



## Interview with Sybrandus Adema of Afrikaans TaalMonument

Blog / By Rob Glass

There are many people, places, and more that have monuments and statues dedicated to them. But did you know that the Afrikaans language of South Africa has its own monument? And how exactly does one dedicate a physical monument to an abstract concept? I contacted Sybrandus Adema, the communications officer for the Afrikaanse Taalmuseum en -monument (Afrikaans Language Museum and Monument) to see just how this concept can develop.

### ***Can you give us a brief overview of the development of Afrikaans?***

Afrikaans (meaning African/From Africa) developed as a contact language between various cultures in the Cape Colony in Africa during the 1700s and 1800s. It is regarded as a [creole continuum](#) and a semi-creolised language because the language is still too complex to be regarded as a true creole in many linguistic and academic circles. While taking most of its cues from the official Dutch variety spoken in the Cape from the 1700s onwards, it was influenced by the speakers of African languages, specifically the first-people Khoisan, and Southeast Asian languages, specifically the Malay-speaking slaves abducted from that part of the world.

The language evolved gradually and in the 1800s local Muslim scholars started using it in Arabic writing for religious instruction of the Koran. Not long after that Dutch linguist Arnoldus Pannevis realised that the language spoken by South Africans was already a language in its own right, which he proposed to be called Afrikaans and not Cape Dutch. He and other Paarl inhabitants yearned to translate the Bible into Afrikaans to establish its status as a written language, using the Latin alphabet. To work for the recognition of Afrikaans as a written language, they formed the Fellowship of True Afrikaners (Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners, GRA) in Paarl on 14 August 1875 in the homestead that today houses the Afrikaans Language Museum, of which the Afrikaans Language Monument is a sister institution. The GRA's and others' activism finally resulted in Afrikaans (and no longer standard Dutch) being recognised as an official language in 1925, which led to the speedy development of the language to be used at the highest levels. Since 1994 it is one of South Africa's eleven official languages.

While there is a huge revitalisation in Afrikaans films, books and other creative outputs, also at art festivals and in cyber space, the language still suffers from its real and imagined proximity to the Apartheid regime. Like many

smaller and other African languages, globalisation, with its emphasis on English, has placed pressure on Afrikaans's higher functions – becoming a monolingual English speaker holds broad appeal to many. Afrikaans, with about 8 million speakers and probably the most racially diverse African mother-tongue, is the third largest mother-tongue in South Africa and is also widely spoken in Namibia.

### ***What was the original idea behind the monument?***

The idea of constructing a monument to the Afrikaans language was raised on 14 August 1942 on the farm Kleinbosch near Paarl during the unveiling of a memorial plaque – in honour of SJ du Toit, DF du Toit and PJ



Malherbe, three founder members of the GRA – who are buried there. This led to a public meeting in Paarl on 26 September 1942 where the Afrikaanse Taalmonument Komitee (Afrikaans Language Monument Committee) was formed with the aim to raise funds for the construction of a “worthy language monument in Paarl”, and to provide bursaries to “deserving post-graduate students studying specific aspects of the Afrikaans language”. Even though Afrikaans was moulded organically all-over Southern Africa, an important part of Afrikaans's formal history played itself out in Paarl.

### ***Why did you choose to do a physical monument to an abstract concept?***

Although it is challenging to visualise a language, the committee wanted a monument to commemorate Afrikaans's coming of age. It would also serve as an information centre regarding Afrikaans's history for local and foreign tourists. A competition was organised for the design of the monument – the brief stated that the monument had to be visible from afar and among other things had to depict the cultural and political flowering of Afrikaans.

Architect Jan van Wijk's design was selected as the winner – one of his most important design considerations was that the monument should harmonise with and complement the natural environment. Van Wijk felt that the lines and other elements of the monument should reflect the natural lines and forms of the environment, and that the building materials should blend in with the rocks on the Paarl Mountain. The next step was to look for a suitable image that could represent Afrikaans. The geometrician in Van Wijk immediately recognised a mathematical hyperbola in the imagery used by the famous Afrikaans writer CJ Langenhoven to describe the growth of Afrikaans, namely a ‘rapidly ascending arc’. Thus, the idea of the main column was born. Van Wijk said to himself: “Wonderful – there you see your language – a nice shape. But it can't be just a shape, it must also have definition.”

To visually express this definition, Van Wijk used the words of another Afrikaans writer, NP van Wyk Louw, who described Afrikaans as the language that connects Western Europe and Africa, like a bridge. Louw also described Afrikaans as a ‘gleaming tool’ and a ‘double-edged sword’. All these concepts shaped the monument in the mind's eye of Van Wijk, and were eventually realised in its structure and symbolism.

The smaller columns on the left represent the influence of Western European languages and cultures on the development of Afrikaans, including Dutch, German, French and Portuguese. None of the columns depict a specific language, and the columns are from high to low to illustrate Europe's diminishing influence on Afrikaans. The wall on the stairway of the monument represents the influence of Indonesian languages (mainly Malay) on the development of Afrikaans. Since Malay is from the East, the wall has been placed between the curves of Western Europe and Africa as a separate entity. Yet it forms a unity with the two forces of Western Europe and Africa that merge to form the bridge that symbolically depicts the root, the roots of Afrikaans. The three domes on the right represent the influence of the Khoikhoi and other African languages, including isiXhosa, isiZulu and Sesotho, on the development of Afrikaans, and represent the southern tip of Africa. Unlike the columns of the European languages, these domes increase in size because Africa's influence on Afrikaans increases. These structures are placed in such a way that they form a curve that joins the main line (that is, Afrikaans), and so completes the circle.

The three continents' representations all feed into the main 57m high column, which stands in a fountain – much like a tree with its roots. The architect left an opening at the apex to represent continual growth. The rising edge of the main wall has a series of openings through which the alternating light and sunrays create magical light patterns on the inside. This light, the opening at the top and the fountain's water symbolise the vigorous growth of the language.

Next to the main column, and also in the fountain, is another column (26m high) depicting the Republic of South Africa, the birthplace of standardised Afrikaans. The column is open to Africa to indicate that an interaction between Afrikaans, South Africa and Africa continually takes place as it has developed into a fully-fledged and independent indigenous language in Africa.

Regarding the architect, of all the projects that Van Wijk took on in his life, his magnum opus, the Language Monument, was the closest to his heart. It is therefore appropriate that his ashes were cemented into a granite boulder here, in the same boulder next to which he and his wife lingered on a day in 1964 when they explored the mountain in preparation for his design. This boulder forms part of a natural outdoor gallery – the Groen Galery – where upcoming Afrikaans writers' poems are exhibited.

### ***What were some of the challenges with creating the monument?***

The first one was to raise enough money and support; it took about two decades after the appeal before the committee could launch the design competition, and then another decade before the actual building work started. Secondly, there were many linguistic and political debates about what exactly the monument should symbolise and to whom (see answer to next question for more on this).

Given its unusual design and the fact that it is located on a small mountain overlooking the Cape Peninsula and Boland valleys, the first project was to build a road to the site, which was donated by the local municipality. Construction of the monument began in late 1972 and was completed at the end of 1974.

Another challenge was to create a special concrete mix, consisting of cement, white sand and Paarl granite. Because the architect wanted to reflect the colour of the rocks on the site, he insisted on using the greyish-brown outer layers of the granite as well as the bluish inner part. The texture of the rocks on the site was imitated by

removing the outer cement layer of the hardened concrete with pneumatic hammers, so as to expose the granite chips embedded in the mixture.

Given the often-windy conditions, the main spire was tested in a wind tunnel in Stellenbosch, and it was found to be able to withstand wind speeds of up to 160km/h.

The construction companies kept to the deadlines, and the architect was often on site to see his dream become a reality. The total cost of construction was around R700 000 (\$48,500). The monument was inaugurated in 1975, a hundred years after the founding of the GRA, and 50 years after Afrikaans became an official language.

### ***Is the monument a representation of the Afrikaans culture or the period in history when it was developed?***

To some degree it is, but the architect envisaged a timeless sculpture imbued with very rich symbolism, which spoke for itself, as it were, and leaves onlookers to find specific meaning according to the viewpoints held by each individual. Although the Afrikaans Language Monument Committee and others insisted that the project must remain politically neutral, this was not always possible. White Afrikaner nationalists were in charge of South Africa and Namibia, and this monument (as well as Afrikaans) was seen as symbols of their political maturity.

The year 1975 was declared Language Year by the South African government, and 14 August was declared a public holiday in celebration of the centennial of the GRA so that “people all over the country can celebrate the birthday of Afrikaans”. On that day, the festivities commenced at the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria. In memory of the eight founding members of the GRA, eight ‘language torches’ departed from the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria to all corners of the Republic and to Namibia (then called South West Africa). In the following months, Afrikaans newspapers regularly covered the ‘Miracle of Afrikaans’, reporting on local festivities and publishing articles on the history of the GRA. The fervour also led to about 20 smaller Afrikaans language monuments being erected in (now) seven of South Africa’s nine provinces, one of them in East London on 9 September as part of a local language festival. It bears the words of an Afrikaans poet, C.F. Visser: ‘O, Moedertaal / O, soetste taal, / Jou het ek lief / bo alles’ (O mother tongue, O sweetest tongue, You I love above all).

Among the aspects debated before, during and after the erection of the Monument, the most important were issues of location, aesthetics, function, symbolism and ideology. The very fact of building a tangible structure such as a monument for intangible heritage, namely language, was questioned in terms of the necessity, practicality and advisability of such an undertaking. These concerns were addressed and answered by the then Prime Minister, adv. BJ Vorster, in his inaugural speech of the Monument. According to him (own translation and abridgement): “If your mother were just a woman, and your flag just a piece of cloth, your national anthem just a poem, and your language just a means of communication; then for you this monument will be a lifeless structure of concrete and granite. Afrikaans had to prove itself against overwhelming odds, and has done so admirably, and that is the reason why a monument has been erected in its honour.”

Although the general symbolism embodied in the Monument, and especially the way in which Van Wijk expressed it architecturally, was met with an overwhelmingly positive response from the Committee, the inclusion of the influence of African languages on the development of Afrikaans engendered strong opposition from a small faction led by the previous chairman of the Committee. They felt that such references were “historically incorrect”. This can be partially explained by the first Afrikaans linguists’ heavy reliance on European languages, specifically Dutch, in the process to codify Afrikaans. This was done in part as a reaction to humiliations suffered at the hand

of the British during the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902, which moved many Boers/Afrikaners to try and be as European as English-speaking South Africans to gain their respect. Afrikaans was partially 'sanitised' of its African and even Malay influences; only in the last three decades have these 'ignored' histories of Afrikaans really been actively researched and highlighted, amongst others by the Afrikaans Language Museum and Monument.

The disagreement then led to bitter arguments, intensive lobbying, petitions, threats of violence and eventually a total schism. There was of course a contradiction in trying to promote Afrikaans as a European language, while at the same time being extremely proud that the language is from Africa and so too, its speakers. Sanity, however, prevailed and the inclusive symbolism as initially visualised by Van Wijk was accepted unchanged.

Afrikaans and its relationship to the other languages of South Africa is a so-called site of contestation, which by implication makes the Monument one as well. The Monument was erected in the heyday of Apartheid, and many critics maintained that the government of the day had openly "hijacked" the Monument as a powerful symbol of Afrikaner Nationalism, which they had also done to some degree with Afrikaans. This was brought about in part by the project having been heavily supported by the state.

Another factor which led to bitter politically inspired clashes was that, initially, few Coloured people were intended to take part in or be invited to the inauguration. This was despite extensive use of Afrikaans in the Coloured community (and their fundamental role in the development of the language), and sent the message of White exclusivity and elitism. A storm brewed in the media and many progressive white Afrikaans writers threatened to boycott the opening, which eventually led to the inclusion in the programme and invitation to the event of a significant number of people from other races. An Afrikaans poem titled 'Nkosi sikelel iAfrika' by a leading coloured writer, Adam Small, was recited at the event even though 'Nkosi sikelel iAfrika' was a well-known anti-colonial and anti-apartheid hymn/anthem. The event, attended by more than 40 000 people, was also a choir festival with nine racially diverse choirs participating. However, for many anti-apartheid activists it was a case of too little, too late, and they still refused to attend the proceedings.

Since the liberation of the country and by default Afrikaans as well, the monument has played a vital role to recognise displaced histories of Afrikaans, as part of a larger decolonisation process. We promote mutual respect and tolerance between members of the Afrikaans language community in order to facilitate a stronger shared cultural identity. As the monument and museum strive for the well-being of Afrikaans within the larger South African society, we wish to encourage and support Afrikaans, especially among the youth and non-mother-tongue speakers. We constantly endeavour to establish mutual respect between Afrikaans and other indigenous languages by, among others, acknowledging the mutual influences of the languages on each other.

### ***Have there been plans in South Africa to create anything similar for the native languages?***

Not as far as we know, but it would be fantastic if this was done. For now, we see the monument not only as a beacon of hope for the development of Afrikaans, but also for all other African languages.

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