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AFRIKAANS MEDIA

What future in the new South Africa?

BY TON VOSLOO

ONE of the liveliest debates in years is bubbling in the Afrikaans community right now. It concerns the position of Afrikaans in the new South Africa. Two actions spurred the debate. The first was the birth of Namibia, whose government decided willy-nilly that Namibia would have one official language only, English, and ditched Afrikaans.

The language which is spoken and understood by the majority of the inhabitants was summarily stripped of its official status by President Nujoma.

The other spur is the growing debate on South Africa's new constitution. Afrikaners realised with a jolt that they had a language struggle, a 'taalstryd', on their hands. The fermentation round this realisation is gathering momentum. At present it is fairly muted, but very real and intense.

A very important spin-off of this debate on the future of Afrikaans concerns the future of Afrikaans media.

To reduce the problem to a single sentence, one can say that it is quite possible that a majority government may be elected in the new South Africa and that this government may do a Nujoma and declare one language only as the official one. If one adds the weight of urbanisation to this theme, then common sense says that language will be English.

Obviously the case is not as simple as that. In the ferment of ideas in the language debate, one hears talk of three official languages, for example, English,

Afrikaans and Zulu, or of an official language plus official regional languages, for example, English and Xhosa in the Eastern Cape, or English and Zulu in Natal, or Afrikaans and English in the Western and Northern Cape, and Afrikaans and North-Sotho in Pretoria and further north.

Before one discusses the position of Afrikaans media, it is worth noting the following:

- The census of 1980 showed that more than 13 million people spoke and understood Afrikaans against 12,3 million who gave English that status.

- Afrikaans is the home language of more than twice as many as those who gave English as their home language.

- More than five million people said Afrikaans was their mother tongue.

- Afrikaans was the biggest home language, after Zulu and Xhosa.

The census of 1991 may bring new statistics to bear on the situation on the ground.

The biggest advantage of English over Afrikaans, Xhosa and Zulu is that it is the gateway to the international community.

Were it not for that, a strong case could have been made for Zulu as the only official language if one took as point of departure a political system of one person, one vote (after all, the Zulus are the numerically largest ethnic group in Southern Africa).

But numbers do not win the argument. Ask any Afrikaans publisher or editor. In the urbanisation process which is confronting South Africa with searing intensity, new arrivals associate upward mobility with the ability to make themselves understood in English.

The English publisher thus has a very

strong card to play in future publishing. His commercial well-being lies in the feet of the new arrivals in the squatter camps and shanty towns around our metropolitan areas.

The English language publisher can be duly thankful to the English colonial system of previous generations which made Southern Africa a depot for the English language in contrast to, say, West Africa where the French predominated.

Before we go into too much detail, it is necessary to identify some ideological baggage and, if necessary, to dump some of it overboard.

The first point to make is that the spark of Afrikaner-ness lies almost exclusively in the Afrikaans language. It is through the language that he reinforced his religious beliefs, and so forth.

One can say that our country would have had far fewer problems if there were no Afrikaans language, and the same can be said of Canada (English and French), or Belgium (French and Flemish).

But as those two settled Western democracies know only too well, a language is not to be tossed overboard or its disposal to be trifled with. Whether one can ascribe it to English domination or to its own irrepressibility, the fact remains that Afrikaans has been the fuel for Afrikaner nationalism for the past century and a half.

This struggle for assertion achieved its primary aims with the official recognition of Afrikaans by the State in 1925 and through its functional usefulness in society thereafter.

The new South Africa, as expounded by President De Klerk, confronts

PLEASE TURN OVER

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Afrikaans and Afrikaners with a moment of truth. If Messrs. De Klerk, Mandela, Sisulu, Buthelezi, Hendrickse and Reddy discuss affairs of state or negotiate, they converse in English. They set the role model for the new South African nation: they do so in English and afterwards, they make the important discussions known primarily through English.

Of course, probably more than half of white Afrikaans-speakers disagree with the De Klerk concept of a new South Africa and they would be first in the ranks of rebels to defend at gun point the dismantling of Afrikaans as an official language. They are in favour of the continued linkage of the Afrikaans language and Afrikaner nationalism. At least, that is how they would wish the situation to remain.

President De Klerk achieved something else in February 1990 and thereafter. He made many Afrikaners realise that the identification of Afrikaans with narrow white nationalism posed one of the biggest threats to the survival of the language.

One notes with appreciation the view of Mr Nelson Mandela in the speech he was prevented from making at Pretoria University. Mr Mandela's views on the future of Afrikaans were released after the abortive meeting. In Afrikaans he wanted to say:

“We are particularly concerned with the Afrikaans language. As you know, most blacks look upon Afrikaans as the language of the oppressor. It is the language of the police and the language of the prison.

“It is one of the two official languages of the country where the languages of 70 percent of the people are not given official status.

“But we of the ANC do not look upon Afrikaans as a language of oppression. It is also not only the language of white Afrikaners and there are many white Afrikaners who are not racists.

“We look upon the Afrikaans now developing as the Afrikaans of the new South Africa, as a language of liberation.

“This language must develop as part of a new democratic nation. We want to create a situation where a new understanding of the word ‘patriotism’ comes into being, where we equate patriotism with something which all the people of the land love.”

Here we have two chief actors in the affairs of State both setting free a language from bondage – in Afrikaans. Their actions may, in time, come to be looked upon as key statements when the language clause is discussed at the negotiation table.

Afrikaners with insight have been arguing for decades that Afrikaans is not the exclusive property of white Afrikaners. They coined the phrase ‘brown Afrikaners’ for our so-called ‘Coloureds’. What they stood for was that Afrikaans be rid of its smothering ideological straight-jacket.

Afrikaans, stripped of its political connotations, may well become a user-friendly language of 14 million people without the ideological baggage, which, in the past, unfairly gave it the negative tag of being the language of the oppressor.

So far so good. A word of warning though. If Afrikaans is sidetracked or stripped of its official status or artificially kept out, then we are looking for serious trouble, no matter what government. Such a course of action will call forth big and fierce resistance.

It will be a ruinous day if white Afrikaans-speakers across the political spectrum judge that they must unite to fight for the preservation of their language.

Their capability for destruction will be massive, dwarfing the resistance efforts we have come to know in Northern Ireland, Lebanon and elsewhere.

To get back to the concept of user-friendly Afrikaans, one can say that a language with this connotation will have a healthy future. In commercial terms, it means that more than half the inhabitants of South Africa are able to speak and understand Afrikaans. It is the language with the best developed infrastructure, and is surpassed only by English.

For this to be attained, Afrikaans must retain its official status. The vigorous debate which I mentioned at the outset, draws its energy from the realisation by Afrikaners that they must ensure that Afrikaans retains its official status whatever the cost.

Thus we have the position that Afrikaners are drawing up strategies and plans to have the most persuasive arguments on the table when the constitutional discussions get under way. The retention of Afrikaans with its official status is a corner-stone. If that is removed, Afrikaans will have a decidedly tough time in retaining its usefulness.

There is a second precondition for survival if one looks at a future constitution.

A new constitution must entrench freedom of speech. If both the language and freedom of speech are bedrocked in a new constitution, then Afrikaans media can go to the open marketplace of ideas with confidence and Afrikaans publishers need not depend on protection or patronage to ensure the language's future.

These days Afrikaners have an urge to confess to all sorts of past sins committed in the name of apartheid. Maybe one should unburden oneself with an admission: the Afrikaans Press, and for that measure the SABC, did not exactly distinguish themselves the past decades in defence of freedom and speech. The indivisibility of freedom, with few notable exceptions, did not overmuch concern leader writers and editors.

Fiery nationalism may have obscured objectivity where other publications were attacked through pernicious regulations and State measures. We may have been lax in coming to the assistance of colleagues in distress because some of those on the chopping block only rarely showed any compassion for the Afrikaner's plight.

Fortunately we have now recognised the real value of freedom and Afrikaans media are now leaders and active participants in organized bodies such as the

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NPU and the Media Council to ensure that unjust laws and regulations which hamstringing the free flow of information and ideas in our society, are scrapped.

A very real fear of Afrikaans publishers is the realisation that a majority government may do to the Press what successive governments of the past decades have selectively done to segments of the media.

To get back to the future of Afrikaans media, one should accept that a language can only claim usefulness when it has a commercial value. Afrikaans publications have to fight hard to gain readers. The increasing use of English in urban sprawls make it easier for the advertising fraternity to plump for English to reach the greatest number of possible clients. Ergo, advertise only in an English paper or through an English advert on TV or radio.

This process is aided by the Afrikaans-speaker's greater bilingualism where he has a lead on English-speakers – another example of Afrikaners underlining the commercial value of English.

By the same measure, non-whites find English necessary for upward mobility in the commercial world.

These factors stack the odds against Afrikaans. To survive in the changing environment, Afrikaans publishers will, of necessity, have to adopt a variety of strategies:

- Move across colour lines to seek Afrikaans-speaking allies for the sake of numbers and commercial well-being;

- Increase the English component of publications to earn enough revenue to subsidise Afrikaans ventures.

- Shape the cultural-political stance in such a way that like-minded Afrikaans-speakers are bound in regardless of colour or creed.

- Form alliances among Afrikaans-speakers of whatever persuasion in the pursuit of creating a strong Afrikaans foundation along the lines of well-known institutions such as the British Council or the Alliance Francaise, which have as their main aim propagation of the English

and French languages and cultures respectively.

- The Afrikaans publisher will have to talk less and do more. For instance, he will have to concentrate on publishing more material that hits the target market first time. There will be less scope for publishing esoteric and elitist material which give no real financial return.

With regard to shaping the cultural-political stance to bind Afrikaans-speakers together, a number of facts need to be stressed:

1. Newspapers in the predominantly Afrikaans areas of the country will have to zone editions regardless of colour connotations, i.e. Eersterust and Mamelodi in Pretoria will have to be provided with copies of *Beeld* attuned to those non-white communities, instead of the present white focus on Waterkloof or Pretoria-West. This will introduce Afrikaans papers to potential new readers. It will be expensive but that is where future growth lies.

2. Afrikaans schools will have to open up across the colour line so that a new Afrikaans nation may be shaped. If Afrikaans is to retain its utility value, it will have to show a reasonable growth rate. The white Afrikaans birth-rate is near zero and future growth will lie across the colour divide. The divide will have to be eliminated.

The emotions unleashed by the view contained in 2. above are causing great emotional stress in the Afrikaans community. This tension is finding its way into every Afrikaans-speaking home. It represents the moment of truth referred to earlier on.

If the propagators of an inclusive Afrikaans culture are able to transform this truth, albeit unpalatable to many, into constructive action, which has the net result of making Afrikaans a more user-friendly language, then Afrikaans may get a great shot in the arm.

Through this race-less Afrikaans one may well look forward to closer contact with the traditional Dutch-speaking countries of origin of Afrikaans, the Netherlands and the Flemish component of Belgium.

The Afrikaans language may find valuable allies in the 20 million compatriots in the northern hemisphere who are themselves getting edgy about their own position in the unified EEC.

The Dutch and the Flemish are already talking about a commonwealth of Dutch-speaking countries, adding our 13 million Afrikaans-speakers to their number to argue that the block of 30 odd million people who have a common language basis, do, in fact, represent a force which cannot be negated.

This international pipeline could bring life to three elements who badly need an injection of survival serum.

White Afrikaans-speakers need it because of their threatened position in their own multi-cultural environment; the non-white Afrikaans-speakers need it because the pipeline represents a link to a greater community and upward mobility in international terms. And the Dutch and the Flemish (and even a few million Indonesians) need the injection as a plant needs phosphates and nitrates from time to time to flourish.

This article did not zero in directly on methods the Afrikaans media will have to adopt to stay alive. The socio-political perspective I offer here is necessary to put the problems of the Afrikaans publishers in perspective. But Afrikaans publishers of newspapers, magazines, books, television and radio are all intimately linked to the usefulness of Afrikaans.

If those links wither, publishers will suffer serious setbacks. In my view, the greatest single danger to Afrikaans lies in its hijacking by political hardliners who would want to maintain the official status of Afrikaans through the barrel of a gun.

That outlook will bring on the death of Afrikaans at a much faster clip than the threat that may be contained in the vague phrase of majority rule.

In our cultural diversity Afrikaans may yet flourish, to the well-being of Afrikaans media. ●

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