Where did this story that Afrikaans is a white person’s language come from?

By Wilmot James

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The sterile debate about whether Afrikaans is an indigenous language (of course it is) or not defines the language as a problem rather than as an opportunity to craft and shape an inclusive South African expressionism.

My Athlone High School geography and English teacher Pat Wagner once (in the late 1960s) made the memorable claim that “a language belongs to those who speak it.”

Although institutional entities played a major role in adding value, language does not belong to those who fund the dictionaries and other means of codifying and documenting the etymology of words, or to the poets and writers of fiction, or to the non-fiction authors and journalists. No, by Wagner’s reckoning, language ownership is vested in not just some but in all those who speak it, and we must surely concur.

Born in Paarl, my first language is, unsurprisingly, Afrikaans. My mouth may open in English, but I tend to think in Afrikaans. I am told that on the rare occasion when I get angry, or want to make a really
wicked joke, I staccato in Afrikaans. I love to listen to and really enjoy someone who speaks Afrikaans really well (and for that I miss Jakes Gerwel). I may even dream in Afrikaans, I cannot recall.

As Neville Alexander used to say, one’s mother tongue may get rusty, but it never leaves you. New York City, where I currently live, is a place of many languages but not Afrikaans, and I miss hearing it there.

I teach health security and diplomacy to graduate students at Columbia University, an elite Ivy League research university based in New York City. My students are surprised when I tell them that Afrikaans is not a white person’s language. That is not what they have learnt.

Recent research undertaken by the SA Institute of Race Relations confirms that over 50% of Afrikaans speakers are like me (of Indian slave, Malaysian and European descent), while 40% of speakers are, or think they are, of European descent. A significant number of Afrikaans speakers are black. Visit the Free State, the North West, or the North-Eastern Cape, and you will understand what I mean. Then read former Mpumalanga Premier Mathews Phosa’s poetry.
So here is the question: where did the story that Afrikaans is a white person’s language come from? Not a language historian by any means.

I recently gave an amateur account to colleagues from the UK and Canadian governments visiting to participate in two conferences on biosecurity and biodefence recently held in Cape Town. I took them to my hometown Paarl and, after explaining why Charles Darwin came all the way in June 1836 from the Beagle docked in Simon’s Town to stand on Paarl’s geologically world-famous granite outcrop, I directed their gaze to the architecturally peculiar Taalmonument as a backdrop to my story.

I was proud to be from a town that published the first ever newspaper — on 16 January 1876 — in the Afrikaans language called Die Patriot. It was a major effort to steer the Afrikaans language away from what was pejoratively referred to as “kitchen Dutch” and drive it towards a refined and more literary destiny.

The people who did the driving called themselves Regte Afrikaners (Real Afrikaners), they were all white, and they saw their task as purifying the language by stripping out corrupting influences. No
person of colour was included in these efforts, and how could they be? The pride was not to be shared. This was early clutching ethno-nationalism at work.

I told my UK and Canadian colleagues that the kitchen in kitchen Dutch was likely a slave one. The kitchens and households of the Dutch settlers and proto-Afrikaners were run by Javanese and other slaves picked up (as my maternal great-great Indian grandfather was) from the coastlines of Malabar, East and southern Africa, including as far south as Mozambique (remember the *Mozbiekers* from Pniel?).

Because of this history, Afrikaans has a significant Malaysian vocabulary (here is a sample — *piesang* for banana, *blatjang* for chutney, *piering* for saucer, *baklei* for fight). Certain words like *trammakassie* (thank you) you would only encounter in sub-communities of Afrikaans-speakers, mostly Muslim. These words, along with borrowed words from English and French, were considered impurities.

The *Regte Afrikaners* used *Die Patriot* to elevate Afrikaans and while there was nothing wrong in doing so, they racialised the effort along the way.
Kitchen Dutch is what coloured people spoke. It was looked down upon as a lesser Afrikaans, spoken by a lesser people. From the slave-run kitchens, Kitchen Dutch spread as a *lingua franca* into the coloured townships of Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein and Johannesburg, and the many rural towns, especially in the Western and Northern Cape.

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Vocabularies became more localised, as did accents and inflections. Those who developed an ear for the unfolding geographical diversity could accurately link accent to place. In case you think that this was a parochial South African thing, well, not entirely.

The Somerset West-born literary scholar Vernon February, who tragically died in the Netherlands as he was planning his permanent return home to South Africa in 2002, spent his remarkable career documenting the considerable creativity involved in
what he termed the creolisation of Dutch in South Africa, Surinam and the Antilles (the latter were South American Dutch colonies).

His counterpart in South Africa was the legendary Adam Small, whose poetry and plays written in the Cape patois (*Kaaps*) captured the searing maladies of a people mercilessly uprooted and segregated into their residential ghettos, of which District Six — still largely empty today — was the most egregious.

Vernon February never attracted the coveted Hertzog Prize for Afrikaans language and literature. Adam Small received his only in 2012, a belated afterthought.

The *Regte Afrikaners* initiated what turned out to be three language movements. Theirs, the first, ran from 1875 to 1899 led by JS du Toit. The second led by Gustav Preller started in 1905, who was joined by DF Malan (in 1948 Malan became South Africa’s first apartheid prime minister) and JHH de Waal, after whom the highway at the foot of Table Mountain was originally named.

Although he was not a part of the ideological thrust of the second movement, the ethologist Eugene Marais — known today for his elegant Afrikaans poetry —
published pathbreaking pieces in *Die Huisgenoot* (the “House Companion”), a serious magazine then, on the evolutionary behaviour of chacma baboons and ants, and established a scientific vocabulary for the Afrikaans language along the way, a monumental contribution its developing maturity. (Apologies for being self-referential, but I wrote an entire chapter on Eugene Marais’ contribution to Afrikaans as a science language in *Nature’s Gifts: why we are the way we are*. Wits University Press, 2010).

Supported by Afrikaner capital, by the 1960s Afrikaans had an architecture of writing stables, book clubs, media outlets and publishing houses. The bread-and-butter of the publishing houses was putting out books prescribed by a national curriculum that depended on Afrikaans being an official language. Winning a contract to publish set work books was a major revenue driver.

The biggest potential market for books was the black schools, but there was major resistance to teaching the subject in most except perhaps for the Free State. When John Vorster’s hard-nosed government imposed the teaching of Afrikaans on all black schools in 1976, a truly arrogant decision, Soweto exploded
and ignited cycles of resistance and repression that were only really resolved when the country turned democratic in 1994.

More than anything else, Soweto confirmed the proposition in most people’s minds that Afrikaans was the language of white supremacy and Afrikaner dominance.

But the truth is that it wasn’t.

Afrikaans belongs to everyone who speaks it — white, coloured, Indian, black — and we should take it back from the purists. As for the Taalmonument, which architecturally presents language development in ethnic phallic-like silos rather than, to use Neville Alexander’s imagery, a large flowing river to which various linguistic tributaries contribute, such dead concrete should be displaced by a living taalbeweging that is inclusive and where the full weight of today’s Afrikaner capital is put behind having new writing stables, book clubs, theatre production, awards systems, media programming and publishing.

Indeed, Afrikaans for all is already beginning to happen.
We do not have to begin from scratch. The *Suidoostefees* has been a dynamic platform of great creativity over the last decade and more. More recently, the annual *Tuin van die Digters* held at the Breytenbach Sentrum in Wellington is one powerful indicator that there is a concerted effort underway to make Afrikaans more inclusive when it comes to script and playwriting for film, theatre, short story and book publishing.

There are other initiatives and projects underway too, including the various mentorship and writing programmes sponsored by the Jakes Gerwel Foundation at its Somerset East Retreat. With Covid-19 on the wane (it is not done with us yet) there is room to lift the spirit in our land beset by stagnation and decline with an Afrikaans-inspired cultural renaissance.

The sterile debate about whether Afrikaans is an indigenous language (of course it is) or not defines the language as a problem rather than as an opportunity to craft and shape an inclusive South African expressionism.
You see, we humans live through our language, it defines us. Like music, language is inherent and not incidental to our nature. DM
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Jane Crankshaw Crankshaw 23 November 2022 at 06:43

(https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-11-22-where-did-
Interesting Op-Ed, I really enjoyed it. Baie Dankie!

Walthew.John 23 November 2022 at 07:28

Thank you for writing this article. I came here expecting to read an anti-white rant. Instead, my eyes were opened to a world of interesting facets of the Afrikaans language.

Dou 23 November 2022 at 07:56
From what I hear you should pass this on to Charlize Theron, she clearly needs some education on the subject of Afrikaans.

Andrew 'Mugsy' Spiegel 23 November 2022 at 09:17

Thanks for this second erudite article on Afrikaans in DM in two consecutive days. But what about that even more important and increasingly widely used SA patois, isiCamtho? Do we have to wait for an unthinking celluloid celebrity’s silly comments about isiCamtho before DM publishes erudite words about it? Or about the often destructively double-edged sword of language formalisation and its relation with identity construction?

Anton Louw 23 November 2022 at 09:40
Well written! Why not write an Afrikaans version?
Jacob Zuma should serve at least another two months behind bars before being considered for parole (https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-11-22-jacob-zuma-should-serve-at-least-another-two-months-behind-bars-before-being-considered-for-parole/?utm_source=top_reads_block&utm_campaign=maverick_news)


ConCourt orders Chris Hani’s murderer Janusz Walus to be released on parole (https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-11-21-concourt-3)

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

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