

**Language biographies  
for multilingual learning**

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# Language biographies – approaches to multilingualism in education and linguistic research

Brigitta Busch

## Introduction – the scope of this publication

The idea for this publication emerged during the Training of Trainers in Southern Africa programme for Educators in Multilingual Education (ToTSA), offered annually by Project for the Study of Alternative Education (PRAESA) at the University of Cape Town between 2002 and 2005. During these pan-African courses participants from diverse backgrounds came together from countries with very different orientations in language policies and approaches to education, such as Burkina Faso, Mozambique, Malawi, Madagascar, Namibia, Swaziland and South Africa, and from different language backgrounds and professional and academic orientations. The heterogeneous nature of the group was a great challenge and at the same time a valuable resource. That is why we decided to work with a biographical approach, amongst others. It consisted in establishing personal language portrayals, writing and discussing personal experiences with literacy, school and language learning and in working on language biographies. Several students chose to write longer or full language autobiographies enhanced by interviews with interlocutors from within their own communication network.

This publication aims at contributing to a growing corpus of academic literature that foregrounds the learner perspective in literacy and language learning and emphasizes emotional dispositions and real and imagined belongings to communities of practice. Being aware that the significance of personal stories of language learning is only beginning to emerge in applied linguistics research and that ‘first-person accounts on language learning have always been received with suspicion, deemed incomplete, biased, unreliable or naïve’ (Kingtoner 2004:220), we would like to make our experiences with a biographical approach available also to teachers and teacher trainers who work in contexts of great linguistic diversity, in order to show that these approaches are deserving of more serious attention. Our experiences draw on studies of multilingualism and linguistic diversity which are based on working with life course narratives<sup>1</sup> and on biographic approaches employed in adult education and teacher training courses that raise participants’ awareness of their own resources and potential<sup>2</sup>.

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1 Franceschini (2001) gives an overview on the theoretical and methodological scope of some of these studies.

2 For an overview see e.g. Kearny 2003.

This first chapter provides an introduction to biographic approaches in linguistic and education research as well as in teacher training and adult education. Chapters two and three are (auto-) biographic texts written by Aziza Jardine and Angelika Tjoutuku, who participated in one of the ToTSA courses. These texts are topical life documents (Plummer 2001), not in the sense that they aim at grasping the fullness of the authors' lives, but in confronting the authors' experiences of language learning, language acquisition and of linguistic practices understood as social practices.

Aziza Jardine's text takes as its starting point the Kaaps-speaking environment of District Six in Cape Town and retraces the ambivalences attached to her first language which she experienced at different times: Afrikaans as the language of the ruling class, the language of oppression, Kaaps as a low prestige variety of Afrikaans, considered a 'lingo' not even a dialect, and finally Kaaps re-appropriated as a means of expressing identity and as a point of departure for acquiring other languages. In its multilayeredness Aziza Jardine's account is more than a linear life story narrative. Interweaving her own language biography with interviews collected among family members, friends and colleagues, she offers the reader the possibility of grasping the major lines and nodes of her communication networks and the language attitudes of her principal communication partners. Aziza Jardine's text concludes with language-related excerpts of her personal diary, written while she was working on her language biography. This meta-narrative – an appendix to her main text – shows how the process of writing her language biography helped her to rediscover and valorize her own linguistic resources, to enhance her language awareness and to develop metalinguistic skills useful for her professional work as a teacher as well as for her personal development towards multilingualism.

Angelika Tjoutuku's text focuses on her first experiences with language learning, literacy and print in the family and peer group environment as well as on her exploits with reading, writing and language learning in subsequent school years. Her account reveals insights on forms of literacy promoted by local communities and on formal schooling in Namibia in the 1960s and 1970s. The biographic approach allows her to take a different perspective from that of the detached analyst or historian: her narrative draws attention to questions of language attitudes, of the link between language and identity. She compares her experiences with the language biographies she collected among family members and friends. She expresses clearly her concern about the 'colonial language fever' that 'befell' her and many others in her generation. From the perspective of her present position at the National Institute for Educational Development in Okahandja (Ministry of Education, Namibia) she suggests different ways for making use of the biographic approach for promoting literacy in African languages.

## Monolingualism – multilingualism – heteroglossia

The African Union has proclaimed 2006 as the Year of African Languages and has entrusted the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) with its implementation. UNESCO is proposing to declare 2008 the international year of linguistic diversity, and the European Union has extended the portfolio of the commissioner for education to the field of linguistic diversity. These randomly enumerated public events testify to the increasing awareness of the multilingual nature of societies in Africa and in other parts of the world. More attention is being paid to designing language policies that take this multilingual nature of present societies into account in different domains.

Research dedicated to social and individual bi- and multilingualism and in language policies has gone through different phases which are linked to varying concepts of social organisation, identity and ethnicity. Until the 1970s bi- and multilingualism was treated as a marginal topic and considered mostly as the exception to the norm of growing up and living in a monolingual environment. Speakers of other languages than the dominant one were seen mainly as deviant and deficient, and so-called balanced bilingualism – the mastering of two languages to a comparable level of proficiency – as a perhaps desirable but nevertheless unattainable ideal. Social progress was linked to the adaptation of language practices to the ruling norm, to individual linguistic assimilation if one happened to be 'different'. On the social level the multilingual nature of societies was seen as a potential threat to national unity rather than as a resource for cross-border cooperation or international exchange, as in the case of the Basque country during the Franco regime or of the predominantly Kurdish speaking parts of Turkey to this day. In some African countries huge efforts were made to promote African languages as national languages with a view to nation building and development (as for example in Tanzania, Madagascar, Somalia). Paradoxically, within the monolingual paradigm language policies also often enough promoted linguistic division in the sense that differences between local varieties of dominated languages were overemphasized rather than the commonalities stressed, in the interests of segregation, exclusion and the maintenance of political power. Such a policy contributed to stabilizing linguistic hierarchies in the sense that one language dominated in virtually all public domains, and only territorially and socially limited spaces were allowed for the use of all others.

In the late 1970s linguistic research became more interested in the social dimension of language, and phenomena linked to multilingualism and language contact attracted larger interest. Language policies began to acknowledge linguistic plurality as well as the importance of having access

to education and information in the first language or mother tongue. The valorization of the so-called lesser used languages, of languages with lower social prestige and the recognition of linguistic rights were certainly an achievement within the framework of this approach. Nevertheless, concepts based on the assumption of languages as bounded units and on cultural identity linked to a particular language continue to take a monolingual paradigm for granted and fail to grasp the social heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981), i.e. the multilinguality, the multivoicedness and the multidiscursivity of our societies.

In the current debate around linguistic practices within the paradigm of globalization some of the very core concepts in sociolinguistics are being questioned. The monolingual habitus (historical disposition) of the multilingual school is being challenged as a feature that excludes access to education for speakers of lesser-used or non-dominant languages (Gogolin 1995). Multilingualism, more specifically multilingual practices are seen as situated practices rather than as abstract and absolute competences a speaker acquires. The idea of a perfect mastering of two or more languages is dismissed in favour of concepts that acknowledge that multilingual competencies are organised around activities, situations and topics (Blommaert 2005). Similarly, practices such as language crossing (Rampton 1995), i.e. the appropriation of elements of other voices across language boundaries, that are not based on the knowledge of a language in a traditional sense but rather on language as an expression of style, are being increasingly perceived as multilingual practices and not as deficiencies, as hitherto. Language ethnography and the de-construction of language ideologies demystify the notion of language as a bounded and countable unit (Gal 2006) and allow deeper insights into the relationship between language and constructions of identity. The awareness of diversity not only as a multitude of separate and bounded languages communities but also within a community, a network of communication or within a given situation builds on the concept of heteroglossia developed by the Bakhtin circle (1934/1981). Aziza Jardine's narrative captures some elements of the heteroglossia that characterizes the linguistic situation in the Western Cape. In tracing the ambivalences that accompanied her own change in attitude towards her first language, towards Afrikaans/Kaaps, and in documenting the stances of different persons within her communication network towards the 'language' and the 'lingo', she shows that no single social group can today legitimately claim ownership of a language and the power to determine fixed 'boundaries' around the language, or define who is or is not a 'legitimate' speaker of the language. Aziza's text shows that language is contested and that language practices are situated and negotiated practices.

It is interesting to note that in linguistic research early works on bilingualism followed a biographic approach and yielded results that diverged from the monolingual paradigm prevalent at the time. Jules Ronjat's (1913) and Werner Leopold's (1939–1949) famous diaries document the language development of their respective children. Ronjat was the first to document the language acquisition of a child with whom the one-person-one-language method was practised. His son Louis grew up in a French-German bilingual situation in which his father spoke exclusively French to him whereas his mother spoke only German. Ronjat's work was ground-breaking as he could show that growing up bilingually had not retarded or hindered his son's linguistic development in any way. Leopold's diaries – also considered a milestone in psycholinguistic research – document his daughter's simultaneous acquisition of English and German. Both works highlight different phases in language development, when children tended more towards one or the other language or when some 'mixing' occurred. A series of language acquisition diaries with different language pairs or even more than two languages followed (Maneeva 2004). And both works stand in opposition to the then ruling opinion that bringing up a child bilingually could be harmful.

In several domains of linguistic research, for example in the field of language policy and language planning, the problem of the disparity between the macro-sociological approach based on large-scale surveys and the micro-level of the individual speaker has been addressed. There is an uneasiness about capturing the language attitudes, the plans and aspirations of speakers concerning language learning and connections between language and identity (Calvet 2002). Biographic approaches can mediate between the macro level of sociolinguistics interested in the roles and functions of languages in a larger social context and the micro level of the individual angle, the psycholinguistic approach. The biographic account can offer insights into how an individual experiences the broader social context and the language regimes in which she develops her language practices, her ambitions and desires in terms of imagining herself as a speaker of a certain language or code. In this sense biographic approaches can occupy a meso level between the macro level of sociological analysis and the micro level of a particular case study. Although the biographic approach relies on individual case studies, it is not primarily interested in the uniqueness of a particular life story but rather in the social dimensions of language practices that it helps to reveal. The value ascribed to a particular language practice cannot be understood apart from the person who employs it and from the larger networks and social relationships in which this person is engaged (Bourdieu 1982).

## 'Gold ... the language of my heart ...' – what language portrayals tell us

The first step towards Angelika Tjoutuku's text was taken during a session of the pan-African ToTSA course in 2002. Students were asked to think about the codes, languages, the means of expression and communication that played a role in their lives and to map them in a body shape drawing according to the importance they attached to them. In the beginning some of the group members were a bit reluctant as drawing did not seem a 'serious' way of reflecting about language practices. Eventually everybody joined in and enjoyed the activity which gave rise to a very lively debate on language acquisition and language learning. From the 20 portrayals we learnt that more than 50 codes/languages were present in the group and that in about a quarter of them such varieties and codes figured as emotionally important means of expression that were not standardised or officially recognised as languages in education.

'Yellow, i.e. gold, is Otjherero, my precious language, the language of my heart. Red is Afrikaans, my second best language, the one that was imposed on me. English is green, it is my third best language, the language that opens many doors to me – my key to greener pastures. Yellow and green are for my stomach, for knowledge and for communication. Purple stands for Oshivambo and brown for other African languages, blue is for German. These three colours refer to languages which I use in communication here and there.'

This is how Angelika Tjoutuku described her language portrayal when she presented it to the group during the workshop. Her drawing (see back cover) and the explanation she provided reveal different aspects of how she lives her multilingualism and how changing language policies in Namibia have affected her own linguistic practices.

Language portrayals, drawings to visualise individual linguistic resources, came into use in the beginning of the 1990s when school classes in European cities had become largely multilingual due to migration and labour required mobility which brought children from very different countries and language backgrounds together into a common learning environment. For children colouring in preprinted body silhouettes with different colours is an activity they know well from painting books. They usually enjoy choosing a colour to symbolize a particular language or code they speak and take their time to find the appropriate way to represent their linguistic capital. Drawing language portrayals as a group activity provides an occasion for metalinguistic considerations and makes different forms of multilingualism lived within the group visible (Krumm 2001). For adults in a situation of further education and training the change from the written mode to the visual mode, from representing ideas and concepts not

through words but through design, is rather unusual. It was actually in the heterogeneous multinational and multilingual group of the first pan-African ToTSA course that I ventured for the first time to propose to an adult audience the drawing of language portrayals as an introductory activity to a workshop on teaching methods for multilingual classrooms. Since 2002 I have seen the drawings of several hundred portrayals in different courses and language environments in different parts of the world.

The pictures that result from the drawings are very different but so far none of the drawings have been monochrome, i.e. showing a situation of monolingualism; even pictures in which only two colours figure are the exception rather than the rule. People define for themselves which languages, codes, registers and so forth, deserve a colour of their own. Often different varieties related to one standard language figure in different colours, for instance English for lingua franca communication and English for leisure time activities like music, movies, and so on. First languages, languages/ codes with high emotional value and such that are important to the author of the portrayal often figure in bright colours (e.g. red, yellow). Languages once learnt or acquired that only play a marginal role at the time of the drawing tend to be depicted in pale shades. Languages or codes loaded with negative connotations are frequently represented in the 'non-colour' grey. Although there is no neutral and universal meaning that can be attached to a particular colour, colour becomes a signifier, a bearer of meaning, in a particular situation and in association with the meaning potential it has acquired because of its cultural history (Kress, van Leeuwen 2001:59). How the different colours are arranged and brought into relation with different body parts is again very variable. Both the colour and the location of a particular field within the drawing reveal their meaning only when the drawing is explained and interpreted by the author.

To change the mode of representation, to express thoughts and feelings about one's own linguistic resources and language practices not verbally but visually helps to shift the focus of attention. Whereas the logic of speaking and writing is determined by time and linear sequencing, space and simultaneity characterize the image (Kress 2004:152). The image draws attention to the way in which the different components of the picture relate to each other, it is a kind of snap-shot of a particular moment in time. In the case of the language portrayals it foregrounds the state of the personal language profile that is actually present rather than emphasising the path which has led to it.

Language practices are regularised by strict and normative rules. Through language use the social status, affiliation with a professional group, affinity with a certain world view, and the ties to certain geographic and linguistic environments can be expressed. The processes that determine language use run to a large extent in an automatized way and escape

conscious control. Therefore it is difficult to analyse and discuss personal language use in a reflective manner. It is the change of the representational mode with its particularities that makes language portrayals an interesting point of departure for thinking and discussing about language in use. Language attitudes, the importance of a particular dialect, code, lingo or register, aspirations in language learning, fantasies and projections in imagining oneself as a speaker of a language/code can surface and become easier to grasp.

### Memory work on autobiographic essays

There is an increasing number of accounts on the use of biographic approaches in teacher training and in training for academic writing (e.g. Ball 2003, Mendelowitz 2005 describe activities in the South African context). Ball (2003:200) argues that the narrative autobiographical essays teachers wrote during training courses in the US and in South Africa about their own literacy experiences contributed 'to bring to a metacognitive level of awareness those experiences that helped to influence their own literacy attitudes and their preconceived notions of what it meant to be a teacher'. Mendelowitz (2005) shows how memoir writing in a course for pre-service teachers served as an introduction to writing and understanding the nature of narratives. In this concept memoir writing is seen as a group activity and is not conceived as solitary product-oriented but rather as a process which encourages identity work and stimulates students to take up new subject positions.

Feminist studies in particular have sought to promote a methodological and theoretical framework that allows the development of emancipatory approaches based on autobiographical texts and on collective work on such texts, so as to make power relations and gender roles apparent and to develop alternative modes of action. Frigga Haug's (1999:199 ff) concept of memory work refers to instances where the roles of the researcher and the subject of the research coincide, and where sociological introspection takes place.. It consists of short biographical texts which describe a particular situation in detail. The writing is followed by a close reading of the texts produced in the group, and by a group discussion in which these texts are analysed. Memory work is work close to the text, it is based on text and discourse analytical approaches. It prepares the persons involved to consider new and different perspectives, attitudes and visions for the development of a personal voice and opens a way for the transformation of practices and the implementation of emancipatory strategies.

It was an activity based on the concept of collective memory work that inspired the next step towards Angelika Tjoutuku's text. After having drawn the language portrayals, students in the 2002 pan-African ToTSA

course were asked to write short texts about their first encounters with literacy. They were asked to concentrate on a particular scene they remembered well, rather than on telling a story consisting of a chain of different events. Chains of events that are regrouped to form a story are difficult to work upon because such chains often serve the purpose of constructing the author in a particular role and can have a self-justifying character. Students were also asked to describe the event they had chosen in such a way that it was possible for others to comprehend it more fully. Sensory impressions like smell, taste, sounds, and colours can help the author to deepen memories. Feelings and subjective impressions are important pieces of information in this context and should play a role in the text, whereas analytical interpretations should be left to the group.

Many of the texts written during the 2002 ToTSA course reported first encounters with reading or writing as traumatic events. Stories centred around how family or first language(s) had been disregarded or were even forbidden in the context of the formal school system, how difficult learning was without books and sometimes even without paper or slate boards or how literacy skills they had acquired in the community before entering the formal system were belittled. Angelika Tjoutuku's story focused on a scene when her brother had offered to teach her how to read and write so that she could decipher the messages her sister used to 'encrypt' her notes in order to deny Angelika access to them. Her description of learning as a peer group experience gave rise to a discussion about the relationship between formal and informal education and the importance of first languages in education, as well as about questions of motivation in literacy learning and on dimensions of creativity and play in school.

Writing stories about their own first encounters with written language allowed the students to appreciate first steps in literacy from the learner's perspective, i.e. another perspective than their present as teachers or teacher trainers. The analyses of the texts within the group of students focused on how different positions and attitudes were embodied and expressed by teachers and experienced by the learners as well as on how alternative learning strategies could be developed. The aim of memory work is not to gather information about 'what happened' but rather about which subject positions were taken within the social settings in which language practices are enacted, as well as to ask the question about possible alternative ways of acting in similar situations. The way for a reflection on and a transformation of practices is thus opened up. Memory work is based on the assumption that individual language practices stand in a complex relationship to collective memory and history. It further assumes that in the individual's memory, historic events and processes of social change play a role as subject positions are developed in relation to such events and processes, and that individual language practices are socially shaped and contribute in turn to

shaping them. Ball (2003:200) who used a similar approach of collective autobiographical writing in teacher training courses in South Africa and in the US, summarises:

This autobiographical activity served as a readiness exercise that prepared teachers to consider new and different perspectives, attitudes, and visions for language and literacy, inclusion, and teaching practices in the classrooms.

## Writing and telling language biographies

The collective work on the short texts on literacy and language learning, the insights that could be gained from a textual analysis of such texts, and the obvious pleasure in writing vivid and reader-friendly texts that all served to motivate some ToTSA students to present a biographical text as part of their assignment. In their respective texts both Aziza Jardine and Angelika Tjoutuku emphasise that writing their own language autobiography and conducting biographic interviews among family members and friends that are part of their communication networks has helped them to develop a deeper understanding of learning in general, and language learning in particular, and has enabled them to link theories about language and language in education to their practical work as teachers and as teacher trainers.

To understand what a language (auto-)biography can tell us, it is important to analyse the process of narrating an (auto-)biography – or elements of it that centre around a particular topic such as language. In telling life stories people organize their biography, and life is depicted as clusters of ‘stories’. For the narrator the first task consists in a stringent selection and compression of what should be told; it is to choose what seems relevant from an unlimited store of individual experiences and to find the appropriate (linguistic) means of expression in terms of terms of register, code and style. As all utterances, personal life histories are dialogic in nature (Bakhtin), a relevant ‘other’ is always co-constitutive in a particular text, i.e. the narrator develops a narrative – written or spoken – always with a (potential) reader/recipient in mind. To take a practical example: a short language biography included in a curriculum vitae for the purpose of a job application will take a different shape than what the same person will tell a friend or a teacher about their experiences of language learning.

Significant others play different roles in the life course narrative: they appear in the narrative as persons who tell the narrator who she or he is or is perceived to be and allow the development of contradictions between ascribed and experienced or aspired identities. Angelika Tjoutuku speaks about her disappointment and her subsequent unhappiness in school when her first teacher made it clear that she refused to consider her a competent reader, even though she had heard her fluently reading a rather complicated

text. Aziza Jardine writes about her momentary retreat into silence and speechlessness when she found out that certain persons denied her the status of being a legitimate speaker of English and Afrikaans, the two languages she had been using in personal communication and during her school education. Significant others also appear in the life course narrative as ‘generalized’ others, as the impersonal ‘moral’ authority that enforces obedience to the rules of language use. Fragments from other texts are often built into the narratives, for example as text elements from literature, soap operas, films, magazines, other persons’ accounts. As any other type of text, autobiographical accounts have an intertextual dimension: they relate to other discourses present in society and position themselves vis-a-vis the dominant discourse.

The interdependence of individual and collective memory has been a broad concern in the social sciences and cultural studies for a longer time. The concept of ‘collective memory’ was developed by Maurice Halbwachs (1950/1997) who showed that the embeddedness into a social framework is crucial for the constitution and the preservation of individual memory. In terms of this concept, individual memory is part of a collective memory and generally constitutes itself with reference to the actual social conditions and discourses in society. Recent research in neuroscience and cognitive psychology has provided new insights into how memory is constituted and how it functions (Welzer 2005). This research has also confirmed the cultural studies perspective that individual memory is socially constituted. Memory in this understanding is not the depiction of events and experiences ‘as they were in reality’; instead, memory is understood as a continuum of change, an ongoing process that filters less relevant perceptions from more relevant ones, stores autobiographically important experiences, deepens, reconfigures, re-evaluates and transforms them according to new experiences and social situations (Welzer 2005:21f). It seems that emotional experiences attached to particular moments play a more important role than is generally assumed. In particular, retrieving and transforming stored memory takes place when memories are being communicated, when they are being talked about. It is the autobiographical memory that integrates different layers of memory responsible for storing lived episodes, semantic knowledge, automatised behaviour, and so on (Welzer 2005:144). The autobiographical memory organises past experiences in a way that corresponds to the narrator’s present situation, it makes individual experiences available for communication and links individual experience to a particular historical configuration (ibid.:236).

A further theoretical strand of reflection on autobiographies is situated within literary studies. From this perspective, biographies and autobiographies constitute the life history genre which has developed in close connection with contextually determined concepts of the self and the way the self

is seen in relation to the collective. Philippe Lejeune (1975/1996) postulates that what he has called the autobiographic pact is a defining feature of the autobiographic genre. This pact supposes that the author, the narrator and the main character in the text are identical; that the text refers to something that is true, a truth not in the sense of a claiming the exact depiction of veritable reality, but of authenticity and coherence of the narrated experiences.

The two autobiographical texts published here are first-person accounts. Sometimes it is nevertheless easier for authors to write in the third person, since writing about 'him' or 'her' already implies a greater distance and an observer position. These two texts can be characterized as an autoethnography, as the autobiographical account is in both cases complemented by recent interviews within the immediate memory community, the family and circle of close friends or, to put it differently, within the immediate personal communication network. Both texts are also enhanced by other documents. Angelika Tjoutuku's contains facsimiles of pages from school textbooks which had made a strong impression on her. And Aziza Jardine's text contains topical extracts from her personal diary. The interlacing of text elements from different genres and sources with the autobiographical narrative draws the reader's attention to the intertextual nature of the texts and to their social embeddedness. In their respective conclusions both authors agree that writing language biographies has not only made them more aware of their proper language practices, but that they also see fields of application of the biographical approach in their professional life as educators.

Language biographies are increasingly being used as an introduction to creative writing and as a preparation for language learning. The European Language Portfolio makes use of language biographies on a large scale. It was launched on a pan-European level by the Council of Europe during the European Year of Languages in 2001 as a tool to support the development of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. The portfolio aims at motivating learners by acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language skills at all levels; and to provide a record of the linguistic and cultural skills they have acquired (to be consulted, for example, when they are moving to a higher learning level or seeking employment at home or abroad). The portfolio contains a language passport which its owner regularly updates. A grid is provided where language competences can be described according to common criteria accepted throughout Europe and which can serve as a complement to customary certificates. The document also contains a detailed language biography describing the owner's experiences in each language. Finally, there is a dossier where examples of personal work can be kept to illustrate one's language competences (CoE website 2006). Without entering into a discussion about the merits and

shortcomings of the European Language Portfolio I would like to stress the fact that a language biography is included as an obligatory part in the Portfolio. This is no doubt a step forward to acknowledging that language learning takes place largely outside formal institutions and that resources acquired in any language are being valorized.

In conclusion, the example of the language portfolio shows that first person accounts of language learning are beginning to be taken seriously, not only in educational settings such as university-based research, teacher training, and schooling, but also outside of these, in the less formal domains of home and community. In our view, the two accounts that follow exemplify this broader approach to multilingual learning.

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## Ampe' Proudly Kaaps – A language biography from the Western Cape

### Aziza Jardine

I have chosen to describe my language history by including the narratives of people who reflect the language environment I was exposed to, and who influenced my language learning. This is why I refer to it as a language biography rather than a language autobiography (cf. Nekvapil 2003). I also reflected on the process of writing the language biography and how this, together with readings on language attitudes and identity during this period influenced my capacity to observe language practices, and raised my language awareness and understanding.

### 1. A Western Cape language biography

#### My parents' languages

My mother, one of nine children, was born and grew up in District Six. The family spoke what I now understand to be Kaaps-Afrikaans and this has remained my mother's home language. As was the custom in her community during the 1940's girls only attended school until they became *jong meisies* (attained puberty). They would then stay at home till they were old enough to go and work in the clothing factories – usually at around 15 or 16. My mother attended school until Std 5 (Gr 7) and does not remember much about her English language learning, but she did learn enough for her to be able to read the newspaper and communicate with the younger generation fairly fluently – although English phone calls still make her nervous.

Her brothers had the option of continuing school if the family could afford this and only the youngest one did. He completed Matric and was offered a bursary to study in England but my grandparents did not think this would be wise. My uncle ended up working for an accounting firm and now owns a second hand bookshop. The other brothers chose my late grandfather's trade of tailor.

Apart from Afrikaans and English, Malay and Arabic also formed part of my mother's life. Arabic especially, is valued highly as it is the language used to perform the daily prayers, it is used at certain ceremonies and for reciting the Koran. In Cape Town most Muslim children went to Muslim school to learn to recite.

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3 Please note that all translations are in italics – eds.

**1. Hystaal vannie Kaap – die taal vannie ha't**  
*Home language of the Cape – the language of the heart*<sup>3</sup>

**73-year-old uncle (1 November 2004)**

Hulle sê os Muslims vannie Kaap is 'n snaakse soot – os praat Afrikaans, batcha in Arabic en skryf briewe in Engels. Nieman skryf Afrikaanse briewe nie – miskien omdat os kombuis Afrikaans praat. Die Engels wat os skryf is da'em nade an die regte Engels.

*They say the Muslims of the Cape are a funny lot – we speak Afrikaans, recite in Arabic and write letters in English. Nobody writes Afrikaans letters – perhaps because we speak kitchen Afrikaans. The English that we write will be closer to real English.*

Daa was 'n paa Engelse kinnes by die skool dai tyd ma osse lesse was in Afrikaans. Os het nou en dan separate Engelse lesse gekry ma skool was 'n Afrikaanse environment. Ek kan ondou doerrentyd al – as mense Engels gepraait, het mense gesê hulle is sturvy, hulle vebeel vi hulle, hulle dink hulle's wit. Ek wiettie, consciously of sub-consciously, as 'n mens ieman Engels hoo praait, het 'n mens gedink hulle is slim, advanced.

*There were a few English children at our school but the lessons were in Afrikaans. We did have separate English lessons now and then but the school environment was Afrikaans. I remember already in those days, people who spoke English were seen as thinking of themselves as white, better. I don't know, consciously or sub-consciously, when someone spoke English one thought of them as clever, advanced.*

'n Paa jaa terug het die mense begin praat van Afrikaans assie taal vannie oppressor, assie Apatheids taal. Dai het nooit eintlik by my gedjarrie nie – Afrikaans was my hystaal, my moedestaal. Ek voel nou nog soe. Ek gie nou al 24 jaa klasse (Moslem school) en sê vi al my nuwe studente ek praat Afrikaans en dat die notes in Afrikaans sal wies. Waa ek wiet mense praat Engels by die huis sal ek 'n pa't van my les in Engels hou ma ek voel altyd dat as ek van my ha't wil praat, dan praat ek Afrikaans.

*A few years ago people started speaking of Afrikaans as the language of the oppressor, as the Apartheid language. I never went along with this – Afrikaans was my home language, my mother tongue. I still feel this way. I have been teaching at a Moslem school for 24 years and I tell all my new students that I speak Afrikaans and that the notes will be in Afrikaans. Where I know people speak English at home a part of my lesson will be in English, but I always feel that when I want to speak from the heart, I speak Afrikaans.*

My late father was born in Port Elizabeth (PE). He too came from a large family. They were eleven children – six of them had passed away before I was born. Although he was Afrikaans speaking, they grew up in a mixed area and attended a school where both English and Afrikaans were used. My late grandfather was a tailor too but he was more well off than my Cape Town grandfather and regularly travelled to Cape Town to sell his wares. He also spent more than a year in Mecca. His father was a sheikh so my PE family was introduced to Arabic before they went to school and they are all able to recite well.

My father left school after Std 6 (Grade 8). I learnt on a recent trip to Port Elizabeth that he and my late uncle (a year younger than him) were in the same class throughout school. And that at the end of Std 6 both of them were able to obtain a bursary to continue their schooling. According to my aunt, my father did not like school and chose to leave. By this time he had been orphaned and was being reared by his older sister. His brother continued both his secular and religious education and became a sheikh (studied in Egypt) as well as a teacher and later, principal. After he left school he helped his older brother, a tailor. During the 1940's most males in Port Elizabeth either became tailors or worked in the building trade. He moved to Cape Town as a young man where he started working in a clothing factory. He would later become a self employed tailor.

One of my earliest literacy memories is seeing my father read the newspaper. He read *The Argus* every day. I also recall him sitting on the musallah (prayer mat) reciting the Koran. At the time I did not think of this as reading – it was something connected to religion. He was able to recite well and could understand and quote some frequently used phrases and verses.

By the time I was old enough to notice, the Afrikaans/Kaaps he was no longer different from that spoken by the rest of the family. Most of his customers spoke Kaaps but he had no difficulty communicating in English when he had to.

**2. 'Plat Afrikaans' van die Baainars**  
*'Plat Afrikaans' of the P.E. people*

**76-year-old aunt (Port Elizabeth visit, October 2004)**

O hulle (my nephews) is mos Engels – eers kon die mense in die Kaap nie Engels praat nie. Al wat hulle geken het was nay, hey en say ...

... dan kom die Baainars van die Kaap en hulle was miskien net 'n maand daar dan wil hulle soos die Kapenaars praat ... dan is dit net dji en nie (nee) – ons praat mos plat, by julle was dit die Nederlands ...

... hulle (her children) sê ek is outyds – hulle gebruik nie meer woorde soos djamang (toilet) en kaparang (shoe) nie

... ons het die wyses van die Malaysians verloor, die sagheid, die soppangheid

*My nephews are English – at first the people of Cape couldn't speak English. All that they knew was nay, hey and say ...*

*... then the people of Port Elizabeth would return from the Cape, they'd been there perhaps a month and then they want to speak like the Capetonians ... it would be dji and nie (no) – our speech is flat, you had the Dutch influence ...*

*... they (her children) say I am old-fashioned – they no longer use words like djamang (toilet) and kaparang (shoe)*

*... we have lost the ways of the Malaysians, the gentleness and humility*

### Early years: Kaaps Afrikaans with a Malay-Arabic flavour

I was born in District Six and am one of seven children. I have very few memories of my years before six. We moved around quite often and had lived with four different families before I attended school. We left District Six when I was 4 years old. My aunt and her family moved into my grandmother's house until they were required to leave because of the Group Areas Act. As a child I could see District Six changing but I have no memories of any talk about how people felt about this. I don't know if this was because the topic was not considered fit for children to hear about or because the community saw this as inevitable, something that they have no control over.

My home language, like all of my family's at the time was Kaaps-Afrikaans – with a Malaysian, Arabic flavour. I discovered at school that some of the terms I used at home were not appropriate there. I could not greet or say thank you the way I did at home. Prayers were said in Afrikaans and not in Arabic.

I have no memories of being read to as a child – my father was in hospital for long periods and my mother had three other children to see to. My uncle had a tape recorder at the time and had formed a 'club' of actors who would record themselves – these 'plays' were all in English – this was probably one of my earliest conscious encounters with the language apart from the songs that my family says I enjoyed singing. My uncle also recorded my four-year-old brother who used to love telling nonsense stories. I remember 'Die aeroplane wat 'n skirtjie angehettit' (The airplane that wore a little skirt). The Afrikaans we spoke included a lot of code mixing from the start.

My first experience with books was the *Sus en Daan* reader my sister, a year older, brought home from school one day. As six year old I must have noticed that the people in these books were all white but I can't recall questioning this. Perhaps because I saw this as part of what reading and books were about – pages had words and pictures of things, animals and white people. I cannot recall if it was my sister who taught me but when I started school I found that I was able to read most of the books on the reading rack the teacher had in front of the class.

My first memory of school was my teacher taking me outside to test how much vision I had in my right eye (I am able to see light and movement only) and then seating me in front of the class. I loved my Sub A teacher. She was kind and gentle and thought that my ability to read when I started school was special. I remember her taking me to the principal to read for him –and him taking me to the bigger children to read for them.

I discovered in grade one that the way I spoke was different from the way words were written in books. This was very gently pointed out to me by my teacher when I read to her. She did not rephrase any of the children's verbal responses to her questions though – she used standard Afrikaans but accepted the language we brought to school. I can still remember the rhymes – English and Afrikaans she taught us. As with singing, I was not self conscious about the language when reciting rhymes.

### 3. Learning in English – teaching in Afrikaans

#### My grade 1 teacher (Telephone conversation, 19 October)

I grew up speaking English. Both of my parents were English speaking so the first time we heard Afrikaans was at school. All my schooling as well as my teacher training was in English. I did Afrikaans as a second language at school and at college but at that time we did not spend too much time on this.

I learnt my English from my parents but my granny also played a vital role. We were eight children, so my mother did not have time for things like reading to us. My granny filled the gap. She would tell us wonderful stories about the olden days and she would also read the newspaper to us every night.

I think I was also fortunate to have attended a very good Catholic school – the nuns were nurturing and encouraged us to join the library. During that time it was still the apartheid era so we did not have the variety that children have today but we made do. Because of my grandmother and the nuns reading became a lifelong interest.

After college we suddenly found that the laws had changed and that there were only a limited number of English schools. I could then only find a job at an Afrikaans medium school. It was difficult at the beginning but I learned as I went along – I was learning while I was teaching you.

Most of the children – about 90% – who attended the school came from poor backgrounds and many came there using ‘raw’ language which we had to try to correct. I enjoyed teaching you – remember the way you would tilt your head when you looked at me. You were very shy, very quiet.

I use English most of the time now but when I know that someone is Afrikaans speaking I always try to speak Afrikaans even if my pronunciation is not perfect. When I find an Afrikaans magazine I will also not shy away from reading it. I have never thought of one language as being better than another – you take your language and you use it in a way that you feel comfortable. When I do speak Afrikaans I try to speak proper Afrikaans, not the kombuis Afrikaans that some people use. I have been invigilating at Matric exams for the past 12 years now and there I also use proper Afrikaans.

When my daughter was at tech she had many Black friends, so she would come home every day and ask me to learn the Xhosa words they had taught her – but then she was young and young minds can take in things much more easily. I used to know some words but have forgotten them now.

We discovered our Port Elizabeth family when I was in primary school – my father had bought a car so we could go to PE for a wedding. We would make regular trips down thereafter. On such trips I began to understand that the Non Whites sign in front of a toilets meant that it would be in such a state that we would not be able to use it. And it was on these trips that I would hear white females tell my father, ‘Julle mense kannie hier koop nie – julle moet daar agter by die venster gaan koop.’ (*You people can’t buy here – you have buy at the window at the back.*) I remember someone in PE saying, ‘Die Boere dink ons kleur sal afgaan en aan hulle vassit.’ (*The Boers think our colour will wash off and stick to them.*)

### First school years: cracking the code in English and Arabic

Grade 2 was a year of the teacher screaming and hurling objects at children, children having to kneel in front of the class for ages. If I learnt anything that year it was in spite of, and not because of this teacher.

It was around this time that I started attending Moslem school. Here we would get *koples* (religious instruction) as well as the basics of reciting the Koran. I struggled to crack the code from the start and did not enjoy these sessions – perhaps because I had nothing to bring to my ‘reading’: Reciting is not linked to understanding the language. Arabic became a part of my life from an early age. One of the 5 pillars of Islam is the daily Arabic declaration of faith which children memorize as soon as they are able to talk. There were also short prayers we were taught and hearing the call to prayer.

I spent a lot of time with my cousins during these years. The whole family gathered at my grandmother’s place on Saturday afternoons and we spent Sundays with some of my cousins who enjoyed putting on old costumes and having concerts. They often complained that I spoke too fast. My father used to enjoy telling the PE family that I loved talking – to the extent of saying the most embarrassing things just for the sake of saying something. And all this in the Afrikaans mix that I was reared on.

During Grade 3 we started regular English periods where we were required to speak only English – quite a stressful period for most of us. We were so envious of the few children who could speak English. This was the start of the thoughts and feelings around English being better, English children being better. I found that I did not have difficulty reading in English and that I understood what was happening in the reader but that I was often stumped by the irregular sounds – which was embarrassing when reading aloud.

My mother’s youngest sister had meanwhile moved to Port Elizabeth and when her children visited us in Cape Town we discovered that they were English speaking. This was the start of the move to English for the family as a whole. We did not question this at the time but we all ended up (trying) to speak English to these cousins. This code switching in favour of English is now the ‘natural’ way of using language in my family even though using English for many of us does not happen without effort.

We had regular contact with our PE cousins and enjoyed teasing one another about language – about the way we say for instance *skwassies* for squash. We teased them about how they used *is* and *was* but I think we all knew that their Afrikaans was a *suiwerder* one. After a recent trip to Port Elizabeth my brother forgot to make the adjustment back to Kaaps and used his ‘polished’ Afrikaans to tell us about the family. I noticed a similar tendency when my brother-in-law accompanied us on a PE trip this year. And I found myself switching to English when I had to use the word *djy* (*you*), which sounded rude.

The Port Elizabeth visits also highlighted the fact that my father’s family was much better at reciting the Koran than we were. Once when we spent one of the long holidays there, all of us attended my uncle’s Moslem school where we would get a chance to recite for him. I prayed that he would not ask me to do so and when he did all I could do was page through the surat looking for a page that I would be comfortable reading – till he realized what was happening and let me off the hook. Some cousins later asked me why I did not recite anything.

#### 4. I don't like listening to the Afrikaans we speak ...

Port Elizabeth Cousin (conversation, 9 October 2004)

I speak English and Afrikaans, I also know a few Xhosa words but I can't really speak the language. We spoke Afrikaans at home – I learnt it from my parents, the environment and friends. Most of my family is Afrikaans so I use this language when I speak to them. I didn't enjoy learning Afrikaans at school though – some teachers used English while teaching Afrikaans.

I learnt English at school and also indirectly from my father – he was an English teacher and used to buy us the classics in comic form. At university my friends laughed at me when I told them I enjoy reading Shakespeare.

I attended an English medium school – for some reason my father wanted us to be taught in English. I can remember how difficult it was for me at the beginning. I responded to most comments or questions with 'y e s'. The teacher did not help much. At that time the school had a kind of a quota system whereby only a limited number of children could be placed in the English class – when one child complained that 'there are children here who speak Afrikaans at home' the teacher looked at me disdainfully and said: 'I know'. I felt so good when she found out in Grade 3 that I had outperformed all the English children.

For another strange reason, my youngest brother did his schooling in Afrikaans. I remember his frustration when he proudly told us about the bromponie (*scooter*) that he had seen and none of us knew what he was talking about – someone quickly had to find a dictionary. He made us quite uneasy at times using words like *wispelturig* (*fickle*) – this would be followed by an awkward, careful silence. There was clearly a difference between the *suiwer* Afrikaans taught at school and the one we were using at home.

My mother had great difficulty with English – to a point of it becoming a phobia. My father's best friend had a very English, Egyptian wife and when my mother had to visit there she used to dread the ordeal – I once heard her saying, 'O, nou moet ek weer gaan Engels praat!' (*Now I have to speak English again!*)

I use English more than Afrikaans now – my children and husband speak English. My reading and viewing is also in English. I suppose you can say that I value English highly. I don't like listening to the Afrikaans we speak, it's like its shortcomings become more manifest, like it's open to ridicule. I remember how I felt in Grade 2 when I referred to the toilet as *djamang* and no one knew what I was talking about. I remember how envious I felt once when my cousin wrote my mother this *suiwer* Afrikaans letter to thank her for her hospitality. Having said this – why is that English speaking people always expect Afrikaans speaking people to switch to English when there is a conversation?

At the start of Grade 4 I came home in tears – the Grade 2 teacher was now teaching Grade 4. As in Grade 2 school did not feel like a safe place. I cannot remember anything about my language learning during this year but I do recall that this was the year that I discovered that I had no talent for drawing – and in a moment of sheer recklessness, when I was struggling too much, drew a rectangle and labelled it 'Ek is 'n man' (*I am a man*). For some reason, the teacher did not comment on this.

When he had enough work we would all look forward to Fridays when my father took us to *Bollie Winkel* to buy the weekly *Bollie* comic (this later formed part of *Die Huisgenoot*). Sometimes there would be money for *Beano* also. Then we would listen to the English programme *Squad Cars* on Springbok Radio.

My Grade 5 teacher sometimes used our Afrikaans when he joked with us. He was kind but I don't think he was very serious about teaching. I felt that it didn't really matter to him whether we learnt or not, that he was going through the motions and just teaching us the minimum.

By this time my father was working for himself so when work was slack he used to fetch us at school on the pretext that a family member was ill – and then take us to the matinee show at the Avalon bioscope where we watched westerns mostly. This is a cherished memory.

My father and I also shared an interest in rugby and enjoyed listening to the Afrikaans rugby commentaries. Then the British Lions toured and he supported them instead of the Springboks – and I learnt that there were places where there was no Apartheid, where the supremacy of whiteness was not a given. As a ten year old this was very hard to grasp.

During an examination in Grade 6 I had to rewrite an *opstel* (*essay*) after my teacher had misplaced the one he had taken to the big school to show one of his colleagues. This was written in standard Afrikaans. By now I was able to read Afrikaans and English fluently. Apart from the comics we bought on Fridays I cannot recall any other reading I did during this time. I did well in tests but I still spoke very little English. During this year I was sometimes allowed to watch the boys playing soccer while the girls did Needlework. I had managed to convince teachers that my vision did not allow me to do this subject.

I left school at the end of Grade 6 after six years of formal schooling. In spite of the trauma of Grades 2 and 4 I ended my school life confident of my ability to do well in academic subjects. I recall the glimmer of hope when my Grade 1 teacher visited our house towards the end of the year – and the quiet resignation when I realized that she had left without being able to convince my parents to allow me to continue my schooling. Although the practice of withdrawing girls from school was less common then, it still happened in our family and was not something that I had any control over.

I also remember the unspoken uncertainty about my future – my sister, two years older, was now at home, helping my father while my older Cape Town cousins were all working in the clothing factories. Given my struggles with needlework I could not see myself coping at home or in a clothing factory ...

### Leaving school – keeping up with reading

I listened to the radio during the day, Afrikaans serials mostly – this did not standardize my language – and then music. I enjoyed folk music and wrote down and memorized favourites. I read and reread Joan Baez's biography. My music tastes was different from my cousins (now my only peers). Once I overheard an older cousin telling her brother not to talk to me 'want sy wil net stry' (*she just wants to argue*) – my cousins were not interested in hearing why we could not support the Springboks. As a 13 year old I felt different from my cousins, from other 'normal' teenagers who were at high school ...

My father bought himself some Louis L'Amour western books at a sale one day so I read this for a while. Thereafter I made regular trips to the library. Looking back the library was quite small but to me it seemed that there were so many books, more than enough for my needs. I can recall wishing that I had someone who could recommend some good books but I lacked the courage to speak to the librarian. Now I think that perhaps this was not a such a bad thing after all as I ended up spending many peaceful hours just browsing, reading. When I have the time during school holidays this is something that I still enjoy doing.

During this time I looked forward to the Friday visits of one of my PE cousins. He was staying in Cape Town while studying medicine at UCT and provided some company. We enjoyed the same kind of music and he has a good sense of humour. I also enjoyed listening to the discussions my father and his friends had – about current events and religion mostly. The language used was Kaaps but a lot of English was used also. These discussions helped to me to understand the world and I also came to realise that the way I saw things did not always match my father's.

When business was slow in Cape Town my father would drive up the West Coast looking for customers. We ended up travelling to a town on the West Coast one year. The people there spoke standard Afrikaans and yet I can't recall feeling apologetic about the language I spoke. But then they were poor and didn't have straight hair ...

A few months after my 14th birthday I became ill. My sheikh/school principal uncle and his family came down to see me and suggested to my parents that what was needed was for me to be stimulated – that I needed to resume my schooling. I started at a correspondence college shortly

thereafter. Tuition was offered in English only. English was offered on Higher Grade (HG) and Afrikaans Standard Grade (SG) so this was what I ended up doing. I completed the Junior Certificate (JC) and Senior Certificate (SC) and did not have much difficulty learning the content subjects on my own but was aware that my pronunciation of certain biology terms especially was far from accurate. I also found it difficult to come to grips with the literature aspects of the language. We were provided with a list of books to study but no tuition was offered. My uncle (my mother's youngest brother) tried to assist and I ended up enjoying some of the set work. Poetry remains beyond me. Just before I resumed my schooling this uncle gave me a set of encyclopaedias which I was able to use to supplement my content subject reading.

### Language change in the family

Things changed for the girls in our family thereafter – schooling no longer ended at puberty. All my younger sisters completed Matric, three chose to switch to English during high school and had no difficulty learning in their second language. One of my sisters did remark to me once how the teachers tended to think the English children were better, cleverer. She did all of her schooling in Afrikaans and then studied at an English university.

My brother did likewise. Although he speaks Kaaps where it is the norm, (he speaks English to his children and Kaaps to his wife) he is the only one of us who is able to speak and write standard Afrikaans well. His children are also bilingual. My niece whose only experience of Afrikaans apart from listening to the family speak, has been the Afrikaans spoken at school, speaks standard Afrikaans – with an accent. The family enjoys her mimicking the English of her Afrikaans speaking teachers. English appears to be quite a struggle for many white Northern Suburbs teachers now. My oldest nephew, a second year university student, pretends that he cannot speak Afrikaans but has been heard to use the language with my mother when he thinks no one is listening.

#### 5. At 'home' in two languages

15-year-old nephew (written response, 22 October 2004)

My primary language is English and my second language is Afrikaans. I utilize both my languages fairly well in terms of reading and writing and speaking. Arabic is another language I can read although I do not understand it nor speak it.

I learnt my languages through a formal education system but my ability to use both languages is also largely attributed to the bilingual environment at home. My family also speaks both English and Afrikaans fairly well, and therefore played an important role in my language development. I learnt to read Arabic from my family and also at Muslim school which I attend in the afternoons.

English is my main language so obviously my most used one. I use English with anyone that understands it and Afrikaans for those who don't. My geography classes at school are dual medium with 40% of the children being Afrikaans. I speak kombuis Afrikaans to them – they respond in Afrikaans. I have no problem speaking kombuis Afrikaans. I never read much Afrikaans except for the books I am obligated to read at school and in my opinion these are sufficient. I use Arabic when I pray and I also use some words when speaking to fellow Muslims – shukran and assalamu alaykum for saying thank you and for greeting.

In my opinion the most important factors that help one to learn a second language is the quality of education one receives as well as the languages spoken at home. Reading is also an important factor and one of the best ways to improve. Naturally how much you speak will be linked to how well you do. In the end, I'd say that your willingness to learn a language will ultimately decide whether you succeed or not. I am intent on learning other languages, specifically Malay and Arabic, in order to maintain my cultural and religious heritage. If I put my mind to it I know I will succeed.

In the 1970s the younger cousins were all being raised with English as home language although – with the exception of my youngest uncle – their parents were not very comfortable speaking English. We then started speaking English to them – and still do. Another language change has been the replacement of some Malay terms with Arabic e.g. *Shukran* for *trammakassie* (thank you). I am not sure about the reasons for the change – I think in some ways it is linked to the move to English as people in the past did not make a clear distinction between Malay and Afrikaans terms. The change could also be ascribed to the high status that Arabic has in the community, and to education – as people come to know of the Arabic term for an object or they would want to use it rather than Malay or Afrikaans. This tendency was not confined to my family and also did not only affect English speakers. So, for example, I now use *musallah* instead of *tapytjie* for prayer mat, *Salaah* instead of *soembaaing* (Malay) for the daily prayers.

English in the workplace and for studies

In June 1977 I started working at the correspondence school where I had studied. There I was placed in a situation where I was required to speak English daily. Most of my co-workers spoke Kaaps while the bosses, white, spoke English. Although my understanding of the language was quite good I had extreme difficulty speaking it. Once when I went to the manager I became so frustrated with my inability to find the correct words that I turned around and went back to my desk without having said a word.

I started with BA studies at Unisa while working at the college. Because I lacked the confidence to do either English I or Afrikaans Nederlands I, I

ended up doing Practical English and Praktiese Afrikaans. My sociology readings were particularly valuable as these provided me with the language to think about certain concepts and ideas that would impact on the way I viewed the world. This was also the start of my thinking about certain things in English as this was how I had come to learn about them. During a sociology Cape Town/Durban interface session we were invited to pose questions to be answered by lecturers at the other venue. The response to the one I wrote down made me realize that I could hold my own – that I did not have to feel inferior to the whites around me. But these incidents were few and far between. I realise now too that I would have learnt much more if it had been possible to communicate via e-mail and check one's thinking with a lecturer.

The psychology reading was not as interesting but here too there was conceptual and vocabulary learning. The many theories, and the insistence of the different camps once again caused me to be sceptical of those who thought that their views were the truth, the one right way of viewing things.

When I left after five and a half years I was able to make myself understood and was less anxious about speaking English. I realized that I sometimes used the Afrikaans word order and made concord and pronunciation errors but I also realized that I had quite a good general vocabulary, acquired via reading mostly. This was pointed out to me by one of the proofreaders at the college.

## Encounters with Kaaps at the workplace

I started working in the local government Housing Department in Cape Town in 1982. This involved some administrative work but also a lot of contact with tenants. I tried to use standard Afrikaans in response to the Kaaps that was used because I felt that this was somehow more polite.

For the first time I worked with coloured seniors (housing managers). They were all English first language speakers but I felt none of the strain that I had felt at my previous work. Perhaps this was because they were able to use Kaaps also – and did this to bring humour or add warmth to a situation. One housing manager used Kaaps more often than the rest – this, along with her political convictions, are what makes me remember her the most warmly.

### 6. Language-rich environments

Former city council colleague (telephone conversation, 6 November 2004)

I speak, read and write English and Afrikaans but I also know a few Xhosa words –not enough to communicate but I remember some phrases from when my daughter learned Xhosa at school. She did Xhosa till Grade 9 but then

didn't see her way through doing the literature sections. I think she can understand when someone speaks slowly but she does not really have conversational Xhosa – I think it was the way she was taught – memorization work and translation work mostly.

I observed the Grade One class at the school the other day – they were so cute, singing the body parts and not even realizing that they were learning. They teach the kids Xhosa from Grade 1 now – my daughter only started in Grade 3.

I think we remember what we were taught when we were young. I can still remember the Muslim prayer that my brother taught me as a child – he had learnt it from a friend. At work my friend can't believe that I know about Muslim terms like oenang (Malay – invite) and fard (Arabic – obligatory). My daughter in turn surprised me by saying, 'I don't know why she wears a sweater under her bather – she is not mukallaf' (has not attained puberty). Their school is very progressive – they learn about different cultures and religions and end up more informed and tolerant.

I learnt English from my parents – my mother was from Stellenbosch, so her side of the family spoke Afrikaans. But my parents spoke English to us. There was only one English school in the area at the time, so I ended up learning in Afrikaans from Grade 1–3. I learnt Afrikaans at school but I also learnt it from friends –most of the children we played with were Afrikaans. My schooling from Grade 4 to Grade 12 was in English.

When I worked at the City Council I used Afrikaans mostly and then if I wanted to be understood I used the Cape Town Afrikaans. When we worked in the Tygerberg area we found that although all correspondence was done in English the people there could not speak English. We then adjusted our Afrikaans to match theirs – and felt frustrated by this. Why did we have to accommodate them? They did not even make an effort to try to learn English. I remember how lost I felt at an Information Technology meeting once – I had the general Afrikaans language but lacked the technical terms to understand what was happening.

Once I started working for the Argus I found that I used English a lot more. I also realized that one's job sometimes determines the kind of language one uses. The work I am doing now involves a lot of contact with our financial section in Pretoria and I am of necessity having to learn some Afrikaans commercial jargon e.g. 'Ek trek net gou 'n staat' for 'I am printing a statement.' When one is able to speak two languages and someone is struggling too much in one of them, then one has to accommodate them. I think one of the quickest ways to learn a second language is if you are placed in a situation where you have to use the language. One is not likely to acquire a second language if it is only used at school – if it is not used in your community.

I value English as my home language and also as an international language. Most of the Afrikaans I speak to family members and friends is Kaaps. It's interesting, although I regret what they are doing to the language, the kids seem to cotton on to this lingo more easily, my nephew read a poem by Adam Small the other day and remarked that it was easy to understand, that this is how people speak. I do feel that one should master at least one language though – that one should be able to speak, read and write at least one language well.

I can understand why many Afrikaans speaking people now speak English to their children – they feel their children will be disadvantaged if they don't. How many Afrikaans technikons or universities do you find in Cape Town?

I think that if I were suddenly put into a situation where I was working with a lot of Xhosa speakers I would make the effort to learn the language. If I were a teacher of young children I would definitely do everything I could to learn – how do you pacify a young child if not in his own language?

Working at the Housing Estate office was scary in one way – the rest of the housing assistants were all English speaking and would sometimes speak of household objects or food items that I had not heard of, so whenever they invited me to their homes I had to think of an excuse. I was terrified that they would find out how ignorant I was. After two years at the housing office I asked for a transfer to town as I realized that I did not have the temperament for the Housing Assistant job.

I remember being quite confused by a fair skinned staff member's accent when I got there and after being in town for a week couldn't help but ask someone if she was white. In town we worked with people who had purchased their homes. Many of these people were English speaking. I found that I was quite relaxed speaking English to people where they sounded like second language speakers too.

After a few years at the Council I became restless and did History 2 via Unisa to enable me to do the Higher Diploma in Education (HDE). I learnt about Bantu Education and the thinking 'Black people think more slowly, are more suited to physical work', that drove the oppressive education system.

### Teaching at a special school 1989–2002

In 1989 I started teaching at a school for cerebral palsied learners having completed the first year of the HDE. I did practice teaching the same year – History and Guidance grades 7–11, in English only. The oral exam I had at the end of the course allowed me to teach in English and Afrikaans.

My first two years of teaching was a Grade 3 Afrikaans medium class. I did not find it difficult to move to standard Afrikaans as the terms I used

could be found in the subject guides and in text books but I had not been trained to teach in the foundation phase so relied greatly on the guidance of the Head of Department.

Shortly after I started at the school a remedial teacher from Beaufort West joined the staff. She made an immediate impression on me because of her knowledge of and passion for teaching as well as the very good standard Afrikaans she used. I enjoyed listening to her speaking Afrikaans and noticed how much more knowledgeable she sounded when she expressed herself in her home language. We became good friends and even when we speak now I still try to adjust my speech to match hers.

**7. Rebels, nie snobbisties nie / Weier om Kaaps te praat – gemors, nie 'n taal nie**

***On being a rebel, not snobbish / Refuse to speak Kaaps – a mess, not a language***

**Friend/former colleague (telephone conversation, 6 October)**

Ek verstaan, lees, praat en skryf Afrikaans en Engels. Mens moet natuurlik die twee tale van mekaar onderskei – Afrikaans is my moedertaal en dit was met my van Day One. Ek het die taal van my ouers, familie en vriende geleer.

*I understand, read, speak and write Afrikaans and English. One has to distinguish between the two languages of course – Afrikaans is my mother tongue and has been with me from day one. I learnt the language from my parents, family and friends.*

Engels is eers later deur middel van liedjies, stories en die radio aangeleer. My moeder en haar broer was Engels maar my pa was Afrikaans. Omdat ons in 'n Afrikaanse omgewing (Beaufort-Wes) grootgeword het en my pa Afrikaans was, het my moeder Afrikaans met ons gepraat. Sy het wel nou en dan vir ons Engelse stories vertel of Engelse liedjies vir ons gesing.

*I learnt English later, via songs, stories and the radio. My mother and her brother were English speaking but my father was Afrikaans. Because we grew up in an Afrikaans environment (Beaufort West), my mother spoke Afrikaans to us. She did however tell us English stories and sing some English songs to us now and then.*

Op skool het ons eers in Graad 2 begin Engels leer – eers rympies en woorde (ek dink ons moes 50 woorde ken) en daarna het ons begin lees en skryf. Die onderwysers wat vir ons Engels gegee het, het die taal geken want hulle was Engels maar ons het nie die taal beoefen nie – ons het net Engels gepraat in die Engelse sessie – en 'n mens MOET die taal oefen as jy dit wil baasraak.

*At school we only started learning English in Grade 2 – first via rhymes and words ( I think we had to know 50 ) and after that we started reading and writing. The teachers who taught us English knew the language because they were English but*

*we did not practice the language – we only spoke English in the English period – and one HAS TO practice a language if you want to master it.*

Ek onthou hoe moeilik dit vir ons op Kollege was – alhoewel die kolleges dual medium was, was daar baie van die lektore wat kwansuis nie Afrikaans kon praat nie en dan moes ons na Engelse lesings luister. Van die Engelssprekende studente het ook betoog as lektore Afrikaans gepraat het en het baie van die lesings ontwig – hulle het gevoel dis die taal van die oppressor. En dan was dit ons Afrikaanssprekendes wat aan die kortse end getrek het. Engels was op ons afgedwing. Jou notas was dan in Engels en voor jy studeer vir die eksamen moes jy dit vertaal – en dan was jy nie altyd seker of jou vertaling reg was nie.

*I remember how difficult it was for us at college. Although the colleges were dual medium many of the lecturers pretended that they could not speak Afrikaans and then we had to listen to English lectures. Some of the English speaking students also protested when lecturers spoke Afrikaans and would disrupt our lectures. They felt that Afrikaans was the language of the oppressor. And then we as Afrikaans speakers were the ones who got the short end of the stick, English was forced on us. Our notes would be in English and you had to translate them before you studied for the exam – then you couldn't be sure that your translation was correct.*

Toe ek by die Kaap begin onderwysgee het ek by my suster kom bly en Engels met haar kinders begin praat. Die skool in die Kaap was dual medium en ek het ook daar Engels gehoor en met die leerlinge Engels gepraat. Maar ek het ook vanuit die staanspoor besluit dat ek Afrikaans gaan praat – dat ek nie my moedertaal gaan prysgee nie. Ek dink ek was rebels – ek sou nie die Engelssprekendes die bevrediging gee om Engels te praat nie. Die Engelse het mos in elk geval daai meerderwaardigheidsgevoel. Tog het ek by die skool gevind dat die mense wat regtig goed Engels kon praat nie neerhalend was nie – dis diegene wat maar Afrikaans was en Engels aangeleer het wat snobbisties was.

*When I started teaching in Cape Town I stayed with my sister and started speaking English to her children. The school in the Cape was dual medium and I also listened to English there and spoke English to the children. But from the start I had made up my mind that I would speak Afrikaans, and that I was not going to give up my mother tongue. I think I was a rebel – I would not give English speakers the satisfaction by speaking English. English speakers in any case have that superiority complex. And yet I found that those people at school who could speak English well were not condescending – it was those who were Afrikaans speaking and had learnt to speak English later who were snobbish.*

Tans gebruik ek Afrikaans en Engels in ons kerk en ook as ek met professionele mense soos doktors praat. Ek vind ook dat vandat ek in die Kaap is, lees ek meer Engels. Ek skeep eintlik so bietjie die Afrikaans af – die meeste naslaanboeke is in Engels.

*I use Afrikaans and English in church and also when I speak to professional people like doctors. I find that since I moved to Cape Town I read English more and am neglecting Afrikaans in a way – but then most of the reference works are in English.*

Ek weier om Kaaps te praat, dis nie 'n taal nie, dis 'n gemors van 'n taal. Ek noem dit eintlik 'n skollie taal – hoe kan 'n mens so praat – djywietni? Ek glo almal kan regpraat. – Nee, jy praat nie so nie – ek praat eintlik van die mense wat lankal van die platteland kom en nou soos Kapenaars praat. Jy weet die mense sê goed soos 'boem' vir 'boom'. [So do !!]

*No, I refuse to speak Kaaps, that's not a language, it's a mess of a language. I actually call it gangster language. How can you speak like that: 'djywietni?' (you don't know?). I believe that all of us can speak properly. – No, you don't speak like that – I'm talking about those people who've come from the platteland long ago and who talk like Capetonians. You know, these people say things like 'boem' for 'boom' (tree). [So do !!]*

Ek dink Engels het waarde want dit is meer universal maar Afrikaans is my moedertaal en in jou moedertaal kan jy beter jou gevoelens uitdruk, kan jy jou ideas goed oordra, kan jy jou standpunt stel. As jy in jou tweede of derde taal praat moet jy eers jou gedagtes formuleer voor jy hulle kan uitspreek – dit vloei nie soos in Afrikaans nie.

*I think English has its value because it is more universal but Afrikaans is my mother tongue and in your mother tongue you are better able to express your feelings, you can explain your ideas and views. If you have to speak in your second or third language you have to formulate your thoughts before you can verbalise them – they don't flow as they do in Afrikaans.*

Nog iets – deesdae kan swartmense kwansuis ook nie Afrikaans praat nie – hulle weier om die taal te praat en Afrikaans is eintlik nader aan Xhosa as wat Engels is. Jy moet altyd jou taal afskeep om ander te akkommodeer. Ek hou ook van Xhosa en as ek 'n nuwe taal aanleer sal dit Xhosa wees. Alhoewel ons daai conversational Xhosa kursus by die skool gedoen het, het dit nie gewerk nie want ons het dit nie toegepas nie. As die predikante by 'n sinode bymekaar kom, gesels die Xhosaspreekende vroue saam dan voel ek soms uitgesluit..

*And another thing: nowadays many black people pretend they can't speak Afrikaans, they refuse to speak the language and yet Afrikaans is much closer to Xhosa than English is. You always have to neglect your language to accommodate others. I also like Xhosa and if I learn a new language it will be Xhosa. Although we did that conversational Xhosa course at school it was not effective as we did not apply our knowledge. When the ministers (preachers) meet at a synod, the Xhosa speaking women speak to each other and then I sometimes feel excluded ...*

## Teaching English 2nd language – Die kinders wil net Engels praat

In 1991 I started subject teaching – *Geskiedenis* (history) and English second language Grades 6 and 7. I enjoyed teaching second language English. Children still did their content subject in Afrikaans so were not required to do much conceptual thinking in English. Despite this, most of the learners were highly motivated and their teachers sometimes complained: 'Die kinders wil net Engels praat.' I read up about and used the communicative approach to second language learning. I tried to create an environment where they were given an opportunity to speak often, where it was acceptable to make mistakes. I used standard Afrikaans when teaching *Geskiedenis* and allowed learners to respond in Kaaps during discussions. I also made a point of letting them know that my home language is Afrikaans.

The staff at the school at the time was around 50 and included drivers, housemothers (classroom assistants), therapists, a nursing sister and a psychologist. For the first time I worked with 'equal status' whites but I soon realized that the 'equalness' was there in my head only. When I reasoned about this I would see them as equals – four years university qualification – but the accompanying feelings would not always come. I now realize that academic qualifications apart I did not really believe we were equals and that I somehow felt that overall the white being was better – more intelligent, well spoken, affluent.

It soon became clear that the principal at the school and all but one of the therapists (a very good friend) did not see teachers as equals. Therapists were the ones who voiced their confident opinions during staff meetings and had the most to say during case conferences and class discussions. I was quiet during these discussions and remained so for much of my initial years at the school, including the one that highlighted the arrogance the most. We were discussing the progress of a boy who had severe physical constraints and the physiotherapist, very quiet about what she had been doing during her therapy sessions, felt quite qualified to provide my fellow grade teacher with some unsolicited tips on how to make his geography lessons more interesting.

I spoke to the school psychologist (someone whom I had come to respect for her ability to think clearly and be impartial) and thereafter we experienced some turbulent months. Many therapists could not see why teachers felt inferior, that their opinions were not valued. This tension never completely disappeared and I, for one, always went into class discussions reminding myself that it was necessary to listen beyond the accent and the confidence – that as class teacher I knew more about one of my children's reading abilities than a speech therapist who writes in a report, 'S. reads very well but his comprehension is poor.'

## 8. Learning Xhosa at work

Education specialist, friend, former colleague (telephone conversation, 16 October 2004)

I learnt my first language via my family, the environment, church and school. As a child I read more than other children my age – would go to the library every Thursday instead of playing like my friends. I had a large vocabulary because of this. In Grade 9 (Std 7) we had an unconventional teacher – she would let us write poetry and do things that were not really part of the syllabus. She made me excited about the language.

At university I started out doing medicine – not because this was what I wanted to do but because it was what the family expected me to do given that I was also good at science and maths. I hated this and was fortunate enough to be able to switch to an Arts Degree that included an English major. Although I received the English Prize in each Grade at high school I lost my confidence and doubted my ability when I started at UCT. The white students came from a much more language-rich background I felt – they had so much confidence. And then there was the accent. I struggled with this for some time but then a lecturer's remark after a tutorial gave me some perspective. He said my written response was the only one that showed understanding and insight ...

Hardly any Afrikaans was spoken in the area where I grew up so my first real contact with the language was at school. I became aware of the 'superiority' of English at an earlier age – my mother discouraged us from speaking or learning the language – learning Afrikaans was not something one should aspire to. I think this was because, at that time already, Afrikaans was thought of as the oppressor's language – and also because at the time most of the people who spoke Afrikaans came from the country areas and were thought of as backward. I can recall how confused I was about this – two of the children at school were orphans who, although they were attending an English medium school, were Afrikaans speaking. And there was nothing wrong with them.

The teachers who taught us Afrikaans at high school were Afrikaans first language speakers who loved their language and tried to instil this in us. I remember one teacher. She realized that many of us had very little understanding of the language, so she gave us lists of words and drilled some structures. This might be contrary to what is considered good practice now but for those of us with hardly any understanding of the language, who were not exposed to the language outside school, these provided 'solid things' to build on – unless one has some vocabulary it is extremely difficult to understand a language.

When I started teaching I again became aware of how negatively Afrikaans was viewed – Afrikaans learners, in the minority, were looked down upon by the teachers. I can recall staffroom comments and discussions – not sure if reference was made to their behaviour but Afrikaans speaking children were 'different'. Most of the Afrikaans children came from poorer homes.

I don't speak Afrikaans well but my understanding of the language is an academic one so it is quite good – I am quite comfortable in a dual code conversation. And where I can see that people are not able to speak English – some parents, for example – I have enough Afrikaans to communicate in this language.

We are learning to speak Xhosa at work now. This is something I initiated, not only because Xhosa is one of the official languages of our region, but also because I think it is unfair that Xhosa speakers should be expected to learn English with no attempt on our part to learn their language. I am also hoping that the course we are doing now will help my colleagues to realize how different the grammatical structures of English and Xhosa are.

I find that I have changed. When the Xhosa speakers on our staff make mistakes I listen for content. The rest of the staff are not yet prepared to do this and are quick to judge the speakers as less, pointing out grammatical errors on letters and e-mails to me. Because one wants the messages that go out to be of a reasonable standard I am now checking and helping with this. It is a lot of extra work but I see this as the cost of transformation – if I am going to insist that people's English be of a certain standard I might not have Xhosa speaking people on my team. Unfortunately most of my colleagues do not yet see things in this light – and neither do the schools, where the expectation is that presentations should be in perfect English ...

The two previous Xhosa courses that I did were with mixed groups and then we did not have contact afterwards. Now we are doing it with colleagues and we encourage and motivate each other. The other day I was able to venture more than the usual 'molweni' (hello) and 'ninjani' (how are you) and tried 'nibonise iipensile' (show the pencils) and a few other instructions. The Xhosa speakers were appreciative of the attempt. I think it helps that the instructor is someone who has learnt the language – he understands the difficulties we might have and there is also the inspiration of knowing that he learnt the language late in life – that it can be done.

## First encounters with isiXhosa

From 1994 to 2002 I did class teaching in Grades 5 and 4 – English medium. I needed to learn more about teaching literacy as many children were still at foundation phase level so I started my Bachelor of Education

studies at Unisa. I found that reading about Chaos Theory helped to explain the way I learn. I also came to realize that reading cannot be equated with phonics and that writing is not spelling. I learnt to recognize and value progress, however slow or little.

I taught two isiXhosa speaking children during this time – without any insight or attempt on my part to acknowledge the language – I thought that children were at the school to learn English. When the boy I taught had difficulty following instructions and answering reading comprehension questions I interpreted this as him having ‘reasoning difficulties’. The teacher in his next class made more of an effort and would sometimes put isiXhosa words up outside the class.

I taught the second isiXhosa speaking child the year I left the school and still did not make a serious effort to meet her language needs. But I did feel uneasy when she would insist that she did not really speak isiXhosa at home. During a class discussion one of the therapist remarked: ‘When she came to us last year she knew nothing, she was an empty slate.’ Even I could recognize that she came with a great deal – just in another language.

The school tried to prepare itself for isiXhosa speaking learners by having staff do a conversational Xhosa course. I had to stop midway because of family commitments. The school also employed an isiXhosa speaking teacher aide when two isiXhosa speaking children were admitted to the preschool classes. Greetings in assemblies were done in English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa and Arabic.

This course was my first real encounter with the language. Somewhere I had picked up ‘ewe’ for yes but this was as much as I knew. I can recall a TV programme teaching a South African language in the 1980s I think – but then all African languages sounded equally foreign to me at the time. What I also remember are the indignant newspaper letters and radio discussions about second language speakers ‘being allowed’ to read English news on radio and television. Even though I had very little knowledge of or interest in other South African languages, this viewpoint, as well as the way some relatives made fun of the English pronunciation of black second language speakers made me uncomfortable. But at the time I lacked the knowledge or insight to verbalise my feelings.

An Afrikaans (Kaaps) speaking teacher joined the staff and became my grade partner. She enjoyed playing with words and was very good at expressing herself in either language I thought. But I remember her most for the way she used Kaaps, the way she brought out the colourfulness of the dialect and its ability to say things in a way that English or standard Afrikaans cannot.

## 9. Between Afrikaans, Kaaps and English

Teacher, former colleague (telephone conversation, 4 October)

My first language is Afrikaans (Kaaps) and my second language is English. I learned to speak Afrikaans at home, via family and friends. Perhaps radio too. I speak Kaaps to my family and friends, when I am relaxed. When I have to do public speaking I try to use standard Afrikaans – this I learned by listening to the radio and watching TV.

I don’t feel good about using Afrikaans in public – mense sien neer op Kaaps – die blankes maak guy van ons, en die well-to-do kleurlinge maak guy van ons. Dit vat aan ‘n mens. (*People look down on Kaaps, whites make fun of us and the more well off coloureds make fun of us – it gets to you.*) The other day there was a coloured pop group on TV and I felt so good about it, but then they started rapping in this horrible Kaapse accent. I also saw a grown man on TV speaking like this – he didn’t even try to change his accent. Al my familie is getroud met mense van die platteland want hulle hettie kans gesien vi die accent nie. (*All my relatives married people from the country areas because they couldn’t see themselves coping with the accent.*)

I was exposed to English when family members from Durban came to visit. We also learnt some English at school. The teachers we had were good, dedicated ones but we did not get to use the language on a daily basis. During holidays we helped my father at his work and there we often had to speak to English speaking customers, I can remember making many mistakes. I think I also learned to speak via the books that I read. ‘n Mens praat soes ‘n mens lies dan nie? (*You speak like you read, not so?*)

Ek het arm, eenvoudig grootgeword. (*I had a poor, simple upbringing.*) When I started at college I realized that I was amongst more well-to-do people so I made a conscious effort to improve my English. It’s all to do with one’s self concept – people who spoke English were better.

At work I tend to speak English to the English speakers. But sometimes I become rebellious and just speak Afrikaans – and then I see that they have to struggle again. When it was my turn to do assembly I always used to do so in English as I could not be sure that I would not use some Kaaps – but then I realized that I am an Afrikaans teacher and that it was unfair towards the Afrikaans speaking children to have to listen to English assemblies all the time. The children in our family are all English speaking now, so I speak English to them.

I think I am passionate about both languages – I read both languages – light reading mostly – verorber (*devour*) tydskrifte – and love Afrikaans movies. My father used to take us to the drive-in to watch Afrikaans movies – people like Rika Sennet and Hans Strydom.

I think there is a move back to Afrikaans now and I am glad about this. When I listen to some Afrikaans on TV, some Laurika Rauch songs e.g. dan spreek dit tot 'n mens se siel (*it speaks to your soul*). There is just one thing though – when they speak of Afrikaans on TV dan is die focus net op die Boere en hulle Afrikaans ( *then the focus is only on the Boers and their Afrikaans* ).

I plan to start learning to speak Xhosa soon because this is the language black people in this region speak – will start by buying a dictionary. Don't know if this will help but I will try.

Although I had made quite a few good friends at the school I still listened much more than I spoke – I felt that because of my history I did not have much to say. One of my friends later told me that she found me quiet and aloof when she first joined our table at interval. What I was beginning to find was that when I felt really strongly about something I would voice my opinion – and because I spoke when I was angry or upset what came out was usually not very clear. People also complained that I spoke too fast.

Three of my sisters were married by this time. My youngest sister married a student who had plans to study in Saudi Arabia to become a sheikh. He moved to Medina shortly after they got married and my sister joined him there when she could. She used to work from over there some time (computer analyst) but also taught English now and then. Although she speaks and writes English very well many of the Arab children had difficulty with her accent. She was able to pick up some Arabic while in Medina but found the grammar very difficult. When she worked in New Zealand last year she was also teased about the way she pronounced the English 'r'.

## 10. Studies in Arabic

### Brother-in-law (conversation, 6 November 2004)

My father teaches children to recite the Koran so I learnt to recite from an early age. My first experience of learning to speak and understand Arabic was at the Darul Arkam at the Muslim Judicial Council's offices in Newfields, Cape Town. I entered this institute immediately after Matric.

The aim of the institute was to produce Arabic speaking students and they did this via teaching religious studies using Arabic as medium of instruction. I found this difficult at first but at the end of the three year course I had a basic knowledge of the language and could speak although not fluently. During my final year a delegation from the university visited the school in search of some students that they could offer scholarships to. I was accepted to study and went to study in Medina. A few months after that I got married.

The first month at the university was extremely tough as all orientation courses were done in Arabic and I found that some people switched between using a dialect (which I did not know) and classical Arabic. They also spoke very fast.

Foreign students with no Arabic knowledge are required to do a two year bridging course – I chose to do one year of the course so that I could be sure that my understanding of the language was good enough for me to cope with the lectures and reading.

I found that South Africans were at an advantage as far as reading/reciting goes in that some of the sounds are similar to Afrikaans and so easier on the tongue than it would be for some Europeans. A disadvantage of the South African system and a reason why I needed the bridging class was that the use of Arabic was restricted to the classroom. At the end of my first year I was able understand the dialect and classic Arabic.

My line of work means that I still use the language regularly – apart from the daily prayers, tradition and the nature of the Friday sermon requires that my sermon be in both English and Arabic. The research I do for the Friday sermon is also done from Arabic books. And when I meet with my colleagues we try to remember to have our conversations in Arabic so that we don't lose the ability to communicate in the language.

English is my home language – it was the language my parents spoke to me and the one I spoke at school mostly. I neglected Afrikaans at school. Now my work needs me to be able to speak Afrikaans too because just as I struggle to speak Afrikaans there are many people who struggle to speak English. I have to learn so that I can do justice to everyone – not the proper Afrikaans but the one Capetonians speak.

While in Medina I realized that we all have great potential for learning language – and that one doesn't have to wait till one knows the grammar to be able to communicate, once one knows a few words and phrases one should start.

I met an 18 year old who was learning Arabic and was already able to speak 8 languages including Chinese, Urdu, Persian and French. It helped that his father was in the diplomatic service but I think in his case he is perhaps more gifted than most.

I travelled with the new school principal for a while. He was raised in Elgin and spoke Afrikaans very well but since English was the language used for staffroom announcements and in meetings, this was what he spoke. Looking back I think he managed very well but at the time I too (silently) judged him on the odd concord or pronunciation error rather

than remember my often voiced question about why it is fine for English speakers to struggle when speaking Afrikaans and nothing was thought of it, while Afrikaans speakers are thought of as less educated, intelligent when they struggle with English.

My experience at the many workshops and in-service sessions that we had at the school showed me that I had good listening skills if I found the topic worthwhile and could make a contribution if I could risk the errors that might creep in. The last few years of my stay at the school I was still very self-conscious about my not being able to pronounce the English 'r' like a first language speaker but I knew that I had the ability to speak the language well – if I could learn to speak more slowly and in full sentences, not repeat myself so much.

I found that when I wanted to hear myself think or make myself understood I needed to write – that I was more effective writing than speaking. Also I was able to mask my 'second languageness' when I wrote. Once when I felt particularly upset a colleague suggested that I write down my thoughts saying 'You are much clearer when you write.' I was asked to take minutes of departmental meetings soon thereafter – and was able to rebel against the constraints of standard English by adding some humour to what was clearly supposed to be serious formal writing.

My Head of Department at the time was an English first language speaker who was also able to speak Kaaps fluently. We became good friends and spent long hours talking over the phone – speaking Kaaps when we were relaxed or frivolous and codemixing freely. She has a very good command of the English language and our conversations – the things intimate friends speak about, our talks about teaching and learning, about school relationships – enriched my second language without my feeling any pressure to adjust the way I speak. She sometimes made fun of the way I say things e.g. 'sikke goete' for 'sulke goed' (*such things*) – and then went on to include this as part of her language later. The only time that I become aware that I think in Afrikaans mostly is when the English doesn't want to come fast enough – most of the time I am not aware of the codemixing and switching that happens.

### 11. Kaaps now and then

Friend, ex-colleague (telephone conversation, 18 October 2004)

I speak English and Afrikaans and some conversational French – I can read and write a little, about Grade 2 level. We spoke Afrikaans at home (my parents are bilingual) but I attended an English medium school. At the start I felt embarrassed when children found out that I was Afrikaans speaking – they used to make fun of children whose home language was not English.

I was very good at English from the start. One of my fondest memories is of the time that I was reading in the playground when in Grade one and the older kids called their friends to come and listen to me. I think I have a flair for languages – can't recall being read to by either of my parents.

The Afrikaans we spoke at home was Kaaps. My Granny who reared me until I was 14, was from Namibia and spoke suiwer Afrikaans to me – but all of her children and my father spoke Kaaps so that is what I ended up speaking. I do recall that as I became older I became more aware of the language she was using and I tried to adjust my Afrikaans, make it more suiwer. She is the one that awakened the interest in Afrikaans in me.

I liked my Afrikaans teachers at high school – they did a good job of teaching us. Their use of the language captivated us and they helped us to recognize our own ability in the language. I did Afrikaans Nederlands 2 at university.

English was one of my majors at university (ek was by die wit university!) and this has become my first language now. This is the language I use at home (although my children who are at ex-model C schools in the Northern suburbs speak Afrikaans well) and at school. I teach Afrikaans as second language but apart from this all my teaching is in English.

I speak English to my colleagues, but I use Kaaps now and then – when I am frivolous, and then only when I know that the person understands the lingo (and yet I have found that some people who do speak Kaaps respond to me in English when I speak Kaaps to them) – I suppose it depends on the mood – you e.g. speak Kaaps to me wanne djy nie lis is om in Engels te dinkkie, wanne, djy wil vinnig praat en djy nie lis is vi die intellectual bridge van Engels dinkkie. (*...when you don't feel like thinking in English, when you want to say something quickly and you don't want to make the intellectual effort to speak English.*)

Although I am comfortable using Kaaps and English with relatives, praat ek somtyds Engels met my family in law – as ek vi hulle wil bamboozle en wys hoe slim ek is. (*When I want to bamboozle them and show them how clever I am!*)

I place a high value on English as my first language but I am not ashamed of the fact that I do speak Kaaps – it is very much a part of me. Iets wat soe bietjie an my krap (*something that irks me*) though is when someone in a position of leadership has problems with register, where, in between good English or Afrikaans they use words or phrases that are inappropriate or 'plat'.

I might be interested in continuing my French studies some time and if I have to travel I might learn some other conversational languages – this applies to Xhosa too. Having to learn the basics of another language is a challenge I can do without at this stage of my life.

I came to realize that teaching literacy was my major interest and felt frustrated that I had to spend my time teaching things like Technology and Art so I registered for the two year Further Diploma Education (special needs) course at Unisa as first step towards becoming a learning support teacher.

I applied for a learning support post while doing the first year of the FDE. One of the panel members, white, posed her question in Afrikaans and I responded in English. Not because I wanted to use English as a way of gaining some distance as I sometimes do, but because I did not know the Afrikaans terms for many of the things we were speaking about. I was not successful – overheard someone when I left – *'ja, maar die Engels ...'* (yes, but English ...) The post was for an itinerant teacher at two Afrikaans medium schools.

Because I felt I had missed out on the Conversational Xhosa opportunity I made sporadic attempts to learn the language – via some books that I had bought mostly and also by registering for Unisa's beginners Xhosa course during my last year at the school. I did not make much progress as I was unable to come to grips with the grammar.

### Learning Support – Multilingual teaching

During 2002 I applied for a Learning Support post in the Cape Town area. I attended a one week orientation programme at the EMDC in February. The Special Needs specialist spoke about teaching isiXhosa speaking learners and I remembered her: 'If you can't meet the children half way then meet them some way.' I tried to ensure that I used some isiXhosa words in each lesson but was still working in the dark mostly.

When I started at one of my schools in 2003 I found that more than half of the children were isiXhosa-speaking. Thinking back now I can't recall one interview question relating to teaching isiXhosa speaking children – or that the post had any language requirements. The valuing of diversity that was found at the special school was not present here. Greetings and assemblies were in English only and the only isiXhosa I heard teachers use was *yi'zap* and *hlala pantsi* (come here and sit down).

When I started at my second school in April 2002 I found a different approach to learners – teachers spoke with more concern and respect. Still they said, and I agreed, that I was not really at the school to deal with children with 'language problems'.

### 12. IsiXhosa and the linguistic market

Teacher, colleague (conversation, 4 October 2004)

I understand, speak, read and write English and Afrikaans. I learnt my first language from my parents firstly, then from my siblings. I am the youngest of 8 children and was immersed in grown up language. I picked up a lot of slang from my older brothers and sisters – my parents would correct me. My language was above the norm as a child I could understand and use words not expected of a young child.

Because I was the youngest, a lot of pressure was put on me to be ready for school – my siblings made sure I could write my name when I was three. They also insisted that I learn certain words. When I look back now I can see how unfair this was – I still struggled to read and only started to enjoy reading when I was older. My teacher really thought I was stupid. I think that things would be different if I was starting to learn to read in Grade one now – we still used those Janet and John books.

I learnt Afrikaans by listening to my mother speaking to my father. He was English speaking and my mother, from Swellendam, was Afrikaans speaking. She spoke Afrikaans to my father but English to us. She struggled initially but became better at it. I think I would have liked Afrikaans if my mother had spoken to us – she spoke *suiwer Afrikaans*. But she would not speak Afrikaans to us, saying that Afrikaans was for her family, we are English. Even my grandmother in Swellendam spoke English to us – when we visited she would say, 'Hier kom die Engelse kinders.' (Here come the English children.)

We all ended up learning in English – except for my eldest brother who grew up with my grandmother in Swellendam, and my sister. She was the fourth child. When it was her turn to go to school my mother was working. She left her at school saying: 'Here is my child'. One of the teachers asked all the Afrikaans children to move to one side and because my sister liked the look of the teacher she moved with them. It was only after my sister had been at school for two months that my mother found out she was in an Afrikaans class. Both my sister and my brother speak Afrikaans very well.

The Afrikaans we learnt at school was never interesting. And I will always remember how the Std 6 (now Grade 8) teacher used to keep on criticizing us – 'You people must stop thinking in English and then write in Afrikaans' – but don't we think in our first language? I think they should have allowed us to write in English and then translate. I hardly ever write or read in Afrikaans now.

I don't think I like Afrikaans – I speak a mix, more *Kombuis* than Afrikaans now – and I feel shy, uncomfortable speaking Afrikaans in front of some of my colleagues who

spek suiwer Afrikaans. Now some people think I can't speak Afrikaans, but I can.

A few weeks ago I decided to join the Saturday Xhosa classes at a school in our area. I feel that I will be able to bond with my children more if I can speak Xhosa – and I will also become more marketable.

I was prepared to continue teaching as before until I discussed some reading strategies with a teacher and he pointed out that those strategies would not work with Xhosa speaking learners. Many did not have the language to use context clues when reading, a child might be able to 'read' the word *accident* without knowing what it means. This unsettled me and I was forced to find out more.

### Awareness of Multilingualism: 2003 – 2005

During June 2003 I made contact with Carole Bloch of PRAESA and was invited to attend the Training of Trainers in Southern Africa (ToTSA) course. There I was exposed to people and ideas that helped to challenge some of my attitudes. One of the most valuable things I learned was to listen for what was said rather than the accent, the way English was used to say it. This was something that I carried away with me and remind myself of when I need to. I once again became aware of some of my limiting beliefs e.g. that people who struggled with English were less educated.

I left ToTSA with some teaching strategies – comprehensible input, interactive writing – but more important, with the belief in multilingual awareness, in the need to affirm the home language of the child at school and create opportunities for children to hear and speak their language. Also how essential it was for me to make a serious attempt to learn isiXhosa.

When testing English first language learners I had found that the words they were more likely to be able to read were verbs like see, look, run and jump – so I started learning these (I had purchased a little dictionary) and then extended my isiXhosa learning to verbs being used in class e.g. open, close, write, read and later to other verbs that I occurred in stories e.g. swim, like, cry. Thereafter I moved on to some colours, animals and classroom objects. The children helped with pronunciation. I found that I was only able to remember a word once I had written it down and had used it a few times. The children often found my attempts amusing; mostly they valued whatever attempt I was making. As I started learning the grammar – and struggled/ still struggling so much – I became more appreciative of what the children had already managed to do, of the learning that they brought to school. I made a point of letting the Afrikaans and English speaking children know of my struggles and how proud I was of the progress that I was making.

What the little isiXhosa I had acquired allowed me to do was make sure that all children could see that I valued isiXhosa as well as allow me to put up some multilingual print. I was also able to check the isiXhosa speaking children's understanding of very simple, structured sentences by asking them to translate the sentences to isiXhosa for me.

At the schools I made some attempts to extend multilingual awareness beyond my learning support class via team teaching and multilingual assemblies. Although the principals at both schools were very supportive, I had more impact on the children than on the adults on the whole. At one school especially attitudes have not changed – referring to Xhosa speaking children as 'them' – remarks like, 'This whole multilingual thing will be solved if the Xhosa speaking children go back to the townships.' I need to remind myself that not all teachers at the school are as negative.

### 13. African languages: broadening the social world

Teacher, colleague (conversation, 15 October 2004)

I speak English and Afrikaans and also a little Sesotho and Setswana. I learnt English at home – from my parents. There were books everywhere. My mother still reads all the newspapers: The Argus, Cape Times, Sunday Times and Rapport. I could read before I went to school. I had a very good memory and won a prize at our church for this as a three year old.

Although English remains my first language I sometimes think that it can become overpowering – that there is a perception amongst many black people especially that the ability to speak English will open doors and bring economic success.

We did not speak any Afrikaans at home so what I learnt I learnt at school. At high school I had a very good, unusual teacher so at the end of my teacher training I was able to teach both English and Afrikaans first language. I use Afrikaans with the kids at school now – for some their third language. When I speak to my colleagues I use English and Afrikaans (Kaaps). I think Afrikaans is an important language because most of the people in the Western Cape come from an Afrikaans background – it has cultural value.

I learnt to speak Sesotho when I was teaching in Lesotho. I taught there for 15 years. Setswana I learnt while working in Mafikeng. The two languages are very similar. I didn't attend any courses and can't recall being taught by anyone. It helped that I had a love of languages but it was also a matter of being placed in a particular situation – having many Basotho speaking friends, finding that government officials are not very nice to you if you speak English to them. Being able to speak Sesotho and Setswana allowed me to connect with the children and gain the confidence of their parents.

I still use Sesotho and Setswana now and then – some business people I have met are Sesotho speaking. I often meet some of my former pupils at UCT – and then there is also a Sesotho school in Langa. I think the additional languages I have learned opened up a whole new social world for me. Time constraints perhaps stop people from learning another language but then there is also the perception that one's culture – and therefore one's language – is the 'standard right.'

I am going to make an effort to learn isiXhosa – it is the most common African language in the Western Cape and I can't even speak it – this job should have resulted in my learning some isiXhosa by now but the kids all speak English. When I learn now it will not be for the kids – it will be to broaden my social world.

The internet and e-mail became a source of language learning for me. I was able to check my understanding and benefit from the knowledge and experience of PRAESA staff. E-mail communication with PRAESA staff allowed me to check my understanding of language and literacy readings. I was able to reflect on my changing classroom practice and the effect this was having on the children and on me. Communicating via e-mail resulted in English idiom and vocabulary language gains while my writing also benefited as I was challenged to voice my feelings and confusions clearly. I was, and still am, learning to read and write by reading and writing (Smith 1993). I found these communications nurturing and affirming. The responses encouraged my efforts without minimizing or trivializing the challenges I was facing. I was made to feel that my concerns were real and worth listening to – and that my writing was worth reading.

When I started as Learning Support teacher I realized that my years of experience at a special school meant that I would be able to make a contribution at large group cluster meetings. But I also knew that I could not trust myself to speak clearly so I remained quiet for much of last year. And when I was asked to read a poem one of the facilitators had seen at my school I started off apologizing for the fact that I had difficulty with the English 'r'. I found learning support teachers on the whole a very serious group. Now I have my say – and sometimes become irritated at others for not understanding me the first time. This year I form part of a smaller cluster – and all of the teachers in the group are wonderfully rich language users who I am learning from and enjoying.

#### 14. Suiwer Afrikaans in Namibië

##### Learning Support teacher (conversations, 18 and 20 October 2004)

I speak English and Afrikaans – completely bilingual – and can also follow a little German. I can speak a little too – kan vir iemand 'n stukkie brood vra as ek gestrand is. (*I can ask someone for a piece of bread if I'm stranded.*)

My home language was English – both my parents were English speaking. My schooling from Grade 1 – 12 was in Afrikaans because there was no English school in the area where we moved to. (I am from Namibia). Although I was in an Afrikaans medium school my parents continued speaking English to me. I did English as a second language. I remember that I read a lot and that I enjoyed school.

Ek het by die Universiteit van Wes-Kaapland kom studeer omdat daar destyds nie 'n universiteit in Namibië was nie. Omdat ek nie Matriek vrystelling gehad het nie, kon ek nie 'n graad doen nie. Ek het eers later my graad deur Unisa verwerf (Afrikaans/Nederlands 2) – en het die jaar die BEd Honneurs – Spesiale Onderwys voltooi. Al my studies was tot op 1999 in Afrikaans. Toe het Unisa vir my laat weet dat ek die enigste Afrikaanse inskrywing vir Geskiedenis 1 was en dat al die studiemateriaal daarom in Engels sou wees. Dit sou my vrystaan om die eksamen in Afrikaans af te lê. Ek het nie eintlik dit moeilik gevind om in Engels te studeer nie.

*I came to study at the University of the Western Cape as there were no universities in Namibia at the time. I was unable to register for a degree as I did not have Matric Exemption. I obtained a degree via Unisa – Afrikaans Nederlands 2 – and completed the BEd Honours also via Unisa at the beginning of this year. Up until 1999 all my studies were in Afrikaans. But then Unisa informed me that I was the only Afrikaans student to do History 1 and that all the study material would therefore be in English. I would have the choice of writing my exams in Afrikaans if I chose to do so. I did not find it hard to study in English.*

My children did German as a second language when we were living in Namibia. They would not speak Afrikaans to me saying that they were embarrassed, that they did not sound the way the Afrikaans speaking children did. Even after we moved to Cape Town and they had to read for me as part of their homework they would do so quickly, self-consciously. We also found that although they never spoke Afrikaans to us, they were able to understand the language just by listening to us. One of my children chose to do Afrikaans as a first language when she wrote Matric –and she passed with an A.

Ek praat nou Afrikaans met my ma. Ek het naderhand so gewoon geraak aan die Afrikaans op skool dat ek met my ouers begin Afrikaans praat het. Hulle daarenteen, praat Engels met my! Dieselfde snaakse taalsituasie geld ook vir my kinders – hulle praat Engels en hulle niggies praat Afrikaans. In Namibië moes al

ons skole na onafhanklikheidswording na Engels oorslaan en het sommige van die niggies dan Engels met my kinders gepraat. Maar die meeste van hulle praat nog steeds Afrikaans. Ek lees meestal Engels omdat meeste van die koerante op straat Engels is – maar ek is ook baie lief om die Huisgenoot te lees.

*I speak Afrikaans to my mother now. After a while I became so used to speaking Afrikaans at school that I started speaking Afrikaans to my parents. They in turn speak English to me! This strange language situation also applies to my children – they speak English and their cousins speak Afrikaans. After Independence all the schools in Namibia became English medium schools so some of the cousins started to speak English but most of them are still Afrikaans speaking. Most of my reading is in English now – the newspapers you buy in the streets are English – but I also enjoy reading die Huisgenoot a lot.*

I speak suiwer Afrikaans – I don't know how to speak Kaaps. Sometimes when I start speaking people look at me and ask me where I come from – then one feels like an outsider, not part of the group.

I think that what keeps people from learning a language like isiXhosa is the difficulty of the language and also one's age – children seem to learn a new language more easily. Also we tell each other that English is the common language – that this is the language the children are trying to understand anyway. I don't think we are really trying that much. Also we are still very separate, we don't really interact.

I am learning to speak isiXhosa now. As ek 'n woord 'n paar keer hoor dan vra ek vir die kinders wat dit beteken – so het ek nou al 'n hele paar woorde aangeleer. Partykeer is die kinders in die ander klasse verbaas om te hoor dat ek isiXhosa woorde ken.

*When I hear a word often I ask the children for its meaning – in this way I have learnt quite a few words. Sometimes the children in the other classes are surprised to hear that I know some isiXhosa words.*

At the start of this year I attended a workshop on Diversity Management which helped me to see the language issue as one of the many 'isms' in our country. The presenter was an Afrikaans first language speaker but I did not mind the occasional error because what he said made such an impact. This workshop and talks I had with colleagues and friends thereafter, helped me to see that for me language, culture, class and race are not separate issues.

One of the schools I work at employed a Xhosa-speaking Grade 6 teacher from the second term. She assists me with translations when

necessary and is also helping me to learn to understand spoken isiXhosa (I find that no matter how hard I try I am unable to understand conversations) by asking me a question or making a comment in isiXhosa and then being prepared to repeat it, slowly, as I usually need her to. I also find that I need to hear myself translate her comment or question to English – give myself time to think – before I can make a response – in English still at this stage.

### 15. Being able to speak most of South Africa's languages

Teacher, friend (written response/conversation, 18 October 2004)

My languages are isiXhosa, English, Zulu and Afrikaans – although I am not good at speaking Afrikaans.

I learnt Xhosa at home from my parents, and English at school and from my brother who left home at the age of 14 and left for Australia. He always wrote letters to me in English and his friends from all over the country used to write letters to me. I had to answer these letters in English, that is where I think I improved my vocabulary. Secondly, through reading newspapers and magazines (English).

Zulu: my sister is married to a Zulu and I stayed with them for quite some time – and again Zulu is similar to my home language.

Afrikaans: at school. I had a very good Afrikaans teacher at primary school. He liked the language and enjoyed teaching it. At school we had to recite Afrikaans poems like Muskiete Jag, Lui Letta and Die Kwatertjies etc. At college, Afrikaans was my third language. During our lectures we were not allowed to speak any other language but Afrikaans.

I think what helps one to learn a second or third language is to speak that language and to show interest in that language. For me it helps that I have a lot of friends from foreign countries like Zambia, Namibia and the Congo. I love travelling and have been to Zambia and Namibia. I also do a lot of reading – English magazines and newspapers – and I watch TV and listen to the radio.

When I moved to Cape Town from the Eastern Cape in 1996 I worked at a restaurant. Most of the staff were Xhosa speaking but there were also a few foreigners. The South Africans wouldn't mix with the refugees – they felt they were better, but it was also xenophobia I think. While I worked there I tried to make people see that we are all black, that we are all from Africa.

I did my teacher training and practice teaching in English. For the first half of this year I taught Maths at an Afrikaans medium school. I taught in English but the children (40% were Afrikaans speaking) understood me. Half of the children in this class are Xhosa speaking – I use isiXhosa when they ask me to explain instructions. I find that the children like speaking isiXhosa to me – and I have to stop

them sometimes, e.g. when they reply to my questions using isiXhosa. I feel that the English and Afrikaans speaking children do not know what is happening. Also most parents ignore their culture, they send their children to school to learn English and when they hear that they are being taught by a Xhosa-speaking teacher – I run away from those little things ...

My feeling about my other languages is not different from my own language. I just feel like I must be able to speak most of South Africa's languages. I need to speak them more so I can be fluent in all of them.

I would like to learn French also but I find it very difficult. My boyfriend is French and most of his friends can't speak English or Afrikaans. His home language is Lingala but he cannot speak his own home language. I think it is easier than French, especially since it is an African language.

Between April and August 2004 I attended a Narrative Therapy course – and found new ways to describe my world and think about the way I related to others. I started to risk using isiXhosa in taxis and while shopping and found an overwhelmingly positive response from Xhosa speakers both in acknowledging my greetings or observations about the weather and in the way they are prepared to assist with pronunciation.

In July 2004 I attended the SAALA conference where the idea of South Africa being a multilingual country was brought home. The SAALA experience was valuable in other ways too – the talks with humble African academics, the realization that I am still not able to listen to some whites, forcing me to look at my feelings about my own language. I was also forced to face the feelings that surfaced when I realised that my own language, Kaaps, did not count in academic circles, and that in this context I could not trust myself to express myself clearly in my second language, English.

At school I was joined by a PRAESA staff member during the third term. Her stay opened up the possibility of us turning around the tendency of Xhosa-speaking children leaving school without being able to read and write in their mother tongue. We also used the opportunity to share some language learning experiences. During one of our discussions about language attitudes she remarked, 'They expect us to sound like first-language speakers.' I made up my mind then that I was no longer going to be self-conscious about not being able to pronounce the 'r' the way first-language speakers do. Our relationship also allows me to practice my isiXhosa via code mixing, sms texts and e-mails.

## 16. IsiXhosa: Fighting for equal status

Friend, researcher, teacher trainer (conversation/written response, 12 October 2004)

My mother tongue is isiXhosa but I also understand, speak, read and write English (well enough) and Afrikaans and Zulu (a little, but Zulu more than Afrikaans).

My father introduced us to isiXhosa reading. He read the Bible to us every evening and often gave us a piece to read. When he read, he would ask us what verse he read, just to make sure that we were awake! I did not enjoy this as these sessions were almost like a service, not that I hated services, but he took so long making sure we understood him and what God was saying to us. Everything was too long ... So they did not really result in a love of reading.

Although most of my reading is in English now I do still read Xhosa stories at home to my son. I speak isiXhosa at home and at work. I also do some isiXhosa writing, not a lot though.

I never really thought of this thing of MOTHER TONGUE I learnt of this term, sometimes when I learnt about multilingual education. So it being isiXhosa also wasn't something I looked at seriously. That isiXhosa is also fighting for its equal status (as other African languages) as English and Afrikaans. Also it wasn't something I thought important, not negatively until I was required to do some translation work. Conflicts within me started when I was required to produce standard Xhosa for our materials that we were developing and translating.

I learnt English mostly from reading at home. I used to buy comics from the money I received for doing chores. Once I had read one I would swap with a neighbour – I think this acted like a kind of motivation or incentive. Later I began reading Mills and Boon. I can't remember doing much English reading at lower primary school. I can't remember what things we did at senior primary.

When I started at college I came into contact with more English-speaking people so I felt the need to improve my English. I felt good when I could speak English better than my Xhosa-speaking friends. I almost feel ashamed now for ever thinking that. It was silly, really. Now I don't worry if I mess up in English – it is my second language anyway. Most of my reading and writing – e-mails – is in English.

I learnt Afrikaans at school. I hated the way I was taught Afrikaans – teachers first of all didn't themselves understand the language. Then there were the rhymes they taught us – meaningless bits you had to memorise – and face being lined up and hit if you failed to remember it. Afrikaans stories that were read were translated to isiXhosa or English.

We were never given the opportunity to discuss things so we had very little understanding of the language. Yet in the exams they expected you to understand. Although I can understand and speak the language now I do very little reading or writing in this language.

I learnt Zulu by watching TV programmes and also from friends at college who spoke Zulu to me – I got to use my Zulu knowledge a bit in college as my friend would speak only isiZulu to me and I would reply in isiXhosa. Nowadays I hear isiZulu on TV only.

I am going to work more on improving my mother tongue now. I plan to do this by reading and writing more and also by using isiXhosa in all functions/domains.

## 2. Writing language biographies – a reflection

The process of conversing, recalling and writing was done over a six-week period. Most of the conversations took place telephonically. I jotted down notes using the questions as an open frame. It was necessary for me to type up the conversations shortly thereafter, on the same day at least, if I was to tie the key words together.

I use the term conversation rather than interview because the observer's paradox – injecting oneself into the data – was ever present (Wardhaugh 2000:148). Because of my interest in the subject I responded, prodded, even objected at times. Some of the respondents were anxious about being interviewed initially but were put at ease when I gave them an indication of the kinds of questions I would be asking. I was able to use the questions to guide the conversations in most cases – one or two people found it difficult to stop talking after the first question so I allowed them to talk and fitted what they had said into a frame afterwards.

It was clear that respondents enjoyed speaking about their language experiences and that for many, language is an emotive issue. From the start, this study has been a personal one, and in line with this I found the conversations enjoyable, meaningful and enriching. The conversations also helped me to become more aware of how language is used in my world. I recorded my growing language awareness via a diary on my language observations during this period. (Refer to Appendix I.)

### Kaaps/Afrikaans – My hystaal

'For the ordinary person a dialect is no more than a local, non-prestigious (therefore powerless) variety of a "real language" ... it is often equivalent to non-standard or even sub-standard and can connote various degrees of inferiority with the connotations of inferiority carried over to those who speak a dialect' (Wardhaugh 2000:24).

An issue that was raised by many of my Afrikaans-speaking interviewees and that plays a key role in my own language biography is the relationship between Afrikaans and Kaaps, the question of standard language versus dialect. I experienced this link between speaking a dialect and feelings of inferiority again shortly before beginning to write this text.

At the annual conference of the Southern African Applied Linguistics Association (SAALA) in July 2004 I received a call from my mother while travelling with PRAESA staff. Earlier in the day it had felt so good to hear one of them speaking Kaaps but now I was embarrassed to respond to my mother. I felt it was fine to speak the dialect if your first language was really English but speaking Kaaps at home somehow gives you away.

The thread of feeling inferior for speaking Kaaps can be found throughout the following statements derived from the interviews and conversations, above:

- 'Niemand skryf Afrikaanse briewe nie, miskien ommat os kombys Afrikaans praat.' (1)
- 'Many came using "raw" language which we had to try to correct.' (3)
- 'When I speak Afrikaans I try to speak proper Afrikaans, not the kombuis Afrikaans some people use.' (3)
- 'Nee, ek weier om Kaaps te praat. Dis nie 'n taal nie, dis 'n gemors van 'n taal. Ek noem dit eintlik 'n skollie taal ... Hoe kan 'n mens so praat? Ek glo almal kan reg praat ...' (5)
- 'Afrikaans learners, in the minority, were looked down upon by these teachers.' (8)
- 'I don't feel good about using Afrikaans in public – mense sien neer op Kaaps. Die blankes maak guy van ons en die well to do kleurlinge maak guy van ons.' (9)
- 'I have to learn (Afrikaans) so that I can do justice to everyone – not the proper Afrikaans but the Afrikaans Capetonians speak.' (10)

Feelings of inferiority, of one not speaking a 'real' language seem to belong to people whose home language is Kaaps/Afrikaans – English speakers who are able to speak Kaaps do not seem to have the same feelings.

And yet at the same time the language is valued as a language close to one's feelings and as a relaxing medium of communication:

- 'As ek van my hat af praat dan praat ek Afrikaans' (1)
- 'I speak Afrikaans to my family and friends when I am relaxed.'

- 'I don't know how to speak Kaaps ... one feels like an outsider, not part of a group.' (15)

The thoughts expressed above relate to Kaaps versus standard Afrikaans – with standard Afrikaans being regarded as the 'pure' or 'real' language. As a child the 'differentness' of the language became clear at school, as I interacted with my Port Elizabeth family, as I listened to Pip Freedman doing his Gammatjie en Abdoltjie jokes on radio. But the feelings of inferiority only really surfaced when I needed to interact with white Afrikaans speakers. I remember my apologetic 'I only speak kombuis Afrikaans' when I first entered the job market. I also felt at a distinct disadvantage having to think about my pronunciation, searching for a word, while conversing in Afrikaans. The thought of responding in Kaaps was unthinkable at that stage. Perhaps just as well, since 'the code one chooses has an important consequence for how others view you' (Wardhaugh 2000:111).

The sentiment that Kaaps (or kombuis Afrikaans as I called it until a few years ago) was not a 'real' language has been with me for most of my life – I loved Afrikaans 'if it was spoken properly'. As recently as 2003 I felt guilty indicating that I was bilingual – I spoke Kaaps and second language English which meant that I didn't have a 'real' first language – that I spoke one and a half languages at best.

And yet I have continued to use Kaaps and it has been so essential to my being. I use it at home all the time, with relatives most of the time, with friends often and at work sometimes. Whereas I often use it with my friends when I am playful I can also use it when I am serious. And when I listen to their responses I realize that there is nothing ugly or deficient about the language – my language use, the code switching, code mixing and code mangling is strange at times but I use it effortlessly and it serves me well.

I am no longer apologetic about speaking Kaaps. I know that there are times that I find listening to it unpleasant, for example the speech of people who are under the influence of alcohol and the exaggerated accents on TV programmes. But I no longer feel any embarrassment about others hearing me use Kaaps with family and friends. I have come to realize that what makes a language beautiful depends on what is said and how this is said rather than the language structure or pronunciation.

At the start of this writing I did not have clarity about the Kaaps that I speak. There are still areas that I need to explore, such as the influence of Malay on the Afrikaans we use in Cape Town and the different varieties of Kaaps that may exist. I do know that although there are certain pronunciations that most of us use, e.g. *oe* for *oo* or *djy* for *jy* and that code mixing occurs, the Kaaps I speak is not exactly like my brother's.

#### **Ampe Proudly Kaaps – 1 March 2005**

Ek dink my language use is 'n combination van lygyt en asprisgyt. Ek code switch, code mix en code mangle more than most en nie die Engelse of die Boere sal van my Kaaps approveie. Ek is baie lief vi constructions soes gewatch en sukking en my familie sê patykee vi my – 'os praattie soe nie' – nieman van hulle sê bv. 'ek het it daa gesittit' nie.

Dan is daa oek die fact 'at ek directly van Engels na Afrikaans translate en vice versa ... die aspect is nogal iets wat my soe bietjies uneasy lat voel ... en oek 'at ek often code mix ommat ekkie die Afrikaanse word kennie, en 'at menssie allowed is om in Kaaps te skryffie ...

But otherwise serve my language my well. Birie hys issit effortless en natural en soe oek is my conversations mit my bilingual vrinne – never mind of my een Afrikaanse vrint praat van 'n gemors van 'n taal'.

I look forward to the time when I have enough isiXhosa to include this as part of my Kaaps but at this stage praat ek net kancinci. I would also like it if I could use my Kaaps with my English friends maa ek kannit noggie riskkie wan ek issie sieke of hulle my serious sal vattie, somehow nie vi my as less sal judgie.

Soe miskien is ek noggie soe comfortable mirrie taal as wat ek gedinkkittie ...

#### **Almos' Proudly Kaaps – 1 March 2005**

*I think my language use is a combination of being lazy and rebellious. I code-switch, code-mix and code-mangle more than most, and neither the English nor the Boere (Afrikaners) would approve of my Kaaps. I love constructions such as 'gewatch' (watched) and 'sukking' (struggling) and my family sometimes tell me, 'We don' speak like 'at.' Nobody would say, for instance, 'Ek het it daa gesittit' (I putted [put] it over there).*

*Then there's the fact that I translate directly from English to Afrikaans and vice versa ... this aspect makes me a bit uneasy ... and also that I often code-mix 'cause I dunno the Afrikaans word, and that you're not allowed to write in Kaaps ... But otherwise my language serves me well. At home it's effortless and natural, as are my conversations with my bilingual friends – never mind that my one Afrikaans friend speaks of a 'mess of a language'.*

*I look forward to the time when I have enough isiXhosa to include this as part of my Kaaps but at this stage I can speak only a little. I would also like it if I could use my Kaaps with my English friends but I can't risk it yet 'cause I'm not sure if they'll take me seriously and would somehow judge me as inferior.*

*So maybe I'm not as comfortable with the language as I thought ...*

I am beginning to appreciate the feelings of solidarity and warmth when people code switch or code mix at social functions and, now and then, at workshops. When I hear someone struggling to speak English I want to plead with them – *os amal vestaan Afrikaans ...*

And then I want to plead with myself to risk using Kaaps more – I use it with my colleagues at school, why not extend this to my white Afrikaans speaking colleagues at the EMDC where I do not have to prove myself? At this stage this still feels unnatural and I find myself switching to English. I will remember what one of my former colleagues told me in the conversation we had (6): ‘We then adjusted our Afrikaans to match theirs – felt frustrated by this, why did we have to accommodate them?’

It is no longer as important for me to be able to speak standard Afrikaans – I understand and can read it well and that is fine for now. As a teacher I was able to use standard Afrikaans when I started teaching – if I am placed in a situation where I need to speak the language regularly I think I will be able to manage.

There was a time during the last few months when I practised with colleagues at school but I found this too unnatural and exhausting. For this reason and also because I need to be clear about not adjusting my language from a position of inferiority, I decided against working on my standard Afrikaans. At this stage it is much more important for me to be able to speak and understand isiXhosa.

As a primary school child I was able to write standard Afrikaans although this was not what I spoke at home. Because I virtually stopped writing in Afrikaans since then I am no longer able to write anything but informal notes. Although it would be good to be able to think of myself as fully biliterate my inability to write standard Afrikaans does not cause me too much concern.

Because most of my learning has been in English I lack the Afrikaans vocabulary to converse without code mixing. According to Wardhaugh (2000:112), ‘listeners can very quickly stereotype one’s personal and social attributes on the basis of language cues’, and the reality is that in most cases strangers will think me less educated if I speak Kaaps or code mix. In these cases I will speak English. Where I want to use language to connect with a white Afrikaans speaker I will code switch if I become too self-conscious using Kaaps.

## English – the prestige language

In matched guise experiments people ascribe more favourable characteristics – of being more intelligent, competent, industrious – to English speakers even though these are not deserved (Wardhaugh 2000:341). Although English came nowhere near to being an international language

for me as one of more than 3 million pilgrims in Mecca this year, in my language community English is the language that matters and is valued and English speakers sit with this prestige ascribed identity. This was expressed in many of the conversations:

- ‘as mense Engels gepraat het, het mense gesê hulle is sturvy, hulle vebeel vi hulle, hulle dink hulle’s wit. Ek wiettie, consciously of sub-consciously, as mens ieman hoo Engels praattit, het ’n mens gedink hulle is slim, advanced.’ (1)
- ‘I suppose you can say I value English highly.’ (4)
- ‘I value English as my home language and also as an international language.’ (6)
- ‘Ek dink ek was rebels – ek wou nie die Engelssprekendes die bevrediging gee om Engels te praat nie – die Engelse het mos in elk geval daai meerderwaardigheidsgevoel.’ (7)
- ‘I realized I was amongst more well-to-do people so I made a conscious effort to improve my English – it’s all to do with one’s self concept. People who spoke English were better ...’ (9)
- ‘... they used to make fun of children whose home language was not English.’ (11)
- ‘Ek praat soms Engels met my family in law – as ek hulle wil bamboozle en wys hoe slim ek is.’ (11)

Like many Afrikaans or Kaaps speakers I too feel the tension between valuing English and struggling with feelings of inferiority, of thinking that English speakers are ‘better’ in some way. As described in the language autobiographies of my interviewees, English appears to have a long history, and people often refer to English-speakers as being more intelligent or advanced or better off.

My battle with English started with embarrassing mispronunciations while reading aloud in class and seeing how children who were able to speak English were admired. Then at work the almost debilitating difficulty of speaking to the white managers; shying away from social encounters because of my limited vocabulary of everyday objects and events; feelings of inferiority about the second languageness of my English – using Afrikaans word order, the inability to pronounce the ‘r’ like first language speakers do; all of these compounded my feelings of inferiority when I was in the company of those who spoke with a white accent.

But then most of my reading and academic learning has been via English. And it is also in English that I am able to write down and clarify my thoughts. I have been able to use English as a way of equalizing power in some cases. A white Afrikaner struggling to express herself in English

does not have time to think of herself as better, is not as imposing as one using standard Afrikaans. Some of my friends are English speaking and I enjoy listening to and learning from them. Code mixing using some English is part of my Kaaps. Perhaps it would be more difficult for me to accept and value my Kaaps if I could not speak English ... A friend has said (15), 'There is an expectation that we should speak like first language speakers.' This was also an expectation that I placed on myself because I had held the stereotype in my head (Alexander 1998) that English and English speakers were better in the area that mattered for me. They were more intelligent.

I then not only judged myself on my ability to speak this prestige language but I also judged others and so ascribed to them an identity – people who were unable to speak good English were less educated. I made such judgements more in the case of black South Africans. With whites, although I enjoyed watching them struggle, I did not relate this to their intelligence, not consciously at least.

### isiXhosa – Building Bridges

Because of the experiences I have had the past two years I no longer judge people on their ability to speak English. The ToTSA course more than anything else helped to change my perceptions. But significant too has been my attempts to learn isiXhosa, my difficulties with the complex grammar, my inability to understand the simplest conversations. This struggle has helped me to overcome any language prejudice that I might have felt towards isiXhosa and remains a humbling experience. My attempts to learn isiXhosa have also shown me the value learning another language has for building bridges and breaking down other stereotypes – and have opened up the possibilities of my using Afrikaans, e.g. to challenge the stereotypes I have about whites.

Because isiXhosa speakers allowed me to see how much they value the interest I show in their language I was able to understand why I tend to react more warmly to people who show that they have some understanding of mine (Kaaps). I was also able to recognize the change in a white Afrikaner when I switched to Afrikaans when I realized she was struggling in English. This was also raised in the language biography I recorded. A former colleague explained (6): 'When one is able to speak two languages and someone is struggling too much in one of them, one has to accommodate them.' A year ago I would not have agreed with this view – now I see this as a way of showing respect, as an essential part of being South African.

Although the clicks – I am still too embarrassed to risk – and understanding conversations remain major challenges I have acquired some phrases which I enjoy using. My vocabulary is growing steadily and I am

able to formulate simple present and future tense sentences which I can use at school and with colleagues and friends. I think I would need to do a few formal courses before I will be able to count isiXhosa as one of my additional languages but I am proud of what I have learnt so far.

### Conclusion

The writing of a language biography begins to play a role in language learning, as for example in the framework of the European Language Portfolio. It can be used to provide information about an individual's language background (Broeder *et al.* 2001) as well as serve as an instrument for language planning (Scheider & Lenz 2001). But it also helps the author to enhance her or his own language awareness. As Bloch (personal communication, 2004) writes, 'A language biography provides the mechanism for one to use one's own language experiences to pull together and deepen/ sharpen one's understanding/views about language issues.'

My recollections, the observations I made during this period (see Annex 1) and the conversations I had with family, friends and colleagues sharpened my understanding in many ways. Amongst other things I came to realize that my feelings and attitudes were not unique, that other Kaaps speaking people struggle with the same feelings of inferiority. Some of their comments helped to point me towards more positive ways of using language. Looking back on my own language history I now realize how I have allowed my insecurities about speaking English to keep me from connecting and risking.

The reading I have done and the input I have had from PRAESA helped me to understand language prejudice – my own as well as that of others. I understand how I live with my languages and in many cases why I do so. Comments such as 'they expect us to speak like first language speakers' and, linked to this, 'language change seem to be motivated by the desire to be more like those with higher social prestige', have helped me to change the way I look at my own as well as the second languageness of other people in my community.

The heightened awareness that this language biography brought helped me to see that for me language is but one aspect of identity. It is closely related to race, but social class and factors like occupation, education and income (Wardhaugh 2000:143) also influence language perceptions and prejudices. Not all white accents have the same effect on me. It is the one that sounds educated, looks affluent that I struggle with ... where in an attempt not to feel inferior I sometimes keep myself from listening.

I now have a clearer understanding of the prejudices and stereotypes that I carry around (Alexander 1998). Because I realize that these prejudices were learned they can be unlearned. Conversely, I am learning that I do not have to act in accordance with the identities others ascribe to me.

This heightened language awareness does not sit comfortably yet. It requires effort to challenge one's perceptions – to ever be asking 'Why are you feeling this?' or 'Where is this coming from?' At this stage I still need to remind myself that as long as I allow myself to feel intimidated by an accent or think of others as 'less' because of some perceived deficiency in their language I am passing a judgement based on some kind of prejudice or stereotype. And that I am still allowing others to 'incarcerate my mind' (Alexander 1998:20). The process of unlearning will not be easy but because of the knowledge and insight I have gained I feel positive that I will be able to continue the start I have made. For me language has started the process of removing the layers that keep me from seeing and listening to my fellow South Africans.

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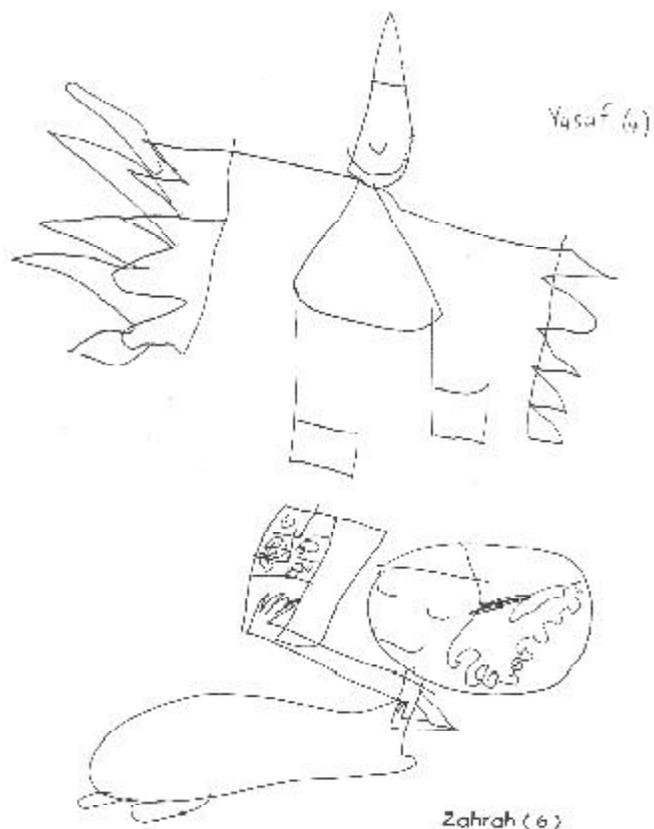
## Appendix 1

Language observations recorded in a diary during the time I was writing this language biography, 23 September – 28 October

- 23 September in taxi – coloured 'guard' spoke English to black passengers. I gave him 'thenga iwotshi' when he told one lady, 'I must buy a watch'. Told him that it was good to be able to travel with a friendly guard.
- 24 September – started greeting for Hadj – brother in law spoke Kaaps (standardized a bit) or English depending on the language of people we greeted. Some of the Arabic words used: nijah – intention, dua – prayer, Inshallah – God willing; and a Malay: maaf – forgiveness.
- 25 September – isiXhosa speaker in queue in front of me: 'It's nice and cool here.' I responded 'poli.' and she obliged with polille. Started speaking to me about her son thereafter. Greeted them (her sister in law and niece) with Hambani Kakuhe – response, 'Thank you very much dear' Enkosi kakhul'. Thought then that I would probably never meet them again. On my way out spoke to a little boy – vula as he tried to open door. Father smiled proudly. Effort to speak isiXhosa will always meet with appreciation ....
- 26 September – attended family wedding. Bride started off with some Arabic phrases then continued in immaculate English. Parents and grandparents, most people at wedding Afrikaans (Kaaps) speaking.
- 27 September – My 4 year old nephew does not understand me when I speak Afrikaans to him but has memorized a few Arabic prayers – pronunciation very good although he does not understand what he is reciting. His sister (aged 6) does have some understanding of Afrikaans but is not willing to let me see how much she knows. Does not speak the language at all. I am conflicted when I speak to her – do I use Kaaps, standard Afrikaans?
- 28 September – phoned the education department – official more relaxed when I used dankie when I could hear that she was Afrikaans speaking
- 29 September – very pleased to hear that a friend has much more isiXhosa than I thought she had! Also aware that when I start speaking about things that have intense meaning for me, I cannot manage in English alone – need to be able to code switch, speak Kaaps.  
First attempt to read the Koran after a very long time. Struggled but realized that I could use the suras I have memorized to teach me to read the ones I don't know.
- 30 September – Nephew and niece playing in the study. Nephew wrote his name starting from the right. Knows all letters of the alphabet. Wrote 'book' and 'yes' then some random letters asking 'this spells?' Asked me, 'Why do divers have triangle slippers?' Sister responded 'They're not slippers they're flippers and they are not triangles.' Also later, while we were using dominoes to build objects and shapes – 'You can use the dominoes to build the capitals in my name' ... Realised how fortunate they are – read to regularly, playing around on a computer therefore able to identify and write letters –

and being able to build on this once they start with formal schooling – very different from circumstances of most of the children I teach.

Nephew stopped drawing to look at me and observe, 'Your doekie is colour but people isn't colour – people is just people and children.' His sister a while ago remarked to me, 'People are different shades but it doesn't matter.' [see drawings – below]



E-mailed English-speaking friend using some standard Afrikaans.

Phoned English/Kaaps speaking friend – the message on her answering machine starts with salaam and ends with shukran. Phoned an Afrikaans speaking friend – English answering machine.

- 1 Oct: Shopping. Met former pupil – obviously struggling with English but would not change even when I switched to Afrikaans.  
Asked assistant – 'How do you say 'Can I have one' in isiXhosa?' She provided 'Ndicela' – not quite right? – Greeted her with 'Ube nemini emnandi' – pleased about her response 'nawe' – as this showed that she understood my isiXhosa.

Earlier the morning spoke to sister while waiting for shop to open – spoke Kaaps and did not mind English speakers at the back hearing. Told her that I was glad she was speaking to her kids about race – says that she does not want to make them too sensitive about colour – started speaking about shades when her daughter asked why her brother is 'white' and she is not.

- 2 October: Heard cousin speaking to his father – used Kaaps – he was one of the first cousins brought up speaking English – some cousins now reverting to speaking Afrikaans to parents because they know it is easier for them.  
Smsed a friend using some isiXhosa. She replied teaching me some phrases.
- 3 October: Brother in law put some Arabic phrases, vocabulary on computer for me – some patterns with nouns? Need to be careful – will not be able to memorise Arabic and Xhosa at the same time? Decided to be more systematic in learning Xhosa – consolidate what I have learnt.  
Greeting for Hadj – mostly Afrikaans now – responses always in Kaaps – touched by sincerity of wishes. Whether a language is beautiful or not depends on what is said and how this is said ...
- 4 October – enjoyed speaking to a former colleague about her language history – realized that she shared some of my feelings about Kaaps.  
Asked a friend/colleague if she could help by speaking to me – slowly – in isiXhosa – need to learn to understand. Asked me, 'Uyenzile?' – yenza was familiar but I was stumped by the inflection.
- 6 October – find that I need to hear my translation before I can respond to her isiXhosa remarks.
- 11 October – learning to listen softly – enjoyed Afrikaans used by travel agent – Kaaps has ability to make me laugh.  
Workshop – not open to listening to white presenter – left during the break after she had told the group 'You can stay here till 6 if you are going to continue interrupting me like this'. Felt that I didn't have to stand for that. Realized later that once I related to her as white I became overly critical and that I somehow felt that I did not have to think of her feelings, of her humanness.  
Home: Nephew while drawing: 's is for ... Salaah and f is for?' Once I had given him some examples, he was able to volunteer 'and f for fish'. Beginning to see how children actively construct their knowledge. (Got the same feeling about a learner this morning – unable to blend, very few sight words – somehow he has managed to crack the code.)
- 20 October – Why am I surprised that my isiXhosa speaking colleague/friend writes English well?  
When we spoke today I wished that I could understand isiXhosa – that one can only open one's soul in one's own language.  
Asked colleague if we could converse in standard Afrikaans – that I wanted to work at my ability to speak standard Afrikaans.

- 22 October – Again had to ask friend to repeat herself before I could understand her – and then only able to respond in English – figuring out individual words then using the roots to understand general meaning.
- 23 October – School workshop – Vision and Mission Statement. Presenter, former principal, used English mostly, but also standard Afrikaans when the language seemed to express the idea better. Told my principal afterwards that I made him feel good because I had affirmed him on a few occasions – apart from the fact that I did not have to worry about colour what made me so responsive was the way he used Kaaps now and then but especially when he used a Malay word to respond to one of the participants – asked ‘Op watter skouer sit die ieblied?’ (devil) Is this how the kids feel when they see that I know a little about their language?
- 25 October – Teacher very proud of one learner who was able to tell her ‘girl – hit me.’ Said that although this child does not use articles or adjectives the meaning was there – I agreed. Then asked her if she knew the isiXhosa for girl, hit and me. She said that acknowledging this gives one renewed respect for what the kids are able to do. Spoke ‘polished’ Afrikaans to a learning support colleague – becoming less self-conscious about doing so. Attended meeting – admired a Xhosa speaking colleague’s ability to add bits of Afrikaans to her English.
- 28 Oct – Multilingual Awareness team teaching with Praesa friend- felt that many kids had been turned around at the end – no longer shy to admit that they speak isiXhosa at home. Many of them found that they are in fact able to write in isiXhosa. Also did some affirming of Afrikaans (Kaaps) home language speakers – a few had no problem speaking to me in Kaaps thereafter. The majority spoke English to me though.

## Appendix 2

Questions that served as a framework in the biographical conversations with my interviewee.

1. Which languages do you understand, speak, read and write?
2. How did you learn these languages? (when, from whom?)
3. What do you think are the factors that help one to learn/ keep one from learning a second language?
4. When do you use a particular language? (with whom, activities, reading, TV?)
5. How do you feel about the languages you speak? What is your attitude towards these languages? What is the value you place on these languages?
6. How have your languages impacted on your life? (memories, anecdotes?)
7. Do you have any intention of learning any additional languages? If yes, why? How do you intend going about doing this?

## Treating the colonial language fever. A Namibian language biography

AngelikaTjoutuku

### 1. My language biography

I grew up at my place of birth, a village known as Ombujovakuru in Otjozondjupa Region. In Ombujovakuru – as in other villages in the region – people were either illiterate or had only very rudimentary reading and writing skills. These are the people to whom I would like to say a word of gratitude for making use of our literacy skills for their correspondence purposes which were highly valued and sometimes rewarded with praises and gifts in the form of money, nuts and wild berries. The church pastor also encouraged children to read aloud certain Bible texts during the open-air church service at our village. Our reading and writing in the mother tongue improved very fast through this kind of practice. Otjiherero, my mother tongue, was the only language spoken in the area. I had a good native command of the language that I picked up from people around me. The only slight problem I had was with the transformation of the direct speech into indirect speech. My grandmother straightened it out through little messages that she used to give me to convey to other members of the family. I still recall that she used to tell me a message, then asked me to demonstrate how I would do it and corrected me until I got it right.

### Early exposure to linguistic analysis

I am the fourth child of our family. We were two daughters and two sons. Unfortunately, my sister who was eight years older than me, preferred to play with members of her peer group. I did not have friends to play with and was therefore forced to be in the company of these teenage girls from the age of six years onwards. There were times when they did not want me in their company for reasons that were better known to them, but they had no chance to get rid of me. It was very unfortunate for them that they could not speak any other language except for Otjiherero, our vernacular. The level of my language acquisition was on a par with theirs. Even if they tried very hard, there was no word within the range of their vocabulary that was strange to me. For that matter, they were forced to insert some funny words and strange phonics into the Otjiherero sentence structure to prevent me from taking part in their conversations. For example, *indjo tu yende ngwina* (let us go there) became *i-yongombo ndjo-yongombo tu-yongombo ye-*

*yongombo nde-yongombo ngwi-yongombo na-yongombo*. The word *yongombo* (of the goat) had been inserted between the syllables of each multi-syllabic word and at the end of each monosyllabic word. This was confusing for me in the beginning as my focus was on *ongombo*. After they had cheated me several times, I ignored the repeatedly inserted word and focused on the syllables, which I rejoined to reconstruct the sentence.

The next puzzle the girls used could have been troublesome if I had not dealt with another exercise of a similar nature before: *Immindjo tumnu yemnende ngwimmina* (let us go there). With regard to this puzzle, they inserted two nasal sounds (/m/ and /n/) between the syllables of each multi-syllabic word and at the end of mono-syllabic words. To adhere to the Otjiherero grammatical rules of open ended syllables, the inserted nasal sound (/mn/) becomes a syllable on its own, ending in a vowel which is in harmony with the preceding vowel (e.g. /mn/ preceded by /i/, becomes /mni/).

Eventually they created another thought-provoking puzzle which I also decoded in a week's time: *Iindjoto tutu yetendete ngwiinata* (let us go there). Here they inserted another syllable with /t/as initial letter. As in the previous one, the ending vowel of the inserted syllable is in harmony with the ending vowel of the preceding syllable.

I regard my incidental exposure to the analysis of Otjiherero syllables as something that counted in my favour towards the mastering of literacy in my first, second and third languages.

## Learning to read – the brother as a teacher

My whole motivation in reading started when I was approached by some village teenage boys to deliver certain notes to my sister who was more confined to our home after her initiation (first menstruation) ceremony. My family was preparing her for an arranged marriage and did not want her to get in touch with the village boys who were hanging around at the village shop and water point.

Some young men who were interested in my sister sent notes to her, which they told me to deliver to her in such a way that my parents would not notice. I delivered these notes as per instruction and the village boys were very satisfied and rewarded me with sweets as a token of appreciation. The way that she responded when she was reading these notes made me curious. I wanted to know what the young men were writing that amused her so much. I tried to imitate my sister by pretending to read these notes, but could not make sense out of them. At last I realised that I needed to learn how to read and asked my sister to teach me. Frankly, she was not willing to share the information from her lovers with me and refused.

Fortunately my brother Mboti, who was three years older than me, was very kind and agreed to become my teacher. He brought a reader back from school and managed to teach me during weekends when he came home from school which was approximately 30km away. I was very happy and used to count the days of the week one by one, knowing that he would come back on the fifth day. Saturday was a day of fun. My brother was a bird hunter. After our daily tasks I used to accompany him on his bird hunting mission, carrying the reader along with me. Sometimes he would teach me while we were out there in the bush relaxing under a tree or frying some birds on the fire.

Sometimes my brother taught me twice a day if he had no other tasks to fulfil for our father. During the school holidays we had ample time to concentrate on our reading classes. We used to have classes two or three times a day depending on the daily schedule. Our good brother and sister relationship created a relaxed atmosphere. Mboti was very patient and willing to assist me any time. All these factors contributed a lot to the fast pace at which I mastered reading in Otjiherero, my first language, long before I turned eight.

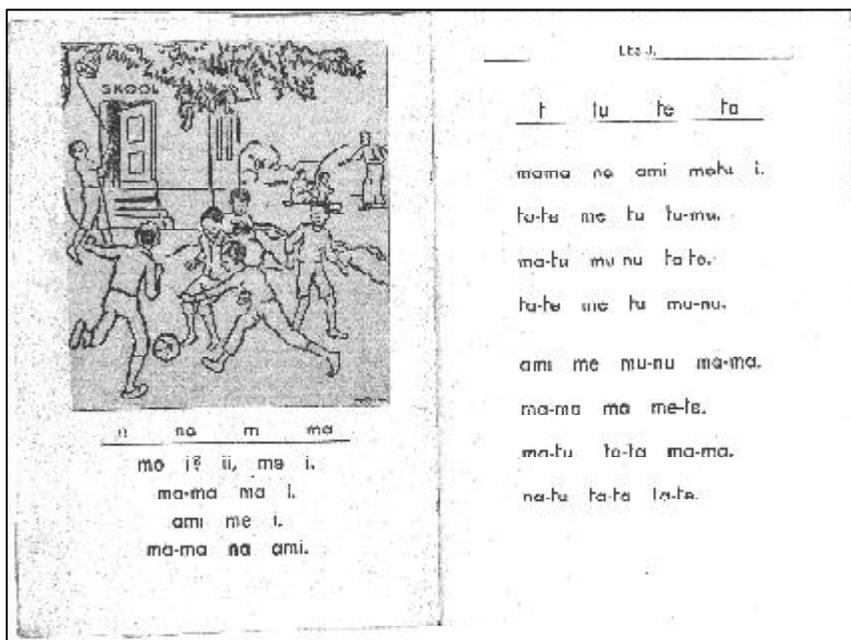
I enjoyed the peaceful and quiet environment in the bush. There was no one to disturb me like grandmother who used to ask me to bring *ekara* (hot charcoal) for her smoking pipe. My sister was also very relieved that she was no more in the company of the *ovikaubungu* teenage girls during weekends and school holidays.

The reader, Okambo kOkurihonga Okulesa by Dr H. Vedder, a missionary of the Rheinisch Mission Church, had a format that started with the five vowels of Otjiherero which were written in a jumbled order as shown below:

**LES 1.**

	<u>i</u>		<u>u</u>	
		<u>e</u>		
	<u>o</u>		<u>a</u>	
a	e	i	o	u
o	i	a	u	e
e	u	I	a	o

Each lesson in the book started with key sounds, which were repeated several times in the two following lessons. Both lessons were derived from the same topic and picture. The illustrations were only on the left as indicated on top of lesson 2:



Each lesson in the book had a similar poster. Each second lesson was longer than the previous one. Lessons become longer towards the end of the book and pictures disappeared after all the phonics were covered (from lesson 21). The words in lessons 22 to 40 were no longer divided into syllables, and capital letters were introduced. The reader was small (a bit smaller than A4 folded in half) and light. It fitted nicely into the hands of a little child. It was written in legible bold print with a double space between words. It had black and white pictures. It covered all the phonics of Otjiherero. There were no questions or activities in the reader. Its contents were based on rural life and folk tales, and a few texts promoted Christianity.

### Entering the formal school system

I still remember that the year I started going to school I could not start school in the first term due to heavy rains, flooded rivers, the lack of bridges, and the fact that transport was only provided once a month between our village and Windhoek. For someone looking forward to being in school it was really hard to hang around for more than three months. Finally I managed to arrive at St Barnabas School in Windhoek at the beginning of the second school term.

Unfortunately, my first day at school revives bad memories because of the teacher's unfair treatment. I was placed in a multi-grade classroom

where we were taught through Otjiherero as the medium of instruction. After the break, the teacher was busy with the 'Groot A' (Sub A2) class and sent the 'Klein A' (Sub A1) class outside with a big boy who was instructed to teach the reading lesson on a poster. I could not understand why some learners could not read, and laughed at them. After several warnings, I was reported to the teacher. The angry teacher grabbed a stick and beat me three times on the hand. Then he instructed me to pay attention and learn from the other children. On my way out I said: 'What am I going learn from kids who cannot read?' The teacher called me back and asked whether I could read. I just nodded my head while crying. He gave me two lessons from our first reader, *Okambo Okuribonga Okulesa* and was surprised by the good level of my reading skills. Instead of apologising, he warned that I should not make a noise again.

For the rest of the year, I just sat there like deadwood without learning anything during the reading lesson. There was also no supplementary material to read. The reader that we used in Sub A2 and Sub B, titled *Embo rOkulesa*, was written by Dr Heinrich Vedder. It was not interesting at all. The print was too small for children of my age. It consisted of forty reading texts. The majority (53%) of the texts were aimed at the promotion of the Christian faith. They were too abstract and vague for children of my age. The text which confused me most was known as 'Ondiro' (death). I mistook Death for a horrible monster which came to kill people. The content of the story in short is as follows:

A man was walking along the road when he was attacked by Death. 'There is no man who will escape me,' shouted Death. The strong man overpowered Death and left him injured at the side of the road. A young boy who passed by found Death lying there and took care of its wounds. Yet Death had no mercy for the poor boy who helped him, and wanted to kill him immediately. After an argument, Death agreed that he would give him some more time and that he would send some messengers to him before the time had come. After a short while, Death came back to the boy. When the boy complained that he had not seen the messengers Death had promised to send, he told him that the messengers were already there and that they were headache, fever and pain. There was no way out and Death killed the poor boy without mercy.

Imagine such a figurative story for children aged seven to eleven years. It was very scary and sounded very strange, but there was no one to clarify its meaning. Teachers never bothered to explain anything. We also assumed that teachers were never to be asked questions.

This story disturbed me for years and stayed with me until recently when I got hold of this reader and reviewed the text with the eyes of an adult. I came to the conclusion that the contents of this reader, except for fables and a few other texts on moral lessons, are totally inappropriate for children under the age of ten.

## Writing in Otjiherero

I learned to write at school soon after my eighth birthday. Fortunately, by the time that I started school I had already been exposed to numeracy and many games that had made me ready for school. Thus I had practised most of the patterns which were used for the hand-to-eye co-ordination during the school readiness programme. For instance, we drew lines of similar patterns in the soil with sticks and fingers for the decoration of our imaginary bedspreads when we were playing the *Ouruwo*, the little-house-game, in the dry river bed.

The first month at school, I was only troubled when writing the numbers two and five. I failed to understand why I could not cope. Every time I was told to repeat the exercise, I cried and the tears dropped on my maths exercise book. The teacher thought that I was messing in the book and beat me. Despite all these frustrations, I managed to master the two numbers soon and became a star in mathematics as I had already gained some experience in adding and subtracting at our village shop. What I learned at school that year were only the symbols for 'plus' and 'minus'.

Writing as a new skill fascinated me very much. Every afternoon I started writing with my finger in the soil. I transcribed each reading lesson on the walls of our house until I had covered every single space where my arm could reach. Then I got something to climb on in order to write higher up on the wall. One day I took my aunt's white shoe-polish and wrote a few lessons on the outside walls. My aunt was furious and shouted at me. The next weekend she bought a gallon of pink paint and instructed our cousin to re-paint all the walls. Although I was seriously reprimanded, I could not stop at all. I kept on writing on our small water container and finally forced my aunt to buy me a spare exercise book for my writing skill practices.

Communication with friends in the form of letters already started when I was in Sub A2, i.e. in the second year of school. I still remember the letters of condolence that I received from my two best friends, Titi and Vajoo, when I was in the rural area for the funeral of my grandmother.

As there was no well established standard orthography for Otjiherero, we were taught only to use the correct phonics for spelling without paying attention to certain rules like the disjunctive and conjunctive way of writing. The most important thing was to write neatly and without spelling mistakes. Reading and writing skill in the mother tongue improved through the little exposure and practice that we got through correspondence with friends and family members and the reading of Bible texts. One day, my aunt also encouraged me and said: 'Good girl! Your

teacher is impressed by your progress in school. He thought that I was the one who taught you how to read, write and calculate. But I told him that this was impossible, because I was a real *ongombe* and could not read, write and calculate myself.'

I cannot recall any activities in the line of creative writing in Otjiherero; we did only spelling exercises and dictations. Story telling took place during the oral lessons, but it did not serve any literacy-related purpose as there were no discussions or questions on the stories. The teachers did not bother to tell stories themselves. The only response from their side was: 'Next' or 'next one'. Sometimes the teacher was dozing at the table and did not listen to what we were telling during the story telling period. The rest of the time was devoted to Bible Studies.

We were fortunate that Otjiherero continued to be taught as subject for one more year after having switched over to the Afrikaans medium of instruction in Std 1 (year four). In that way, I had the advantage of learning my mother tongue for the first five years of my primary school education.

I cannot recall any poems that we learned in school in Otjiherero except for one political song that we were singing and reciting when we were in Sub B:

*Matu pandere pove hi Suidwes-Afrika*

*Matu tire pove hi rootate yetu*

*Mona mwi, mona mwi omu twa turire*

*Mona mwi, mona mwi omatundu wetu*

*Matu pandere pove hi Suidwes-Afrika*

(We will stand by you, our country South-West Africa)

We will die for you, country of our father

Here, here is where we were living

Here, here are the places where we used to stay

We will stand by you, our country South-West Africa)

## Afrikaans – an alienating experience

Reading and writing in Afrikaans was introduced in 'Groot A' (Sub A2, i.e. the second year). Afrikaans was completely foreign to most of us. The meaning of each and every word in the lesson was taught during the reading period. I can hardly remember that we had any conversation

exercises in Afrikaans. We learned two rhymes, *Baba se vingertjies* (which I have forgotten) and *Die klok*:

*Die klok*

*Tik-tok tik-tok*

*Hoor wat sê die klok*

*Honderd jare is al oud*

(The clock

Tick-tock tick-tock

Hear what the clock says

A hundred years old)

The teacher did not explain the meaning of the rhymes. We just recited them in a chorus or individually.

I had a big struggle with the Afrikaans word order and some strange phonics like /sk/ in *skool* and /sl/ in *slaap* and also with the spelling of some words like *die* which sounds like the Otjherero /ndi/. Due to my limited vocabulary, I was neither able to communicate verbally nor in written form. Each community at Windhoek Old Location, where I lived, stayed in a separate area and spoke its own vernacular and practiced its own culture. Therefore, I did not have the chance to speak or learn any language outside school. Many people in my community could not read, write or speak any other language apart from Otjherero. My aunt with her broken Afrikaans, sufficient for basic communication as a domestic worker, could not offer any support when I struggled with my homework. Once I was confused by some Afrikaans-speaking ladies from the coloured community whom we met at a nearby shop. I could not understand why they asked for 'een pond botter' (one pound of butter) and paid two shillings instead of one pound, the British currency which was used in Namibia before the South African rand and cent currency. It puzzled me, but I did not ask anyone. Then I discovered that one pound in this regard refers to weight.

The first Afrikaans reader that we used had black and white pictures and simple bold printed texts which were very easy to read. This was lesson 1:

*Fana en Nana.*

*Fana en Nana kom.*

*Ma roep.*

*Fana en Nana kom eet pap.*

(Fana and Nana.

Fana and Nana come.

Mom calls.

Fana and Nana come to eat porridge.)

The environment in which the stories in the reader were set, was rural. There was nothing in the book that could reflect my cultural identity. The next reader which was prescribed for Sub B was titled, *Môreson Reeks, Afrikaanse Leesboek vir Bantoe-skole by Barnes, Ross and Potgieter*. It had beautiful pictures with a good balance between rural and urban environments. Its print was big and bold. The book was not only meant for reading, but also for upgrading the limited vocabulary of 'Bantu children'. Each lesson had the same format as here in lesson 1:

kat muis nee slaap vang vloer

*Hier lê my kat.*

*Waar lê hy?*

*Hy lê op die stoel.*

*Wat doen die kat?*

*Die kat slaap.*

(Here lies my cat.

Where does he lie?

He lies on the chair.

What does the cat do?

The cat sleeps.)

The material was meant for children and we enjoyed it. The list of new words and exercises for 'klank drill' (sound drill) at the beginning of the book were very useful. Like the previous reader, this Sub B reader had a lot of names from South Africa



which were strange to us (e.g. Pule, Modise, Nosipho). Thus the reader did not fully reflect our cultural identity.

The teachers were very eager to explain the meaning of new words at the beginning of every new reading lesson. They also assisted us with the pronunciation of words during the reading aloud session. To be honest, they were more willing to teach Afrikaans and English than Otjiherero. Written work in all three languages consisted mainly of dictation. I still cannot forget how I was puzzled when our Std 1 class teacher told us to write an essay of ten sentences about 'Ons Dorp' (our town). I did not know what the word 'opstel' meant and on top of that, my vocabulary was too weak to construct a sentence in Afrikaans. Well, I put something on paper which I was not quite sure of.

Close to the end of my primary schooling, I started to realise that I had problems with Afrikaans prepositions. This happens to many speakers of Otjiherero, which is a language that uses locatives in most cases, a language with very few prepositions like up, down, inside, outside, behind, in front, on top and near. I still remember how my Std 5 teacher explained the preposition in 'ek bak in die son' (I am baking in the sun) where I used 'ek bak op die son' (I am baking on the sun). Our teacher explained the difference with an illustration of a cartoon of a person sitting inside the sun. I enjoyed that explanation and never forgot that preposition again. Of course this teacher who was the speaker of the same vernacular as mine, understood why I had problems with prepositions.

My biggest problem with Afrikaans started at high school (now known as secondary school) where all my Afrikaans teachers were whites. These white teachers did not try to understand why I was struggling with prepositions in Afrikaans. Instead of teaching me how to master them, my teacher gave me a list of more than fifty sentences with prepositions that I had to learn by heart. Most of these sentences were above my level of understanding. So, I just tried my best to learn them like a parrot, even if it was impossible for me to master them all. What I got in return was nothing else than humiliation.

The other problem that I had with Afrikaans was the pronunciation of words that start with the letters /b/ and /d/. We, the Otjiherero-speaking learners were mocked by our teachers because we pronounced words such as *berge* (mountains) and *daar* (there) as *mberge* and *ndaar*. The teacher intervened with destructive remarks like, 'You Hereros, the word is not mberge'. We were the laughing stock in every single Afrikaans lesson. Therefore, the Afrikaans class was 'onsmaaklik', was not enjoyable, to the Otjiherero-speaking learners. Our primary school teachers who were speakers of Otjiherero as we, could not realise that we were pronouncing words with the letters /b/ and /d/ wrongly and never corrected us and could not spare us all that later embarrassment.

The white teachers were not aware that the vast majority of the Otjiherero-speaking learners of those days grew up in linguistically homogeneous rural areas where they did not have the chance to learn Afrikaans or any other language before school-going age. It was really unfair to compare the Otjiherero-speaking learners to the Khoekhoegowab (Nama-Damara)-speaking learners who grew up in towns and who were exposed to Afrikaans at an earlier stage. Some of us who struggled with Afrikaans were labelled as 'stupid' by those who did not speak a single word in our languages.

In Otjiherero it is acceptable to say *beh!* to show that you don't follow what is said. That was not allowed by the white teachers who were teaching us Afrikaans. As someone who was influenced by my mother tongue, Otjiherero, I tend to say *beh!* and you can imagine the humiliating remark that followed. 'Ekskuus, nie "heh" nie! Hou op om bobbejaan tale te praat.' ('Excuse me, not "heh!" Stop speaking baboon languages.')

My language Otjiherero was referred to as one of the so-called baboon languages. Certainly, it was meant to be a joke, but what a joke! No wonder that we started hating Afrikaans and its speakers so much. The Soweto riots because of Afrikaans followed six years later on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 1976. We saluted those brave kids for their prompt action, even if it cost them their blood and even if lives were lost. They released black children in South Africa and in Namibia from the hegemony of Afrikaans.

### Learning English and German, and finding back to Otjiherero

The problems that I experienced with acquiring my third language, English, were similar to the problems with Afrikaans. Luckily, my brother Mboti was around to help me with the pronunciation of some difficult words in English. During that period the wind of English swept over from South Africa. Some students like the late Advocate Fanuel Kozonguizi had enrolled at South African institutions of higher education and propagated English. The youth at the Old Location, including Mboti and other school dropouts, were impressed by the students' level of proficiency in English and started to communicate in English themselves, no matter how broken it was. I regarded this as an inspiration for me. I was always listening carefully when they spoke English and asked my brother later on to explain the meaning of some words. He also assisted me with my homework in English and Afrikaans. English pronunciation was not only problematic to me as a learner, but also to some teachers. Teachers pronounced certain words differently and confused us that way.

In primary school my Sub A1 and Sub A2 teacher was good in all three languages (Otjiherero, English and Afrikaans), but he preferred to pray in English. Every morning we prayed the Our Father with him for the two

years that we were in his classroom. Even if I was not able to pronounce it correctly, it gave me the feeling of speaking English. Every night I repeated that prayer before I went to bed, in this way:

Our father who ati heaven  
Hallowed tibi thy name  
Their kido come  
On earth esiti heaven  
For ever e ever, Amen.

My aunt was very impressed and praised me by saying ‘You have got a soft head.’ With that expression she meant that I was learning fast.

Apart from the supportive role of my mother tongue and its solid foundation in literacy, I could also rely on my strong interest in languages. I also assume that the space of one year between the introduction of Afrikaans and English in school avoided confusion around specific phonics.

The language teacher that I adored so much at high school was Mrs Amy Hoets, my English teacher. She was a friendly and supportive elderly lady. For instance, when we happened to construct an English sentence in the wrong word order she used to say: ‘I think this is a *Bantuism*. You constructed this sentence in the same order as in your home language. In English the adjective comes before the noun’, and so on. Her English lessons were enjoyable. Although she was a native speaker of English, she could admit that she did not know everything. ‘Let me ask Dr Barnes, the author of this book’, is what she used to say. She always came back to us with the right answer after a week or two. She was our only hope and inspiration as future teachers.

In my first year at secondary school, I took German as a third foreign language. In the first week, the teacher came in for two days and presented a few lessons that we could not follow at all. By the end of the week he gave us some material to read and went on study leave for four weeks. Upon his return he expected us to conjugate some nouns in the ‘Nominativ’, the ‘Akkusativ’ and ‘Dativ’. It was a matter of doing it right or getting a knock on the neck, followed by a ‘dumme Schweine’ (stupid pigs) remark. Two students left school. I just hung on until the end of the year and dropped German for another subject.

My literacy in Otjiherero never stopped being functional. Since I first acquired literacy skills in Otjiherero, I used to assist my family members with their correspondence or even with love letters for some of my

cousins who were illiterate. One story that I remember is the incident of Frieda’s love letter. Frieda, who was much older than me, had a boyfriend who had dated her for three years. In the meantime, another young man started to propose to her with love letters. As Frieda was illiterate, I was the one who had to read and to reply to these letters for her. She dictated what I should write in the letter. One day, just after I had finished writing Frieda’s love letter to her secret lover, her boyfriend entered the room. The way that this young man looked at me was frightening. I was so scared and could not think straight. The only solution that I could think of was to get out of the room. So, I folded up the letter neatly, put it back into the writing pad and went back to school. When I came back home during the weekend, my niece confronted me and said: ‘You are a stupid young girl. Why did you put the letter back in the writing pad? You should have taken it with you as if it was yours. The man read the letter and ended the relationship.’ One year later, Frieda got married to the secret admirer and my words of congratulations to her were: *It is due to my stupidity that you are getting married today. The other gentleman should have waited for years to come.*

The way that my immediate family members and other members of our community made use of my literacy skills encouraged me to become what I am today. I was trained as a teacher for the upper primary phase. Otjiherero was one of my three languages of specialisation and I have been teaching Otjiherero for more than fifteen years.

Currently I am one of the promoters of my home language. In my current job as senior education officer for Otjiherero at the Ministry of Education I read a lot of Otjiherero manuscripts that I evaluate on a continual basis. Soon after the independence of my country I developed two textbooks for Grade 9 and 10 respectively. Apart from that I produced a lot of poems which are used in schools. I am also assisting the Directorate of National Examinations and Assessment (DNEA) with the setting and the moderation of examination papers and other related tasks. I am currently busy writing my own children’s stories and poems and assisting teachers in writing learning materials in Otjiherero.

## 2. Language biographies of my family and friends

A language biography is not easy to get out of people. They prefer to talk about something else that happened in their lives than elaborating on language acquisition and literacy learning experiences. That is why I could not get much out of some people, including my own mother. Among the people that I interviewed was one young lady, a cousin of mine, who really enjoyed the interview and provided me with more interesting information.

### My mother's story: the first school in the village

My mother grew up as a rural child. None of her family members could read or write as there were no schools in the whole area until the first school opened its doors when she was thirteen years old. She was one of the first kids from the village that were sent to school. At school she learned how to read and write in her mother tongue, Otjiherero. There were no textbooks at school. Their teacher started by teaching the five vowels (a, e, i, o and u) which were repeated at the beginning of each reading lesson. Their teacher also taught them how to read single words like *tate* (father), *mama* (mother) and so on. Later on they were given simple sentences to read, for example:

*Tate ma ri onyama.* (Father is eating meat.)

*Mama ma tereke.* (Mother is cooking.)

They also did not have any exercise books. During the handwriting period, the teacher wrote a letter and a word on the blackboard and instructed them to rewrite these on their little writing boards which were known as *otjirei*. They had little bits of old cloth that they used as dusters.

Other subjects they learned were Bible studies and simple calculations. My mother enjoyed school and felt very bad when she was taken out after her first periods, close to the end of her first year at school. She feels that she had not learned much in the few months that she was in school, except for calculating, reading and writing in Otjiherero. Her reading skills in Otjiherero improved gradually when she became an adult and was attending church services where she had to follow the texts that the pastor read out of the Bible. Her writing skills only improved through correspondence with family members who were staying in the remote area of the Omaheke region. Her handwriting is very bad and she does not like reading and writing. In fact, she no longer uses her writing skills at all, preferring instead to communicate via the telephone. Sometimes she reads the Bible when she is in the mood for it. She feels that her parents were unfair to take her out of school, while her cousin John, who started school with her, could stay on and became a teacher.

### My husband's story: peers as 'auxiliary' teachers

My husband also grew up in the rural area. The only school in the area was seven kilometres away. As a herd boy, he was not allowed to go to school before his ninth birthday. But he had a niece who was taken out of school to stay at home and she started to teach her cousins on an informal basis. She did not have any material and started to teach them by writing words in the sand. Then she asked my husband and his younger brother to read with her. Some of the words that he still recalls are: *Sara* (girl's name), *esu* (puff-adder), *ongeyama* (lion). She also taught them to write their own names. My husband was eager to learn and also wrote names of some other members of his family. By the time he was sent to school he could read a few words in Otjiherero.

At school their teacher taught them through the global teaching method, whereby they were first asked to read the whole sentence and then word by word. He liked reading, but hated the idea of being beaten if he failed to read well. To avoid the inconvenience, he worked very hard after school. His niece helped him to rewrite what he had learned at school, until he could master the new phonics. Sometimes she taught him from the Otjiherero book of hymns. He was able to master all the Otjiherero phonics within six months and was promoted to Sub A2 after June. Although the teacher and medium of instruction remained the same, he was then confronted with a new language, Afrikaans. He heard Afrikaans for the first time from his teacher. It sounded very strange and funny, but he wanted to learn the language of the whites (*eraka rovirumbu*). His parents used to tell him that he needed to learn the language of the whites to interpret for them if they happened to fall sick and needed to consult a doctor in the nearest town. Their teacher taught them parts of the body, objects and animals. He pointed at objects in the surroundings and said: *tafel* (table), *stoel* (chair), and so on. Sometimes he switched from Otjiherero to Afrikaans (e.g. *huis/ondjuwo*). The poor old teacher was not proficient enough in Afrikaans and was possibly too proud to consult his colleagues. When his Afrikaans vocabulary failed him, he did not hesitate to use an Otjiherero term in the Afrikaans sentence structure, e.g. 'Die *ngongwa* byt' instead of 'Die rooiby byt'. My husband and his fellow learners assumed that the Afrikaans term for a *red bee* was also *engongwa*, as in Otjiherero. They only managed to learn better Afrikaans from Std 1 onwards when they were taught by a teacher who had a better command of Afrikaans. The medium of instruction was not solely Afrikaans as it was supposed to be, but a mixture of Afrikaans and Otjiherero up to Std 5. To his disadvantage he failed Afrikaans in Std 6.

English was introduced as a subject when they were in Std 2. They started with reading that went together with the learning of the basic

vocabulary. Their teacher was far better, but one of the lazy types. He did more boasting about his English than teaching. My husband's interest in English was instilled by Asaria, a school boy who came from Botswana when they were in Std 6. He was very friendly and helpful. They used to approach this boy to assist them with reading and pronunciation. The boy also taught them English when the teacher was absent for some reason. Their teachers were unfriendly, and the learners never asked questions when they could not understand. That is why they relied on this boy from Botswana. My husband's English only improved in high school, even though they were taught by Afrikaans-speaking teachers who pronounced words with a funny accent.

Currently my husband mostly communicates in Otjiherero with his family members and also listens to the Otjiherero radio channel of the Namibia Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). English is his second best language. He uses it for wider communication with friends and colleagues from other language groups. He likes reading English newspapers and watching TV programmes which are completely in English except for the news programme in Otjiherero, broadcast twice a week.

### **My son's story: a long list of languages**

We went to stay in Windhoek for three years. My son also stayed in the rural areas for one year and used to go there during school holidays so he could acquire a good command of Otjiherero. In the year he turned four he started attending pre-school at the Afrikaans-medium Red Cross Pre-school and Day Care Centre. He did not learn much at that school, because the Otjiherero-speaking kids isolated themselves from the rest and did not make any efforts to interact with the others. He was transferred to an English-medium, former white pre-school for another two years. He learned some basic English vocabulary and was able to communicate in English at a very low level. I was the only one who sometimes tried to communicate with him in English. He did not speak English with his friends who were all Otjiherero-speaking and did not have much exposure to English during his first three years of education.

Later he was enrolled at an English-medium primary school in the Katutura township of Windhoek. He coped well with English orally, but not with written work. He used to spell words as they sounded to him and it did not improve for several years. His parents did not bother with his spelling. They only assisted him with reading and speaking skills in English. His parents did not encourage him to improve his Afrikaans, the second language that he learned at school. The little command of Afrikaans that he had was just what he picked up in the streets of Katutura through commu-

nication with friends. He had Afrikaans for three years and dropped it when he left the country with his father.

He was ten when he left the country with his father. They stayed in Moscow for three years. Apart from English, he was confronted with two more foreign languages, namely Russian and French. These languages were more complicated for him than English. He experienced Russian as the most complicated one of all. Towards the end of his first year there, he had only mastered the Russian alphabet together with some 'strange' Russian letters. He and his father had no communication with the Russian community.

After three years, they left for Germany and he dropped Russian and started learning German and French. He made friends with kids who were native speakers of German. They encouraged him and he developed an interest in German. With some support from his father, he had few problems with German.

Back home he continued with English and German at Secondary School. He lost his native speaker command of Otjiherero. In the meantime he added Oshikwanyama to his list of languages. He went through the process and pain of learning seven languages in his life. Now he is more comfortable in English and German than in Otjiherero, his mother tongue. There are times when his Otjiherero vocabulary fails him when he wants to say something to his grandmother. This kind of handicap makes him feel lost. He feels terribly embarrassed when his Otjiherero-speaking friends make negative remarks, such as: 'How come that your Otjiherero is so weak, while you are the son of the lady who knows Otjiherero in and out?' He has already mentioned to me that he would like me to give him back-up classes after the completion of his tertiary studies in 2005. He wants to pay more attention to Otjiherero and fill the gap. The few words that he knew in Russian and French have completely left him. He feels that it was necessary to learn so many languages and yet he cannot speak most of them well. He would have preferred to learn two or three languages and know them well, rather than being 'half-baked' in many languages.

### **My cousin Naroo's story: Improving the mother tongue outside of school**

Naroo is a young lady of twenty-eight years who is a member of the third generation of the Ovaherero who fled to Botswana during the 1904 Ovaherero Genocide. She grew up in Ondwezu village in the Orapa area of Botswana. She stayed with her grandmother and acquired a good standard form of Otjiherero. Due to the lack of communication between Ovaherero and Botswana kids in the village, she did not have a chance to learn

Setswana before school-going age. She attended primary school at the nearest rural town where her sister was employed as a domestic worker.

The problem started at school when she was confronted with two foreign languages. She had to learn through Setswana as a medium of instruction and learned English as a subject. She could not cope during the first half of the year. Her teacher was very rude and called her names like 'madi kgwa' (woman of the bush). Naroo felt very bad and hated that teacher. Their teacher did not make any effort to accommodate learners who were not speakers of Setswana. She beat them and labelled them as being stupid but did not explain what they could not understand.

Naroo relied on the assistance of her friend who was fluent in Setswana and taught her everything she had not understood during the reading lesson. By the end of the year, she could read simple words like mme, ala. Her reading and writing in Setswana improved during her second year of schooling.

During the English lesson, the teacher concentrated on teaching basic vocabulary and on instructions. He repeated the words and instructions and explained their meaning in Setswana. Luckily, English was new to all, thus the teacher could not discriminate between learners. He stopped calling her 'madi kgwa' when he realised that Naroo was picking up English very fast compared to many other learners in the classroom. Naroo wanted to learn English at a very fast rate and hated the fact that she was not able to construct a simple sentence in English soon enough. She mentioned that problem to her sister, who could not understand what she was trying to explain because her sister had never gone to school.

In the small town where Naroo lived English was only heard in the classroom during the English lesson. It seemed that English as a medium of instruction was not fully implemented at the primary school level. Instead teachers used a mixture of Setswana and English. Naroo's proficiency in English improved through the reading of leaflets of the Bible texts. She also took them along when she went home to her grandmother on weekends and during school holidays. She translated the message of those leaflets to her grandmother who appreciated this very much and encouraged her to do more exercises of that nature. Her grandmother became angry when she sometimes mixed Otjiherero with Setswana, because of the negative attitude that Naroo developed towards the status of her own vernacular. Her grandmother reprimanded her until she realised the importance of her mother tongue. Together with her cousins, they started to develop Otjiherero reading and writing skills on their own through the use of the Otjiherero Bible and book of songs. Her grandmother was always willing to assist them when necessary as she was proud of their initiative to master reading and writing in their mother tongue.

Soon after the completion of form 5 (Std 10), she got married to a Namibian man and migrated to Namibia. She is currently staying in an area where Otjiherero is predominant. Currently, she is using English for reading newspapers and magazines that she gets from her husband once a week. She hardly hears any Setswana in the area where she is staying. She doesn't regret that she has learned two foreign languages, but feels that the education system deprived her of the advantage of studying literature in her mother tongue.

### My friend Raphael's story: growing up bilingually

Raphael grew up at Kakangala village in the Caprivi region. He learnt to speak two languages simultaneously. At home, he communicated in Silozi with his grandfather and in Chisubiya with the rest of the family. The playground was dominated by the Silozi-speaking children. He did not experience any problems with the acquisition of the two languages that he learned from birth. He does not mix these two languages. According to him, each language has its peculiar rich vocabulary with a few terms which do not correspond. For instance ihanda (head of a certain fish) does not exist in Silozi, but again Silozi has another term like tasa (new moon) which is not known in Chisubiya. Unlike Silozi, Chisubiya is not a written language or a language of education. For that reason, the status of Chisubiya is lower, and technical terms are almost non-existent.

He learned to count in English from the fishermen before his enrolment at school. He learned reading and the writing of a few basic phonics in Silozi from his cousin at home. The approach he used was the teaching of vowels, then combinations of vowels and consonants before moving to sentences, for example:

a            e            i            o            u  
ma        me        mi        mo        mu

By the time Raphael started school at the age of twelve, he was able to read and write in Silozi, the only written indigenous language in the whole Caprivi area. He was placed in Sub A1 for three weeks before he was transferred to Sub A2. He skipped Sub B and was transferred to Std 1 in the year that followed. He did not experience any problems with Silozi literacy. In fact, his Silozi became stronger than his Chisubiya which serves the role of a spoken language at community level without any written literature. At school he only learned to write the few letters that caused confusion like *-u-* and *-n-*; *-b-* and *-d-* and the *-e-* that he wrote upside down. After that he could play with the combination of sounds and spelled any word that came to his mind. Their Std 1 class was combined with a Std

2 class. Sometimes the teacher encouraged him by saying that his spelling was far better than some of the Std 2 learners’.

Their English teacher’s proficiency in English was quite good. They started by learning some nouns and instructions (e.g. mother, eat, open the door). He still remembers one boy who translated *my uncle* into Silozi as *mai a kulu*, which means the eggs of a tortoise. That boy was later on nicknamed ‘Maiakulu.’ The only written work in English that they were doing was spelling dictations. He had a problem with English words which are not pronounced as they sound. It was odd that *t-a-l-k* should be pronounced *tok*.

Afrikaans was introduced at Sub B level. As someone who skipped Sub B, he came across Afrikaans for the first time in Std 1. It sounded strange, but its spelling was easier than the English. He learned a few poems in Afrikaans that he recited at joint school concerts with learners from Botswana. His pronunciation in Afrikaans was awkward, yet people were impressed because they did not know a single word of Afrikaans. Later on Afrikaans became a hated language because of its association with the colonial oppressors.

Today, except for hearing Afrikaans on the streets of Windhoek, he does not use it at all. Even if he speaks Silozi at first-language level, he feels that it is not as genuine as the one spoken in Zambia where it originated. He regards himself as a multilingual person who speaks Chisubiya and Silozi as his first languages, English as his second language and Afrikaans as a third language (which is hardly used). As a result of his working responsibilities, he uses English and Silozi on a more regular basis. He uses Chisubiya at family and community level only.

Raphael feels that the promotion of Silozi in education has placed it in a stronger position as compared to Chisubiya. He feels that unless the Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (MBESC) revisits its language policy, the promotion of Silozi as the sole language of education and lingua franca of the Caprivi region could cause a lot of damage to the other languages which are spoken in the area.

### 3. What the language biographies show

The samples of language biographies collected among my family and friends provides clear evidence that many Namibians from the black communities are multilingual, as summarized in Table 1.

Person	languages spoken	level	current status
myself	Otjiherero	L1	• communication at community level
	Afrikaans	L2	• communication when necessary
	English	L2	• wider communication and employment
	German	L3	• not used at all
husband	Otjiherero	L1	• communication at community level
	Afrikaans	L2	• communication when necessary
	English	L2	• wider communication and employment
son	English		• wider communication and employment
	German		• communication and employment as well
	Otjiherero		• communication at family level
	Oshikwanyama		• communication at family and peer level
	Afrikaans		• communication with some friends
	Russian		• not used at all
mother	Otjiherero	L1	• communication at community level
cousin	Otjiherero	L1	• communication at community level
	Setswana	L2	• almost not used
	English	L2	• wider communication and information
friend	Chisubiya	L1	• communication at community level
	Silozi	L2	• communication when necessary
	English	L2	• wider communication, information and employment
	Afrikaans	L3	• almost not used

Table 1.

The biographies show that many illiterate parents and members of the extended family deemed it necessary for their children to master basic literacy skills in their mother tongue. They realised through their own life experiences that literacy was necessary in this new era and made a lot of effort to support their children. The contribution of parents only stopped when their children entered the classroom and were taught in languages that their parents could not speak, let alone read and write. They entrusted the teachers with their children and were waiting for the half-year and end-of-year progress reports. On the other hand, the so-called educated parents like myself often devalued their vernaculars in education, even if they were proud of their own languages as tools of communication and cultural identity. I took my child to a school where he was taught through another medium of instruction than his first language. The reasons that guide such decisions are often that African languages are not seen as viable for scientific and economic purposes, as well as for wider communication at regional and international level. Currently my child regrets that he is not able to read and write the language which is supposed to be his mother tongue. I realise that I was one of those people with 'colonial language fever'. I thought that there was no bright future for my children without a good command of the so-called 'bread and butter languages'.

In the past, as we see from the accounts, many girl children were taken out of school by their parents for protection reasons as in the case of my sister, my mother and my husband's cousin. Parents felt that basic literacy in the mother tongue and a little command of Afrikaans or English was sufficient for the girl child. How many girl children were or still are deprived of their right to education? Even though many people realise the importance of education for children of both sexes, there are still children – especially among the previously marginalised groups like the San and the Ovahimba communities of Namibia – who are bound to their cultural practices of early marriage for teenage girls. There is not enough awareness of the fact that if you educate women, you educate the nation.

Afrikaans had the status of an official language and a language of wider communication in pre-independence Namibia. It was a compulsory subject for all learners throughout the country. The wheel turned in favour of English after independence. Now we are sitting with another colonial language which has taken over the role of a national language of the Namibian Nation. Many parents are now striving for the improvement of their children's proficiency in English. According to the 2001 education statistics, among the 17000 Otjiherero-speaking learners in lower primary schools, only 8000 learners (47%) are taught through the medium of Otjiherero. More than half of them are taught through the

medium of English. With parents who have fallacies that the child's command of English improves faster if she or he is taught through the medium of that language, it is not possible to have a 100% rate of mother tongue instruction in the near future. Although the education system makes provision for the teaching of Namibian African languages, parents are not always aware of the importance of the first language and take the wrong decision.

As many people in Namibia grew up in homogeneous rural areas, there was little chance to learn languages across ethnic groups. My friend Raphael is the only one among my interview partners who is bilingual in two African languages, Chisubiyana and Silozi, since birth. On the other hand, many black Namibians learned one or more languages of European origin, like English, Afrikaans and German. At the same time we were deprived of the opportunity of having in-depth studies of literature in our mother tongues. The colonial masters' divide and rule policy proved to be successful. The colonisers used the promotion of languages and cultures as an excuse to separate people in separate groups that are not co-operating. I believe strongly that present negative attitudes towards African languages are partly guided by the fear of repeating the mistake of disunity. Even though English has been selected for the sake of its 'neutrality' and international status as a national language, it cannot qualify as a language of wider communication in Namibia as it is only spoken by a small percentage of the Namibian population. It is obvious that the vast majority of the people are now actually excluded from the benefits of knowing the sole official language of the country. The status of other Namibian languages will be elevated when people come to realise that their languages are not only languages of identity and communication at community level, but also languages of empowerment in all spheres of life.

It is obvious from the language biographies that some people like me or my cousin took their own initiative to learn how to read and write in their vernaculars. We are not an exception. But this effort was hardly valorised in the school system. Similarly, my husband's niece: Naroo lived in Botswana, a country with a monolingual policy. She learned to read and write in Otjiherero from her grandmother and partly on her own through the use of the Otjiherero book of songs at home. Looking at the way some people attained literacy without assistance from the formal school system, it shows us clearly that people are willing to make a difference to their lives. The literacy programmes which were introduced by the Directorate of Adult Basic Education (DABE) in Namibia can link onto this long tradition of community support and interest.

The accounts of my interview partners show how important teaching methods are: there was little emphasis on interactive methods and on

meaningful writing. Most of us went through the same process of additive and subtractive language-in-education policies whereby mother tongue teaching was dropped and other languages like English and Afrikaans were added. At lower primary level, the system produced 'half-baked' learners who could only read, write and speak a few words in their second and third languages, whilst communication was totally out of the question. Taking the example of my husband's teacher, it is obvious that some teachers had a tough time in teaching through languages that they did not master themselves. The question of teaching approaches was not taken seriously. Schools had no choice, they had to cope with untrained and half-trained teachers. Many learners dropped out of school after three or four years without being able to communicate in any other language except their mother tongue. Those who stayed in urban areas gained more vocabulary on the job market, with very few who became more proficient in languages during their further studies (in secondary and tertiary education). Learners are now expected to be trained in a way that will make them individuals who can argue, persuade and advise their peer groups and other members of their communities without violation of any culture. They are also supposed to be trained to become creative thinkers and writers.

## 4. Fields of application: working with language biographies in multilingual schools

### A point of departure for learner-centred education

Whenever we look at the biographies of people, we have the tendency to focus on what people have achieved in terms of academic achievements or heroic deeds; we focus on people such as politicians and prominent members of society. We rarely focus on everyday life in biographies. A medical practitioner is always going a few steps back by inquiring about the patients' medical records. This enables him or her to link previous problems to the current complaints for effective diagnoses and suitable medication. That is exactly what we as educators are supposed to do if we are striving for improved language teaching. We need to get a better picture of every child's language acquisition experiences. Such information can be gathered through language biographies and which can enable teachers to identify the child's resources and needs.

Language acquisition is an informal learning experience that starts at birth. Every child is able to acquire any language at mother tongue level, if he or she does not have serious mental deficiencies. According to Brewster, Ellis and Girard (1992:7), mother tongue learning is a natural phenomenon which differs from the systematic structured classroom learning and teaching of languages. Whenever one has to move from the natural way of language teaching and learning to the more structured way, there is a big change in the approaches which are applied. The child is now moving from a spontaneous to a more purposeful and structured way of language learning. In our formal approaches of language teaching we tend to underestimate or downgrade the child's ability of language learning. We should put more emphasis on language teaching approaches that are more close to natural ones, that foreground the aspect of pleasure. The Namibian Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture supports the idea of Learner Centred Education: 'The language is the most important key to learning ... Children play and experiment with the language, demonstrating and enjoying their ability to acquire language and even to turn it upside down for fun' (2003:12).

One of the wise sayings of Madiba Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa, is: If you talk to a person in a language that he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart. As we have seen in the biographies, children bring to school languages they need for communication with other members of their local environments like nannies, friends and adults who are speakers of other languages than the child's mother tongue. Teachers could take cognisance of such languages through the children's linguistic biography.

Teachers who are equipped with such information will be able to recognise the languages that their learners speak and discover the multitude of languages spoken by the learners in his/her classroom. In other words, language biographies could serve as a point of departure for understanding each learner better.

Some time ago I visited a rural school with Otjiherero medium of instruction from Grade 1–3. In the Grade 1 classroom were two boys from a nearby commercial farm who were proficient in Khoekhoegowab and Afrikaans. Both of them had a very poor command of Otjiherero. The teacher was accommodating. She went out of her way to clarify some ideas to them in Afrikaans. She also allowed them to use their vernacular when they communicated with each other. To the questions that she posed in Otjiherero, they responded in Afrikaans. On the other hand they were communicating with the rest of the classroom in their still limited Otjiherero. These two kids were very active. This is a good example of how multilingualism can be exploited to the benefit of the child in multilingual or even in monolingual classrooms when childrens' linguistic backgrounds are respected.

Allowing the learner the freedom to express herself in her best language as in the above mentioned case is one positive step towards the promotion of learner-centred education. Classroom observation shows that learners who can express themselves well, participate more in classroom activities. Therefore, it is not possible for learner-centred education to be explored to its fullest with learners who struggle with the language which is used as the medium of instruction. On the other hand, learners who communicate in each other's languages in and outside the classroom learn to respect and appreciate other people's languages and cultures. The children in such classrooms develop a closer relationship and start to accept each other as children of one country (Namibia) and one nation.

### **Awareness raising among teachers and parents**

Sometimes teachers have difficulties in understanding why children do not progress quickly. Especially teachers who are not speakers of African languages sometimes do not understand why learners can fail to apply certain rules of languages of European origin like English, Afrikaans and German correctly. Accounts of experiences in language learning can help to open the eyes of teachers in multilingual classrooms to the pain that other teachers might have caused learners by making discriminatory remarks. Teachers will realise the sensitivity of the learners concerning their own languages and cultures, and will learn to handle learners with respect, no matter their origin, languages or the colour of their skin.

The Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture introduced a Mobile Schools Programme for the children of the marginalised Ovahimba and Ovazemba groups in the Kunene Region. This school which consists of thirty units is known as the Ondao Mobile School. During my recent visit to some of the Ondao Mobile Units, I realised that the literacy rate of the Ovahimba parents was very low. The great majority of the Ovahimba parents are not able to read their names. One parent elaborated on how they suffered because of lacking reading skills, saying that before her children had joined the Ondao Mobile School, she used to take the whole family's health passports to the nearby clinic for the nursing sister to select hers. Subsequently the school children were able to read them and give her hers when she had to visit the Health Clinic for medical treatment.

It is helpful for learners and parents in such communities to know about the language biographies of other people. It will let them know that other parents and learners were in the same boat less than fifty years ago. The parents will also learn to know how other parents motivated their children by turning their literacy skills into useful communication tools. Hearing about previous experiences will help the members of these communities to find their way towards the improvement of their literacy skills in the mother tongue.

### **Producing supplementary teaching materials**

Anecdotes of linguistic biographies could serve as supplementary material which reveals memories of the past and enlightens visions for the future, not only to the learners of the mobile schools, but also to others throughout the country. This is in agreement with what Bloch (2000:16) says: 'Language is a major vehicle which we all use to consolidate and clarify our lives through our own stories and we reconstruct memories of the past and visions for the future.'

Language anecdotes could be useful and interesting stories which learners can listen to, tell and discuss in the classroom as part of the oral/aural lessons. Such anecdotes will also enable learners to know where they stand in a multilingual environment. Such stories about language acquisition and learning can also provide reading material that is close to learners' immediate environment. Teachers can ask learners to make enquiries about the linguistic biographies of their parents and other members of their family. This can be a way of giving them practice on how to conduct enquiries and analyse findings. So learners do not only collect interesting anecdotes from the field, but also develop some basic research skills. In the absence of sufficient supplementary reading material, some selected language biographies could be recorded and transcribed for reading purposes.

At a recent meeting, members of the Otjiherero Curriculum Committee of the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) decided to issue a newsletter entitled *Okarumba*. This newsletter will be issued three times a year. Language biographies could form part of the *Okarumba* newsletter. In the long run a collection of linguistic biographies could be published in book form, which would be read by the Ovaherero community at large.

### Planning language in education policies

As the world is changing on a continuous basis, the education system also needs to be reshaped and reformed in order to adjust to the ever changing world. Linguistic biographies can serve as a good way to collect data on language use in daily life. On the other hand, linguistic biographies can serve as a mirror through which one could reflect the strength and weaknesses of school language policies and literacy acquisition programmes, and to work out means of improvement for the current language policies for schools. Data collected among the population can guide education planners to revisit the education policies and to streamline them into more useful policies. As planners of education and trainers of trainers we are always happy when the policies that we put in place and the approaches that we have identified are well implemented, but we do not do enough to understand the extent to which the languages that are taught in schools are utilised by individuals in real life.

In this global era, learners should be trained to become members of the global community who read for enjoyment as well as for the purpose of cognitive development. Language skills should be utilised to analyse, explore and discover issues which can create a culture of appreciation and positive attitudes towards life. Learners should be granted the freedom of imagination and creativity as a solid base for improved self-reliance. Languages should not be promoted with the aim of creating a nation of the semi-literate majority and a sustainable smaller group of the ruling elite as it used to be in the past. Provided it is utilised well, multilingualism could be a great strengthening mechanism of education in many different ways. On top of that, it creates a culture of mutual understanding among speakers of various languages.

The interpretation of the language biographies of people of different gender and ages will not only allow room for the establishment of better language policies, but also bring people to realise that languages are no more tools of separation, but vehicles of communication and transfer of knowledge, which empower them culturally and economically.

Language is without doubt the most important factor in the learning process for the transfer of knowledge and skills ... The paradox is that

education plans and programs are often designed to pay more attention to the structure of educational systems and curricula than to language policy? (ADEA 1996).

Parents who read or listen to the language biographies of others will probably not repeat the same mistakes when they are expected to guide or make language choices with and for their children. With the support of parents with positive attitudes toward their languages, the need for language campaigns which are frequently launched by the officials of the Ministry of Basic Education Sport and Culture (MBESC) will gradually diminish, and the African languages will take their rightful position in education.

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