Discipline: Linguistics

'Language is an essential tool of colonial domination.' Discuss this statement in relation to a particular colonial and cultural context of your choosing.

'Language in history: that full field' (Williams, 1983, p. 189)

South Africa is a unique setting for a study of language in history. It was, like other parts of the continent, populated by indigenous groups before arrival of the European. It is, however, naïve to generalise South Africa with other colonies in the continent, for the linguistic conflict in colonial South Africa was not a monomachy between the European and the vernaculars, but a three-way conflict between the two Europeans and multiple vernaculars.

Etienne van Heerden (1991), a South African writer, classified an analysis of 'language' into three categories: language as a language, language as a writer's strategy, and language as a metanarrative (p. 9). One would expect that to understand the power of language in colonialism is to assess the language policy and the effects thereof. This essay, however, discusses the effects of languages in colonial policies, showing how language and discourse play more active and operational roles than obvious language policies. As Bakhtin (1981) puts it, languages 'serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even hour' (p. 262-263). In short, this essay explores how van Heerden's language as a metanarrative and Bakhtinian monologic discourse had reinforced in the colonial domination (Crowley, 1996), particularly in South Africa before its full independence in 1931.

The colonial history of South Africa largely began when the Dutch East India Company acquired a supply base at Cape Town in 1652 and started bringing agricultural settlers into the colony. In the early 1800s, the British obtained the Cape Colony from the Dutch after a series of agreements during Napoleonic War, after which Britain suffered from

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severe unemployment. Consequently, the government encouraged the British to settle in the Cape, and between April and June 1820, around 4,000 settlers had arrived in the colony (South African History Online, 2019). The presence of British settlers grew larger and day-to-day business started to be conducted largely in English. In 1822, Lord Somerset, the British colonial governor, declared that English be the sole language for schools, churches, government, and courts (Van Der Merwe et al, 2012, p. 102). The colony employed numerous British schoolmasters and Scottish clergy to help propagate the language. One of the first printing presses in South Africa, for example, was the Lovedale press of the Glasgow Missionary Society in Tyhume Valley (Mzamane, 1983, p. 181)

These examples encapsulate how language policies took shape in British colonial domination, but also explain an underlying cause which would fit into Phillipson's (1992) definition of linguicism and linguistic racism: 'the ideology of linguistic superiority associated with dominant language' (p. 104). English was seen as a superior tongue, conveying complex meanings yet in a simple way. Kaplan (1966) explains this by modelling the English 'cultural thought pattern' as a straight arrow from the beginning to the end, whereas the pattern in other languages is more complex. Furthermore, Jespersen (1922) believes that a quality of a primitive language was the absence of abstract or general terms (p. 494), under which the Zulu language of South Africa was classified, as it had no word for 'cow', but only 'red cow' or 'white cow' (Sayce, 1875, p. 429). According to Pennycook's (2002) colonial dichotomy, this was an attempt to construct an illogical and primitive colonised Other in contrast to the logical and advanced colonising Self (p. 160). This notion was reflected through contemporaneous literature, such as Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1886), which portrays the protagonist as a 'colonial gentleman' and the natives as either dangerous or subservient (Minter, 1942, p. 3; South African History Online, 2022).

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As such, there was a special emphasis in Anglocentric education to fulfil the burden of civilising the colonies. As anthropologist Malinowski (1936) commented, a black man can become the white's equal through education (p. 504), a comment made to assist colonial control (Phillipson, 1992, p. 117). To illustrate, Olive Schreiner had to take the manuscript of *The Story of an African Farm* to publish in London, since the early English publishing industry in South Africa was already preoccupied with schoolbooks, not on general readership (Donker, 1983, p. 31).

Nevertheless, one might argue that in religious missions, attempts were made to educate the native in vernaculars as well. The Pilgrim's Progress, for example, was translated into Xhosa as early as in 1867 and to Sesotho in 1872 (Mzamane, 1983, p. 182). However, although these texts were in native languages, they were transcribed in European orthography. Even though Errington (2001) argues that they preliminary served to 'mitigate linguistic otherness' (p. 21), the orthography was eventually embedded into the vernaculars, successfully incorporating the cultural thought pattern into a language in its written form, or in Bakhtin's term, the vernaculars are progressing into a heteroglossia. Moreover, Phillipson (1992) argues that education and readings in vernaculars were only seen as a 'transitional phase' to the higher education in English, in order to prepare a pro-British elite to help the colonisers with their 'indirect rule' (p. 111-112). An example of these elites was Tiyo Soga, the first black priest to be ordained in South Africa, who was educated in Scotland (Mzamane, 1983, p. 182). This shows not only how colonial dichotomy effectuated language policies, but how these policies in turn dominated the colony and assisted the administration. Metcalf (1995) argues that the 'scales of civilisation' did not just reflect the enthusiasm for the Enlightenment but also secured a position for the British (p. 34).

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The Anglocentric policies, including the English language policies, alienated the Dutch settlers (referred hereafters as Boers or Afrikaners) in the Cape who started to migrate inlands in 1930s. The migration was later known as 'the Great Trek'. This explains how the Anglicism discourse influencing Anglocentric policies caused friction between the old and the new settlers. The trekking Boers did not instantly find themselves a plot of land to live in and faced numerous battles with local Africans, such as the 1838 Battle of Blood River against the Zulus. Eventually, they established two Afrikaner republics: Transvaal and Orange Free State. Again, the metanarrative of colonial dichotomy rationalised the Great Trek in a way such that the discourse juxtaposed a substantially settled land of Europe to the primitive empty land of colonies, and it was the duty of the European to populate these newly discovered land, a tabula rasa on which their linguistic, cultural, and territorial claims were imposed (Singh, 1996). Lugard (1926) further argues that it is particularly the case for Africa, since 'the former inhabitants of Africa have left no monuments and no records other than rude drawings on rocks like those of Neolithic man' (p. 66). Hence, European settlement in the terra nullius is an ethical and teleological progress to fulfil this void, prompted by the widespread narrative. The empty land discourse was epitomised by the Natives' Land Act of 1913 which forbade Africans from owning and renting lands in most parts of the country (Petzold, 2007, p. 120).

However, the most significant public discourse which justifies Afrikaner colonial dominance was shaped after the event. In fact, the term 'Great Trek' was only introduced and actively constructed in the 1880s in an attempt to glorify the Afrikaner identity. As historian Van Jaarsveld (1958) puts it, 'Afrikaners saw the Great Trek as the central thread of their history' (Petzold, 2007, p. 117). Coetzee (1993) further explained that the Trek was somehow regarded as the travelling out of Egypt to Israel as a 'Chosen people' in a 'covenant' with God (Petzold, 2007, p. 117). Subsequently in 1875, for example, the Society of True

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Afrikaners promoted the concept of 'our language, our nation, our land' and 'God-given destiny' (Bostock, 2018, p.27). Phillipson (1992) points out that the domination of the natives was justified by Joshua 9:21 from the Bible: to let the Gibeonites to live among the Israelites as 'woodcutters' and 'water carriers' (p. 119). As a results, these constructed religious myths add up to their legitimisation. Apart from this, the Afrikaners assumed a special role of mediation between the notions of the colonising 'Self' and the colonised 'Other' (Barris, 2014). Unlike the British, they did not entirely see themselves as a European, nor did they align themselves with the natives. Hoffman (1916) commented that the Afrikaners are 'the only one who understand how to deal with the black' (p. 10), while simultaneously criticising that they were 'lazy by nature and negligent' (p. 14), the qualities which were formerly attached only to the colonised Others through another colonial discourse of 'the Myth of Lazy Native' (Alatas, 1997; Pennycook, 2002, p. 58-59). With this conflicting narrative revolving around the Afrikaners, they emerged in an ideal position to dominate and colonise, having shared both the characteristics of the Self and the Other (Barris, 2014, p. 95). This formed a distinctive concept of Afrikaner nationalism which would continue to dominate South Africa until the end of apartheid in 1993.

The British continued to dominate the politics of South Africa after the Great Trek, and a series of conflicts took place between the Afrikaans-speaking and the English-speaking regions. One of these disputes flared up in 1886 when a mineral wealth deposit was discovered in Johannesburg, an English-speaking enclave in Transvaal (Ball, 2017), resulting in the Second Boer War. The British also sought to consolidate their omnipotence against the natives by force in the 1870s (Minter, 1942, p. 9), waging the 'Wars of Dispossession' (Mzamane, 1983, p. 183). Ultimately, the British united with an iron fist their colonies and the Boer republics into the Union of South Africa in 1910 with a dual official language: English and Dutch, further marginalising the Afrikaans-speaking Boers – who would win the

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right to speak in Afrikaans 15 years later – and the native Africans, whose languages were not given any status at all. The dominance of the British rose sharply, and by 1921, 76% of company directors, 60% of businessmen, and 37% of civil servants were born overseas, particularly in Britain (Minter, 1942, p.43). These changes reaffirmed the influence of the colonial discourse within the British society, as articulated by J. C. Smuts (1929) in lectures at Oxford and Edinburgh,

> The best hope for civilizing the African is greater white settlement, for by themselves Africans have not much initiative, and if left to themselves and their own tribal routine they do not respond very well to the stimulus of progress. (Minter, 1942, p.43)

On the other hand, it can be argued that language might not always be an efficient tool for colonial domination. Mzamane's (1983) analysis of literatures by black Africans proves the existence of language resistance. As a result of using European orthography, the European schooling, and the printing press of the missionaries, natives enjoyed the benefits of an increasing literacy rate, as seen in the emergence of vernacular newspapers, such as *Leselinyana la Lesotho* (The Little Light of Lesotho) in 1864 and *Isigidmi SamaXhosa* (The Xhosa Express) in 1884. This growing literacy exposed the natives to ideas which might posed a threat to Anglo-Afrikaner domination, including African nationalism beyond 'tribal or ethnic consciousness' (Mzamane, 1983, p. 182). As Makoni et al. (2012) put it, 'most nationalist African leaders were products of these (European) schools' (p. 532). For example, writer William Gqoba portrays in his novel *Imbali YaseMbo* (History of the North-Eastern Peoples) the awareness of common threats Africans faced from the European in the continent, and Thomas Mofolo later incorporated the sentiment into his historical novel *Chaka* (1925), which told the story of the Zulu warrior-king with the same name. The most prominent one probably was Solomon Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930), which depicted the Boers negotiating to split

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lands with the native Barolongs during the Great Trek. Petzold (2007) interpreted this as an outright rejection of the empty land discourse of the colonisers: a 'revisionist historiography for readers familiar only with the official (white) version of the past' (p. 120), thereby delegitimising the Afrikaner claims to settlement and openly opposing the 1913 Land Act. In short, the introduction of language and orthography may be counterproductive for the colonisers.

Furthermore, the Bakhtinian monologic quality of European colonial discourse was questionable; there were indeed some dialogic dynamics within the discourse, which may not directly serve the oppressive colonial ideology. To illustrate, even though *Chaka* was originally in Sesotho, it was so popular that translations were available in European languages (Mzaname, 1983, p. 182-183). This signifies that the Europeans also admired the works of the natives, and unlike *King Solomon's Mines*, the view towards Africa in *Chaka* was narrated by the Other, not the Self who aestheticised the continent which, for long, formed a part of the colonial discourse (Spurr, 1993, p. 7). The translation was perhaps one of the first African linguistic contributions towards European polyglossia. Consequently, to cite Bakhtin (1981), the polyglossia 'fully frees consciousness from the tyranny of its own language and its own myth of language' (p. 61). This was the case in the colonial discourse, as the monologism died down and stronger and empirical dialogism emerged in the Western world. For example, Phillipson (1992) described the Phelps-Strokes report on education in British Africa, whose team visited South Africa in 1924. The report came into shape with the blessing of the Colonial Office, but it criticised the Anglocentric education of the colonies, such as the education of the English language and literature. Instead, it called for an increase in vocational education and native languages, which could be put to practical use (p. 118-119). Even though it is argued that the reform was done to provide a docile but skilled workforce for the empire, the report itself is an example of a movement to wider dialogic

discourse, which would eventually undermine the monologism of the colonial dichotomy. Therefore, the metanarrative employed in colonial domination might not be as effective.

In short, the most obvious role of languages in colonialism discussed was the apparent language policies imposed by colonial governors, which went in line with the underlying discourse, another role for which language is accountable. The post-colonial language dynamism of South Africa continues to be volatile. Afrikaans proceeded to be a dominant language in the apartheid era, during which English seized the opportunity to rebrand itself as a 'language of liberation' (van Heerden, 1991, p. 9). Post-apartheid South Africa stunningly included 11 official languages, but English remains the most dominant one, which raises a question whether the language of liberation has again turned into linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), or whether it is essential in the construction of an inclusive national identity (Povey, 1976, p.14).

The debates around the roles of language in colonial and post-colonial world thus continues, but one thing is for sure: language is never something exogenous to a society and must not be studied in such a way. Besides, the language as a metanarrative is an overarching principle for a historiography, so it is impossible to truly understand history without truly understanding the discourse. This is why language in history is *that full field.*

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