Whiteness, not Afrikaans, must fall

It is the third-most widely spoken language in South Africa, mostly by coloured people, who have also been systemically marginalised in this country. But Afrikaans still functions as a tool of whiteness, used to discriminate against and exclude those who are not white Afrikaners, and this is why #AfrikaansMustFall has been the demand of protesting students at dual-language institutions such as the Free State and North West universities.

It is for this reason that, judging by our four-day finance minister Des van Rooyen’s name, many assumed that he was a white man.

For a long time my stance on Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in universities has been firm: it should be scrapped because of reasons that many others have mentioned before. In last week’s Mail & Guardian, Nic Spaull and Debra Shepherd wrote that “only 14% of black African students who qualify for university took any Afrikaans at school. We cannot see how excluding 86% of black students from accessing Stellenbosch University is fair, given our apartheid history, or how the university will become more representative of the country without transforming its language policy.”

In Luister, a documentary about the racism black students face at Stellenbosch University, one recalls white Afrikaners telling him: “If you don’t speak Afrikaans, you don’t belong here.”

The experiences of black students featured in the documentary viscerally show how Afrikaans can be used to discriminate against, hate and abuse others. But what about black students who can and want to learn in Afrikaans?

It was not until I went to North-West University’s Potchefstroom campus, where I met black students who speak Afrikaans and wanted to study in Afrikaans, that I realised that doing away with the language would be to the detriment of black students who are excluded in other ways at these institutions.

As a black student at NWU in Potchefstroom who studies in Afrikaans, Grantham Jonkers does not see this as a privilege. Afrikaans is his home language and it was the medium of instruction throughout his schooling. Although he wants Afrikaans to stay, he still feels excluded by the culture.

“I see Afrikaans as a language that I speak. I am still black and, because I do not embrace white Afrikaner culture in the same way, I will still be discriminated against. I am aware that I am in a better position than my black friends who don’t speak Afrikaans at all.”

During apartheid, Afrikaans was the language of the oppressor, who was white, and it continues to evoke the same sentiments when it is used to promote whiteness and its culture. The standardisation of Afrikaans denigrates the dialect of many coloured people and exalts white people’s Afrikaans; referring to it as suiwêr (pure) Afrikaans also contributes to how the language remains perceived as white.

When we, as black people, are in Lichtenburg, Ventersdorp, Musina or Standerton, where the language and culture of Afrikaners function to remind us that we don’t belong, we also say #AfrikaansMustFall.

Whiteness has appropriated Afrikaans and it has become hard to draw the line between it as a language that is mainly spoken by non-whites and the culture that often works to exclude others.

The Afrikaans language is not the problem; whiteness as a social construct is. Just as we accept that white privilege exists and understand how it functions in the white supremacist, capitalist world we live in, so we must acknowledge that whiteness functions in the same way when it comes to Afrikaans.

Until Afrikaans can free itself of whiteness, the call for the fall of Afrikaans will continue.

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