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The State of French in Lesotho: local "ownership" as the only viable way forward

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Abstract

It is common cause that French has a unique place in Sotho culture compared to its place in the cultures of fellow SADC countries. But this language and culture, to which Lesotho owes, among other things, the Sesotho orthography, are slowly but surely vanishing from the landscape of modern Lesotho where French now seems to be the preserve of private or "international" schools. This paper explores the need for indigenous Basotho, the vast majority of whom attend government-run schools, to study French. It goes further to propose possible changes to the national language policy and schools curriculum that will ensure that French is treated like any other subject in Lesotho's schools.

Introduction

The majority of Lesotho schools do not offer French or any other foreign language as a subject. In fact, it appears only private schools offer French in Lesotho, leading to the French Department at the National University of Lesotho having difficulties finding suitable schools for three students going on teaching practice in 2007 (Manyawu, 2007). This is clearly a policy as well as a curriculum issue as it can no longer be argued in any modern society that foreign language education is a luxury. On the contrary, Mankolo (Mankolo, 2006: 1) argues that globalization requires the adaptation of educational content to meet both personal and national demands.

Debate on language policy in Lesotho ignores the teaching of foreign languages. This phenomenon is not unique to Lesotho. Researchers have made similar observations concerning countries like Kenya (Mulinga, 2006). In fact, in countries like Zimbabwe, the pressing need to integrate Blacks into the economic mainstream saw school authorities compelled to offer new technical subjects focused on the immediate developmental needs of the nation. This paper will attempt to show why and how French should be accommodated in both the national language policy as well as the schools curriculum in Lesotho.

French and Language policy issues in Lesotho

In Lesotho, the dust seems to be settling on the language policy front. This is hardly surprising given that the country celebrated its fortieth independence anniversary in 2006. What is striking is that Sesotho seems to have an upper hand over English in a diglottic situation. While, officially, Sesotho is the language of instruction for the first four years of primary education, in reality it competes with English well beyond those initial four years. It is also the favourite medium of verbal business communication. In some written business communication, the terms *Ntate* and *Mmē*, for instance, appear to have replaced Mr. and Mrs. in texts otherwise

written in English. This is the case in some memos and minutes of meetings at the National University of Lesotho. The imperatives of linguistic unification and status enhancement of the national language are, by and large, attained in Lesotho. I, therefore, think that it is time that policy makers considered the place and role of French in the local education system. Their major task must be to determine how individuals and the nation at large can benefit from the presence of this language in Lesotho

My argument for developing the teaching of French in Lesotho is based on my (Manyawu, 2007) observation that the relationship between Lesotho and the French language and culture is not only unique but also deep-rooted. This state of affairs can best be described through the notion of "xénité" (foreignness or strangeness), which stipulates that the smaller the cultural and economic distance separating prospective language learners from the target language the more likely prospective learners are to seek to learn it and vice-versa (Dabène, 1994). The notion of "xénité" builds on the earlier notion of practical utility or utility value.

The Practical Utility of a Foreign Language

The practical utility of a language defines the benefits a learner gains from his/her linguistic knowledge in the more or less long term (Bogaards, 1991). For instance, in Lesotho, English is a prerequisite for study at a tertiary level institution such as NUL. This notion has implications for the learner's attitude (interest and personal investment in the learning process) towards the target language as well as the approach s/he may favour to learn it.

While the notion of practical utility is helpful, it only suggests the possible origins of that utility or lack of it. It also assumes that every prospective foreign language learner is mature and has the power to choose what s/he learns. This is not always the case for school children, for instance. On the other hand, relatively high first year intakes in recent years in the French Department at NUL suggest that adult students have an idea of the importance of French in their careers.

Distance as a Factor in Language Policy Design

In an officially bilingual country such as Lesotho, every individual must learn the national language, Sesotho, as well as the official language, English. Since English is already, for many, akin to a foreign language (Chimhundu, 2002), learning French can seem quite onerous for most Basotho school children. Reasons most frequently cited by those opting not to learn French include:

- a) the difficulty of the language (“It’s so different from Sesotho and English.”);
- b) its apparent “uselessness” (“What will I do with it?”); and
- c) lack of people to converse with in French (“Where will I use it?”).

Such statements, albeit mostly stereotyped, warrant a review of the environment in which the language is learnt.

The conditions in which the French language is learnt in Lesotho can best be qualified as “exolinguistic” (Dabène, 1994). For Dabène, an exolinguistic situation is one in which the target language is removed from the learner’s universe and where the institutional contact that the learner has with it (target language) is accompanied by no meaningful extra-institutional acquisition (Dabène, 1994). This is the very essence of the adjective “foreign” in the term “foreign language”.

Dabène uses the notion of distance to define what she terms various degrees in the foreignness (*xénité*) of languages¹. She describes three different types of distance that define the foreignness of a so-called foreign language.

a. Material distance:

This is geographical separation, which affects even relations that teachers have with the countries whose language they teach. Lesotho is about 3000km from the nearest French-speaking country (DRC), a country with which it actually has no official

¹ « degrés dans la xénité des langues »

arrangement concerning the teaching/ learning of the French language. The only bilateral agreement Lesotho has with another country concerning French on Lesotho soil is that which it has with France, a country about 12000km away whose diplomatic presence in Lesotho is at consular level. Given that Lesotho is totally surrounded by English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africa, any international contact French teachers may have with other speakers of French appears to be limited to interacting with colleagues in neighbouring South Africa, an unfavourable situation that would be tempered by the presence of the thriving and committed Alliance Française of Maseru, which is manned in part by personnel from France. The Alliance Française actually has an open invitation to all teachers of French and other "friends" of the French language and culture ("les Francophiles") to use their premises as a socio-cultural venue and library.

b. Cultural distance:

Divergences of a cultural nature can take the form of differences in relational practices and in value systems prevailing in the societies or the educational systems that they engender (ibid.). Such divergences can actually engender antipathetic attitudes towards a given language, its speakers or culture. Of all Southern African countries, Lesotho has probably the most peculiar cultural bond with the francophone world. The French language and culture have more significant links with Lesotho than with any other Southern African country outside South Africa. This is mainly due to the fact that the country was evangelized by protestant Franco-Canadian missionaries in the early part of the 19th century. The contribution of these missionaries to Sesotho culture is quite significant. Their most telling impact is in the linguistic domain where they laid the foundation of the linguistic unity of Lesotho through their transcription of Sesotho and the translation of the Bible into Sesotho (Castel, 1988). By so doing, they imposed the Sesotho language as the undisputed medium of national communication in the country once and for all. Literary works by Basotho writers such as Thomas Mofolo ("Chaka"), Edouard Motsamai ("Mehla ea

Malimo”) and James Machobane (“Mahaheng a Matšo”) have been translated into French. Franco-Canadian culture also contributed to moulding the religious face of modern Lesotho. Pius XII College, ancestor of the National University, has a Franco-Canadian past (*NUL 2006-2007 Calendar*, 2006), and so do numerous schools, missions, churches and hospitals throughout the country. This positive cultural contribution has engendered positive sentimental value for French people in Lesotho. Among the Whites (“Makhooa” in Sesotho) present in Lesotho, the French are called by a special name, “MaFora” and their country is known by the name “Fora”.

The question is: what is the place accorded these past cultural links in present-day Lesotho? The past certainly does not appear to have persuaded independent Lesotho’s policy makers to give greater space in the curriculum to the French language than it enjoys in other SADC countries.

British colonization, however, militated against further development of the links between the Basotho and French culture and language in the education system. There were two curricula in the protectorate, one for the Whites and the other for the Blacks. (The former remain as private or “international” schools.) French featured in the White schools curriculum but had virtually no place in Black schools. Aims and content of the subject were literally transplanted from Europe. Foreign language education had a strong bias towards culture primarily because white youths learnt French in order to use it in their international travels to France and/or Canada (Quebec), not in Lesotho. The result of this bias was very clear in the Cambridge “A” Level syllabus, which was dominated by the study of French literature. The study of African writers or writers from anywhere else outside France was neglected.

French, as a subject, does not feature prominently, if at all, in the academic tradition of the majority of the black actors involved today in the teaching/ learning of French: various bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education, teachers, learners and parents. Further, research has shown that, in the post-colonial climate where priority is on the construction of an “indigenous African” identity,

European foreign languages lose even more of their value in the eyes of Blacks (cf. Dabène, 1994: 33, on a similar situation in Nigeria).

c. Structural/ linguistic distance:

These are differences noted in the two linguistic systems that the foreign language learner has to handle: that of his mother/ first language (and any other previously acquired languages) as well as that of the target language. I am not aware of any contrastive study carried out in Lesotho between Sesotho and French. I note, however, major differences in all areas of the linguistic system, be they phonetic, phonological, syntactical or lexical. There are nevertheless peculiar similarities in the phonetic domain. For instance, the sound [R] as in [Roma] is identical to the Parisian [R] and quite different from the [r] generally noted in most other Bantu languages. Similarities of a lexical nature also exist. For instance, the Sesotho word "*Mmē*" is identical (save for the accent on the *ē*) in writing to the French abbreviation of the word "*Madame*". The two words share the same meaning (Mrs./ Madam) and differ only in that the Sesotho "*Mmē*" also means "mother" while the French *Mme/ Madame* does not. In terms of orthography, Lesotho's Sesotho owes its system of accents to French orthography. A study in this area is likely to reveal more contributions of the French language to Sesotho and how they have been integrated into the latter.

"Ownership" of French through inclusion in the National Language Policy

Lesotho can ill afford to allow a language as important as French to exist for centuries within her borders without claiming "ownership" of it. An intergovernmental conference on language policies in Africa, held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1998, and attended by Lesotho, set out to :

“... define prospects for the political and technical management of the African linguistic context, with the main outcome expected being a mutually agreed reference framework to be used by each African state to set out a clear and comprehensive national language policy indicating clearly the statuses and functions of the languages in use and the measures proposed to implement that policy.” (Chimhundu, 2002).

While French prominently figures in Lesotho’s “linguistic context”, this statement effectively relegates it to an undefined and nebulous socio-economic space in the country. A direct result of such an approach is that little official thought is given to French and resources for its development are scarce, if at all they exist. In fact, French continues to be taught in the few institutions referred to above mostly because of the financial and material backing of France. The French Consulate’s commitment to institutions teaching French in Lesotho is demonstrated most eloquently by the financial support it has given to the NUL French Department over the years. It also offers bursaries – albeit few and far between – that are meant to entice local youths to study French. With the independence of South Africa, the French Government’s support for the teaching of French in Lesotho has tended to diminish as more focus is put on South African institutions.

History has, however, shown that it is possible for African governments to deliberately move to teach foreign languages once political and economic benefits for the country have been clearly defined. This is the case of Zimbabwe, which recently introduced the teaching of Chinese language and culture at the University of Zimbabwe in support of the state’s “Look East” economic policy that seeks to develop relations with Asian countries (*The Zimbabwe Standard*, 22 January 2006). “Zimbabwe’s largest university will soon begin teaching Chinese, in the latest example of increased ties between the Beijing and Harare governments”). Studying a similar situation in Kenya, Damien Mulinga argues that the French language in Southern and Eastern Africa would benefit a great deal

from a stronger presence of French businesses in the region (Mulinga, 2006). Likewise, the government of Lesotho could actively seek to lure French and Francophone investors using its "Franco-Canadian heritage" as an attraction.

At another pan-African language policy development workshop at which Lesotho was represented, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) concluded that, "No language policy can be dissociated from economic, social and cultural realities, and that education must allow for a broadening of life's opportunities" (www.adeanet.org/newsletter/Vol8No4/en-n8v4-2, 16 March, 2001). The peculiar and lasting contribution of French culture to nation building and language development in Lesotho is something that needs to be recognized and documented. The government should also consider the active role played over the years by the French government in the development of French as a subject in the country. Further, a key foreign language like French mastered by key players in public administration and business is a resource that would definitely broaden opportunities for Basotho as individuals and Lesotho as a country.

A brief statement officially highlighting the historic and unique contribution of Francophone people to local culture could be added to the national language policy of Lesotho. The policy could go on to describe the role that French can play in the future development of the country. This would serve as a useful and unifying guide for the nation's curriculum developers and education administrators. There is no escaping the reality that ADEA recognizes: "Political will lies at the heart of any reform effort" (*ibid.*). A policy statement is a condition sine qua non since administrators and implementers take their cue from policy makers. The absence or ambiguity of a policy statement on French may easily be construed as official discouragement, particularly in a country where central government plays a preponderant role in education.

French as an Optional Subject on the Curriculum

Among factors that go into formulating a curriculum is the notion of defining "ideals" to pass on to the younger generation. "The curriculum is the most obvious and direct means in the whole educational organization of transmitting national and community ideals from the older to the younger generation." (Rupert, 1976: 113) While newly independent nations' ideals may leave little room for European foreign languages (which, after all, are for some a sore reminder of colonialism), mature independent nations must realize the importance of these languages in their long-term goals. Such countries must take note of the international dispensation of globalization where nations, especially developing ones, can ill afford the luxury of an introverted curriculum. Countries like Lesotho must aggressively seek to network with institutions in developed nations in order to survive and prosper.

However, even when convinced of the need to introduce French, curriculum designers could still find it difficult to accommodate French on an often-overloaded school curriculum. A tried and tested, albeit controversial, curriculum choice that Lesotho can consider is to initially introduce French in schools as a means of differentiation through which the nation's 'elite' (business leaders, government leaders, diplomats, etc.) is defined. A system of "streams" could be developed where pupils are placed in classes according to their performance. "In secondary education differentiation takes place by means of a system of optional subjects and here again the four streams are taken into account" (Rupert, 1976: 123). Over and above a common curriculum of "core" subjects considered essential for any youth, selected subjects would be made available only to certain streams. For instance, the "top" stream could take French over and above the core load of subjects available to all other streams.

Planners would also have to decide the objectives and content to be covered depending on the intended end use of the target language. They could, for instance, debate whether or not the

“Communicative Approach” is preferable to other foreign language teaching approaches in Lesotho.

Benefits for Lesotho

Lesotho is a relatively poor developing country massively dependant on its more industrialized neighbour, South Africa, whose mines employ up to 35% of Lesotho’s male adults of working age. Lesotho’s most urgent need is, therefore, economic development. A critical mass of French-speaking Basotho young men and women could help Lesotho realize this goal in the following sectors:

- a) **Tourism:** Lesotho is an attractive tourist destination, thanks largely to its climate (snow in winter with even a possibility of skiing), its mountainous terrain and its peaceful atmosphere. The influx of tourists from French-speaking countries could be increased by the guaranteed presence of competent French-speaking tourist guides and travel agents in the country. These could be employed both by the government ministry in charge of tourism and private sector players.
- b) **Business:** The confidence of investors from French-speaking countries could be boosted by the knowledge that they would be aided by competent local translators and interpreters in their interaction with local players in business instead of having to bring expensive translators from outside Lesotho. The very presence of French-speaking locals in Lesotho, added to the historic Francophone influence in this country, could be an attraction on its own for businesses from Francophone countries.
- c) **Education:** The French, mostly through the Alliance Française of Maseru, are already active in the local education sector. The French Department at NUL was launched by French experts and all local staff in the French

Department were trained in France and/ or Canada. If the government were to take such measures as suggested above, the French government and/ or the Canadians could see in them committed partners, not only in the teaching of French but also in the diffusion of French and Francophone cultures. The French and/ or Canadians could increase their commitment to the teaching of French through the provision of scholarships for future teachers, guides, translators, etc. They could also help source teaching materials and even collaborate in the development of teaching resources (eg. textbooks) that respond more directly to local curriculum objectives and the needs of learners in this part of the world.

- d) Research: Lesotho is endowed with invaluable archival resources at French or Canadian-built institutions such as Morija. These are of great interest to historians, anthropologists, linguists and other academics. Concerted efforts could and should be made to make researchers in the Francophone world aware of the existence of such resources and the institutions that house them. This could increase French-speaking countries' interest in Lesotho and make the learning of the French language even more pertinent. The National University of Lesotho, through its French Department, could spearhead such a strategy on behalf of the Ministry of Education. As I write, one member of the French Department at NUL is working on a doctoral thesis based on the writings of sub-Saharan Africa's first indigenous language novelist, Thomas Mofolo, which were translated into French by missionaries working at Morija. Her research director is a Professor at the world-famous *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS) in Paris, France.
- e) Culture: Language is inseparable from culture. Cultures exist in order to achieve two fundamental functions. First, a culture serves to identify a people by distinguishing it from other peoples. Secondly, culture can draw different peoples

together. It can, therefore, be argued that greater interest by the Basotho in French will translate into greater appreciation of the French and Francophone peoples. Such opening up to the outside world will broaden the Basotho youths' horizons and increase their options in life, which is a curriculum need. Once the Basotho reach out to the Francophone world, chances are the latter will show more interest in Lesotho and the Basotho people. The French government could also feel encouraged to invest more in cultural projects of benefit to both countries. The annual Harare Festival of the Arts in Zimbabwe, which benefits a lot of local artistes as well as others from Francophone countries, is a good example of such opportunities (Manyawu, 2007).

Conclusion

There is a palpable presence of French culture in Lesotho. The French language is part of the national heritage of modern Lesotho. The Basotho people look back at the historical and historic contribution of the "MaFora" to their country's development with a touch of fond nostalgia. It can, therefore, be suggested that, in Lesotho, the term "foreign", as in foreign language, should be used more to qualify the conditions in which French is learnt than to qualify its strangeness. Through her Consulate and the Alliance Française, France remains committed to working with Lesotho to develop the teaching of French in the country to the mutual benefit of all stakeholders. However, so long as the subject depends uniquely on foreign sponsorship, its future will remain precarious. Lesotho needs to – and can – assume "ownership" of French by treating it like all other subjects offered in the country's educational institutions. There are ways in which Lesotho can maximize her benefits from historical links with French culture. A clear statement defining the place and role of French in modern Lesotho as well as a well-studied positioning on the national

curriculum are at the heart of such a strategy. This could be based in part on a survey of the role and place of French in Lesotho as perceived by various stakeholders in the country.

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