Polyglot Nation by Alex Pepe

South Africa is a nation with a rich, expansive, and turbulent history. Even today, the nation at the tip of the African continent is in a constant bustle, moving forward in leaps and bounds in realms that none thought possible a quarter of a century ago. While much attention is paid to the racial history of the country, one can easily overlook the details that emerge about the country itself.

Picture for a moment a beautiful country united by a ferociously difficult past that was brought together by a single man, whose image and ideas transcended generations and languages. In fact, Nelson Mandela, South Africa's most primary figure of the last twenty years, spoke four languages according to the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. Throughout the entire period of apartheid, the nation had to work around a language barrier impossibly wide, and today the same barrier exists, for South Africa has eleven official spoken languages (English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Swati, Ndebele), and a twelfth official language in South African Sign Language.

The number is a baffling one. How can any one nation expect to operate on a day to day basis if one needs to carry around a Rosetta Stone to understand each other, especially within Johannesburg, the largest city in South Africa, where all eleven languages are spoken? How can a country with so many languages be run? How can citizens interface with their government? How can businesses hope to sell products to the people of a modern-day Babylon? The answer is a rather simple one, and it took a trip to the country itself to glean it; most citizens of South Africa are polyglots. The average citizen that I interacted with in my South African experience can speak upwards of five or six languages.

The idea of learning even one language outside of one's native tongue is daunting, let alone five or six. But that's precisely the problem facing South African natives; their native tongue is one of many in the same country. The country should be virtually impossible to live in due to all of the

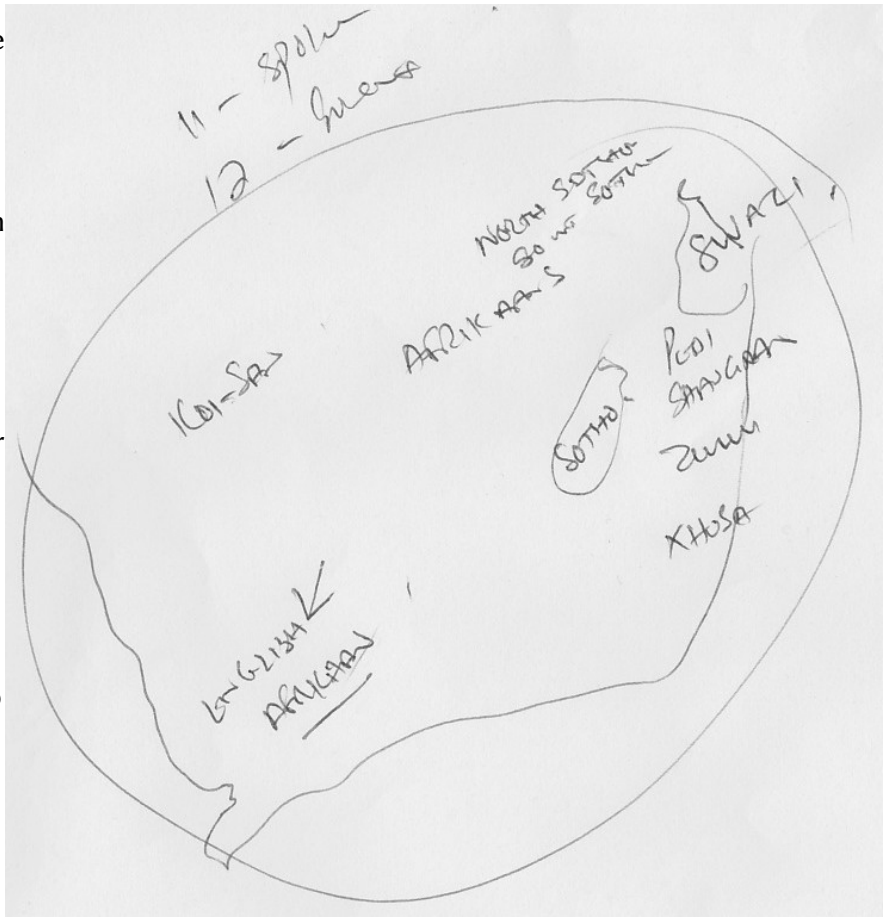
language barriers; however, the main mediating language that the vast majority of South Africans speak fluently or must learn is English for professional, commercial, financial, and administrative reasons.

Regarding the latter reason, the post-apartheid government is fully aware of the lingual conundrum. For the most part, the government leaves it up to their constituents to communicate amongst themselves in whatever language they choose (which is a right protected by the constitution of South Africa, however a parent can request their child to be instructed in any of the twelve languages in school according to the *National Education Policy Act of 1996*). The government itself however operates officially with English and South African Sign Language (SASL) according to the *South African Languages Bill*, with the only government program that utilizes any of the other languages being the translator's booth in the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg on the off chance a plaintiff or defendant does not speak English.

The government's solution to the communication conundrum is a rather simple one as well: upon order of Parliament and published on Parliament's web publication, all government documents are written in a form of simplified English known as "plain language" in order for even rudimentary English speakers to participate in government. This can be seen as an effective cost-saving measure in comparison to a country like Canada, which spends $2.4 billion dollars per year on translations between French and English in order to communicate properly with Quebec according to a 2012 Fraser Institute Study. There is no similar number in existence in South Africa, and considering the sheer number of languages that South Africa has to contend with, the number would be astronomical if it did exist.

Indeed, while citizens can interface with their government rather easily due to the plain language of its documents, actual interaction with fellow South Africans is a much different matter. As I stated before, the government does not regulate this, and businesses are allowed to publish literature in any of the eleven languages at their choosing. Wealthy businesses such as media organizations opt to publish media in all eleven languages, as a representative of Media24 put it, "by courtesy." They recognize their country's rich linguistic heritage and choose to participate in it as much as they can. Smaller businesses however are forced to publish only in English, for the cost of publishing in all eleven is an exorbitant one.

Many of the tour guides and friendly faces that I had the pleasure of speaking to around the country follow the same mindset as Media24: learning as many languages as one can is essential if one wants to communicate with as many people as possible. "It just makes things easier" is what one tour guide said, a man who knows five languages. He went on to say that if you can connect with someone in their own language rather than try to make them speak one you are more comfortable in, "it makes their day."



Truly then, cultural representation is of maximum importance in South Africa, and in order to make one feel as though they are represented, talking to them on their own level and in their own language goes a long way.

One particularly snarky Mohammed Khan, owner of the tourism company Tribal Meetings, agreed with this sentiment in his own way; "It's a total waste of time" he quipped sarcastically, while drawing me a map of South Africa, pointing out the general regions of where each of the eleven languages is mainly spoken. MK, who knows six of the eleven spoken languages as well as SASL, is a person who particularly benefits from the knowledge of more than simple English. In order to set up working relationships with people around the country, he must be able to speak as many languages as possible. This is a highly effective business method, for MK has working relationships with many people across the country who speak many different languages.

All of the people I met in South Africa were always willing to give me at least a word or two in their languages; most of them gave me a lesson in a language called Xhosa. This language is spoken mostly in the Eastern Cape of Cape Town, and is particularly peculiar to Americans because this is the African language that is often mocked by those ignorant of its actual existence as "that language with the clicks." Indeed, this IS that language, and though I cannot begin to guess how to spell some of the words are spelled, I was told (by more than one friendly South African) how to pronounce the "Q" "C" and "X" clicks of the language. It was impressed upon me by one of them the great importance of distinguishing clicks, for a single wrong click could change the entire meaning of the word.

These free language lessons were the result of us, in the modern day, being in a South Africa that is 20 years removed from the turbulence of apartheid. Back in those days, language was much more political and secularized. Ntsiki Biyela, the resident winemaker of Stellekaya Wineries put this into perspective for both myself and the rest of my group as we sipped warm, full bodied red wines late on a somniferous summer evening. Ms. Biyela was educated in the art of winemaking at Stellenbosch University in Cape Town, which was a feat of extreme difficulty for her because she was a Xhosa-speaking black girl in an all-male white university that taught and predominantly spoke in Afrikaans, another of South Africa's eleven languages (predominantly spoken by whites). As a result of this, Ms. Biyela was forced to learn the language in order to be educated, and while she did so, the history of Afrikaans in apartheid South Africa has a bloody history thicker than red wine.

On June 16th, 1976, racial tensions came to a head as a result of a piece of legislation regarding language. The *Afrikaans Medium Decree of 1974* was a piece of legislation passed by the apartheid government that mandated the instruction of all subjects in schools to be given purely in

the Afrikaans language. This was met with high amounts of resentment from blacks all across the country, for Afrikaans was seen as a white man's language, or the language of their oppressors. Tensions built until a student protest was arranged on that day in June, two years after the passage of the act. The protest was peaceful initially, but turned violent as a result of police intervention and miscommunication, resulting in the deaths of up to 700 students.

The Soweto Uprising as it came to be called had sweeping effects on the political landscape of South Africa, many considering it to be the turning point on the history of apartheid. The Uprising completely tarnished South Africa's international reputation, smearing the name of apartheid upon the international community and causing the UN to impose hefty sanctions upon the nation. The South African Rand devalued at a rapid pace, plunging the economy into a deep recession. The African National Congress political party, the very same party Nelson Mandela would lead the country with 20 years later, gained massive amounts of popularity by making an example of the Uprising overseas and in-country as a reason for international and intranational action against the apartheid era government.

That however was 40 years ago; the South Africa of today has a widely accepted view of all languages, but Afrikaans is still generally known and regarded as a white language. I however am of the opinion that because of Ms Ntsiki Biyela's experience as well as another experience, the Soweto Uprising did not precisely work as a means of true and lasting cultural and political change in regards to the root of the problem that caused it. The aforementioned other experience was my visit to Kalksteen-fontein Primary School in the Western Cape in Cape Town, where an assembly was held in honor of Rutgers visiting the school once again. As a primary school, all of these children were in the six years old range, and most of them knew very little English. Indeed, all of these children had a first language of Afrikaans. As remnants of the *Afrikaans Medium Decree of 1974*, there are still schools throughout the country (and indeed universities in Ms Biyela's case) that teach purely in Afrikaans.

This is the edge that lies beneath the

polylinguism of South Africa, for while knowledge of more than one language can open many doors, the lack of knowledge of language can close them. During our visit to the primary school, we were shepherded into a room full of a classroom of students around eight years old. When asked questions in English, they barely understood what we were saying, and what they said in response was simplified and sparse. They were clearly Afrikaans speaking children. As I mentioned before, it is a constitutional right for parents to choose which language their children are schooled in, and the results of that decision are potentially lifechanging; in choosing that these children only learn in Afrikaans, it leaves the decision of learning English and other languages purely up to the individual. While some children have the aptitude (and indeed most of the people I met in South Africa did) to learn more than one language, the fact that they are only taught a single language in a polyglot nation is quite simply a disadvantage to them. Their teachers, as native South Africans, surely know more than one language, thus it should not be a hard stretch to teach children more than one language while still in school.

In a country like South Africa, not only is being a polyglot a necessary part of everyday life, it is a necessary part of success and survival. Though considering the mental capacity necessary to hold five or six languages at a time within their brains on a daily basis, I would venture to say that South Africans already have a step up on both as members of a polyglot nation. Through a government that understands the very real possibility of being lost in translation and protects linguistic heritage, to companies who lead the nation in courteousness and encourage others to do the same, South African natives know how to talk on someone's own playing field, literally and linguistically.