

language
Draft for purposes of discussion

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

THE FUTURE OF AFRIKAANS AS A LANGUAGE OF SOUTH AFRICA

Dear Dr. Alberts,

We have taken some time to answer your communication about the future of the Afrikaans language because of the importance of the issues you raise and the need to give them considered responses. 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 take pride in the fluency with which they handle the English language, it is because they have learnt it without having had it thrust upon them, and because of the doors it has opened to them.

Similarly, the attempt to enforce 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, if we remember correctly, to 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, must be 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 share your 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 Willemse, we feel a special joy, since we know that our Afrikaans-speaking brothers and sisters are far from 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 at the history of how Afrikaans came first to be officially recognised. 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 grandparent's 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 Barry 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 as a pre-requisite for recognition,

Afrikaans would never have replaced Dutch, 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 legal articles 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 preceded 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.

As you well know, there is a great debate amongst language specialists throughout the world as to whether standardisation to which you refer helps or hinders the development of a language. The modern trend appears to be to emphasise flexibility and adaptability rather than orthodoxy in language use.

We are aware that there are many Afrikaans-speakers who challenge the way that standardisation has been dominated by white professional bodies to exalt a certain mode of speaking and writing the language. They argue that black Afrikaans-speakers, whose slave, servant and free ancestors were the earliest progenitors of the language, have been ignored or marginalised in relation to the process of deciding on what goes into dictionaries and what is correct Afrikaans. These critics go further and challenge the very notion of whether only one variant of Afrikaans as it is spoken should be taken as representing the language as a whole. Thus, they point out that the Afrikaans spoken by the Namaqualand people should not be regarded as 'bad Afrikaans' but simply as a different variant of the language.

Others insist upon the importance of what they call die nuwe Afrikaans, which corresponds to the inventive and deliberately impure and expressive way in which people actually speak. There is thus a constant dialectic between the rules which bodies like yourself propound and the creativity and rule-breaking of daily language use. The confident appropriating of words from other languages is a sign of maturity, they declare. They claim that only dead

languages can be encapsulated in rules and measured according to fixed criteria. Afrikaans, like the other languages of our country, is very much a living language, they insis . Officialisation can easily lead to fossilisation.

It is not for the state or for political organisations like ours to try to determine issues such as these. Indeed, members of the ANC and the many Afrikaans-speakers who have a close but critical relationship with our organisation, are active participants in the debate, and they do not all line up on one side or the other by any means.

We stress the importance of a dynamic and socio-historic approach to languages rather than a static and formalistic one, not in any way to diminish the undeniably meritorious achievements of Afrikaans, but to ensure that now that Afrikaans has 'made it' as a well-adapted, self-confident language, capable of criticising itself, 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 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 on the fringes of 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 "vorentoe" or "skiet".

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, the intricate courtesies of our speech, 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 belong to 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 best interests, because they feel they come from a higher culture than ours.

The Milners of this world come in many guises and speak many languages: some enforce assimilation, some apply segregation, but what they all have in common is their insistence that they are more civilised than we are and better equipped than us 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, we can develop a common approach. Our objective is to find a place in the sun and under the stars for all our languages.

There is enough sun and enough space and enough good sense and and enough starlight 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 kept our various languages from developing a full modern vocabulary in the past - 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 Parliament, so it is right that we should be able to hear Zulu and Sotho and all the other languages of the country spoken there. It makes no sense to enfranchise all the people and not to enfranchise their languages. You cannot say to people: you are welcome to participate in the life of the nation, but please leave your language behind.

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 basic entitlement and not simply 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 these 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 or in particular regions.

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 through officialisation.

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 can lead 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 based on convenience and affordability in appropriate cases.

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

For example, at present all the eleven above languages are used in the context of the different legislative assemblies created by the so-called policy of separate development [we include the TBVC administrations and the so-called homelands governments]. In their largely separate spheres they are all treated as official languages of one kind or another.

In a reintegrated South Africa, we would expect the languages too to be re-integrated. Thus we would expect the members of the new unified Parliament to have the right to use all the languages which today are spoken in the separate Parliaments, not because of their current usage in apartheid-created institutions, but because they are languages of the South African people.

We would expect that statutes of the new Parliament that are national in character would be promulgated in all these languages. This would not necessarily mean, however, that Hansard should translate all speeches into all eleven languages. Parliament itself could decide what the best practical means of ensuring effective respect for all the languages would be, for example, by designating 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 fullest protection that any language can have is that its use is defended by those who do not speak it as well as by those who do.

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 would ensure that proper respect for all our country's languages was maintained.

We envisage the creation of something along the lines of a Language Board or Language Commission with significant powers and resources to ensure that the three fundamental language rights are respected: namely, the right to use one's language, the right to develop one's language, and the right to understand others and be understood by others [the right to learn other languages and the right to translation into and from one's own language].

Despite many attempts by many people to come up with a scheme of official languages for the country, we have been unable to find any that even begins to be workable and fair. The officialisation approach is doomed because it seeks to force reality into a pre-ordained scheme, rather than allow the scheme to emerge from reality.

Officialising languages is a relatively crude and mechanical way of guaranteeing language rights. It deals more with language obligations than with language rights. It tends to apply a schematic and unsophisticated approach instead of a nuanced one. It ignores the fact that there are many different dimensions to the language question, each of which

requires its own specific answer in the context of broad general principles.

Thus, the language issues that have to be solved in relation to dealings between citizen and the state are quite different from those that bear on education which in turn are quite different from those that relate to the media.

A rights-based approach to language would enable us to spell out the principles governing each of these areas in a much more differentiated, concrete and meaningful way than simply declaring one or two or three or eleven languages to be official. Questions of regional predominance could be catered for in an appropriate way, and the element of affordability could be given due weight without it being allowed to destroy fundamental rights.

Space could also be found to ensure that languages other than the eleven mentioned above be treated with respect. There are languages which are not as deeply woven into the texture of South African life as the eleven, but which nevertheless have considerable meaning for their users and which enrich the character of South African life, languages such as Gujerati and Telega, Portuguese, German and Greek, Arabic and Hebrew, to specify just a few.

We prefer a people-centred system of guaranteed and enforceable language rights which every citizen can enjoy in relation to each other and against the state, to a state-centred one which the state imposes on citizens.

Officialisation, that is, emphasis on linguistic monopoly [or duopoly or triopoly] would inevitably result in some languages being privileged in relation to others. It would create language resentment and promote language competition where language harmony was needed.

Just as we believe in the Constitution guaranteeing strong religious rights without officialising any particular denomination, so we support strong constitutional protection for language rights without creating state-based hegemony for any language or languages.

It might be useful for all bodies involved with the promotion of languages, together with the citizenry in general, to be involved in a process of formulating basic language rights in a Charter or Declaration of Language Rights. This could then deal in an across-the-board basis with language rights in relation to all the crucial areas:

dealings with the state, education, the media, literature and so on.

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 do with language rights.

A language deeply implanted in our soil, in active daily use throughout the country, backed up by lively cultural organisations, and given strong constitutional acknowledgment together with the other languages of South Africa, has nothing to fear.

We need to ensure positively that people feel free and comfortable in using their mother tongue through the length and breadth of the land. 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 or balkanised into certain regions only.

We dread the idea of political power being localised around hegemonic regional languages, with all the consequent temptations to indulge in politico-linguistic cleansing so as to maintain autonomous power bases. This would be catastrophic for the country as it would be for the different languages.

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