

Historical experiences in developing Afrikaans as a language

Summary

Around 1900 most of the Afrikaans speech community preferred to speak Afrikaans and write in English, while they used a very formal Dutch during public events. The official language in the British colonies of the Cape and Natal was English and in the independent republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free State the official language was Dutch – the result of South Africa being colonised by both the Dutch and the British. Many speakers of Afrikaans were not convinced that Afrikaans could be used in the higher language functions like Dutch or English.

It would require the inspiring arguments, courage and years of hard work of leading intellectuals to change the thinking of the speakers and to influence policy makers to support the elevation of Afrikaans. Newspapers supporting the cause of Afrikaans, literature of high quality and dictionaries advancing the development and standardisation of the language are amongst the other factors contributing to place the elevation of Afrikaans on track. One of the most prominent intellectuals arguing the case for Dutch (and indirectly for Afrikaans and language rights in general) was Onze Jan ("Our Jan") Hofmeyr who started a national debate with his speech, titled "Are we serious?" in 1905. As early as 1882 Hofmeyr stated that when the speakers of all African languages were represented in the South African Parliament they should be able to use their languages. His support of Dutch was never meant to exclude other languages, but his aim was equal rights for all the languages spoken in South Africa.

In 1914 Afrikaans replaced Dutch as the medium of instruction for mother tongue speakers of Afrikaans in primary schools. Langenhoven, Afrikaans writer and later a Member of Parliament played a vital role in this achievement. In the 1920s secondary schools followed suit and in 1925 Afrikaans became an official language alongside English and Dutch. In 1918 Afrikaans was for the first time offered as a subject at some universities and in 1920 universities started instructing in Afrikaans. The first complete Afrikaans translation of the Bible was published in 1933.

History, however, has the tendency to repeat itself and presently English completely dominates the civil service and the administrative and corporate world. Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools and especially universities is under threat and a growing number of Afrikaans speaking families are switching to English or sending their children to English schools.

Events around Afrikaans up to 1900

Resistance against Anglicisation

The first indication that language would be an important factor in the Afrikaans community was when the anglicisation policy of The British Governor, Lord Charles Somerset (1814 to 1826) in the Cape Colony was vehemently resisted by the Dutch community and the effort to anglicise the church by importing Scottish Presbyterian ministers failed dismally as some of their families like Thom, Murray and Robertson

became Afrikaans speaking. The journalist, L.H. Meurant, was the first to use Afrikaans as an ideological tool when, in the mid nineteenth century, he propagated the separation between the Eastern and Western Cape Province in a series of Afrikaans dialogues.

The struggle against Dutch and English

A much more powerful mobilisation involved the *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* ("Society of true Afrikaners") or GRA, founded in 1875, that published **the first Afrikaans newspaper, *Die Patriot***, and had Dr S.J. du Toit as their leader. Though this movement broke important ground for later developments, it petered out by the end of the nineteenth century. It was a regional movement of which the influence was strongest in the south western Cape. Standard Dutch still commanded the strongest political, intellectual and institutional support and church leaders firmly opposed the **attempts of Dr Du Toit and his followers to propagate an Afrikaans Bible translation**. No prominent newspaper, other than the *Patriot*, **advocated the elevation of Afrikaans**. The movement had preciously few intellectual resources beyond Dr S.J. du Toit himself, who became alienated from his constituency by his rapprochement to the Prime Minister of the Cape, Cecil John Rhodes, during the 1890s.

Towards the end of the century two judges from the Orange Free State, F.W. Reitz and J.B.M. Hertzog, also gave their backing to Afrikaans when they **stated that Afrikaans was not inferior to English or Dutch** and that **Afrikaans and not Dutch would be one of the future official languages of South Africa**.

At the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century many of the urban Afrikaans speakers were proponents of English and in Cape Town many of the high profile Afrikaans families had become English speaking. It was especially the young ladies who considered English to be fashionable and they expected young men to court them in English. **In the Cape Colony 80% of the Afrikaans speaking primary school learners were being taught through medium of English and in the Transvaal it was almost 50%. Many parents saw English as the key to the economy, law, literature and science despite the moving pleas of leading figures in the Afrikaans community to eschew English.**

Events around Afrikaans after 1900

The Anglo-Boer War

The Anglo-Boer War (1899 to 1902) provided a new impetus to the effort to elevate Afrikaans. After the war with its atrocities (27 000 women and children died in the concentration camps and hundreds of farms were burnt down) **a negative sentiment towards English set in**.

Intellectuals, newspapers and poetry advance the cause of Afrikaans

In the years directly following the war, **the case for the elevation of Afrikaans was argued by a whole range of leading intellectuals** in most of the prominent urban centres, including Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Bloemfontein, Pietermaritzburg, Potchefstroom and Pretoria. In 1900 Jan F.E. Cilliers related how he met an Afrikaans poet while on commando in the war who switched to English when he wanted to express an opinion on a serious or complicated matter. He pleaded for the development of Afrikaans by writers and poets to such a level that that it could portray thoughts on any subject. In the following years he would become one of those poets. Various influential **newspapers rallied to the cause**, e.g. *De Volksstem* (Pretoria), *De Afrikaner* (Pietermaritzburg) and *De Goede Hoop* (Cape Town). **A most telling early contribution was Afrikaans poetry of genuine high quality**, e.g. *Winternag* ('Winter night') by Eugène Marais in 1905 as well as books of poems by Totius (J.D. du Toit) and J.F.E. Celliers in 1908, D.F. Malherbe (1909) and C.L. Leipoldt (1911). These literary works made the Afrikaans community acutely aware of the beauty and merit of their language, enabling them to give expression to their deepest and most intense emotions.

Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr starts a national debate

In March 1905 Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr, journalist and later politician, known as "Onze Jan" ('Our Jan'), delivered an epoch-making address on invitation of the students of the Victoria College in Stellenbosch. He was asked to speak on the subject, **"Are we serious?" Hofmeyr was deeply concerned by the erosion of language rights under the new British colonial system**, not only in the Cape Colony but in all four British colonies. His address was a wake-up call to the Afrikaans community to insist on their legal language rights and to use Dutch in all public spheres as determined by law. Hofmeyr confronted the students about their tendency to write, to court and to practice their religion in English and about their belief that they needed only English for their future. He also blamed parents and leaders in the Afrikaans community for pledging their loyalty to Dutch in public, but sending their children to English schools.

Hofmeyr emphasised, however, that he was not anti-English, but that his thorough knowledge of English obtained during his university studies made him realise the importance of loyalty to Dutch just as the English are loyal to English. **The future of Afrikaans depended on the will of the speakers to assert their language. That will does not emanate from the masses or political movements, but from the creative and leading role of a smaller group of intellectuals and opinion formers.** Hofmeyr planted a seed in the creative minds of young intellectuals that would bear much fruit and at the same time he also started a national debate on the benefit and value of a first language.

Gustav Preller, a young journalist of the Afrikaans newspaper, *De Volksstem*, in Pretoria, quickly responded to Hofmeyr's **"Are you serious?"** speech in a series of articles titled **"Let us be serious"** in which he strongly argued the case for the elevation of Afrikaans. This was followed by a speech by D.F. Malan titled, **"We are serious,"** in Stellenbosch in 1908 in which he stressed that the future development of Afrikaans was in the hands of its speakers.

As early as 1882 Hofmeyr had already stated that the day would arrive soon that the speakers of all African languages in South Africa would be represented in Parliament and that they should be allowed to speak their own languages. His support of Dutch (and indirectly Afrikaans) was thus never meant to exclude other languages, but his aim was equal rights for all the languages spoken in South Africa.

The South African Academy for Science and the Arts

Obdurate resistance by proponents of Standard Dutch continued to frustrate the efforts of those in favour of Afrikaans, but they were eventually persuaded to join forces. In 1909, the *Zuid-Afrikaanse Akademie voor Taal, Letteren en Kunst* ('The South African Academy for Language, Literature and the Arts') was established, later to be renamed and restructured as *Die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* ('The South African Academy for Science and the Arts'). This organisation created a united front between the pro-Dutch and pro-Afrikaans camps and placed on tap the redoubtable intellectual resources previously devoted to the cause of Standard Dutch.

Standardisation

The Akademie, through its Language Commission, devised the standardised Afrikaans orthography: the first edition of the orthographical principles, exemplified in an extensive glossary, was published in 1917. This text, the *Afrikaanse Woordelys en Spelreëls* ('The Afrikaans Word List and Spelling Rules'), has gone through several revisions over the years. It is one of the most important tools for the standardisation of Afrikaans.

The Hertzog literary prize

In 1915 the Akademie awarded the Hertzog Prize for Literature for the first time and it is still the most prestigious Afrikaans literary prize today. The aim of the prize is to encourage the publication of Afrikaans literature and it is awarded annually for prose, drama and poetry on an alternating basis. The prize money was donated by J.B.M. Hertzog and was the balance of the money collected nationally by Afrikaans-speaking people to pay for a court case in which Hertzog, then Minister of Education in the Free State, was accused of slander against a school inspector who undermined his bilingual policy in schools.

Specialist Journals

Since 1922 the Akademie has also advanced Afrikaans as a language of science through the accredited specialist journals, *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* ('Journal for the Humanities') and *Tydskrif vir Natuurwetenskappe* ('Journal for the Natural Sciences'). *Tydskrif vir Natuurwetenskappe* also publishes English articles.

Support for the elevation of Afrikaans from clergyman and politicians

The church was won over in the course of the decade 1910-1920 and gave its approval to the translation of the Bible into Afrikaans. A draft translation appeared in 1922, followed by the final version in 1933. The versified psalms were published in 1937 and the other hymns in 1944. Some of the most dedicated early proponents of Afrikaans were clergymen, including D.F. Malan, who was to play a significant role later as a journalist and a politician. Political support came when the National Party strongly endorsed the official recognition of Afrikaans, which came about in 1925.

Afrikaans as an official language and medium of instruction at school and university

The recognition of Afrikaans as an official language in 1925 was the culmination of the efforts of the language movement, but by then Afrikaans had just begun to assume the trappings of a language of culture. It had a huge distance to go yet. Though hampered by the relative poverty of the Afrikaans speech community, exacerbated by the Great Depression, Afrikaans started broadening its functional base in the course of the 1930s. By 1939, the personnel of the civil service had become predominantly Afrikaans-speaking. In 1914, the first measures were adopted for the introduction of Afrikaans language education in the primary school. In the 1920s, the first Afrikaans high schools were established. The universities of Potchefstroom and Stellenbosch were instructing in Afrikaans in 1920, and in the 1930s the universities in Pretoria and Bloemfontein became predominantly Afrikaans.

The role of dictionaries

Dictionaries were important agents in the development and standardisation of Afrikaans. The initial activities in Afrikaans lexicography followed the traditional pattern of a non-standardised, developing language.

Bilingual dictionaries

In 1902 the Patriot Dictionary established the roots of Afrikaans bilingual lexicography. As an instrument of language development it had an even more far-reaching influence. Published shortly after the Anglo-Boer War (1899 – 1902) when the relations between Afrikaans and English was extremely sensitive, it has to be regarded as one of the major attempts to establish Afrikaans as an independent language, demonstrating the right of Afrikaans to coexist alongside English. In the preface the editor, Dr. S.J. du Toit, however, emphasised that his primary aim was to promote co-operation between the Afrikaans and English communities in the country.

When Afrikaans was recognised as an official language in 1925, it became imperative to illustrate the adequacy of its vocabulary in order to hold its own against English as a well-established, global language. In the next decade two bilingual dictionaries would fulfil that role and also play an important part in the standardisation of the language, namely *Groot Woordeboek/Major Dictionary* (1926) and *Tweetalige Woordeboek/Bilingual Dictionary* (1931).

The compilation of these dictionaries presented a number of problems, because Afrikaans had not yet been standardised and spelling was an issue. Most of the spelling problems could, however, be resolved by relying on the work of the Language Commission of *Die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* ("The South African Academy for Science and Art") who devised the standardised Afrikaans orthography. In 1917 the Akademie published a special-purpose dictionary, the *Afrikaanse Woordelys en Spelreëls* ("The Afrikaans Word List and Spelling Rules") exemplifying the orthographical principles. The tenth edition was published in 2009 and it remains an ongoing tool for the standardisation of Afrikaans.

Both *Groot Woordeboek* and *Tweetalige Woordeboek* tried to reflect the real usage of spoken and written Afrikaans, **giving prominence to the inclusion of neologisms**. The approach stressed the dynamic nature of the developing language, thus **boosting the confidence of the speakers**. In later years bilingual and multilingual dictionaries involving Afrikaans and the other African languages would follow, advancing the cause of multilingualism in South Africa.

To establish a sound terminological basis, a language relies on dictionaries and Afrikaans followed the traditional lexicographic process with the publication of numerous **technical or special purpose dictionaries, aimed at the terminology of a variety of subjects**. The official recognition of Afrikaans in 1925 prompted the State to systematic and widespread translation into Afrikaans, which presupposed extensive terminological research. A central bureau for translation and terminology was instituted in the civil service, assisted by similar bureaus in a host of public service institutions (the Departments of Transport, Postal Services, Mining, Defence, Geological Survey, etc.) and parastatal organisations (the Wool Board, the broadcasting authority (SABC), the state-owned Iron and Steel Corporation (ISCOR), and the Energy Supply Commission (ESCOM)). In the private sector individual subject specialists and some of the larger corporations also contributed special-purpose dictionaries. The State's terminological work was later coordinated by the National Terminological Services (NTS) that operated a computerised terminological data base and issued a catalogue of technical dictionaries. More recently the NTS and the State Language Services of Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) amalgamated to form the National Language Service. (For a complete list of technical dictionaries, see Department of National Education. 1993. *Catalogue of Technical Dictionaries*). **The extensive terminological work has contributed much to the lexical enrichment and standardisation of Afrikaans.**

Standard-descriptive dictionaries

Standard-descriptive dictionaries are limited to the **portrayal of the standard variety of a language** and standard-descriptive Afrikaans dictionaries soon followed the bilingual dictionaries involving Afrikaans and English. *Verklarende Afrikaanse Woordeboek* ("Descriptive Afrikaans Dictionary") was the first, published in 1936. The major contribution to this category came much later with the publication of the *Verklarende Handwoordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* (HAT) in 1967. The HAT could benefit from

an already standardised language and the fifth edition of the dictionary was published in 2005. Presently it continues to **contribute to the establishment of standard norms**.

Comprehensive descriptive dictionaries

Lexicographic activities in a language usually culminate in the compilation of a comprehensive descriptive dictionary once the language has been standardised. Work on the WAT (*Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal*) – the comprehensive descriptive dictionary of Afrikaans – was, however, started before the language was fully standardised. Initially this hampered progress, but once the first volume (the letters A to C) had been published in 1950, the volumes started flowing in regular succession. The main task of the WAT is **to document the Afrikaans language in its entirety, not only portraying the standard variety**, but also recognising the contribution of other indigenous languages like Khoi and San and varieties like Griekwa-Afrikaans, Namakwalands and Kaapse Afrikaans. Over the last twenty years the **WAT has played a vital role in the training of lexicographers**, especially during the establishment of dictionary units **for all of South Africa's official languages**.

Afrikaans publications

The publisher, Nasionale Pers (est. 1915), was to play an important role. Its weekly magazine *Die Huisgenoot* (est. 1916) became immensely popular. For decades, it offered the widest variety of reading in Afrikaans. A major role was played by the academic publishers in establishing Afrikaans as an academic language. J.L. van Schaik, established in 1915 in Pretoria, is a prime example. The newspaper, *Die Burger*, was founded in 1915 and became predominantly Afrikaans in the early 1920s. In the 1930s, three more Afrikaans newspapers were established. Afrikaans radio took off during the late 1930s. Afrikaans literature, especially poetry, took enormous strides in the 1930s, with the début of the *Dertigers* ('Thirty-ers'), including first and foremost N.P. van Wyk Louw as well as Elisabeth Eybers and Uys Krige.

The state of Afrikaans around 2000

Standard Afrikaans has grown strongly in the past four decades. The thriving Afrikaans publishing industry produced a great variety of books for all tastes and on all levels, including a number of multivolume encyclopaedias, as well as many newspapers and periodicals. The Bible translation of 1933, which still adhered closely to the style of the Dutch Bible, was revised radically in 1983. In the early 1980s, an Afrikaans Living Bible was also published. *Huisgenoot* became one of the most popular magazines in the country, with weekly sales of more than half a million. Some years ago an English version, *You*, was initiated. Afrikaans cultural festivals have grown steadily during the past fifteen years. There are presently 6,5 million mother tongue speakers of Afrikaans of whom 3,5 million are not white.

However, the use of Afrikaans on radio and television has decreased drastically in the past fifteen years and English completely dominates the civil service and the administrative and corporate world. Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools and especially universities is under threat. History has the tendency to repeat itself and presently a growing number of Afrikaans speaking families are switching to English or sending their children to English schools. A sizeable number of Afrikaans speakers are of the opinion that their language rights are once again threatened.

Recommendations for the development of African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education, alongside English and Afrikaans

- 1** Intellectuals who believe in the potential of African languages to become mediums of instruction in Higher Education should take the lead in stating this publicly in order to inspire and convince the speakers of our languages to believe likewise. In the words of Henry Kissinger, "No policy – no matter how ingenious – has any chance of succeeding if it is born in the minds of a few and carried in the hearts of none."
- 2** Prestigious literary prizes and prizes for scientific publications will encourage speakers to publish in African languages. It will elevate the status of the languages and enrich the vocabulary.
- 3** Newspapers published in African languages will convince the speakers of the relevance of their languages and the newspapers can argue the case of the elevation of the status of the languages.
- 4** Accredited journals for the publication of research articles in African languages, entitling the researcher for a research subsidy, will stimulate the scientific use of African languages. The articles can thereafter be translated into English or other languages if the researcher wishes his work to enjoy wider exposure.
- 5** A major role could be played by academic publishers in establishing African languages as academic languages.
- 6** The State should start systematic and widespread translation into African languages, supported by terminology development.
- 7** The National Lexicography Units could be relocated to the Department of Higher Education as PanSALB sees its mandate as the monitoring of languages and not the development of languages.
- 8** Proper funding for the NLUs – according to the original planning of PanSALB, each unit should employ eight permanent staff members. Presently they cannot afford to employ more than three on the grant provided by PanSALB. Proper funding would also prevent the well-established units from losing more of their expertise to the private sector.

9 Continued support from the well-established NLUs, like the Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal, to the newly established units.

10 Terminologists could be appointed at the National Lexicography Units to do fieldwork and to gather terminology in the rural, urban and academic environment to ensure that the existing terminology in these areas are documented and preserved. Each lexicography unit is presently seated within the relevant speech community. More terminologists could be appointed at the Terminology Coordination Section, National Language Service, Department of Arts and Culture.

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