

The Status of Afrikaans as an Indigenous South African Language

(Document compiled by the Afrikaans National Language Body of PanSALB)

1. Introduction

The status of Afrikaans as an indigenous South African language has long been a contentious matter not only within the Afrikaans speech community itself, but also within the wider South African speech community. Since its inception, Afrikaans has been weighed down with various negative connotations, such as “colonial language”, “language of the oppressor” and “white man’s language”. As is the case with many languages with a colonial history, even English, Afrikaans indeed has a dark past due to its use as an instrument of oppression during Apartheid. This past, however, is only one part of the history of Afrikaans. In this document, we would like to shed light on another, albeit lesser known, history of Afrikaans, namely the history of Afrikaans as an indigenous South African language. This history runs parallel with the well-known history in which the indigenous nature of Afrikaans was often deliberately suppressed.

2. The classification of Afrikaans

In his article titled *Die klassifikasie van Afrikaans* (“The classification of Afrikaans”), Kotzé (2018) points out that Afrikaans can be classified in various ways depending on the descriptive framework used. Genealogically speaking, Afrikaans can be classified as an Indo-Germanic language due to its historical connection to Dutch. However, according to Kotzé (2018), this classification is an oversimplification of the Afrikaans language situation as it does not take into account the language contact situation in which Afrikaans came into existence and still functions to this day. It is, however, especially this view of Afrikaans as the “daughter language” of Dutch that was overemphasised during Apartheid.

3. The Apartheid myth

Afrikaans had already been mobilised in the nationalist awakening of white Afrikaners at the end of the nineteenth century, but it was only after the South African War (also known as the Anglo-Boer War), which took place from 1899 to 1902, that Afrikaans increasingly became a symbol of white Afrikaners' struggle for recognition as a nation. The ideology of Afrikaner Nationalism, a racist nationalist movement, was tightly interwoven with an Afrikaans language movement that sought to appropriate Afrikaans as the language of the Afrikaner (cf. Webb & Kriel 2000:21-22, 30-42; McCormick 2006:98-103). Although about fifty percent of the native Afrikaans speaking population consisted of coloured people, the variety of Afrikaans that was selected to serve as the basis for Standard Afrikaans was mostly spoken by white speakers (Webb & Kriel 2000:22; McCormick 2006:92, 96). At the same time, the language varieties mostly spoken by coloured speakers of Afrikaans were stigmatised. Historical linguists overemphasised the role of Dutch in the genesis of Afrikaans while downplaying the role of language contact with non-white communities; dictionaries were compiled from an exclusively "white perspective"; and linguistic research was mostly focused on Standard Afrikaans (Webb & Kriel 2000:22-23). Standard Afrikaans was used to maintain the hegemony of white mother tongue speakers of Afrikaans through a process Myers-Scotton (1990) calls elite closure¹, where the standard language variety is used as a filter "in an exclusionary, marginalising process" (Chick & Wade 1997:272). As the "exclusivisation of Afrikaans" caused "a rift between formal standard Afrikaans and its other varieties", "language-internal tension" was produced, which was "educationally, economically, culturally, and politically detrimental" to especially the coloured speakers of Afrikaans (Webb & Kriel 2000:23). This eventually resulted in a shift away from Afrikaans in favour of English as a first language among many coloured speakers of Afrikaans (Webb 2010:113; cf. Anthonissen 2009). For these speakers of Afrikaans, the standard language became a symbol of arrogance and cruelty (Webb 2010:112).

¹ Elite closure is a strategy used by the socio-political elite to limit access to socioeconomic mobility and political power by people not proficient in the dominant language variety, thus maintaining the elite's own power and privilege by establishing certain language prerequisites (Myers-Scotton 1990:25, 27).

4. The other story of Afrikaans

Sonn (2016) emphasises the ambiguity of the history of Afrikaans by referring to the position of coloured speakers of Afrikaans: On the one hand, they speak the language of the oppressor, but they themselves were also oppressed in this language. Sonn (2016) argues that it is therefore important to note that Afrikaans isn't solely the language of Apartheid, but also the language of the fight for freedom and reconciliation.

In this regard, Titus (2016) refers to the role of the coloured people of the Genadendal Printers in resisting colonial oppression by breaking away from Dutch in 1816. This shift away from Dutch would only occur about 60 years later, in 1875, under white Afrikaans speakers, for example with the attempts of the Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners ("Association of Real Afrikaners") to have the Bible translated into Afrikaans.

There was also visible resistance to colonial oppression from within the Afrikaans Muslim community. From 1862, Abu Bakr Effendi and his sons established Muslim Theological Schools in the Cape, Kimberley and Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha), where the medium of instruction was Afrikaans (Molteno 1984:52). Various Afrikaans texts written in Arabic script was published by the Muslim community long before the Afrikaners even thought about writing in Afrikaans (cf. Davids 2011). The so-called Ghoema songs sung by Cape Malay slaves and their descendants, first in Malay-Portuguese, Malay-Dutch, and later Afrikaans, can be seen as satirical opposition to colonialism. During Apartheid, resistance against oppression continued in Afrikaans, especially at the University of the Western Cape's Afrikaans Department, which was one of the biggest departments of its kind during the seventies and eighties (Winberg 1992:132). These examples emphasise the status of Afrikaans as a language of resistance against Apartheid and as a struggle language.

Although our socio-political history often wants to paint Afrikaans as the language of racists, oppressors and nationalists, the language also has a history of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and anti-apartheid activism. It is therefore important,

when considering whether Afrikaans is an indigenous South African language, to take into account the whole story of Afrikaans.

5. The whole story of Afrikaans

The truth about Afrikaans that was often conveniently hidden during Apartheid, is that Afrikaans is the product of what Davids (1994) calls “acculturation”. Acculturation, according to Davids (1994:113), is a phenomenon that exists when groups or individuals from different cultural groups are in constant direct contact with each other, resulting in a change in the original cultural patterns of both groups. At the settlement at the Cape, the local cultures of the Khoi-Khoi and San peoples and the foreign cultures of the Dutch colonisers, Germans, French, and imported slaves from different parts of Southeast Asia and the African coast all existed together in a collective society (Davids 1994:113). This racial mixing and social contact played an important role in the genesis of Afrikaans (Davids 1994:110).

Today it is widely accepted among Afrikaans historical linguists that Afrikaans is the product of the creolised Dutch of the free Blacks, slaves and lower classes at the Cape, as well as the Boers, slaves and Khoi-Khoi in the interior of South Africa at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This creolised Dutch developed from the social relationships between the slaves and their masters, between colonisers and free Blacks, among slaves, and between the Khoi-Khoi and colonisers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Davids 1994:113). But because Afrikaans dared not be seen as the product of racial mixing during Apartheid, white Afrikaner language historians hid the creole origins of Afrikaans in order to emphasise its European descent. The origin of Afrikaans was sought in its European history by casting it as a spontaneous development from seventeenth century Dutch, while simultaneously keeping the recognition of the contribution made by non-white speakers to a minimum (Davids 1994:112).

Although the core vocabulary of Afrikaans is borrowed from Dutch, changes to spoken Dutch at the Cape can be seen as early as 1671 (Davids 1994:112, 114). The impact of a variety of languages on Dutch was not merely limited to a few lexical items. The

grammar and phonology are borrowed, to a great extent, from the Malayo-Polynesian and Khoi and San languages that Dutch came into contact with at the Cape (Davids 1994:112, 118). These languages changed, in the words of Davids (1994:118), the soul of Dutch by introducing foreign elements to the lexicon, phonology, as well as the grammar. These elements changed Dutch to Afrikaans, but, more importantly, these changes didn't take place in Europe, but in the multilingual society of the first 100 years of white settlement at the Cape (Davids 1994:118). Acculturation is, in essence, responsible for the African roots of Afrikaans, according to Davids (1994:112). Davids (1994:116) even goes as far as saying that without the linguistic acculturation that took place at the Cape because the slaves came from different backgrounds and spoke different languages, Afrikaans wouldn't have existed.

From this creolistic viewpoint, Afrikaans has its genesis in a language contact situation where speakers from related as well as unrelated languages made their mark on the language that would eventually become known as Afrikaans (Kotzé 2018). And from a geopolitical point of departure, Afrikaans is an indigenous African language of South Africa that came into being and developed in Africa and is the only language that reflects the name of this continent (Kotzé 2018).

6. Final thoughts

Although the ANLB regards Afrikaans as an indigenous language, we are against any attempts by any organisation to use this status of Afrikaans as a loophole to avoid or oppose the introduction of other indigenous languages as additional languages in schools. As a body of PanSALB, which seeks to promote multilingualism, we believe that individual multilingualism is an asset in a multilingual country such as South Africa, and as such we fully support the introduction of additional indigenous languages into the school curriculum. Given the rich multicultural history of Afrikaans, we would like to see this indigenous language used in conjunction with – and not in opposition to – other indigenous South African languages, thus ensuring a truly multilingual environment in which speakers of Afrikaans can thrive as contributing members of the South African society.

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