

English in the prison services: a case of breaking the law?

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ABSTRACT: In this article we report on an investigation into the use of English in a prison in the Eastern Cape Province, run by the Department of Correctional Services (CS) 5 years after the declaration of an official multilingual policy. The investigation consisted of a range of interviews and observations in this institution, aimed at establishing the extent to which the national language policy is actually being implemented on the ground. Findings suggest that the use of English predominates in the high, official domains, that there is a marked avoidance of Afrikaans, and that Xhosa, the main language of the Eastern Cape Province, increasingly occupies the lower, unofficial domains. Tensions between policy and practice are discussed, and it is argued that the CS has shown that pragmatism is a much stronger force than ideology. While the roles of Xhosa and Afrikaans appear to be in the process of reversing in the Grahamstown prison, English has emerged as stronger there than it has ever been before. And because it will continue to be a necessary prerequisite for the mobility and promotion of staff in the country as a whole, and the *lingua franca* for an increasingly mobile criminal population (which means the prisons are likely to become increasingly linguistically diverse, rather than settling into regional patterns) everyone will have to have some proficiency in English, which, ironically, will promote and strengthen it even more.

INTRODUCTION

Five years have passed since the declaration of South Africa's new 11-language policy in 1995, and despite strongly worded legislation, and the establishment of several authoritative bodies charged with monitoring the implementation of the policy, there seems to be little evidence of any significant changes in actual language usage in most public domains, where English still seems to be the predominant language. In fact, the reality in South Africa, some would argue, is of state language policies that run counter to South African people's strong positive attitudes towards, and preference for English (Kamwangamalu 1995; Bowerman 2000; Dyers 2000) and fairly sceptical attitudes about the value of indigenous South African languages (Mawasha 1996).

This article examines the use of English in one such public domain, a prison in the Eastern Cape Province, run by the Department of Correctional Services (CS), and reports on a range of interviews and observations in this institution. Findings suggest that the high, official domains involving the communication of authority are increasingly English-dominated, with a decided swing away from Afrikaans (which formerly held sway), and that indigenous languages still occupy the low domains. It is hoped that research such as this paper will form part of an often neglected aspect of language planning: feedback and evaluation, in order to assess the efficacy of the policy and its implementation (Kaplan & Baldauf 1997).

1. LANGUAGE POLICY AND LANGUAGE PLANNING IN AN IDEAL WORLD

While most theorists agree that there are three types of language planning (acquisition,

corpus, and status planning¹), several have tried their hand at defining language planning, but they have failed to agree on a single standard definition to date. According to Rubin (1973:4) language policy is deliberate “change in the systems of language code or speaking or both that are planned by organisations established for such purposes”. Cooper (1989: 45) echoes this view that “language planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure or functional allocation of their language codes”. Eastman (1983) also points out how language policies are devised to manipulate language in order to reach objectives. In fact, most theorists agree that such planning is a very conscious attempt at intervention in the self-adapting process of language and of social and cultural development, and that it is a highly political matter. As Blommaert puts it (1996: 217), “whenever we indulge in language planning we should be aware of the fact that we indulge in political linguistics”.

However, policy-makers and planners need to understand the social system within which the language plan is to function (Hartshorne 1987; Haugen 1983; Wessels 1996:171), and to obtain appropriate sociocultural and linguistic information about the users in terms of whom the plan was devised. Several researchers claim that policy-making is not planning and make the point that the declaration of a policy is only one aspect of language planning, and usually precedes it (Appel & Muysken 1987: 47). This is certainly the case in South Africa, where the far-reaching and highly innovative language policy (1996) was a fore-runner to the planning phase, when actual implement of the policy was planned. One also needs to acknowledge that language planning is not always linear, with a starting point (of fact finding) culminating in a final implementation stage (Bambgose 1991); in reality, the fact finding stage is often missing, and steps tend to be interrelated and bi-directional. A further desideratum relates to assessing the impact of language planning in an ongoing cyclical fashion, because language policies take time to implement, and are hard to assess and evaluate; ideally, such assessments should feed back into the policy, which should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate adjustments in the light of hands-on experience.

2. LANGUAGE PLANNING IN THE REAL WORLD: THE CASE OF SOUTH AFRICA

In many ways, the new South African policy has met the “ideal” criteria: prior to 1996, policy-making was top-down and ignored consultation; in contrast, the Language Action Task Group (Langtag), although commissioned in a top-down way in 1996 to advise the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology on a national language plan for South Africa, had as its brief “to collectively devise a coherent national language plan which would encompass all state structures and civil society” (Langtag 1996:7). It could therefore legitimately claim to have evolved democratically, after consultation.

The resulting language policy aimed to assist South Africans to “function effectively in the multilingual milieu of South Africa” (Langtag 1996:13), acknowledging the different levels of linguistic proficiency of different people and the need for different languages to be used for different purposes. In challenging the hegemony of English and Afrikaans and attempting to eliminate negative stereotypes linked to indigenous languages (including the attitudes of African speakers), it aimed to promote national unity, respect and tolerance for linguistic and cultural diversity and to promote national economic development (Langtag 1996:11, 12). Language was now viewed as a right, and the need to protect minority groups, their languages and their identity had emerged as paramount. The report (1996:28) criticises the Government’s evasive provision that questions of usage, practicalities and expense should

be taken into account in implementation, because this suggests that multilingualism is excessively expensive.

The resultant language plan was ambitious and far-reaching, and, as this paper will try to argue, it may have failed to take sufficient cognisance of the socio-political dynamics of the South African context. Evidence to date suggests that, five years down the line, implementation is very far from being achieved and “little has changed in five years since the end of the apartheid era” (Bowerman, 2000:30). As pointed out in de Klerk (2000:89), despite *de jure* parity, *de facto* linguistic parity is still a seeming impossibility, and there is increasing evidence, ironically, that English is growing in its tendency to monopolise many areas of public administration in South Africa, and in many other multilingual contexts such as business, schools, university campuses and military camps (de Klerk 1996; de Klerk & Barkhuizen 1998). More recently, Bowerman (2000:63) has shown that its usage has actually increased extensively in parliamentary debates (where speakers of indigenous languages outnumber mother tongue speakers of English (Pandor 1995:75)), government publications, and on all educational levels as well as the media (including radio, TV, written media and film). In contrast, despite the explicit intention to implement functional re-allocation to high domains for previously marginalised languages, and despite legislation and strenuous efforts by the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB), which has established lexicographical units and Language Bodies for each official language, there is a general decline in usage and support for Afrikaans (de Klerk 2000; Dyers 2000), and persistent functional deficiency and low levels of development for indigenous languages in terms of corpus, status, and prestige in the area of education, commerce, science and technology (Bowerman, 2000). There are minimal changes in the status of indigenous languages, except for minor increases in parliamentary speeches, government publications and signage, and TV (Bowerman 2000:63; cf. Kamwangamalu 1998:284). This means that their speakers are excluded from high corporate and official domains and increasingly demand access to English, which they see as increasingly necessary for success.

Thus it would seem that English, the first language of only 8.6% of the people in South Africa, is entrenched in a dominant position and faces little or no threat because of its highly favourable economic, social and historical status. Most importantly, demographic factors also favour English, and it is these factors which appear to have been overlooked in the initial phases of policy-making and planning: English, while not the numerical majority language in any of South Africa’s provinces, has the widest and most general distribution of all languages country-wide (although its speakers are mainly distributed in the Western Cape, KwaZulu Natal, and Gauteng). Each of the indigenous languages (if Afrikaans is excluded) is found mainly in a particular province, but English is found (and understood) throughout the country, and English is not associated with the negative connotations that Afrikaans brings with it, owing to its unfortunate historical links. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Distribution of first Language by province (in %)

	Af	Eng	Nd	P	So	Sw	Tso	Tsw	V	X	Z
W Cape	59.2	20.3	0.1	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	19.1	0.1
E Cape	3.7	0.0	0.0	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	83.8	0.4	
N Cape	69.3	2.4	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0	19.9	0.0	6.3	0.3
Free State	14.5	1.3	0.2	0.2	62.1	0.1	0.5	6.5	0.1	9.4	4.8
KZ Natal	1.6	15.8	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.6	80
Gauteng	16.7	13.0	1.6	9.5	13.1	1.3	5.3	7.9	1.4	7.5	22
Mpumalanga	8.3	2.0	12.5	10.5	3.2	30.0	3.5	2.7	0.1	1.3	25

N Province	2.2	0.4	1.5	52.7	1.1	1.2	22.6	1.4	15.5	0.2	0.7
N West	7.5	1.0	7.5	4.0	5.1	0.5	4.7	67.2	0.4	5.4	2.5

(Population Census 1996:11)

Af = Afrikaans; Eng = English; Nd = Ndebele; P = Pedi; So = Sotho; Sw = Swati; Tso = Tsonga; Tsw = Tswana; V = Venda; X = Xhosa; Z = Zulu.

This paper hopes to offer some insights into the extent to which South Africa's language policy is being implemented 'on the ground', in the department of CS. It also aims to provide some feedback to policy makers, since, if any policy is to be truly effective and legitimate, it needs to be flexible and ready to adapt to the context and the people whom it purports to serve. One way of achieving this is to seek evaluation and feedback constantly, especially regarding the implementation and reception of the language policy: a good policy needs to test itself for effectiveness in an ongoing, cyclical process.

3. THE STUDY

The research reported in this article was carried out in August 2000 at the Department of Correctional Services which serves Grahamstown and the surrounding area (cf. de Klerk & Barkhuizen 1998 for a parallel study in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). The research aimed, through interviews and on-the-ground observation over a period of a few days, to establish what the staff see as the "official policy", and in particular to evaluate the role of English in day-to-day life in the CS. The main instrument in this study was in-depth interviewing (see Taylor and Bogdan 1984) on an individual and on a group basis, supplemented to a limited extent by observation, in the public-access areas of the prison and in the grounds, in order to corroborate, where possible, the reports given by those interviewed, and in order to reduce the possibility of subjective reporting in the interviews (in which informants may be subject to influences or pressures from the interviewers). In addition, a brief tour of the premises was conducted.

Interviews explored linguistic backgrounds, views regarding actual language policy, current practice regarding day-to-day language usage, and feelings and attitudes about the use of languages in the CS². These interviews were conducted in English, and although in each case interviewees claimed to be reasonably competent in English prior to the interview, it must be borne in mind that there is potential for the language chosen to have influenced responses in some way. The following people were interviewed (estimated ages in brackets):

- * the head of the prison [H], a Xhosa-speaking male(48);
- * a group of 4 Warders:
 - [W1]: white male, Afrikaans L1; some English, no Xhosa (35)
 - [W2]: black male, Xhosa L1; some English, no Afrikaans (35)
 - [W3]: black male, Xhosa L1; some English and Afrikaans (40-45)
 - [W4]: coloured male, Afrikaans L1; some English, no Xhosa (40)
- * 2 reception clerks (the people who "receive" and "dispatch" prisoners):
 - [R1]: white male, Afrikaans L1, with some English (40)
 - [R2]: white female, Afrikaans L1, speaks English (35)
- * the telephonist [T]: black female, Xhosa L1, some English, minimal Afrikaans (30);
- * a group of 6 prisoners:
 - [P1]: white male, English L1, speaks Afrikaans and a little bit of Xhosa (35)
 - [P2]: coloured male, Afrikaans L1, speaks English and Xhosa (25-30)
 - [P3]: coloured male, Afrikaans L1, speaks English (25-30)

[P4]: coloured male, Afrikaans L1, speaks English and Xhosa (fluently) (35)
 [P5]: black male, Xhosa L1, knows some English and Afrikaans (25-30)
 [P6]: black male, Xhosa L1, knows some English, no Afrikaans (25-30)

Although these interviewees are not, strictly speaking, a representative sample of linguistic proportions within the prison ranks, choosing a sample on this basis would have meant that Xhosa speakers would have predominated. Instead, it was felt to be desirable to seek the views of speakers of English and Afrikaans as well.

A description of the prison:

106 staff members run the prison, and rough estimates (from interviewees) suggest a home-language distribution of 50% Xhosa, 45% Afrikaans and 5% English. Warders who were interviewed agreed that about 80% of the warders are Xhosa speakers, and the remaining 20% Afrikaans (“I don’t think there’s anybody here that actually is first-language English” [W1]). The prison accommodates 632 medium-term inmates, made up in the following proportions (these statistics were provided by the prison, which adopts a procedure of describing prisoners in terms of race, and not in terms of primary language spoken):

Table 2: Racial distribution of prisoners

	Blacks	Coloureds	Whites	Other	Total
Male	48.5% (307)	46.4% (295)	0.7% (5)	-	96% (607)
Female	3.5% (22)	0.3% (2)	-	0.1% (1)	4% (25)
Total	52% (329)	46.9% (297)	0.7% (5)	0.1% (1)	632

The prison is classified as a “medium” security prison, with inmates serving an average sentence of 8 to 10 years; long-term prisoners are sent to “maximum” prisons for periods exceeding 10 years. Prisoners share cells, with anything from 20 to 40 inmates in a cell at any one time, depending on the degree of overcrowding. Allocation to different cells is primarily according to the legal status of the inmate (awaiting trial; unsentenced; sentenced but with further charges; on appeal etc.). Age and gender are also catered for, with separate accommodation for females and juveniles. Only thereafter is some effort made to adjust distribution in terms of ethnicity and linguistic background.

While transfers to other prisons and requests for changes of accommodation are entertained if possible, usually, once allocated to a cell, groups tend to remain with each other for quite a long time and inevitably they get to know each other, since prisoners are permitted to talk to each other freely at all times. They can watch TV or listen to the radio at certain times (in communal rooms), have free choice as to programme selection, and there is a small library on the premises, catering for English, Afrikaans and Xhosa. Inmates eat in shifts in dining halls and are under constant supervision, including times when they take exercise outside. Church services are also offered to inmates, largely in English and Xhosa, and various social workers offer a range of workshops (e.g. crafts for women).

A. Linguistic background and abilities of interviewees:

The *head’s* home language is Xhosa, and he learned English and Afrikaans in secondary school. When he first joined the CS in 1981, it was dominated by Afrikaans:

you come here as an English-speaking you won’t get inside because ... those people

who were at that time in a strong position, the Afrikaans speaking, no matter you had to [speak Afrikaans] if you either get the job or not because you cannot try to speak it.

Ironically, though, his initial training in the CS (in Pretoria) was in English, because, “our instructors were blacks ... there were training college for blacks, training college for whites, training college for coloureds”; English was the only available *lingua franca*, shared by speakers of the full range of African languages. His competence in English during the interview was consistently and demonstrably good.

The receptionists, on the other hand, (a white male and a white female) are both thoroughly Afrikaans, and had worked in the CS for 11 years, starting in a totally Afrikaans environment (“we spoke Afrikaans most of the time”[R1]) until 1994, when the changeover happened, and with the sudden increase in Xhosa speaking staff “we had to adapt to speak you know English to suit them” [R1]. R2 admitted that “now in this stage ... you have to be English to get the job”. Although both lacked confidence in their English, they demonstrated a reasonable level of competence in speaking it to the interviewer. Neither of them could speak Xhosa.

The telephonist /secretary [T] is a Xhosa speaker who first encountering English in grade 4, and demonstrated a reasonable proficiency in English. She frequently mentioned that her Afrikaans was very weak. She had worked at the prison for only one year, answering the telephone and typing a range of letters, both official (in English) and “personal” letters from prisoners or social workers which were often in Afrikaans or Xhosa (“so I have to type English, Afrikaans and Xhosa, three languages”).

The warders: [W1] was a white male, Afrikaans speaker, with some command of English and no Xhosa. He had been in the CS for 14 years, 13 of which had been in the Grahamstown prison; [W2] was a black male, Xhosa speaker, with some English and no Afrikaans, and had served in the CS for 12 years (in Transkei, Mpumalanga then Grahamstown); while in Mpumalanga he had spoken a fair amount of Siswati; [W3] was a black male, Xhosa speaker, with some English and Afrikaans, who had worked for 18 years in the CS, starting in Grahamstown, then moving to KZN (where he spoke Zulu quite a bit) and back to Grahamstown for the past 6 years; [W4], a coloured male, Afrikaans speaker with some English and no Xhosa had spent 18 years in the CS (16 in Port Elizabeth and 2 years in Grahamstown).

The prison inmates: Since the prison accommodates offenders who are primarily from the Eastern Cape, and in light of the linguistic demographics of the area and the aftermath of 50 years of apartheid, most of the inmates are either Coloured Afrikaans speakers or Xhosa speakers (see Table 2). Other languages, such as Zulu, Sotho or Venda, had a very low distribution although a slight increase in numbers of inmates speaking other black languages had recently been experienced.

B. Linguistic policy and practice operating in the prison:

Prisoner placement

Placement of prisoners would be the first step in ensuring smooth communication. The current policy was aimed at sending inmates to prisons where their language is spoken: on

admission

we have to find out exactly where does he come from and it is the policy of the department also that we must try by all means to place or transfer the prisoner nearer to the prison where his home is ... we have to group them according to their culture [H].

However, circumstances often prevented this:

They usually ask to be together or whatever but we normally try to put the Xhosa-speaking together and Afrikaans together but if we can't accommodate them it's too bad [R2].

Crowded conditions (frequently alluded to during the interviews), inevitably resulted in less flexibility. Receptionists are of primary importance in such allocations, and usually two people are involved in these initial interviews. R1 explained how, when a new prisoner arrives, they are initially addressed in English ("we speak English now ... to the prisoners" [R1]) and their personal particulars are captured on computer (inmates are not required to write anything themselves).

Ironically, such a policy has the potential to reinforce separatism and ethnic boundaries, so, to counteract this, there is a deliberate attempt to mix people, avoiding a scenario in which someone finds themselves totally isolated:

in our case here you have seen we have got only five whites; it is frustrating naturally... to put one white in a cell of 35 blacks. But if there are also coloureds there and he understands their language, Afrikaans, then there's no problem, but if there is a white man somewhere we have to take that one and place him with the other one whether they are in the same cell with other people who speak different languages, Xhosa and Afrikaans ... he must have somebody who understands him also [H].

Allocation of staff to different sections is also done keeping language in mind, trying to ensure that all three languages are catered for:

we now make a point that we will do this so that they can help each other... because there are some of them who are ignorant they cannot understand another language ... then the warder who is also speaking Xhosa must also be there to assist his colleague who cannot be understood by those black people for instance, because unfortunately we have got some of the whites who speak only Afrikaans but they can't speak Xhosa [H].

Broader language policy and practice for the CS

As far as "official" government or provincial language policy was concerned, it was clear that there was only a vague understanding of what it was, and that, instead, a *modus operandi* had evolved naturally out of circumstances, and had become accepted as the unofficial policy. There appeared to be no written documentation or instruction regarding policy or

practice (“you see at times not all these things are written in black and white” [H]), and as a result, a practical solution had evolved. As the prison head put it, “you see, particularly here in the Eastern Cape, the common language that is used is English”.

Linguistic issues had apparently been discussed at regional level:

at a meeting now with the regional commissioners, those are the things that they talk about in their meetings; when we go to those meetings then we are asked to encourage ... let people use that kind of language [H].

This policy had filtered down to institutional level, with H trying to raise awareness among staff, and occasionally instructing them

to change ... their negative attitude towards other languages that they do not speak... yes of course all these languages are official but what the situation would be if I stand up in a meeting situation and I speak Xhosa, the next person just stand up and speak his or her own language then we won't be understanding each other. Then we just agree upon that the language which we must use is English. I don't say they are doing the same in King Williams Town or Port Elizabeth ... those are just the local arrangements [H].

Warders confirmed this loose arrangement: [W1]

There are, if I could put it like that, ‘guidelines’, but there isn't a forced-down policy for instance. The idea is that you use basically English, because that's the neutral language. So, basically your correspondence, all your registers and that are mainly in English, because when I now write something in Afrikaans he [pointing to [W2]] can't speak Afrikaans or read Afrikaans, so how will he read my entries or my reports? So that's why we try and keep it to English. But when I write something for him [pointing to W4] personally, or when I know for a fact that person is Afrikaans then I will put it through in Afrikaans.

They believed that this “policy” had been received on instructions:

It's coming down from the top, from head office. But as I said there's nothing direct on paper that says it must be English. Because how can you say you must speak this one, then I'm taking away his right to speak Xhosa, and I take my right away to speak Afrikaans. So there isn't a direct order that says everything must be in English. If I can put it like this, it is a gentlemen's agreement that it's in English [W1].

The receptionists were similarly vague as regards any formal or official moment when language policy had changed, and could not remember any letter or document. They mentioned having been asked to speak more English to accommodate the influx of staff from Ciskei and Transkei, and as R1 put it:

there's more Xhosa speaking staff but now to understand each other we must speak English ... otherwise they won't understand us ... even our

correspondence to head office and other institutions must be in English now [R1].

However, no explicit instruction to this effect had been received, and the practice appeared to be voluntary. The telephonist reported that

they didn't say anything to us when we first came here [1999] ... they told me that I must speak English or Afrikaans only ... that's what they said ... the official languages are English and Afrikaans [T].

She, however, had chosen to ignore this instruction, and to use Xhosa with fellow Xhosa speakers and she felt that the policy should be changed to be English, Afrikaans and Xhosa, referring to her lack of proficiency in Afrikaans ("its going to be difficult for us to speak Afrikaans" [T]).

Linguistic requirements for staff employment appeared to be very loose, and there is no language requirement that staff should be competent in Xhosa; given the historical inheritance of a largely Afrikaans-speaking staff in 1994, this is hardly surprising. Instead, it emerged that proficiency in English was viewed as far more important than Xhosa; T, on applying, certainly got that impression ("Ja they did specify they said ja English its preferable to speak English or Xhosa speaking, that said so on the application" [T]). Her interview had been solely in English ("and it was tough" [T]), and all the interviewers had spoken only English during the interview.

Despite the varying linguistic competence of staff, no effort had been made to offer language classes, and those interviewed expressed lukewarm enthusiasm for such an idea. There was a similar lack of official linguistic support for the telephonist, who frequently had to type letters in all three languages, and was not provided with any dictionaries. Hardly surprisingly, staff had not made any effort (or felt any need) to learn the language which they could not speak.

Although using Xhosa occasionally oiled the wheels of conversations regionally and ironed out potential misunderstandings, especially regarding serious or emotional issues, English was clearly favoured overall since it enhanced prospects for promotion beyond the confines of the province. The importance of English for high-status functions (such as its use as a major criterion for prospective employees) was explained by H:

what they used to say was Xhosa ... or English; and then if they know that they will deploy you in an area amongst Xhosa speaking, then they will say emphasize Xhosa more than maybe Sotho" ... but "when I have to go to Venda, let's suppose, our African languages [are] going to be a nuisance [H].

the problem is ... I have got fears of being transferred to another place, the northern province because I know I'll be having a problem there... they are going to say to me you can speak Xhosa, but speak English, people will understand [H].

In other words, H saw his competence in Xhosa as a double-edged sword: while qualifying him well for employment in the Eastern Cape, it was a disadvantage in a Venda-speaking area. It is competence in English which gives the promise of promotion and mobility.

According to all informants, the written mode of communication was exclusively

English for all documentation, and this was confirmed by a perusal of the noticeboards in the foyer, in which everything was English: “If it is about the department, unfortunately then we try and keep it in English” [W1]. Occasionally, some Afrikaans or Xhosa documentation might still change hands, but this was usually an exception, and on a person-to-person (low-status) basis:

let’s say at times I phone to head office and I speak to a certain guy there that I know and he knows that I can speak and understand Afrikaans and he says ‘okay I’m going to send you something and he writes me, that is in Afrikaans, because he knows that thing is not ... for anybody’s attention other than myself [H];

When maybe I am writing a letter, a message actually, to somebody who is not here, I will leave the message in Xhosa if they are Xhosa speaking [W3].

In interaction between warders and prisoners, initial overtures, to discover language preference, appeared to be made first in English, (“I have to ask him in English whether he’s Afrikaans” [W3]). Where Xhosa was possible, it took precedence, because of low levels of English competence among prisoners, but those warders with no command of Xhosa (e.g. W4) tended to stick to English in their interactions with prisoners (“if the prisoner, if they doesn’t know Xhosa, I will speak English ... I’ll see that the others they don’t understand then I’ll repeat it in English” [W2]; “because most of them are Xhosa speaking, and from time to time you’ll find that there are people there who understand Afrikaans, but mostly they prefer to be spoken to in English. So English is the preferred language”[W1]). The prisoners who were interviewed agreed that Xhosa tended to predominate (“because the majority of the guys is Xhosa speaking” [P1]), and that English was the primary alternative, typically used only to warders and staff known to be English or Afrikaans speakers. While some were willing to speak Afrikaans to Afrikaans warders (“whenever I can’t answer them I speak Afrikaans, I mix it” [P2]), others were not so ready to do so, partly because of their lack of competence. It was also clear that different languages were mixed in the cells; Afrikaans would be used among prisoners who recognised that they shared this mutual language (“When I meet with my friends” [P2]).

Some prisoners expressed general satisfaction with the way language is used in the prison, and did not feel that their language rights were being abused (“No it’s okay like this [P4]; You get by the way it is, you know. You just have to” [P1]). However, Afrikaans speaking prisoners had experienced very real problems with speaking Xhosa:

but there is guys here who speak Xhosa only, that can’t speak Afrikaans [P3]

There are some of them who are not understanding Afrikaans. They also can’t speak English. They are just straight Xhosa, so there’s a communication problem [P6].

There nevertheless appeared to be a general goodwill and determination to muddle through, with most prisoners willing to compromise:

You got to communicate. If a guy won’t speak Afrikaans to you or English or

Xhosa, he's gonna have to communicate with you somehow, so he's gonna have to learn to adjust, you know [P1].

Inmates apparently receive guidance, instruction and visits from a range of social workers, medical workers voluntary organisations and religious groups, and most of these visitors from outside, including professional legal practitioners, do not speak or understand Xhosa, and require interpreting services during their visits. Unfortunately, however, such services are not provided for in any official capacity, and *ad hoc* use is made of anybody who happens to be nearby and has the required linguistic competence; such people range from warders and supervisors to cleaners or even fellow prisoners:³ “we make use of them so that they can understand exactly what is said” [H]; “if they still don't understand we get our cleaners to interpret to us” [R1]. The only exceptions were legal practitioners, who brought their own interpreters with them, since it was against prison policy to provide informal interpreting for them, in view of the risks linked to incriminating evidence and later court appearances. According to the prisoners, even black Xhosa-speaking visitors speak English, unless they are talking to a Xhosa-speaking prisoner. Warders who interact with such visitors tend to play it safe and use English, which occasionally led to unnecessary effort:

Many a times I finish with the conversation in English and then I find out, but hell, why didn't I talk Afrikaans? We are both Afrikaans speaking. But as I say, the whole conversation took place in English because you react on what the other person is speaking [W1].

It seemed that the need for interpreters was fairly frequent, in light of the high number of black inmates, most of whom come from depressed socio-economic backgrounds and have low levels of literacy; receptionists explained that although many initially claimed to be able to understand English, their competence was only superficial:

you ask them questions and so they said they don't understand ... especially when they come in and when they go out we have to summarise what's taken place then we experience that they don't understand actually what's going on [R1].

Thus there is an obvious conflict between official South African language policy, the “unofficial” language policy at the CS, and the actual practice on the ground in day-to-day life. The latest draft Provincial Languages Bill for the Eastern Cape (2000) states that the official languages of the province are isiXhosa, English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, Sesotho and Sign Language (Ch 1: 2.1) and **requires** all government institutions to use at least three of these languages in **all** their communications (4.1); even more problematic is the *requirement* that such institutions serve any member of the public (i.e. all prisoners) in any of these 6 languages “where there is a substantial need for communication and services in those languages and it can be reasonably expected of the institution concerned to communicate and render services in those languages” (4.2(b)).

In contravention of this requirement, the CS has an agreed-on, semi-official preference for English, reiterated in interviews with a wide range of staff. It was clear that English is being used in formal interactions for two main reasons: out of pure necessity, as *lingua franca* in cases where there is no other commonly understood language; and as a means to avoid using Afrikaans, despite the fact that it was frequently an obvious *lingua*

franca for most staff who are Afrikaans-speaking coloureds; the head's view was that

unfortunately for them they have to try to speak English also for the sake of other people, let's say black people ... because most of the people especially Eastern Cape they do not understand Afrikaans, they can speak English [H].

T also cited her incompetence in Afrikaans as grounds for insisting on English when they occasionally addressed her in Afrikaans. She has, on occasion, had to say "listen I understand Afrikaans but please speak English because it is better than Afrikaans to me" [T].]

Nevertheless, actual practice reveals flexibility and mutual consideration, all in the interests of successful communication, both among staff and in staff/inmate interaction. For this reason, Xhosa is the preferred medium in informal domains in all cases where only Xhosa interlocutors were involved, especially in cases where competence in English is low. This was particularly prevalent in staff/inmate interaction, in view of the fact that most prisoners and most staff share this language, and high numbers of prisoners have no English at all. The telephonist also often used Xhosa when she sensed that a Xhosa-speaking client was experiencing difficulties in English ("that's why you have to answer in Xhosa so that they must feel free to speak Xhosa" [T]). The quality of communication usually improved as a result.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Kelman (1971: 23) identifies two sources of legitimacy for a national system or policy: the extent to which it reflects the ethnic and cultural identity of the national population, and the extent to which it meets the needs and interests of the population. Such evaluation is the final phase of the four main phases of policy-making: fact finding, planning, implementation, and feedback (Rubin 1971: 200- 21), and should include details about the outcomes of the language policy, determining appropriate strategies to improve the language policy, and comparing actual with expected outcomes. The latter is of crucial importance in assessing our national language policy: it is obvious that language problems and social phenomena are inextricably linked, and that language problems are embedded in a broader social context (Neustupny 1974); it is the "people" side of the picture that needs to be explored after policies have been declared, and this paper offers some insights and attempts to provide some form of evaluation to feed into the process of policy adjustment that should, ideally, be taking place at national level.

A language plan must be practical and feasible within a particular context and culture, and ideally such a plan should pass 4 tests (Bowerman 2000:78 citing Reagan 1995: 320):

- * it must be desirable for the society as a whole
- * it must be just, equitable and fair to all
- * it must be effective
- * it must be tolerable, and have pragmatic viability

Both the current national and regional policies pass the first two tests but fail the last two very badly. The impossible problem is to get a balance between ideology and pragmatics, and this small piece of sociolinguistic research in the CS has shown that pragmatism is a much stronger force than ideology (Bowerman 2000: 172), and that, while the roles of Xhosa and Afrikaans appear to be in the process of reversing in the Grahamstown prison, English has emerged as stronger there than it has ever been before. Although the Head did say that "it is the policy of the department also that we must try by all means to place or transfer the

prisoner nearer to the prison where his home is”, aiming for some linguistic conformity, the country’s increasingly mobile criminal population matched with high risks involved in prisoner transfer are likely to counteract this. And because English will continue to be a necessary prerequisite for the mobility and promotion of staff in the country as a whole, and the *lingua franca* for an increasingly mobile criminal population (which means the prisons are likely to become increasingly linguistically diverse, rather than settling into regional patterns), everyone will have to have some proficiency in English, which, ironically, will promote and strengthen it even more. And thus, if the law is to carry any real force, Correctional Services is going, by virtue of having to use English, to become party to law-breaking on a daily basis.

Even if the policy required English and only one additional language, the consequence in prisons such as that discussed in this paper would not all be rosy: while on the whole such a policy would be just, desirable, fairly effective and fairly tolerable (in terms of expense), given increasing mobility as a response to joblessness, speakers of most indigenous languages are increasingly likely to be incarcerated together, so further discrimination against people who do not speak English or the regional language is likely. The alternative, English only, while improving the lives of the indigenous population and giving them access, would fail the first two tests and rapidly advance the decline of indigenous languages. But the process seems to be firmly set in motion: we are already seeing English grow at the expense of the corpus needs and status of indigenous languages, and if this process continues, it will not be long before the CS has no choice at all: they will **have to** use English, and the fact that they may be breaking the law as a consequence is likely to be the least of their problems.

NOTES

1. du Plessis (1991), in Coetzee van Rooy (2000) adopts a different classification system, suggesting four types: as a solution to problems (e.g. to unify a diverse population), as an agent or form of change (e.g. to revive dying languages, or to modernise (as for Hebrew)), as a form of social manipulation (e.g. to reinforce national identity, as was the case in Israel (Spolsky 1991)), and as a form of social intervention.
2. see de Klerk, V. & Barkhuizen, G (2001), for an article which focuses on patterns of language usage and attitudes.
3. One of the cleaners was available during the prisoners’ interview, and he proved to be useless, demonstrating a singular lack of comprehension of the flow of conversation, despite his avowed trilingual abilities.

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