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Schiff, Sheila

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Johannesburg College of Education
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ENGLISH ACADEMY

LITERACY IN ENGLISH

AMONG NON-WHITES IN SOUTH AFRICA

by S. SCHIFF

DURING the course of these lectures, you have had the privilege of hearing eminent men and women, qualified to speak authoritatively on wide fields. The subject suggested for this lecture is also very comprehensive but, as I am not qualified to deal with all the aspects of literacy among Non-Whites in South Africa, I propose to consider only those with which I am familiar. This means that I shall deal only with literacy in English among the Bantu people. In this connection, I am in the position to provide you with a worm's eye view of the topic. I have experience in high school education and teacher training of Bantu students and have had the advantage of working with colleagues whose experience and insight far exceed my own.

The problem of literacy in English, is my very intimate concern and I can speak very freely on many aspects of it—especially after marking examination papers! For the purposes of this talk, it is essential that we should keep in mind, those developments in the past, which have given English its present status in Bantu Education.

English has played the same role in Africa, that Latin did in Europe during the Middle Ages. In fact, the parallel is very close. English is the means of communication between members of different Bantu groups in South Africa today and it has been, and often still is, their sole means of acquiring some of the knowledge and culture of Western Civilisation. It is only very recently, that books, other than the Bible and school readers, have begun to appear in the various vernacular languages. Even now there is very little choice in reading matter and English books and English publications such as newspapers and magazines supply most of the requirements of the Bantu reading public.

The firm entrenchment of English in Bantu education, is due to the fact that, as a result of the great wave of evangelical activity in Europe and North America during the latter part of the 18th and the 19th century, many English-speaking missionaries began work in South Africa. The first mission school specifically for Bantu was established in the Cape in 1799. The missionaries found that literacy was vital to their work of spreading the gospel and raising the moral standards of their converts. Of similar importance, however, if social conditions were to be improved, was instruction in various trades. Thus we find shoe-making, carpentry, weaving, brick-making, etc., figured largely in the curricula of the early mission schools. The instructors in the various institutions, which sprang up throughout the country, were mainly recruited in England and it followed that English became the medium of instruction. Text-books were imported from England. It was some time, before the difficulties of establishing orthographies for Tswana, Xhosa, Zulu, etc. were overcome, and the British and Foreign Bible Society was able to print Bibles in these languages and the various mission printing presses were able to produce the beginnings of a vernacular literature.

The government of the Cape Colony began to subsidize Bantu education as early as 1841. After 1865, there was a more rapid increase in school attendance until, in 1925, £284,000 odd was given in state grants and by 1951 this had increased to £2,315,000.

In Natal, similar grants rose from £90 in 1865 to £1,223,500 in 1951. In the Free State and the Transvaal similar development followed more slowly.

You will notice that these figures are those of "state grants." The actual schools were established and run by missionaries. When certain standards had been attained the schools were subsidized provided that they followed the syllabus laid down by the provincial authorities. They were inspected by the provincial inspectors to see that the desired level was maintained. Every encouragement was given to missionaries. As a child I often heard my father, who was a missionary, discussing "your" schools and "my" schools with his colleagues. By this time the actual teachers in the primary schools were Bantu but there was very close supervision and control of schools, by the responsible missionaries.

This state of affairs was changed five years ago, when the Bantu schools of all four provinces were brought into line and a common syllabus was drawn up to replace the varied—and at times vague—syllabi then current in the individual provinces. The medium of instruction in the Primary Schools is no longer English but the **mother tongue** of the pupils. The supervision of the schools is entirely

Mrs. S. Schiff has taught English to Bantu students for many years and has first-hand knowledge of their linguistic problems.

in the hands of European inspectors and Bantu sub-inspectors and supervisors. The high schools and training schools are largely staffed by Bantu teachers. All this follows the pattern of development that we find in Europe when, largely as a result of the invention of printing and the influence of the Reformation, education became secular in character and broke away from many of the old humanistic traditions. In Europe the process was gradual, but **here,** in our midst, we have Bantu races who are rushing through the changes of centuries in a couple of decades. Many are bewildered and confused, and it is difficult at times to get developments in their correct perspective. Education is now being offered in the mother tongue. Seven years ago it was available only to those who could master a sufficient command of English to follow the instruction given in that language. In other words only those with linguistic talents could profit by academic education. (This was one of the findings of a Unesco committee on medium of instruction.)

This change in the medium of instruction is bound to have a profound influence on the type of literacy in English which we can expect to find emerging in the next few years. Pupils will certainly not have the same type of vocabulary in for instance, arithmetic or geography, and many people view this with alarm, as they feel that there may be a general decline in the knowledge of English, and particularly, that people with academic ability may be deprived of the opportunities that exist today, of benefiting from correspondence courses and other forms of higher education that are given through the medium of English. Against this, must be put the fact of the large number of new schools, both primary and post-primary, that have been opened in the last few years, especially in the rural areas and the new urban townships. Thousands more children are now learning English as a subject and the department is paying a good deal of attention to improved reading books and helps for teachers. If the syllabus, as laid down for the primary school, is faithfully and competently carried out, all pupils should be able to converse and carry out their day-to-day activities in English.

PROBLEMS OF LITERACY

So far, we have viewed the topic of English literacy among the Bantu from a general standpoint. There is much, however, to be said about the particular and individual problems which make understanding, speaking and reading English, very difficult for Bantu people. Some of these problems stem from the fact that for the majority of the Bantu, language is something that is **spoken** and not **written.** The average individual takes great liberties when speaking his mother tongue and cannot be expected to have any feeling for niceties of expression in a foreign language. I have struggled for years with the haphazard use of tenses that mars the work of many pupils. It has been of some comfort to find that Tswana and Zulu teachers have the same problems and frustrations. Our continuous, simple and perfect tenses have their parallel in the vernaculars but are largely ignored by those who are illiterate or who are living in an urban area. There the respect paid to oral tradition has diminished through contact with European ways. In Xhosa for instance the "literacy" language in which the old praise songs were written, is understood by few of the modern generation. This has had a grave effect on the general standard of usage of all language. If you have a loose and careless attitude to your own language, it affects your attitude to other languages as well. This same inaccuracy of expression is responsible for much misunderstanding between the Bantu and the European.

With the European many of the "slovenly" expressions into which the spoken languages slip, have a chance of being corrected by contact with the written word through reading. One has only to think of the enormous influence on written and spoken language of Luther's translation of the Bible and of the Authorised Version in their respective countries. Among the Bantu there are not many to whom reading is a pleasure, even when they are well able to read. This is partly because the tribal life of the Bantu developed both the art of oratory and the pleasures of conversation. Reading which is sustained solitary effort is foreign to their way of life. The form of reading which makes most appeal to the average Bantu with some education is newspapers and magazines particularly as these lend themselves to the communal activity of reading aloud and discussion. Unfortunately journalese, particularly of the "slick" variety employed by widely read magazines is itself frequently slovenly.

Other inaccuracies in the use of English arise from the traditions of the Bantu. For example pupils have great difficulty with personal pronouns. In most of the Bantu languages you refer to a man of a woman as a "person" and to any possession as belonging to a "person." It was not necessary to have masculine and feminine forms of the pronoun as men and women worked and ate apart. They did not have many personal possessions as there was so much communal ownership. Lands for instance belonged to the chief as representing the whole tribe. Any person of standing was addressed and referred to in the third person and by his rank. The use of a pronoun is discourteous and the Bantu who tells you that an article belongs to "someone" is not being deliberately misleading, but is translating literally, from his own language.

Only those of us who teach English as a second language realise how exasperating and chaotic the language is. Rules cannot be laid down to guide the faltering steps of a foreigner. Our idioms often

defy explanation and the many literary allusions which colour them are a closed book to many pupils. When they in turn are trying to make themselves understood by an Englishman, the vernacular idioms, so dramatic in their own speech, when translated, become quaint or even ridiculous. Some common and persistent errors have dramatic value. For instance you will hear someone say "The bus left me" which is far more poignant than our English expression "I missed the bus." Similarly I relish the frequent comment on an exercise which has required extensive red-pencilling—"Mistress, my book is bleeding."

Bantu culture made them a practical people. Metaphors are apt to be taken literally apparently with the idea that Europeans are so unaccountable that anything can be expected from them. Bantu languages are rich in adjectives but have few abstract words—which again makes thinking in English difficult. Many Bantu people are puzzled by the way we use the same word one minute as an adjective and a little while later as a noun and then a verb. Our unphonetic spelling is a further complication.

These very real difficulties in the English language are proving great obstacles to literacy among the Bantu people. Although more Bantu children are learning the language than ever before ,many of them seldom hear English spoken outside the school. Many teachers are neither fluent nor accurate in their use of English. Their errors are perpetuated by their pupils. Often the blind are leading the blind. Once a fault has been established, it is extremely hard to eradicate because the children no longer listen to themselves speaking. Often my students have great difficulty in understanding English as spoken by an English-speaking European and in times of stress revert to constructions and expressions that have been "black-listed."

There are many times when the handicaps of the Bantu student of English seem almost overwhelmingly discouraging. Many have no cultural background to speak of. Their foundations are faulty. Their conservatism is almost mulish and yet, these same handicaps are an incentive to further effort on the part of the English-speaking teacher. For those who have lost their old tribal culture, there is a crying need for some understanding of Western culture to give them direction in a confusing world. There will be progress in the laying of foundations of English teaching, now that the direct method of instruction is being universally enforced. English books are more readily available and every encouragement is being given to the teachers by means of refresher courses and increased library facilities. The conservatism has its good side in that it is good to know that people are prepared to hang on firmly to what they have been taught—provided that they have been taught the right things!

Our final consideration must be what we, as people interested in the advancement of English literacy, can do to help the Bantu in the difficult transitional period through which they are passing.

Firstly there is a crying need for suitable reading matter in Bantu communities. We can give practical assistance in the establishment of school and communal libraries whenever the chance occurs. The telephone book will give you the number of the local Bantu School Board. Please remember that while the children will enjoy the simple picture and story books that your children have outgrown, the teachers will value school text-books in such subjects as history and geography. Anthologies of poetry are also appreciated—particularly of poems suitable for children. For all his difficulty, Shakespeare is extremely popular with the Bantu. Our school librarian finds that his plays are taken from the shelves almost as fast as they are returned.

Your Bantu employees appreciate it if you pass your newspaper on to them and if more Europeans were to read and pass on a magazine such as "Drum" it would benefit both sections.

Very little is being done to encourage a better standard of English speech among the Bantu people who have left school. Here we might encourage competitions—not of elocution—but of reading unfamiliar passages, producing short plays and of making impromptu speeches. Noble spirits might act as adjudicators and the less noble donate prizes. There is great enthusiasm among Bantu people for choral competitions. Perhaps some of this can be diverted to achieving a better standard of English speech.

And finally we can practise tolerance in our relations with all Bantu people. Often linguistic misunderstandings give rise to mutual irritation. We may show a lamentable lack of respect when we address an adult as "boy" or "George" and even words with a quite innocent derivation come to have, what a recent writer on semantics calls a "snarl" value—"Kaffir" for instance. Respect means much to the Bantu and very often we give moral offence quite unnecessarily. There are frequent occasions too when we have thought a Bantu was being impertinent when actually no impertinence was intended. A servant may say "The mistress must give me some money" when actually he means "I need some money" or even "May I have some money?" Quite often I have asked whether the speaker intended this or that when a rude remark has been made and have provided the correct expression that should have been used. Usually such an action is appreciated as most Bantu people are only too grateful for help and encouragement.

In fact if we look around, there are plenty of opportunities for each one of us to make a personal and effective contribution towards the advance of Literacy in English among the Non-Whites in South Africa.