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# Linguistic diversity in South Africa and the challenges of the African Renaissance

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South African Embassy,  
Berlin, 21 November 2007

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## Linguistic diversity in South Africa and the challenges of the African Renaissance

- Colonial conquest, imperialism and globalisation have established a hierarchy of standard languages, which mirrors the power relations on the planet. Above all, English, in David Crystal's coinage, is a "global language", indeed, *the* global language. From all parts of the world, including the continent where the English language originated, we hear the same complaint: *English is destroying our languages*
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- There is ample statistical evidence to demonstrate the current dominance of English in international trade, finance, world governance and in tertiary education, science and technology, the publishing industry and other domains. The statistics pertaining to the Internet reinforce this perception. According to [globstats@global-reach.biz](mailto:globstats@global-reach.biz) (30 September 2004), 35.2% of all information on the world wide web is in the English language, 35.7% in numerous non-English European languages and 32.3% in non-English Asian languages.
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- Non-English African languages do not warrant a mention because they can hardly be said to be “present” on the net at this stage. The yawning digital divide, specifically as it involves the peoples of Africa, could hardly be manifested more eloquently than by this statistical silence.
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- The ultimate question, for those of us who are convinced of the need to plot an alternative route for the human species is what we, as language specialists and practitioners, can do in order to strengthen those social and historical forces which are running counter to the apparently unstoppable logic of globalisation
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- *“Because hegemony is not totalitarian, there is always a possibility of counter-hegemonic social and cultural construction”, (Susan Sonntag)*

the question arises in the African context: how do we assist in the decolonisation of the mind of the billions of people who are held in thrall by the demonstrable “superiority” of the global languages as propagated and prioritised by their own ruling groups and strata?

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- It is indeed clear that there must be some reaction, if only because the babel of languages in the world is an essential limitation on globalization, and the increase in education and literacy will render this problem particularly acute for the purposes of the world's uniformity. The idea that one day the entire world will speak English seems utopian to me; it is something that will not happen. Multilingualism, by definition, is an obstacle to globalization. (Hobsbawm 2003:125)
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- The 5-Ds argument for the preservation of linguistic diversity.





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# Linguistic diversity in South Africa and the challenges of the African Renaissance

- Linguistic diversity in South Africa: some statistics.

**Table 1.4: Percentage of population speaking each official language as their first home language, Gauteng and South Africa, 2001**

Language	Gauteng		South Africa	
	N	%	N	%
Afrikaans	1 269 176	14,4	5 983 426	13,3
English	1 105 192	12,5	3 673 203	8,2
IsiNdebele	171 018	1,9	711 821	1,6
IsiXhosa	671 045	7,6	7 907 153	17,6
IsiZulu	1 902 025	21,5	10 677 305	23,8
Sepedi	945 656	10,7	4 208 980	9,4
Sesotho	1 159 589	13,1	3 555 186	7,9
Setswana	741 219	8,4	3 677 016	8,2
SiSwati	122 560	1,4	1 194 430	2,7
Tshivenda	154 183	1,7	1 021 757	2,3
Xitsonga	505 380	5,7	1 992 207	4,4
Other	90 134	1,0	217 293	0,5

Other includes all the non-official languages spoken in South Africa as home languages.

Source: Statistics South Africa, Population Census 2001

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See Pansalb and Stats SA

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**Table 1.5: Population distribution of each official language most often spoken at home within each population group, Gauteng, 2001**

Language	Black African	Coloured	Indian/Asian	White	Total
Afrikaans	41 951	218 424	4 941	1 003 860	1 269 176
English	74 464	109 932	200 691	720 106	1 105 192
IsiNdebele	168 987	315	579	1 137	171 018
IsiXhosa	668 404	723	115	1 804	671 045
IsiZulu	1 897 857	2 604	162	1 403	1 902 025
Sepedi	944 054	614	82	907	945 656
Sesotho	1 157 019	1 686	72	811	1 159 589
Setswana	738 186	1 997	127	909	741 219
SiSwati	122 074	164	28	294	122 560
Tshivenda	153 710	140	31	301	154 183
Xitsonga	504 402	275	44	660	505 380
Other	51 684	1 101	11 144	26 205	90 134
<b>Total</b>	<b>6 522 792</b>	<b>337 974</b>	<b>218 015</b>	<b>1 758 398</b>	<b>8 837 178</b>

Due to rounding, columns may not add up to 100%.

Source: Statistics South Africa, Population census 2001

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Statistics South Africa

Primary tables: South Africa

## 1 Home language

Tables 1.1 to 1.4 show the numbers and percentages of people speaking each of the official languages of South Africa as their first home language (language most often spoken in the household) at the time of Census '96 and Census 2001, broken down by population group and gender.

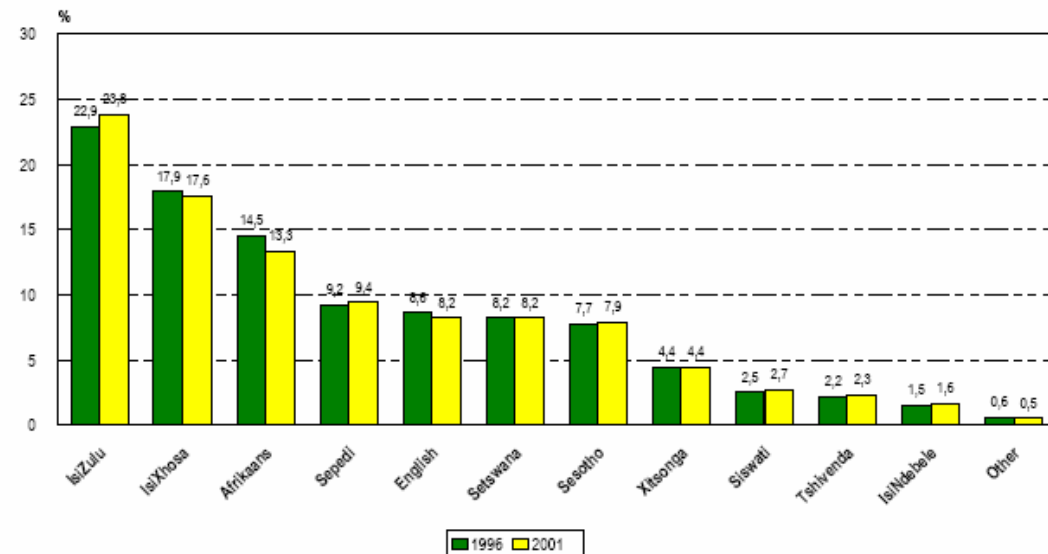
The most frequently spoken first home language in both census years was isiZulu. It was spoken by 9,2 million people in 1996, increasing to 10,7 million in 2001. This was followed by isiXhosa, spoken by 7,2 million in 1996 and 7,9 million in 2001. The third most frequently spoken first home language was Afrikaans, spoken by 5,8 million in 1996, increasing to 6,0 million in 2001. The least frequently spoken first home language, of the eleven official languages of South Africa, was isiNdebele, spoken by 587 000 in 1996, increasing to 712 000 in 2001.

The nine official indigenous African languages were spoken as first home languages by 76,5% of the population at the time of Census '96, increasing to 77,9% at the time of Census 2001. Afrikaans and English together were spoken as first home languages by 23,1% of the population in 1996, decreasing to 21,5% in 2001.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of people speaking each home language in 1996 and 2001. Almost a quarter of the population reported isiZulu as their first home language.

The ranking order of languages most often spoken at home remained the same over the two censuses.

**Figure 1**  
Distribution of the population by first home language  
Census 1996 and 2001



Census 1996: Excluding unspecified language  
Census 2001: Imputed values for unspecified language

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## ■ Constitutional provisions on language issue

### 6. Languages

1. The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.
2. Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.
3.
  - a. The national government and provincial governments may use any particular official languages for the purposes of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned; but the national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages.
  - b. Municipalities must take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents.
4. The national government and provincial governments, by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. Without detracting from the provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.
5. A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must -
  - a. promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of -
    - i. all official languages;
    - ii. the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and
    - iii. sign language ; and
  - b. promote and ensure respect for -
    - i. all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu; and
    - ii. Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa.

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## ■ Bill of Rights

### 29. Education

1. Everyone has the right -
    - a. to a basic education, including adult basic education; and
    - b. to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible.
  2. Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of, this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account -
    - a. equity;
    - b. practicability; and
    - c. the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices.
  3. Everyone has the right to establish and maintain, at their own expense, independent educational institutions that -
    - a. do not discriminate on the basis of race;
    - b. are registered with the state; and
    - c. maintain standards that are not inferior to standards at comparable public educational institutions.
  4. Subsection (3) does not preclude state subsidies for independent educational institutions.
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## ■ Bill of Rights

### 1. **30. Language and culture**

Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights.

### 1. **31. Cultural, religious and linguistic communities**

Persons belonging to a cultural, religious or linguistic community may not be denied the right, with other members of that community -

- a. to enjoy their culture, practise their religion and use their language; and
- b. to form, join and maintain cultural, religious and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society.

### 2. The rights in subsection (1) may not be exercised in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights.

### **35. Arrested, detained and accused persons**

### 3. Every accused person has a right to a fair trial, which includes the right -

- k. to be tried in a language that the accused person understands or, if that is not practicable, to have the proceedings interpreted in that language;

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- The challenges of the African Renaissance with respect to South Africa's linguistic diversity translate as the enhancement of the status and the intellectualisation of the African languages. Without the implementation of this strategic commitment, all talk of an "African Renaissance" and an "African century" is an illusion
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# Linguistic diversity in South Africa and the challenges of the African Renaissance

- Language planning infrastructure in South Africa: The main achievements after 12 years





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- The Pan South African Language Board (Pansalb), representative of all the official languages as well as South African Sign Language. (See Pansalb website [www.pansalb.co.za](http://www.pansalb.co.za) for details).
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- Nine Provincial Language Committees. Their main task is to represent Pansalb and to watch over the implementation of official language policy at provincial level.



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- 13 National Language Bodies whose main task is to see to the corpus development of their respective language.
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- 11 Lexicographic Units, each of which has ultimately to create and maintain a comprehensive monolingual explanatory dictionary as well as promote and publish other dictionaries for the respective language.
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- Notable among Pansalb's successes have been the successful piloting and inauguration of a Telephonic Interpreting Service of South Africa (TISSA), the commissioning of the vital *Language Use and Language Interaction in South Africa. A National Sociolinguistic Survey* (2000) and the institution of the structures referred to above. In general, however, it has not been a prominent force and has been obstructed by the hegemonic national and global forces that shape the asymmetrical power relations of all multilingual states.
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- Although it has constitutional autonomy as a statutory body, administratively, Pansalb falls under the Department of Arts and Culture, which has responsibility for managing language matters in the new South Africa. Since the National Language Service (NLS), which, originally, was no more than the translation and terminology service to government, also falls under this Department, overlapping concerns and conflicts of interest inevitably occur and, in fact, in recent years, there have been numerous, sometimes paralysing, tensions between the two entities.
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- It should also be noted that important departments of state, among others, Education and Defence, have tended to make policy independently, with only nominal consultation with Pansalb.



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- The recent *ad hoc* Committee on the Review of Chapter 9 and Associated Institutions, which was chaired by Prof. Kader Asmal, was so unimpressed with the effectiveness of Pansalb that it recommended that its “ ... lexicography units ... be transferred to the Department of Arts and Culture, and the Board itself ... be incorporated in the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities. ... (Executive Summary of the Committee’s Report, p. xiii).
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- Except for the South African Broadcasting Corporation which has an improving record as far as the use of indigenous languages is concerned, most media, the public service and the vital tertiary education sector have tended to join the slide towards a unilingual public policy delivery, in spite of the fact that this disposition favours the English-knowing elite and, thus, deepens the asymmetry of power relations in South Africa.
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- An important exception is provided by the privately owned print media in KwaZulu-Natal, where the Zulu-language daily *Isolezwe* and the magazine *UmAfrika* are pioneering the popular reading of serious public interest material in African languages.
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- Two other important language policy initiatives should be noted. The National Language Policy Framework, approved by Cabinet in 2002 was shaped by a dedicated task team that reported directly to the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. The same team formulated the South African Languages Bill which, at the time of writing (April 2007) has not yet been placed before the National Assembly even though it was similarly approved by Cabinet. The Language Policy for Higher Education (2004) also resulted from the work of a special committee, appointed by the Minister of Education.
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- The NLPF is an important interim provision, since all departments of state and provincial governments can and do use it as a set of guidelines for the formulation and implementation of language policy. As such, it constitutes an important guarantee for the practical realisation of a democratic policy of multilingualism and language equality in the longer term.
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- South Africa is a land of good hope. Developments in the educational sphere are beginning to light up the road ahead. For reasons connected with the slow and zig-zag improvement of the system, especially the shocking findings in 2004 and subsequently that very many children cannot read at grade level, there is a new urgency on the part of the DoE to explore mother tongue based education. About this, I shall speak in detail in another presentation.
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- It is perfectly clear, however, that unless African languages are given market value, i.e., unless their instrumentality for the processes of production, exchange and distribution is enhanced, no amount of policy change at school level can guarantee their use in high-status functions and, thus, eventual escape from the dominance and the hegemony of English.
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- We have understood for many years already that the previous and current language-medium policy caused cognitive impoverishment and, consequently, necessitated investment in compensatory on-the-job training by the private sector in order to enhance the “trainability” of the just-from-school recruits. This wastefulness would be completely avoidable if a national development plan existed, in which reform of education and economic development planning were more effectively integrated
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- This would mean that fundamental changes in the language-medium policy would be directly related to the increased use of the African mother tongues, where relevant, in the public service and in the “formal” economy. An articulated programme of job creation and employment on the basis of language proficiencies would, in the South African context also serve as an organic affirmative action programme, one that would not have the unintended consequence of perpetuating and entrenching divisive racial identities inherited from the apartheid past.
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- This new phase of the development and use of African languages in high-status functions should be approached and understood against the background of the strategies, activities and programmes of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), viewed as an instrument of the African Renaissance and of the cultural revolution on the continent during this, the “African century”, both of which were so hopefully proclaimed by President Mbeki at the end of the 20th century.
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- As a specialised bureau of the African Union, ACALAN is beginning to influence decisively the direction and modalities of language policies on the continent. South Africa, because of its own recent history and its human and material resources, is bound to play an important role on this new road, and clarity about our own positions on and commitment to a democratic language dispensation is, therefore, fundamental. The success of ACALAN will have direct and enduring consequences for all African countries, not least for the Republic of South Africa.
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- In conclusion, lest there are people among us for whom the language question remains a minor issue, let us remember the winged words of Halliday and Martin:

*The history of humanity is not only a history of socio-economic activity. It is also a history of semiotic activity.*

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