

**Not even colonial born:  
England, the English and the problem of education in South Africa**

**The Percy Baneshik Memorial Lecture  
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**(The first cricket match at Newlands in 1888 was between two teams called Mother Country and Colonial Born)**

1. My first consciousness of English was at the hands of the local bubby, as we called the Indian shopkeeper on the Cape Flats, a man who was neither white nor English. I could not have been more than 6 or 7 years old when my mother sent me to the shop to buy something. I will never forget the response from behind the elevated counter. The bubby called his relative from the room at the back of the shop and said this in Afrikaans: “kom kyk; die kaffir praat Engels” (come and look; this *kaffir* speaks English.) It would take a few years before I grasped the full devastation of that sentence on my sense of self. The two things—*kaffir* and English—simply did not belong together. Since that day I could not easily separate the language English and the English.
2. It was however a combination of the English missionaries in our evangelical church (with its roots in the Plymouth Brethren) and my father’s experience as a domestic worker (at one stage of his life) in the home of English madams from Rondebosch that really hardened my attitudes towards the English. The settled missionaries from England (as well as Scotland and Ireland) for their utter hypocrisy in selling salvation among the natives while living segregated, privileged lives that they would not enjoy in their motherland. The English madams for destroying my father’s sense of equality and authority, leaving within him a deep sense of racial inferiority.

3. Somehow my English-speaking father and my Afrikaans-speaking mother decided to raise their children in English; hidings, however, were in Afrikaans. We attended classes in English from school to university. I suspect that this calculation on the part of my parents had two unspoken logics to it; the logic of economics (your chances of upward mobility) and the logic of politics (the language of the oppressor).
4. And so I grew up with two inheritances. The ability to speak and write and fight in the English language, on the one hand, and a deep suspicion of the English as racial hypocrites whose liberal pretence helped them escape the harsher criticism of apartheid reserved for white Afrikaans speakers.
5. I raise these biographical encounters with English, and the English, to in part address the dilemmas of the politics of language in both school and university education today.
6. Black parents prefer to have their children study in English. No matter what politicians might say about indigenous education, or PANSALB about language rights, black parents make the correct calculation that the entire economy is organised on English terms and therefore the chances of success are much greater in the colonial language.
7. This by the way is something that Afrikaans language activists cannot understand as they try to bring the non-English languages under one political umbrella in what is a very superficial scheme to advance the one other language that enjoyed status and funding as official language for decades under apartheid, Afrikaans.
8. There is another reason why English is the language of choice in school. It is that the indigenous languages are so poorly taught. This is where a major miscalculation occurs on the part of language activists: simply learning in your mother tongue is absolutely no guarantee of improved

learning gains in school as the disastrous ANA (the annual national assessments) results show year on year. The problem is not the language of instruction it is the quality of teaching, the knowledge of curriculum, and the stability of the school.

9. Here then is one major solution to the long-term resolution of the crisis in education: instruct every teacher and every child in English from the first day of school rather than add to the burden of poor instruction in the mother-tongue in the foundation years to the trauma of transition to English later on. Countries like Zimbabwe made that choice early on and that is one reason why their students perform so much better in South African universities.
10. Now I am a realist in political terms. I understand that the symbolism of supporting indigenous languages has a political value beyond the kind of pragmatic reasoning that I have indulged so far. And so under the current government this is not likely to change—public allegiance to indigenous languages and private choices of study in English.
11. There is another hypocrisy at play here. Black elites trumpeting the value of indigenous languages in schools while their own children attend middle class private and public schools in English. (This of course is not dissimilar to black unionists disrupting the schools of the poor while their own children study in former white schools)
12. At universities with dual language policies, like the UFS, black students make a very different argument for having all classes in English. They see their choice of English as a trade-off that demands a similar give-and-take from Afrikaans-speaking students. In other words, let the Afrikaans students give-up Afrikaans just as we gave up Setswana or isiZulu and let us all learn in English, the common factor in our educational experience. There is, by the way, another reason for this kind of bargaining—a deep suspicion on the part of black students that

Afrikaans-speaking students get access to examinable knowledge in ways that they do not by virtue of being taught in the language of the lecturer i.e. Afrikaans.

13. There is a fascinating revolution underway with respect to language usage in everyday life on a university campus like the UFS: there is no discernible tension, anymore, about using English only in meetings of residences and other public meetings where all students (and staff) are in one place. That hard core resistance to English, on the one hand, or the unwillingness to engage in English because of genuine difficulties of expression on the part of Afrikaans speakers, is mostly something of the past.
14. I suspect that more and more classes will remain in English and Afrikaans as dual medium tracks while common room meetings of students will be in English only—without any need for political statement or policy announcement.
15. Why is this happening? Here there is an important lesson for language relations in our country, or in any country. We sorted out the human (race) relations before we sorted out the language relations. That is, by bringing black and white students into communion as human beings, and by transforming the learning commons (especially in the residences), the hard lines around rival languages—English and Afrikaans—started to dissolve. Put somewhat differently, language differences are in and of themselves not contentious; it is of course the mobilization of languages (or any other cultural assets) for political purposes that constitute the problem.
16. This is why Afrikaans-exclusive or even Afrikaans-dominant white schools and universities represent a serious threat to race relations in South Africa. You simply cannot prepare young people for dealing with the scars of our violent past without creating optimal opportunities in the educational environment for living and learning

together. In other words, breaking the transmission line for the intergenerational transfer of bitter knowledge (*Knowledge in the Blood*) is crucial for the building of an inclusive democracy.

17. What does this mean for English? Quite simply, it is English and not Afrikaans that could be the “*taal van versoening*” for it lays the foundation for a common language that then enables encounters in Afrikaans and our other indigenous languages. But this does not happen automatically; it can only be a consequence of a purposeful pedagogical and political intervention that brings black and white students into a learning commons.
18. The example of *Huis Koos* is instructive:
  - 18.1 the photograph
  - 18.2 the song
19. This does not mean the end of Afrikaans, as the *taal* doomsayers would have us believe for the mistake we make is to insist that ALL spaces be Afrikaans-present when in fact lectures, church meetings and peer-group meetings could very well be in Afrikaans or Sesotho, for example. What English does is level the playing fields in the historically Afrikaans universities for common engagement.
20. The problem with taking on English as the language of common engagement is that it leaves untouched the questions we should be asking about English as a political culture in South Africa past and present. This is why universities like UCT sit atop the hill seldom subject to the same incisive criticisms made of the historically Afrikaans universities for their complicity under and after apartheid in retaining powerful white English cultures which both exclude and alienate black South Africans from the common engagement.

21. What are the features of this political culture—*that collection of values, attitudes, beliefs and practices*—that exclude and alienate within English South African society and universities in particular?
- 21.1 the race and class-based system of exclusion that keeps poor black students out.
- 21.2 the tortured arguments about “standards” that in consequence retains a strong class and race preference within the student body (this is not an argument about standards per se; it is about its application in exclusive terms)—Judge Dennis Davis in this room a few nights ago recalling his conversation with the Vice-Chancellor: “if we let them in, they might fail, and the stereotype is reinforced.”
- 21.3 the very high costs of pursuing a degree compared to most universities effectively sealing entry from most qualifying poor students
- 21.4 the dominant institutional cultures which are highly elitist, cold, aloof and removed from the daily struggles of the poor in the townships and from the embrace of “the stranger in the midst.” *English is still the only language I know of that can make you feel small and excluded without uttering a word.*
- 21.5 the pretence of excellence when what is on offer, in the words of Professor Bongani Mayosi, is actually quite mediocre in parts.
- 21.6 the use of high-English in ways that completely render the familiar strange and “out of the hands” or “beyond the reach” of the native
- 21.7 the retreat into complex theory and, in particular, English and European theory, normalizing the postcolonial reference point as the motherland

21.8 the body language—cold, erect, frowning, distant, judgmental, cynical, didactic and formal—which alienates and holds at a distance the approaching native; in another context I mentioned as one other aspect of English political culture *the inability to give an unconditional compliment.*

22. All languages of course hobble under the burden of their colonial and apartheid histories, whether as oppressor or oppressed languages. But while Afrikaans has, rightly, been the target of political ridicule, English and the English continue to labour under what Herman Giliomee famously called “the illusion of innocence.”

23. So what does the transformation of English (and the English) look like?

23.1 it starts with the building of an English competent citizenry that can “speak back” on the terms of the language itself (much the same as Richard Rive or Imraan Coovadia or Eskia’ Mphahlele did with the colonial language)

23.2 this means a school system that introduces English as early as possible, ideally in the Foundation Phase, with competent teachers in classrooms rich in English language-based learning materials

23.3 this means making English a compulsory language course for all students to ensure across-the-board competences in the language together with other kinds of co-curricular activities that strengthen language usage

23.4 this means open-campus discussions on English political culture and history that removes pretences of innocence and allows for open, direct conversations about cultural inclusion and exclusion through English