

Remember why we aren't talking?

The causes of the vast gulf in communication in South Africa were not acknowledged at a recent conference in Pretoria where the importance of communication during the negotiation period was proclaimed loudly.

SUE VALENTINE reports.



Du Preez: "We are all here together".



Sibiyana: Media increased racial division.



Degenaar: Democratic culture worthwhile goal.

worthwhile goal to pursue in a country such as South Africa was the building of a culture of democracy, said Degenaar.

All important to this concept, however, was the assumption that everyone had the same meaning of democracy. It was not enough to agree on the goal of democracy, South Africans had to choose what they meant by the term.

Degenaar argued that a meaning of democracy needed to be negotiated. For those dispirited by the controversial nature of key

political concepts, Degenaar urged that the negotiation of meanings should not be seen negatively. Questioning what people meant by the words they used and negotiating a common understanding was a rewarding and exciting process.

The head of the Centre for Intergroup Studies at the University of Cape Town and a mediation expert, Pro-

fessor H W van der Merwe, said successful negotiations in South Africa would depend on the extent to which the major contenders in the country come to terms with the realities of the situation, the extent to which other political actors felt part of any negotiated settlement and the extent to which the leaders could sell to their followers whatever agreement they make.

"We have to find ways of involving the broader population. We have to communicate, educate and promote an appreciation of a democratic system as well as *participation* in the process."

Leaders and followers from all groups and in all organisations needed to learn negotiating skills, while new values of trust and tolerance had to be cultivated.

Addressing the question of how the media could contribute to effective communication in the negotiation era, the editor of *City Press*, Khulu Sibiyana, said that on the whole, the media had increased racial division in the country.

"Newspapers talk about 'black news' and 'white news'...they published different 'Extra' editions because they do not want to offend white readers, but they want to keep a high black readership and get greater advertising revenue."

The black media were under severe pressure to be propagandists for the black community and black journalists were reminded constantly of their political role.

The media were the custodians of the well-being of all South Africans, they should fiercely protect their independence from any government and give space to all views objectively and accurately. □

over the minds of people. If people were not conscious of this, they would become victims of them. He said it was vital to be aware of the role of language and to realise that it did not mirror the world neutrally.

'A meaning of democracy needs to be negotiated ... the negotiation of meanings should not be seen negatively'

"Since language helps us to construct a world and ourselves along with it, we need to pay attention to the way in which we speak, for example, about 'politics', 'state', 'nation' and 'democracy'. We must ask ourselves whether it is an appropriate way of speaking, or whether we have become victims of an outdated, limiting and dangerous discourse," he said.

One of the terms to come under Degenaar's dissection was "nation". He poured scorn on those who used the term as if "nation-building was the type of activity loyal citizens should inevitably be involved in", explaining that "nation" had a range of meanings related to its various historical contexts.

For Degenaar, the concept which poses the least problems and which overcomes the conflict between a "transcendent culture" and particular community cultures was the concept of a democratic culture. A democratic culture allowed for a plurality of cultures to exist. Rather than futile effort being channeled into the romantic notion of nation-building, the only

THE ISSUE of "communication in the negotiation era" came under the spotlight at a one-day conference in Pretoria recently as delegates examined the urgent need to reach common ground in the quest for a peaceful settlement in South Africa.

However, it was perhaps just a little too easy, in the serene surroundings of the CSIR's conference centre, to emphasise the need for compromise and tolerance without acknowledging the South African context and the reasons for the divisions in our society.

Delegates to the seminar ranged from the Bureau for Information, TBVC states' representatives - including Ciskei's Brigadier Oupa Gqozo - and members of the ANC's Youth League.

While there was a clear willingness to proceed with the job of urgent and effective communication between all parties and among all South Africans in the negotia-

tion period, there was little sense of acknowledgement of the history which has contributed to the vast gulf in communication - and the inability of many people to communicate in the manner of debate and discussion dictated largely by Western modes of behaviour.

The director of the Regional Research and Report Corporation (which organised the conference), Dr Hanneke du Preez, said in her introduction that South Africa's only hope for finding common ground was through communication.

Communication in the apartheid era had been characterised by the attitude "I here, you there"; the message communicated by black resistance groups was "you owe me". However, the central theme in negotiation communication, said Dr Du Preez, was "we are all here together".

The deputy editor of *Rapport*, Dr Piet Müller, said the ending of apartheid would not necessarily mean the end of poverty. The promise of "total victory" had not been achieved and this had to be explained to the people on the ground. To secure meaningful negotiations political leaders would have to explain the toning down of long-term demands.

"Negotiations will only succeed if political leaders succeed in communicating the political realities to their supporters," he said

In one of the most thought-provoking addresses of the day, Stellenbosch University philosopher Professor Johan Degenaar examined "the controversial nature of key political concepts in South African negotiations".

He said words and meanings had power