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Revisiting the end of the world: an interview on language identity and displacement

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<http://umich.edu/~aacollab/index.html>

The documentary *The Boers at the end of the world / Boere op die aardsdrempel*, about a small Afrikaans community in South America, was filmed a few years ago.

kykNET Silwerskermfees 2015: *Boers at the End of the World* | *Boere op die aardsdrempel*



“Afrikaans is fossilised there. Their idea of what it means to be Afrikaans comes from an earlier time. Interestingly, as the linguist Andries Coetzee points out in the film, this also means that they predate apartheid.”



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The three linguistics professors from the University of Michigan who appear in the film – Andries Coetzee, Nicholas Henriksen and Lorenzo García-Amaya – visited South Africa in March 2019. The University of Michigan has undertaken a major multi-year study of the Afrikaner community in Patagonia, due to their unique linguistic and cultural situation – this study is encompassing not only the language, but also the culture, religion and sociological aspects of the community.

It’s a “second act” to the story, and one that could mean the continuation of the community for years to come.

Naomi Meyer now interviews Andries Coetzee and Nicholas (Nick) Henriksen on Afrikaans language and identity in Patagonia, as well as in South Africa.

Nick and Andries, a few years ago, at the kykNET Silwerskerm Festival, I saw the fascinating film *Boere op die aardsdrempel* / *The Boers at the end of the world*. I discovered quite a lot about this tiny community of Afrikaans-Spanish people. I conducted a few interviews, following the movie, like [this one](#). I realised that only a handful of people in Patagonia can, in fact, still speak or understand Afrikaans. Firstly: why the research on this tiny community of Afrikaans-Spanish speakers?

Nick: There are three main reasons:

First, most immigrant communities lose their immigrant language after 40–50 years – the Patagonian Afrikaans speakers continue to use Afrikaans after 120 years, which is exceptional, linguistically. (Usually, in immigrant communities, the immigrant language survives for 40–50 years, but not typically for 120 years – since the community lived practically isolated in the Patagonian desert until the middle of the 20th century, they were able to maintain their language for an unexpectedly long period of time.)

Second, Patagonian Afrikaans offers a window into how Afrikaans was spoken prior to standardisation and officialisation in 1925. These speakers didn’t participate in the standardisation process that took place after 1925 – thus, their Afrikaans offers a special window into how Afrikaans might have been spoken prior to the loss of variation through standardisation.

Third, this is the only bilingual community in the world that we know of where Afrikaans and Spanish have persisted for multiple generations (in terms of both culture and language).

Also, feel free to listen to [this audio on CapeTalk radio](#), where I talked about this in greater detail when I was in Cape Town in April.

Secondly: why the ongoing research?

Nick: Our research is funded through a generous grant from the [Humanities Collaboratory](#) at the University of Michigan. We were first funded through a small Proposal Development grant in May 2017, and now a much larger grant, from September 2017 to September 2019. Under this larger grant, we are able to tackle many pressing questions related to the fascinating intertwinement of language, culture, race and identity in the Patagonian Afrikaans community. This new grant is allowing us to ask broader questions related to language and identity through two fieldwork trips: in 2018 to Patagonia, and in 2019 to South Africa. We are also developing a fascinating [digital archive](#), with images of the community and history, which can be accessed worldwide.

What really pushes our research forward, though, is the involvement of undergraduate students at Michigan, and their excitement about this project. This is where I think that our project really shines, and offers a clear example of how undergraduates have become uniquely excited about the usefulness of collaborative research methods. Specifically, our undergraduate collaborators deeply value the opportunity to work on humanistic projects in a learning setting that challenges them to work with data and to think critically about the bigger picture of the human experience. In this sense, we believe that we are uncovering a model of how to rethink undergraduate education for humanities majors. To offer concrete evidence, you can read here [one article by an excellent student researcher, Ellie Johandes](#) – in all cases, our students acknowledge that the collaborative work that they did on this project was a key factor in achieving professional and postgraduate success. [You can see another article here](#), written by a student journalist at the University of Michigan.

Andries: I'll add to Nick's answer that the research is ongoing because we keep on finding new interesting questions to investigate about the community! When we first visited the community in 2014, our plans were limited and focused mostly on the linguistic properties of the community's Afrikaans and Spanish. We realised very quickly, however, that the community was so much more than just their languages. They represent in a real sense the very universal human experience of being "outsiders", of how humans create communities in new and unfamiliar environs, and of how we are engaged in constant processes of redefining our identities in relation to the changing realities that life presents us. During our first trip, we were fascinated to see how the Patagonian Afrikaans community has negotiated for themselves an identity that recognises their African (and European) heritage, and yet simultaneously is fully integrated into Argentinian society. They represent such a good example of not giving up one's past, while also living completely in the present and focusing on the future.

This experience of having to renegotiate one's identity is, of course, a very common human experience. Humans have participated in mass migrations since the earliest dawn of human society. And, migration is again (or perhaps, still) very present in the modern world, too, with migrations from central Africa towards southern Africa, northern Africa towards Europe, central America towards the USA, etc. Understanding how the Patagonian Afrikaans community has negotiated their identity and their relation to place is, therefore, a very current topic, and can be of value to the understanding of current migrant communities.

So, another reason why our research is ongoing is that we have discovered so many more interesting questions to investigate!

Boer-tyne: 'n Familiefotoalbum uit Argentinië



Cecil Dickason gesels oor *Boere op die aardsdrempel*, oor sy Argentynse wortels en deel foto's uit 'n album van 1971.



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I know that you are busy with a project called “From Africa to Patagonia: Voices of displacement”. What exactly are you busy with, regarding this project?

Nick: We are an interdisciplinary research team composed of scholars housed in different academic departments at the University of Michigan. Most generally, our project analyses how language is entangled with cultural identity in a community that traces its roots to the South African Boers who settled in Patagonia, Argentina, after the second Anglo-Boer War in 1902.

Bringing together a team composed of five disciplines across the humanities and social and cognitive sciences (namely linguistics, anthropology, social history, statistics and literary/cultural studies) enables us to explore intersecting facets of language, culture and history through phonetic analysis, ethnographic studies and historiography. This is of particular value to research such as ours, on the relationship between **language and identity**, as this matter raises questions that are disciplinarily hybrid by nature. Our collaboration especially bolsters the position of the humanistic social sciences in two ways. First, it addresses the social, ideological and linguistic consequences of human displacement, a defining aspect of the human experience. In the 21st century, the issues of immigration, ethnicity and racial identity have remained at the core of many debates – most universities in the United States now include race and ethnicity courses as key requirements of humanities curricula. Our project provides a new perspective on identity by focusing on how the displacement of a white, European population plays out in contemporary linguistic and racial politics. Second, by establishing collaborations with scholars in Europe, Africa and South America, our project supports international collaborative engagement in the humanities. All of this goes to show the richness of the linguistic world of the Patagonian Afrikaans community, and points toward the importance of the collaborative research we do, which unites the insights of phonetic analysis, ethnographic studies and historiography to draw out otherwise elusive aspects of human life.

Akademiepryse 2017: Erepenning vir 'n dokumentêre TV-program in Afrikaans aan die regisseur Richard Finn Gregory – commendatio



“Boere fassineer egter ook op vele ander vlakke: die besondere leefwyse van hierdie groepie mense word simpatiek uitgebeeld en hoewel die eenvoudige (selfs armoedige omstandighede) van hierdie mense die toeskouer opval, is dit eerder die pretensielose eerlikheid van hierdie

groepie persone wat die kyker aangryp en roer.”



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I see [on your website](#) that you write about your findings as derived from “an exceptional situation of cultural and linguistic contact that is not present in any other location in the world”. Why so? What makes this specific community so unique?

Nick: It is important to note that one of the things that surprised us most was how similar Patagonian Afrikaans is to Afrikaans as it is spoken in South Africa today. Language can change a lot in 120 years. That Patagonian Afrikaans is so similar to current South African Afrikaans indicates, we think, that Afrikaans was already fairly stabilised by the start of the 20th century. Given that it was still primarily a spoken language at that point in time, it would not have surprised us had it still been more in flux, in which case Patagonian Afrikaans could have been quite different to how South African Afrikaans is today. Afrikaans became an official language in South Africa in 1925, and it was at that point that dictionaries were written, grammar books for teaching the language in school were written, the Bible was translated, etc. When this happens in a language, we often find that it becomes more “fixed” than when it was mostly a spoken language. It appears, however, that although Afrikaans was not widely written by 1900, the spoken version must have been fairly stable by that time.

Taal en migrasie: 'n onderhoud met Andries Coetzee



“Migrasie is deel van die geskiedenis van die mensdom vanaf die vroegste tye en tot vandag toe. Sover as ek kan sien, is daar niks nuuts in die migrasie van boere na Patagonië toe nie, en ook nie vir boere wat sou kies om Rusland toe te gaan nie.

Hierdie migrasies vind al vir millennia plaas en om baie van dieselfde redes: ideologies, finansiële, avontuur, oorlog ...”



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Minority languages often carry political baggage. Afrikaans is no exception. Recently you visited South Africa, and my question is: did you experience Afrikaans in South Africa as a language spoken mostly by white people? Just as Afrikaans and Spanish collaborated and intertwined in Patagonia, so Afrikaans is influenced, on a day to day basis, by all the other languages spoken in South Africa itself. Or, what were your findings after your recent visit to South Africa?

Nick: When we travelled to Maclear (Eastern Cape) in March, we definitely learned that some of the original Patagonian settlers were from Maclear. Some of the Maclear inhabitants were able to remember some of the last names of the families that we know in Patagonia, such as Schlebusch and Coetzee. The Maclear residents also told us that they knew of some of the Patagonian settlers who had repatriated to South Africa in the 1930s. Unfortunately, based on what we were told, those same repatriated families had moved on to other parts of South Africa, such as Johannesburg. Thus, it was not possible to speak to the actual descendants of the original (repatriated) Patagonian settlers. Importantly, there were other family names (from Patagonia) that the Maclear residents did not mention. This would seem to confirm the historical record that *some*, but not *all*, of the Patagonian settlers hailed from the Eastern Cape.

This brings us to the next phase of our project (and to our response to your last question), which is that we will head to the Northern Cape in March 2020, to see in what ways we can uncover linguistic parallelisms between Namaqualand Afrikaans and Patagonian Afrikaans. This will be a critical trip from a linguistic point of view, especially because, as many of the Maclear Afrikaans speakers told us, there are pronunciation features used by the Patagonian Afrikaans speakers that sound more like the Afrikaans spoken in Namaqualand. So, we would like to collect linguistic data from Namaqualand Afrikaans speakers and compare it with the data that we have collected from the Patagonian Afrikaans speakers. In particular, we are focusing on a phonetic feature that distinguishes Patagonian Afrikaans from “standard” Afrikaans, which is “glide insertion” after the [k] sound. So, for the Afrikaans word *kind* (“child”), standard Afrikaans speakers say [kənt], whereas Patagonian Afrikaans speakers say [kjənt], with an extra “glide” sound between the [k] sound and the vowel [ə]. Our intuition tells us that Namaqualand speakers also pronounce the word as [kjənt], but we’ll need to get authentic linguistic data to confirm this.

Andries: Let me also add a few notes to Nick’s already very complete answer here. Having grown up in South Africa, I was, of course, very familiar with the high levels of multilingualism in South Africa. I also

knew that Afrikaans is spoken by many different people, and that, in fact, most first language speakers of Afrikaans are not white. In the Maclear region, where we did data collection in February, however, it is true that most first language speakers of Afrikaans are indeed white.

Something that surprised my American colleagues (I think they'll agree with this statement!) was just how common multilingualism is in South Africa. All of the Afrikaans speakers we interviewed in Maclear also speak English, of course. But, many of them (maybe even most) also speak Sotho and Xhosa. Although multilingualism is common in many parts of the world (Europe, throughout Africa, etc), it is not so in the USA, and it was surprising to see how "normal" multilingualism is in Maclear. People switch between languages without giving it much thought, in the most natural way. It is just part of the everyday lived reality. It is when multilingualism is normalised that one finds communities where multiple languages can coexist and thrive together.

Of course, when languages have such sustained and intense contact, they will start influencing each other. That's a natural part of language change and development, which has played out in the history of humankind since there was language contact (and hence probably since the very early origins of human language). A language is embedded in its social context, and it changes in response to that context. Since the contact situation of Afrikaans in South Africa is so radically different from that in Patagonia, we would expect to find differences between the varieties of Afrikaans. In Patagonia, we would expect that Afrikaans should show some natural consequences of its contact with Spanish. In South Africa, we should expect influences from contact with English, Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu, etc.

Do you consider Afrikaans an African language or a European one? Why?

Andries: Afrikaans is a language with deep roots in both Europe and Africa. I think it would therefore be a false dichotomy to classify it as one or the other. It could not be what it is today without both its European and African identities.

From Africa to Patagonia: January Update



There are hundreds of languages in Africa. Why are you interested in a language like Afrikaans?

Nick: The interest of our project goes beyond selecting one of the hundreds of languages in Africa. We are mostly intrigued by the fascinating linguistic, cultural and historical situation of the Patagonian Afrikaans

community, and how it speaks to the relationship between Europe, Africa and America in ways that have not been well defined in previous research.

At the same time, our research, focused on bilingual communities and identities, speaks to linguistic situations replicated in most of Africa, where many communities are themselves bi- or multilingual. So, this is a relatable topic throughout much of Africa.

Andries: Afrikaans is interesting and unique for many reasons. It is one of the youngest languages currently spoken, and that allows us the opportunity to observe a language relatively early in its development. It is also the only Germanic language that originated outside of Europe, and the only Germanic language that has had such a long history of intense contact with non-European languages (well, maybe the same is true of English in India). For all these reasons, studying Afrikaans doesn't only help us to understand Afrikaans better. We can also learn more about how languages originate and develop, and how the complex social landscape in which a language is embedded shapes it.



Picture taken during recent reach trip to South Africa (picture provided)

Among many Afrikaans speakers, there exists anxiety about Afrikaans as an academic language. How did you experience this in South Africa? Do you think that Afrikaans is still widely spoken in shops and on the streets and in academic institutions?

Andries: Language is used in the contexts where it is needed. The world is full of examples of stable linguistic situations that have lasted for centuries, where multiple languages are spoken at home, but one or a few languages are used in public spheres. Although the likelihood that a language will thrive and grow is higher if that language is used in many different spheres (home, work, school, government, etc), that is not strictly speaking a requirement for a language to thrive.

It's been two decades since I last lived in South Africa, and I am, therefore, not the most well informed about the language usage patterns in modern South Africa. Impressionistically, I would say that Afrikaans is used less in public spheres now than before. Most government business is now conducted in English, where, until 1994, it would have been conducted in Afrikaans. Many previously Afrikaans universities have also shifted to using English as language of instruction. At the same time, Afrikaans is thriving in South Africa. There are many parts of the country where Afrikaans, rather than English, is the lingua franca. That

is certainly the case in the rural villages in Limpopo, where my family lives, and I would imagine that it would also be true in parts of the Western and Northern Cape. But, I don't spend enough time in South Africa to know for certain – you would have a better feeling for this than I do!

Afrikaans also has a vibrant press culture, with many Afrikaans newspapers and magazines with strong circulations, a strong literature tradition with new novels and poetry being published (and often selling very well), a very active music scene and a vibrant TV and film industry. My impression is hence that, though Afrikaans is used less in official government spheres, it is thriving more generally.



Picture source: <https://publicengagement.umich.edu/language-and-identity-lessons-from-a-unique-afrikaans-community-in-patagonia/>, Richard Finn Gregory / GOODWORK

Should all small languages receive attention and be available in writing or in print? When is there a need to give attention to a language's academic development? And, how can this be done, say, in a language like Xhosa?

Andries: This is the domain of language policy, which falls outside of my area of expertise. So, I cannot answer this question. I can say this much, however: as a linguist, I consider all languages as equal from a grammatical perspective. There is no language (or variety of a language) that is inherently better or worse. So, whether a language is a written language or only a spoken language, whether it is used in formal settings or only in the home, doesn't determine the value of the language. As linguists, we value all languages equally as expressions of the human cognitive and cultural capacity for language. And, as linguists, we want to study and document all languages. Every language that goes undocumented and unstudied represents a gap in our understanding of the full diversity of the unique human capacity for language.

Because the language of Afrikaans carries so much ideological baggage in South Africa, and because of the politics surrounding it (for example, the fact that it was forced onto so many non-Afrikaans speakers during the apartheid era), some people now find the whole topic of the Afrikaans language problematic. If one is passionate about the language and its academic use, it may be

frowned upon because of the language's history, even though plenty of Afrikaans speakers are not white (most of the Afrikaans speakers in South Africa, in fact). Did you encounter any political views on Afrikaans during your research? (And, what about the racist words some of the Patagonian Afrikaans speakers use, without even meaning to be racist – just old-fashioned words demonstrating the language's roots and the way of thinking of its speakers in the past?)

Nick: Regarding the “ideological baggage” that you refer to in your email, I would say that some of the people that we talked to (some journalists, especially) discussed this at length while we were in South Africa. At the same time, these people also acknowledged their fascination with the language, for example, with their enjoyment of playing with words in the language (for example, using many diminutives on a single lexical item – that seems like such fun!), and with the importance of the **Woordfees** Festival as a magnificent way of celebrating Afrikaans language and culture.

I think that it's important to indicate that the speakers of Patagonian Afrikaans, based on our interactions with them, do not hold the strong associations regarding the “ideological baggage” that the Afrikaans language has in South Africa. Since the Patagonian Afrikaans community hasn't maintained consistent connections with South Africa, the community in Patagonia wasn't involved with the ideological views or historical/political processes that shaped the Afrikaans language and South African history during the second half of the 20th century.

On the other hand, Afrikaans is an element that underscores their South African identity, something that is unique in Argentina, as most immigrants in Patagonia are of European descent (Spanish, Italian, Basque, German, Welsh, English and Portuguese, among others). For many Patagonian Afrikaans speakers, the Afrikaans language also brings fond memories of their parents, their grandparents, and their youth growing up on the Patagonian farms. To offer one anecdote, in 2014, during our first fieldwork trip to Patagonia, we met a family of about seven siblings (in their 50s and 60s) who wanted to talk to us in Afrikaans. They were very eager to meet us and tell us their story. Once we had finally met them, we realised that these siblings spoke very choppy Afrikaans; however, we also realised that, for them, the Afrikaans language was symbolic of their mother, who had spoken Afrikaans and had passed away at a young age. Their father spoke Spanish only, so once their mother had passed away, they no longer had a direct connection to Afrikaans, and likely lost any little ability (or passive knowledge) of the language. Thus, our presence in Patagonia was critical for these siblings, as a way of remembering their mother and bringing up fond memories of her. They, therefore, wanted to listen to Andries speak Afrikaans, not for academic or political reasons, as you mentioned in your message, but for sentimental reasons. Altogether, this anecdote helps to drive home an important point about the Patagonian Afrikaans members: many in the Patagonian community tell us that Afrikaans runs in their blood, it is part of their DNA, it is their identity, and the Afrikaans language is one concrete instantiation of this. (Yes, some of them are aware that certain words that they use are considered “racist” in South Africa, but it's probably more central to underscore the fascinating connection that the language has with their identity and their past.)



Picture source: <https://publicengagement.umich.edu/language-and-identity-lessons-from-a-unique-afrikaans-community-in-patagonia/>, Richard Finn Gregory / GOODWORK

Is anybody planning another film after your research (“From Africa to Patagonia: Voices of displacement”) is complete? Or, where can people follow your progress?

Nick: To my knowledge, no one is planning a film of the impressive calibre that Richard produced in 2015. If you know of anyone who is interested, feel free to send them our way! At the same time, we have established a [YouTube channel](#), where each month our team collaborators talk about their role in our project, and how the Afrikaans Patagonian community speaks to so many topics and matters that are relatable to our 21st-century society!

Many people are afraid that Afrikaans as a language is dying, because of many complex reasons. Do you think Afrikaans is a resilient language? Do you think the language will survive in South Africa? (Or, is its future elsewhere?)

Nick: In Patagonia, it is difficult to think that the Afrikaans language will survive for more than 20–30 years. Only the oldest generation speaks the language; their children and grandchildren already speak Spanish only. At the same time, the identity is very strong in the community among many of the children and grandchildren. This strong identity is not going to go away any time in the future, I don’t think. We talk about this at length in the essay in *The Conversation*. Even the younger generations will tell you, “Afrikaans is part of my genetic code; it is part of who we are; it is in our way of life.” So, although the use of the language might not survive for more than a few decades, identity and culture will not go away any time in the near future.

As for the future of Afrikaans in South Africa, based on my limited knowledge and exposure, I am not sure that it is going to go away any time soon! There is clear evidence that children still use and learn Afrikaans, especially in certain regions of South Africa. This goes well with the need for intergenerational language transmission as a way of preserving the language. Certainly, though, it is important to note that many Afrikaans speakers in South Africa are also bi- or multilingual! In Cape Town, especially, the bilingualism

with English and Afrikaans seems to be very robust. While it is true that some speakers might be heading toward greater use of English in some areas, there are other areas (like in the province of Limpopo, where Andries is from) where the use of Afrikaans, and intergenerational language transmission, is clearly evident.

So, although Afrikaans might be decreasing in popularity, and some institutions are shifting to English, it might be difficult to think that it would be classified as an “endangered” language at any point in the near or distant future! The language definitely has a strong literary and cultural tradition and a vibrant press, and is definitely thriving!

Pictures: Lorenzo García-Amaya



Reageer

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Stel my in kennis indien nuwe kommentaar bygevoeg word.