

AFRIKAANS AS A LANGUAGE OF RECONCILIATION, RESTITUTION AND NATION BUILDING

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Introductory remarks

It is by no means axiomatic that a language which has in at least two significant phases of our history been an apple of discord can under changed circumstances become a language of reconciliation and nation building¹. Yet, it is as such that I wish to present the future of Afrikaans within the larger context of a democratic, multicultural and multilingual South Africa.

In order to ground my argument properly, I want to draw attention to three particularly problematical aspects of the history of the language we call Afrikaans. In doing so, however, I shall refrain from a detailed exposition and make do with citing the most useful references that can be followed up by those who may wish to examine in depth the questions that I raise. These three aspects are

- the debate about the origins of Afrikaans;
- the issue of the racialised standard of Afrikaans; and
- the legacy of Bantu education with respect to the enforced use by black students of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction before 1976.

I select these three issues simply because they constitute jointly and severally the dialectical pivots on which the fortunes and the future of the language can, and probably will, be turned around, as it were. Instead of the stigma of “the language of the oppressor”, the speakers of Afrikaans, like those of every other South African language, can aspire to and attain for their mother tongue the halo of a language of liberation and of unification. This proposition may sound utopian at present but it is grounded in real actions and relations that are taking place as we speak.

¹ Panel input at the conference: *Spreek, Theta, Talk: 'n Suid-Afrikaans-Nederlandse dialoog oor die dinamika van taal, kultuur en erfenis*, 22 – 23 September 2009, University of the Western Cape.

Before I tackle each of these issues in turn, let me state quite clearly that the understandable tendency among people to attribute to “languages” certain, often decisive, causal qualities is akin to the way in which fetishes are used in pre-industrial communities in order to deal with social or natural forces over which they do not appear to have control. It is a mode of behaviour or a disposition that indicates a pre-scientific cast of mind, one which we have to transcend if we are going to have any hope of achieving even reasonable, let alone rational, levels of discourse and constructive dialogue.

The immediate referent of this statement is the still widely held view that “Afrikaans” is a racist and oppressive language. To equate some of the attitudes of some of the mother tongue speakers of a language with the language itself is to make a rudimentary but potentially dangerous category mistake. If this mode of operation were to be generalised, very few languages would fare worse than the English language, given some of the atrocities and horrendous acts of despoliation associated with the establishment of the British and U.S American empires.

The original sin

Afrikaans, it has been said², came into being as a language because the slaves of Asian and African origin as well as the dispossessed Khoekhoe had to learn Dutch in order to survive and operate in the gradually expanding colony of the DEIC in interaction with their masters and with one another. This is, in my view, the simplest and most lucid general statement about the origins of Afrikaans, one on which all of us who have an interest in the matter, can agree. Had this not been the case, if the Dutch had carried out the systematic extermination of the aboriginal people, and had the good burghers of Holland and Zeeland been interested in mass colonisation, South Africa today would have had a form of Dutch that would have the same relationship to Algemeen Beskaafde Nederlands as American or Australian or, indeed, South African English has to the Queen’s English.

The debate about whether Afrikaans is a Dutch-based creole or a Dutch dialect is, as I see it, just another reflection of our Philistine preoccupation with “race”. For, it is assumed, if it is a creole, the decisive contribution to the development of the language would have to be acknowledged as being that of the non-European segment of its

² Groenewald, cited in Giliomee 2003:4.

mother tongue speakers and, vice versa, that of its mother tongue speakers of European descent, if it is a dialect of Dutch that has been lightly influenced by contact with languages of African and Asian provenance.

I am reluctant to delve any deeper into this question in the present context; it has been canvassed at length from the different angles of vision of the protagonists at different times during the past 110 years, more or less³. It does seem relevant, however, to suggest to interested specialists to reconsider the whole notion of creolisation in line with the kind of approach that innovative scholars such as Salikoko Mufwene (2008) are foregrounding increasingly. It is a re-reading of the evidence based on the realisation that in fact all languages come into being as “creoles” and that those that have in recent and contemporary scholarship been so named, are – with few, if any, exceptions – characterised by the fact that they were given shape in certain significant ways by non-European peoples, who were invariably slaves or indentured labourers. Taken to its logical conclusion, it would seem, the notion of a “creole language” may well be a racist construct. I am neither competent nor disposed to take the matter further at this stage. However, it seems to me that Afrikaans, Dutch and other scholars ought to take up this challenge and reconsider, and perhaps recast, the entire debate about the origins and development of Afrikaans within a totally different paradigm. Such a joint undertaking would create one of many platforms on and from which Afrikaans could be projected as a language of reconciliation and unification.

Dankie and tramakassie

Indeed, this proposition leads us directly into the minefield of what I call the racialised standard of the Afrikaans language. This is not the place or the occasion on which to enter into the increasingly strident polemic about the ontological status of the notion of “a language”. Among others, I have myself touched on this potentially very creative debate in two recent contributions⁴ in response to the formal tabling of the question by Makoni and Pennycook (2007). Suffice it to repeat my position that this polemic is in essence a debate about the duality of all social phenomena, i.e., the fact that social constructs are both being and becoming, things and processes, nouns and

³ See Davids 1994 for references.

⁴ Evolving African approaches to the management of linguistic diversity. Keynote address delivered at the AILA Conference, 24 August 2008 in Essen, Germany. Street and standard: managing language in contemporary Africa. Address delivered at the International Conference on Everyday Multilingualism in Eisenstadt, Austria, 13-15 June 2008.

verbs, depending on the socio-historical context and the political use to which they are put. A corollary to this proposition is the fact that any theory of social constructivism necessarily implies some such notion of duality. The concrete issue that has to be addressed is in all cases why and how the continuum between street and standard gets ruptured.

Having said that, it ought to be clear that because of its racist impetus, Afrikaner nationalism had to create a racialised standard. In strictly Risorgimento-nationalist terms, it was, thus, not even a genuine nationalism! The classical tenet of Risorgimento nationalism: *Die taal is gans die volk* (in its original Flemish formulation) is negated in every guideline proposed by the authors of the standardisation of the language in various phases of its becoming until very recently. By way of example, I refer to the very first discussions, beginning on 14 August 1875, when the Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners, meeting a few kilometres North-East of where we are deliberating today, reached the conclusion that

[...] (it) was not enough [...] to write and read ‘Hottentots’ Afrikaans; the time had come to discover how the ‘civilized part of our people’ speaks Afrikaans and to formulate rules for the language. (Giliomee 2003:5).

Reverend Du Toit, who was the acknowledged leader of this first Afrikaans language movement, distinguished between the three Afrikaans varieties supposedly spoken by what he called the notables (*Here*), the (white) farmers or burghers (*Boere*) and the “*Hottentots*” or servant class, and made it explicit that in his pioneering literary work, he deliberately held to the language of the *Boere*. It is indisputable, therefore, that at the outset, the standard was deliberately racialised and that this “Afrikaans” was indeed a “white man’s language”, as many an Afrikaner nationalist would proudly proclaim in subsequent years. “White”, obviously, in this context was equated with “civilised”. In his contribution to Vernie February’s pioneering publication⁵, Hein Willemsse cites the fact that in his *Die Triomf van Afrikaans*, which appeared in 1943, E.C. Pienaar opted for “die onvervalste volkstaal [...] in sy mees beskaafde, d.i. *onder beskaafde Afrikaners* mees gebruiklike vorm” (Willemsse’s italics). Needless to say, one could multiply the examples but it is unnecessary to belabour the point.

⁵ February, Vernon. 1994. *Taal en Identiteit: Afrikaans en Nederlands*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg. (p. 151)

Although I do not agree with everything he has written on the subject, the position taken by Fritz Ponelis is eminently reasonable and even prophetic when he maintains in the same volume (p. 106) that

Standaardafrikaans beleef 'n goue eeu, maar het nou 'n
keerpunt bereik, wat belangrike konsekwensies het vir
die taal self en vir die instellings wat Afrikaans
ondersteun.

Can we re-standardise Afrikaans? Should we do so? Is it enough simply to “democratize” the language, as Christo Van Rensburg⁶ suggested a few years ago? Are we not provided with a historic opportunity to recast the standard in a more flexible mould, one in which, among other things, a larger, more representative, space is provided for the contribution of Kaaps and Oranjerivier Afrikaans not only in respect of its lexicon but also of its syntax, its morphology and its phonology? Such an undertaking would, for example, give equal value to the use of “tramakassie” as to “dankie”, much as in English we say with no sense of semantic confusion or evaluation: “I am told” or “I am informed” [...]. Popular or prestigious authors, journalists and other literary artists may well eventually allow such synonyms to be used differentially in specific contexts in order to indicate or emphasise specific nuances, but this would be an organic development deriving from the conceptual equality accorded to the two usages by mother tongue speakers of the language. The linguistic enrichment and the cultural ambience that would ensue would, once again, allow the language to be an instrument of unification and socio-cultural *toenadering*. Of course, the most daring and imaginative literary artists have not waited for the lexicographers to catch up with them. However, it is the latter who “set the standard” and they have to be convinced that a word like “tramakassie” should appear in the HAT with the explanation “sinoniem van dankie”. Instead, we should be reading “synonym for ‘dankie’” and, vice versa. Until this happens, all reference to the other varieties of Afrikaans will inevitably remain in the realm of folklore or exoticisms, i.e., be no more than a polite, paternalistic and politically correct genuflection in front of the Unavoidable..

More generally and relevantly, this undertaking would place Afrikaans linguists at the cutting edge of the standardisation debate, where the tendency is to increase the comprehensiveness of the acceptable forms and the vocabulary of the relevant

⁶ In Webb 1992

language. We would no longer construct such an impenetrable and alienating wall between street and standard as we do at present.

Restitution and regstellende aksie

My analysis up to this point has been concerned with mother tongue speakers of Afrikaans, i.e., with bridging the anachronistic abyss that divides most white from most black Afrikaans mother tongue speakers of the language. We live, however, in an eminently multilingual polity, one where, for better or for worse, we have 11 official languages. Rather than repeat the history of this dispensation, I want to state as clearly as possible a proposition that, I believe, is being ignored at our peril. Because apartheid was a systematic affirmative action programme for white South Africans, in particular for white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, and in the absence of a social revolution as one of the results of which yesterday's masters would have lost everything they had gained or built up, any negotiated settlement that did not include an affirmative action provision would have been condemned as a blatant sell-out by those who had struggled against apartheid and, beyond that, against racial capitalism. The modalities of implementation of this programme in post-apartheid South Africa are, to say the least, profoundly disruptive and often even destabilizing, largely because the original conceptualization of the bulk of the programme is based on the same racial categories which came to shape the colonial-apartheid past of South Africa, rather than on the contemporary fact of disadvantage, however defined.

I cannot critique the AA-BEE project here, except to state clearly again that insofar as its conceptualization and its implementation conspire to entrench the colonial-apartheid racial categories and their concomitant sub-national identities, they are digging the Big Hole into which we, or our children, will inevitably disappear, as did so many hundreds of thousands of the people of Ruanda.

Disadvantage can be addressed in many other ways that do not entail this disastrous effect. One of these is the use of language as a social and economic resource and as an instrument of restitution. The "miracle of Afrikaans" (another of our many South African miracles!) has many unintended benefits – I call them Mephistophelian effects⁷. In the course of pursuing their sectionalist and racist project, the Afrikaner

⁷ Ich bin der Geist, der stets das Böse will, aber stets das Gute schafft" (Mephisto in Goethe's *Faust*).

nationalists, among other things, created a layer of highly skilled language specialists, people who are adept at making dictionaries, newspapers, magazines, radio and TV programmes, as well as ICTs and who have perfected many other skills in the all-pervasive domain of language use. Nothing could be, and is, more self-evident than to recruit and deploy these skills in order to assist other African languages to acquire similar levels of modernization and sophistication. Elsewhere, I have referred to some of the conditions of success of such a project⁸. I refer again to the pioneering work that is being done in this context by the Buro van die Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal at the University of Stellenbosch, the Taalfasiliteringsprogram at the University of Free State, the Stigting vir Bemagtiging deur Afrikaans, Die Afrikaanse Taalraad and many others.

Afrikaans, Afrikaner, Afrikaan

I want to end off this input by pointing to one of the main spots where so many of our historical dogs lie buried. It is my view that if those who continue to call themselves “Afrikaners” will realize that the only way this sub-national identity could ever become accepted by all South Africans is if it were to be stripped of its anti-black historical baggage and to build on the essential theme of anti-imperialism in which it was constructed as a conscious strategy. One of the implications of what I have said hitherto is that Afrikaans, the language, does not belong to “the Afrikaner”, in spite of all attempts to make out of it a “white man’s language”; it belongs to all who speak Afrikaans, especially to its mother tongue speakers. Algemeen Beskaafde, so-called Standard, Afrikaans *does* belong to “the Afrikaner”, especially to the Afrikaner nationalists and, as Dr Johnson might have said, they can have it! They fabricated it as a deliberately racially exclusive way of speaking, writing, feeling, thinking and communicating. If “Afrikaner” is once again to regain its original geographical meaning of “African” (as opposed to “European”, “Asian”, “American”, and “Australasian”), it will become an elegant variation of “Afrikaan”, that peculiar coinage that was forced upon us by the appropriation through naming of Africanity by white, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans.

Identities are social constructs. They can be deconstructed, alternatively reconfigured. In all other Germanic languages, the term “Afrikaner” is equivalent to the English –

⁸ Die noodsaak van universiteite vir die oorlewing van die nie-dominante tale In Suid Afrika. In Giliomee et al 2001.

but not the *South African English* - word “African”, or the Xhosa term “Umafrika”. Only in Afrikaans does it have a racial dimension. When the day dawns that those who take pride in calling themselves “Afrikaner” can think of themselves in terms of Umafrika, will the speakers of Afrikaans no longer have to brace themselves on the backfoot. In the new South Africa, this feat is eminently possible, however loudly the hyenas might howl on the right.

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