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A CASE OF DAVID AND GOLIATH: THE CHANGING POSITION OF AFRIKAANS VIS-À-VIS ELEVEN OFFICIAL LANGUAGES[1]

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1. Introduction

As part of its colonial heritage, South Africa has had a history of linguistic hegemony. Originally, while it was a colony administered by the Dutch East India Company (1652-1795), Dutch was the only official language of the Cape of Good Hope. After 1806 and 1814, when South Africa had became a British Colony, English at first co-existed with Dutch, but as early as 1822 English became the dominant official language for all higher functions (state, courts, schools). In 1925, Afrikaans replaced Dutch as the second official language of the Union of South Africa. Since 1948, Afrikaans was the language of the ruling National Party and as such it played a powerful role in the political arena, in the military and police force, in the media, in the public and educational sectors. This was the *status quo* until 1994. South Africa was regarded as a "bilingual country" despite the fact that both English and Afrikaans were the mother tongues of minority groups. It was only with the Language Policy of the African National Congress (ANC) that the real issue of South Africa's multilingualism was addressed, and the new government of South Africa has since then made attempts to find ways how to implement this policy.

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[1] Over the years, during his stay in South Africa, Roger Lass has shown great interest in the history of Afrikaans and the problems concerning its existence in a multilingual and excolonial society. I am dedicating this article to Roger in collegial friendship and in admiration for his enormous contribution to historical linguistics, especially in the South African scenario. Although my paper is not directly concerned with English historical linguistics as such, it does fall within the ambit of Roger's interest in South African English and extraterritorial languages and their fate in situations of language contact.

While Afrikaans was an official language, entrenched in the government and enjoying legal protection, the indigenous languages of the country posed no threat, they could largely be ignored. The emphasis was on the competition with English. In the new dispensation, however, Afrikaans not only has lost its protected position, it also has to face one of the most striking characteristics of the South African population: its linguistic diversity. The position of Afrikaans in this typically African linguistic pluralism is a radically new one in that it involves a repositioning of language and cultural identity of its speakers and the future of the language which might be in the balance.

The continent of Africa is three times the size of Europe (30 million km^2) but it has only half as many inhabitants as Europe has. Its approx. 550 million people speak more than 800 distinct languages (Myers-Scotton 1995: 10); a less conservative estimate puts the number on well over 1000 languages. Where Europe has on average 8 million speakers per language, Africa averages 250 000 speakers per language (Knappert 1990). Linguistic pluralism is therefore a characteristic feature of the whole of Africa. Seen against this background it is not surprising that linguistic pluralism is also a specific feature of South Africa.

2. A sociolinguistic profile of South Africa

2.1. Linguistic diversity

According to the 1991 census figures and more recent updates, South Africa has close on 40 million speakers who belong to more than 28 linguistic groups (Schuring 1993; Webb 1995: 15). The national linguistic composition now consists of eleven official languages (since 1994) as well as the European immigrant and the Oriental languages (Van der Merwe 1994: 1). All the official languages have a recognised spelling and writing tradition; there are, however, at least another 18 spoken African languages, not counting dialectal differences. The 12 indigenous Bantu languages (mainly Nguni and Sotho languages) are spoken by 74% of the population, i.e. 27,8 million speakers of whom 8,5 million have Zulu as their home language, 6,6 million speak Xhosa, and 3,7 million Sesotho, to mention only the major groupings.

The former official languages – English and Afrikaans – are spoken by 9,2 million people. Numerically, Afrikaans ranks third in the list of first languages with 5,8 million speakers, while English ranks fifth with 3,5 million mother tongue speakers.

2.2. The (first) home languages of South Africa[2]

Home language	No. of speakers	Percentage
Zulu	8 483 720	21,96
Xhosa	6 580 380	17,03
Afrikaans	5 804 411	15,03
Northern Sotho	3 722 444	9,64
English	3 482 375	9,01
Tswana	3 319 951	8,59
Southern Sotho	2 598 367	6,73
Tsonga	1 681 575	4,35
Swazi	991 008	2,57
Venda	858 704	2,22
Ndebele	600 305	1,55
Other	507 260	1,31
Total	38 630 490	99,99

Fig. 1 The home languages of South Africai in 1991[3]

2.3. Major trends in the dynamics of linguistic diversity

Due to the rapid population growth during the past forty years – an increase from 14 million in 1951 to approx. 40 million in 1995 – all the major languages have increased numberwise (Schuring 1993). Three languages, however, have decreased in relative speaker numbers (mother tongue speakers). One of them is Afrikaans which took a dive from 19,4% to 15,4%, mainly as a result of birth control and language shift.

Xhosa, which used to be the largest linguistic entity, decreased from 20,23% to 17,16%, mainly as a result of language shift; and Southern Sotho decreased from 7,46 to 6,84%.

Other languages showed an increase in relative speaker numbers. Zulu which increased by 4,5%, has overtaken Xhosa and is now the biggest language with 8,5 million speakers (22,5% of the total population). Zulu speakers do not show signs of language shift in favour of another Bantu language. Other African languages showing growth are Northern Sotho and Tswana, both increased by 2%.

[2] It is virtually impossible to get exact figures of the total population and of individual language groups. This was the painful and rather embarassing experience during the general elections in 1994. Much information has to rest on projected and estimated figures.

[3] An update of the figures for home languages can be found in Tuch (1995 24). It gives the total population of South Africa as 40 715 708; Zulu L1 speakers as 9 105 702, Xhosa speakers as 7 443 661, and Afrikaans as 5 919 112.

English increased from 8,63 to 9,26% due to language shift among the Indian population who during the past decades adopted English, giving up their Indian home languages which dwindled from 93 000 in 1980 to 25 000 in 1991. Considerable language shift among Afrikaans mother tongue speakers also contributed to the increase of English. There is also a clear shift among descendants of European immigrants towards English.

The three biggest languages, therefore, are Zulu, Xhosa and Afrikaans. Some noticeable tendencies are the growth of Zulu and Northern Sotho and the relative decrease of Afrikaans. Furthermore it is to be expected that as a result of the new language policies some of the African languages will gain official status in certain provinces, e.g. Zulu in kwaZulu/Natal, Xhosa in the Western Cape.

2.4. Demographic and geographic distribution

Concerning the demographic and geographic distribution, English and Afrikaans are nationally distributed.

English as a first language is strongly represented in almost all the major urban centres and in the upper class of society. Furthermore, in the so-called black communities English has become the language of the political, economic and intellectual leadership (Webb 1995: 19).

Afrikaans as a home language shows a strong concentration in the Western Cape, the Free State and parts of Gauteng; it is used right across the socio-economic spectrum. It has a large secondary speakers' community in some 10 million who use Afrikaans as a second or third language.

The indigenous languages are to a large extent regionally based and are mainly used among speakers of the working class. It is important to note that there are no homogeneous and no monolingual areas anywhere in South Africa. This is a factor which complicates language planning.

2.5. Multilingualism

Another important factor is the remarkable degree of multilingualism especially among the urbanised Nguni- and Sotho-speakers. Most of them speak more than one Bantu language plus Afrikaans and/or English. Until 1990, which marked the beginning of the democratisation process, the term multilingualism was hardly ever used. As Webb (1995: 18) pointed out, "the general concept was bilingualism, which was used to refer to 'a knowledge of Afrikaans and English'." While bilingualism has always been strong among Afrikaans speakers, and multilingualism was characteristic of many black people, the English population has traditionally been largely monolingual.

2.6. Language status

This is linked to the question of language status. English has an exceptionally high status as the language of the economy, technology, the media, its position as a leading international language, and lately as the increasingly dominant language of government and politics. As such it now poses a threat of linguistic imperialism to all the other languages which might lead to monolingualism (cf. LANGTAG reports, June 1996).

For most of its mother tongue speakers, Afrikaans is a strong symbol of group identity, although in many other communities it is stigmatised for its political association with the apartheid regime and the suffering connected with it. However, it is highly valued as a modern means of communication, "it has gradually established itself (through upwards mobility of its speakers) as an important medium even in the field of banking, commerce and industry, where English traditionally enjoyed predominance" (Kotzé 1995: 167). It serves as medium of instruction at 8 of the country's 21 universities. It established itself in all higher functions, i.e. in political, administrative, clerical, educational and literary spheres. It was dominant in the sphere of government (both legislative and executive).

3. Afrikaans – Colonial language or a language of Africa?

3.1. Brief historical overview

In recent years the question has often been asked whether Afrikaans is a colonial language or a language of Africa? (cf. Raidt 1996) Looking at its history one can state that it is certainly not a colonial language, but it is a European language derived from a Dutch vernacular of the 17th century, and a language that developed in Africa, shaped by white colonists who came to the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, imported Asian slaves, local Khoikoi and so-called "Coloureds". Genetically, Afrikaans is a Germanic language which however as a result of extensive language contact, linguistic intereference and imperfect learning has undergone significant simplification, mainly in its morphology. Although the official language of the small colony under the rule of the Dutch East India Company was Dutch, a local vernacular soon developed so that already in the second half of the 18th century the common language of communication was "Cape Dutch" or early Afrikaans.

Only a century later serious and concerted efforts were made to develop a written language, originally intended for a Bible translation for the benefit of the coloured Christians for whom Dutch was unintelligible.

Before a Bible translation could be attempted, an orthography and some kind of standardisation of the language had to be brought about. The process of standardisation, however, became the starting point of the political entan-

glement in that the Afrikaans variety of the white Afrikaans-speaking middle class was selected as the most acceptable foundation and norm of the Bible translation, whereas the variety of the "coloureds", the very speakers who had helped to shape the language, was lost sight of.

Almost from the outset and perhaps unwittingly, another goal came to the fore, Afrikaans was perceived as a possession of the white Afrikaner population, the Boers, who felt oppressed by the British. The language became the symbol of national identity in the struggle against English political and cultural supremacy. The confrontation and competition with English would remain an ongoing factor from the 19th century onwards, determining linguistic, political and cultural developments.

Seen against this background, it was a major breakthrough when, in 1925, Afrikaans replaced Dutch as the second official language, and even more so when the almost exclusively Afrikaans speaking National Party came to power in 1948.

3.2. Afrikaans and neo-colonialism

The past fifty years saw the meteoric rise of Afrikaans not only to the level of official language (next to English) of the government of the day (1948-1994), but also to a language that could stand its ground vis-à-vis well-established languages of the Western world, with its world-class literature, and its fully developed terminology for all areas of science and technology, the arts, and the various professions, reflected in more than 250 professional dictionaries and terminology banks. All along Afrikaans competed with English and therefore Europe and the Western world.

And it competed with Africa. The mainly Afrikaans speaking Nationalist government enforced its ideology of separate development, forced removals, job reservation, group areas and mixed marriages acts etc. through numerous apartheid laws, passed and applied through an Afrikaans medium police, military and officialdom.

The entrenchment of the politically inspired Afrikaans language policy in black education proved to be disastrously counterproductive. It eventually led to the Soweto uprising of 1976, a milestone in the history of modern South Africa and in the alienation of Afrikaans from the black population. Although thousands of black South Africans speak Afrikaans as a second or third language, and speak it with greater ease than English, many now give preference to English.

As a first, second and third language Afrikaans is actively used by more than 15 million speakers; it therefore has a wide usage as a means of formal and informal communication and could conveniently serve as a lingua franca. Furthermore, it has, in the course of the past sixty years, developed into a

full-blown scientific, technological and cultural language which is on a par with English and other leading Western languages. However, on account of its politicisation during the apartheid era and its stigma of being the "language of the oppressor", many speakers find it unacceptable as a lingua franca and English is more and more becoming the language enjoying full recognition and status at the expense of Afrikaans and all the other languages.

4. Afrikaans in the "New South Africa"

In the new democratic South Africa Afrikaans no longer enjoys legal and political protection and privileges. And the effects are already painfully visible. As Van Rensburg writes in June 1996, the interim Constitution of December 1993

> stipulated that the country would forthwith have eleven official languages, not only two as in the past. This impacted dramatically on both Afrikaans and English, but in totally different ways, while influencing all the other language communities. In a development unforeseen by the constitution, English, exploiting the highly impractical situation of eleven official languages and backed by influential commercial institutions, made a bold move forward with the obvious intent of becoming all but in name, the sole official language of the country. In the process Afrikaans lost and is steadily losing valuable ground (Van Rensburg 1996: 7).

Afrikaans has already experienced serious losses in eight areas: government and administration, the legal system, science and technology, media and communication, education, arts and culture, sports and recreation, trade and industry (Prinsloo 1996: 20).

Afrikaans medium schools are under heavy pressure to become bilingual, i.e. Afrikaans and English medium. There is a real threat to Afrikaans in tertiary education. Several Afrikaans-medium universities now have to bend to pressure from above to offer instruction through the medium of English as well (Steyn 1993).

The most visible and painful loss is the radical downscaling of Afrikaans on television. From the former 50/50 allocation of air time between English and Afrikaans, the new broadcasting time for English is now more than 50%, whereas Afrikaans, Zulu and Xhosa get just over 5% each. More than 20% of broadcasting time is supposed to be multilingual, but is in fact mainly English.[4] It is not surprising that there is a public outcry and a loss of confidence as Steyn recently pointed out:

[4] This is a gross violation of the recommendation of the IBA (Independent Broadcasting Authority) according to which the public broadcasting system should be designed in a manner that 'allows for equitable treatment and development of all eleven official languages of South Africa, with special emphasis on those that hitherto have been marginalised' (Alexander 1996: 9).

> Since 1994 the new rulers in South Africa have seriously harmed the position of Afrikaans. It almost seems as if the present regime expects that in the process of reconciliation Afrikaans-speaking people should reconcile themselves to the fact that their language is being eradicated. Many Afrikaans-speaking people already question their own loyalty towards the government acting as though it were bent on destroying everything that the Afrikaans community has established. One of the areas where Afrikaans suffered the most serious derogation is that of television...(Steyn 1996: 33).

Ironically, at the recent LANGTAG Conference (Language Plan Task Group), organised by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (29 June 1996), the question of language equity received prominent attention, with special reference to the danger of the "dominance of English". Again the need was highlighted "to promote multilingualism" and "to promote respect for linguistic diversity in the context of a nation-building strategy" (Alexander 1996: 17). However, practical ways of implementing these lofty ideals have still to be found.

In the meantime, while Afrikaans is licking its wounds, there are positive initiatives to promote its own cause. One such initiative is the "Foundation for Afrikaans", a non-profit organisation which strives to promote Afrikaans language projects in the fields of literacy and journalism, Afrikaans in education, Afrikaans community projects in different regions, the marketing of Afrikaans in a new South Africa etc. The Foundation wants to address grievances and problem areas such as

- the repositioning of Afrikaans in a multilingual country;
- the dissatisfaction over the down-scaling of the language by transforming it into mobilisation;
- stimulating new language projects and energies;
- accentuating signs of determined resistance against the down-scaling of Afrikaans in areas of significant importance;
- obtaining international support;
- the compilation of a comprehensive language plan for the Afrikaans community (Prinsloo 1996: 19)

Instead of relying on legal and state protection as in the past, instead of being reactive, the Afrikaans speaking community is becoming pro-active by getting involved in a determined plan to promote and safeguard the linguistic and cultural heritage of Afrikaans, e.g. in the media with the project of setting up an Afrikaans medium TV channel and radio stations (Steyn 1996: 34), in the printed media by promoting the publication of Afrikaans books, journals and newspapers; technological programmes are developed to assist Afrikaans speakers, e.g. computerised home studies programmes, Afrikaans information

on internet; Afrikaans computer programmes for scientific research, Afrikaans spell checks etc.

In connection with the government's "Pan South African Language Board" (PANSALB) and the "Language Planning Task Group" (LANGTAG) a comprehensive language plan for the Afrikaans community has been initiated (Prinsloo 1996: 22). This plan aims at the coordination of strengths and expertise and new areas of growth in the field of Afrikaans, which should be of benefit not only for Afrikaans speakers but for the whole development of the country as a whole.

An important growth is the liberation of Afrikaans from its political stigma. Already many "Coloured" Afrikaans speakers and writers are again proudly identifying with Afrikaans as their mother tongue (cf. Small 1996; February 1994). Even more important is the gradual shift in regard to language norms and the tacit acceptance of linguistic variants from those sociolects. The hot debate around "Standard Afrikaans" as being a white language is showing positive signs of change (Ponelis 1994, Odendal 1996: 16). In the future, Standard Afrikaans will be far more inclusive especially in regard to the varieties of the so-called "Coloured" communities.

In a fascinating article on "Afrikaans – an English-speaking perspective" R. Ryan, professor of English, asks: "For how long will the language be punished for its perceived complicity in apartheid politics?" According to Ryan the future of Afrikaans lies in the contribution it continues to make within the range of literature and cultural production.

> In the final analysis, literary production may contribute more than any superstructural deployment, to the continued viability and prominence of a language. The rise of Afrikaans, as a langauge, was accompanied by the foundation of a literature occupying space within a number of literary genres. This literary tradition need not be eclipsed as a consequence of the political marginalisation of the language...Afrikaans literature has, from its inception, resisted being the mouthpiece of a single interest group... In literature, Afrikaans has been both the language of hegemony and the language of dissidence...
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> The multiplicity of styles, genres, voices, positions and subjects within Afrikaans literature is itself a remarkable historical phenomenon...Moreover, the continued literary employment of Afrikaans by communities designated so-called 'Coloured' has dramatically increased the range of cultural participation in Afrikaans literature...
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> It is historically likely that, at a time in which the Afrikaans language is deeply implicated in large-scale political and social change, the phenomenon of Afrikaans literature will experience a growth phase while continuing to interrogate its own traditions (Ryan 1996: 17).

The future of Afrikaans in a democratic South Africa will largely depend on its vitality as a language to be proud of by all its speakers, on an "inclusive" and nation-building language policy, and on the continued dynamism to accept new challenges in a multilingual society. The way into the future will certainly be frayed with almost insurmountable difficulties and without language protection despite the language right enshrined in the Constitution. The LANGTAG document states:

> South Africa is in the midst of a rapid and deepgoing transition from a racist, patriarchal and authoritarian past to an anti-racist, anti-sexist and democratic future (Alexander 1996: 3).

Afrikaans is part of this process of transition. During the past century it has set a precedent of how an undeveloped colloquial language can be fully developed so as to compete with world languages in the technological era. In this respect it could show the African languages the way towards full language maturity – provided it does not meet with too much antagonism and suppression. For Afrikaans, however, a new "struggle" has begun, that of the David of a local minority language against the Goliath of an increasingly powerful international language.

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