REFLECTION

Charlize, let me tell you a little something – a journey to Afrikaans

By Marianne Thamm
(https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/author/mariannethamm/)
21 Nov 2022
Marianne Thamm reflects on Charlize Theron and the Afrikaans language.

When music legend Johnny Clegg sang and spoke isiZulu he came alive.

He was possessed by a distinct energy which animated his conversation and which was often lacking when he gave interviews in English.
When Johnny spoke Zulu – or when Zulu spoke Johnny rather – there was a playfulness and presence which English didn’t seem to provide.

Zulu enabled the musician and legend to find a path to his soul, his heart, his creativity, his place in the world.

There are languages which allow this playfulness.

English, of course, is pliable, but must be radically bent and tickled and reshaped to allow a sort of informality some other languages offer more readily. Nigerians have stretched English, as have the Irish and the Americans.

The Queen’s English is as much of an emotional and social straitjacket as *Algemeen Beskaafde Afrikaans* (Generally Civilised Afrikaans) – it keeps all people and things in their place.

**Two tongues**

There are two versions of Afrikaans in conversation with itself. Always have been.

There is the “generally civilised” version which in 20 years established itself as a full-fledged and internationally recognised literary and academic
language.

En route it became the language of officialdom, power, control and white Baaskap (supremacy). It was one of only two official languages in apartheid South Africa and was a compulsory subject in schools.

That is how it landed in my mouth and worked its way to the arsenal of languages that surrounded me.

The push of Afrikaans onto a multilingual black populace led to the rebellion in Soweto in 1976. More than 100 children were shot resisting the imposition.

It was this Afrikaans that was resisted.

Then there is the Afrikaans that has pushed back and smashed the claustrophobic window on the universe a narrow Afrikaans offered.

And it is this Afrikaans which opens up a pathway to a sort of a unique verbal jazz, a flexible code with ready access to humour, satire and ridicule.

Portuguese and German were the mother tongues of our parents in virulently Afrikaans-speaking Pretoria in the 1970s. Being raised in a family where accented, broken English was the lingua franca, however, opened up many other paths to communication.

And so it was that Afrikaans acquired a generation of new speakers, while they in turn acquired and possessed it. Today it is spoken by about eight million South Africans.

Because of this, I could call Conservative Party leader and Dutch Reformed Church dominee, Dr Andries Treurnicht, from the Cape Town offices of
the English-language *Cape Times* in the 1980s where I worked.

The instruction that evening was to seek his opinion on the announcement by President PW Botha of proposed “reforms” to apartheid, roundly rejected within and without formal politics. Naturally these “reforms” excluded the black majority.

Treurnicht had left the National Party in disgust to form the Conservative Party. He had been deputy minister of Bantu Administration and Education in 1976 when the Afrikaans-language policy was imposed on black students.

As an Afrikaner nationalist and neo-Calvinist he strongly supported apartheid, a policy later declared by the UN as a crime against humanity.

Treurnicht answered his landline at his home in Cape Town. It was late. Around 11pm. The story had been a leftover from the day shift. No one was keen to call up Treurnicht.

Offering comment to an English-language newspaper would have coloured how Treurnicht pitched his response. Our conversation in “algemeen beskaafd” Afrikaans was easy.

Being Catholic and unfamiliar with the bible – dogma being the preferred method of conjuring – I asked Treurnicht to explain what he had meant by “Ichabod” which he had used in his comment.

“It is this Ichabod” (Then it will be Ichabod) he had replied.

It had something to do with the loss of the ark to the Philistines in Book of 1 Samuel, I later understood.
But this reporter’s lack of knowledge was an immediate alert to Treurnicht that he was speaking to an outsider, not someone raised Afrikaans and not a protestant.

But that is what happens when you force a language on a country and its people.

Afrikaans took me there right to Treurnicht on the other end of the line that night, but it also took me elsewhere.

In the 1980s it took me to the music of Johannes Kerkorrel, Koos Kombuis, Amanda Strydom and Piet Botha, the comedy of Casper de Vries and Nataniël. This was when white speakers of the language hurled it back at those who used it as a weapon.

It was in Antwerp, Belgium in the late 1980s when my dear friend, Belgian writer Tom Lanoye, convinced me to untether, once and for all, Afrikaans from its history and those who claimed it as their own.

The journey began and has never stopped.
Along the way stood a stellar line of individuals who offered up the tongue in protest, defence and pushing the limits it imposed: Adam Small, Antjie Krog, Breyten Breytenbach, Ingrid Jonker, Andre Brink.

Today Afrikaans, to those who speak it, offers a smorgasbord of literary, artistic, musical, intellectual and cultural delights. More books are published in Afrikaans than any other indigenous language. It is celebrated in world-class, contemporary theatre at myriad festivals.

A thriving film and television industry provides work for thousands of artists, writers, actors, musicians, directors – black and white.

Many artists, particularly musicians, have made lucrative and enduring careers: Karen Zoid, Nataniël, Amanda Strydom, Fokoff Polisiekar, Youngsta CPT, Early B. The list is too long and keeps getting added to.

![Early B performs at the annual Liefde By Die Dam at the Meerendal Wine Estate on November 12, 2022 in Durbanville. The much-loved Afrikaans pop-rock music festival is celebrated annually.](Photo by Gallo Images/Die Burger/Jaco Marais)

Black Afrikaans
As an author and chronicler of the history of black writers of Afrikaans literature, Professor Hein Willemse, of the Department of Afrikaans at the University of Pretoria, has written extensively (https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/82217/Willemse_Black_2020.pdf?sequence=1) on the subject.

In September 2019 he noted: “It is striking that not a single Black Afrikaans writer formally debuted between 1961 and the 1976 uprising.”

Willemse’s article was a complimentary piece to a 2002 paper by Professor Ampie Coetzee titled “Swart Afrikaanse Skrywers: ’n diskursiewe praktyk van die verlede” (Black Afrikaans writers: a discursive practice of the past).

It was 1985 when the first Black Afrikaans Writers Symposium, in association with the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), took place. This was followed up in 1995, 2005 and 2015.

Notable here is the role of UWC) and its vice-chancellor, the iconic Jakes Gerwel (1987-1994), who inspired a generation of black professionals, activists and politicians. Or rather “coloured”, as the apartheid government would classify students attending this “bush” college at the time.

While back then Stellenbosch University was still a bastion of white Afrikanerdom, UWC was where revolution in Afrikaans was fermenting.

As Willemse records, the Black Afrikaans Writers symposia “brought together writers who had several characteristics in common”.

“They mostly shared a legislated racial classification and used the Afrikaans language as a medium of literary expression. They mainly came from the Afrikaans rural areas, were fairly educated and were born in the immediate post-1948 era.”

These writers “ascribed to divergent social identities and diverse political orientations, implicitly suggesting multiple ways of resolving the late apartheid crisis of the 1980s”.

These symposia, writes Willemse, had “bestowed an identity on a literary development that in crucial respects was antithetical to the dominant perceived notion of Afrikaans and Afrikaans literature as white, Afrikaner-centric, middle class, nationalist, pedestrian and for the most part, indifferent to the political struggles of black South Africans.”

**Literary pioneers**


Then there is Frieda Gygenaar, Abraham Phillips, AHM Scholtz, EKM Dido, Karel Benjamin, SP Benjamin, Mathews Phosa, Allan Boesak, Zulfah Otto-Sallies, Loït Sôls, Clive Smith, Kirby van der Merwe, Joseph Marble, Elias Nel and Catherine Willemse, who were all published, notes Willemse, with “mostly mainstream Afrikaans publishers in the immediate thawing of the apartheid state”.
A “third-wave”, a post-2000 generation “broadly categorised as black, has come to the fore,” notes the author.

These include novelists and autobiographers Simon Bruinders, Olivia Coetzee, Zain Eckleton, Jenna-Leigh February, Brian Fredericks, John Fredericks, Fatima [Osman], Hemelbesem (Simon Witbooi), Valda Jansen, Chys Rhys, Jeremy Vearey and Bettina Wyngaard.

Poets who have captured the times are Ronelda Kamfer, Lynthia Julius, Andy Paulse, Jolyn Phillips, Shirmoney Rhode, and Nathan Trantraal as well as playwrights Christo Davids and Amy Jephta.

**Officially Official**

In 2021, Minister of Higher Education Blade Nzimande announced that Afrikaans would no longer be considered an “indigenous” language.

Protest followed after the release of a Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions which excluded Afrikaans, Khoi and
San languages from the definition of an “indigenous” language.

By May 2022, Nzimande backtracked and declared all these tongues were from one mother and belonged along with the others.

It was a historic victory cementing the status of these languages and finally Afrikaans.

UWC has been at the forefront of liberating Afrikaans (there were some dissidents at Stellenbosch, however, fighting from within). Today Afrikaans is spoken without fear at UWC while at Stellenbosch it has become a fraught political football.

For some of us Afrikaans feels like home. **DM/ML**

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Winterlorinda 22 November 2022 at 05:27


Excellent article thank you, just a pity I don’t think she would read it and, if she did, she wouldn’t understand.

Wilhelm Boshoff 22 November 2022 at 05:40

Thank you!

Kenneth Jeenes Jeenes 22 November 2022 at 06:45


Such an excellent piece, Marianne!

Peter Bartlett 22 November 2022 at 06:51

Clearly, Charlize is more adept in the art of speaking absolute ‘kak’ than she is at basic arithmetic; as this article so eloquently sets forth.

I counted around sixty names in the article alone – excluding Marianne and myself – so presies hoe die poppie kon uitkom op die syfer 44 is onverstaanbaar.

I failed Afrikaans in my third term Standard 9 and set about taking extra lessons – surrounding myself with Afrikaans speaking friends; and later work colleagues and business people – and today, some fifty-odd years later, I proudly count myself in as a makgemaakte Engelsman, and one of Charlize’s 44; or should that rather be Marianne’s 8-million, who regularly enjoys speaking Afrikaans.

Unlike one of my heroes too – the legendary White Zulu, Johnny Clegg; who was fluent in isi-Zulu – I also take pride in being able to get by and converse fairly adequately speaking and understanding the isi-Xhosa language.

I wonder – other than ‘kak-praat’, Engels and [maybe still] die ou Boeretaal she grew up with – how many African languages our Bombshell from Benoni speaks?

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**Easy Does It** 22 November 2022 at 07:01

I am sure each language has a journey and some more interesting than others. This does not make Afrikaans any more special – in fact, I have come to detest Afrikaans because I am a product which has had Afrikaans stuffed down my throat. There is nothing in Afrikaans for me to like and I am not alone. Speak to me in Afrikaans and I will answer in English every time even though I understand and can speak a little Afrikaans.

Libby 22 November 2022 at 08:56

If it makes you feel good to do so, nobody really minds. The fact that Britannia ruled the waves and forced the English language down the throats of all their colonised subjects made it the world language that it is today.

It would be good to take note that one does not get a cookie for being able to speak only English.

Mark Kerruish 22 November 2022 at 10:47
I went to China and I learnt to speak basic Mandarin. I am planning to go to Portugal and have started learning Portuguese. Spanish is next on my list. Learning a language is a great way to broaden one’s understanding of people and the world. I feel very sorry for monolingual people. It must be so claustrophobic in their heads.

Libby 22 November 2022 at 09:12


Hats off to you, Marianne. If one is ignorant and uninformed one should not be arrogant as well.
I wonder if ms Theron’s reference to Afrikaans includes Kaaps?
She should possibly consider that the reason for her misinformation is the fact that she only speaks one language and thus people switch to their second or third or fourth language to accommodate her.

Karen G 22 November 2022 at 15:45

(https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-11-21-charlize-let-me-tell-you-a-
Charlize is Afrikaans – she only learned to speak English when she moved to the US at the age of 19. Charlize still speaks Afrikaans to her mother. Maybe because she is the only person she knows in America who speaks Afrikaans she came up with the daft number of 44 or maybe she was just showing off and trying to get a laugh from her interviewer, just like John Steenhuisen with his “roadkill” comment.

Mark Kerruish 22 November 2022 at 10:41

I also loathed Afrikaans when it was forced down my throat at school. Afterwards, I went out with an Afrikaans lass who introduced me to Koos Kombuis and Ingrid Jonker. I discovered that there was a lot there for me if I only bothered to look. I’m glad I did, and I can only encourage others to do the same.
What an interesting comment. I was going to say the opposite.

With everything that was wrong and abhorrent about Apartheid, it is a very logical but unfortunate consequence that the majority of South Africans would shun the language. There were two languages of oppression, one being English, but so be it.

What many South Africans do not realise, or seem to think about much, is that Afrikaans is actually the perfect struggle language. It was the “kitchen language” spoken by those who were oppressed by their Dutch overlords (“Verenigde Oos-Indiese Companjie) and the language grew amongst those who started drifting inland, away from oppression. Then the English came and colonised the country, gathering the riches, and oppressed both the Afrikaners and indigenous nations. The real “forcing down throats” was the English forcing English and Latin down everyone’s throats. Hence my opening statement.

My personal belief is to look at history and learn from it. The emotional hanging on is not conducive to growth.
and reconciliation. We all should now know better. Historically though it would bear thought to remember the oppression of the boere-volk and their predecessors, in conjunction with indigenous nations.

What a fantastic opportunity we have to “free” the language as well and grow it into a truly indigenous South African language, which will stand as a beacon against colonialisation and oppression. The freedom within the language structure itself is symbolic.

**Andrew Blaine** 22 November 2022 at 07:55


As an engelsman who started learning Afrikaans, “van die bruin mense” at the age of 32, I appreciate the gift the language gives to all South Africans and the beauty it bestows on the country. Surely, there is no other language, created by the oppressed of our land, which expresses the love and pathos, humour and pain if all speakers. We should love and cherish it, while protecting it from the ravages of politicians?

**Jan Swart** 22 November 2022 at 08:38

Here's an Afrikaans sentence that can’t be translated into English: Die kind kruip onder die tafel deur.

Karen G 22 November 2022 at 15:49

the child crawls through under the table?

Lindi Van Niekerk 22 November 2022 at 08:15
Such a balanced and beautifully written article. I so regret my reluctance to learn how to speak Afrikaans fluently because of my associating it as the language of the oppressor. My parents also discouraged me from excelling at Afrikaans throughout my schooling. Two significant events required me to shift my perspective and prejudice; I fell in love with the most wonderful man who happened to be Afrikaans, secondly, in my training as a clinical psychologist in the Western Cape, many of the patients I saw were Afrikaans speaking.
I love that Marianne chose to journey into another experience of Afrikaans and has shared that discovery with us. On a personal level I’m committed to challenging my own prejudice so that I’m able to connect better with Afrikaans speaking patients or clients who are brave enough to seek therapy. I’m saddened that in some way I was not able to fully hold the needs of patients I worked with as I stumbled and tripped over my clumsy use of the language.
On the positive side, I did not raise my children with prejudice against any culture or ethnic group and they both love the expressiveness of Afrikaans!

Jane Crankshaw Crankshaw 22 November 2022 at 09:34
We have to remember that Dutch was the first official language of ours since the 1660’s ...the English were Johnny Come Lately’s so it stands to reason that Afrikaans (a derivative of Dutch/Flemish) should be acknowledged as Zuid Afrika’s first Official Language!

Karen G 22 November 2022 at 15:54

Well technically the first language of South Africa would be the language spoken by the Khoisan folk already here, who greeted the Dutch explorers in the 1660’s.

Jane Crankshaw Crankshaw 22 November 2022 at 08:27
Even to English speakers Afrikaans feels like home!
And probably why South Africans travelling Europe find the Netherlands so familiar and comforting too! Lovely article, thanks!

Colleen 22 November 2022 at 08:27

Every South African – and perhaps Charleze as well – should read Helen Oppermann Lewis’ book Apartheid – Britain’s Bastard Child.

Tony Aka Tony 22 November 2022 at 09:54

Informative. Also relieved that only the title responded to Charlize’s (troll?) comment.

Steven Burnett 22 November 2022 at 10:04
This whole knew jerk reaction to a throwaway comment that was clearly a joke just cements the impression that Afrikaans mense really can’t take a joke.

I’m a soutie who was forced to bumble through it at school, but then went to an Afrikaans university with a platteland roomie who had zero English. I quickly learnt to love and respect the language, and it’s not going anywhere.

It does strike me as odd that my primary school children at a very diverse school have only Afrikaans as the second language option, some things take forever to change.

Karen G 22 November 2022 at 15:54

Agreed.

Michael Olivier 22 November 2022 at 10:12


What a wonderful article Marianne. Wish more of us South Africans would treat the genuine history of our land with such depth of understanding and tolerance, and balanced recognition of our faults and all our great character. There is so much in each of our “official” languages to be discovered, treasured and developed, rather than minimised or forever to be carried as yokes of burden.

Cunningham Ngcukana 22 November 2022 at 10:50

Blade Nzimande is what the late Dr SK Matseke called educationists who need education themselves. He needs to understand that Afrikaans is indigenous to South Africa and is not spoken anywhere. He needs to understand the definition of indigenous language in the context of the trilogy of our heritage as a country. The fascism of the SACP, is what led him not to be appointed a Minister of Education during the Mandela years. In search of a cabinet post, he abandoned all principles including ethics, morality and supported an ANC feudalist in the name of Jacob Zuma. Now that the fascist who has no respect for democracy has attain the elusive objective, he runs that department by decree.
Franz Wagener 22 November 2022 at 11:20


Thanks

Vincent Coetzee 22 November 2022 at 12:26

I always find it irksome when people play the “my language is better than your language” game. As a native English speaker I can naturally make the language do things that a non-native English speaker can not, similarly a native Afrikaans speaker can make Afrikaans do things that a non-native speaker of Afrikaans can not. Everyone thinks their native tongue is better than every other tongue in the world while it’s probably not so. I could argue that if Afrikaans were as flexible as you claim, that it would have taken the world by storm as English has, but I won’t because I believe that everyone’s native tongue is precious to them. If you don’t want me making embarrassing comparisons about the number of nouns and verbs English has compared with Afrikaans, don’t play the frankly infantile game of language one-upmanship. I cherish Afrikaans, I cherish English, but one is not better than the other, they all have virtues and they all have vices and to insist that Afrikaans is better than any other language is churlish.

**Manfred Hasewinkel** 22 November 2022 at 15:29


Excellent article and thanks for making the effort.

**Matsobane Monama** 22 November 2022 at 15:43

There is NO such thing as BLACK Afrikaans but rather Coloured Afrikaans. They now identify themselves as Coloured n proudly themselves as such and yet they were put 3rd on Apartheid racial hierarchy, hating half your blood. How many of you Speak or Attempt to speak an AFRICAN language? Our names are shamelessly BUTCHERED in conversation and @ work places. Khoi n San are African languages Not Afrikaans. The beaches in CT n Durban syns read European only, you excluded yourself not us. What has now changed? No white person ask, am i pronouncing your name or surname correctly? Remember the article by Cornelius Monama daily maverick, spokesperson of Minister of Defense a few weeks ago? It’s there in your face Monama but some comments Manana, Munana, Manama. You just don’t care. Lecturers even argued why don’t we put an h if we can’t Call it e.g Mphahlele, they arrogantly said Mfufalele. My children won’t speak a language of people Who don’t want or atleast try to Speak n write African languages Correctly. Charlize Theron has traveled the world, learned how small Afrikaans is in a Global space. English is the international language of trade. Period.
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