

Losing Terrain Yet Thriving

The Position and Status of Afrikaans Anno 2018 in South Africa

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'It is a frequently asked question whether and why languages should be maintained. In a global human heritage perspective, languages are as unique as biological species and linguistic diversity should therefore be maintained in the same spirit as biological diversity.'

Pekka Sammallahti

Afrikaans, a language that originated at the southernmost tip of the African continent, finds itself in a new eco-dynamic habitat as one of South Africa's eleven official languages. South Africa's language dispensation is an intricate one where the forces of a 'free language market' offer little protection for indigenous minority languages, i.e. languages other than English. Such a highly diverse language environment requires effective language management in order to create and maintain sufficient space for indigenous languages to flourish. Over the past two decades of democracy precious little has been done to support South Africa's linguistic diversity, resulting in encroaching habitat loss for indigenous languages across most societal domains, including Afrikaans.

Although Afrikaans is South Africa's third most-spoken home language (after Zulu and Xhosa) and has been operating in a non-dominant juxtaposition with the nine other official indigenous languages since democracy in 1994, its position and de facto status are largely undervalued. Moreover, the language remains stigmatised in certain quarters owing to its association with the previous apartheid regime notwithstanding its inclusive profile with the majority of its speakers (both first and additional speakers) being non-white. Afrikaans is clearly at a crossroads, at a point where significant domain loss is impacting the vitality of the language and hence its status and position in society.

The road ahead for Afrikaans will largely be determined by coordinates such as the contributions of *language activists* on the one hand, and *organisations* involved in developmental work in Afrikaans communities and schools on the other hand. Activist groups such as AfriForum and Gelyke Kanse are engaging in legal action and court cases in an effort to turn around the English-only language policies that have recently been adopted by historical Afrikaans universities. The development work done by the very popular Afrikaans arts festivals such as the US Woordfees and the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kultuurfees, and also



the Stigting vir Bemagtiging deur Afrikaans and the Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging, among others, is promoting the much-needed reconciliation in the historically divided Afrikaans speech community. The success of these respective initiatives will depend on the extent to which the umbrella body, the Afrikaanse Taalraad (ATR), is able to create the necessary synergy between seemingly divergent approaches to prevent Afrikaans proverbially being led down the garden path.

Domain loss

An important domain loss that highlights the ground that Afrikaans stands to lose was the #AfrikaansMustFall campaign mounted at the University of Pretoria in February 2016 by students demonstrating against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in higher education. It has since become clear that university managements at historically Afrikaans universities prefer the use of English as a language of learning and teaching because it affords wider access to students across the board. As a consequence, Afrikaans has been eliminated from two historically Afrikaans universities, i.e. the Free State University and the University of Pretoria, and from the University of South Africa (historically a bilingual university). English has now become the sole language of learning across all university campuses except the Potchefstroom campus of the North West University and a few undergraduate modules at Stellenbosch University.

Sadly, the only remaining options for Stellenbosch students who prefer studying through the medium of Afrikaans are 'course outlines in Afrikaans, Afrikaans tutorials and the freedom to ask questions in Afrikaans and submit assignments and tests in Afrikaans. Afrikaans, which functioned for decades as an asset and as a language earmarked for constructive development, is increasingly viewed as troublesome, a stumbling block in the achievement of transformation objectives' (Visagie 2017). Judging by a poll conducted at Stellenbosch University in 2016, where two-thirds of Afrikaans students indicated a preference to be taught through the medium of English, it is just a matter of time before Stellenbosch University terminates the use of Afrikaans as a language of teaching and learning.

Type	Afrikaans		English		Bilingual		Total	
Year	2004	2016	2004	2016	2004	2016	2004	2016
Universities	0	0	7	10.67	4	0.33	11	11
Universities of Technology	0	0	5	5	0	0	5	5
Comprehensives	0	0	3	6	3	0	6	6
Total	0	0	15	21.67	7	0.33	22	22

Language dispensation at South African higher education institutions subsequent to a rationalisation process (2004) and change in language policies at historically Afrikaans universities (2016)

I have cautioned elsewhere that the debate on the status and future of Afrikaans in higher education 'should be understood against the backdrop of the reality that very few of the languages spoken in the world are in fact used in institutions of secondary and higher learning' (Beukes 2010: 210). An undisputed achievement of Afrikaans is that it is the only African language and one of only a few other modern languages (such as Catalan, Hebrew, Hindi, Indonesian) that developed in the course of the twentieth century to function as a fully-fledged language of science and as a lingua academica for teaching purposes. The domain loss that Afrikaans is suffering is clear from the statistics regarding journal articles published in Afrikaans in the period 1990 to 2002: the number of articles dropped from 14% to 5%.

Year	Afrikaans		English		Total
	N	%	N	%	
1990	912	13.8	5,705	86.2	6,617
1994	590	8.6	6,301	91.4	6,891
1998	408	6.1	6,235	93.9	6,643
2002	183	3.2	5,554	96.8	5,737

Number of journal articles 1990 to 2002 – Mouton (2005: 372)



Encroaching habitat loss is also taking place at primary and secondary school level as a result of the anglicisation of higher education. It is estimated that about 750,000 Afrikaans learners are currently still part of the public school system (Giliomee 2016), but Afrikaans parents are increasingly opting for English-medium schools as a function of the drastic domain loss of Afrikaans in higher education, as well as the 'common sense' choice for future access to the global economy. This state of affairs will most certainly impact negatively on the demand for Afrikaans-speaking teachers and their training in the future.

Thriving language festivals

In contrast to the domain loss that Afrikaans is suffering in education it is burgeoning in various other domains. This is a function of its loss of status as a 'public' language since 1994, but at the same time it points to a strong language vitality. A case in point is the phenomenal rise and thriving of Afrikaans language festivals these past two decades. The first festival, the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) held annually in the small Karoo town of Oudtshoorn since 1995, boasts significant increases in ticket sales from 30,314 in its first year to 135,000 in 2017. Another example is the Stellenbosch University's Wordfees with record sales in 2016, an increase of 27.8% since 2015.

If production is used as an indicator, trends in book publication since the 1990s indicate that Afrikaans is the strongest literary language in South Africa (Galloway 2002). In particular, as far as fiction and children's books are concerned, some 75% to 80% are produced in Afrikaans (Stassen 2015). When bearing in mind that first-language speakers of Afrikaans account for about 14% of South Africa's population of 55 million people the fact that 40 of the top 100 books sold in South Africa in 2013 were Afrikaans books is a significant measure of language vitality.

Language	Poetry	Theatre	Fiction	Total
Afrikaans	283	53	2,464	2,800
English	302	127	545	974
Multi-lingual	34	20	109	163
Bantu languages	342	283	635	1,260

Trends in book publication in SA (Galloway 2002)



Language vitality

At the dawn of democracy, former President Nelson Mandela at a meeting with Afrikaans organisations acknowledged the value of Afrikaans as a language of science: 'The argument for retaining, protecting and fostering Afrikaans is certainly a national concern rather than sectional. It is a South African language which, according to all standards, has produced significant achievements in



terms of its developing into a language of science, academia and intellectual expression' (my translation; Mandela 1995). Against the backdrop of the clear signs of language vitality, it is to be hoped that constructive language activism coupled with the Afrikaans speech community's 'language capital' (i.e. organisations and bodies such as the Afrikaanse Taalraad, the SA Academy for Science and Arts, the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities, etc.) will in future facilitate in enlarging the language's footprint and secure its future position and status. ■

FURTHER READING

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