have to stress, however, that we are not, and cannot be, motivated by any Anglophobia. While we cannot, of course, condone the sycophantic mutterings of many of our predecessors on the African and Asian continents and, regrettably, of many living exponents of the belief that English is God's gift to humanity[9], we harbour no hatred against the language of Chaucer and Shakespeare, of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Charles Dickens, George Bernard Shaw or even of a Lloyd-George, a Disraeli or a Churchill. From the bitter experience of the Soweto uprising in 1976, we South Africans know very well that it is not the language that people use that is at fault; it is people - usually those who have the power and the authority to manipulate and to mobilise "the masses" – who use the language for oppressive and exploitative purposes, who have to be opposed. Indeed, if this proposition were not true, the English language would be one of the most hated objects in the world.

Besides this principled position, however, there is another compelling reason why we cannot be counted in the ranks of those who joy in English-bashing. The simple fact of the matter is that English as a global language is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. *We are opposed not to English – obviously – but to the hegemonic position of English, which necessarily puts other languages and varieties at risk to the point of threatening them with extinction.* Precisely because of the power and concrete socio-economic advantages which English as a language of global communication carries in many societies and international sectors today, we have arrived in the South African context, at the formulation of our strategic pedagogical objective as being the establishment of a mother tongue-based bilingual[10] education system. In this conception, English rather than any other important language, is taken to be the constant element in the equation. In this regard, the developments in the European Union, where both French and German albeit in different modalities are fighting a rearguard action against the dominance of the English language, ought to help us to realise that it would be a Canute-like strategy to try to dethrone English from its status as the global language of the 21st century. If powerful nation states such as those of Western Europe are unable to brake the progress of the juggernaut of English, there is no way that small peripheral countries,

especially those with a British imperialist heritage such as many of the independent states of Africa, could do so. For all the reasons mentioned earlier, however, and because history never stands still, in spite of appearances to the contrary, it is vital that all languages be kept alive and that their vitality and usefulness be maintained and enhanced.

How children learn

The fourth reason why a policy of promoting multilingualism is essential derives from the psycholinguistic and pedagogical domains. Again, there is no need to go into detail. Many scholars across the globe who are concerned with education as a professional practice have made seminal contributions in this area. I refer at random to authors such as Cummins, Lopez, Ramirez, Smitherman and many others in America, Skutnabb-Kangas, Huss, Baker, Gogolin among many others in Europe, Tadadjeu, Obanya, Bamgbose, Okombo, McDonald, etc., in Africa and, of course, the many Asian and Australian scholars who have contributed to our understanding of the formative role of L1-medium education. Even though it is indisputable that children can learn in any language which they know well enough and there are, of course, countless examples to prove this proposition, it is counter-intuitive to maintain that the children of a local, regional or national community[11] should as a matter of course be schooled in a second or in a foreign language.

In this connection, the issues around emergent and early literacy are central, even though, because of outdated status reasons as well as simple ignorance about the domain, they seldom feature in the general sociolinguistic literature. The consensus today is that children learn to read and write in much the same manner they learn to speak a language[12]. Should this insight eventually filter "down" to the teacher training institutions in any significant manner, it is to be anticipated that the classroom practices of most pre- and primary school teachers will undergo a fundamental change. Of even greater importance in the present context is the understanding that children can learn to read and write two (and, in individual cases, even more) languages simultaneously. Given our commitment to mother tongue-based bilingual education, the research on biliteracy is one of the most urgent priorities for enhancing the possibility of realising the goals of

promoting and maintaining linguistic diversity and spreading literacy skills as widely as possible.

Language and identity

The fifth and final issue is the integral relationship between language and individual as well as social identity. In this connection, we normally confine our discussions to the structuring and constitutive role of the mother tongue, i.e., the primary language or languages, in which the child is socialised. Without further exploration of the debates that have been, and are still being, conducted in regard to the main content of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about the link between languages and the way we perceive the world or construct our diverse realities, I believe that it is most appropriate to accept a weak version of that celebrated proposition. By doing so, we immunise ourselves against any narrow nationalist notions of language as the "soul" of a nation. We accept the view, which is borne out by all linguistic research and by actual experience, that anything (thought or emotion) can be expressed in any language, even though the overtones and resonances will differ from one speech community to another and from one individual to another because of the unavoidable specificity, i.e., the contextual uniqueness, of all experience. To operate from the premises of the so-called "strong" definition of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, lays one open, among other things, to playing into the hands of the most reactionary, backward-looking elements in modern societies and to sow the dragon's teeth of civil conflict and international war.

The historic task of the African middle classes

Ultimately, we are interested in these insights in order to gauge the nature and the scope of the challenges that face us as we set out to change matters in such a way that the situation begins to favour the empowerment and the economic and cultural enfranchisement of the peoples of Africa and of the rest of the ex-colonial world.

Without any exaggeration, it may be said that what is demanded of the African middle classes in general, and of the African intelligentsia in particular, is no less than Amilcar Cabral's almost forgotten demand that they "commit class suicide". To put it in a

nutshell: the African revolution has not been consummated anywhere on the continent. Economic and, indirectly, concrete political, independence as well as a genuine and profound cultural revolution have yet to be attained. These desirable goals have, moreover, to be arrived at in a world where the ever tighter integration into the world economy is projected as an inescapable imperative and where any move towards even a modicum of autarchy or "de-linking" in Samir Amin's resonant words is considered to be a kind of national suicide.

The forward-looking political leadership of the continent have recognised the need for a regional closing of ranks in order to acquire the strength and the sense of unity of purpose that will make it possible to bargain for a better deal for the continent at the global tables of plenty represented primarily by institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Organisation and the World Trade Organisation. This is the real political purpose of the idea of the "African renaissance" and of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and related economic concepts. It is also the real reason for the makeover of the Organisation of African Unity in the guise of the African Union. In other words, we are seeing a concerted attempt by the most enlightened sectors of the upper and middle classes of Africa to speed up the modernisation project that began with such great hope and expectations in 1957-60 and that imploded so lamentably after 1973. It remains to be seen whether these moves will do more than entrench the privileges and the rule of the very elites that have ruined the continent and made it into a byword among the nations for inefficiency, ineptitude and simple backwardness.

Be that as it may, at the level of language policy and language use, the post-colonial situation accurately reflects the reality of dependence and secular stagnation. The starkness of the situation is captured best in the simple, matter-of-fact words of the Mazruis:

> …. (An) important source of intellectual dependence in Africa is the
> language in which African graduates and scholars are taught….
> (Today), in non-Arabic speaking Africa, a modern surgeon who

> does not speak a European language is virtually a sociolinguistic
> impossibility…... (A) conference of African scientists, devoted to
> scientific matters and conducted primarily in an African language, is
> not yet possible…. It is because of the above considerations that
> intellectual and scientific dependence in Africa may be inseparable
> from linguistic dependence. The linguistic quest for liberation,
> therefore, must not be limited to freeing the European languages
> from their oppressive meanings in so far as Black and other
> subjugated people the world over are concerned, but must also seek
> to promote African languages, especially in academia, as one of the
> strategies for promoting greater intellectual and scientific
> independence from the West (Mazrui and Mazrui 1998:64-65).[13]

In other words, Africa's middle classes have to commit class suicide. This requirement arises from our acceptance of the correctness of the insights of Pierre Bourdieu and his school of how linguistic markets operate. Already in 1971, Pierre Alexandre (1972:86). had demonstrated how, in post-colonial Africa, one's degree of proficiency in the ex-colonial language has become a determinant of class location and even of class position. The African elites who inherited the colonial kingdom from the ostensibly departing colonial overlords, for reasons of convenience and in order to maintain their grip on power, have made nominal gestures towards equipping the indigenous languages of the continent with the wherewithal for use in powerful and high-status contexts. The result is a vicious downward spiral where the fact that these languages are not used is the cause of their stagnation and of the belief that they cannot be used in these functions[14]. The failure of leadership and the willingness of the elites to follow in the wake of their colonial forerunners are, naturally, reflected in the language attitudes that characterise the generality of the population. Since their role models overtly and repeatedly demonstrate their lack of belief in the capacity of the indigenous languages to fulfil all the functions of a language in all domains of modern life, the people begin to accept as "natural" the supposed inferiority of their own languages and adopt an approach that is determined by considerations that are related only to the market and social status value of the set of languages in their multilingual societies. They fall prey to what I have dubbed a Static Maintenance Syndrome (SMS). This means that the native speakers of the languages believe in and cherish the value of their languages, i.e., the vitality of the languages is, within certain limits, not placed in doubt. However, they do not believe that these

languages can ever attain the same power and status as, for example, English or French. They themselves and, more pathetically, those who ought to know better because of their access to the relevant scientific information, end up believing that their languages are intrinsically incapable of attaining the analytical shape and capacity of the more powerful languages of the world as we know it today. Because of the operations of the linguistic market, what Karl Marx referred to as a fetishistic relationship is set up between the indigenous and the dominant colonial languages[15]. This is the meaning, in the African context, of the kind of "evidence" proffered by ordinary parents when they try to explain their opposition to, or their scepticism about, mother tongue education by claiming that "our languages do not have words for concepts such as "atom" or "theorem"; so, how can we expect our children to learn real mathematics or physics?"[16]. The overall social-psychological result of this debilitating attitude is what Ngugi wa Thiong'o has called the "colonisation of the mind"[17]. From a linguistic point of view, while the languages continue to be used in most primary contexts (family, community, church, pre- and primary schools), they are kept, as though by some taboo, from being used in all high-status or secondary domains such as science and technology, languages of tuition in secondary and tertiary education, philosophical and social-analytical discourse, among many others[18]. The intelligentsia reinforce this static maintenance syndrome because their relative proficiency in the dominant ex-colonial languages allows them to enjoy what Bourdieu called the "profits of distinction".

The intellectualisation of African languages

Against this background, it is clear why the drastic image of "class suicide" is so apt. What is required of the intelligentsia and of students of applied linguistics and language activists is no less than the initiation of the linguistic counterpart of a radical version of NEPAD, i.e., the construction of the language infrastructure of the continent as an integral component of the economic development plan and as an inseparable element of the cultural revolution and of the deepening of democracy on the continent. This is an All-African project which, on the domain of language policy and planning, involves what we have elsewhere referred to as the "intellectualisation of the African languages". It is a project that will demand a long-term commitment to language development (corpus

planning) and to the use of African languages in all the most powerful domains of social life (status planning), among many other things. As such, it is a long-term, secular process that will test the political will and stamina of the ruling groups of the continent to the full. In this context, as I shall show presently, the placing and maintenance of African languages in cyberspace as an integral aspect of the virtual reality in which all of us are increasingly "at home" are an essential step if Africa and its peoples are not to be condemned to perpetual outcast status.

Like the electric power grid and the telecommunications networks that are being planned and gradually executed, this intellectualisation project will change the parameters within which all social development on the continent will be able to be conceptualised and implemented. Seen in this perspective, some of the arguments that are usually wheeled out to discredit the proponents of a policy of promoting multilingualism fall into place. Of these, the most specious is the so-called "costs-of-multilingualism" argument. There is a growing body of evidence that, calculated on the basis of either economic or/and social cost, a well planned policy of multilingualism has many more benefits and carries much fewer costs than a unilingual policy in a multilingual society. In purely monetary terms, we arrive consistently at an additional per annum increase in national and provincial government budgets of between 0,5% and 0,8%, a figure that is confirmed by detailed research in the EU context.

My core proposition is that we have to initiate a counter-hegemonic trend in the distribution of symbolic power and cultural capital implicit in the prevailing language dispensation in Africa's education systems. And, let us have no illusions, this is a historic challenge, one which we may not be able to meet adequately. To paraphrase Sibayan: (1999:448), we are called upon to initiate the secular process by which the African languages will gradually eliminate the dominance of English in the controlling domains of language or, at the very least, share those domains with it. In this connection, we have all been heartened by the very welcome developments at the level of the AU, where the African Academy of Languages is due to become one of its specialised agencies.

Professor Abdulaziz (2000:15) of the University of Nairobi, in line with what this paper is advocating, explains what has to be done:

> … (Scholars) in the linguistics of African languages have a great task in securing and preserving the linguistic heritage of Africa. Special attention needs to be focused on small-group and dying languages that have so far not been described. Equally crucial is to develop to the maximum those languages that could be used as vehicles of communication and knowledge in all spheres of modern life. These include the languages that are now functioning very well as national or official languages at the national and regional levels. For there is need to reduce and where possible eliminate the diglossia prevailing with the use of European languages as languages of education, technology and modernisation. If efforts are not directed towards achieving this goal, then African languages will remain forever underdeveloped. The present European languages could be taught well to serve as second and foreign languages since they are languages in which there is an enormous literature in all spheres of human endeavour.

It follows that what we have to propagate immediately, intensively and continuously, is the rehabilitation of mother tongue education within the context of a bilingual educational system where the other language in most cases will be English. In other words, mother tongue education from the pre-school right through to the university with English as a supportive medium, or in some cases, certainly at university level for some time into the future, also as a formative medium. Every African language department at every university or technikon, has got to propagate and support this particular demand. The failure of post-colonial African states to base their educational systems on the home languages or at the very least on the languages of the immediate community of the child, more than any other policy or practice, explains the fundamental mediocrity of intellectual production on our continent. We have to persuade our communities about the potential of African languages as languages of power and languages of high status. It is our task as language activists and professionals to do this, it is the task of the political, educational and cultural leadership of the continent to do this and to create the conditions that will make it possible to realise this proposition.

African languages and cyberspace

The tasks alluded to here become enormously more challenging but also more realisable in the context of the new information and communications technologies that are transforming the entire world. The general effects of these epistemologically revolutionary developments have been analysed by many scholars, especially in respect of the electronic media. Besides the specific pragmatics-related effects on especially written text, some of the socio-psychological consequences require careful attention from all who are concerned about the proliferation of ethnic and other group prejudices. On the one hand, it is more than obvious that the availability of the Internet as a tool enables smaller linguistic communities, if they have access to the necessary hardware and software, to take their virtual places alongside all the peoples of the world and to preserve their languages as expressions of modernity. There is also no doubt that the world wide web is beginning to serve as a kind of linguistic archives for endangered and even extinct languages and that this capacity is of the utmost significance for the preservation of the cultural heritage of all of humanity.

This heritage orientation towards the web is in some sense backward-looking and it is, therefore, pertinent to ask how we can best use cyberspace in order to enhance the status and accelerate the use of our languages in all the controlling domains. In this connection, under the aegis of ACALAN, there are the beginnings of important work, especially in respect of the promotion of training in computational linguistics and of terminology development and standardisation for science, technology and other fields. However, the really significant issues have to do with freedom of access to the net, the curtailment or, preferably, the outlawing, of any obstruction to the Internet whether this emanates from governments or from private sources. As victims of the digital divide, African scholars and people tend on principle and for reasons of self-interest to be in favour of the maximum of freedom in respect of the Internet and of the digital environment generally. The ongoing debates on these issues

(freedom of access, of information, of speech, etc.) are not new, of course. They repeat similar debates that took place under historically different conditions when radio, television and other inventions in telecommunications first became issues of public interest[19]. We have to find ways of resolving the awful contradictions inherent in the "magic" of the Internet and in all its related functions and processes, the fact that it is one of the most timely products of the human mind in that it enables us to tackle the enduring questions of poverty, disease, illiteracy and ignorance but that through the manner in which cyberspace is, or can be, appropriated, it might very well serve as one of the most pernicious tools for the perpetuation of inherited social inequalities of all kinds. International agreements and conventions on the freedom of access to and use of the Internet are pivotal instruments for the promotion of democratic governance and should be used towards this end by African, and other, democrats.

These are by their very nature not simply technological questions; they are, in fact, political questions par excellence, and the burden of addressing them falls squarely on the shoulders of those who wield power in the world. It is clear, whichever way we approach the matter, that it is in the interest of the periphery to mobilise all those global forces that tend towards more equitable access and use of the planet's resources within the framework of an ecologically responsible code. Specifically with regard to the maintenance and promotion of multilingualism and cultural diversity through the use of the Internet, it is essential that we approach the question in terms of some notion of the optimal balance between local needs and global imperatives. The depressing and disgraceful situation that obtains in respect of the Internet presence of African languages has to be addressed urgently. For African writers, poets and other artists that cannot afford print publishing for all the reasons that we know, the Internet provides the perfect point of entry for the initial dissemination of their works. As such, it can help to create the readership and the publishers' market that can bring about the change in the market value and, thus, in the status of

the languages of the continent. The leadership of the African Academy of

Languages and of its related associations is essential if we are to make a

success of the long journey ahead of us.

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Notes

[1] This paper was originally read at the Thematic Meeting organised by Unesco in cooperation with the African Academy of Languages, the Government of Mali and the Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie within the framework of the 2nd phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, held in Bamako, Mali, on 6-7 May 2005. It is a revised version of an earlier paper read at a workshop on multilingualism held in the South African parliament in February, 2004.

[2] See, e.g., Gell Mann 1998 and Skutnabb-Kangas 2000.

[3] For an illuminating account of the Danish case, see Hjarvard 2004

[4] See Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:91-96). The analytical coordinates of this debate have to be defined very carefully. Otherwise, it may become as irrelevant as the intense debate that was waged by avowed Marxist scholars in the 1920s and the 1930s on the subject of whether language "belonged" to the realm of the "superstructure" or of the "economic base". That debate, as is well known, had the Mephistophelian consequence of both contributing immensely to a thriving Soviet linguistics practice and resulting in the social and professional isolation and even in the physical extermination of so-called dissidents and deviationists. To quote Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:96):

> To me it seems important that serious consideration to the study of the possible causal relationships will not be curtailed by accusations of essentialism, romanticism, fundamentalism, neo-Darwinism, or any of the other –isms which might prevent serious and solid scholars from entering the field. The issues are too important to be waved away by thoughtless labelling before they have been thoroughly studied. And the interest, and action, have to grow faster than the threats to the planet.

May (2001:3), however, points to the danger that language loss may be contemplated with equanimity precisely through the emphasis on the analogy with the loss of biological diversity.

[5] Charles Darwin (1913:137), citing an essay by Lyell, which dated from 1863, as early as 1871 pointed out the "parallelism" between the development of different languages and distinct species. His discussion of this question, incidentally, serves to underline May's caveat (see note 3 above).

[6] It is plausible and justifiable to speculate that it is this need for co-operation that originally led to the activation of the genetic software in the brain of the genus "homo" which Pinker calls "the language instinct".

[7] A useful South African case study is du Plessis and Schuring 2000.

[8] This raises the question of the rights of immigrant and regional or other demographic minorities. In this context, I shall refrain from discussing the matter. The literature on the subject is rich and varied. See as one of the most recent publications in this domain Extra and Gorter 2001. Also, May 2001.

[9] In our context, I have often quoted the following gem delivered by one of the leading lights of the South African oppressed at the beginning of the 20th century. Dr Abdullah Abdurahman, in 1902, in reference to the language question in the evolving Union of South Africa, had this to say among other things:

> The question naturally arises which is to be the national language. Shall it be the degraded forms of a literary language, a vulgar patois; or shall it be that language which Macaulay says is "In force, in richness, in aptitude for all the highest purposes of the poet, the philosopher, and the orator inferior to the tongue of Greece alone?" Shall it be the language of the "Kombuis" [kitchen, NA] or the language of Tennyson? That is, shall it be the Taal [Afrikaans, NA] or English?....
> (Cited in Alexander 1989:29)

[10] "Bilingual" is used as a term of convenience and in order not to complicate the argument in detail. In reality, the term implies multilingual systems in countries such as ours where, in some parts, all 11 official languages are used regularly and widely.

[11] In the case of our own continent, Africa, we could almost add the category "continental". The assertion is certainly true of most of sub-Saharan Africa.

[12] See Bloch 1997

[13] Ironically, the multilingual proficiency of African, and other elites, given the global importance of especially English, is one of their most valuable skills, provided that they are used in order to widen the

circles of the beneficiaries of the knowledge society and not, as at present in most cases, to effect "elite closure".

[14] Writing in the Indian context, Pattanayak (1998:25) formulates this phenomenon most elegantly:

> The argument whether a language has to be developed to be used or used to be developed goes on adinfinitum (sic). In the meantime English the super colonial language, goes on introducing (being introduced NA) into newer domains. Its intrusion is then cited as the reason for further support.

[15] "There is a definite social relation between men (sic), that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 1983:77)

[16] This is a typical view, one which I am repeatedly asked to respond to. The irony of the fact that in most cases, the terms referred to are not "English" in their immediate origin escapes those who make the point.

[17] Ngugi's views about the cultural and political impact of the hegemony of the colonial languages have been attacked for alleged "linguistic determinism", i.e., as deriving from a (very) strong definition of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (see Mazrui and Mazrui 1998:53-55). In my view, a careful reading of Ngugi's work as well as his professional practice refutes this construction.

[18] In the Philippines debate, Sibayan (1999:448-450) distinguishes between what he calls "popular modernisation" and "intellectual modernisation". The former refers to the fact that the local languages are kept up to date for purposes of the electronic and popular print media. It is in the latter respect that the role of the tertiary institutions becomes critical. Their task can be said to be that of enhancing the intertranslatability of the African languages in as many of "the controlling domains of language" as possible.

[19] Brigitta and Thomas Busch drew my attention to this point.