



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

Prof Mandla Makhanya

Vice Chancellor and Principal of UNISA

Official Opening

National Conference on Multilingualism in Higher
Education: Issues, Challenges and Opportunities

20 August 2015

Kgorong

Muckleneuk Campus, Unisa



Programme Directors of this and following sessions




Our keynote speaker and The honourable Minister of


Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande




Our other keynote presenters this morning, Professor


Mbulungeni Madiba and Prof Tessa Dowling


 Unisa's Vice Principal Academic: Teaching and Learning,
Prof Mare

 Unisa management members in attendance

 The organizing committee of this conference

 Speakers of various themes

 Academics and Students from all participating institutions

 Distinguished participants

As I am assigned to do the official opening, allow me first to also reinforce what Prof Mare has said in welcoming you. We are, at Unisa, honoured and pleased that you singled out our institution as a venue to tackle such an important transformative policy conference which, I am convinced, will go down in the history of our higher learning institutions as a timely intervention whose implications is timeless. As we are all aware of the recent blowing of the winds of discontent and change demanding genuine transformation in our universities, this conference may have a great potential of giving real

content to some key aspects of transformation of higher education landscape in South Africa.

We should recall that South Africa and Africa's struggle against colonialism and apartheid was also a struggle for cultural emancipation beyond the change of the political order. Throughout political history of conquest and domination the conquerors, to ensure sustainability of their hegemonic project, often invest more on cultural oppression or marginalization of indigenous cultures than they do on military or security hardware as they know that colonization of the mind is greater than all armies and security forces combined.

A great African thinker and liberation fighter, Amilcar cabral, delivering the Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture at Syracuse University on 20 February 1970, made a profoundly instructive observation when he declared that,

“History teaches us that, in certain circumstances, it is very easy for the foreigner to impose his domination on a people. But it also teaches us that, whatever may be the material aspects of this domination, it can be maintained only by permanent, organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned. ..For, with strong indigenous cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation.” (Amilcar Cabral, History is a Weapon: National Liberation and Culture, 1970)

Language is at the very heart of all the cultural life as it is a heritage reservoir and a repository passed from generation to generation. Cultural oppression will often be signified by the language status of both the dominant hegemonic culture and that of the marginalized. Language gives voice and narrative dignity to any cultural group or community of people, in the absence of that then people concerned must essentially be attached as appendages of other dominant cultures.

At the dawn of our democracy the Constitution recognized the importance of unity in diversity in its preamble and went further to officially recognize eleven official languages and the promotion of other indigenous languages of the Khoi and the San indigenous people. Sadly and quite paradoxically, in two decades of our democracy we have seen a rapid decline of our indigenous languages and cultures in public spaces and even in formal institutions. The formal policy recognition of these African languages including the Language Policy Framework for South African Higher Education of 2001 has yielded very little by the way of concrete impactful implementation of multilingualism, save a few isolated cases. It is, therefore, my humble submission, that this conference cannot make an impact or leave a mark without addressing these apparent contradictions.

We must always be reminded, though I suspect I am preaching to the converted, that multilingualism has various practical and tangible implications for a nation building and transformation project. It allows a majority of people to have a meaningful participation in a democratic discourse and commercial transactions, it assist in fostering multi-cultural cultural consciousness which is an essential ingredient for social cohesion, unity, and national identity. Moreover, it lifts the veil and the mask of cultural alienation of the majority of citizens whilst also providing cognitive justice to the learners.

Our former President and global icon, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, makes a simple and yet profound point on the mother tongue when he says,

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.” This

is a very important observation in practical terms beyond the sentimental aspect that we often associate mother tongue with.

As we honour women and pay tribute to the struggle for gender justice we must also be mindful of gender dimension of patriarchal society as expressed in our languages. Therefore, we also have to consider the gender dimension of language policies in their diverse forms. We may be focusing on higher education as per the theme of this conference but we dare not ignore the implications of multilingualism, or lack of it thereof, in foundation and primary phases of our education systems as these have implications on the quality of students who will later go to tertiary institutions.

University of South Africa is repositioning itself as an African University in both form and content, therefore the outcomes of this conference will be of interest to me as we embark on this transformative project.

Great technological innovations and revolutions especially in the space of information and communication technologies suggest that any multilingual project ought to take that into account and assess the implications for its lexicology.

In our Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, we have a fearless champion of higher education transformation and that is an assuring support and reinforcement of the work we are doing here.

We, therefore, look forward to the deliberations of this conference and hope it will yield the results the organizers had hoped for.

I thank you