

**Welcome & Opening at the 2011 Joint Annual Conference
of the Linguistics Society Of Southern African (LSSA), the
Southern African Applied Linguistics Association (SAALA)
and the South African Association of Language Teachers
(SAALT), and the Second International Conference on
English Pronunciation: Issues and Practices (EPIP 2)**

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Introduction

The officials of the LINGUISTICS SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN (LSSA), THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN APPLIED LINGUISTICS ASSOCIATION (SAALA) AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN ASSOCIATION OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS (SAALT), the convenors of the joint annual conference of these bodies, the convenors of the SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION: ISSUES AND PRACTICES distinguished guests, presenters and participants from local and international universities, molweni, good evening, goeie naand

It is a great privilege to host the joint annual conference of LSSA, SAALA and SAALT as well as the Second International Conference on English Pronunciation: Issues and Practices at Rhodes University, and a great pleasure to welcome you all to Rhodes, to Grahamstown, to the Makana region and to the Eastern Cape province.

To our compatriots from the rest of Africa and participants from other countries around the world, a warm welcome also to South Africa.

I wish to extend my thanks to the colleagues in the Department of English Language and Linguistics headed by Prof. Adendorff, to Dr Sally Hunt, the coordinator of the conferences, and to our Conference and Events Office for their efforts in organising and hosting the two conferences, and to all of you for entrusting Rhodes with this conference, and for travelling considerable distances to grace us with your participation.

I am especially pleased by the presence of colleagues from elsewhere in Africa. The Pan-African nature of the conference gels well with our University's aspiration to be an outstanding African university, 'which proudly affirms its African identity', and is rooted in the aspirations, challenges and struggles of the continent.

For transport, logistic and costs reasons, compared to universities in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, Rhodes academics have to work hard to attract and host national and especially international conferences.

That we do so with considerable success is testimony to the quality of the scholars to be found at Rhodes and the recognition that the University enjoys nationally and internationally.

As a 107-year old institution, and the smallest university in South Africa, we take pride in a number of features of Rhodes. 59% of our 7 300 students are women; 26% are postgraduates and 21% are international students from some 45 countries around the world.

Among South African universities we possess among the best pass and graduation rates, among the best research outputs per academic staff member and proportionally our students consistently win more prestigious national and international scholarships than any other university.

Some imagine and like to say that our successes have to do with the fact that we are a quaint small town and that there is very little to do in our town. This is hardly the case! This is an intellectually and culturally vibrant town in which there is lots to do, if you are enterprising.

We like to think that our successes and achievements have to do with the fact that as Rhodes we have a good understanding of what it means to be a university, that we take learning, scholarship and knowledge very seriously and that we work hard to create a vibrant and critical institutional culture that embraces academic freedom, intellectual autonomy and debate.

It is especially appropriate that a conference which brings together theoretical linguists, sociolinguists, applied linguists, language teachers, and researchers and teachers of English, phonetics and phonology around the theme of *Interactions and Interfaces* is being held at Rhodes University.

At Rhodes we boast outstanding English Language and Linguistics and English departments, and are home to the Institute for the Study of English in Africa and the Dictionary Unit on South African English.

We enjoy recognition for path-breaking work in isiXhosa, and undertake innovative research and teaching in English-language education in our Faculty of Education. Academic literacy and its acquisition by especially socially disadvantaged students is a strong concern of our Centre for Higher Education, Research, Teaching and Learning.

Finally, we have a strong relationship with the National English Literary Museum that is located here in Grahamstown. For all these reasons, we like to think that we are an intellectual and scholarly force with a long and prestigious track record in the issues that are concerns of the two conferences.

The theme of the conferences is *Interactions and Interfaces*. Over the next three days there will be an impressive 19 panels, 4 workshops, and some 70 research papers and presentations that cover a wide-range of important issues.

On the one hand, the theme seeks to reflect the multidisciplinary nature of the conferences. On the other hand, the theme provides a frame for conversations between different theories, conceptions of language, languages and people.

Your research-informed conversations are of great value and their outcomes have the potential to help us think through and address numerous contemporary social, cultural and educational problems and challenges

Despite the proclaimed virtues of globalization and greater contact across regions, nations, cultures, religions and languages, recent decades have witnessed the triumph of particular economic and social orthodoxies and an associated closing of minds and hearts and discarding of important human values.

The negation of core human values – respect for human dignity, difference and diversity, human rights and the oneness of humanity – have promoted destructive fundamentalisms of various kinds, social exclusion, intolerance and prejudice, and have made the world a much less just, safe and secure place.

The closing of the mind has been evident in the economic and social thought that has prevailed during the past thirty years. Wisdom derived from vigorous intellectual debate, knowledge, and understanding has been disdained. Instead of the idea of the public good and ethical leadership, self-serving ideas based on arrogant power and narrow economic interests have triumphed.

As a consequence, we are now confronted with massive problems of social inclusion and justice and social exclusion. Even though universities and higher education hold the promise of contributing to social justice, development and democratic citizenship, we ourselves frequently continue to be a powerful mechanism of social exclusion, through both our own internal thinking, structures, cultures and practices and our external conditioning by the wider society.

This regime of social exclusion extends well beyond issues of access and admissions to universities and opportunities for youth and people of working class and rural poor social origins.

It extends, especially in places like South Africa, to the issues of the historical ‘legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation’, which are threats to the flowering of ideas, discourse, discovery and scholarship, and also to academic freedom.¹

This gives rise to the challenges of decolonizing, deracialising, demasculanising and degendering our inherited 'intellectual spaces,'² and of building new institutional cultures of genuine respect for and appreciation of difference and diversity – whether class, racial, gender, national, linguistic, religious or sexual orientation in nature.

It further extends to the issues of academic cultures, and largely ignored epistemological and ontological issues associated with language, literacy, learning and teaching, curriculum development and pedagogical practice. How do we create the space for the flowering of other epistemologies, ontologies, methodologies, issues and questions other than those that have dominated, perhaps even suffocated, intellectual and scholarly thought and writing.

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen: the continued dominance of pernicious economic and social orthodoxies have also been hugely harmful to how we today think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about education, scholarship and knowledge.

These orthodoxies approach higher education and investments in universities from the perspective of solely or largely the promotion of economic growth and the preparation of students as productive workers for the labour market and economy.

Of course, higher education must cultivate the knowledge, competencies and skills that enable graduates to contribute to economic development, as such development, which must be environmentally sustainable, is important for greater social equality and wider social development.

It is also not in dispute that in some cases there is need for extensive restructuring of academic qualifications and programmes to make our curricula and our teaching-learning practices more congruent with the knowledge, expertise and skills needs of a changing economy and society.

Still, we have to be extremely vigilant about numerous developments that have the potential to seriously corrode scholarship, knowledge and higher education.

One is a purely instrumental and utilitarian approach to higher education which reduces its value solely to its efficacy for economic growth, and the associated call that universities should prioritize largely professional, vocational and career-focused programmes and 'skills.'

The emphasis on 'material wealth,' 'skills,' and 'practical utility' is not 'merely a confusion of means with ends.' It is 'a perverse placing of means above ends. Education is also a goal in its own right. If we must put this in economists' language, we can say that understanding is a form of wealth.'³

Another danger is the rampant marketization, commercialisation and privatization of higher education and the creeping and horrendous notion of students as 'customers' and 'clients' of universities. Much the same can be said of the obsession of a number of universities and administrators with the new fads of global and national university rankings.

I share the lovely sentiment of a fellow Japanese vice-chancellor who says: 'A farmer wanting to breed a big cow should focus more on nutrition than the weighing scales.'⁴ And as Einstein has said: 'Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.'

Many of the developments of recent times denude higher education of its considerably wider social value and functions. It is vital that as academics and university administrators we defend, revalue and reclaim scholarship, knowledge and education as fundamental cornerstones of human development and restore to universities their vital and varied social purposes.

These social purposes are fundamentally to *produce knowledge*, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our accumulated scientific and cultural heritage; to *disseminate knowledge* and to *cultivate minds*, and to undertake *community engagement* in a way that is informed by our scholarly expertise and reinforces and enhances such expertise.

Our societies require graduates who are not just capable professionals, but also sensitive intellectuals and critical citizens.

Martha Nussbaum captures our tasks well when she argues that we are charged with the 'cultivation of humanity,' which means the development of 'three capacities.'⁵ 'First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions.'

Second, is students seeing themselves 'as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern' – which necessitates knowledge and understanding of different cultures and 'of differences of gender, race, and sexuality.'⁶

Third, it is, however, more than 'factual knowledge' that is required. Also necessary is 'the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.'⁷

If it is a love of knowledge, understanding and truth that makes us academics – it cannot be the salary - it seems to me that Language and Linguistics, with their sensitivities to language, culture and context and issues of social inclusion and exclusion, are well-positioned to help our societies and also our universities to advance social justice and more inclusive social and academic cultures.

Of course that requires us not to see issues of language and linguistics as technical and neutral issues, and for our thinking and practices to be also animated by concerns of social justice.

It also means being open, as befitting scholarship and universities, to issues of epistemology and ontology, including our sometimes very traditional, parochial, outmoded and unacceptable ways of thinking about knowledge and about other people.

Colleagues, beyond communicating, as we do at conferences such as these, with peer scholarly communities, we also have the responsibility, in the words of Stephen Jay Gould, to 'convey the power and beauty of (knowledge) to the hearts and minds' of the general public.⁸

We engage insufficiently with the public and serve inadequately as catalysts of critical public education and intellectual and cultural debate. I sincerely hope that some of the papers being presented here will be shared with a wider public in the forms of magazine and newspaper opinion pieces.

I am most pleased that there are postgraduate students at these conferences. Our postgraduates are the potential much needed next and new generations of scholars and intellectuals. They are precious talents and must be given every opportunity to succeed.

In closing, I trust that you will enjoy stimulating and productive conferences in this lovely Eastern Cape location, and that through vigorous and critical discussion and disputation there will be new insights and ideas that will help advance discovery, knowledge, understanding and practice.

I wish you an enjoyable stay at Rhodes and in Grahamstown and I am confident that you will find your Rhodes colleagues friendly and hospitable hosts.

¹ du Toit, A. 2000

² Bentley et al, 2006

³ Martin Wolf, *Financial Times*

⁴ cited in Charon and Wauters, 2007

⁵ Nussbaum, M. (2006), page 5

⁶ Ibid., page 6

⁷ Ibid., pages 6-7

⁸ Stephen Jay Gould (2006)