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Linguistic rights and language policy: A south–north dialogue

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Abstract

A central thought, even a guiding principle, in Neville Alexander's work is the affirmation of the right to communicate and learn through one's own home language. In his writings, he embraced language policies that firmly reject all forms of racialisation and ethnicisation. For him, the imposition of one (national) language, along with the fragmentation of society into bounded and ethnicised linguistic groups, can be considered an expression of hierarchical power relations. This article explores Alexander's proposals on inclusive language policies that have resonated in Europe, not only in the scientific community but also with policymakers. Today, in many countries the emphasis on a single national language risks the exclusion of large segments of the population. The focus is here on how linguistic categorisations arising out of language ideologies can determine language policies and, more particularly, language-in-education policies. In highlighting Alexander's conviction that the role of sociolinguists is not limited to the description and analysis of the role of language in society, but that it should also encompass social criticism and the will to promote transformation, the article investigates how language policies can be part of a counter-hegemonic strategy and can be conceived as a means of approaching a more democratic and just system.

Keywords: counter-hegemonic strategy, inclusive language policies, language-in-education policies, linguistic categorisations

Introduction

But just as Copernicus and Galileo dared to pose the question: Is it not possible that the earth is revolving around the sun rather than the other way around as we have always believed and as the 'evidence' of our senses tell us?, so today, a few daring scholars have thrown doubt on the Eurocentric dogmas about nations and nationalism (Alexander 1989).

It was in January 2000 at a conference in Oegstgeest in the Netherlands that I got to know Neville Alexander better and to learn more about the social and political commitment that inspired his work in applied linguistics.

Though the theme of the conference was language policies in Europe, scholars from other continents had been invited to participate, with the aim of including a non-European perspective in the debates. At that time, only three years after the implementation of the new South African constitution, which recognises 11 official languages and so has made multilingualism one of its guiding principles, the South African experience not only aroused vivid interest among scholars in applied linguistics, but was also invested with great hopes and expectations. Alexander was invited as one of the intellectual visionaries and promoters of the post-apartheid language policy, and also as a scholar known for his vigilance and sharp criticism of all policy measures that were likely to underestimate the potential of the African languages and the importance they had for their speakers.

In his presentation (Alexander 2001:355) he underlined the fact that a comparison of language policies in

Europe and in post-apartheid South Africa could be useful because there were both generic similarities and great differences between them. Similarities, because in both cases language policy is linked to questions of inclusion and exclusion; differences, since the terms 'minority' and 'majority languages' have completely different meanings in South Africa than in Europe: in Europe the term 'minority languages' traditionally refers to languages with low status that are less present in the public domain. By contrast, even though in South Africa English and Afrikaans are the languages of arithmetic minorities they manifest all the features sociolinguists generally ascribe to dominant languages, whereas the African languages – spoken by numerically larger shares of the population – are in a low-status position.

One of the central debates during the conference was around data collection in the much anticipated population census in 2001 in Europe, from the point of view of applied linguistics and language planning. Arguing that the state has no right to classify citizens into predetermined and bounded ethnolinguistic categories or to require them to assign themselves to such categories, Alexander and I found ourselves arguing against the view of the vast majority of the speakers. His rejection of the ethnic and racial categorisations on which the racist apartheid policy had been based was not astonishing for the participants in the conference. But it came as a surprise when he told them that in the new South Africa also he refused any categorisation of this kind, even for the purpose of implementing an affirmative action policy, and that he himself was not prepared to tick any boxes on official forms that asked for racial or ethnolinguistic affiliation.

My rejection of the inclusion of questions in the population census that assumed an equation between language use and ethnicity was based on the experience in European history of persons who were identified as belonging to particular ethnic, religious or linguistic groups being persecuted under the Nazi regime – an experience that is still present in attitudes and implicit fears, even in the third post-war generation. Despite the difference in the African and the European historical background, the similarity of our points of view became the start of a regular cooperation, academic exchange and long-lasting friendship.

As I will argue later in this article, the refusal to accept ethnolinguistic categorisations or language policies inspired by monolingual ideologies arose from deep convictions that characterised Alexander's political commitment and academic thinking from the very beginning. Both could, in his view, become barriers which inhibit access to education, employment and social welfare. By contrast, he advocated a language policy aimed at social, political, economic and cultural empowerment.

In this contribution I will show how relevant his thoughts on the possibility of an empowering language policy are today for Europe. As regards the processes of globalisation and migration, Europe is confronted with a growing linguistic diversification not only in European metropolises, but increasingly also in more peripheral areas. In everyday politics this diversity is often treated as a problem concerning the individual speaker who is required to assimilate and 'master' the particular national language, rather than as a challenge to the traditional monolingual orientation of society.

Europe – where for centuries a monolingual habitus has dominated and even become a destructive export product – is now in desperate need of language policies that aim to include while respecting difference; policies able to prevent further cleavages in society. Therefore, Alexander was highly valued in Europe as an expert on language policy and language planning, and as a visionary thinker. He was invited not only to give guest lectures and seminars at numerous universities across Europe or as a keynote speaker at international conferences, but also as an expert and counsellor by institutions such as the Council of Europe's language policy division, the Unesco Commission or the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). The fact that he was awarded the *Lingua Pax* prize in 2008 speaks of the high regard in which he was held among European language activists.

Alexander had a profound knowledge of European history, culture and philosophy. From 1958 to 1964,

as a scholarship holder of the renowned Humboldt Foundation, he studied German language and literature at the University of Tübingen (Germany), where he gained his PhD. He spent several lengthy research periods in Europe, dedicated to the study of the history of colonialism or, most recently, to the contribution language policy can make to the peace process.

The anti-apartheid solidarity movement in Germany in the 1960s crystallised, to a large extent, around the campaign for Alexander's liberation from prison. He was an uncompromising critic of European colonial policies and the legacy of Eurocentric thought whose impact is still felt today in its former colonies. As he stressed in the Hannah Arendt Lecture in 2011 at the University of Hanover, the cultural dependence of the African elites on Europe, and the degree to which the minds of the members of the privileged middle class have been colonised, find expression not least in the ongoing predominance of three European languages – English, French and Portuguese – in present-day Africa. He reminded us that these languages still remain the sole languages of power in almost all sub-Saharan countries, whereas for the great majority of the poor in urban and rural areas a skill they have fully mastered – to speak their own African languages – is of virtually no use to them (Alexander 2011a).

Despite this critical attitude, Alexander was reluctant to propose recommendations or lessons directed at Europe and the Europeans. Rather, he would, as he did in the same Hannah Arendt Lecture, give expression to the hope that Europe, once it became aware of its increasingly peripheral position with regard to global power relations, would be able, in its own interest, to enter into a dialogue with Africa on a more equal footing. These were not just theoretical considerations; Alexander was eager to grasp the opportunity to initiate such a north–south or south–north dialogue whenever it arose. An example of this was the project 'Literacy and linguistic diversity in a global perspective', in the course of which the first links were established between the African Academy of Languages (Acalan) and European bodies interested in the promotion of linguistic diversity (Alexander and Busch 2007).

Rethinking the notions of nation and language

In this section I present a discussion of how Alexander elaborated the principles that guided his thinking and action on language policy. The arc of his work in this sphere stretched from his very early political activities as a student in Cape Town, to the theoretical work he accomplished during and immediately after the years of imprisonment on Robben Island, to the preparation of a post-apartheid language policy in the late 1980s, to the struggle for the implementation of such a policy in South Africa post-1994, and, especially in recent years, to the development of a pan-African perspective on language and education policies.

As Alexander explained in a detailed interview¹ (Alexander 2011b:52–53), he first became seriously involved in discussing language issues in the early 1950s when, as a student at the University of Cape Town, he also became an active member of the Teachers' League of South Africa, which was affiliated to the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM). Against the background of the apartheid policy of 'Bantu education', which was aimed at dividing the large majority of the people classified as 'black' into separate ethnic and linguistic groups, and at reducing their economic status to that of unskilled labourers with only the most elementary education, a passionate debate took place within the Unity Movement concerning the way in which the relationship between English and the other languages spoken in South Africa should be conceived in the future.

One faction in the Unity Movement argued that the languages which they chose to call 'tribal languages' were backward-orientated and should therefore be abandoned in favour of English as the international language of modernism and science. The other group refuted this seemingly radical position, saying that one should not throw out the baby with the bath water and that there should in no way be an either/or choice between African languages and English, but that both should be used as mediums of instruction.

In the abovementioned interview, Alexander recalled that these discussions had a lasting impact on his thinking and on his attitude towards language.

The key theoretical text on which Neville Alexander based his later work was *One Azania, one nation*. He secretly started to work on this book during his imprisonment on Robben Island, and completed it during the period of his house arrest in Cape Town; it was published in 1979 in the UK under the pseudonym of No Sizwe. As he explained (Alexander 2011b), his writing was to a large extent motivated by his sometimes controversial exchange of ideas with Nelson Mandela, on how to imagine the nation-building project in post-apartheid South Africa, while they were both imprisoned on the island.

I would like to use this opportunity to discuss in greater detail some of Alexander's ideas which are relevant to the language question as they were put forward in this publication, which has for many years only been available in libraries. In this book, Alexander undertakes a critical examination of nationalist and liberal conceptions of nationhood, and more specifically discusses two major currents within Marxist schools of thought. He rejects the Austro-Marxist assumption of the nation as a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, a community of destiny, characterised by a specific 'national character', but he also disagrees with Stalin's definition of a nation as 'a historically evolved stable community of people based on community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture' (No Sizwe 1979:165). In Alexander's understanding, 'nation' is not a supra-historical category given once and forever for all, but instead depends on a specific set of circumstances, including elements of consciousness, which is why '[i]t is impossible to give a definition valid for all time and place of what a nation is' (ibid:167).

In the late 70s he argued from a Marxist point of view that in Western Europe the ruling bourgeoisie had most frequently taken the language group to which it belonged as a point of departure to create a unified market. This led, as he demonstrates in the text, in some cases (for example the German case) to the unification of formerly separate feudal entities, and in others (as in the Austro-Hungarian case) to the break-up of the empire.

In discussing the African situation, Alexander points out a fundamental difference from that of Europe: while the coalescence of people in Europe required several centuries, in sub-Saharan Africa the capitalist market was the alien imposition of a foreign bourgeoisie (ibid:169). Imperialist rivalries changed the whole pre-existing territorial configuration: 'Lines are drawn on maps in London, Paris, Berlin and Brussels through deserts, mountains and lakes in Africa. And these "accidental" political entities congeal into fixed proto-national units' (ibid:170).

In *One Azania, one nation* Alexander also examines the specific situation of South Africa, where a conflict had occurred between the imperialist forces represented by the British Empire and an already established local (white) bourgeoisie. The idea of a unified South Africa emerged logically from the struggle of the Afrikaners against British imperialism, and the compromise between these two forces was established through the exclusion of the large majority of the working people from all the benefits of nationhood.

With reference to the situation in the late 1970s, Alexander identifies three distinct conceptions of nation in South Africa, namely

- one represented by the ruling racist regime, imposing a separation into racially or ethnically homogeneous states or Bantustans;
- one aiming at the successive integration of the excluded population into a (bourgeois) 'multi-national' or 'multi-ethnic' nation, an orientation which he mainly ascribes to the African National Congress (ANC); and, finally,
- an understanding of national liberation which 'involves a determined and uncompromising struggle against all attempts to divide the population on the basis of language, religion, tribe or caste' and

which ‘proposes the solution of the national question by means of the application of consistent democracy in every sphere, by the legal enforcement of equality of all languages’ (ibid:178).

However, he knew that the heritage of a divided past would continue to weigh on the future. On the whole the language question plays rather a subordinate role in *One Azania, one nation*, but nonetheless, already in the late 1970s Alexander was formulating the guidelines of what would become the basis of his ground-breaking work on language policy:

Although it is axiomatic that a group of people cannot constitute a nation unless the individuals understand one another, it does not follow at all that they have to be able to do so in one particular language, in some ‘mother tongue’. The real problem here is one of ability to communicate and this is never a mere morphological question. In a multi-lingual nation the ability of the majority of the people to speak more than one language solves the question of communication unless other questions arising from antagonistic contradictions in the social formation obstruct such communication (ibid:168).

It becomes clear that Alexander is suggesting a shift from a purely formal – or structuralist, as one could also say – understanding of language to a perspective emphasising the dimension of social interaction. In the same manner as he cautions against all attempts ‘to make out of these groups of people’ (groups speaking the same language) as ‘socio-political entities comparable to the colour-castes of the recent past’ (ibid:180), he rejects the idea of a monolingual nation and advocates a multilingual society in which all can communicate in more than one language. What he postulated more than three decades ago as an alternative to the homogenising monolingual European nation-state model is today of great relevance not only for South Africa but also for Europe itself, which is confronted with a new kind of linguistic diversity. Europe, which was used to being able to export its ‘universal’ models to the rest of the world, today faces the necessity of having to learn from others.

In *Language policy and national unity in South Africa/Azania* (Alexander 1989), published ten years after *One Azania, one nation*, the language question has moved to the centre of Alexander’s interest. From the very first pages, he makes clear that for him dealing with language issues is not an end in itself, but is part of the struggle for national liberation. The initial question is not how to promote this or that language, but rather: ‘How do we abolish social inequality based on colour, class, religious belief, sex, language group or any other basis?’ (ibid:7).

Again, he criticises the Eurocentric concepts of nation and language transposed to and imposed on African societies, now referring to academic works published in the meantime by scholars in the social and political sciences, such as Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined communities* (1983) and works in postcolonial studies.

Referring to Patrick Harries (1988), Alexander (1989:23) reminds us that many of the ethnic divisions that are today a concrete reality did not exist, even in a conceptual form, before the end of the 19th century. Linguistic and other boundaries were erected in order to restructure the African world in a way that would make it more comprehensible to Europeans. And, referring to Terence Ranger’s (1983) thoughts on the ‘invention of ethnicity’, he adds that the arbitrary lines drawn by missionaries through language continue to demarcate their sectarian territorial boundaries, and that these boundaries were deliberately used by the apartheid regime to justify the fragmentation and subjugation of the black people, that is, to ‘define and confine groups of people in the prison of social anthropological theory’ (ibid:22). As he states, social categories are not god-given trans-historical entities; they are not given once and for all (ibid:24). Consequently, Alexander also applies this idea to the question of ‘what “a particular language” means’ (ibid:8), understanding ‘a language’ as the result of political and economic developments in a historical moment and not simply as a question of ‘particular rules of grammar and syntax’.

From the perspective of the need to bring together large sections of civil society through a future language policy in a new South Africa, in *Language policy and national unity in South Africa/Azania* (1989), Alexander highlights possible convergences rather than existing areas of dissent when he discusses different positions on the language question within the liberation movement and in civil society at large. This dual approach of analytical thinking and political and social practice is also a characteristic feature of Alexander's later work. He addresses this duality when he postulates that for strategic reasons, linguistic phenomena have 'under certain circumstances to be perceived and lived as "things" (nouns), under others as "activities" (verbs)' (Alexander 2011c), recalling an analogy with Werner Heisenberg's theory on the wave-particle duality of matter. One could argue that, whereas the academic is aware that language should primarily be understood as a dynamic social process, the *zoon politikon* that Neville Alexander was in every moment of his life is also inclined to treat 'languages' as (temporarily) stable categories, for example, when using notions such as 'mother tongue' which presuppose the existence of homogeneous language communities, or when borrowing arguments from linguistic ecology.

In the early 1990s, with the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, the implementation of a new language policy was high on the agenda. As one of South Africa's prominent language experts, Alexander was deeply involved in this process, and held key positions in different language planning bodies. As he explained in the abovementioned interview (Alexander 2011b), for him it was a central concern not to conceive of language policy and language planning as a government-initiated, centralised, top-down move, but instead as a democratic process. In this respect his ideas differed from the position which was then dominant – also in the wider African context – that is, following a Eurocentric model rooted in the monolingual paradigm that was indebted to modernisation theory.

He saw social movements as driving forces not only in language policy but also in language planning, and deemed it indispensable to hold broad discussions in different milieus of civil society with the aim of gathering information on language attitudes, complaints and demands regarding language rights. He explicitly made the point that language policy should be negotiated, implemented and monitored by organisations and bodies that bring together language specialists and language practitioners from the fields of education, interpretation and media, rather than leaving policy formulation to those who claim to represent particular language or ethnic communities. The question of linguistic rights was, for him, primarily one of social equality. The process of defining a language policy eventually resulted in the recognition of 11 official languages in the South African post-apartheid constitution, which Alexander considered to be a very important victory for people involved in the language question (ibid.).

What happened in South Africa in the field of language planning and language policy in the early 1990s evoked interest and recognition among academics and language activists in many other African countries represented in the African Academy of Languages (Acalan). The new impetus derived from the recognition of multilingualism and the explicit valourisation of African languages in South Africa contributed to the fact that language questions were no longer only discussed within national frameworks, but rather on a transnational pan-African level, where specific attention was drawn to trans-border languages and languages of wider communication. From a European perspective, Alexander's insistence that language policy is neither to be conceived in terms of monolingualism in the service of a nation-state nor in terms of ethno-linguistic categories is especially relevant, as it turns away from the European tradition of leaving language policies and linguistic rights to be dealt with via negotiations and conflicts between the state and representatives of ethno-linguistic groups, or among the latter.

For a multidimensional conception of linguistic rights

In Europe linguistic rights are traditionally discussed in terms of minority–majority relations differentiating between so-called autochthonous minorities – linguistic groups historically present

in specific areas of the national territory – and so-called new minorities, referring to those who have recently immigrated.

Whereas migration patterns had remained relatively stable for a long time, giving rise to particular diaspora communities within certain European states, in the last few decades migration flows have become much more diversified. Complex migratory trajectories, involving temporary stays in several different countries and frequent moves, have become the rule rather than the exception. In migration research a focus on transnational networks has gradually replaced the assumption of stable communities regrouping migrants according to countries of origin.

The new linguistic diversity can be witnessed in all domains of society. Education systems, for instance, are faced with the challenge of catering for pupils with very different linguistic backgrounds. Taking the city of Vienna as an example, one can note that more than 50 per cent of children in primary school have family languages other than German; in some schools this ratio is much higher and sometimes reaches up to 90 per cent of children for whom the medium of instruction is a foreign or second language. In one single classroom it is possible to find as many as ten different family languages, among which African languages such as Somali, Akan or Yoruba are also increasingly present.

These developments are the reason why Europe has to abandon language policies that until now have been guided by basic assumptions such as the idea of monolingualism as the organising principle for the nation state; the idea that languages are firmly linked to specific territories; and the notion that speakers can be defined in terms of belonging to a particular language group. In sociolinguistics the concept of a linguistic repertoire has gradually been replacing the dichotomy of language of origin and target language. The linguistic repertoire concept aims to take into account multilingual biographic trajectories, and to valorise all linguistic resources on which speakers can draw, regardless of whether these are second or third languages, standard, dialectal or other varieties.

Mainstream political discourse in Europe, however, reveals quite another orientation. In many countries there is a new emphasis on the national language (or in some states, national languages) in education and other public domains. Acquiring a national language (in its standard variety) is seen as a duty imposed on all persons with migratory backgrounds, as a proof of their willingness to integrate and of loyalty to their new country of residence. Non-compliance is sanctioned with deterioration in status, such as the refusal of a long-term residence permit or the right to citizenship. In past years an increasing number of language requirements have been introduced not only in the domain of education, but also in connection with residence permits and citizenship. In most cases these required language competencies have to be proven with certificates earned on the basis of language tests.

Tim McNamara (2009:158), one of the leading international experts on language testing, shows very clearly that in these tests it is not communicative competence that is at stake, but rather the measurement of conformity with a national ideology. Adrian Blackledge (2006) speaks of discourses and ideologies that seek to justify such tests as a 'racialisation of language', meaning that debates about alleged language deficits function as a substitute for other forms of social and political exclusion based on the now socially 'less acceptable' concepts of race, ethnicity or culture.

While public discourse is generally firmly rooted in a monolingual paradigm, everyday language practices often speak a completely different language. When examining local language regimes in neighbourhoods, organisations and institutions, one finds a plethora of pragmatic approaches that recognise the reality of linguistic diversity and seek viable ways to respond to these challenges.

In most European countries, teacher training does not prepare future teachers for classroom situations in which the majority of the children do not have the language of instruction as their family language; therefore teachers have to experiment with new forms of teaching and learning if they are not willing

to accept the exclusion of a high number of pupils from the actual learning process. Initiatives aimed at including the languages that pupils bring with them as a resource range from dual/multiple-medium instruction to additional mother-tongue or heritage classes, or from one-person-one-language models in team teaching to concepts of open and self-regulated learning resulting in multiliteracies, to name but a few.

In my own research I have had the opportunity to explore a particularly interesting teacher-initiated model in a public primary school in Vienna (Busch forthcoming) which is part of a larger movement that encompasses more than 100 multigrade primary school classrooms in the city of Vienna alone. In contrast to the traditional classroom in which homogeneity is the ruling organisational pattern and tacit principle, the multigrade classroom is founded on the principle of heterogeneity as a precondition for social learning. From their first year of schooling to their fourth year, children are deliberately merged into one single learning group, which is consequently characterised by heterogeneity not only in age, but also in language backgrounds and learning pace and styles.

Embracing an open learning approach inspired by the pedagogies of Montessori, Freire and Freinet, activities such as multimodal text creation allow pupils to bring in their languages and ways of speaking. The dominant German language loses its feature of an imposed language – one that is ‘unassailable but unattainable’, to borrow an expression that Alexander (2000) coined about the dominant English language in South Africa. Having lost the threatening power of exclusion through normativity, the dominant language can become a kind of lingua franca, one language among others in which ideas can circulate.

In Europe discussion about linguistic minorities and their rights still concerns almost exclusively the so-called autochthonous groups, and disregards the pressing needs of a society which, as a whole, is becoming increasingly linguistically diverse. For a long time language rights were generally conceived in terms of the aim of protecting so-called minority or endangered languages, which are seen as part of the European cultural heritage. Such rights are granted to specified traditional language groups within specific territories, for example in the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. In this understanding language is firmly linked to territory and to collective identity; it is inspired by an idea of multiculturalism that assumes the existence of separate linguistic groups within a state.

As I have argued here, it has become necessary to rethink the conception of linguistic rights in the light of the new challenges resulting from processes of globalisation and increasing demographic mobility. The concern of my contribution is to point out that Europe must therefore get off its high horse and, with a certain degree of modesty, draw on the lived experiences of multilingual societies which, from a Eurocentric point of view, have usually been considered part of the periphery. It is my view that Europe needs to engage in a south–north dialogue. In this perspective, Alexander’s (2007:14) thoughts on language policy and language rights are particularly inspiring – thoughts that he summarised pithily in a publication of the Council of Europe with the question: ‘How can we, through language planning and other interventions, initiate or reinforce changes in the patterns of development and in the dominant social relations?’

Understanding linguistic rights as social rights means focusing on the rights of individual speakers, and on their language practices and needs in the here and now. A speaker-centred approach must first of all acknowledge that language is not just a ‘neutral’ medium for the exchange of messages, but is closely tied to personal and collective experiences of discrimination or empowerment, as well as to ideologies, discourses and hierarchies present in societies.

When exploring relations between language and human rights, it is therefore necessary to take into account the multidimensionality of language in communication, as elaborated by Karl Bühler (1990 [1934]) in the early 20th century: The expressive function that relates an utterance to the speaker, the

representational function that relates it to the content of the message, and the appealing function that relates it to the interaction partner. Rethinking language rights from this perspective requires us to find ways to balance and fine-tune, according to the specific situation, language policies that take into account the dimensions of identity, instrumentality and social interaction (Busch and Busch 2012).

Inclusive language policies therefore rest on three pillars: The right to express difference and the recognition of difference; the facilitation of equal access to resources and rights despite difference; and, in Nancy Fraser's words (2000:112–113), the need for 'social interaction across difference'. As she explains, policies of self-affirmation that concentrate only on the recognition of difference tend to fix and reify identity ascriptions and can result in the exertion of moral pressure on individuals to conform to a given group culture: 'Ironically, then, the identity model serves as a vehicle for misrecognition.' Fraser pleads for an alternative approach to recognition which takes into account questions of social status and social subordination – insofar as one is prevented from participating as a peer in social life. In this sense, misrecognition means being denied the status of a full partner in social interactions. Only when one is enabled to act as a full partner and to interact with others on an equal footing, does it become possible to expose oneself to interaction across difference.

It is precisely with the objective of fighting against linguistic exclusion that Neville Alexander tirelessly emphasised the need to upgrade and strengthen the position of African languages by expanding them into all domains of public life, by intellectualising them for tertiary education, and by making them visible and audible in the public domain. His arguments about the importance of language policy in bringing about a democratic and egalitarian society, developed as they were for the African context, can be applied more generally to situations where there is a clear imbalance in power between high- and low-status languages. As he reminds us, 'the empowerment of "the people", who are after all the beginning and the end of a democratic system, is axiomatically only possible in and through a language, or languages, in which they are proficient' (Alexander 2007:14).

Note

1. The English version of the interview will soon be published by UKZN Press, Scottsville.

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