

Poets, editors, essayists and novelists

by Raymond Louw

Over the last year the SA Pen Centre – Pen is the acronym for Poets, Essayists, Editors and Novelists – has been trying to increase the number of such literary institutions in South Africa.

Last year after three years of trying, its proposal that the Pretoria Pen centre be established as an institution for Afrikaans writers and recognised by International Pen, the London-based centre which acts as the mother body of the 144 autonomous centres throughout the world, was accepted.

The opposition to the Pretoria Pen was based on the thought that the South African Pen centre, which is based in Cape Town and is largely English-speaking should be a multi-language centre. There was also some opposition on the ground that Afrikaans was the language of the oppressor in South Africa.

The first argument was countered by the claim that people felt at home and preferred an institution where they could speak freely in their own language and the second by the argument that when one spoke of the language of the oppressor in an African context one was referring to English, French, Flemish, German, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and Dutch and in a world-wide context to many other languages as well.

Another argument advanced by supporters of the Pretoria Pen was that more writing in SA is done in Afrikaans than in any other language.

The figures that illustrate the extent of Afrikaans writing were compiled in 2000 (Source: Francis Galloway *Statistical trends in South African book publishing*):

Language	Poetry	Drama	Fiction	Total
Afrikaans	283	53	2 464	2 800
English	302	127	545	974
Multilingual	34	20	109	163
African languages	342	283	635	1 260

There is a move to start another language-based Pen for Zulu-speaking writers. When established, it will be called the Durban Pen.

In the rest of Africa there are 18 Pen centres of which 15 are active. A leading figure in the Sierra Leone Chapel, Mike Butscher, was elected to the International Pen board in Dakar in July.

Pen's mission is to promote literature, to defend freedom of speech and to build a community of writers.

