

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL INCLUSION IN SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA

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South Africa has a long and rich history when it comes to language and culture. The passion for savoring this diversity can be seen in the post-apartheid media representation of the 11 official languages of the country. Although this has not always been the case, the post-apartheid policies implemented in the country have done wonders to ensure the survival of its cultural diversity. Media representation and availability of news, educational, and entertainment programs in people's mother tongue during the early 1960s and beyond have caused South Africans to be diverse and educated. This paper will explain the language-related policies currently in place in the country, look at the successes that have come from them, and examine how the government has worked with the South African Broadcasting Corporation to succeed in the goals set forth when the policies were initially instated. Through the examination and comparison of census data from 1996 and community survey data from 2016, I aim to prove that South Africa has succeeded in its goal of keeping its cultures and languages alive. Specifically, language representation in media has ensured the survival of the languages and the cultures associated with them in South Africa.

When The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa was drawn up in 1996, special considerations were implemented to accommodate all the cultures present in South Africa. Before 1996 the separatist government tried to eradicate the native languages and culture. The main tactic to achieve this goal was to completely eliminate all media representation of these native languages. According to Lekgoathi in 'You Are Listening to Radio Lebowa of the South African Broadcasting Corporation,' "Its first (radio) programmes used only the country's two official languages, Afrikaans and English and, as in other parts of colonial Africa, it was targeted specifically at white listeners" (Lekgoathi 578). This was a targeted effort to suppress the culture and language of the black South Africans. They and their way of life were viewed as less than

and savage; therefore, the government forced them to only have access to Afrikaans and English radio if they could even manage to get access. In the 1960s, the government realized that their separatist propaganda was not making it to the black townships because many people living there did not understand English and Afrikaans. This caused significant tensions and made it difficult to control the people in the townships, who were the majority of the population. Thus, Radio Bantu was created. “When, for the first time, they had access to their own language on mass radio, most North Sotho listeners embraced the new medium instead of being ‘turned off by the tone and substance of its political and cultural propaganda, especially in news and current affairs programmes’ (577). This was the spark that would later burn apartheid to the ground. Access to news and entertainment in their own language, albeit for only 30 minutes a day, created a surge in ethnic nationalism amongst black South Africans. In June of 1962, the time allocated for vernacular radio was increased to 12 hours a day (579). This extension was great for black South Africans because it allowed more people access to these stations throughout the day. By the mid-1990, the government lost its monopoly over black listeners, and the airwaves opened to allow the establishment of community radio stations (593). This marked the end of the separatist government and was part of the foundation that was laid for the beautiful rainbow nation that South Africa is today.

South Africa is unique in its multilingualism. Census data ranging from 1996, the first year South Africa was run as a Democracy, to the most recent compiled date from 2016 show the overwhelming success of the language and education policies. The year 1996 was a particularly exciting year for non-white South Africans. It was the first year the new democratic government would be in office after 45 years of the oppressive apartheid regime. At this time, the government decided to conduct a nationwide census including every South African from all

cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. The census was answered by 40.6 million citizens. It was the first to include questions on home languages and race or population group (The People of South Africa Population Census, 1996 12). The census covered about the 11 languages chosen to be the official languages of the country; these languages are as follows: Afrikaans, English, IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, SiSwati, Setswana, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga (The People of South Africa Population Census, 1996 12). The home language, or mother tongue, distribution in South Africa is represented by this graph.

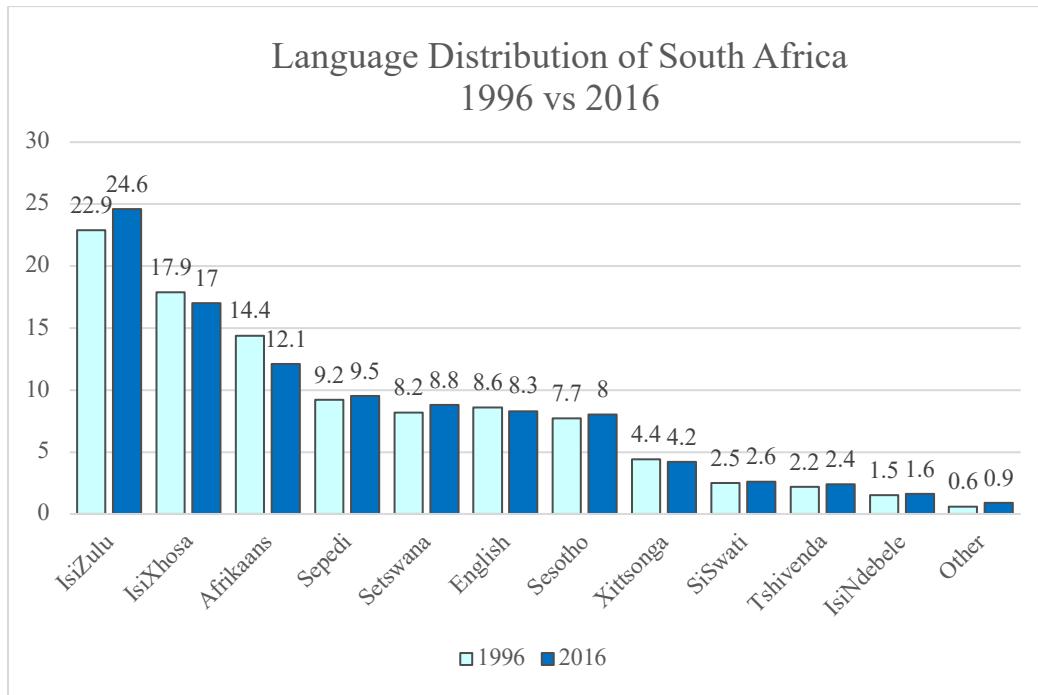


Fig.1 Home language distribution for South Africans in 1996 and 2016

Sources: (The People of South Africa Population Census, 1996)

(Community Survey 2016 in Brief).

IsiZulu has remained the most spoken language in South Africa over the 20 years between these two population surveys, and a similar pattern can be seen for the rest of the official languages; as the years have passed, the home language distribution in South Africa has stayed virtually the same. This is mainly due to the media's dedication to programming in all these languages.

One of South African media's most prevalent success stories is the South African Broadcasting Corporation, widely known as the SABC. South Africa's public broadcasters are partially funded by the government and thus have a constitutional duty to treat South Africa's 11 official languages equally. According to the current SABC editorial policy on language, "the public broadcaster has a unique responsibility to broadcast programmes that promote the development of national identity while supporting development of our languages and cultures" (Mdeni 1). The broadcasting of both radio and television programming in all the official languages is very important because it helps keep the languages relevant and aids in the teaching of the languages to new generations of speakers. Along with its acceptance of democracy, South Africa has chosen to promote its diversity and preserve it. The SABC has acknowledged that all South Africans have the right to be informed in their language of choice, and to achieve this, they have made a public commitment to provide both news and entertainment throughout South Africa in all 11 languages. "The SABC commits itself to being the voice and vision of every South African" (1). This has been evident since the declaration of the 11 official languages in South Africa, the SABC has aided notably in the preservation of not only these languages but also the cultures associated with them. Most children are introduced to the languages that they do not speak at home through radio and television, and by having this introduction so early on in life they learn to understand and respect the cultures in South Africa. The SABC has aimed to "promote understanding and acceptance of and between the linguistic and cultural groups in South Africa" (2). South Africa is a cultural Mecca and the only way we can preserve the cultural diversity in our country is to teach our children about the cultures and languages our countrymen speak and practice. In South Africa we believe that you fight hatred with education, because most hate is rooted in ignorance.

The SABC is the main source for televised entertainment in the official languages, they have three channels. There is SABC 1, which broadcasts in siSwati, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, and English, SABC 2, which broadcasts in Afrikaans, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, and English, and then lastly there is SABC 3, which broadcasts in Afrikaans and English (Nwaneri, Mann and van Niekerk 354). It is interesting to see that English is the only language that appears on all three channels. Nwaneri, Mann, and van Niekerk conducted a survey where they collected data from 50 people ranging from age 18 to 60. The survey had 15 questions asking respondents about their “attitude towards the SABC and mass media language usage” (355) and asked them to rate the statements between 1 (totally disagree) and 5 (totally agree). The 6 highest rated statements were about language importance when consuming media and whether the media is addressing language needs for all South Africans (356). This cements the need for language representation on television and radio and shows that the people think the current media is doing a good job with its representation. “The peculiar structure and history of South African society make it binding on its peoples and institutions to preserve their languages, which are vital and essential pillars of their cultures and heritage” (359). The South African media has worked hard to make sure this statement is true and continue to do its best to provide access to entertainment in all form. The constitution not only provides the right of every South African to be able to access media in their home language but also to access education in it.

The constitution of South Africa was created with the cultural diversity of the country in the forefront of the minds creating it. The Pan South African Language Board was created by the government in order to promote the use of the 11 official languages (Nwammuo and Salawu 2). This may seem like an excessive amount of languages to have marked official, in 1996 there were about 25 indigenous languages spoken (3). As a South African I can attest that at any time

when you are in public spaces in South Africa you could easily hear 4-5 different languages being spoken around you. This is the case in large part to the Language in Education policy, commonly referred to as LIEP. “This new LIEP in South Africa was aimed at uplifting the status of the indigenous languages of disadvantaged people of South Africa” (4). This in turn has caused more people to feel comfortable speaking their mother tongue in public and increases the demand for news and entertainment in these languages. While indigenous languages have become more prominent in the country, English has remained the most dominant language spoken in official circles. Of the 11 official languages English is also the most spoken and understood language globally. Most of the other languages are either only spoken in south Africa or in Africa. It is also the preferred language for digital communication and on social media.

The rise in popularity of social media has created a useful new tool for teaching English throughout South Africa. This has been particularly useful in the more rural areas where they have internet access or cellular service. In 2011 the syllabus rolled out by the department of Education strongly encouraged the use of digital technologies for teaching subjects like English (Rwodzi, de Jager and Mpofu 1). The most widely used digital technology is cellphones and therefore a useful tool to use is social media. A study conducted by Rwodzi, de Jager, and Mpofu tested this theory in a township secondary school. They found that the biggest problem faced during the study was access to smart phones and the internet (4). Townships are some of the poorest and underserved communities within South Africa. This is also why forming that sense of digital self within these communities is so sought after. “The fundamental experience of learners in the social media connection brings a sense of belonging to a network where social matters and academic issues are combined” (5). This is very attractive to teenagers who are figuring out their own identity in the real world and might be to shy or scared to ask certain

questions in person. The study concluded that participants learned “social media socialization” skills “and learning English using digital technology help learners with typing skills, editing, copying and pasting, forwarding and resolving ideological differences in a professional way” (6). Social media is just another modality for learners, internet literacy in the modern world is just as important as reading literacy in the modern world. The younger the learners are when introduced to different types of media in education the better, because our world is ever evolving.

Early childhood education plays a major role in acceptance and preservation of both language and culture. The SABC realized this and partnered with Sesame Workshop, the production company that made Sesame Street, to bring a version to the children of South Africa called Takalani Sesame. According to a graduate case study written by Tamagnan, Meredith, and Kato for the Harvard Graduate School of Education, “The program is built by a team of early childhood education experts from South Africa, in order to fit the unique country context. … For instance, Takalani reflects the multilingual society of South Africa by airing its programs in nine of the 11 recognized mother tongues” (Tamagnan, Meredith and Kato 2). This is very useful for caregivers because when children are young, they are only really introduced to their mother tongue and getting a child to focus on a program that they cannot understand is difficult. I can remember that before I was of the appropriate age to attend preschool it was very frustrating to almost exclusively have access to cartoons in English, which is a language I did not understand at the time. Takalani Sesame was one of the only children’s programs available to me in the early 2000s that used my mother tongue (8). In the early 2010s when my younger siblings were preschool aged, they had a whole channel dedicated to Afrikaans children’s programs. Takalani Sesame is also very helpful in educating children on country specific problems, like the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa. They introduced an HIV-positive character named Kami as

a vehicle for their HIV/AIDS curriculum (9). This is a big problem in the community and having the representation on Takalani Sesame is a useful tool to start the conversation around AIDS and how some of the community members might be affected by it. “Although Takalani Sesame programming targets young children, importance is placed on family relationships and support” (15). This helps young children feel more confident speaking about educational or personal problems they may be facing. The case study concludes that “mother tongue language and culture are recognized as being linked to a person, cognitively, linguistically, and emotionally” (18). Providing a source of educational entertainment content helps these kids form a good positive foundation for their personalities to grow from.

South Africa’s commitment to language representation, education, and cultural preservation has been successful in promoting diversity and fostering a sense of national identity. The efforts of the media, government, and educational institutions have played a vital role in ensuring the survival and appreciation of the country’s rich linguistic and cultural heritage. By embracing and celebrating its diverse heritage, South Africa continues to strive towards a more inclusive and united society.

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