It’s time to decolonise Afrikaans

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At the end of a successful literary event held at Stellenbosch University recently, and in which I took part, I was asked for an on-camera interview by some journalists who were in attendance.

I happily obliged. The gossp about the magical world of books needs to be spread beyond a university function.

After a few energetic sets of answers in English, the journalist then asked me, “Can we now repeat the interview in Afrikaans?” That stopped me in my linguistic tracks.

“Uh... uh,” I hesitated. I always have this hesitation when journalists invite me on to programmes that are Afrikaans-medium. I do not speak Afrikaans with the same comfort as I do when I speak English.

But this is weird, because the discomfort with speaking Afrikaans isn’t about fluency. My mother tongue is Afrikaans. Everyone in my family speaks Afrikaans at home, and I am pretty much the only one who has been thoroughly anglicised because of my having attended an English-medium former Model C school, followed by English-medium university education.

But of course I am still fluent in Afrikaans.

So what’s up with the hesitation to speak Afrikaans publically? Or to conduct interviews about politics in Afrikaans?

Or speak about the magic of books in Afrikaans?

The Afrikaans which I speak with my family isn’t the Afrikaans which you mostly hear in the media and popular culture.

It is, of course, our own coloured dialect and tongue. It is a mix of Afrikaans and English, words from other languages, and we pronounce words not as “Standaardafrikaans” demands that we do, but in ways of our own choosing.

Even parts of our vocabulary are specific to the communities in which we live. And I am not referring here exclusively to “Afrikaner”, which has received some attention over the past few years, referring to the Afrikaans spoken on the Cape Flats by coloured communities there.

It initiates me when we assume homogeneity across coloured communities in the country.

When it comes to Afrikaans, coloured communities nationwide might share the commonality of not speaking Radio Sonder Grense Afrikaans, but beyond that, there are interesting and important differences in dialect, accent, vocabulary, and so on, between coloured people from different geographies.

These differences aren’t teased out when we reduce coloured identity to some grand narrative about the Cape Flats.

There is a willful refusal to recognise a multiplicity of coloured experiences, evidenced by the fact that coloured communities tend not to be treated with complexity in popular discourse.

But here’s the snag. As we approach Youth Day this week and commemorate the Soweto Uprising of 1976, it struck me that that uprising, sparked in the first instance by a rejection of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, has not led, 40 years later, to the complete liberation of Afrikaans from its roots of shameful political domination.

The year 1976 is often reduced to a black-and-white narrative. But for Afrikaans-speaking coloured South Africans, who obviously do not self-identify as white, and many who do not self-identify as black (although some of us do so politically), the politics of Afrikaans remains a knotted affair.

Afrikaans may slowly have lost its dominance politically and socially, but within the Afrikaans communities in this country there is still an unequal distribution of linguistic power that remains unresolved.
My reluctance to speak Afrikaans on radio and television is simply because we always, as coloured people, assumed that the Afrikaans spoken by white Afrikaans people is the gold standard of Afrikaans. But that is obviously political rubbish.

Rubbish that reflects how the economic and social power of white Afrikaans people still inform, to this day, who the custodians of Afrikaans are.

And given that coloured people have very little economic power, Afrikaans music, theatre, festivals, newspapers, magazines, books, television and cinematic productions are dominated by white Afrikaans speakers.

Even some of my Afrikaans journalist friends sound more like Riaan Crumwagen than Riaan Crumwagen does, such is the tight hold of racism’s history on our language.

Sure, you have the odd KykNET channel for coloured viewers, and some hip hop groups have and then asserting truths about our communities.

But these exceptions stand out precisely because they are exceptions to the norm of white Afrikaans hegemony.

That hegemony will continue for as long as coloured communities remain on the margins of this country economically, socially and politically.

And that battle for linguistic equality is so off the radar for many of us that we become anglicised when we access economic power and escape our communities.

Until a journalist asks us to code-switch, and we freeze, trapped between rehearsed anglicised identities and Afrikaans authenticity.

I should not hesitate to speak my brand of Afrikaans publicly.

But I do, And that reveals self-coating that requires deep personal work to undo. We need to decolonise and liberate Afrikaans. Yet,

* Eusebius McKaiser is the best-selling author of A Banzi in my bathroom and Could I vote DA? A voter’s dilemma. His new book, Run, racist, run: Journeys into the heart of racism, is now available nationwide, and online through Amazon.

De wit-Afrikaner het ook geen aansprakelikheid toegewys as kon trots op enige onderskeiding van hul taal nie. Die bruinners moet hulle branders maak, soos wat die wit-Afrikaner gedoen het, indien hulle as part of die wit-Afrikaner gelyk wil wees.
Eerstens sou jou graag wou dat witbruins wat Afrikaans as hul taal gebruik met al sy variantie in versoere en dialekte, as ‘n enkelgeskiedenigheid aangepas word.

Koos Holtzhausen
2016-06-24 at 17:33

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