

University of Pretoria 100 years celebration

Language as an instrument of reconciliation

5 March 2008

Mathews Phosa

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me say what an honour it is for me to share with you the century of difference that this august institution has made to life's of countless students, institutions and to this great country of ours.

We live in a wonderful country full of a variety of different shapes and colours, blessed with complementing cultures and designed in such a way that we have the privilege of many different languages being spoken by our proud citizens.

This given historical fact was the point of the departure in the constitutional negotiations and led to the unique end product that saw South Africa end up with eleven official languages.

It moved away from the exclusive former language policy which had only Afrikaans and English as official languages and deepened perceptions that certain language and cultural utterances were being oppressed, despite them being in the country and on the continent for hundreds of years.

You can never successfully exclude culture, language and pride from a negotiation agenda and therefore the outcome of our 1996 constitution was the recognition of this wonderful quilt of interwoven languages that we have in our country.

My point of departure is a simple one. If we recognize that we need each other in this country then our pride of what is culturally ours should extend to what is culturally that of our neighbour and fellow South African.

Language offers us a sharp and soft instrument that brings power and acceptance, and brings new perspectives, challenges and common ground between us. The simple act of trying to master a new language opens up new barriers for you and gives you access to new experiences and new opportunities.

We are now entering the so-called post-liberation phase in our country. In my life that means that we should revisit and repaint the window. It is only when we are brave enough to take the paint brush in our hands that we move forward and find the space to embrace each other.

My approach has always been that must not emphasize differences. It works for me when I look for things that bind me to those who grew up differently to the way I did. It gives us something to jointly care for and protect.

For me Afrikaans is the perfect example of a cultural vehicle that was hijacked for political and other purposes. Through that it became a political target, and in the process there were unintended consequences, a beautiful language became labeled as the language of the oppressor.

It became a language associated with a despised political system, and through that association, became an initial victim of the struggle for the liberation of our country.

From that experience we have learnt many valuable lessons that should guide us as we plan for the next, more inclusive, chapter of our common future and history in the country that we share, and belongs to all of us.

Wat is die belangrikste lesse wat ons geleer het uit die misbruik van Afrikaans deur politici en ander geslote en uitsluitende groepe?

- n Taal is niemand se politieke eiendom nie
- Jy kan nie in die langtermyn n taal institutionaliseer nie
- Taal het nie kleur nie
- n Taal word voller en ryper en meer soepel as hy hom oopstel vir n bietjie gebruik en misbruik oor kulturele, rasse- en politieke grense heen
- n Dinamiese taal moet n bietjie van n losbol wees, hy moet nuwe bedmaats soek, hy moet by die buurvrou nuwe truuks gaan leer, en hy moet nie skaam wees om te eksperimenteer met nuwe uitdrukkings en woorde nie
- Hy moet wegbly van etikettering af en hy moet weghardloop daarvan as sekere segmentele groepe hom passievol as bedreigd verklaar, want dan begin sy politisering weer van voor af.
- Hy moet wegbly van die bedekking met n geloofskleed. Politieke en geloof het n manier om n taal los te ruk uit sy gemeenskapsankers en dit die ekslusiewe eiendom van uitsluitende groepe te maak. Wees versigtig!

Vandag is Afrikaans polities vry, hy is een van elf amptelike landstale, en hy is, in terme van status, in n beter posisie as ooit tevore.

Want, sonder sy politieke baggage het Afrikaans n just cause geword: Afrikaanse feeste is aan die groei, Afrikaanse musiek is op kommersiele en kwaliteits-hoogtepunt, en die taal is oopgestel vir "volksvreemdes" wat ons nog twintig, dertig jaar gelede wou weghou van die bloedbelope hande van "godlose kommuniste"

Vandag is Afrikaans die eiendom van beide FW de Klerk en Mathews Phosa en dit maak hom sterk en soepel. Sy champions en beskermhere kom nie meer eksklusief uit een groep, een kerklike sinode, een politieke party of een ras nie. Hy is nou die soepel eiendom van n baie groter groep gebruikers en verbruikers as ooit voorheen.

En daarin, dames en here, le beide Afrikaans se beskerming, sy toekoms en sy oorlewing. Vandag, n skrale dertien jaar nadat ons land vreedsaam n demokrasie geword het, is die werklikheid dat ek, en baie van my mede-struggers, sal toi-toi as Afrikaans verneder of benadeel word.

Die rede daarvoor is eenvoudig, die leierskap van die taal is uit die hande van politici geneem en geplaas waar dit hoort: by digters, by sangers, by akademici, by kerkleiers, en by die man in die straat wie verstaan dat offisiele beskerming van die taal net soveel kwaad as goed inhou.

En, laat ons dit nou maar verwoord op n manier dat niemand dit kan spin of wanvertolk nie, dit is goed vir die taal dat sy swart gebruikers hom luister, skryf, lees en praat. Die gee aan die taal broodnodige suurstof en die township woorde waaroor ons twee dekades gelede nog amptelik gefrons het bou aan n taal waar onwaarskynlike vennote nou bloedverwante broers en susters geword het.

Maar, in die sukses van die taal le daar ook n waarskuwing: Soos die gebruikers van Afrikaans oor grense gebreek het, so het die uitdaging vir Afrikaanssprekers nog groter geword om ook weg te beweeg van die koloniale model en ook uit te vind hoe proe die ander inheemse tale van die land en sy kontinent op sy tong.

Om net Afrikaans en moontlik Engels te kan praat is vandag oudmodies en reik terug na die glorie dae van Britse oorheersing. Ons is nou vry, en ons moet ons vreugde dat daar nuwe gebruikers van ons taal is omskep in n wins: Deur ook ons ore, oe en monde oop te maak vir die gebruik van die sogenaamde swart tale van ons land.

Ons moet dit hoor EN probeer praat. Ons moet dit oefen en lag vir ons gesukkel. Ons moet ons uitreik-en die uityreik van ander na ons-gebruik as die speelveld van versoeningsaksies. Ons moet prê he terwyl ons mekaar se kosbare kultuurgoed omhels. Dit is die maklikste moontlike manier waarop ons saam in die skrum van die nuwe Suid-Afrika kan sak.

Ladies and gentlemen, South Africa and Africa is not a place or sissies, not will it be a place for bullies.

What it is, is a place for those of us who want to stay here and make the country and continent a better place for all.

It is in that spirit that I am uttering these words to you in English, a common instrument that allows us to exchange values and ideas. It is also in that spirit that I urge you to reach across divides and literally hold the languages of your neighbours close to your chest; to learn those languages, to study them, to share them and to speak them.

You can only hold me close to our heart if I find a way to communicate with you.

Language is that instrument. Language is that medium, and language is the spear in our hands that we want to put to new use.

So my request to all of you is: let us use language to build bridges. Let us learn new languages to solidify those bridges, and let us illustrate our patriotism by getting off our comfortable armchairs and talk to one another, however uncomfortable, difficult and funny that may be or sound.

I thank you.