

Who is laughing last in the South African classroom?

A critical reflection on language in education

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Abstract: Performance of pupils using African languages at home testifies to both the inequalities of South African education and society and to a failure to address language problems in education. We reflect on findings from a case study in a secondary school. It was found that pupils struggle to articulate ideas in English which is, for most learners using African languages at home, both their second language or First Additional language (L2) at school and their language of learning. This article aims to offer a new analytical perspective by focusing not simply on cognitive and linguistic issues, but on the different ways in which reality (or ontics) is enacted within different language communities. A postcolonial view is developed which does not oppose the use of English instead of the home language (HL), but which emphasises the importance of developing pupils' ability to live in tensions created by the opposing ontological assumptions embedded in the different languages and cultures. In order to benefit from these insights (1) pupils must be well-grounded in their HL, as well as (2) in the dominant language, and furthermore, (3) pupils must be enabled to live simultaneously within different realities (ontics).

Introduction

At the beginning of each year, the South African public is confronted with disappointing results of pupils who use African languages at home¹ in the Grade 12 examinations. In addition, various authors have questioned the extent and level to which a matriculation qualification prepares pupils for the world of work (Alidou, Boly, Brock-Utne, Diallo, Heugh and Wolff, 2006; Alexander, 2005a; Chisholm, 2004; Reddy, 2004; Taylor and Prinsloo, 2005). The ways in which these results reflect the inequalities of the South African society are increasingly recognised.

At the heart of the matter lie issues related to the choice of English as the language of learning/teaching (LoLT). Concerns about English as the LoLT are widespread (Alidou et al., 2006; Alexander, 2005a; Skuttnab-Kangas, 2000; Phillipson, 2000) and it is recognised as one of the important factors that contribute to the general difficulty experienced at school by pupils who use African languages at home. According to these authors English is in most of the cases not pupils' second language but often their third or fourth language. This is also confirmed by the case study discussed below. Most pupils write the exam, therefore, in a language with which they are not familiar.

Due to the political history of South Africa, English and Afrikaans have been well-established as languages of learning, to the exclusion of African languages. The effect has been that, for all pupils who use African languages at home, their HL remains a language for everyday communication, but not for further education. Alexander (2005b: 4) writes about what he calls a social pathology, the 'Static Maintenance Syndrome', and points out that while Africans are proud of their mother tongues, they use them only in the primary language domains, i.e. at home, within the community and at elementary school. They do not believe that these languages could become a powerful means of communication or a part of their 'formal' lives.

The difficulty most pupils who use African languages at home experience with English has been the focus of this research (Alidou et al., 2006; UNESCO, 2010), ranging from views that emphasise the 'deprivation' of pupils who lack cultural capital to the 'symbolic violence' of educational institutions which exclude certain groups from education.

Conceptions of learning have progressed from narrow cognitivist models to the acknowledgement brought about by Vygotsky (1986) of the importance of sociocultural processes and the role of education in social transformation (Stetsenko, 2008). While this article's approach to the problem is related to sociocultural views, it does not focus on the relation between language, meaning and cognition as such, but invokes the relation between language and ontology. It agrees with Stetsenko's view that a sharp separation should not be made between epistemology and ontology.

The expansion suggested herein (in the spirit of Vygotsky's project) goes beyond the epistemological level by stating that while there is indeed no gap between changing one's world and knowing it (a point well understood by Piaget and Dewey), there is also no gap between changing one's world, knowing it, and being (or becoming) oneself; all three dimensions simultaneously emerge from this process. In other words, no knowledge and no human beings exist prior to and can be separated from transformative engagements with the world, including, importantly, other people. In this perspective, the very distinction between acting, knowing, and becoming (including developing one's identity) dissipates (Stetsenko, 2008:484).

The acquisition of language and knowledge is therefore accompanied by the acquisition of an ontology, in the process of the becoming of both the individual and of reality. Education could then be seen as the process through which pupils are enabled to fully participate in the ongoing transformation of reality.

Pupils who use African languages at home and who do not perform well at schools because of an inadequate competence in English as the LoLT, are therefore excluded from full participation in the transformation of reality. The concerns about

their preparedness for tertiary education and for the world of work (Alexander, 2005a; Chisholm, 2004:1-2; Reddy, 2004:2) are indications of this issue.

This article argues that the problem must not only be located at the level of knowledge and cognition, but also at the level of ontology. The concept *ontic* is introduced and refers to the dynamic process through which reality is enacted. It is argued that English as a colonial language carries a dominant ontology which threatens the ontologies of the colonised, leaving them in a position of marginalisation and alienation.

In order to address this problem the ontics of pupils have to be recognised. In order for pupils to participate actively in social transformation, or in the continual transformation of reality, a process of decolonisation is needed that does not deny the dominant ontology, but that draws from the resources of other ontologies in order to create transformative spaces within the tensions between different ontics. It is an '*activist* or transformative stance on ontology and epistemology' (Stetsenko, 2008:486).

This article does not address this problem fully. Its purpose is only to introduce the ontological framework as a way in which to understand the difficulties pupils experience. It also draws on an empirical investigation that was done in an inner city school to show how weakly pupils are socialised into an own ontology and what the effects are of languages that are not fully developed in the educational sphere.

The argument that will be developed in this article is that the language practices in this school generally has the result of 'converting' pupils who use African languages at home to a dominant (Western) culture and ontology. It is argued that these practices contribute to a large extent to the poor performance of these pupils. A postcolonial approach needs to be developed that would avoid both neocolonial imposition and attempts to revert to a 'pure' traditional culture. The singularity of both these approaches needs to be avoided in order to develop in pupils the ability

of living with multiplicity and ambiguity. The hope is that such a dynamic concept of culture and ontology which avoids traces of neocolonialism would enhance the ability of pupils to participate actively in shaping an increasingly globalised and complex world. In order to bring about this ability in pupils, three elements have to be in place: pupils have to be well-grounded in their HL(s) and in an African ontology; they should be fully socialised within the dominant language (and in the Western ontology) and lastly they must be enabled to switch between their traditional ontics and the dominant ontics and to live within an ontic tension. It is not assumed that either of these ontologies are static nor that they could be defined in isolation from each other.

This article approaches this problem by providing an investigation of School C as a case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). School C is an inner city school where research was conducted, over a period of nine years (1998-2007), by one of the authors. This school is known as one where pupils who have failed in their previous schools are given a 'second chance' to continue their schooling. The school is relatively small, with 12 permanent and 7 part-time (African languages) teachers. The school has an annual average of about 30 Grade 10 pupils, 50 Grade 11s en 200 Grade 12s. As it is a semi-private institution and an affiliate of a Further Education and Training (FET) College, annual fees are higher than those of subsidised schools. The data was gathered through questionnaires, creative writing tasks, and individual and focus group interviews with pupils and with teachers. The investigation was done in various subjects, but the work of learners used in this article, was produced by pupils in the English class. This investigation has been reported on in two papers (Postma, 2002a and 2002b).

The article proceeds as follows: After a discussion of some postcolonial perspectives on language in education, the theoretical framework is explained. The two sections following the theoretical framework provide an interpretation of the data in the light of the postcolonial theoretical framework.

Postcolonial perspectives on language

Various prominent linguists (UNESCO, 2010; Alexander, 2000a, 2005c) in Africa display an ambivalent attitude towards the place of 'colonial' languages (such as English, French, German and Portuguese) in education in Africa. They are on the one hand, concerned that African languages are not fully used, while on the other hand, they do not argue that 'colonial' languages must be excluded. These views of postcolonial thinkers reflect their critical questioning of the dominant position of English and of the neglect and marginalisation of African languages. They also propose ways in which this problem could be addressed if attention is given to multilingualism and the intellectualisation of African languages.

The concern about the use of African languages is expressed by Samassekou as follows:

It is now time that Africa stopped being the only continent where a school child can have access to knowledge and science only through a language other than the one spoken in his family (Samassekou *in* Alexander, 2005c:13).

Bamgbose (*in* Alexander, 2005c:15) also discusses this neglect of African languages, pointing out that the role and vitality of African languages have been eroded due to the impact of colonialism. He claims that not many Africans believe that their children could receive a meaningful education today in African languages beyond the early years of initial education, and adds that those who are literate only in an African language are viewed as inferior to those who are proficient in what he describes as imported or partner languages (such as English, French, German and Portuguese).

Bamgbose (2005:19) points out that pupils who use African languages at home are treated differently from the rest of the world since they are not educated in their first language. In his argument in favour of the use of the mother tongue as the LoLT, he discusses and refutes possible reasons why African languages are not being used in postcolonial Africa. The first of these reasons is that English was often the

colonially imposed medium of instruction in schools; the second was the acceptance after independence, that Westernisation was the ideal. Another reason is the belief that African languages do not have scientific concepts to be used for academic purposes. Bamgbose is convinced that African languages can cope with the demands required by technology and science, and points out that traditional African concepts about the universe, measurement, medicine and the environment exist and can be used in education.

Concerning the matter of the dominating Western curriculum at schools, Bamgbose advises that teachers should not mistake linguistic inability for cognitive inability since it would lead to the exclusion of pupils who use African languages at home:

It is, therefore, not surprising that wrong judgements are made on the child's intelligence and ability when the fault lies squarely on a premature use as medium of what is best accepted and treated as a second language. Those who drop out and those who fail at the end of primary school now constitute another squad of the excluded... (Bamgbose, 2000:12).

Bamgbose (2000:11) writes that language exclusion occurs as a result of language politics, especially in countries in sub-Saharan Africa. One way in which language exclusion occurs is caused by the notion of 'official languages', where those who are fluent in the official languages become participators and those who are not fluent, are excluded. Bamgbose (2000:11) believes that some people are overtly excluded while others are covertly or indirectly excluded. He explains that this also applies to people who claim to be adequately qualified in the official language, while in reality they lack sufficient competence.

In the unique case of South Africa where two of the eleven official languages (English and Afrikaans) are imported languages which have been dominant in education, *it is clear that children who speak African languages are at a disadvantage in that they have to cope with mastery of English before they can receive any meaningful education*, while children who speak English or Afrikaans can go straight to learning new content without having first to learn another language (Bamgbose, 2000:13) [Own emphasis].

The concern of these postcolonial thinkers is linked to the close relation they believe exists between language, values, culture and knowledge. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:117) argues that the cognitive, intellectual, scholastic or literary component of cultural competence relates to knowledge of the relevant culture, and views languages as a possible core value in various cultures. This means that the knowledge component of cultural competence would also include knowledge of the languages pertaining to that culture, while the cognitive component would include some knowledge about the history and traditions of that culture.

Barasa (2004:168-173) writes that language is a component of culture. Acquiring a language therefore also implies acquiring the culture of that language, and when pupils acquire many languages they learn aspects of many cultures, opening up cognition of sections of those cultures (2004:168). Barasa (2004:173) argues that while early multilingual experience enables children to appreciate and integrate different cultures and to adapt easily to new situations and environments, pupils in Africa as well as South Africa, are offered insufficient exposure to different languages with the result that cognitive development is inadequate. Barasa argues that enhanced cognitive functioning that follows upon early multilingual experience promotes cognitive and metalinguistic abilities, such as originality, creativity, divergent thinking, sensitivity to linguistic cues and verbal flexibility.

Barasa (2004:172) refers to the sadness Ngugi expresses when pointing out that the language used in the education of African children is foreign to them, and their school books are also written in a foreign language. This includes exercises, tests and exams, all of which contribute to linguistic bewilderment and subsequent underachievement. Barasa (2004:172) concludes that

...thought in the child also took the visible form of the foreign language. The child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:201) agrees with Bamgbose (1991) and Ngugi (1994) when commenting that language has been instrumental in keeping up colonial

structures and reproducing neocolonial structures. She also states that education has assimilated indigenous minority children by homogenizing them through language domination. She opposes arguments that some languages are 'better' than others, by pointing out that a person's mother tongue or home language allows creative use of human ingenuity (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000:220).

Bamgbose's points out that postcolonial authors display an awareness that African languages need to be developed and intellectualised. Postcolonial linguists (Alexander, 2005b; Bamgbose, 2005; Samassekou, 2005; Szanton, 2005) believe that these languages have to be intellectualised in order to compete on a more equal ground with the 'colonial' languages. This is done by proponents of the intellectualisation of African languages, a project undertaken by members of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN). Finlayson (2002:58) voices the wish of language planners and linguists when she writes that the intellectualisation of "our indigenous languages can contribute to poverty reduction and development remains the challenge for all Africans, particularly those in South and southern Africa". The project of intellectualisation is prompted by the fact that African languages are largely neglected and excluded from higher levels of education.

This discussion of some postcolonial views has highlighted the ambiguous attitudes towards the problematic role of colonial languages in postcolonial Africa. While these languages remain the dominant languages in governments, commerce and education, concerns are raised about the status and power of African languages and about the language politics of English and other 'colonial' languages. The consensus seems to be that the educational and intellectual development of pupils who use African languages at home are directly related to the use of the HL in education and to the development of African languages in education.

The ontics of learning

This ambiguity among postcolonial authors about the role of colonial languages necessitates rethinking of the identity and role of languages in education in a way that goes beyond the irresolvable tension between the choice for either English or African languages. An approach needs to be found where the benefits of English could be drawn upon while its dominance is questioned. A postcolonial position should not discard English nor replace African languages.

Such a postcolonial position is developed by Verran (1999, 2001, 2007) who reflect on her investigations as a science lecturer of teacher education students in Nigeria among the Yoruban people. She was particularly interested in the culturally relative way in which concepts in science and mathematics were understood within the context of English and Yoruba. The important insight Verran gained was that each language is embedded in a particular view of reality (ontology) and that the pupils' way of practising a subject reflects their ontological assumptions, their beliefs about the things of which the world consists. Instead of a focus on *ontology* which deals with theories of the basic entities and structures of the world, she introduces the concept *ontics* which refers to the dynamic enactment of reality through repetitive embodied practices.ⁱⁱ By introducing the concept *ontics*, Verran moves away from a static understanding of culture and ontology towards a dynamic conception which describes the way in which reality is enacted through practices:

Doing ontics as I understand it could hardly be more different from the ways these twentieth century philosophers imagined it. Mine is not a quest to describe how things are. For me ontics recognises itself as emergent, partial and performative. In this I see myself as following the philosopher A.N. Whitehead. Ontics does not aspire to completeness and accepts and values vagueness. Ontics is a politics of rendering our ontic commitments visible, often by telling stories, but also in other sorts of embodied performance. (Verran, 2007:110)

Reality is therefore not a static entity to be represented in language, but it is performed through linguistic and other cultural practices. The mathematical practices of Yoruban pupils enact a reality that is different from that of the official

(Western) curriculum. Verran investigates how different ontic enactments of the mathematical concepts of measurement and quantification take place in the official school curriculum (originating from Western science) and in traditional Yoruban cultureⁱⁱⁱ. She describes how differently situated cultural practices enact different ontics. While the Western concept mainly uses a standard unit of measurement as the basis, Yoruban ontics takes the type of material as the basis which determines the appropriate form of measurement. Verran argues that the different enactments of reality in Western and Yoruban ontics are embedded in the different concepts and categories of the languages. The languages both reflect the underlying ontology and enact the ontological assumptions.

Verran focuses in particular on middle class Yoruban pupils who are fully competent in both Yoruba, their HL, and in English the LoLT. She compares the contrasting teaching practices of two of her Nigerian student teachers. In their respective lessons, Mrs Taiwo draws on the Western view of quantification as modelled by the lecturer, while Mr Ojo mixes Yoruban and Western ontics. Instead of following the way measurement has been defined in their teacher education class, and using a measuring stick, he hands out cards and pieces of string, redefining measurement as the number of times the string could be wound around the card. This is in contrast to the Western concept of measurement as a linear extension. In this process Mr Ojo provides an alternative understanding of measurement which is embedded in the Yoruban culture. The mixing of Western and Yoruban ontics indicated the success of the lesson for Verran (1999:150). But it is also this mixing of Western and Yoruban logics by Mr Ojo which elicits 'disconcertment' in their lecturer because he has deviated from the lesson they modelled in class and introduces a different understanding of quantification and measurement. Besides disconcertment it also elicits 'laughter' from the lecturer. It is

...the sort of laughter that grows from seeing a certainty disrupted to become a different sort of certainty. I felt as if I 'saw' length ... and 'saw through it' at the same time whenever I watched my Yoruban [student teachers] teaching 'length'... (Verran, 1999:140).

One might expect children to be quite confused when confronted with these different ontics in the mathematics classroom. One might also expect a 'colonial' teacher to correct pupils' 'wrong' ontics and to replace it with the 'correct' Western way of understanding and living in the world. Verran provides, however, a different perspective which might be valuable for coming to grips with issues of language in education in South Africa. These different ontics makes Verran (1999:150) realise that 'all sorts of further possibilities open up' when mixes of this kind take place. It became clear to her that these pupils should be trained in the routines of both Yoruban and English language quantification, and that they can be trained to adopt routines that translate between the domains, learning to live simultaneously in two different worlds or to switch from one world to the other.

This ability to function in different ontics represents in Verran's view (2007:105) a cognitive advantage. In the follow-up study, Verran compares the cognitive ability of bilingual Yoruban pupils with a group of middle class monolingual English-speaking pupils in Australia. She found that the cognitive abilities of the monolingual group are not on the same level as those of the bilingual group. This could be attributed to the fact that they have not been advantaged by the opportunity to experience the possibilities of existing in an alternative ontics. It seems then that significant educational advantages are to be gained from the ontic tension that is brought about by learning in two completely different languages.

Both the disconcertment and the laughter are important pedagogical features:

We experience the certainty at the same time as we experience something else: the amazing hoax of certainty. And at this a great laugh is liable to well up. This laughter, reflecting the disconcertment, is vital, for this is how we are enabled to know ourselves as participants who tell stories as part of our participation. Staying true to that laughter will find us better ways of telling true stories in responsible ways. (Verran, 1999:151)

Verran presents here a postcolonial approach to learning in Africa. The postcolonial *moment* does not occur when the dominant Western form of knowledge and logic is discarded in favour of what some might call the 'authentic ethnical'. To the contrary, it occurs at exactly that moment when the relativity of both ontics is experienced and when new possibilities open up in the tension between the two. This awareness of relativity does not lead to the denigration of either ontics, but requires translations and switches between the two.

This position of Verran (2002) is different from 'foundationalist' views where either the Western or the African ontics is asserted in an absolute and singular way as the only reality. She also attempts to overcome a relativistic position which asserts both as equally legitimate but also as separate and incommensurable.

Ontics refers to the dynamic enactment of reality through recursive (cultural and linguistic) practices. Not only concepts and meanings are being created, but reality itself is also (re-)created. The Yoruban pupils live in a reality where measurement is preferred to be repetitive winding rather than extension. Although the Western and Yoruban concepts could be compared, the groups live in different realities. This is not to essentialise these realities because they are contingently performed within a particular context. Ontologies and cultures are fluid entities and any attempt to identify and classify (Bowker & Star, 1999) them is wound up with the will to control. The contingency and fluidity of ontologies make the dominance of any particular ontology so much more problematic. The purpose in this article is not to essentialise either Western or African ontologies, but to describe the process through which African pupils could become full participants in the transformation of reality. In Verran's example this participation is enabled for the bilingual pupils who could live simultaneously in different worlds. They are in a position where they could see the relativity of not only their own ontology, but also of the dominant Western one. The postcolonial moment is experienced when both Western and African ontics are enacted as contingent and fluid.

If these ideas were to be generalised and applied to the South African context, we would need to establish the conditions for the kind of learning which would enable pupils to live in an ontic tension. From this discussion, it seems that the generalisation of such a cognitive advantage requires three elements: (1) The proper socialisation of pupils within their own language and culture (ontics), (2) their socialisation within a dominant language (English), and (3) a pedagogical process which enables pupils to switch, or oscillate between the two and to translate between them. This pedagogical process requires of the educator to maintain her disconcertment as well as the 'laughter' and to resist resolving the ontic tensions.

The analysis that follows shows, however, that the first element is absent in the case study since pupils are not adequately and appropriately socialised in the language and culture with which they are most familiar. The subsequent section shows that many pupils remain alienated from English. It is argued that the absence of these two elements renders impossible the creation of an ontic tension. Although the ontics associated with English is dominant, many pupils do not acquire it but remain outside. The ontics of English should not be replaced by the 'traditional' (indigenous) ontics either, since an 'ontic tension' is imperative for creating a 'postcolonial moment'. This ontic tension entails that pupils are able to 'live' simultaneously in different ontics and translate the one into the other.

Inarticulate HL in education

We find in the South African context the opposite to what Verran found among the bilingual Yoruban pupils since the Grade 12 results of most pupils who use an African language at home testify to their inability to participate fully within the curriculum. If ontological assumptions are embedded in language and if pupils cannot enact their own ontics in an articulate way then they could not have expressed these assumptions at a level that could compete with a dominant language.

This section shows that pupils' ability to articulate their own ontology is weakened because of their weak sense of a HL. Added to this is the finding that African languages are not adequately developed in education to fully represent the ontological assumptions embedded in the culture. This finding is based firstly on the lack of academic proficiency in the HL and secondly on the lack of the intellectualisation of these languages as viewed, for example, by members of ACALAN, as well as by Légère (Alexander, 2005c, Légère, 2004).

In the case study a questionnaire was used to explore pupils' linguistic background. They were asked what their HL was, and what their mothers' and fathers' HLs were, after which they were asked whether other languages were used in their home. When asked which languages were used at home, one learner wrote the following (Pupils' writing is reproduced unchanged throughout):

- (1) I never realise that I know so many languagees and the is some languagees that I know but I didn't menshin. I new confused which one is my home language.

Other questions concerned their primary school language, and which other languages were used at school before that year. It was interesting, though not surprising, to see how many languages were involved. They were also asked to distinguish more finely between a possible HL and a secondary language, to indicate which languages they understand, speak, read and write. It was expected that insight in this would provide an indication of the depth of familiarity with a language.

Below is a diagram which reflects the HL of pupils and their parents. The languages are listed below, with the numbers and percentages of pupils, mothers and fathers.

Insert Diagram 1: Home or first languages of pupils, mothers and fathers

It was interesting to note that pupils were not always sure which one language was their HL, as indicated by the crossed-out answers in the questionnaires where such questions were asked. They also did not always share their HL with their parents

but often with members of an extended family such as grandparents, uncles, aunts or friends (cf. learner who speaks “Zulu fulltime”, see (2) below). Out of 46 Grade 11s in the school, there were only three cases where the pupils, their fathers and mothers all had the same HL. Pupils’ uncertainty about their HL could also be seen in the spelling of the different languages, e.g. Xhosa ('Koza').

It is clear that the pupils are uncertain which language is their HL and if they are certain, this is not always the same language as the HL of their parents. Besides this uncertainty, their knowledge of their preferred African language is often too sketchy for Grade 12 purposes, which puts them in the unenviable position of not having any one language on the required level to take for Grade 12 purposes (Bamgbose, 2003:421-428).

Another problem many African pupils experience is that their HL is not fully developed before they attend school for the first time. Most African pupils are unable to start and complete their schooling in their HL. This inability to complete schooling in the HL, implies that abstract concepts are never adequately developed in this language.

The lack of depth in any particular language is in stark contrast with the pupils’ multilingualism as indicated in the following diagram.

Insert Diagram 2: The number of languages understood by pupils in School C

This remark by a learner illustrates their uncertainty about their HLs, but also their multilingualism:

- (2) My background is complicated maam. Okay, my Grandma is Xhosa and grandpa is Swati my mother's parents. My Grandma from my Dads side is Tswana and so is my grandpa which makes my Dad Tswana and my mom Swati so I think I'm a Tswana but I speak Zulu fulltime.

Although this learner is uncertain, (I *think* I'm a Tswana) he takes his father's language and culture as his own. This confirms Webb's (2002b:67,196) finding that mother tongue is not a significant concept in Africa and that the father's language is

often used as the HL. This difference lies at the heart of the African learner's 'otherness' relating to language and cultural differences between Western and African customs and lifeviews.

This section indicates that pupils are not able to explore or express their ontologies by means of a HL at a level that competes with the way it could be expressed in the dominant language. It is therefore very hard for pupils to introduce their ontological assumptions into the classroom and to obtain official recognition. They are therefore severely limited because they do not have the conceptual tools to translate for themselves the ontological assumptions embedded in the dominant language.

A sense of alienation

While pupils find it hard to enact an own ontics in a language with which they are most familiar, the question could be asked about their relation to the LoLT and school knowledge. The investigation shows that the absence in the school of cultural resources and concepts that would enable pupils to live within their own ontics in school leads to a sense of alienation and disconnectedness. Instead of cultural resources they find very little in the school that is familiar.

Here is one example of a task that was given to pupils and a discussion of the response of one learner, Vusi:

Write a friendly letter to your neighbour, where you tell him/her that he/she should really try to keep their dog quiet at night. Inform them in a humorous fashion that you are not angry, just tired of the incessant barking. [Underlining indicates words that Vusi used in his letter – possibly the words he understood best in the assigned task].

Vusi proceeded to write a letter that was difficult to decipher

(3) mathe alway angree she hit me angree you sleep outside night and dogs.

He offers an account of his home life, revealing abuse from his mother (“mathe”). The response suggests that the learner’s failure to interpret the task should be related to an ontic dissonance, an inability to enact the ontics of the dominant class. It is not simply that the learner misunderstood the task at a cognitive level, but that the learner lives in a different world from the one described in the task. Although this example may be more extreme and pronounced than most, it reflects the type of meaning many pupils make in the English class. This response demonstrates the distress the learner experiences in living conditions within which the concepts of ‘humour’ and ‘friendly’ may not fit. The present reality is so dominant for this learner that the possibility of an alternative reality is far removed and unthinkable.

This response makes it possible to identify some of the ontological assumptions embedded in this task. The task, that was given to all pupils in the cluster (the departmentally arranged group of schools), that included three ex-Model C schools^{iv} and two township schools, assumes a middle class (white) South African neighbourhood where families typically keep a watchdog on the premises (Van Sittert & Swart, 2008:24). It also assumes the kind of civility where neighbours would resolve issues by writing letters or notes, thereby reflecting the politics of politeness (Mills, 2003; Van der Walt, 1992:49, 50 and 60) and the assumption was made that pupils would see humour in the situation as would be expected from a white middle class learner in Grade 11.

The problem is not only that the learner found it difficult to relate to the task or misunderstood the task, but that the task enacts a certain ontics in which ‘dog’, ‘humorous’ and ‘friendly’ have different meanings. The learner’s response demonstrates his inability to participate in the enactment of the particular ontics.

Pupils’ sense of confusion becomes pronounced when asked which section of English they find difficult:

- (4) The work is fairly understandable but I think the posing of the questions were difficult in a sense that you understand them but you don't have the right words to answer.

At times pupils blame themselves for this failure:

- (5) I don't know if I'm a slow learner or what but can you perhaps help us what language.

The attitude pupils display towards English reflects further estrangement. They are not able to relate the language to their own lives and see it as a foreign language instead of a second language. To many learners who use African languages at home, English as a school subject remains the language of the powers-that-be, the ex-colonial language that does not 'belong' to them. This estrangement causes a rift and prevents real learning from taking place. One learner wrote the following about her difficulties with understanding English:

- (6) You're English Mam find dificult cos samtmes you do now when to use the words then you want to use eg veb's, adjectiv's, adverb and also the speling is sam time dificut.

Many pupils' sense of destitution in the English classroom becomes apparent when they have to complete sentences. In response to finishing the following sentence:

When the wind howls at night, I feel...

a learner wrote:

- (7) So unhappy because of the failing English. Is hard for me to write it.

Another sentence that had to be completed, was:

Raindrops remind me of teardrops because...

and it elicited the following response:

- (8) ...of failing my other subject.

This response seems disappointingly unoriginal, but while it reveals a lack of creativity on the surface, what it really emphasises is the learner's great fear of

failing at school and an awareness of the inability to fit in with the teacher's and school's expectations.

The lack of locatedness of pupils within an ontics and their confrontation with a dominant Western curriculum can have no other result than such a sense of alienation. It is concluded that pupils are ontically confused and that they therefore do not dispose of a strongly present framework that could act as a reference point in their further learning and an alternative to the dominant ontics in the school. What pupils would acquire with the HL is not only the ability to express themselves in a language with which they are more familiar, but the ability to see the world in a way that reflects an appropriate level of linguistic, cognitive and ontic development and maturity on their school level.

Conclusion

This article has provided some evidence that the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment of English in the case of a particular school testify to the dominance of Western ontics embedded in the English language. This dominance, in combination with pupils' weakly developed own ontics, reduces the ability to gain advantage from the switch between different ontics. It leads inevitably towards a sense of alienation among pupils and a disconnectedness with the curriculum.

This tragedy that is playing itself out in the South African classroom is no laughing matter. It appears from this case study that the contribution pupils could make to their own education is not recognised. Pupils investigated in this study have not achieved the required cognitive level appropriate to their school grade. The reasons for this problematic of learning in South Africa schools that are suggested in this study are the following:

- Pupils are not adequately inducted in their mother tongue and its associated ontics.

- Pupils are alienated from the curriculum and the pedagogy because they are not in a position to find much that is familiar.
- There is a pedagogical unawareness of the need to foster an ontic tension.

This research could be extended in order to establish the kind of competence that is assessed in the final examinations. It needs to be investigated whether the examinations assess pupils' ability to function in different ontics or whether a hegemonic ontics is taken for granted or even worse, imposed. The implication is that, even if bilingual pupils have achieved the ability to live in an ontic tension, the examination would neither acknowledge nor confirm it.

The main argument is that the need to live in ontic tension would be a much more appropriate preparation for pupils in a world where cultural diversity becomes increasingly more apparent within a shrinking global village and where the transformation of traditional values undermines old certainties. Maybe the last to laugh will be those pupils who are exposed to very different languages with different ontics associated with them, because they might be better prepared for the increasing complexity and uncertainty of our time. The resources to achieve this are already present in the South African classroom.

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Notes

i This phrase 'pupils who use African languages at home' is used to refer to the language that is used most frequently at home. It is preferred to 'home language' since few of these pupils have only one home language.

ii The concept 'ontology' refers to theories about reality and is related to epistemology (that deals with questions about the possibility and status of knowledge. Ontology refers to the things that exist which are described as 'noumena', 'Ding an Sich' or the 'ontic' which, according to Kant, is not knowable, or the 'ontic'. In phenomenological thinking these entities are taken as inaccessible as such. Verran follows Whitehead's view in which the ontic is established through human practices.



iii It is not assumed that Western or Nigerian ontology is homogeneous or static. The concept 'ontic' indicates the dynamic way in which realities are enacted through interaction with all kinds of entities.

iv Ex-model C schools remain a category often referred to in South African education. It refers to the previous dispensation when model C schools were mainly the white middle class schools.