

The future lies on the tongues our youth

During Youth Day and Youth Month we are used to looking back on the past. This is necessary because we need to learn from the past and ensure that the youth never have to sacrifice themselves for politics again. The best way to achieve this is to look forward and to give the youth a future.

As people that are concerned with language we must therefore ask: How can the indigenous languages provide a better future for the youth and the country as a whole?

We sometimes see encouraging signs that some institutions are noticing and taking seriously the value of the indigenous languages. For example, we are delighted when we hear that somebody has completed a PhD in isiZulu or in isiXhosa. These students are pioneers of the indigenous languages.

Next year is also the tenth anniversary of a creative bilingual honours degree at the University of Limpopo. This university has sent dozens of qualified young people into the world who think and feel differently about language and are serious about using the indigenous languages in domains usually reserved for English. We also hear of stunning progress with mother tongue education in the Eastern Cape, and increasingly of writers writing books in indigenous languages or directors using the indigenous languages in films.

In some domains, therefore, we are making encouraging progress with our languages. This work promotes the status and prestige of our indigenous languages and reflects a growing linguistic movement at a grassroots level - enough to make one's heart glow with pride.

But is that enough? Are we winning the battle as a whole? What is the struggle actually about?

To be clear, it is not a fight against English, because one can only lose such a fight. The English language is simply too powerful and too useful to want to ignore or oppose. We therefore retain English and appreciate the access it gives us to the world. But we also value our indigenous languages and ask ourselves what value they add to our lives. Why are they important to us? Why do we want them to be used?

In the first place, therefore, it is a struggle for our indigenous languages rather than against English. For many people, this struggle begins with the positive links between language, culture and identity. If the speakers of our languages are not aware of this link, they are also unaware of what they can lose if their languages were to shrivel and die. This makes it difficult to promote a language.

However, we also know that we must always focus on the positive aspects of language and that we must not set one language up against another. To set up Afrikaans against isiXhosa, or Sesotho against isiZulu, or vice versa, is both meaningless and dangerous. Such a negative approach ultimately leads to exclusive, selfish identities that do nothing good for our languages or the country.

In the second place, therefore, we are not engaged in a struggle for each of our own indigenous languages but in a struggle for multilingualism. Culturally, we do not want to experience the world only through the eyes of a single language, especially if so many of us struggle with that language or cannot identify with it. We want to prevent the hegemony of a single language in all sectors of society and create more space for the indigenous languages.

However, we need to look beyond culture and identity, because the struggle for multilingualism is about much more than that. What other value do our indigenous languages add that English cannot emulate? The only way to answer this question is to determine the net worth of multilingualism and what monolingualism costs us.

Many people would argue, for example, that English gives one the best access to an education and academic development. This is indeed true for many students with a middle-class background, but what about the rest? How many young people are deprived of an education and how many smart children underperform due to English monolingualism? And how can anyone defend exclusion through English monolingualism?

English is also the language of the economy, many would argue, and therefore unassailable - but how many people are denied access to the economy due to such monolingualism? How can inclusive economic growth take place through English-only when so many people have not mastered the language? And how can companies achieve the best growth potential if they communicate with their customers in one language only? What is the full economic potential of multilingualism?

Can a government department or a hospital effectively market their services through English-only? Is good service delivery possible at all if it relies on one language only? And is a true and participatory democracy achievable based on English-only?

Cultural self-confidence and social cohesion, inclusive and fair economic growth and a true constitutional democracy are difficult to achieve within a monolingual regime. Multilingualism is the best way to include people and to give the youth a future.

It is therefore in the interest of the youth to promote multilingualism, rather than shifting across to English monolingualism. More importantly, all institutions - from schools to universities - should do more to make the indigenous languages attractive and to ensure that young people learn to speak one other's languages. That is how one creates social cohesion.

The future of our country lies on the tongues of our youth.