

# An interview with Theo du Plessis

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## Biographical sketch

Theo du Plessis is Professor Emeritus in Language Management in the Department of South African Sign Language & Deaf Studies and founder and former Director of the Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment (established 1995) at the University of the Free State. He teaches sociolinguistics and language policy and language planning and is editor-in-chief of the Van Schaik book series *Studies in Language Policy in South Africa* and of the SUN Media *South African Language Rights Monitor* book series as well as its *Taalmonitor* [Language Monitor] book series. Until 2023 he was Associate Editor of *Language Matters* (UNISA/Routledge), an ISI-rated international journal, and serves on the editorial board of several journals.

In 1994 with the financial support of the Flemish Government he established an interpreting service at the Free State Legislature, the first simultaneous interpreting service of its kind in South Africa. In 1996 he established the Flemish Interpreter Centre as the first interpreter training laboratory of South Africa and headed up the interpreting service for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the largest undertaking of its kind ever in South Africa. He was also responsible for establishing Sign Language as a legitimate academic discipline at the University of the Free State in 1998 – since 2010 housed by an independent academic department. In the same year (1998) he was also responsible for establishing Language Practice as a teaching and learning programme at this university, covering the fields of interpreting, translation, language editing and language management. He served as Chairperson of the University of the Free State Language Committee 2004-2012. In 2011 he established an interpreting service at the University of the Free State, also the first of its kind in the country.

From 1992 until 2000 he served on the Board of the Trustees of the Cape Town based National Language Project of Neville Alexander, from 1996 until 1997 on the Language Task Group of the former South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology as member of the Subcommittee: Equal language services and from 1996 to 2001 as board member of the newly established Pan South African Language Board.

He received the South African Association for the Advancement of Science's G2A3 medal for his master's dissertation in 1983 and was the first recipient of the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings [Federation of Afrikaans Cultural

Associations] prestigious Language Award for doctoral study in Afrikaans in the same year. In 2004 he received the University of the Free State Centenary Medal for his outstanding entrepreneurship in establishing and developing the Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment, as well as nationally and internationally recognised expertise in multilingualism and language management. In the same year he was also awarded the Certificate for Research Excellence by this university and in 2014 he received the Vice-Rector's Award for Community Engagement, Category: Community Service and Community-engaged Research.

He has been a member of the International Academy of Linguistic Law since 2007 as well as of the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns [South African Academy of Science and Art] since 2021.

**What is the most interesting concept/idea that has come out of sociolinguistic research in the last 10 years in your view, and why?**

The development of the subdiscipline of language policy and language planning (LPP) as related forms of language intervention in society. Apart from the pioneering work of the founders of this endeavour such as Einar Haugen, Charles Ferguson, Heinz Kloss, Joshua Fishman, Joan Rubin, Björn Jernudd, Jyotindra das Gupta, Robert Cooper, etc., it is probably Jiří Neustupný's *Post-structural Approaches to Language* (1978) that influenced me the most in the early years of my career. I am thinking here in particular of two of the typologies he developed, his initial Language Treatment Typology (which gave rise to the differentiation of two approaches to language problems, namely a policy approach and a cultivation approach) and his later Language Correction Typology which achieves a reconciliation between a more sociolinguistic conception of language problems (as socially-related issues) versus a more linguistic conception (as grammatical issues). From this developed his idea of Metalinguistic Correction (i.e. language policy, language cultivation and language planning). Such corrective actions function within a matrix of three related systems, a social system (the space within which relevant processes are consummated), a communicative system (the correction discourse) and a noncommunicative (behavioural) system (among others, processes of intervention, investigation, reflection, and implementation). What has made this framework attractive is the approach of language policy and language planning as related metalinguistic interventions within a particular space but subject to particular discourses and therefore not in isolation as a purely scientific matter. (Here one thinks especially of Valter Taulli's stimulating but rather controversial *Theory of Language Planning*, 1968.) I would like to refer to this aspect of Neustupný's systematic matrix in very simple terms as “the larger conversation about language

policy and language planning”, a theme that I later built on in various further publications and through which I eventually established the *South African Language Rights Monitor* as a media monitoring project. Neustupný and his students later took his ideas further with what they dubbed a Language Management Theory (quite different from Bernard Spolsky’s), a development with which, however, I am not entirely in agreement.

**What is the most unproductive concept/idea that has come out of sociolinguistic research in the last 10 years in your view, and why?**

The whole idea of translanguaging and how it has in fact become a neo-liberal approach to try to circumvent and obfuscate or completely deny sociolinguistic facts about bilingualism, code-switching, semi-linguism, linguistic or language deficiency etc. Where in the 1980s the concept simply referred to a different type of language teaching dynamic (a language class where the use of the other language is allowed versus the more traditional language class where this was strictly speaking taboo), it has now become such that it is presented as an all-in-one solution for students from language minorities (or situations of disadvantage). It is increasingly (unlike the original version) driven by “wokeness”, a tendency that contributes to the avoidance of anything that can stigmatize, insult, psychologically violate and isolate minorities or the disadvantaged. Translanguaging is presented as a pedagogical approach that seeks to achieve so-called linguistic equality and promote social justice, but rarely is it shown empirically and substantively whether such objectives are really achieved. What is therefore largely lacking is **robust empirical evidence** to support the almost fantastic claims about the imagined outcomes of this perceived all-out solution. At this stage, we are mostly confronted with anecdotal reports, predominantly coloured by a strong emotional undertone. Translanguaging substantially undermines the pursuit of academic excellence and provides no pedagogically based role model for socially mobile and driven language learners. On the contrary, in reality it actually creates even greater inequalities. Besides, the whole ideology surrounding translanguaging falls flat in spectacular fashion when Deaf learners are drawn into the picture, where interaction with a totally different language modality comes into play. Hence, the adherents of translanguaging up to this point tend to focus on spoken languages for convenience, seemingly avoiding a language class where two totally disparate modalities are supposedly used.

**What are the major changes that the field has undergone during your career?**

As for the direction of LPP, the development of a more encompassing theoretical framework. Here one thinks particularly of Nancy Hornberger's framework of language planning that integrates the core of theoretical concepts since Haugen's quadruple typology and Robert B. Kaplan and Richard B. Baldauf's later further refinement of these, also known as the so-called Classical (theoretical) Approach. This framework achieves integration between language planning types (status, corpus, acquisition, and prestige planning – more recently also language attitude planning), language treatment approaches (policy and cultivation) and associated aims (largely conceived by Moshe Nahir). One of the gains of this framework is the clear differentiation of different LPP artefacts (written outcomes) brought about by the different types of intervention. Complimentary to this the development of a Typology of Language Planning Agents by Ferguson and Das Gupta. With his development of the Domain Approach, Spolsky makes a further theoretical contribution by shifting our focus to the functional units of language use, each requiring a unique form of language intervention. Neustupný and Jiří Nekvapil's development of the Language Management Theory delves into the dynamic processes through which people navigate language choices, language use, and language change. It considers both everyday interactions and the role of official institutions in shaping language practices. Finally, in more recent times, the so-called Critical Approach to language planning dominates the field, with which the conflicts of interest surrounding LPP actions and their epistemic justification for the pursuit of social justice receive greater attention. Self-reflective inquiry into the relationship between the investigator and the examined is inherently part of this critical view. Authors such as James Tollefson, Thomas Ricento, Joseph Lo Bianco and Anthony Liddicoat lead this development.

**What would you say are the most pressing gaps in contemporary sociolinguistics, and why?**

Because of the relative dominance of somewhat more Western-oriented data, we have always sat with a gap in our understanding of language dynamics in non-Western contexts. As a result, we forfeit exposure to the richness of linguistic diversity in these areas and do not take sufficient notice of their unique sociolinguistic dynamics. Unfortunately, this is likely to work restrictively on the global perspective on the prevalence of language variation and language change.

Along with this, probably not enough attention has yet been paid to the effects of migration on the sociolinguistic dynamics of countries, especially where the

migration occurs as a result of violence and war. More attention should be given to ongoing phenomena such as language contact, language mixing, language shift as well as the role of language in social integration and the promotion of social cohesion; with it the whole issue of language and identity and language rights. The scale of migration worldwide deserves our in-depth attention. As far as I'm concerned, the migration phenomenon poses greater challenges to a next world than globalization.

And of course, the impact of digital communication and the new media on language variation and identity is a major challenge and still largely unexplored area of inquiry. The impact of these phenomena on language practice and language norms and their role in creating new sociolinguistic spaces and even language codes should be investigated more thoroughly.

**How would you define the role of sociolinguistics in broader society? Have you observed changes in that role during your career?**

Sociolinguistics can substantially change people's views on language diversity and its role and function in a society and help to achieve greater language awareness, break down linguistic biases, and promote social justice and togetherness.

In the South African context, sociolinguistic investigation has played an important role in the reappraisal of language variation in Afrikaans, giving rise to extensive language investigations during the eighties of the twentieth century in a variety of Afrikaans-speaking communities. Under the inspiring guidance of Afrikaans sociolinguist and Labov student, Christo van Rensburg, the University of the Free State set the tone with its project *Gesproke Afrikaans* [Spoken Afrikaans], supported by the Human Sciences Research Council. It was the first large-scale language diversity investigation in South Africa since becoming a Republic in 1961 and certainly the first among communities not classified as "European" in terms of the country's bizarre racial classification. In the long run, this project culminated in the identification of three historical non-standard Afrikaans varieties, namely Burgerafrikaans (largely the result of dialect mixing and change in the 17th-century Colonial Dutch of the officials and Vryburgers [Free citizens]), Kaaps (Cape Afrikaans, largely related to the Dutch Creole that developed among the slaves) and Oranjerivierafrikaans [Orange River Afrikaans] (largely related to an inland Koiné in the rural area that developed on the basis of interaction between Khoi-pidgin and a domestic Dutch variety). Not only did contemporary sociolinguistics contribute significantly to a greater appreciation of dialect variation in Afrikaans, but it also began to contribute to the restoration of human dignity among minorities as well as a rediscovery of one's own identity. Among the outcomes of this is a particu-

larly dynamic language movement in Kaaps that can be seen in the emergence of a literary tradition in Kaaps, the compilation of a dictionary in Kaaps, Afrikaans and English, the growth of theatre and visual media in Kaaps and generally the promotion and re-claiming of Kaaps identity. This movement has gained such momentum that urgent calls are currently mounting regarding the re-standardisation of Afrikaans and for giving greater recognition to non-standard Afrikaans varieties. Although a similar movement did not start for Oranjeriverafrikaans, the appearance of the so-called Griqua Psalms (Griqua Afrikaans is one of the particular varieties within this dialect) attracted particular attention and led to the development of new theatre plays in this dialect and the rediscovery among the KhoeKhoen of their First Nations identity. From this developed the rediscovery of the importance of the original indigenous click languages and their promotion as additional languages in education. Also, it led to the recognition of the tribal chiefs of the KhoeKhoen on the same level as that of the Bantu peoples of South Africa. There is even among some of these communities a drive for secession from present-day South Africa.

**What are the topics that you would concentrate on now if you had the opportunity to start all over again?**

I would certainly like to pay greater attention to historical sociolinguistics and further research on the origin and development of language diversity in Afrikaans. My interest is specifically in language conditions under the VOC regime between 1652 and 1795. So much of the archival material over this period is still unexplored and offers endless possibilities to the enthusiastic investigator.

**What would you say has been your most significant contribution to the field so far?**

In my early career, my language historical research where I investigated the Afrikaans language movements and came up with a rejection and reinterpretation of the traditional views. From this followed my first book publication, which attracted media attention in such a way that it led to more than one documentary on my view of the Afrikaans language movements. The reason for this media interest is that, among other things, I identified the Arabic-Afrikaans writing movement among Cape Muslims as a unique language movement. (The local imams taught Muslim children to write Arabic through Kaaps and had to develop a unique Arabic writing system to reproduce some Afrikaans sounds in Arabic orthography.) Although my views on the Afrikaans language movements are not accepted everywhere, it has

been included in Wannie Carstens and Edith Raidt's recently published *Die storie van Afrikaans* [The story of Afrikaans], the most comprehensive biography of Afrikaans until now published.

In my later career and following my doctoral studies, documenting LPP in the domains of state administration, justice, education (basic as well as higher education) and the media (both written and audiovisual). Three book series under my editorship originated from this, the Van Schaik series, *Studies in Language Policy in South Africa*, in which up to this point nine numbers were published, the SUN Media series, *South African Language Rights Monitor*, in which ten numbers appeared and finally the SUN Media *Taalmonitor* [Language Monitor] series in which two numbers have appeared so far. Together, these publications represent the most comprehensive documentation of language policy and planning in practice in South Africa. In particular, my work on LPP in higher education attracts quite a bit of attention.