

The threatened language

English loses ground
in South Africa.
Who is to save it?

JOHN POVEY

himself. And he spoke of the tendency among Africans in what seems a hopeless position to 'bourgeoisify' themselves; they imitate the boss and a good salary plus fine furniture comes to be all that matters. Effective African political action, Kaunda pointed out, has only come when the potential leaders decide to give up their all for this political struggle." Be that as it may, Mbeki gave up all and so have thousands of other Southern African heroes, both of town and country, now dead or locked away.

IN ITS DECEMBER issue, *WUS in Action*, published by the World University Service, Geneva, has revived with acknowledgements *The New African's* "Africana" column. The quoted newspaper's touch of cloacal humour is commendable in a country where the apartheid joke has worn a bit thin:

Forty-nine Cape Town multi-racial toilets, run by the City Council for the benefit of the public, have become the last places in South Africa which are still untouched by apartheid.

But City Council officials said they expected the Government to clamp down soon and compel the council to segregate these public conveniences.

One lawyer said: "These are virtually the last bastions of multiracialism in the country and in that sense they will soon be rare items. Before the 'WHITES ONLY' notices are placed on them, one of them should be transferred to the South African Museum".

Lawyers say there are two Acts of Parliament under which the Government could act against the toilets. There is the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953, and the Group Areas Act of 1957.

In the Group Areas Act "occupation" is the operative word as far as the toilets are concerned. So far the provision which defines occupation has been directed at people of different races sitting down together in cinemas and restaurants. They only break the law when they are seated, but when they stand up they are in the clear. Lawyers say that if the same criterion is applied to the multi-racial toilets, then standing in them would be legal, but sitting down in them would not.

Another lawyer said: "The Government could, of course, issue permits for people to use the toilets but this is not likely".

EVENING POST (PORT ELIZABETH)

WUS in Action's special Southern African issue covers CADET, the long-hoped-for adult education college for Bechuanaland, higher education in the Republic (by Dr. Dan Kunene, formerly of the University of Cape Town, now UCLA), Angola, Salisbury, Lesotho, and a SWAPO student's escape story, from Ovambo-land, South West Africa, to Finland.

LAMENT ABOUT THE DECLINE of English in South Africa is as tedious as yearning for "the good old days"—and as pointless. Complaints of degenerating pronunciation from some BBC norm, of the defiling of the pure spring of English by slang; stories of illiterate clerks and semiliterate engineers oppress us from every side. The fact that some of these observations may in themselves be true, does not compel the corollary that the pillars of the English language are about to collapse. Nevertheless the position of English in South Africa is threatened. Pressures both linguistic and political must make one concerned about the eventual fate of English in the country. English can be eliminated or, more possibly, reduced to a usage peculiar to the 1½-million-strong British tribe.

The language is daily losing ground among the 11 million Africans, at the mercy of an educational system—"Bantu Education"—which seems partly designed to weaken the 150-year-old grip English has on white South Africa's subject peoples.

The ruling Dutch-descended *Afrikaner-volk* are losing it too, but more by their own wish, since by many of them it is still resented as the language of their one-time British conquerors. The linguistic difficulties common in other areas are thus reinforced in South Africa by political decision and social attitude.

English in South Africa derives, of course, from the British acquisition of the Cape and the subsequent occupation of the Eastern Cape by the 1820 Settlers. Both mission and state education, from earliest times, brought English to the African community, among whom it became, in an unusually pure form, a *lingua franca* whereby the barriers dividing a multiplicity of munity is, by and large, convinced of the be crossed.

Penalties and inducements derived from the priority granted to English in government, law and education, as well as attempts at legislation, were used to try and eliminate the Boer *taal* from the country.

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They were not successful, and from them, no doubt, stems some of the linguistic antagonism that exists between the Afrikaners and other language groups in the country today.

The Afrikaner's accent indicates the attitude that if you do have to use English from time to time you will never speak it well enough to be mistaken for a *rooinek*. While the English, on their side, are too ready to assume that the obligation to bilingualism rests only with the other side.

For the Africans it is the one international language within reach—sought after, held to, but now increasingly denied to the coming generation.

FOR THE AFRICANS, indeed, the situation is, as always in this country, the most difficult and the most desperate. The African community is, by and large, convinced the importance of English. For them English is the essential tool of communication, the window to the outside world. It is a vehicle which more than African languages or Afrikaans can penetrate that hated isolation that is imposed by the government. The African writers use English to gain an international audience, to link themselves to a powerful literary tradition. They draw upon the resources of the language yet they extend and alter it so that it becomes a living and individual medium in their hands. Writers like Lewis Nkosi, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane and Noni Jabavu have demonstrated what English can achieve when a fresh ear is linked to a different sensibility.

Government legislation, the Bantu Education Act, has decided that African education shall be conducted in the language of the individual tribes. There is some external evidence to show that the mother tongue is the most effective educational medium in the earlier stages of a child's training. The debate in other African countries which have accepted English as their second language centres only upon the question of the most convenient and effective time for introducing the child to the new language. However, no one would pretend that such concerns motivate the decisions of the South African government in their plans for African education. Their motive must be to deny as effectively as possible the chance of the

by Afrikaans teachers whose own English is often less than perfect. They learn the language in Afrikaans-medium schools where that solitary daily English period may be the one concession made to the national policy of bilingualism. Such students learn English with that ineffectiveness and lack of enthusiasm that marks, say, British school attempts to learn French. Such efforts are rendered negligible when the language is completely ignored outside the hour of instruction in the classroom.

Reinforcing the accidental incompetence of much teaching and the indifference of many learners is the Afrikaners' high suspicion of the tongue. They have a strong, and not unjustifiable, concern for what the English language can do. Not only can its superior commercial and international validity reduce Afrikaans to a merely local oddity, but it makes available in English a good deal of reading matter that is regrettably contradictory to the philosophies preached to the innocent children of the *Afrikanervolk*. English is a language tainted with political and social heresies. The struggle to develop Afrikaans has been politically inspired. It is the unifying force that distinguishes the cherished vision of the Afrikaner nation. For this reason the constitution affirms that both English and Afrikaans are the national languages — not either. Such choice would end Afrikaans as a serious force outside being a dialect of the platteland farmers. As it is, in reflecting nationalism, it allows these people to claim themselves as true South Africans in contrast to the British who expose their dual allegiance by using the language of another country.

IT MUST BE RECOGNISED that in South Africa, English is both utterly necessary and largely neglected or even opposed. Guy Butler called English "the language of dissent." In South Africa dissent is not a sign of an active play of intelligence but a political attitude fraught with danger to the *status quo*. Material in this language is all too readily found to be "Indecent, obscene, or objectionable, under sub-section 3b of section 113 of the Customs Act 1964." It is desperately necessary that English be kept alive in all parts of South Africa. In the face of the virtual opposition to the language that follows from some of the government's edicts, in the face of the often complacent indifference of the English, it is the one thing that holds South Africa still to the outside world. A total victory for Afrikaans would hold back the educational—and therefore political—advance of the African people. It would also make for the completion of that *laager* mentality that welcomes South Africa's total political isolation. To offset this very real threat in any organised way are a few dedicated academics and responsible writers, the English press, and those few valiant literary magazines that somehow manage to survive like *Classic* and *Contrast*. The stakes in this linguistic competition are the highest imaginable for the future of South Africa.

African student getting access to English. Without English there can be virtually no higher education and no effective communication abroad. The policy of denying the African English permits the primary assertion of their tribal rather than national identity. Not only does this device confuse the black/white simplicity of the racial issue but it would isolate such people from world concern and international agitation.

The need for improved and effective English teaching for African speakers is vast beyond belief. There have been valiant projects initiated but they can only tackle the very fringe of a totally degenerating situation. The work of Professor L. W. Lanham of Witwatersrand University can be used to help the African teacher of English. His linguistic researches have allowed him to isolate the points of maximum interference between the mother tongue and English. Thus the most common and gross errors can be diagnosed and corrected. But the interference differs from one tongue to another and the problem is continuous. The studies of Professors Butler and Branford at the new English Institute at Rhodes University give some attention to the teachers in the contiguous reservations of the Eastern Cape, who struggle to communicate English in the African schools. They attempt to give assistance to the floundering efforts of the African elementary school teacher so that some use can be made of the minimal attention that can be legally paid to English. These unfortunate teachers, with inadequate and sometimes incomprehensible English, are driven to teach those who hear only the local vernacular, who may, indeed, never hear an English speaker in their lives. Incompetence of technique, the worst kinds of dreary and unhelpful drill, the inadequacy of text material the discouragement the system invites, all create conditions in which English threatens to disappear. Mispronunciations are so regularly repeated in class speech that the learning of English becomes more like that old party game where you whisper a phrase to your neighbour who repeats what he thought he heard to his neighbour until the conclusion exposes the total gibberish from which no intelligible meaning can be derived. What could help would be the kind of ambitious programmes undertaken to the north. They utilise all

modern methods; the tape recorder, records, visual aids. But such a crash programme needs money and, more than money, training. It requires that kind of enterprise and direction which is most expressly contradicted by government educational policy.

NATURALLY THE SITUATION of the language amongst native English speakers is the least depressing. Certainly the English have sadly neglected the teachers in their English-medium schools. The profession does not attract the more able when being an Englishman is in itself a step upwards in the economic hierarchy of South African business. A recent questionnaire elicited the depressing information that some half of the teachers of English at the Junior High School level had not majored in English at their own training colleges. This is dangerous but not fatal, however, because there is a very real protection of the English of such children, incompetent as it may seem in the classroom. There is for English children the constant reinforcement of hearing the language spoken by native speakers amongst their friends and at home with their family. This reinforcement is not available to those whose English is only a second language.

The type of English that these South African children speak is another question. There have been many scare articles predicting the imminent decay of the Queen's English. Such columns usually finish their dire warnings with the demand that we all "wake up and do something about it before it is too late." What to these self-appointed policemen are signs of degeneration are in fact signs of change rather than decay. We should avoid the assumption that one implies the other in a language.

When there are fewer Canute-like commands in the schools to hold off the encroaching national idioms there can be a more effective concept of what English can be in an independent country. It can develop, as it is doing in other regions of the world.

FOR THE AFRIKANER the future of English is less encouraging. It is a second language and interference from their mother tongue makes for an accent and some constructions that are all but unintelligible to the native speaker. Afrikaans pupils are taught English