

An Anglo¹ thinks about Afrikaans

“This is not just about Afrikaans, but about the possibilities of our national life.”

I arrived at the University of Stellenbosch in January 1965 to take up my first academic post, as a lecturer in the Department of English. I had just ‘come down’ from Oxford with an Honors degree, and had decided that I was not interested in returning to the very familiar atmosphere of UCT, my first alma mater, and was deliberately looking for a more challenging environment. As it happened, a vacancy had suddenly arisen at Stellenbosch, where a young lecturer from England had made the mistake of dealing, as a critical exercise, with explicitly political material as part of the ‘Engels Spes’ course. Upset students whinged to upset parents, who took their worries to the Rector, and that was the end of the Engelsman.

What he had not realised was that you don’t have to ‘talk politics’ in order to cultivate critical thinking – Shakespeare, Jane Austen or Robert Frost will do just as well, if not better, because they are rooted in deep cultural awareness and they delight in the creative and subversive dance with language.

I welcomed the opportunity to come to Stellenbosch (although a few complacent, supposedly liberal English-speakers of my acquaintance regarded this as perverse). I had become familiar with – if not fluent in – Afrikaans through many hitchhiking and mountain climbing trips in the platteland as a student at UCT in the late Fifties. I had already been moved by Adam Small’s *Kitaar my kruis*, sent to me at Oxford by my father in Cape Town (who had determinedly moved on from his school Nederlands to a version of Afrikaans) and I soon bought Breyten Breytenbach’s *Die ysterkoei moet sweet*, which was causing much excitement among some of the students (I particularly remember Fanie Olivier’s enthusiasm).

This was a period (still in the shadow of Sharpeville, to put it in a less parochial context) when jeans were taboo on the streets of Stellenbosch, lacquered bouffants were rife and Johan Degenaar had been given a special academic department to keep him from polluting the minds of the theological students (who largely ruled students’ institutional lives). I was – so I was told – regarded as ‘queer’ in some circles because my hair just touched my collar when I rode my bike.

Nevertheless there was a vigorous undercurrent of scepticism, even scorn, for the apparatchiks of the National Party, the Broederbond and the church who were deliberately trying to promote and enforce a monopoly over Afrikaans and Afrikaansness that was narrow, self-seeking, authoritarian and fraudulent.

The fraudulence of this view did not however prevent it from being widely influential beyond Afrikaans circles, and it later morphed into the misguided and muddleheaded opinion that Afrikaans is ‘the language of the oppressor’. The absurdity of this view, and the remarkable irony that English, the arch-colonial language of our times, is to be preferred, has been noted before in this debate, but I have little doubt that a lingering undercurrent of this alleged reputational stain is one element in the pressure to water down the presence of Afrikaans at Stellenbosch.

Let us suppose, for instance, that for the last twenty years the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, with the enthusiastic support of national and provincial governments and relevant agencies, had been undertaking a planned and thorough programme of building the capacity of isiZulu as a viable language of tertiary teaching and scholarly research. Suppose this wonderful effort had reached the stage that the University was preparing arrangements to put the use of isiZulu on an equal footing with English, enabling students to continue through higher education in the use of their mother tongue, while also enjoying the opportunity to interact in different ways with the wider world through the institution’s connection with English.

¹ I am not ‘English’, any more than a French-speaking Canadian is French, or a German-speaking Hungarian is German. The Canadian term ‘Anglophone’ would be acceptable.

Do you suppose that this would have prompted an outcry alleging ‘unfair privilege’, ‘exclusion’, #UKZN Must Fall, and so forth? I think not.

So what’s the difference?

First, Afrikaans is singled out because of the irrational prejudice of guilt-by-association that still lurks in the minds of people who either were genuinely hurt under apartheid or who, while in some respects benefiting from apartheid, were happy to push the blame onto a convenient scapegoat.

Secondly, the University of Stellenbosch has, as an institution, complacently ‘gone with the flow’ over the years with respect to its relationship with Afrikaans, and has had no coherent and decently confident cultural/linguistic vision that could have put plans in place that would balance fair access and mother-tongue commitment. Instead, it has allowed ‘the market’ to speak, as if that mythical entity is an idol demanding our collective stupefaction.

So where are we going?

We have so far failed as a nation to give meaning and respect to the constitutional recognition of our multi-lingual heritage. The Pan-South African Language Board appears to have imploded, while the practical and visionary voices of Neville Alexander and others are drowned by the vacuous chatter of social media. Current debates at the University of Stellenbosch are a large-scale public reflection of what has been playing out in thousands of newly middle-class homes across the country, in which multi-lingual parents have deliberately dumbed down their families by going English, cutting their children off from direct communication with their grandparents and turning them into cultural orphans.

The University of Stellenbosch has the opportunity, even at this late stage, to demonstrate another path, but it cannot do so alone. A policy which maintains Afrikaans as an institutionally respected cultural presence in the university (and recent counter-proposals by Herman Giliomee and others indicate a possible way forward²) will only be acceptable if it is defined as a nationally exemplary experiment in the strengthening of mother-tongue education at tertiary level.

The University should therefore act as an honest broker or facilitator in reaching out to colleagues at the Universities of Cape Town, the Western Cape, Rhodes, NMMU, Fort Hare and Walter Sisulu – that is, universities who operate in the cultural zone in which Xhosa is a leading language and culture – in order to initiate a cooperative strategic plan for building Xhosa into the viable and vigorous language of teaching and research which it might and should have been years ago. One or more of the above institutions would undertake to set a date at which teaching in Xhosa would be introduced as an option.

The history of the evolution of Afrikaans from the informal language of an under-class to a medium of fine literature and varied academic discourse should be an inspiration and an example. All the other languages of this country have vivid lives, but they deserve a wider and fuller presence, for the sake of their mother-tongue speakers and of the rest of us.

The marketisation of culture and learning and the accompanying managerialisation of most universities (yes, the words are as ugly as the phenomena they describe) have made it difficult for academics to remember that they are much more than pawns in a game of market economics. However, the current crisis at Stellenbosch is an opportunity to think again about what a culturally alert university might stand for. This is a time for clarity, confidence, generosity of spirit and imagination. After all, this is not just about Afrikaans, but about the possibilities of our national life.

John Cartwright
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² This is also the attitude and line of thinking of Gelyke Kanse, which I support and whose petition I have signed (www.gelykekanse.com).