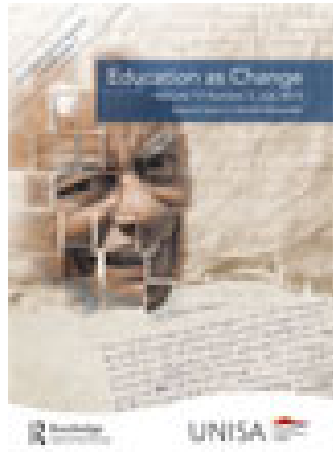


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Engaging a visionary: Horizons of the (im)possible

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Engaging a visionary: Horizons of the (im)possible

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Abstract

Neville Alexander has had a profound impact on the way we think about language education and language policy in South Africa. His views on the harmonisation of African languages, mother-tongue education, the position of English and the importance of literacy have shaped academic and policy debates since the early 1990s. Visionaries are able to combine insight with foresight and so imagine a different way forward. In this way they change what Roger Simon describes as the 'horizon of possibility'. This article examines Alexander's positions critically in relation to questions of power, identity, access and social transformation, in order to understand both their take-up and their rejection. Both history and geography – time and space – are central to this discussion of his achievements.

Keywords: Alexander, harmonisation of African languages, mother tongue, Nhlapo, Praesa

Introduction

Neville Alexander has had a profound impact on the way we think about language education and language policy in South Africa. His views on the harmonisation of African languages, mother-tongue education and the position of English, as well as the importance of literacy, have shaped academic and policy debates since the early 1990s. Visionaries are able to combine insight with foresight and so imagine a different way forward. In this way they change what Roger Simon (1992) describes as the 'horizon of possibility'. This article examines Alexander's positions critically in relation to questions of power, identity, access and social transformation in order to understand both their take-up and their rejection. Both history and geography – time and place – are central to this discussion of his achievements.

We take a position that Alexander, the visionary, was influenced in part by the complex political, cultural and linguistic developments of the 1940s that were characterised by differences in ideology among divided African freedom fighters. On the one hand, the ANC, seeking a policy of inclusion of both Africans and non-Africans who were fighting against colonialism, culminating in the *Freedom Charter* in the early 1950s, gave English a lingua franca status as the language of mass mobilisation. The Pan-Africanist Congress and, later, Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo), and other organisations to which Alexander was affiliated (National Liberation Front, National Forum and Workers Organisation for Socialist Action) gave prominence to African unity and black consciousness. Clearly, Alexander's views were informed by a desire to find a common black political and cultural identity, in the face of the social fragmentation of black people and the unification of Afrikaners around a language and culture that was becoming a powerful force for Afrikaner nationalism.

The harmonisation of African languages

The origin and political context of harmonisation

Alexander's idea of harmonising mutually intelligible African languages in South Africa was first proposed by Jacob Nhlapo, a teacher, political propagandist and editor, in 1944. Regarded as the first black South African with two doctoral degrees, Nhlapo used his academic expertise in Bantu studies to discern a growing tribalisation of African people based on the different languages they spoke. At this stage in history, Nhlapo was reacting to what he perceived as the fragmentation of black people through African languages, which had started with earlier colonial conquests of divide and rule as well as missionary mishearing (Mansour 1993). According to folklore, competition for new converts and the lack of central coordination among different missionary groups led missionary linguists to separate variants of mutually intelligible languages when they put them into writing from as early as the 1820s (Makalela 2005; Makoni 2003). However, it was only in the 1940s that the idea of African unity became prevalent due to the changing political developments of that time. Harmonisation – or, as put by Nhlapo, 'unification' – envisioned a strong African language as a tool for the restoration of a disintegrating black community.

Whereas there are apparent links between the unification of African people and the Africa-wide unification agenda under the broad theme of Pan Africanism, it is important to consider that black South African unity thinking was running parallel to the growing strength of Afrikaners as a strong lobby group for self-determination and unity, which was centred around the development of Afrikaans as a new language. Nhlapo had seen the success of unifying this 'kitchen language' and the rallying of Afrikaner unity (the formation of a 'Broederbond') on the basis of linguistic and cultural unity. Indeed, Afrikaner nationalism heralded a new era in which Afrikaners dominated politics and enabled the National Party to come to power in 1948.

There is no doubt that the harmonisation proposal was essentially a politically motivated language planning enterprise from its inception; yet Nhlapo resorted to basic literacy and education concerns to justify it. Without explicitly stating the deliberate division of African languages by the missionary linguists and the political implications of uniting African languages, Nhlapo (1945) argued the case by showing how literacy development and readership are affected by the wholesale division of languages. He stressed, in particular, that weaker African languages could not be used as languages of learning and teaching. Among other things, he cited three spellings for the word 'cow' to illustrate how mutually intelligible pronunciations in Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana were accorded three different spelling forms as *kgomo*, *khomo* and *kxomo*. These differentiated mis-spellings (Makalela 2005) or misinventions (Makoni 2003) were linked by later studies to the influence of the missionary linguists' different mother tongues. For example, the Catholic missionaries worked in the south (Southern Sotho), the London missionaries in the west (Western Sotho) and the Lutherans in the north (Northern Sotho) and created different orthographic systems that came to be conceived as three Sotho languages: Sepedi (German Lutheran missionaries), Setswana (London English Missionaries) and Sesotho (Roman Catholic missionaries). Nhlapo's (1944:10) proposal for 'the trouble of a Babel of Bantu tongues' was an attempt to save the languages from further fragmentation and to enrich them as vehicles of education and enliteration. He stated in the original proposal:

Having agreed as to which are the chief Bantu languages in South Africa, we can also agree that the work of joining Bantu languages would chiefly have to do with these languages. From these tongues we can at first build up two languages. Zulu and Xhosa, together with the branches known as Ndebele, Swati, Baca, etc., are so much alike that, put together, they can make one good strong language called Nguni. In the same way, Pedi, Tswana, and Southern Sotho, together with Kxatla, Tlokwa, etc, are so much alike that joined together, they can make a good strong language called Sotho (Nhlapo 1944:6).

As will be seen in Alexander's version of the proposal, the idea of harmonisation assumed mutual intelligibility within two major language clusters: Nguni and Sotho, and the possibility of re-standardising their orthographies. Nhlapho's proposal never saw the light as it was seen as a direct challenge to the hegemony of Afrikaans and, to some extent, English.

Response to linguistic apartheid

The need to unify black people through African languages was read in the context of rising Afrikaner nationalism. Nhlapho's fear of further disintegration became a reality when the National Party adopted a separate development ideology (apartheid) to retain its grasp on power. Verwoerd's blueprint ensured that Africans were separated into homeland reserves, using perceived language differences as a criterion for group inclusion and exclusion. He decreed: 'Africans who speak different languages must stay in separate quarters' (Alexander 1989:21). African languages were used for an extended period of time as mediums of learning and teaching until Grade 8, to bring about further divisions under the pretext of separate development (Heugh 2002). It was in this context that the liberation movements objected to the extended use of African languages in education.

The indigenous languages were represented by the Bantustan homelands as follows: Sepedi (Lebowa), Xitsonga (Gazankulu), Venda (Venda), Setswana (Bophuthatswana), IsiNdebele (Kwa-Ndebele), isiZulu (Zululand), Xhosa (Ciskei and Transkei), Siswati (Kangwane), Sesotho (QwaQwa) (Makalela 2009a, 2009b). Each homeland had separate language boards and radio stations that institutionalised language differences. Black migrant labourers were also separated into different sections of the same township according to the language spoken in their original homeland. For instance, Naledi, a section of Soweto, was reserved for Setswana speakers, whereas Shiawelo, in the same township, was a mini-reserve for Xitsonga migrant labourers. All these aspects of linguistic apartheid became central to Alexander's view of language as a means of creating African national unity among previously segregated speech communities.

Re-emergence of the harmonisation debate in the late 1980s

After the Soweto uprising of 1976, which was a culmination of a protracted language struggle against the domination of Afrikaans and the entire Bantu education system, the language struggle in South Africa continued on two fronts: The first aim was to destabilise the hegemony of Afrikaans, and the second to seek a lingua franca, English, as a unifying language of struggle. It is nevertheless important to highlight ideological differences which existed among black freedom fighters: Freedom for all (ANC) versus freedom primarily for blacks (PAC and Azapo). With an expectation that liberation was imminent in the late 1980s, political movements and intellectuals began to envision a new socio-political order. While the ANC took the decision to have English as the unifying language in its Harare Declaration (1989), other political parties disagreed. These ideological differences surfaced in the National Language Project (NLP) in which Alexander argued for both indigenisation through re-standardised African languages and globalisation through English. In his seminal work, *Language policy and nation building in South Africa/Azania* (1989), Alexander argues that national unity among previously fragmented communities is only possible through the languages of the masses. He forcefully states the harmonisation proposal as follows:

[O]ne issue has engaged my attention and will not be postponed. I refer to what I call the question of the possibility and desirability of consolidation (standardizing) Nguni and Sotho languages, respectively. In a nutshell, I am examining and airing the possibility that major varieties of Nguni (Zulu, Xhosa, SiSwati and Ndebele) and Sotho (Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho, Tswana) can and should be standardized or unified in writing and in all formal settings (school, church, law, court, etc) (Alexander 1989:74).

This proposal also reflects the form of language-based nationalism Nhlapo had proposed prior to apartheid policies coming into effect. Alexander envisions what the new South Africa can and should look like after the demise of apartheid. He sees a country with harmonised African languages as pillars of social equity, where the majority of the population has access to education through African language mother tongues, in the same way that Afrikaans- and English-speaking children have the advantage of learning to read and write in their home languages (Alexander 2001).

Because the harmonisation proposal was viewed as a threat to the survival of Afrikaans as a dominant language, to the hegemony of English as the sole medium of instruction in black schools, and to language-based black identities established under apartheid, it was never likely to succeed. Like the apartheid government, the new political dispensation under the ANC gave no space whatsoever for the possible unification of African languages as part of a 'redress' for linguistic inequalities of the past. Instead, a Pan-African language board was formed, mimicking the apartheid language boards of the 1940s. Because he was disillusioned by the new language policy framework, Alexander established the Project for Alternative Education in South Africa (Praesa) in 1992 and embarked on projects which he imbued with his commitment to language planning from below.

Harmonisation: The Alexander debate misunderstood

One of the paradoxes of post-independent South Africa, according to Alexander (2004), is the apartheid inheritance of a separationist language ideology. Harmonisation is often misinterpreted as meaning that some African languages will be 'killed' and that people will lose their languages and identities. However, harmonisation does not take anything from the speakers (Webb and Kembo-Sure 2000); instead, it adds a core written standard for literacy, which pupils from different mutually intelligible languages acquire at school, while retaining their home or spoken varieties (Makalela 2005:168). The key word in the proposal is *orthography*, not *language*.

One of the closest examples of orthographic harmonisation is Shona in Zimbabwe. While the missionaries initially put different dialects in writing, Doke and other linguists began a harmonisation project that led to a single spelling system for all Shona dialects. Other African examples include Runyakitara in Uganda and Igbo in Nigeria (Prah 1998). How people refuse to accept a proposal that is linguistically, economically and politically sound indeed remains an issue in the post-independence era. As we know, the standardisation and re-standardisation of writing is a normal language planning activity (corpus planning) that happens (and has happened) to varying degrees in all languages, since the time of the ancient Greeks (Mansour 1993). All these examples suggest that Alexander was a visionary language planner who used hindsight to propose an alternative future for South Africa's written language systems.

Mother-tongue-based multilingualism

One of Alexander's most influential positions is that South African schools should promote multilingualism that includes at least three languages taught as school subjects, in what he calls a 'trifocal language policy', and adopt the mother tongue or a familiar language as the language of instruction in primary schools and preferably throughout the education system. Alexander's work pays attention to historical forces (national and global) that have promoted certain languages at the expense of others on the African continent. His discussions of colonialism (Alexander 2006a), nationalism (Alexander 2003) and capitalism (Alexander 2006b, 2006c) inform our understanding of language policy. He explains why it is in the interests of elites, who have the linguistic capital afforded them by their knowledge of the language of power, to work to maintain the status of these languages, and how ordinary people diminish

their own languages by recognising their value only for 'the primary contexts of family, community, elementary school and religious practices' (Alexander 2007:6).

According to Alexander, multilingualism is a norm and a resource that can be used to harness cultural, economic and social opportunities in South Africa. As it stands, multilingualism as defined in the constitution can be misread as multiple unilingualisms and 'boxed' entities that reproduce the status quo of the past linguistic order. For this reason, he proposed additive multilingualism, where every school-going child in South Africa will learn at least one African language that is not his/her home language. This means that the language-in-education policy should prescribe three languages as compulsory: English, home language and another African language, which will vary according to the language which predominates in each of the nine provinces. In this way, mother-tongue speakers of English and Afrikaans will have acquired an African language by the time they graduate from high school, while mother-tongue speakers of an African language will have had the opportunity to learn another African language. As discussed elsewhere, this policy proposal is the best option for changing attitudes and for the full implementation of multilingualism as a functional resource (see also Makalela 2009b; Prah 1998, 2002).

Alexander's promotion of multilingualism as the only viable language policy for South Africa is underpinned by his unwavering fight for mother-tongue medium of instruction at all levels of education. That we learn best in a language we understand goes without saying; that pupils are at a disadvantage if they have to learn in a language they do not know fully is equally obvious, to say nothing of the difficulties teachers face in having to teach in an additional language. Alexander (2001:16–17) makes this point about mother tongue and equal educational opportunities as follows:

It is an amazing fact that South Africa, in spite of its modernist pretensions, is one of the few countries worldwide where at least primary school children are not taught through the medium of the mother tongue or a language of immediate community ... [I]t is an equally amazing fact that within the South African context the only children who receive mother tongue education virtually from cradle to the tertiary level are the minority English and Afrikaans-speaking children of the country. Children born to parents whose home language is one or other African language; i.e., the vast majority of our children, are doomed to be taught through the medium of a second language from third or fourth grade, mostly by teachers for whom this medium is at best a second language but often only a third language.

To counteract critique about the expenses associated with multilingualism, Alexander (2006c) did his sums, and argued that the costs involved made economic sense. The cost was discussed in related studies as mythical, since the critics only looked at one side of the coin: the immediate costs, rather than the long-term benefits. Needless to say, were the harmonisation of the Nguni and Sotho language clusters a reality, the costs would be even further reduced.

We should state that Alexander's advocacy for mother-tongue education was never in conflict with the requirement to learn English. He did not promote mother-tongue medium of instruction at the cost of access to English; instead, he recognised that English is a global language which gives people access to employment and a multitude of resources (Alexander 2001, 2004). English is increasingly dominant in scientific publications and in the knowledge economy. He understood the material and economic advantages afforded by competence in English, and therefore argued for *both* mother-tongue education and English. His was not an either/or position, but one that argued for additive multilingualism based on the mother tongue. It was, from a linguistic perspective, perfectly possible to gain full proficiency in additional languages learnt as a subject during 12 years of schooling. Praesa conducted research in the Western Cape which demonstrated the efficacy of an English, Afrikaans, IsiXhosa trilingual policy.

While a trilingual policy may be an effective solution for most of South Africa's provinces (the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, North West, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape), it is simply unworkable in Gauteng, where all the South African languages are spoken, where the varieties bear little relation to the standard variety sanctioned for schooling, where languages are constantly mixed in everyday use, and where, increasingly, school-going children speak foreign languages. The dynamic multilingualism of the townships requires deep thought about the definitions of language. Many children grow up multilingually and have a difficult time identifying their mother tongue. In this codemeshing environment, it is not surprising that some of them identify '*kasitaa*' (hybrid township language) or 'Sowetan' as their community language. This is one area where Alexander's vision of mother-tongue education may be limited or may call for a different approach.

Similarly, in Limpopo Province three main African languages are spoken: Xitsonga, Tshivenda and Sepedi (all of which belong to different language clusters) in addition to English and Afrikaans. The separation of regional municipalities such as Vhembe, Mopani and Sekhukhune, means teachers will need to be moved around to cater for one additional African language requirement in largely remote rural and monolingual settings. However, the separation of regions according to languages (old Bantustan borders: Venda, Sepedi and Xitsonga) creates an opportunity for mother-tongue-based education.

Alexander was right to insist that the failure to resolve 'the language question' (2006a) lies at the heart of South Africa's educational failure. Perhaps it is time to consider alternative answers to this question. Alexander (2006a:5) explains the 'lack of political will' to address the language question in terms of 'elite closure', whereby the elite class maintains the prestige language, English, because it gives them status and advantage. 'This limits socioeconomic mobility and political power to people who possess the requisite linguistic patterns' (Myers-Scotton in Alexander 2006a:5) and excludes the majority of the population. When this majority believes its own languages are not capable of being languages of power, and therefore accepts the status and value of the dominant language (English), Alexander describes this as a social pathology, which he brands a 'Static Maintenance Syndrome' (2006a:6). In South Africa, this gives English symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991) – power that derives from the value people accord it. Alexander concurs with Bourdieu (ibid.) that this constitutes a 'misrecognition' of the value of both English and African languages, and that it has consequences for the choices people make (including parents' choices about their children's medium of instruction at school).

However astute Alexander's explanations are, they will not make inroads as long as negative attitudes towards African languages persist: to date, they do not enjoy the same symbolic value as English. The constitution gives parents the right to choose the medium of instruction of their children's education. An overwhelming majority has chosen English, and parents have proved to be as unwavering in this choice as linguists and educationists, including the authors of this article, who believe in the importance of mother-tongue education. Perhaps the time has come to support parents by demanding the educational resources (fluent, literate and properly qualified ESL teachers, books, bilingual textbooks across the curriculum, libraries, school librarians, Internet access, television programmes, small classes, etc.) that would make the choice parents have been given a *real* choice.

We have to develop an education system capable of educating everyone to be fully bilingual and biliterate in English and an African language. This makes it imperative to develop new approaches to the teaching of African languages that take into account the varieties of these languages spoken in urban areas. We need to insist that there are modern, engaging and pedagogically sound educational resources to support the teaching of African languages as both first and additional languages. Whereas English has a wide variety of print and online texts teachers can draw on, there remains a paucity of everyday and literary texts in African languages that are suitable for young people. As long as experts continue to argue about what is best for South Africa's children, as long as we continue to ignore the wishes of parents, it will remain easy for the government to do nothing. Besides, Lisa Delpit (2006) questions our assumption that we know what is best for 'other people's children'.

Because we cannot entertain a return to linguistically and ethnically segregated schooling, it is clear that in order to deliver bilingual education schools will have to offer more than two South African languages from which parents can choose. This would have the added advantage of enabling trilingual or multilingual education over and above a stipulated minimum of two languages. Given our lack of success thus far in developing children's literacy in schools, it might be wise to aim for success in only two languages, in the first instance, thus leaving Alexander's vision of three languages as an option for now and a possibility for the future. Once schools have shown that they are able to produce fully bilingual students, and once access to English (currently the language of power) does not depend on its being the medium of instruction, perhaps then parents might change their minds about what medium to choose. The design and redesign of educational resources for the teaching of languages and the design of bilingual resources that support the use of English as the medium of instruction across the curriculum, would begin to move us forward.

Only a system that supports multilingualism can hope to cater for students' linguistic diversity; and only a system that requires everyone to learn an African language can hope to move us beyond linguistic apartheid. We need to begin to imagine a future South Africa in which people who do not know both an indigenous and a global language are unable to function in both work and social environments. Alexander (2007) is correct when he states that what is needed is a different linguistic climate. We also have to imagine schools where children acquire one another's languages from socialising across existing racial divides, such that linguistic diversity becomes a productive resource for language acquisition. And we have to imagine classrooms that will make learning and teaching our languages not only possible, but also pleasurable.

Creating the conditions for literacy

For success in school, the language question has to be linked to questions pertaining to literacy. A bilingual or trilingual language-in-education policy, whether mother-tongue-based or English-based, has to encompass biliteracy. South Africa has to tackle this problem using research rooted in both cognitive and socio-cultural theories about reading, adapted to local conditions.

The Vulindlela reading clubs were started by the Praesa Early Learning Unit 'to create conditions in community settings which inspire, promote and support reading for enjoyment and the development of reading habits in mother tongue and additional languages among children and adults' (Alexander et al. 2011:1)

These out-of-school community-based clubs meet for two hours every week, where adult volunteers 'play games, sing songs, tell, read and write stories' (ibid:3) in English and isiXhosa with children who choose to come. Story and pictures in books are seen as central to engaging children with literacy, as providing rich possibilities for exploration and interaction, and as a means of extending children's possible worlds, along with their imaginations. Overall, the project adopts a whole language (Goodman 1991, 2005) acquisition (Krashen 1988, 1993) approach to literacy development, as opposed to the 'skills based, part-to-whole model, focusing intently on teaching technical skills like recognizing letters and sounds, and putting them together to make words and sentences' (Alexander et al. 2011:1) used in schools. Adult literacy role models provide children with the kinds of informal experiences with books and literacy that occur

in homes where books and writing (usually in English) are part and parcel of everyday life, and where there is a huge body of (English language) story and other books that are shared with children from when they are very young (ibid.).

These middle-class English family literacy practices are embedded within local community languages and practices, such as oral story-telling, song and children's games.

Much of the success of these clubs rests on their location in communities that support them and away from the restricted pedagogies and conceptions of literacy in prescriptive curriculum documents and traditional formal classrooms. The original Vulindlela club has not only attracted a loyal following of children, but has also collected and helped produce literacy resources in African languages. The clubs underline the need for lively modern materials to be designed and published for children in all the official languages of South Africa. In addition, the Vulindlela Reading Club in Langa has become a model for reading clubs, which are starting to mushroom elsewhere. This has led to a new national reading-for-enjoyment initiative called Nal'ibali, which includes the training of volunteers and literacy organisations in the methods used and honed in the Vulindlela biliteracy project.

The community base for these clubs is also their limitation. Based on the goodwill and commitment of volunteers, the project attempts to change children's reading habits in two hours a week, while traditional dispositions towards literacy are constantly reinforced in schools. Reading for enjoyment needs to be part of mainstream literacy teaching. To this end, the Early Literacy Unit of Praesa has done extensive work with Foundation Phase teachers.

The Vulindlela club focuses on books, but this generation of children is likely to consume texts using digital media. We have to begin to imagine school literacy beyond the book. Mobile literacies exist, even in poor communities in South Africa, with the widespread take-up of cell phone technology. It is important to build on these emerging forms of literacy which have been adopted by communities as part of everyday life. Texting, for example, has established 'writing' and 'reading' as recognised literacy practices in ways that older technologies did not. Praesa is taking up this challenge with its new research focus on e-Tablets.

Given that literacy is not just a social practice, but also entails the development of decoding, comprehension and meaning-making skills, it is important to redesign the approach to developing these skills. Current approaches, emanating as they do from the centre, are not always appropriate for teaching literacy in languages that are not cognate. Learning English phonics or phonemics is hard enough for mother-tongue pupils because English is an opaque language – one letter can represent many sounds and one sound can be represented by many letters or letter combinations. If these sounds have no equivalent in a pupil's mother tongue, the task is infinitely more difficult. First, the sounds are difficult to hear and produce; second, pupils often try to learn distinctions from teachers who cannot themselves produce these distinctions. This would be equally true for learning African languages, where tonal variation is challenging enough for English or Afrikaans speakers to hear, let alone produce. Because African languages are transparent – letters correlate with sounds – learning to decode text is relatively easy. What is difficult is being able to read agglutinative words formed by the inclusion of several morphemes. What is perhaps needed for literacy learning in African languages are early readers with hyphens inserted between morphemes. This would have two advantages: words would be broken down into smaller units of meaning, and learning to read would also teach pupils to recognise the different morphemic elements of words. As readers become more competent, this scaffolding device could be removed. We need to develop local pedagogies for teaching our children to read.

Alexander started Praesa in 1992, and his 20-year involvement with the study, research and development of alternatives for post-apartheid education has enabled us to think about language and literacy in innovative ways that open up possibilities for policy makers, researchers, teachers, children, parents and communities. The Vulindlela project is just one example of Praesa's contributions.

Conclusion

In this article we presented Alexander's influence on language and education in post-apartheid South Africa. The socio-historical context of linguistic apartheid influenced the way he thought about languages in this country. His minimal proposal to harmonise only the orthographies of mutually intelligible clusters of languages would have given those languages a competitive edge as languages of education. It would also have had a significant impact on the production of print in African languages, and on the economic viability of developing educational materials. This, in turn, would have contributed to greater access to and support for literacy. But the separation of identities entrenched by history has proved to be too strong. Power and identity continue to stand in the way of Alexander's vision of linguistic and social transformation and the possibilities it offers for improved access to literacy and to the growth of writing and publishing in South African languages. In addition, the consequent threat that he identified, of future ethnic conflict in South Africa, remains undiminished. Signs of this have already emerged in the struggle for control of the ANC. However, as a visionary who used both insight and foresight, Alexander's legacy to the South African linguistic landscape continues to offer horizons of possibility (Simon 1992) for future generations.

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