MANAGING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE
BERNE, 26 September 2007

(ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF ARTS AND CULTURE, SOUTH AFRICA (REPRESENTED BY DR MBULELO JOKWENI) AT THE SWISS CELEBRATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN DAY OF LANGUAGES)

Good Afternoon
Ndimasiari
Molweni
Sanibona
Goeie naand
Dumelang
Thobela

Programme Directors and Representatives of the Forum of Bilingualism,
Mrs Borel and Mrs Brohy,
Dr Frederic Jauslin, Director-General of the Federal Office of Culture,
Dr Mario Annoni, President of the Swiss Arts Council, Pro Helvetia,
Excellencies,
Mr Hans Stoeckli, Mayor of the Bilingual City of Biel-Bienne,
Mr Oliver Maradan, Deputy Secretary-General of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education,
Mr Fulvio Caccia, President of the Maison Latine,
Members of Federal, Cantonal and Municipal Parliaments,
Educationalists, Linguists, Poets and writers present,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed an honour and privilege for us, as South Africans and officials of the Department of Arts and Culture in particular, to participate at the Swiss Celebrations of the European Day of Languages. To us this opportunity means that our Constitution (as well as our endeavors to manage linguistic diversity in South Africa) is recognized; hence we could not afford to turn down the invitation. As you know, South Africa is similar to Switzerland in as far as linguistic diversity is concerned; hence it makes perfect sense for us to share our perspective in this regard. Of course, this does not, in any way; imply that the manner in which we manage linguistic diversity is the best. We are here to share our experiences and practices so that you can embrace what suits your situation and eschew the rest.

One of the commonly used slogans in South Africa is "UNITY IN DIVERSITY". Why is this phrase so important in my country, and what does it mean for South Africans? In the South African context the meaning of this phrase relates to the

upholding of multilingualism and multiculturalism as a unifying force that makes South Africa a proud nation in Africa and in the world. Just like Switzerland, South Africa expresses its soul through diversity; and to use Grin's words, "not in spite of diversity".

In South Africa language was once an instrument of political, economic, social and educational control. The language policy of the time excluded the mother tongues of the majority of South Africans. Given this, it is no surprise that language was the impetus behind the uprising in Soweto on June 16, 1976. On that day, school children protesting against the imposition of one language (i.e. Afrikaans) in education at the expense of all others took the country on a huge stride in its journey to freedom. Words that could not fight for themselves were given voice by those who used and loved the many languages of our country. Among other things, it was only the beginning of the end of a system of only two official languages.

The demise of apartheid and the birth of a new democratic South Africa led to the adoption of a Constitution (1996) that instituted the principle of multilingualism by assigning official status to eleven languages, including nine previously marginalized indigenous languages of the country. According to Neville Alexander, one of the language activists in S.A, our constitutional provision for the promotion of multilingualism represented a major shift from the Eurocentric ideology which uses one language as a criterion for the definition of a nation. As explained by the "UNITY IN DIVERSITY" slogan, for South Africans, diversity should not be viewed as a ban to solid nationhood, but a boon.

Most importantly our constitution has a chapter on the Bill of Rights, which is said to be the cornerstone of our democracy. On the issue of equality, the Bill of Rights states, among other things, as follows:
"The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social religion, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, **language** and birth".

The manner in which the inherent right to one's language has been violated in the past in South Africa is unspeakable. I am sure that we all agree that the importance of this right cannot be overemphasized. When people are denied the right to their language they are in actual fact denied the right to access government information, the right to participate in political debates, the right to defend themselves in the courts of law, the right to free communication, the right to fair education, the right to be themselves, to mention but a few. For instance, a friend of mine from Uganda once said to me, "You know Mbulelo; I am a Muganda, not so much because I live in Uganda, but because I speak Luganda". What can be construed from this assertion is that identity is not so much about where one lives – but it is a matter of your culture and your language, and those two can never be separated.

In South Africa a lot of research has proved beyond reasonable doubt that non-mother tongue education, for example, does not benefit the majority of the population. For example, the MarkData-Pan South African Language Board's sociolinguistic survey of 2000 showed that only 20% of isiXhosa speakers "comprehend English fully" and 96% of isiXhosa speakers regard isiXhosa as their language of thought. Much as research findings like these are not necessarily shocking, it is however very much disturbing to note that the vast majority of the people were for decades forced to learn in languages which were not their languages of thought. Just imagine!

Having said all this, it is important for me to mention that in order to redress the imbalances of the past and at the same time put to implement the constitutional mandate, the government of South Africa put in place the National Language Policy Framework, which provides as follows:

(a) By consensus, each government structure must agree on a working language(s) (for both intra and interdepartmental communication purposes), provided that where practically possible no person will be prevented from using the language(s) of his or her preference.
(b) In communicating with members of the public (for official purposes) the languages of the citizen's choice must be used.
(c) Where the effective and stable operation of government at any level requires comprehensive communication, it must be published in all 11 official languages and, in the provinces, in all the official languages prescribed in the province.
(d) Government communication at the international level will normally be in English or ad hoc in the preferred language of the country concerned.

Alongside the National Language Policy Framework, the national Department of Education introduced a "Language in Education Policy", which underscores multilingualism as an extension of cultural diversity and an integral part of building a non-racial South Africa. The underlying principle of this policy is to pursue an approach that is most supportive of **general conceptual growth** among learners; hence additive multilingualism. This means that learners are encouraged to retain their home language for learning and teaching, and to acquire at least one other additional language. This is done so as to ensure that while learners become competent in their additional language; their home language is maintained and developed. It is also encouraged that a home language be used alongside the additional language for as long as possible.

It is however, unfortunate that these policy intents do not always apply. The reason being that there is still an aversion towards mother tongue education on the part of the parents, and as a result, English has become the *lingua franca* in schools.

Ladies and gentlemen, as we all know, to have good policies in place is one thing, but to put policies into practice is a different matter altogether. In this regard, South Africa is no exception. To facilitate implementation, the government is in the process of establishing language units in all government departments. Significant progress has been made towards the establishment of the South African Language Practitioners' Council, a statutory body which will be responsible for the registration of language practitioners and regulation of standards and practice.

It should also be mentioned that implementation of the policy hasn't been easy. The challenges range from low levels of development in the case of indigenous official languages to issues of attitude towards African languages. Needless to mention that the state needed to embark on numerous language developmental programmes which would help enhance the status of the previously marginalized indigenous languages, which are accorded the official status. I will not waste time by detailing each and every programme that our government has instituted as a remedial action. Instead I will highlight few flagship language projects undertaken by the Department of Arts and Culture.

One such project is the Bursary Scheme, which the department initiated with a view to building capacity. The bursary scheme tackles the shortage of professional translators and interpreters in South Africa. While there are many gifted workers in these fields many have learned translation and editing on the job, and as such there is an increasing need for more and better trained language specialists. In stimulating training, the bursary scheme assists departments of African languages at universities around the country, which are under pressure to close because of diminishing numbers of students. The scheme makes available millions of rands to be allocated to postgraduate studies in Translation and Editing, Interpreting, Human Language Technologies, and Language Planning.

As part of implementation, the department has also established Language Research Centres (LRDCs) for each of the nine indigenous languages. These are situated in tertiary institutions that are located in the heart of the communities that speak those languages. The LRDCs work closely with their respective communities, and forge partnerships with non-governmental and community-based organizations. Essentially, these Centres are there to establish in principle and practice the use of indigenous languages for the conduct of commerce, politics, science, research and government.

The Department has also laid the foundations for a Human Language Technologies (HLT) industry in South Africa. HLT is where the language intersects with technology. At its most basic level, it is manifested in such applications as spelling and grammar checkers on personal computers. At a more complex level, other interactions can provide for example, automatic translation into a language of the user's choice.

In 2005 a unique institution was launched in South Africa, and that was the Telephone Interpreting Service for South Africa. Its main objective was to bridge the communication gap between government and the public. It was initiated by the Department of Arts and Culture and makes South Africa a truly functional multilingual country. Another important institution is the Pan South African Language Board which, over above the promotion and implementation of multilingualism, has the responsibility to investigate any alleged violation of language rights, policy or practice.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is our strong belief that the best way to make multilingualism work is to tackle two critical enemies of language use, namely attitudes towards certain languages and unequal levels of development. With regard to the former, the point of departure would be to engage in language awareness campaigns and to instill love for and value to all lesser used languages. Conscious efforts have to be made to make people take pride at using their languages. For those of you who are not familiar with our various National Days, I would like to point out that our Heritage day is one of the most significant days in the year calendar. On this day we pay tribute to our past struggles and present strivings for a better country and to remind us of our rich histories, our many languages and our proud heritage that have brought us to where we are today.. This year's official theme for heritage celebrations is "*Celebrating Our Poetry*". True multilingualism can be further attained by creating employment opportunities for the practitioners. The government can also create an enabling environment, whether by means of policies or legislation, which would assign equal status to all national languages of Switzerland, for example, so that they can be freely used by speakers as languages of commerce, politics, education and son on. Concerning the latter, (i.e. language development) government can engage in various developmental programmes such as those that I highlighted as flagship projects for South Africa.

Programme Director, in conclusion I want to state categorically that in a multilingual country like South Africa , vigorous language development projects, language awareness campaigns, injection of economic value to indigenous languages by creating jobs for professionals, are some of the ways and means by which we can succeed to tackle English hegemony which poses a threat to indigenous languages. Admittedly, it is not easy. We know as a matter of fact that we are faced with a notorious colonial and apartheid legacy which cannot diminish automatically. Let's be reminded that it will keep on rearing its ugly head if we do not act. Chairperson, allow me once more to thank His Excellency, the SA Ambassador to Switzerland and the organizers of this event for affording us the opportunity.

I thank you