Article

Language, power and transformation in South Africa: a critique of language rights discourse

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Abstract
This paper offers a critique of language rights discourse in the context of South Africa’s process of democratic transformation. Drawing on Bourdieu (1991, 1997), I argue that language is not politically neutral, but a socio-political mechanism that shapes power relations. Using this framework, I discuss the post-apartheid gap between language policy and practice. I acknowledge the role that language rights activism has played in raising awareness of how this gap creates impediments for democratic transformation, but I argue that a tendency to rely too heavily on negative constructions of English limits the effectiveness of language rights discourse. I identify three metaphoric images that have a lot of currency for constructing the power of English negatively: English is a ‘linguistic poacher,’ English is a ‘gatekeeper,’ English is a ‘colonizer of the mind’. I discuss the epistemological and political limitations of theories of language and empowerment that use these metaphors to disengage with the notion that the power of English can be harnessed by native speakers of African languages. I conclude with a series of recommendations for creating a discourse that is more effective in challenging linguistic inequality in South Africa.

Introduction: language and inequality in South Africa
Language policies and practices are an extremely important factor in South Africa’s process of democratic transformation. Language is not a politically neutral medium of communication, but a social practice that determines power relations and shapes subjectivity. Bourdieu (1991, 1997) argues that the social contexts that frame linguistic exchanges are characterised by power imbalances. Rather than being based on a ‘collective treasure’ equally accessible to members of a linguistic community (de Saussure 1998), verbal
exchanges take place in inequitable ‘linguistic markets’ where speech acts are assigned different symbolic values. Within any socio-linguistic community, certain ways of using language are considered ‘proper’, ‘educated’, ‘standard’ or ‘legitimate’, while others are not. According to Bourdieu, ‘legitimacy’ is determined not so much by intrinsically superior linguistic features, but by power relations: the language of the elite is imposed as the norm and functions as a gate-keeper. Mastery of this language is a pre-condition for claiming symbolic and material resources. Not surprisingly, access to this language is restricted: in order to maintain these gate-keeping effects, which Bourdieu refers to as the ‘profits of distinction’ (1991:55), only the elite must be able to produce legitimate speech acts in the dominant language. In the case of South Africa, this language is English.

A critical look at language policy and practice in the context of South Africa’s process of democratic transformation is very important, given the extreme levels of inequality that characterise this country’s ‘linguistic market.’ The constitution grants equal status to 11 official languages, positioning this country ‘in the forefront of international language policy development’ (Paxton 2009:346); the reality, however, is quite different (Webb 2009:194). Even though according to the 2000 Census, English is spoken as a home language by only 9% of the population, very often English proficiency is de-facto mandatory for professional employment (Heugh 2000, Alexander 2000, 2002, 2003, Paxton 2009, Probyn 2009), academic success (Lafon 2009), and political participation (Kamwangamalu 2003, McLaughlin 2006). Not surprisingly, access to English proficiency is not equitable. People who speak this language as their mother tongue, and privileged native speakers of other languages who can afford to attend private or ex-Model C schools (policy changes in the early 1990s allowed the category of Model C ‘state aided’ schools to decide on own admissions policies, rather than the prescribed whites-only admission – see, for example, SAIRR 1993:579, 597-8) are much more likely to appropriate the language of power. Indeed, one could make the argument that now that overt racial discrimination is no longer legal, English has become more important as a mechanism for re(producing) social stratification (Parmegiani 2006), and that South Africa has been moving from a racist to a ‘linguicist’ (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1995) socio-economic system. While it is no longer legal to overtly deny opportunities for socio-economic empowerment on the basis of a darker skin complexion, it is a lot easier and more socially
acceptable to exclude with the argument that a candidate’s English is not good enough.

Critical discourse about the power of English: epistemological premises
Language rights activists concerned about the socio-economic consequences of linguistic inequality have created a critical discourse about the power of English to counterbalance what Pennycook (1994) refers to as the widespread ‘neoliberal’ way of thinking about this language, which constructs the dominance of English as a ‘neutral, natural, and beneficial’ phenomenon (1994:9). This paper focuses on certain rhetorical aspects of the critical discourse produced by language rights activists in South Africa; however, given that the power of English in local contexts is inextricably related to its power as an international lingua franca, my analysis includes theories put forth by critics who have looked at English in other contexts, especially if these theories have had a seminal impact on the South African debate.

The term discourse can have a variety of meanings. In my analysis, I am referring to Gee’s notion of ‘Discourse “with a capital D”’, which he defines as a set of complex belief systems that include ‘words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities’ (Gee 1996: 127-8). (For the sake of simplicity, I will not capitalise the term ‘Discourse’ in the rest of my analysis.) According to Gee (1996:132), discourses are ‘resistant to criticism and self-scrutiny’ by definition. Similarly, Kress argues that discourses ‘define, prescribe, and delimit what is possible to say and not possible to say’ (1985:7). While I do not believe that discourses ought to be conceived of as tight compartments, it is true that there is a tendency to prescribe – often implicitly – ‘what is possible to say and not possible to say’ in conversations about the power of English. In fact, the debate about the power of English may seem polarised. For example, in The Cultural Politics of English (1994), Pennycook takes a critical look at the notion that the spread of English is synonymous with socio-economic empowerment by deconstructing the ‘set of possible statements’ propagated by institutions that promote the interests of neoliberal centres of power. Pennycook’s exposition of the lengths that countries such as the United States and Great Britain have gone to in order to promote the spread of their national language across the globe and how this spread has served their economic interests is impressive (1994: 145-79). At the same time, however, while neoliberal discourses created a ‘set of
possible statements’ about English that excluded any notion that the spread of this language might have any sort of negative effects, the critical discourse that emerged from The Cultural Politics excluded, or marginalised, statements that can be made about English as a weapon of empowerment.

The critical discourse’s tendency to dismiss, or at least underplay, the possibility that there might be any benefits in the growth of English as a lingua franca can also be seen in Phillipson’s Linguistic Imperialism (1992), and Ngugi’s Decolonising the Mind (1981), two works that have had a seminal impact in shaping the critical debate in South Africa. In fact, this tendency can also be noticed in several works that are critical of the power of English in post-apartheid South Africa (Alexander 2002, 2003, Alexander and Bloch 2004, Heugh 2002, May 2007, Ndebele 1997, Ndimande 2004, Phaahla 2006, Webb 2004). I argue that in order to come up with a critical discourse that is more effective in addressing linguistic inequality, language rights activism needs to engage more thoroughly with the notion that the power of English is ambivalent, or ‘a double-edged sword’ (Lee and Norton 2009:282). As the neoliberal discourse emphasises, English provides opportunities for socio-economic mobility (Pennycook 1994:1-35); as the critical discourse warns, English excludes from these opportunities and produces social stratification.

Tools of analysis: critical discourse, critical model, and critical metaphors
While there are polarising tendencies in the way English is constructed as a tool of empowerment, it would be unfair to claim that internal criticism is absent from the critical discourse. There is even acknowledgment of the benefits that English can bring to speakers of other languages. For example, Bloemmaert (2001), Granville et al (1998), Kachru (1986) and Widdowson (1998) have questioned some of the statements of the critical discourse without necessarily subscribing to the neoliberal view that the spread of English is always synonymous with socio-economic empowerment. More recently, Brutt-Griffler (2002), Higgins (2009) and Kirkpatrick (2007) have shown that English is being appropriated by non-native speakers who are using it agentively and in their own indigenised ways, giving birth to a myriad of language varieties that are often referred to as ‘World Englishes’. Pennycook himself warns against the danger of degenerating into ‘totalizing tendencies’ and ‘deterministic theses’ if the discourse becomes too dismissive of the idea that English can empower (1994:69). Even theorists who have
constructed the spread of English in terms that are very negative explicitly reject ‘the anti-English’ label and concede, more or less reluctantly, that access to English must be given within the framework of additive bilingual educational policies aimed at promoting the learning and acquisition of both the mother tongue and of English as an additional language (Alexander 2003:11, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2001:143). Hence, relying on a ‘critical’ vs ‘neoliberal’ discourse dichotomy to address limitations in the way English has been constructed as a weapon of socio-economic dis( empowerment) would not be epistemologically sound. Casting theorists either into ‘pro-English’ or ‘anti-English’ ‘sets of possible statements’ is a move that would not do justice to the complexity of what the critics have said about English. Moreover, I do not believe that discourses should be seen as tight compartments. Like Weedon (1987), I believe that the boundaries between discourses are too blurry and fluid to believe that people can easily be placed either into or out of a particular discourse. And even if discourses were indeed tight compartments, it would be impossible to come up with an exhaustive review of ‘the set of possible statements’ that have looked at English critically. Critiquing the critical discourse as a whole, therefore, is not a viable project for this paper. What is viable and, I argue, theoretically and politically necessary, is to critique a subset of statements that have a lot of currency within the critical discourse which limit the efficacy of language rights activism.

Models are simplified representations of phenomena that are too complex to be explained exhaustively. Because models simplify what they represent, they are subject to intrinsic limitations; because what is represented is too complex to be fully explained abstractly, models are indispensable for theory. The ‘critical model’ seeks to represent a subset ‘of possible statements’ within the critical discourse that are used as rhetorical moves to disengage with the notion that power of English can be harnessed by native speakers of other languages and that harnessing this power is an essential part of a process of democratic transformation. As a simplified representation, the critical model itself is subject to limitations. My synthesis cannot capture the full complexity of the subset of statements that fail to do justice to English as a weapon of empowerment. This is because these statements are too numerous and because they are part and parcel of extended arguments whose theoretical value can be fully appreciated only if they are considered in their entirety. Despite its limitations, however, the critical model can be a useful tool of analysis. The statements that fail to
engage with the empowering potential of English are the statements in which the critical discourse’s resistance to internal criticism is the strongest. It is precisely these statements, therefore, that need to be opened up for scrutiny in order to come up with theories that can give us a better understanding of how to make South Africa’s linguistic market more equitable.

My synthesis of the critical model is built around three central metaphors that have a lot of currency in the critical discourse as tropes for constructing English as an obstacle for progressive socio-economic transformation. One of these metaphors presents English as a poacher that is responsible for linguistic genocide: because of its hegemonic power, English saps material and symbolic resources from other languages, which are doomed to remain confined to the lower status of vernaculars or to become extinct. A second metaphor characterises English as a gatekeeper that ensures that societies remain highly stratified: a lack of proficiency in English is used as a mechanism to exclude from education, employment, and status. A third metaphor describes English as a ‘colonizer of the mind’: the learning and acquisition of this language in the periphery results in the internalisation of Western-centric values that instil a sense of inferiority in the colonial subject.

**English as a linguistic poacher**

One of the main arguments of the critical model is that English is responsible for linguistic genocide: English is characterised as a sort of ‘linguistic poacher’ that exterminates endangered languages across the globe by excluding them from prestigious discourses, relegating them to the lower status of vernaculars – at best – or condemning them to extinction. Because of the threat it poses to other languages, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, has repeatedly referred to English as a ‘killer language’ (2000, 2003, see also Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2010). On a similar note, Ngugi has claimed that English ‘flourishes on the graveyard of other people’s languages’ (in Kamwangamalu 2003:69).

Skutnabb-Kangas’s and Phillipson’s correlated notions of ‘linguicide’ and ‘linguicism’ have become key concepts in the debate. Linguicide refers to ‘the extermination of language, an analogous concept to (physical) genocide’; linguicism is

An analogous concept to racism, classism, sexism . . . that translates into ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of resources (both material
Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson draw a parallel between bio-diversity and linguistic diversity to argue that in order to stop the dire consequences that linguisicide and linguicism are having globally, it is essential to promote linguistic human rights. ‘The perpetuation of linguistic diversity can . . . be seen as a recognition that all individuals have basic human rights, and as a necessity for the survival of the planet, in a similar way to bio-diversity’ (1995:84). Pennycook refers to the linguicidal effects of English as a process of ‘linguistic curtailment’ (1994:14), which is in turn responsible for the gatekeeping effect of English.

With English taking up such an important position in many educational systems around the world, it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion and exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions. In many countries, particularly former colonies of Britain, small English speaking elites have continued the same policies of the former colonizers, using access to English language education as a crucial distributor of social prestige and wealth. (1994:14)

The work of Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson (1995) in the area of linguistic rights has had a seminal influence on the way critical linguists have come to see the power of English in South Africa. In order to denounce the hegemony of English, Alexander has referred to the work of Skutnabb-Kangas on linguistic genocide (2002:4, 2003:7, see also Alexander and Bloch 2004). Heugh (2000:13) and Phaahla (2006) have also drawn on Skutnabb-Kangas’s paradigm as one of the arguments for curbing the power of English. Deumert (2010:14) and Kamwangamalu (2003:70) provide examples of how the notion that English is a ‘killer’ of indigenous languages is being used by the South African mass media in sensationalist titles. Here are a couple of examples from Deumert (2010):

- English is a killer language in S.A. (*Cape Times*, May 2006)

**English as a gatekeeper**

Critical linguists have written at length about the gatekeeping effect of English in countries where this language plays a significant role as a medium of intra-national communication, to the detriment of indigenous languages (Heugh 2000, 2002, Tollefson 1986). Many voices in the South African
debate have been trying to counterbalance the growing power of English as a language of national unity by alerting the public to the way this language can function as a mechanism to maintain the country’s enormous gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’. Heugh, for instance, claims that: ‘It is clear that English does not serve the interests of the majority of the people in the country’ because ‘very few people who are not native speakers of English actually have a practical proficiency in English, and so the majority continue to be left in a condition of extreme disadvantage’ (2002:12).

Similarly, Neville Alexander writes that:

Unless you have a command of standard English or of standard Afrikaans in [South Africa] you are simply eliminated from competition for jobs that are well remunerated, you are simply eliminated from consideration for certain positions of status and power […] This means that 75% of the population is excluded, with individual exceptions, from competing for positions of power. (1993:154)

May (2007:34) claims that English ‘functions as the barrier to full societal participation’ and ‘the gate-keeper of humanity’. Hence, according to her, it is a ‘weapon of oppression against those of different languages and cultures’. Without going as far, Lafon (2009:10) points out that the dominance of English as a medium of instruction reproduces socio-economic inequalities between students who have a good command of English and those who don’t, and that these inequalities often correlate with race and class. Similarly, Webb (2006:10) holds the power of English responsible for ‘unequal growth and educational development and unequal social opportunities’. For Phaahla (2006:145), English acts as a gate-keeper by restricting access to knowledge production. Kamwangamalu (2003:68) showed how the perception of English as a gate-keeper is common even among ordinary South Africans.

**English as a ‘colonizer of the mind’**

The idea that English functions as a mechanism for the spreading of Western-centric world views that instil a sense of inferiority in speakers of marginalised languages has a lot of currency in the debate, and it is often associated with Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind* (1981), a manifesto in which the Kenyan novelist and critic states his reasons for repudiating English and embracing his native African language as a means for literary and intellectual expression.
Ngugi does not use the concept of discourse, but his thesis rests on an understanding of language as a ‘carrier of culture’ that extends beyond a socio-politically neutral means of communication to include social and cultural elements that play a key role in the formation of subjectivity (1981: 13-15). He posits a relationship between a monolithic notion of culture and an essential, natural, fixed core that should determine how a person sees himself or herself. After claiming that ‘no man or woman can choose their biological nationality’, he assumes the existence of an ‘African reality’ that should lie at the roots of the cultural identity shared by the African nation (1981:1-2). This essential, African core that is fixed at birth is being shattered by a Western, imperialist ‘cultural bomb’.

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people’s languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their spring of life. (1981:3)

According to Ngugi, it is primarily through language that this cultural bomb detonates:

The choice of language and the use to which language is being put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. (1981:5)

He argues that ‘a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality, but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with specific history,’ which finds expression in the ‘particularity of sounds, words, the word order into phrases and sentences, and the specific manner or laws, of their ordering’ (1981:15). Hence, the use of a ‘foreign language’ in an African context breaks the harmony between the individual and his ‘natural, social environment’ resulting in ‘colonial alienation’ (1981:17) and ultimately subjugation:

Since culture does not just reflect the world in images, but through those images conditions a child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial
child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition. (1981:18)

From the point of view of subjugation, ‘the images of the world’ that emerged in the ‘language of the colonizer’ instil a sense of inferiority in the ‘colonial child,’ whose ‘own native languages were associated in his impressionable mind with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability, or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility or barbarism’ (1981:17-18).

Ngugi’s thesis has a lot of currency in the debate about the power of English as an international and intra-national lingua franca. Phillipson’s rejection of the possibility of seeing English as a neutral tool for communication, especially when used as a medium of instruction in post-colonial contexts, is based on assumptions that resonate with echoes of *Decolonising the Mind*.

For children whose mother tongue is not English, English is not the language of their cultural heritage, not the language of intense personal feelings and the community . . . Claiming that English is neutral (a tool, an instrument) involves a disconnection between what English is (culture) from its structural basis (from what it has and does). It disconnects the means from ends and purposes, from what English is being used for [sic]. The type of reasoning we are dealing with here . . . fits into the familiar linguicist pattern of the dominant language creating an exalted image of itself, other languages being devalued, and the relationship between the two rationalized in favor of the dominant language. (1992: 285-8)

Nkambide Zandile (1997:103) refers to the fact that blacks in South Africa ‘use their mother tongue but must also learn two additional languages’ as an ‘exercise that robs children of their heritage’. Citing Ngugi, he claims that:

The arguments against the use of English as a national language also point out that it is capable of holding captive black cultures, their values, and hence their minds . . . Information defined by representatives of a different language group is likely to be inaccurate or to exclude or deauthorize the knowledge and experience of the other or to incorporate them [sic] on terms that suit the dominant language group. Defining one’s identity in a language other than one’s own is one of the worst nightmares. (1997:106)

Many others in the South African debate have used the notion that
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English ‘colonizes minds’ as part of their arguments for curbing its power. Alexander (2002:119) attributes the low status of indigenous languages to the ‘colonized minds’ of their speakers (2003:16, see also Alexander and Bloch 2004:1). Lafon (2009:18), Madiba (2004:34), Moyo (2002:152), Ndimande, (2004:71-72) and Phaahla, (2006:152) have also made explicit references to Ngugi’s theory to construct the power of English as an obstacle for socioeconomic transformation in South Africa. During an acceptance speech for an honorary degree conferred to him by the American University of Nigeria, South Africa’s current President Jacob Zuma (2011) also referred to Ngugi’s thesis to argue for the need to promote African languages:

The issue of the decolonization of the mind was also important in Ngugi’s wa Thiongo’s concept of African intelligentsia. To him, African intellectuals are alienated from their people as they rely on European languages which, like all languages, are a repository of memory, history, and culture. Therefore part of the decolonization of the African mind must entail using our indigenous languages.

Epistemological limitations
The epistemological limitations of theories that rely heavily on these critical metaphors come from a tendency to be overly dismissive of dissenting interpretations of the power of English and of empirical evidence showing that many Africans want to take ownership of this language. The tautological aspect in Phillipson’s reduction of the power of English to linguistic imperialism (1992) is a case in point. Phillipson introduces the notion of ‘English Linguistic Imperialism’ as a tool of analysis:

A working definition of English Linguistic Imperialism is that the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. Here structural refers broadly to material properties (for example, institutions, financial allocations) and culture to immaterial or ideological properties (for example, attitudes, pedagogic principles). (1992:47)

This ‘working definition’ presents the thesis that the spread of English amounts to linguistic imperialism as an axiom: the alleged ‘dominance of English’ is constructed as an imperialistic socio-political phenomenon by definition. Phillipson (1992: 137-71) provides convincing evidence of how allegedly politically neutral cultural institutions such as the British Council and its American counterparts have taken steps to promote English in the
periphery to serve the interests of centres of power in the metropole. However, the idea that the continued dominance of English after the fall of the British Empire can be ascribed *exclusively* to a successful conspiracy orchestrated by core-Anglophone countries which ‘asserts and maintains the establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages’, rather than to a more complex series of factors, is a theory that remains to be proven, rather than a fact that can be taken as a given. Brutt-Griffler (2002), Canagarajah (1999) and Lee and Norton (2009) have problematised this conspiracy theory by highlighting that native speakers of other languages are agentive in the way they take ownership of English.

While linguicism, linguicide, and linguistic imperialism do occur, it is reductive to see the spread of English exclusively in these terms. As Kachru has pointed, we also need to take into account the ‘transformative’ power of English, or its ‘alchemy’:

The alchemy of English (present and future) . . . does not only provide social status, it also gives access to attitudinally and materially desirable domains of power. It provides a powerful linguistic tool for manipulation and control. In addition, this alchemy of English has left a deep mark on the languages and literature of the non-Western world. English has thus caused transmutation of languages, equipping them in the process for new societal, scientific, and technological demands. The process of Englishization has initiated stylistic and thematic innovations and has ‘modernized’ registers . … It continues to provide unprecedented power for mobility and advancement to those native and non-native users who possess it as a linguistic tool. (1986: 13-14)

In order to come to a sound understanding of the implications that the acquisition of English has on identity and power relations, the critical model needs to be held in tension with the ‘alchemy’ of this language. A discussion of English and empowerment must indeed take into account the linguicidal potential of dominant languages. It is true that most indigenous languages spoken around the Southernmost reaches of Africa (the Khoi and San languages) have almost become extinct and that the South African Indian community has shifted to an almost exclusive use of English as a home language (Deumert 2009:13, Kamwangamalu 2003:68). There are also reasons to be concerned about the Bantu languages spoken in South Africa, which are being excluded from prestigious socio-linguistic domains, putting pressure on their native speakers to carry out more and more of their
linguistic exchanges in English. Nevertheless, it must be noted that while there is evidence that black South Africans are using English more and more, even at home, and not just among the elite (Deumert 2006, Parmegiani 2009, 2010), empirical research (Deumert 2006, 2010, Rudwick 2006) suggests that English is not ‘killing’ African languages, but rather merging with them to expand people’s linguistic repertoires. According to Deumert, studies often cited to argue that a language shift is taking place do not provide conclusive evidence that English is indeed replacing other languages. What these studies document is a widening of linguistic repertoires, in the home, with peers, and at school/work; that is, English is being used in addition to other languages. … Instead of ‘antagonism’ bilingual speakers tend to express strong attachment to their multilingual identities. (2010:17)

In addition, a discussion of the potentially linguicidal effects of English must also take into account the fact that the dominant language can equip marginalised languages to meet the ‘new societal scientific, and technological demands’ Kachru alluded to. Lexical borrowing from English is playing a key role in modernising African languages so that they can be used in the domains from which they have been excluded. Moreover, native speakers of African languages in urban areas often find code-switching and code mixing a more effective means of communication than the ‘pure’ varieties of their mother tongue (Paxton 2009, Probyn 2009:124, Ndlangamandla 2010), which the white missionaries standardised to translate Christian texts. Native speakers of African languages often find these varieties ‘archaic’ and inadequate for expressing modern concepts, and they often prefer to use English words than the words coined by lexicographers (Parmegiani 2009). Native speakers can also be uncomfortable with the identities that are projected through the use of standard or ‘pure’ varieties, which tend to be associated with rural, traditional ways of thinking (Mesthrie 2002:16) that do not reflect urban black South African identities, which tend to be more modern and hybrid (Parmegiani 2009).

There is no doubt that English has a gate-keeping effect in South Africa. However, if taught effectively, this language can become the key to the gate for more and more people, making it a language of inclusion, rather than a language of exclusion. Dominant languages can yield ‘profits of distinction’ for a few and marginalise the masses if and only if only the elite can claim ownership of dominant ways of speaking. As Granville et al, have written in response to the excessive use of negative constructions of English among
language rights activists in South Africa, ‘If everyone had access to English, English would no longer be an elitist language. In this way English could come to be seen as a resource, not as a problem’ (1998:259). Hence, a critical discourse about the power of English should never lose track of the fact that dominant languages can be appropriated by native speakers of other languages.

In order to promote the African languages, Alexander has constructed the power of English as ‘unassailable but unattainable’ (Alexander 2000:1); Heugh has claimed – without much substantiation – that ‘very few people who are not native English speakers actually have a practical proficiency in English’ (2002:12). Similarly, South African novelist Mike Nicol (Sunday Times, 2004: 17-18) has referred to the English spoken by non-native speakers in South Africa – including well educated politicians and business people – as ‘English “with lower case e”’ that is ‘incapable of making meaning’ and is ‘consigning’ this country to a ‘ghetto of mediocrity’. Even a cursory look at an anthology of South African literature written in English can dispel the notion that English is not ‘attainable’ by native speakers of other languages, let alone that it is an ‘English with a ‘lower case “e”’. While it is true that only a few English speakers – both native and non-native – might be able to attain the level of English ownership of writers and political activists such as Sol Plaatjie (1916) and Steven Biko (2002), my personal interactions with black South Africans from all walks of life, and the time I spent observing students from disadvantaged backgrounds at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Parmegiani 2008, 2009, 2010), make me uncomfortable with the claim that ‘practical proficiency’ is restricted to ‘very few’ non-native speakers in South Africa, as claimed by Heugh (2002:12).

Finally, one can make the ‘colonization of the mind’ argument without doing justice to the way this language can be used to challenge power imbalances by giving access to counter-hegemonic discourses such as the one created by Ngugi himself, which would not have been as influential had it not appeared in a language that is as widely understood internationally. Widdowson has exposed very effectively the paradox intrinsic to Ngugi’s thesis and to theories that rely on the critical model:

English today is as much the language of dissent as of conformity, as witness the work of Canagarajah, Kachru, Pennycook, Phillipson and others . . . You cannot use English to argue that it precludes argument. There is a fundamental contradiction in the idea that the language itself exerts hegemonic control: namely, that if this were the case, you would
never be able to challenge such control. This would mean that all those currently busy in exposing the evils of linguicism are, wittingly or not, part of the conspiracy they pretend to expose. (1998: 397)

A discussion of the power of English in terms of ‘colonization of the mind,’ therefore, should be held in tension with the role this language has played in raising consciousness against racist, classist, sexist, and heteronormative oppression. In the context of South Africa, one could look at political tracts and creative writing written in the dominant language by non-native English speaking South Africans to challenge white supremacist discourse. Steven Biko’s collection of essays entitled *I Write What I Like* is emblematic in this regard. In terms of sexism, one could juxtapose the generic use of male personal pronouns in English with politeness norms that are prevalent in rural varieties of Nguni languages (Finlayson 1995, Rudwick and Shange 2009). An epistemologically sound construction of the power of English could also highlight the tension felt by many black South African females who, on the one hand, see English as a way out of cultural norms that create gender inequality (De Kadt 2004, Parmegiani 2010) but, on the other hand, resent the Western-centric aspects of some of the discourses they encounter while using the dominant language.

**Political limitations**

The main political limitations of the critical model come from its tendency to be overly dismissive of empirical evidence showing black South Africans’ desire to appropriate English as an additional language. This desire, which problematises theories based on the critical model, is often dismissed using Marxist concepts such as ‘hegemony’, ‘false consciousness’, or by arguing that, given the dominance of English in South Africa’s linguistic market, native speakers of African languages have no choice but to use English more than they would like.

Phillipson writes that ‘the ideal way to make people do what you want is to make them want it themselves’ (1992:286). Applying this notion to the findings of a study carried out in Namibia, he concludes that illiterate parents’ high rating of English reflects their submission to hegemonic ideas. Referring to similar studies carried out in South Africa, Alexander argues: ‘because of the hegemonic effects of domination, generally speaking, surveys of the kinds on which these studies are based can, at best, indicate the extent of what we can advisedly call false consciousness’ (2000:21).
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I don’t want to deny the existence of ‘false consciousness,’ but I think that we have to exercise extreme caution whenever we resort to this concept as an explanation for a socio-political phenomenon. Epistemologically, the ‘false consciousness’ argument can seal the borders of a discourse by dismissing dissenting views with the claim that those who hold those views do not know any better. Politically, the concept of ‘false consciousness’ can degenerate into an instrument of social control. ‘False consciousness’ implies that there are ‘people who know’ and ‘people who don’t know,’ and that those who don’t know should be told what to do. Of course, Phillipson and Alexander are not advocating the use of coercion, but are only recommending that native speakers of African languages be put in a position where they can make the best decisions about the medium of instruction for their children, which, according to a lot of research, entails a much greater use of the mother tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2003, 2010, Heugh 2000, 2007, Lafon 2009).

But the suggestion that the desires of black South Africans are ‘false’ carries eerie echoes of colonial rhetoric that are not going to fall well on the ears of those who are suffering the price of colonial legacies. In the following passage, taken from a report on education in the Cape Colony compiled in 1882, a historian of the time reflects on the opportunity to invite ‘the natives’ to have a say on matters concerning their education:

‘Would you give the natives a voice in the matter? – I do not think it would be much use. The native voice is after all the voice of the man who has control over them. In speaking of the native voice, you speak of something which really does not exist’. (Teal, in Rose and Tumner 1975:213)

The political agendas behind these conclusions and language rights activists’ use of the concept of ‘false consciousness’ could not be more different. The rhetorical similarities, however, are striking, and in a country like South Africa, where English is associated with the struggle for the liberation of the majority of its people (Peirce 1989, Kamwangamalu 2001) and Bantu languages with racist exploitation and dysfunctional schools (Lafon 2009:39-40), suggesting that black South Africans need to be protected from English because they are not able to make decisions in their own interests is more likely to be an impediment than an effective strategy for the promotion of African languages.

Bridging the gap between South Africa’s language policies (which grants equal status to the 11 official languages) and practices (which make English
a de facto gatekeeper) requires the will to promote Bantu languages. This will has to come from the speakers of these languages (Canagarajah 2005, Moodley 2009). Neville Alexander (2003) has pointed out, the African elite has no interest in seeing their native tongues play a more important role in the country’s political, economic, and cultural life, since they have appropriated English sufficiently to be able to reap its ‘profit of distinction’ (Bourdieu 1991:56). While there are encouraging signs that this might not always be the case any longer, as some leading black intellectuals and politicians have taken a strong stance to empower African languages (Nzimande, in Khumalo 2011, Zuma 2011), it would be hard to dispute that English continues to be the language of the elite (Deumert 2010, Lafon 2009, May 2007). And the black working class, faced with the need to make ends meet in an economy where English is a precondition for most forms of employment, is more preoccupied with ensuring their children’s access to the language of power than with questions of linguistic genocide or colonisation of the mind (Parmegiani 2010).

It is unlikely that the African middle class will voluntarily follow Alexander’s recommendation that they commit ‘class suicide’ by refraining from using English as a status symbol (2003:15). Nor is it likely that the black working class is going to be persuaded by the ‘false consciousness’ argument. If anything, the eerie echoes of colonial rhetoric carried by the suggestion that black South Africans must be protected from English are likely to reinforce the equation that Alexander has referred to as one of ‘the most baneful legacies of apartheid’; that is, the idea that English = liberation, and that Afrikaans and Bantu Languages = apartheid. Obviously, this equation does not make sense. There is nothing intrinsically oppressive or liberating about any language. At the same time, however, it would not make any more sense to replace this equation with another one that is just as fallacious: English = oppression; Bantu Languages = liberation.

It must be highlighted that unlike the founding fathers of apartheid, most critics of English are not against giving access to the language of power; instead, they believe in giving this access while promoting marginalised languages. Alexander, for instance, explicitly rejects the ‘joy of English bashing’ (2003:11) and exhorts the public not to see the language question in terms of an ‘either English’ or ‘mother tongue’ logic (2002: 1). A similar stance is taken by Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson:

We claim that it is perfectly possible to match up ethnolinguistic and socio-economic concerns – there is no necessary contradiction. Likewise
Children need two or more languages in education learned additively. It is not a question of either the mother tongue or a dominant language, but two or more. No language needs to be sacrificed in additive learning. (2001:143)

Indeed, the idea that the appropriation of English and the development of the mother tongue are mutually exclusive is a misconception and a major obstacle in the implementation of the 1997 Language in Education Policy. Language rights activists should not reinforce this misconception by resorting excessively to negative constructions of English. If the case for the need to promote marginalised languages is made by characterising English as a gatekeeper, a linguistic poacher, and a coloniser of the mind, it is easier to conclude that those who want to promote the mother tongue are ‘anti-English’.

**Conclusion**

Rather than dismissing the desire to appropriate English and the scarce support for the promotion of African languages on the part of their native speakers as a case of ‘false consciousness’, ‘colonization of the mind’, or ‘hegemony’, language rights activists should engage with the primary stakeholders of these policies. There is plenty of empirical evidence suggesting that native speakers of African languages are agentive in their language attitudes and practices, not just within intellectual circles, but also at the grassroots level (Canagarajah 1999, Kapp 2000, Parmegiani 2009, Thesen 1997). Understanding the nature of speakers’ investments in their mother tongue and in the appropriation of the dominant language will go much further in promoting marginalised languages than suggesting that native speakers of African languages are unable to make decisions in their best interests. It is difficult for language policies to be successful without the support of their stakeholders. In order to find more effective ways to create this support it is important to use further empirical research to unravel the complexity of language attitudes and practices of black South Africans.

Significant progress has been made on the road to linguistic equality in South Africa. For example, isiZulu, the most widely used mother tongue, has strengthened its presence in the print media, with newspaper sales sometimes surpassing English language newspapers (Deumert 2010:15, Ndhlovu 2008:274). President Zuma has used isiZulu during public functions and called for the need to promote a greater use of African languages in prestigious domains (2011) and education minister Naledi Pandor called for
a greater use of mother tongues in schools (Pandor 2006, in Moodley 2009). The University of KwaZulu-Natal is in the process of implementing an ambitious language policy which strives for the development isiZulu as a language of learning and teaching that eventually will have ‘the same institutional and academic status of English’ (LP-UKZN 2006:1, see also Balfour 2010). A lot remains to be done, however, especially in education (Webb et al 2010).

Given what has already been accomplished and what remains to be done in the fight for language equality, critical language theorists and activists should continue pushing for the promotion of marginalised languages, but in doing so it should avoid resorting to a rhetoric that denies or underplays the possibility of owning English as additional language. Not only does this rhetoric reify the gate-keeping effect of the dominant language, but it is also an impediment for the promotion of African languages. If the legitimate ownership of English is conceived of as a native speaker’s prerogative, we should not be surprised to see native speakers of African languages resisting mother tongue instruction and going out of their way to send their children to monolingual English medium schools in order to make them as ‘native’ as possible, despite their pride in their mother tongue (Rudwick 2006). If activists argue that English ownership can be claimed by anyone as the result of a successful learning process, and if they can convince the general public that the best way to learn an additional language is by building on the mother tongue, it will be easier to convince the primary stakeholders that promoting access to English and promoting a greater use of African languages are two sides of the same coin.

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