



REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA

SPEECH

BY

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AT THE POETICS AND LINGUISTICS ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

POLYTECHNIC OF NAMIBIA

WINDHOEK

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Professors Jonathan Culler, *Paul Simpson, Patrick Hogan and Dan Shen*

Distinguished Academics

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Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to inaugurate the Poetics and Linguistics Association Conference. The overarching theme **“Language and Literature Interface: Contemporary Perspectives”** is highly benefiting and opportune.

A very warm welcome to all the foreign delegates to Namibia - the Land of the Brave. I hope that you will have an opportunity to visit some parts of Namibia. If you go for such a welcome adventure, you can see wild animals in their natural habitat, and enjoy the clear starry skies on long winter evenings.

It is indeed the best time of the year to visit Namibia, because the weather is perfect. It is however not the temperature you necessarily associate with Africa – it's a bit chilly. There is a nip in the air which is very invigorating and enough sunshine to warm your souls.

This PALA conference has assembled aesthetics, poetics, linguistics and literary gurus. One should be forgiven for feeling intimidated and unnerved by the presence of these great minds. However, I would like to assure

everyone that there is no need to feel small. We are all members of the same family, the Poetics and Language Association. All of us have something to contribute to the success of this PALA conference.

At the risk of being accused of being an apologist for British Imperialism, let me quote Arthur Ravenscroft's words in his introduction to Gabriel Okara's novel,

The Voice: - Quote- "One of the unexpected, and certainly one of the happiest by-products of former British Imperialism is that some of the most

interesting writing in English today comes from the former British colonies that are now independent nations.” –
End of quote - I can assure you that I do not condone British colonialism. By quoting these words, I am merely trying to show how British colonialism also contributed to the spread of the English language. Even without quoting any statistics, we all know that English is spoken in all the continents of the world: in Europe, in Africa, in North and South America, in Asia, and in Australia and New Zealand. English is therefore a global language for global citizens.

This is where educational institutions come in. In many parts of the world, English is taught from the cradle to the grave. But this teaching must be done properly by trained teachers. The teaching of English should not be at the exclusion or neglect of Indigenous Languages.

Do we have these English Language trained teachers? I do not think that we have them in enough numbers in Namibia. Is it obvious that proficiency in the English language will enable

learners to perform better in other subjects because these subjects are taught and written in English. It is a fact of life that if learners have deficient English language reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, then they will not understand those subjects written and taught in English. The strident call for the introduction of Science and Mathematics will remain just that unless equally vocal measures are taken to improve the teaching of English in our educational institutions.

Ever since its independence in 1990, Namibia has adopted English as its

official language. In this day and age, with the advent of computers, globalization demands that we learn a common language. As part of the Vision 2030, and in line with the Millennium Development Goals, Namibia is working towards becoming a knowledge based economy.

One of the main goals articulated in Vision 2030 is for Namibia to become prosperous and industrialized, developed by her human resources.

While I would not like to dwell too much on the Apartheid system of the past which has resulted in inadequate human

capacity development, it is to be acknowledged that these concerns are paramount in our minds.

It is necessary for every educator to get involved in this sector to improve the socio-economic standing of our country. As Minister of Education, my primary focus has been to bring about a radical change in the education sector. The recently-held Education Conference that took place 27 June -1 July 2011, is testimony to what we are trying to do in this sector.

Wittgentstein has said, “ [The limits of my language mean the limits of my world](#)”.

Without language nothing can be achieved. Without language there can be no education. Therefore a conference such as the one that is being organized by the Polytechnic is very important in the history of education in this country.

The conference brings together the best minds in the fields of linguistics, and applied linguistics to demonstrate the interface between language and literature with insightful results. It is interesting to note that some scholars

have even gone a step further and attempted to show the overlap among language, literature and communication with the argument that there are methods of analysis that can be applied to all the three broad areas. This interdisciplinary approach has produced exciting results which have demonstrated that methods of analysis used in one discipline can be successfully used in the other disciplines.

Oliver Wendell Holmes “Language is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow”. But for us

here in Namibia, it is also the means of communication. We have a number of English Language daily newspapers which are read by all people of this country and many of our radio stations transmit in English. Despite the tremendous progress that the country has made with regard to education, we still face a number of challenges. “The English language is nobody's special property. It is the property of the imagination: it is the property of the language itself” as has been pointed out by Derek Walcott, the famous Caribbean poet. We have made English

our own, but there are many people in the country who are not able to write powerful, beautiful English. We are still struggling with the proficiency levels of our teachers. English is one of the main culprit contributing to high failure rate of many of our schools. But I believe that if we work together, we will be able to tackle this problem. Concerted effort in this regard will ensure that we will achieve the Millennium Development Goals. We are working towards improving access to existing knowledge and filling in knowledge gaps through research and development.

Literature is an integral part of the education system of any country and should be recognized and celebrated as such. Africa has produced great writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard, J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and many others. There has been a raging debate between the intellectuals in Africa whether literature should be written in the indigenous languages or in English. The two viewpoints have been strongly expressed by Chinua Achebe who believes that it is ok to write in English

and that we should make it our own and Ngugi, who fervently pleads for local languages and who states that it is necessary to “decolonize” our minds, which is the title of one of his books.

There is a concern expressed that the teaching of literature is sacrificed on the expense of Mathematics and other Science related subjects. One of the ways to improve English language proficiency is to introduce the teaching of Literature at all levels of education. Literature is written in language, and so even without any conscious effort, the

more learners are exposed to Literature, the more language they will learn. Once again, though, I must emphasise the importance of hiring teachers with the right training, because untrained, unimaginative teachers can kill all the beauty that is associated with Literature. It is also important to emphasise that properly trained teachers will even know which type of Literature and which texts to teach at what level.

Helen Keller, rising strongly and powerfully above the constraint of being deaf and dumb says, "Literature is my

Utopia. Here I am not disenfranchised. No barrier of the senses shuts me out from the sweet, gracious discourse of my book-friends. They talk to me without embarrassment or awkwardness.” Literature is the heartbeat of a nation. Without literature life is meaningless. We need literature because it is an expression of our soul. There are many prolific poets and writers in Namibia. Some of them write in their indigenous languages, certain others experiment in English. When we read Mvula ya Nangolo’s poems, we remember our moments of yearning and

longing in exile and deep desire to come back to our motherland and drink from the fount of its love.

When the poet Axaro Thaniseb says,
"You ask me who I am

I will show you the rugged plain

The place where stories of the people

Are carved deeply in the stone

I will show you the scars of yester year

Carved deeply on my black back" he

does not speak for himself alone, but

also for every proud Namibian who has

experienced discrimination and

oppression.

When Koemogetsi Molapong says,

“The day I was born

Bullets and tear gas

Welcomed me into this world

Hand grenades and landmines were the
only toys I knew”

He is not conjuring these lines from his
imagination; he is actually reflecting
reality as it exists in some parts of
Africa.

Literature gives voice to our deepest
longings. [Octavio Paz](#), the famous Latin
American poet says, “Literature is the
expression of a feeling of deprivation,

recourse against a sense of something missing. But the contrary is also true: language is what makes us human. It is recourse against the meaningless noise and silence of nature and history.”

The need to study Literature as one way of improving language proficiency must go hand in hand with the need to develop research in Language, Literature and Communication. It is through research in these areas that knowledge will be gathered to show which Literature needs to be taught in Namibia, which aspects of the English language need attention, and how both

Literature and Language can be used to enhance and facilitate communication in Namibian society.

Admittedly, Namibia is still relatively new to research in literature, linguistics and communication, given her late attainment of independence only twenty years ago. However, indications are that, compared with neighbours such as Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa, Namibia might find herself lagging further behind, if current research output is anything to go by. I want to take this opportunity to challenge Namibian

academics to rise up to the call to do more research in literature. I would like the contributions of Namibians to dominate our Institutional Journal of language and communicate.

Let me end my speech by thanking the Polytechnic of Namibia for inviting me to inaugurate the conference. I would also like to wish the delegates good luck with your presentations.

I thank you