

The Post-Colonial Scope for Afrikaans

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Throughout the many years that Afrikaans fought for (often more than) its rightful place in South Africa, the main problem for some Afrikaans-speakers was: how to fight for a language from a left-wing perspective. Indeed, what would constitute a left-wing perspective on a language struggle?

Besides: Afrikaans wasn't just any language. It gave the world the word 'Apartheid' (but also the word 'kopje' for hill). Afrikaans bears the name of the African continent (yet a country was set ablaze in protest against it). Afrikaans is a hybrid language (yet it asserts the purity of its white speakers). Arabic texts provided the first evidence of written Afrikaans (yet those very speakers were later classified not white enough to qualify as full citizens). The majority of Afrikaans-speakers are coloured (but the language has been claimed to be the Afrikaners' single most important identity-forming characteristic).

Over the years the quest for a leftist perspective remained complicated for two reasons. First: the loud clamour of the conservative and chauvinist arsenal used by 'taalstryders' (language warriors) soon became synonymous with conservative middle-aged white men who used Afrikaans as a last bastion of power. This constant conflation of conservative attitudes and the future of Afrikaans prevented the development of a proper and coherent progressive perspective on the strategies Afrikaans-speakers could employ to secure a legitimate future for their language.

Second: the almost complete absence of coloured voices fighting for the rights of Afrikaans deprived this struggle of legitimacy. Sixty percent of those who speak Afrikaans are not white. Where were they in the nineties? What were they saying? It was not difficult to know where they were. Mostly in coloured townships, on farms, in factories, in coloured schools from which it was nearly impossible to find an entry into a debate that inveighed against the absence of Afrikaans on commercial flights and spice bottles or affirmative action that preferred black people to Afrikaners.

Most of the speakers of colour might not even have been aware of this 'struggle' as the Afrikaans language-debate largely took place in the letters columns of Afrikaans newspapers, on the litnet website and inside council meetings where white men ruled the roost.

During the apartheid years progressive policies on Afrikaans were devel-



Robben Island Prison Gate.
Photo by George Hugo.

oped in the Afrikaans departments of the Universities of the Western Cape and Witwatersrand. After 1994 many of those lecturers moved into other administrative, educational or government posts. The Afrikaans department of Wits simply closed down, eviscerating a possible growth point for liberal strategies for the future of Afrikaans.

Thus there were two silent voices in the debate on Afrikaans: first, the coloured voice; and second, the intellectual voice from the left.



Post-colonial since 1994

Prison Cell of Nelson
Mandela on Robben Island.
Photo by George Hugo.

As Afrikaans steadily lost power, and maybe after prompting and sometimes co-opting, the coloured voice began to be heard - albeit with the proviso that its experience of the language was always different.

One of the first intellectuals to attempt to formulate a progressive view and strategy on Afrikaans was Professor Jakes Gerwel. In his monthly column in the biggest Afrikaans Sunday newspaper he set out, in accessible texts, a new way of advancing the language debate. He was soon joined by people like Professor Hein Willemsse and others. (Among Gerwel's major contributions was an investigation for the Minister of Education into the language policies of Afrikaans universities.)

The two-pronged approach he proposed in his newspaper columns is worth exploring. Gerwel suggested that, as part of promoting and fostering tolerance of diversity, there were two issues relating to Afrikaans that were worth pursuing. The first was to democratise Afrikaans itself by turning it into an empowering space for ALL its speakers - in other words to ensure that the coloured voice took its rightful, and empowered, place in the language. The second was to insist that Afrikaans, as part of a multilingual society, had the right to function in all spheres where Afrikaans-speakers are to be found - up to tertiary level and beyond.

Empowering the poorest and illiterate Afrikaans-speakers, as well as other African languages, by pushing for multilingual tolerance would strengthen a democratic and emancipatory ethos in the country as a whole.

Officially, South Africa stepped away from its colonial past in 1910 with the establishment of the Union of South Africa. Nearly destroyed by the Anglo-Boer War and the subsequent depression, white Afrikaans-speakers shaped a unique colonial space, complete with exploitation and silence, within Afrikaans. By excluding a large, but more impoverished group from its ranks, Afrikaans could build up an impressive array of feats: literature (drawing mainly on Dutch and German literature), musical compositions (drawing on German *lieder*), a manufactured culture that changed and exchanged indigenous material with Germanic remnants, eg. songs and lyrics from German *heimatsliederen* and dances.

Emotionally (and legally) speaking, Afrikaans only became post-colonial in 1994 when it had to accept the complete dominance of English while at the same time sharing the leftover space with other African languages on an equal footing. Since 1994 the silences in Afrikaans have slowly been filled with titles such as: the first female writer of colour, the first production of a particular play by people of colour, etc.

Fifteen years into Democracy

Today Afrikaans is in an interesting position. The Afrikaner still holds the dominant position in Afrikaans. Its speakers, generally far better resourced than their 'brown brothers', by and large have a very clear idea of what kind of power they want for Afrikaans and in which direction they want it to develop. But to build a convincing argument in a country where poverty and AIDS should dominate the debate, they need 'coloured support' – even if they have to coerce it.

The coloured speakers of Afrikaans on the other hand are also experiencing problems in finding an equilibrium among three strands that tug at them: first, the strong conviction that English is the language for upward mobility; second, feelings of resistance to Afrikaners who ignored and mistreated them for many decades; and third, their own sense of being swamped by English-speaking black South Africans. Recent research has also shown that this Afrikaans-speaking coloured group has the lowest participation in university education.

The solution seems obvious, given two groups who speak the same language - one needing economic support, the other emotional support.

So, are the formerly privileged Afrikaans schools and universities packed with coloured children and students? No. Are the Afrikaans churches amalgamating in order to share resources for personal liberation and social services to the Afrikaans-speaking needy? No. Are massive resources being deployed to fight illiteracy and inadequate teaching in Afrikaans township schools? No. Are the newspapers chock-full of bursaries to enable poor Afrikaans students of colour to access further education? No. (Though in fact the most recently established fund is a special bursary for poor Afrikaner children) Is the Academy of Afrikaans falling over itself in its efforts to rebrand itself as an academy that would accommodate the majority of Afrikaans speakers? No. Are the Afrikaans festivals overflowing with coloured audience participation? No. Are the publishing houses churning out masses of books by Afrikaans people of colour? No.



Table Mountain as seen
from Robben Island.
Photo by George Hugo.

The reason for all this is simple. To fully accommodate people of colour in Afrikaans within a democratic ethos actually means handing over most (all?) of the power. Among other things this would mean that Afrikaans coloureds should be in the majority on any council dealing with Afrikaans and Afrikaans culture. In a spirit of complete tolerance of diversity, the newspapers should carry mainly 'coloured' stories written in their brand of Afrikaans. In tv soaps they should constitute the main plot and the majority of characters. Etc. The poor and illiterate should be able to hold those who speak their language accountable to such an extent, I would suggest, that if they feel that Afrikaans is no benefit to them in the new dispensation, that should be accepted as a legitimate outcome.

It is difficult to come to terms with such a power shift. Especially if one believes one has made the language what it is, and is confident that one's well resourced knowledge knows what is best. Even the government seemingly prefers that Afrikaans should stay mainly linked to Afrikaners, so that it can be used as a bargaining tool when dealing with Afrikaner complaints. Government was not overly enthusiastic about the Gerwel document's suggestion that different universities should be made custodians of different languages and by implication Stellenbosch University should be allowed to look after Afrikaans. But it immediately agreed to discuss the future of Afrikaans with former president FW de Klerk.

If multilingualism becomes a battering-ram to break down doors for Afrikaans, it would determine not only the strategy but also the counter-reaction. But if diversity becomes the true principle it could be decisive in formulating a strategy for its future.

Only when Afrikaans has become fully diversified will it be able to play a forceful and possibly decisive role in forging a culture of tolerance in South Africa. It could enable the country to accept the asset-value of people who sound, look and believe differently. For the future of South Africa a diversified Afrikaans could be not only invaluable, but crucial. ■