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LANGUAGE MATTERS

Multilingualism and the values of heritage in SA



EVERY year on September 24, South Africans gather around braais, in cultural centres, at stadiums, and on digital platforms to mark Heritage Day. Once rooted in remembering King Shaka, this public holiday has become a national moment for celebrating the country's rich diversity of cultures, traditions, and practices.

However, beyond the braais, colourful dress and vibrant music and cultural productions, we, as university lecturers in languages, want to use Heritage Day to pause and reflect on what sustains South Africa as a diverse rainbow nation.

One of the most powerful expressions of this diversity is multilingualism. With twelve official languages and many more spoken in homes and communities, South Africa is a living example of linguistic plurality. For some, this is simply a practical reality: switching between isiZulu and English at school, or between Afrikaans and Setswana in the marketplace. But, at a deeper level, multilingualism embodies in palpable ways the very values that underpin the celebration of culture and heritage.

Multilingualism is first and foremost about inclusivity and social cohesion. Recognising and using multiple languages in public life affirms that every cultural group has a rightful place in the nation. When isiXhosa and Afrikaans appear alongside English in parliament, when isiZulu and Sepedi are heard on public radio or on televi-

sion programme, this signals that the linguistic heritage of the country is not the property of a single voice or cultural group. Inclusivity matters, especially in a society like South Africa that is still healing from a history in which some languages and their speakers were deliberately marginalised.

Languages, in their diversity, have the potential to unite people. South Africa's first democratically elected president Nelson Mandela alluded to the importance of multilingualism, stating that "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." Multilingualism fosters social cohesion and is an essential element of the philosophy of "ubuntu", which highlights the interconnectedness and coexistence of people as captured in the adage "I am because we are". In this sense, language becomes not only a tool of communication but also a bridge that allows mutual recognition despite differences.

Furthermore, multilingualism is also about creativity. South African writers, poets and musicians have long drawn inspiration from linguistic hybridity. Many artists such as Yvonne Chaka Chaka and Sho Madjozi as well as writers like Antjie Krog have managed to move fluidly across languages. They have succeeded in creating cultural productions that resonate with local audiences whilst remaining globally relevant. On social media and on the streets, the youth effortlessly code-switch between different languages. They are inventing vocabularies that carry their heritage forward in playful and innovative ways. Heritage, in such a case, is not static. In fact, it is a living, dynamic resource which is both important for the present moment and for future generations.

It is also undeniable that languages are keepers of memory. They carry



indigenous knowledge, oral traditions and ways of relating to the land, the environment and each other. For example, proverbs, songs, and folktales carry with them local memories and indigenous knowledge systems. These make it possible to understand how a particular people view the world. Therefore, when a language weakens, so too does the worldview it carries. Protecting multilingualism is, therefore, about more than simply words that facilitate communication. It is importantly about safeguarding the memory and wisdom that sustain us as a people and as a nation.

And in a democracy such as South Africa, multilingualism is vital for civic participation. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, health campaigns in multiple languages ensured that communities across the country could access life-saving information. Unfortunately, such packaging of important information failed to go beyond the days of Covid-19 pandemic.

Democracy itself cannot flourish if only a fraction of citizens can engage in their own languages. Equal civic participation requires that political debates, court proceedings and education are accessible across linguistic lines.

Of course, challenges remain. English dominates higher education, business and digital spaces. In many

instances, it overshadows African languages. Many schools continue to struggle to implement effective mother-tongue instruction. And in everyday life, linguistic hierarchies persist, with some languages being treated as more prestigious than others. To celebrate multilingualism as a core value of our shared national heritage, it is important to acknowledge the collective responsibility to nurture and protect it. What this means is that there is need to invest in translation, terminology development and education, while shifting our cultural attitudes to see multilingualism not as a burden but rather as a treasure that enriches us all.

Each year, Heritage Day reminds us that South Africa's greatest strength lies in its diversity. Cultural practices, languages, rituals and identities weave together into a veritable melting pot. Multilingualism is one of the most central ingredients of this melting pot. It embodies inclusivity, creativity, memory and democracy. These are not just abstract ideals but practical resources for building a more just and cohesive society.

As we celebrate Heritage Day this year, let us not only wear our colourful cultural attires but also speak and listen in the many languages that shape our lives.

For it is in the chorus of voices – although sometimes dissonant, often harmonious, but always alive – that the true spirit of South Africa's heritage can be found. Our future depends largely on how well we can hear and honour them all.

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