

language  
Draft for purposes of discussion

Proposed text for a Letter by Nelson Mandela, President of the ANC, to Mr. L. Alberts, Chairperson of the Suid Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns

THE FUTURE OF AFRIKAANS AS A LANGUAGE OF SOUTH AFRICA

Dear Mr. Alberts,

We have taken some time to reply to your communication about the future of the Afrikaans language because of the importance of the subject and the need to give a considered reply. If the language question is well handled we as South Africans can draw closer together without losing our individuality. If it is badly handled, we could do each other severe and possibly irreparable harm.

In the first place, let us say how much we appreciate the fact that you have raised the matter in the form of a letter asking for our opinion. If ever there was a subject that requires extensive and sensitive discussion it is the question of language. Attempts in the past to force the issue in a unilateral way have only ended disastrously.

Thus the drive by Lord Milner to compell Afrikaans-speakers to assimilate into an English-based culture only produced anger and resistance. If today many Afrikaans-speakers learn English and take pride in their fluency, it is because they have learnt it voluntarily and because of the doors it opens to them, not because they were obliged.

Similarly, the attempt to force Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in 1976 led to the tragedy of what you refer to as the SOWETO riots and what we prefer to call the SOWETO uprising, [and, incidentally, the slogan Afrikaans Kills, not Kill Afrikaans, as you write.]

The lesson we learn from these two bitter experiences is that no language should be either suppressed or imposed. The essence of language rights is that they belong to the people, not to the state, and that they are based on choice, not on compulsion.

In very broad terms we find we are not in disagreement with your statement of criteria governing language policy. We agree that the question is one of rights and not just of convenience; that multi-lingualism in South Africa should be regarded as an asset to be cherished rather than a curse to

be minimised; that the interests and wishes of all Afrikaans speakers, black and white, are considered; and that the future of Afrikaans cannot be looked at in isolation from the future of other languages.

Where we are less convinced is in relation to what you refer to as objective or scientific criteria for judging whether a language is worthy of official recognition. Afrikaans speakers are justifiably proud of the advanced vocabulary which the language has developed to deal with modern science, government, law and commerce.

We would be churlish indeed not to take pride in the awards given in recent years both here and abroad to Afrikaans writers of great brilliance, especially since a great many of them are our comrades in the ANC.

When writers such as Breyten Bretenbach and Andre Brink receive international acclaim, and Antje Krog and Jeanne Goosen are honoured locally, when we hear the vivid oral recitals of Vernie February and read the vivacious criticism of Hein Willemsse, we feel a special joy, since we know that our Afrikaans-speaking brothers and sisters are not being left behind by the great developments that are transforming our country.

Yet we cannot believe that the right to recognition of a language should depend on the number of scientific or legal words that it contains, nor on the range of dictionaries in which it appears, nor on the quantity of prizes its exponents have won.

We may illustrate our point by looking to the history of the recognition of Afrikaans. We ask the question: if the criteria for recognition which you mention had been applied to Afrikaans in the 1920's, would it have then passed the test? The answer must be no.

Your grandparents generation had to withstand the jibes that Afrikaans was nothing more than kitchen Dutch, an inferior creole language created by slaves and trekboers that lacked the vocabulary necessary for higher thought, science and modern administration. Indeed, when Hertzog, the great proponent of Afrikaans, courted his future wife, he did so in English or French.

If the technical characteristics you regard as fundamental had been insisted on, Afrikaans would never have been recognised, and today only English would be used in government, commerce and science.

Thus, to give two practical examples, the first Appellate Division judgement in Afrikaans was given only in 1932, years after Afrikaans replaced Dutch as an official language. and the first Afrikaans language legal textbook was published only in 1946. When I did my articles to qualify as an attorney a few years later, Afrikaans was regarded as the language of the magistrates' courts and was hardly used at all in the higher courts. Most of the achievements of Afrikaans to which you refer with justifiable pride, followed on rather than preceeded official recognition of the language.

We do not wish in any way to detract from the contribution which voluntary organisations such as yours have made towards the development of Afrikaans. Yet the reality is that a developed vocabulary is normally the consequence of recognition, not its precondition.

We stress this point not in any way to downgrade the achievements of Afrikaans, but to ensure that now that Afrikaans has 'made it' as a well-adapted language, Afrikaans-speakers do not show the same disdain to other languages which English-speakers once manifested to Afrikaans [and, unfortunately, frequently still do].

The real reason why Afrikaans was given official recognition had little to do with its technical adequacy or its orthographic coherence, and very much to do with its symbolic and practical meaning to the millions of voters who spoke it. Empowering the language meant empowering its speakers. Disempowering Afrikaans through non-recognition would have meant keeping Afrikaans-speakers permanently as bywoners in public life.

Afrikaans was important to millions of persons because it related to their identity and history and because it was the language through which they expressed their intimate thoughts, their faith and their ideals. The Boer commandos, whom many of us regard with pride as being the MK freedom fighters of their era, did not need dictionaries to tell them when to shout "skoot".

We identify with all those whose language rights have been trampled upon. We know what it is like to have our languages regarded as inferior, suited only for discourse with or between servants. We know what it is like to have the riches of our oral tradition, our proverbs, poetry, riddles, praise songs, sagas and fables, treated as the monotonous ramblings of natives.

We too have experienced the marginalisation once applicable to Afrikaans, the assumption that we must learn the language of those who dominate us while they need not know the first thing about our language. We too know what it is like to have our language looked down upon as not being one of the privileged tongues, as not being civilised.

Perhaps the worst of all is knowing what it is like to be permanently at the receiving end of those who feel they understand better than we do what is in our better interests, because they feel they come from a higher culture than ours.

Milners come in many guises: some enforce assimilation, some enforce segregation, but what they all have in common is their insistence that they are more civilised than we are and better equipped than we are to determine how we should conduct ourselves.

We truly hope that out of the common experiences of yourselves and ourselves of what it is like to have our languages treated in a contemptuous way and marginalised from the mainstream of life, we can develop a common approach so that all our languages can find a place in the sun.

There is enough sun and enough space and enough good sense in our country to accommodate all our languages.

Put another way, the equality we seek is to be achieved not by downgrading Afrikaans but by upgrading the African languages.

What would be most unfortunate would be to create a competitiveness between Afrikaans and the African languages, so that recognition of the one becomes the basis for the exclusion of the other.

This would be particularly grievous if the very conditions which in the past kept our various languages from developing a full modern vocabulary - apartheid, Bantu Education, Job Reservation - now became the pretext for denying us full language rights in the future.

If the kind of linguistic reconciliation that we require is to take place, it is important that assuring a secure and dignified status for Afrikaans is not seen as a barrier to ensuring the recognition of other languages. Any attempt at hegemony or exclusiveness on the basis of the declared

superiority of one language or group of languages over another only puts all languages on a collision course.

Noone has shown better than Afrikaans speakers how a language with a simplified grammar, a limited vocabulary and a relatively short existence can adapt itself to develop virtually from scratch a rich and varied vocabulary capable of responding to the needs of modern government and science. We look to Afrikaans-speakers to be side by side with us in ensuring that African languages reach their full linguistic potential within a relatively short period.

There is no such thing as inferior or superior languages, nor does the quality and value of a language depend upon the number of persons who speak it. All human languages are capable by their very nature of infinite development. Whether or not a particular language is recognised in a particular country depends on the meaning that language has for the people of that country and its degree of implantation in the cultural and psychic life of the nation.

We expect Afrikaans speakers too to understand how important to us it is to have the right to use our languages in the councils of the land.

Just as it was important for Afrikaans speakers to be able to hear their language being used in the country's highest law-making body, so it is right that we should be able to hear Zulu and Sotho and all the other languages of the country there. It makes no sense to enfranchise all the people and not to enfranchise their languages.

We might mention that at our Conference in Durban in 1991, which was the most important meeting of our organisation since it was unbanned, we ensured that appropriate translation was provided to enable speakers to speak in and be understood in English, Afrikaans, Sesotho and Zulu.

We trust that the day is not far off when all political organisations follow suit, not in order to make propaganda, but so as to ensure participation on an equal basis by all language speakers. Afrikaans takes its place in our organisation alongside of and in friendly relationship to the other languages, not in opposition to them.

In certain parts of the country, many of our branches conduct all their proceedings in Afrikaans, since this is the wish of the members. In the Western Cape, speakers at regional conferences make equal use of Afrikaans, Xhosa and

English. It is not unusual in that part of the country for ANC meetings to open with a prayer in Afrikaans.

It is on the basis of experiences such as these, coupled with our experiences of living in other African countries, taken together with our knowledge of South African history and our study of language policies in other parts of the world, that we are making proposals for language rights in South Africa.

Our point of departure is not dissimilar to yours.

We start off on the basis that there must be a system of constitutionally recognised language rights. Although pragmatic and functional aspects are important in relation to how these rights can best be expressed, the foundation of any policy must be one of entitlement and not of convenience.

Secondly, we agree with you that South Africa must be regarded as a bountifully multilingual country. The term bilingualism has been grossly abused here. A person can speak five or more languages, but if they do not include both English and Afrikaans, then he or she is not considered bilingual.

Thirdly, the position of any particular language must be viewed in the context of multilingualism. This means that we cannot look at any language on its own and in isolation from the total language picture.

Our biggest disagreement with yourselves is over your concluding assumption that the best way to secure language rights is through a process of officialisation.

Many countries, such as the USA, do not have an official language at all. Others such as Ireland, have an official language that has great symbolical significance but which in practice is hardly used at all.

It might well be that in the past the equal status of Afrikaans with English could only be achieved through a process of equal officialisation. So much was involved in the struggle for equal status that we can understand your reluctance to forego the hard-won special recognition of Afrikaans.

We feel, however, that in the context of multilingualism a different approach to securing status and respect for languages must be adopted. Officialising any language or

languages can only introduce a degree of rigidity and competition which we believe will be harmful to the future of Afrikaans as it would be to the other languages of South Africa.

Indeed, if we were to opt for linguistic officialisation, then we have no doubt that sooner rather than later there would be overwhelming pressure for South Africa to adopt the Namibian solution, namely the designation of English as the official language, with subsidiary recognition being given to other languages for special purposes.

Our preference is for a more flexible and less hegemonic approach based on the protection of constitutionally acknowledged language rights rather than on the forced use of any language or group of languages.

Once people feel secure in their right to use and develop their language, then they tend to be relatively pragmatic in how best to implement that right. If however, they feel that their language rights are being ignored, they will fight over every traffic summons, every street sign and every shop window advertisement. Canadian experience shows us how attempts to officialise language rights led to insecurity rather than security of language use.

Our starting off point, then, is to make a constitutional statement in the Bill of Rights as to what the languages of South Africa are [in alphabetical order: Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Pedi, Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, Zulu.]

The state is then put under a duty to act positively to promote the development of these languages, especially in education, literature and the media, to engender respect for different languages, and to prevent the use of any language or languages for the purposes of domination or division.

As far as education is concerned, we propose that subject to the availability of public and private resources, and limitations of reasonableness, primary and secondary education should wherever possible be offered in the language or languages of preference of the students or their parents.

It is of course obvious that if eleven languages are given acknowledgment as languages of South Africa, there will be many practical problems relating to their use. We understand that the European Economic Community recognises thirteen languages and has followed the practice of ensuring that all

official documents appear in all of these languages. One consequence of this has been that the second highest EEC budget item [after farm support] is translation.

We realise that not every document in South Africa should be translated ten times. Nor could we expect every official dealing with the public to be able to speak all eleven languages.

For this reason, without extinguishing the basic right of every citizen to use his or her language in dealings with the state, and without derogating from the state's obligation to promote the development of all languages, we propose that Parliament may provide for appropriate practical solutions in appropriate cases.

This would enable a language or languages to be designated for particular purposes at particular levels of government.

For example, at present all the eleven above languages are used in the different legislative assemblies in South Africa [we include the TBVC administrations and the so-called homelands governments]. In their largely separate spheres they are all official languages of one kind or another. In a reintegrated South Africa, we would recognise the right of Members of the new and inclusive national Parliament to use any of these languages if they so wished.

We would expect that statutes that are national in their character would be promulgated in all these languages. This would not necessarily mean, however, that Hansard should translate all speeches in Parliament into all eleven languages. Parliament itself could decide that the best practical means of ensuring effective respect for all the languages would be to designate one of the languages to serve as the language of common translation and of record.

Thus, Hansard could record each speech in its original language, with, say, a translation into English for those who did not understand that language. Simultaneous translation could take place on a similar basis.

At the regional level, however, the number of languages used for purposes of debate could be reduced in keeping with the languages mainly spoken in the region. Similarly, laws that are made by the regional assemblies could be promulgated in those languages only.

In practice, this would result in Afrikaans being used for publishing all national legislation, and most regional



legislation [as your memorandum points out, Afrikaans is spoken in almost all the regions of the country].

The continued existence of Afrikaans-medium schools [on a non-racial basis] would also be guaranteed, as would the right to use Afrikaans in the media.

These would not be special concessions made to Afrikaans as a privileged language, but rather non-discriminatory respect for Afrikaans as a language of South Africa. We feel that such an approach gives more permanence to the language rights of Afrikaans speakers than would any attempt to give Afrikaans a special status above that of other languages.

The Bill of Rights would then contain special mechanisms to ensure respect for language rights. The Constitutional Court would have an important role to play in this regard. The Ombud could also be helpful in ensuring that in its day-to-day administration the government at all levels respected the language rights of citizens.

In keeping with our desire to see an active civil society functioning outside of the state and independently of party political machinery, we also propose that the constitution recognise the right of free association, including the right to form and join cultural bodies. Our proposals go on to provide for the right of such associations to be heard before any action is taken by any public or private body which could directly affect the interests of members of that association.

In other words, we envisage that bodies such as the Akademie would play an active role in ensuring that any measures about to be taken that could affect the rights of users of Afrikaans were fully debated before any decision was taken.

We would wish to place on record that in the light of the struggle of Afrikaans speakers to use and develop their language, we would be particularly sympathetic to any principled approach to the language question which minimised the risk of the present status of Afrikaans being undermined in any way.

The only qualification is that retention of the status of Afrikaans must not result in blocking the way to the achievement of equal status by languages that until now have been discriminated against and marginalised. The best protection that any language can have is that its use is defended by those who do not speak it.

Different language users should be encouraged to unite: strike one language and you strike them all. Language is not a finite resource which implies that you can only augment the rights of some users by cutting down on the rights of others. What we would like to promote is not this language or that, but the concept of across-the-board language rights. Appropriate agencies with a pan-linguistic character should thus be created to ensure respect for the use and development of all languages.

Accordingly, we will be happy to explore with yourselves and with all persons concerned with the promotion of languages, mechanisms of a Parliamentary or judicial nature which will ensure that proper respect for all our country's languages is maintained.

In the end, we are convinced that the true protection of Afrikaans will come from the fact that it is a vibrant language spoken by millions of South Africans in their daily lives. The constitution recognises rather than creates this reality. What we have to avoid is the manipulation of language issues for motives that have nothing to with language rights.

We need to ensure positively that people feel free and comfortable through the length and breadth of the land in using their mother tongue. We would like to see Afrikaans being used as a matter of course in public and private life in all parts of the country, and not end up being ghettoised into certain regions only. We dread the idea of political power being localised around language, with all the consequent temptations to indulge in catastrophic linguistic cleansing.

We know where the homeland of Afrikaans speakers is. It is not this region or that. It is the whole of South Africa, for South Africa belongs both legally and linguistically to all who live in it.