

REVIEW

RESENSIE

Rajend Mesthrie. 2003. *Language in South Africa*. Cambridge Africa Collection. Cambridge: CUP: 485pp

This is the latest volume in the *Cambridge Africa Collection*. It should also be seen in relation to four other volumes published by Cambridge, which focus on language in Britain, Canada, the USA and Australia, respectively.

In the introduction, Mesthrie explains the format of the book and pithily describes some of the particular challenges faced in deciding where the focus would fall. In the end, the volume comes closest to its Australian counterpart. In that case the divisions were 'Aboriginal and Islander languages; Pidgins and Creoles; transplanted languages other than English; Varieties of Australian English; Public policy and social issues (p.3). In the the South African volume Part I covers (albeit not exhaustively) the main languages in the country. Part II deals with language contact. And Part III is concerned with language planning, policy and education. Mesthrie explains how, after considerable debate, the authors decided to use the potentially loaded terms black, coloured and white. African language names are used without prefixes (Xhosa rather than isiXhosa).

Part I is the longest of the three parts. In the first chapter, 'South Africa: A sociolinguistic overview', Mesthrie skilfully contextualises the other seven chapters, which deal with the seven language groupings chosen. These are: The Khoesan languages; Bantu languages; Afrikaans; South African English; South African sign languages, German; and Indian languages. Of particular note is the decision to include sign languages. All of the authors succeed in providing scholarly yet accessible accounts of the 'stories' of the languages

I would like to single out two of the chapters. Herbert and Bailey are meticulous in their presentation of Chapter 3, 'The Bantu languages: sociohistorical perspectives'. They tackle aspects such as the present division into what are now the nine official languages, the much-debated issue of harmonisation and other ticklish questions in a careful, scholarly way. They conclude

A consideration of the socio-history of Southern Bantu languages reveals that there are more questions than answers available to scholars. While there is no question of the Bantu character of all nine of the officially recognised indigenous languages and the linguistic classification of these into four distinct groups ... it is not possible to demonstrate whether two or more of the latter groups represent a valid (higher level) linguistic subgroup. Indeed the historical unity of the Southern Bantu languages (with or without Shona) remains an empirical question for investigation (p. 73).

The chapter on sign language is different from the others in that it deals much more with social aspects than the elements of the language itself. In doing so the authors make a very strong case for the need to accord deaf people full linguistic rights.

One of the perspectives I found particularly interesting was the role of perception in communication across 'the racial divide'. On page 145, Aarons and Akach explain that deafness usually provides a primary identity, ahead of race. However,

Black deaf people see themselves as different from white people, and vice versa. It often happens in meetings that these different communities say they can't understand one another's signed language, and then it is common for people to refer to one another's languages as 'black signed language' or 'white signed language'. When the language samples are examined, the analyst may be forced to the conclusion that the failure of comprehension is not related to the language itself, but to the ways in which users perceive one another.

Part II explores the sophisticated ways in which languages influence and are influenced by other languages. The thirteen chapters cover aspects of language contact relating to pidginisation, borrowing, switching and intercultural contact; gender, language change and shift; new varieties of English; and new urban codes.

Perhaps the most relevant chapter at a time of nation building is Keith Chick's survey of intercultural miscommunication in South Africa. He provides a fascinating, if at times chilling, survey of how what he terms the 'structural circumstances of apartheid society' affected the quality of communication, as well as what the effects of miscommunication were. As he points out, intercultural miscommunication remains a strong feature of our society after apartheid. His concern is the need for comparative studies of intercultural communication in domains where they has been dramatic structural change, as well as in those in which there has been minimal structural change. Perhaps this is also an area where applied linguistics could directly serve the needs of society, offering opportunities of imagining (or reaching into) particular instances of intercultural miscommunication.

Rosalie Finlayson is also concerned to highlight the need for research. In this instance, it involves reaching into a custom which seems to be dying. Her chapter, 'Women's language of respect: *isihlonipho sabafazi*', lucidly and sensitively traces the changes in *hlonipha*. She acknowledges the pace of modern life which is impatient of 'language avoidance patterns'.

The other two chapters I found particularly interesting because they were so colourful were Makhudu's chapter, 'An introduction to 'Flaaitaal' (Tsotsitaal) and Ntshangase's chapter, 'Language and language practices in Soweto'.

Part III had tough challenges to meet. As Mesthrie puts it, 'it deals with the rationale for the most multilingual state policy in the world; the problems and obstacles associated with the policy; and the vision required to put the policy into effective practice'. I found this part disappointing after the strength of the earlier parts. However, perhaps being limited to only 56 pages meant that there was too little room to do full justice to the topic. My strongest criticism is that the most recent work consulted was written in 1996. This is understandable in the case of Reagon who sets the context of language planning, but the other chapters, 'Language issues in education' and 'Recovering multilingualism' are seriously limited by

failing to take account of most of what has been written about the South African policy and its implications.

Despite these reservations, *Language in South Africa* commands attention. It is essential reading for postgraduates and language practitioners, and I would even recommend that prospective language teachers be actively encouraged to read it. Not only is the book meticulous in its scholarship, it makes for fascinating reading.

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