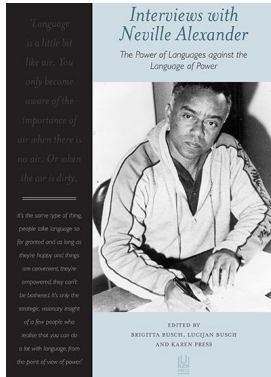


## Neville Alexander: History, politics and the language question

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When Neville Alexander died in 2012, aged 75, after a short battle against cancer, South Africa lost its leading linguistic activist. It also lost an independent political thinker, one who had been incarcerated on Robben Island for 10 years, between 1964 and 1974, interacting there with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Eddie Daniels and others. The book under review is a fitting tribute to a great political figure and scholar. It originated in a series of interviews undertaken between 2006 and 2010, mostly by applied linguist Brigitta Busch of the University of Vienna, herself an academic-cum-language activist interested in multilingualism and the linguistic order in places like South Africa. The editorial credits include Lucijan Busch who undertook some additional interviews. The book was first published in a German edition in 2011, on the occasion of Alexander's 75th birthday. While following the structure of the German original, the South African edition is not identical. We are told in the introduction that Karen Press, the third editor, rearranged the text to suit a South African readership, highlighting Alexander's efforts in formulating a language policy for post-apartheid South Africa. The South African edition contains two parts: the first entitled 'Neville Alexander's language biography' and the second 'A selection of Neville Alexander's writings on language'.

Part 1 attests to a rich family and linguistic history. It covers Alexander's family background and language biography as a young child in Cradock in the Eastern Cape. Alexander's grandmother on his mother's side had been a slave girl from Ethiopia, freed by the British en route to a life of slavery in Saudi Arabia, and released in Port Elizabeth under the care of the London Missionary Society. Alexander recalls hearing snippets of Oromo from this grandmother. His mother spoke Afrikaans fluently but tended to favour English, while his father spoke Afrikaans, despite having an English-speaking father himself (of Scottish origin). The first essay documents further multilingual experiences with Xhosa and some Khoisan, the latter restricted to tales and isolated words from an aunt. The young boy's love of English and Afrikaans was eclipsed by his learning of German as a first foreign language at the Holy Rosary Convent, a Catholic mission school. Here began his lifelong engagement with German: at this stage '...it was the more mysterious aspect, the things you did not understand, which were interesting and which...resonated' (p.25). Alexander also pays homage to Latin, the language of mass and ritual. Later in Germany this was to ease his way into the formal study of the language and its classical authors, of whom Alexander mentions Ovid and Pliny. At the University of Cape Town (UCT) Alexander studied German, Afrikaans, English and History, and became involved in politics, joining the Teacher's League, which was affiliated to the Non-European Unity Movement. The second essay of Part 2 is an engaging account of the young Alexander's fascination with both language and literature components of the three languages he studied at UCT. It was this engagement with the local languages that led him to consider bilingual education as an option, where other activists of the time assumed the backwardness of local languages.

The most informative chapter from the point of biography is the fourth, 'University behind bars: Robben Island 1964–1974', which gives a moving account of events leading to Alexander's arrest and trial on charges of sabotage and incarceration. The story of the island days is – in common with other biographies – a very human one detailing little events that made life bearable and the future possible. The interview focuses on incarceration and labour of course; but has a great deal more on political education, studying through correspondence, visitors from outside, and relations between prisoners and warders. For his Honours essays researched and written in prison, Alexander gains close to maximum marks on the philosophy of history, essays which are – we are told – still used as a model by Unisa's history department. Political education was the bigger goal, leading to the formation of a Society for the Rewriting of South African History, comprising, inter alia, Alexander, Mandela, Sisulu and Kathrada. (Alexander's role is confirmed by Ahmed Kathrada – Robben Island prisoner for 26 years – who in a documentary film of his own life, credits Alexander with convincing Nelson Mandela and himself of the need to see history as a process, not a recent or distant past to which one could dip into and draw on selectively.) Inevitably for Alexander, memories about language are highlighted: Afrikaans as a language of command by uneducated warders, who gradually came to respect their wards; learning Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho work songs; studying Xhosa grammar; teaching English, German and other subjects to fellow prisoners studying for a high school certificate or through Unisa; and secretly translating the *Communist Manifesto* into German for his fellow prisoners. Their obvious connection with a wider world of learning was not lost on the warders, who soon asked for help with their own correspondence studies. In helping one Afrikaans warder with Afrikaans as a subject, Alexander comes to the conclusion that the young warders to a large extent were as much prisoners as they were.

The rest of Part 1 discusses Alexander's release, house arrest and his involvement in SACHED (South African Committee on Higher Education) and the NLP (National Language Project), both of which focused on alternative education for a democratic future. These led to his chairing the LANGTAG (Language Task Action Group) which was a wide-ranging committee of academics, community representatives and language activists, convened in 1994 to inform and advise the new government about language policy matters. As Alexander confirms, the final 11 languages policy was not of his or the task group's making (p.154). Alexander also gives the background to his subsequent involvement as Director of PANSALB (the Pan South African Language Board) and his resignation over the direction the board was taking as well as issues pertaining to autonomy from ministerial control. His role as leader of PRAESA (Project for Alternate Education in South Africa) at UCT is detailed with emphasis on their research and continued language activism.

The second part of the book comprises six essays on the language question, as Alexander liked to call it, prefaced by a three-page select biography of his extensive writings. The essays showcase Alexander's previous writings

and academic articles previously published as PRAESA working papers. 'The national question in South Africa' is an excerpt from a book he published in 1979 under the pseudonym *No Sizwe* ('Mother of the Nation'), *One Azania, One Nation: the National Question in South Africa*. It is well chosen as an initial essay that highlights Alexander's political revolutionary thinking. It is followed by another well-chosen excerpt from Alexander's little book of 1989, *Language Policy and National Policy in South Africa/Azania*. This excerpt forms a link between the historico-political and the sociolinguistic strands of Alexander's thinking. It is the sociological-cum-educational strands that are highlighted in the last four essays: 'Majority and minority languages in South Africa', 'The African Renaissance and the use of African languages in tertiary education', 'Street and standard: Managing language in contemporary South Africa' and 'The potential role of translation as a social practice for the intellectualisation of African languages'. The essays are a good representation of Alexander's writings on language in the last two decades for those wishing to gain an acquaintance of these writings. They are complemented by a very good index.

The insights into Alexander's life and thinking are many, even for those who knew Alexander as a colleague. For – while he was a warm and engaging person – he was not one to dwell on himself. He declined to become part of the new post-apartheid political elite, and refused to engage in mainstream ANC politics. Inevitably, there are some aspects

of his activism that are downplayed in this memoir: the failure at the 1994 polls of the political party WOSA (Workers of South Africa) that Alexander launched in 1990; the lack of support for his harmonisation proposals (to restandardise and unify the Nguni languages and the Sotho–Tswana complex, respectively); and Alexander's position that race as a category should be ignored in admission to higher education. Also, his calls (following Amílcar Cabral, p.265) for the middle classes to commit class suicide to enable the birth of a new society are iterated; there is a need to balance this in relation to one of Alexander's last essays (*Who can say where the dog lies buried?*), which is more moderate in its assessment. The essay, published in the *Cape Argus*, is a scathing attack on the ethics of present-day politicians and administrators, but holds up the deracialising practices of the new, young, educated middle class as one of the few success stories in an otherwise bleak and imploding society.

The editors are to be congratulated on compiling a fitting volume to a great and sometimes unsung scholar-cum-activist. The book will be of great interest to students of language as well as to a more general readership concerned with South African political and intellectual history. In the spirit of Neville Alexander's commitment to multilingualism, it would be good to see the book appear in translation in more South African languages.

