

Multilingual dialogue in a post-Apartheid television drama in South Africa: More than a rhetorical function

*Shole J. Shole*¹

Abstract

This paper examines the use of multiple languages in the television dramas of post-Apartheid South Africa that are broadcast in the state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), with special reference to a single scene selected from an episode of the popular soap opera Generations: The Legacy (GTL) which is a sequel to Generationsⁱ. Multilinguality is not a new phenomenon in creative verbal art, nor is it peculiar to South African fictional television. Given the country's separatist political history, the sudden change in the late 1990s from exclusively monolingual to multilingual dialogue in the SABC soap operas is of socio-political significance.ⁱⁱ The subject is considered within the frameworks of Communication Context and Code of Realism, inter alia, and the article argues that Rainbowism is the main motivation behind the multilingual switch. Promoting the Rainbowism agenda through TV drama constitutes a reliance on the mass media to influence society, a reliance which finds resonance among Cultivation as well as Social Cognitive theorists.

Keywords: Code of realism, multilinguality, Rainbowism, SABC TV soap operas, social cognitive theory

¹ Department of Setswana, North West University, Mafikeng, Email: Shole.Shole@nwu.ac.za

Introduction

Audio-visual dramatic dialogue or fictional television dialogue (FTD), as one of the most important aspects of the genre, has gained a lot of attention from scholars in recent years (Bednarek, 2010; Quaglio, 2009; Dynel, 2011). Most studies approach it as a scripted, mediated discourse that approximates natural conversation. Compared to prose fiction where authorial intrusion or mediation plays a role, drama relies on character verbal interaction to a large extent, although stage and broadcast dramas are also aided by skilful scripting, production, and play-acting. FTD is further recognised as a linguistic phenomenon (Dynel, 2011, p. 43-45), a pragmatic and an enabling rhetorical strategy (e.g., as a reflection of language behaviour in real life, or as the vehicle for delivering narrative, theme, creation of character identity, atmosphere, spectacle and aesthetics). It has also proven to be a very popular subject for research areas such as corpus studies, stylistics, media studies, discourse analysis and reception studies.

Hetero-linguality or multi-linguality is not a new phenomenon in the world of creative verbal arts; neither is it peculiar to South Africa and fictional television. There are ample instances of fictional and poetic works (written or audio-visual) that employ several languages or different forms or variations of the same language within the same text. There are several South African studies on the subject, which analyse it within Apartheid/post-Apartheid socio-political contexts (Hassen, 2008; Barnard, 2006; Kruger, 2012; Msimang, 2006; Raboy, 2007). Understandably, the language issue is one of the most contested and politicized, even after South Africa reached a constitutional settlement in 1994 to lay to rest an Apartheid system that used language as the basis for segregation and for promoting its separatist policies.

This article examines the use of more than one language in the post-Apartheid television dramas of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) as more than a rhetorical or discursive function. In the context of South Africa of the 1990's when South Africa was (and still is) a developing democracy, the use of multilingual FTD can be regarded as reflective of socio-political reality, as a linguistic choice made to attract a broader audience, and a way of contributing to linguistic tolerance and social cohesion. The SABC's multilingual policy in respect of television drama is reflective of the political ethos of post-apartheid South Africa. This short study is based on extracts from an episode of the popular SABC soap opera *Generations: The Legacy*, as broadcast on 27 January 2017 on its SABC1 channel. The article considers historical, ideological as well as legislative factors that could have influenced the linguistic choice for the soap opera by the SABC, particularly in its role as the state broadcaster. The soap opera ushered in a new collective consciousness and is a sign of socio-political paradigm shift in Post-Apartheid South Africa. In one of the most uncharacteristically positive statements about Africa attributed to President Donald Trump of the United States of America (fleeting reported in an SABC news bulletin), was when he said he (Donald Trump) was impressed by the use of multilingual dialogue in South African soap operas. The use of multiple languages in dramatic dialogue also became popular in other South African channels such as *E-TV* and *Mzansi Magic*.

Multilingualism, multiculturalism, Rainbowism: power, patronage and propaganda

This paper argues that the sudden shift by the SABC in the late 1990s from exclusively monolingual to multilingual dialogue in its television dramas serves a socio-political agenda than a purely artistic, rhetorical or commercial one. Just as the new post-Apartheid government relied on its most dependable servant Bishop Tutu to sell the idea of a Rainbow nation on its behalf after the inauguration of Nelson Mandela in 1994, it was only natural that it would rely on the SABC to support it in promoting Rainbowism, multiculturalism and multilingualism in its programming as a state organ that is state sponsored and accountable to the state. Even as it was seeking to shed its previous image as a state-owned propaganda machine, the SABC would have felt duty-bound to contribute to the building of a new national identity, to support the national interests (as represented by the ruling party), and to promote cultural and linguistic inclusivity. In its Statement of Commitment (SABC, 2004), the broadcaster pledges to be guided by, among other things, the obligation to reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingual nature of South Africa while promoting national unity.

As a discourse, dramatic dialogue is created, applied and appreciated within a specific context, which may be socio-political, economic or cultural. Multilingual dialogue in SABC's fictional television, whether it is in commercials or drama productions, deserves to be appreciated within those contexts. Discourses, such as dramatic dialogue, occur in and respond to specific socio-political situations, and should be appreciated within such contexts. For that reason the subject of the present paper is considered within the frameworks of Communication Context and Pragmatics, both of which consider circumstances within which communication takes place; Code of Realism, which refers to a reflection of reality as well as the desire to create a dramatic discourse that approximates or follows the principles of daily speech (Dynel, 2011:44-45); Cultivation Theory, Social Cognitive Theories as well as Critical Discourse Analysis, which probes the relationship between discourse, ideology and power. In this regard, the article suggests that the SABC was influenced by some socio-political agenda, not just the need to reflect South Africa's multilingual reality, or to lend expressive flexibility to dramatic dialogue. The article postulates that "Rainbowism" is the main motive (on the part of the SABC) behind abandoning the restrictive and unrealistic monolingual trend of the Apartheid era.

The concept "Rainbowism" derives from the term "The Rainbow Nation", which was coined and popularised by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1994, when he referred to the liberated South Africans as "Rainbow people of God," expressing a hope and a desire for a deliberate agenda to overcome the divisions sewn by South Africa's Apartheid past in order to achieve unity, mutual respect and tolerance among the diverse groups in the country through multilingualism and multi-culturalism (Wikipedia, 2018). The newly elected president of South Africa then, Nelson Mandela himself, also used the term in a similar spirit, describing the post-Apartheid South Africa as a "rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world."

The rainbow, read literally, means the calm and beauty of the multi-coloured spectacle that follow a heavy rainfall, and metaphorically means the beauty of a multiracial, multicultural nation that is at peace with itself, has been dismissed by cynics as a myth that sugar-coats the racial tensions and prejudices of the past that are still a reality to date. It is criticised as a make-belief non-racialist rhetoric that seeks to avoid or suppress any reference to the problems of colour, race or ethnicity that still exist in present-day South Africa. Luke Slade's study, *Silence at the end of the Rainbow* (Slade, 2015: 8), exemplifies that cynical alternative view of the concept of the rainbow nation, which on the one hand regards Rainbowism as "a dominant myth" intended to help members of a group to articulate the belief they wish to share among themselves and to further articulate the belief to the rest of the world. On the other hand, it calls it a form of "nationalism" that influences an unfair situation in which some narratives (such as dramas) are privileged while others are rejected, depending on which side of the national sentiment they project. Thus, it may silence dissenting voices with regard to the Rainbowism (Slade, 2015:8). Fairly or unfairly, the Rainbowism rhetoric has prevailed as a "dominant myth" that has had influence on the nature of television programming in South Africa, for instance.

It is also possible that government authorities may have persuaded the media to take the social responsibility of promoting the "Rainbow nation" ideology through drama productions as a way of nation-building. This would constitute a reliance on mass media on the part of the rulers to drive an agenda and influence social attitudes and thinking, which would find resonance with the Cultivation Theory, which views mass media as capable of and/or responsible for shaping viewer perception of socio-political reality (Hawkins, 1983; Hammerstein & Brock, 2005), and the Social Cognitive Theory, which sees mass media as capable of influencing attitude or opinion change through purposefully crafted messages or images, and motivating the adoption of new positive attitudes and unlearning undesirable old habits (Bandura, 2001).

There is the assumption that the media, in this case the SABC, may have ascribed to the ruling party's Rainbow philosophy in order to serve their own business interests. Rijal (2014: 126) in his study of media development in Nepal, refers to this persuasion by those in government as the "politicisation of the media," whereby politicians interfere in the media or manipulate the media by means of investment in order that their interests should be accorded priority. The case of the media subscribing to a political agenda is then referred to as the "mediatisation of politics," (media operating in accordance with political directives, thereby creating connections favourable to their interests).

The media on its own may also subscribe to the ruling party's philosophy (without any coercion from the latter), this in order to serve the media's own business interests. Rijal (2014: 126) in his study of media development in Nepal, uses the term "politicisation of the media," to refer to instances where politicians interfere in the media or manipulate the media through investment in order that their interests be given priority. The converse situation is then referred to as the "mediatisation of politics," in which case the media is perceived to be operating in

accordance with political directives, thereby creating connections favourable to their interests. may have subscribed to the ruling party's philosophy to serve their own business interests.

Van der Puye (1998: n.p.) observes that, "In African societies, the social function of the media is coupled with a political-ideological dimension in order to create a consensus in favour of a national ideology". This, he states further, may invariably lead to "the subsequent function of African media and above all, their role as instruments of political power" (Van der Puye, 1998, n.p.).

"Rainbowism" and multiculturalism/multilingualism should then be regarded as ideologies of the governing party. Kruger (2012, p. 505) refers to these as "post-apartheid ideologies," not in the conventional negative sense, but in the positive sense of national transformational agendas enjoying national consensus, even as they are driven by those in power. Thus, in Rainbowism and Multiculturalism, there is a strong belief that the SABC will support its programming, out of "nationalistic fervour," and through what Nelson (1996, p. 232-233) calls "purposeful persuasion" from the Government. Nelson suggests an alternative definition of propaganda as a "neutral" term, and euphemistically referring to it as a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political, or commercial purposes through controlled transmission of one-sided messages.

When the SABC approached scriptwriter Mfundu Vundla for the project of creating *Generations* (Motsaathebe, 2009), they automatically assumed the position of a commissioner, patron, investor and sponsor, which allowed them to exercise some powers by setting parameters within which its writers would operate. With such powers, they took the opportunity to determine the course for practitioners who benefit from them. It enabled the broadcaster to provide ideological frameworks and specific requirements in terms of content and craft and production. For example, it determined whether content should be escapist or reflective of reality, and whether the language should be standard and purist or flexible and hybrid.

SABC drama during Apartheid and post-1990

The SABC, established a few years before the birth of Apartheid rule in South Africa (1936), has been widely described as the one institution that served and helped promote the discriminatory regime until its demise in the 1990's. It was "a state-owned propagandist organisation that promoted the racial divide and upheld a colonial legacy" (Raboy, 2007, p. 17) operating under policies that promoted separate development through separate radio and television channels for White and Black audiences. Black people were further served separately as language-based ethnic groups in accordance with the separatist Bantustan system. There was strict adherence to exclusivist language nationalism and purism. To ensure that there were no mixed audiences or casts, the dramas were monolingual, each catering for a particular language group, e.g. *Mopheme* (Southern Sotho); *7de Laan* (Afrikaans); *Le Tla Mpona* (Setswana); *Senzekile* (Isizulu) and *Westgate* (English).

With the introduction of a new democratic order after 1994, the SABC had to change to a public broadcaster with a new mandate and the responsibility of promoting a new inclusive, multicultural national identity (a concept we refer to here as Rainbowism), as well as to “diffuse historical cleavages between groups” (Raboy, 2007, p.17). It was now operating under the new South African Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the new bodies regulating broadcasting for the new nation, such as the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), which required it to cater for diverse cultural, educational and socio-political needs of all South Africans. It was also called upon to transform itself, and in its new policy document first compiled in 2003 and revised after every five years, it outlined several commitments, key among which are:

- Doing away with separate channels for different language groups
- Using technology and creative, innovative means to produce programmes that promote multiculturalism/multilingualism
- Creating diversity awareness/tolerance
- Making programmes (dramas) accessible to a wide range of audiences
- Promoting knowledge and experiences of each language and cultural group (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 2004)

Not only did the new policy do away with separate TV channels for different language groups, it introduced multilingual programmes that reflect the multilingual reality of the South African society, promoted Bishop Tutu’s multiculturalism, and reached wider audiences beyond particular language groups. It further did away with strictly monolingual programmes (such as dramas), by indirectly persuading dramatists to employ multilingual dialogues in their works (Msimang, 2006, p. 9).

Generations: The Legacy (GTL)

GTL has been chosen as one of the most popular soap operas in South Africa currently, with a significant history and standing in the country’s post-Apartheid fictional television. It is a sequel to *Generations*, which was created by Mfundi Vundla, and sponsored by the newly restructured and transformed SABC of the early 1990s, in line with the new transformation imperatives introduced by the Independent Broadcasting Authority. It was designed *inter alia* to reverse years of perpetuating racial and gender stereotypes by pre-1990 SABC productions (Motsaathebe, 2009). In the words of Mfundi Vundla himself, it aimed

...to show Blacks in a positive light after years of television drama cast [*sic*] Africans as unsophisticated, superstitious idiots who visited witch doctors to solve problems. (Motsaathebe, 2009, p. 431).

One of the *Generations* actors, Sophie Ndaba, takes the point even further when she describes the *Generations* project as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) itself, on the basis that it had a mainly Black management, production team and cast, addressing and responding to Black issues (Motsaathebe, 2009, p. 432).

Signalling a departure from the separatist tendencies and Bantustan ethnicity represented by exclusively African language productions of pre-1990 SABC, the new soap opera sought to reflect and deliberately target a presumably more contemporary, modernist, progressive and metropolitan Black audience, thereby creating a new African identity. Such an enlightened, multicultural audience would be better reached, not through the use of the ethnic-based African languages, but through English, which was regarded as more unifying and having a neutralising effect on the divisive habits of the past.

Multilingual dialogue in *Generations the Legacy (GTL)*: A rhetorical strategy

Several language scenarios have been taken from selected episodes of *GTL* for the purpose of illustrating the use of multilingual speech interactions among characters of various identities, roles, social and psychological types or dispositions, in different situations, settings, and with different individual or group agendas. A cursory analysis of the sociology (class, status), psychology (ethos, morals, dispositions, temperaments, obsessions, mannerisms) and ethnology (types, groups) of the *GTL* dramatis personae, as well as their situations and circumstances, makes it very evident that: firstly, the soap opera is indeed designed to reflect and represent the “Rainbow nation” of South Africa, and that it as seeks to promote multiculturalism. Secondly, insisting on a multi-lingual dialogue does justice to the array of diverse personalities, who are involved in as many diverse situations and settings.

In the few scenarios chosen for illustration here, there is the high class of businesspeople (with or without scruples) namely Tau, Karabo, Kumkani (Gadaffi) and Tshidi; the family elders; the low class township family (Gogo Flo, the respectable grandmother and also mother to the roguish twosome, Lucy and Cosmo); the manipulative teenager Namhla and the innocent schoolgirl Lesedi.

- a) When Tau is alone with his baby boy, he talks to him in Setswana, occasionally switching to English:ⁱⁱⁱ
 - *Ke lekile go go lwela ruri, fela kwa bofelong ke paletswe* I’m really sorry. (I really tried my best to fight for you, but lost out in the end).
- b) In another scene Tau is in conversation with Tshidi, who is not very comfortable in her mother-tongue, and their dialogue is interspersed with some English:

TAU: *A o kgonne go bua le lawyer ya gago* (Have you managed to talk to your lawyer)?

TSHIDI: . . . Amo is being fostered by you . . . so, *go ka se be thata* (It shouldn’t be that difficult to handle).

TAU: Thanks for not fighting this.
- c) When businessman Mazwi seeks the services of a Motswana partner, he mixes Isizulu with English, while the partner responds mainly in Setswana:

MAZWI: *Ngifuna ulandele inkosikaz yam* (I want you to follow my wife’s movements) . . . Report on her every move: *ukuthi uyenzani, kuphi, nabani* (what she’s up to, where, with who).

PARTNER: *Ke a utlwisisa* (I understand).

The complexity of the dialogue is heightened by the fact that the characters often use their different native African languages and their non-standard varieties in their interactions. These native languages include Setswana (Tau, Karabo, Gadaffi, Smanga, Moroka elders); Isizulu/Isixhosa (Mazwi, Namhla, Gogo Flo); *Isicamtho/Tsotsitaal* (Lucy, Cosmo). In the monolingual dramas of the pre-1990, the dialogues were in a standard form of a specific African language, making no room for flexibility to accommodate different interactive contexts. Jan-Louis Kruger observes a similar trend regarding the Afrikaans soap opera *7de Laan* by saying that:

The same utopian image is portrayed in the Afrikaans dialogue with most characters speaking a standard Afrikaans, with very little in the way of sociolect, in spite of the fact that, in reality, there are significant differences in the way different populations speak the language (Kruger, 2012: 506).

The *GTL* production opted for a more pragmatic, realistic and artistically prudent linguistic model, namely a multilingual dialogue. Apart from making the dramas accessible to a wide range of audiences (a commercial consideration) and promoting knowledge of each other among language groups that were kept apart under Apartheid (Hassen, 2008: 35-39), it is a model, which according to Barnard (2008: 40), mirrors the official policy in South Africa in which favours multilingual hybridity and multicultural diversity over linguistic purity and ethnic exclusivity.

There is also the extent to which the diversity in *dramatis personae* influences casting. Some of the key actors, such as Connie Ferguson (Karabo), Rapulana Seiphemo (Tau) and the polyglot Joe Mafela (the Barolong family elder) seem to be specifically singled out for Setswana speaking roles. Ferguson and Seiphemo always speak Setswana in all their dramatic roles that feature an African language. In *GTL* they occasionally switch to English depending on the situation, the setting and the subject (business, boardroom or cultural issue of serious import). Tau and Gadaffi, the somewhat reluctant partners-in-crime, are the unscrupulous businessmen who always want to put up a façade of respectability, and for this purpose they always speak formal Setswana or English.

Tau's sister, Tshidi, is played by an actor who is more comfortable with English and seldom speaks Setswana, but sometimes switches to Soweto Sesotho. Cosmo and her sister Lucy belong to the Isizulu-speaking family, but as the rogue elements in the drama, they often resort to *Isicamtho/Tsotsitaal*. This is a South African township patois mainly based on Afrikaans and Isizulu, and widely spoken by the streetwise (young or old), the gangsters or *Tsotsi* community. In a scene where Cosmo is with fellow gangsters and the subject is crime, they naturally converse in that language only, and not in standard Isizulu or English. The language of Lucy and Cosmo/Thembinkosi featuring items like:

- *Vaya* (go), *ghaula* (eat), *bloma* (stay), *khindla* (wear), *khawada* (embarrass), *magata* (police); *back-spina* (make a sudden turn-around)
- *Shaya ngestina* (literally “hit with a brick” meaning to steal a friend’s lover); *Authi engiyifostanayo* (a close acquaintance, a buddy);

Straight and two beers (As simple as that, or the gospel truth);

There are instances where the nature of interaction is far from what normal verbal interactions are between people in real life, particularly when one considers the nature of the character or the circumstances under which interaction takes place. One such instance, which features several times in *GTL*, is where two characters converse with each other in their own language. For instance, Lesedi uses Setswana when she talks to Namhla, who in turn speaks Isixhosa. Interestingly, Namhla looks more like she belongs to the South African so-called Coloured community^{iv}, or a teenager who is a product of an elite English-only “Model C” school,^v and would be more comfortable speaking English with a good accent!

LESEDI: *Why o sa mpoella gore o dula fa?* (Why didn’t you tell me that you live here?)

NAMHLA: *Andikhange ndicinge unomsebenzi* (I never thought you’d care to know).

Another instance is when Lesedi and her school mates are in a “cool” bar setting, having fun and engaged in a Tequila gulping contest. One would expect them to speak in teen-talk English most of the time, as they have no business or are under no pressure to use their African languages. Yet that is exactly what they do, each speaking in her mother-tongue. It is not a realistic situation, and one can only regard it as contrived to accommodate the use of African languages in a “cool” setting and thereby promote multilingualism, but they mainly speak their respective African languages (Setswana, Isizulu), with a word or two of Tsotsitaal:

- LESEDI: *Hee-wena, a ka lemoga* you’re in trouble” (Hey, you, you’ll be in trouble should she know about this. *O re kolota Tequila tse i-three* (You owe us three Tequilas).
- *Phuza! Fetsa!* (Drink! Finish!)

Conclusion

The analysis of scenarios from *GTL* has demonstrated that dramatic dialogue is created, applied and appreciated within certain socio-political, economic or cultural contexts, and illustrates the importance of using a dialogue that is appropriate to the nature of narrative and character, such as a multilingual dialogue that best reflects the multilingual world of the *dramatis personae*. It enables both the creation of a flexible realistic or pseudo-natural interaction that approximates the real life on which the drama is based, as well as realistic characters’ self-expression in terms of emotions and attitudes of characters of diverse identities, in diverse situations and dispositions. It also allows the diversity of a cast to determine language options in the process of creating drama, so that diverse characters, situations, settings, and subjects are accommodated. More importantly, the paper postulates that the sudden switch by the SABC in the late 1990s from exclusively monolingual to multilingual dialogue was mainly based on both commercial and socio-political considerations, such as contending with other more progressive competitors in a more open and democratic broadcast space of post-Apartheid South Africa, as well as making their products accessible to a more diverse audience. As a state

organ that is sponsored by, and accountable to the state, the SABC may have also felt duty-bound to contribute to the building of the new national identity and producing dramas that support and promote cultural and linguistic inclusivity.

Notes

ⁱ *Generations: The Legacy* is currently one of the most popular soap operas in the country and can claim a significant place in the history of post-Apartheid South African fictional television dramas. Its prequel, *Generations*, was abruptly terminated in 2014 when a labour dispute led to the firing of sixteen of its cast members. Mfundu Vundla wrote them out of the script and created the new show.

ⁱⁱ In one of the rare positive statements about Africa, Donald Trump remarked that he was impressed by this use of multilingual dialogue in South African soap operas (Fleetingly reported in an SABC news bulletin). The trend is also followed by other South African channels such as E-TV and Mzansi Magic.

ⁱⁱⁱ BEE refers to a programme introduced by the post-Apartheid South African government to address inequalities of the past by giving preferential treatment to designated groups Blacks, Indians and Coloureds who were previously disadvantaged by the Apartheid regime.

^{iv} South African natives of mixed ancestry, having descended from interracial sexual unions between Whites and Black Africans. The term is controversial in South African and is rejected by some who prefer to be referred to as Africans, Blacks, or simply South Africans.

^v A typical semi-private Whites-only school introduced in 1991 by Apartheid South Africa. It now admits learners of all races, but it is so expensive that it can only be afforded by the rich.

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