

Afrikaans is not the enemy on campus

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Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande shared an often ignored fact recently, that “the single largest [group of] speakers of the Afrikaans language are the working class in the Western Cape”.

Elaborating, he said: “Sometimes we tend to forget that ... it is not the language of the white elite, as we sometimes want to present it.”

To back up Nzimande’s statement with statistics, Census 2011 breaks down the 6.8 million Afrikaans speakers in the country as follows:

- 3.4 million coloured (50%)
- 2.7 million white (40%)
- 602 100 African (9%)
- 58 700 Indian (1%)

The question that then arises is: Why do so many of us tend to forget, as Nzimande puts it, that Afrikaans “is not the language of the white elite”?

A possible explanation may be that it has always been predominantly the white elite, or the white Afrikaans middle and educated classes that have been staging campaigns and protests against the downscaling of Afrikaans post-1994. Conversely, the Afrikaans-speaking (coloured) working class has hardly benefited from economic and other benefits white Afrikaans speakers were privy to pre-1994 (and today).

One wonders whether students protesting against the use of Afrikaans on campuses are aware of these historical and present-day facts relating to the language and its speakers. I suspect they are not. If they are, they can surely not be protesting against the Afrikaans of “the working class in the Western Cape”.

It should be pretty obvious that they are, even if not articulated in this way, fighting against the Afrikaans of the white elite, which is to say: Afrikaans as it has always been used on the named campuses and other similar public environments. In other words, the protests are against a particular Afrikaans history that is portrayed or celebrated in the names of buildings and through statues erected decades ago.

That is, in essence, a history that reminds us of Afrikaans’ white, privileged apartheid past. It is a past during which working class Afrikaans speakers were treated in the same way and perhaps even worse than the way black students today say they are being treated.

However, it is important to point out that the language cannot be blamed for this. It is the fault of some of the users of the language, who use it as a tool to exclude, insult, discriminate and hurt others.

In a way, Nzimande concurred when he said: “We are not fighting Afrikaans; Afrikaans is one of our official languages. But what we are against is Afrikaans being used to exclude students who actually don’t speak the language at university level.”

The minister’s comments afford us an opportunity to take a closer look at the situation that the speakers of

“black Afrikaans” find themselves in. They, too, feel excluded, now as in the past, by “the [Afrikaans] of the white elite”. That explains why so many opt for English as a medium of instruction, while, at home and among their friends, they comfortably converse in their “Cape Afrikaans”, or “Kaaps” mother tongue.

Consider, for example, the “working class” Afrikaans-speaking cashier at the supermarket who insists on speaking English, broken as it may be, to Afrikaans-speaking customers - only to turn to colleagues moments later and switch to Kaaps, the melodic Cape Flats dialect of Afrikaans. Perhaps they have come to realise that Kaaps will not allow them or their offspring entry into the historically traditional Afrikaans universities.

This is exactly the point that Nigerian-South African Lovelyn Nwadeyi courageously and compassionately made - speaking in English and Afrikaans - when she recently addressed a Stellenbosch University convocation gathering. Her appeal was for an end to exclusionary policies.

The father of Kaaps literature, poet and philosopher Adam Small, wrote in a foreword for the 1973 reprint of his anthology *Kitaar my Kruis*: “Kaaps is a language, a language in the sense that it fully carries the fate of its speakers” from birth, through life until death. This language, he noted, was not “a joke or a curiosity”.

Kaaps was also used by the working class on the Cape Flats to fight apartheid. Other, more educated struggle figures, such as the late professor Jakes Gerwel and Dr Franklin Sonn, used a more “standardised” form of Afrikaans for the same purpose; whereas members of what retired Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs called “the rebellious Afrikaans literature movement”, known as *Die Sestigers*, also fought the apartheid system and censorship through their poetry, prose and paintings.

It was as part of this group that Ingrid Jonker penned her famous poem about a child shot dead when leaving Nyanga location - the poem quoted by Nelson Mandela in his inaugural speech as South Africa’s first black president.

In April 2007, the now late professor Russel Botman said at his installation as Stellenbosch University’s first “black Afrikaans” rector and vice-chancellor that for a long time, and rightly so, Afrikaans was viewed as the language of the oppressor.

“I believe that we have for too long emphasised the pain of Afrikaans. And this is understandable. But what about the hope of Afrikaans?” he asked, emphasising: “Afrikaans is the hope for a better life for a very large number of people across our country.”

The campaign against Afrikaans on campuses should, rightfully, be aimed at the use of Afrikaans - the Afrikaans of the white elite - that excludes non-Afrikaans speakers and even illustrates a disdain for the majority of Afrikaans speakers.

It is important to clearly distinguish between these two kinds of Afrikaans - the one carrying baggage from the past; the other carrying the hope for a better life of at least 3.4 million South Africans.

Perhaps, in a broader sense, the fight should equally be for the inclusion at tertiary education level of black Afrikaans in all its forms, the speakers of which will be seriously affected if English becomes the only medium of instruction.

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