The Taal Monument can be a symbol of hope, nation building and social cohesion

The Taal Monument – Taalmonument in Afrikaans – was partially born in apartheid sin, but it does not mean that the baby should be thrown out with the bathwater. The monument, which in 2020 will celebrate its 45th year, is not just a beacon of hope for a liberated Afrikaans, but for all African languages.

My first real acquaintance with the wonders of Afrikaans and the educational value of the language was around standard 5 (Grade 7) thanks to DJ Opperman’s Groot Verseboek (a definitive collection of Afrikaans poetry). This masterpiece with its blue cover made its way into the Jonas household in a Stellenbosch suburb as a book prize that my older brother, Johnny, received as a top achiever in Afrikaans in his matric year. His love for and studies in languages at the University of the Western Cape as well as his anti-apartheid activism, also IN Afrikaans, in the 1980s left lasting impressions on my formative years.

My interaction with specifically Afrikaans literature not only offered an escape from the daily realities that your typical working-class community had to struggle with, but also served as a catalyst for becoming aware of the defining role the use and abuse of language
can play in people’s lives. It was different, apart times and the Taal Monument, just a few kilometres from my house, certainly was not a welcoming structure where I would feel embraced.

After completing my undergraduate studies at Stellenbosch University, I worked as a contract worker at the Stellenbosch Museum. One day in 1995, when I arrived at my parents’ home, my now deceased Dad awaited me with a cut-out advertisement for the position as head of the Language Museum in Paarl. I will never forget his excited voice and body language. At the same time, also the disappointment on his face when I explained how both the time and I were not ready to manage this institution with so much history, emotion, symbolic value and political luggage. But the seed was planted and I already dreamed of heading up of the monument as soon as the time was ripe. This happened 21 years later.

The challenge that I and the previous directors have faced is how to manage the monument successfully as our activities, services and programmes must represent and reflect a diverse language community. How does the monument create an environment within which social cohesion, language pride and inclusivity are promoted? And how does the institution, which depends largely on taxpayers, serve the Afrikaans community and the South African nation?

As a mother tongue, Afrikaans already boasts the largest racial diversity of all languages in the country, and although old and new Afrikaans cultural organisations have made huge strides in the past two decades, much work is still required to undo negative narratives. Afrikaans-medium schools, for example, must urgently do more to have learners and teachers reflect the language’s demography – something for which bursaries can be used. After all, these learners will one day be in positions where they can promote the undeniable value of mother-tongue education, which most developed countries take for granted.

Indigenous languages find themselves at the edge of the political landscape and Afrikaans even more so because of its link to the apartheid state. Looking at court rulings on language aspects at the universities of Pretoria, Stellenbosch and Free State, as well as events at Overvaal High School, there are clear signs of a calculated attempt to further reduce the survival of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction.
The reasons given by Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng in his court ruling on the future, exclusive use of English in the courts, suggest hostilities at government level and confirm that Afrikaans is still seen among some as the language of the oppressor. An institution such as the monument is regarded as a visible manifestation of the white Afrikaner nationalism’s power, while it in actual fact serves Afrikaans in its fullness.

Afrikaans was also a victim of this nationalism, a nationalism that hijacked the language for short-term political gain and abused it for the sake of mobilisation. Even though white Afrikaner nationalists were and are a minority of Afrikaans speakers, South Africans (Afrikaans and non-Afrikaans) did not try to stop this hijacking hard enough. In addition, under the apartheid regime, many Afrikaans books, plays and music were banned, not to mention the disaster of 1976. The natural relationship between Afrikaans speakers was also soured by separating the language group on a racial basis.

Only in the last three decades has there been a real movement by formerly marginalised Afrikaans speakers to (re)claim the language; an energy that the monument supports by promoting conversations and interactions between Afrikaans speakers.

The composition of the monument staff and council reflects the diverse reality of the speakers and it is increasingly regarded as a space where people celebrate a shared love, Afrikaans, together. The totality of Afrikaans speakers is owning the language, to the benefit of all and especially the language. Since the liberation of the language in 1994, there is a historical revival of Afrikaans literature, music and films. In the cyber space it is just as busy; Google “Afrikaans” and see for yourself.

The monument strives for the well-being of Afrikaans in the South African community and constantly endeavours to promote mutual respect between Afrikaans and other indigenous languages by *inter alia* recognising the mutual influence of languages. Ecological diversity is important for the planet’s inhabitants, as well as a diversity of ideas. In the same breath, language diversity, in South Africa and elsewhere, is an asset that needs celebration and support.

In Cape Town in 2017 the Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani reasserted that the development of Afrikaans has been the most successful decolonialisation initiative ever. According to him and many others, Africa, and especially the continent’s universities, can only shed our colonial straitjacket if we actively develop African languages and use it at
all levels. In this light, we consider the monument not only as a symbol of hope for Afrikaans, but for all African languages. What was possible for Afrikaans, IS possible for all.

While there is a progressive, social cohesive reality at the monument and museum, many South Africans experience Afrikaans in a negative way; from personal interactions with Afrikaans speakers to what they see and hear on the internet. Furthermore, the debate about the future of Afrikaans is still partially dominated by traditional (white) Afrikaner and civil society organisations who sometimes want to negotiate on behalf of all language partners on cultural issues. An attitude of superiority and demanding the language as solely its own by certain sectors within the Afrikaans-speaking landscape, the “fighting in the trenches approach” for the language as well as unacceptable “traditions” continue in post-apartheid society. This is something that is especially noticeable on social media where a minority can hide behind pseudonyms while bellowing abuse.

However, what is notable is that Afrikaans varieties that have been ignored in the past century are now prospering. The inclusion of certain words in the latest Afrikaans Woordelys en Spelreëls (a language guide) gives more recognition to the shared past of Afrikaans and the contributions from other varieties while Prof Christo van Rensburg’s publication, So kry ons Afrikaans (on the history of Afrikaans), emphasises the diverse roots of Afrikaans. Nevertheless, it appears that the non-standardised varieties are still mistakenly considered to be backward, comical and/or inferior. An attitude of regarding only the standardised spoken and written variety as acceptable, serves as an instrument for the deliberate exclusion of probably the largest group of Afrikaans speakers’ unique interaction with Afrikaans.

The monument was partially born in apartheid sin, but it does not mean that the baby should be thrown out with the bath water. The opening of both the museum, 14 August 1975, and the monument, 10 October 1975, was made possible by private initiatives that sought to separate Afrikaans from politics, but it was during the high point of white Afrikaner power which meant that the language was once again abused by some politicians to gain support.

The monument, however, had recognised historical language facts from the outset, especially as Afrikaans writers and anti-apartheid activists made their voices heard. The iconic sculpture on Paarl Mountain strongly emphasises Afrikaans’ African origin and the symbolism is clear that the future of Afrikaans is in Africa, with other Africans. The opening of the monument included a reading of Adam Small’s Afrikaans poem Nkosi.
sikelel ‘iAfrika (God bless Africa) and a choir festival that represented a wide variety of Afrikaans speakers. On the other hand, the official speech was delivered by the then apartheid premier, BJ Vorster.

Museums as cultural landscapes are public spaces that are regarded as “contact zones” where different conflicting ideas, perceptions and perspectives are expressed. In addition, Afrikaans was partially formed a “contact language” between different language groups, and visitors bring their own interpretation and perspectives to the monument. Permanent collections or temporary exhibitions are ecosystems or habitats that are managed, developed, expanded and sometimes pruned. The monument seeks to facilitate processes and establish partnerships for the collection and conservation of Afrikaans communities’ objects, living heritage and cultural uses in situ.

For a decade we have been actively documenting non-recorded Afrikaans and Afrikaans living worlds, especially in the Northern Cape, and preserving them in a digital format for the offspring. Of course, the museum itself plays an important role in the preservation and digitization of incredible Africana Afrikaans manuscripts and other sources of information, including the fascinating role of Arabic Afrikaans.

This monument and even the language are nothing without the community living here and the people who speak Afrikaans. That’s why we offer picnics for the Let’s Read! literacy project for children, a night run for the Boland School of Autism, and we also offer students the opportunity to gain work experience at the monument. Every week, school groups, from a wide range of socio-economic and language backgrounds, come to learn more about Afrikaans’s origins and experience the beautiful scenery.

We commemorate several national and public days, such as 16 June, and this year we offered free entrance to all foreign Africans in South Africa on Africa Day. Throughout the year the monument hosts exciting musical, educational and other events, that attract a diverse audience – see www.taalmonument.co.za (http://www.taalmonument.co.za/) for more.

It appears that the Language Monument is increasingly regarded as a must-see tourism attraction by locals and foreigners. By creating and maintaining the above-mentioned visitor experiences and services, we want to expand the monument into a dynamic and inclusive setting promoting the multilingual diversity of Afrikaans in the context of a multilingual community.
I am held responsible for an institution that some still view in a negative light, but I request them to come and visit us with an open mind. We cannot change the past, but we can focus on what Afrikaans and the monument were always supposed to be. If my father, who had to endure a lot under apartheid, was here, he would be a living witness of how times have changed. And how Afrikaans is an integral, constructive part of our country’s future; something he strongly supported.

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Michael Jonas has been the Director of the Afrikaans Language Museum and Monument since 2016. He has a Master’s degree in Museum and Heritage Studies from the UWC, and has worked in this sector for the past 23 years in various capacities. He is interested in the development of languages as bearers of culture, and regards Afrikaans as a vehicle for social cohesion that should be promoted within a multilingual society.