

## AFRIKAANS AND MULTILINGUALISM IN EDUCATION AND SOCIETY AT LARGE

Address to the Cape Town Press Club by Prof H Russel Botman,  
Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Stellenbosch University

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Thank you, chairperson.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Goeie middag. Molweni.

Thank you for the invitation. It is good to have this opportunity to share some thoughts with you.

With so many journalists present here today, I thought it fitting to begin with a quotation from a newspaperman. In 1996, shortly before a discussion about Afrikaans at Stellenbosch, Ken Owen, former editor of the Sunday Times, said the following: “Afrikaners have always tended to do something irrelevant” (Claassen et al, 2007).

Hopefully today’s discussion on the role of Afrikaans in education and society is not irrelevant. And at Stellenbosch University there is no chance that we think anything we do is irrelevant – neither our language policy, nor our contribution to the country and its people.

Chairperson, as indicated, I will be speaking about Afrikaans and multilingualism in education and society at large. But I guess some of you are also interested in my take on the “taaldebat” at Stellenbosch University (SU). I will try my best not to disappoint.

### AFRIKAANS AND SOCIETY

On one level, Afrikaans is no different from any other language – it is, in the first instance, a communication medium. But we all know language is more than that.

Former president Nelson Mandela put it thus: “If you speak to a man in the language he understands, you speak to his head. But if you talk to him in his own language, you speak to his heart.”

According to Stats SA, Afrikaans is the third largest language in the country after Zulu and Xhosa. Afrikaans has 6,2 million mother tongue speakers and 10 million second-language speakers.

And it goes beyond demographics. Afrikaans remains important to the economy because it has:

- 16% of the consumer market;
- 28% of the spending power; and
- 32% of households with an income of more than R20 000 a month.

Afrikaans had for long been boosted by the fact that it was one of South Africa’s two official languages, alongside English. That changed with the country’s transition to democracy in 1994 and official status being extended to an additional nine languages.

The intention of recognising more of the country's indigenous languages was partly to symbolise the dawning of a new age of equity and justice. But it was also driven by the goal of promoting languages and cultures that had long been marginalised under colonialism and apartheid.

In reality, though, I think it would be fair to say that for many people, not enough has so far come of South Africa's professed commitment to multilingualism. What has tended to happen in practice is the elevation of English above the country's other official languages.

The education sector is no exception. English has become more prevalent in schools and tertiary institutions than in the past. Afrikaans has become less prevalent, and the country's other indigenous languages are even worse off.

On the one hand this is a reflection of the idea that because English is such an important world language, an education in this language would improve one's chances in life. And on the other it speaks to the apartheid legacy of underdevelopment in historically black schools and universities ("black" is used in the broad sense of the word).

While it is true that proficiency in English holds distinct advantages in a globalised world, it doesn't necessarily follow that teaching and learning should take place exclusively in this language. Research indicates that mother-tongue instruction – especially at the foundational stage – is vital for a learner's overall personal and educational development. This is also the case in higher education. It takes quite a degree of proficiency in a language to graduate in it, whatever the field of study.

Afrikaans has lost some ground, but it is still standing reasonably strong as a medium of instruction – both in schools and universities – compared to other indigenous languages. This is indicative of its level of development.

The Taal went from zero to hero in less than a century – from being dismissed as mere "kitchen Dutch" to being a fully-fledged higher-function language capable of expressing the most advanced and intricate concepts of literature, philosophy, science, justice, commerce, etc. on a par with the world's leading languages.

However, Afrikaans also went the other way – from hero to zero – one cold winter's morning in June 1976 when black school children rising up against the National Party government trying to force the "language of the oppressor" down their throats were gunned down by white policemen in Soweto.

One would think this would be enough to put black people off Afrikaans, but that would be an over-simplification rooted in racist stereotyping. Despite the best efforts of the Afrikaner-Nationalists who tried to claim the language for the Volk and cleanse it of all "dark influences", there are still more black people who speak Afrikaans than white people.

### UNIVERSITIES AND AFRIKAANS

The lesson of 16 June 1976 is that language may never again be used to exclude anyone from opportunities. The lesson of 27 April 1994 is that the country – and its assets – belong to all of us.

That is why not one of the formerly white and Afrikaans universities – Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Potch, Free State and Johannesburg – is still exclusively white and Afrikaans. Every black

person and every white person, whether Afrikaans or English, has the right to be a Matie, Tukkie, Puk, Kowsie or Joburger. And this greater diversity is to the benefit of these places.

In my installation speech in 2007 I said: “We can only feel satisfied that there is fair access when the daughter of the farm worker has the same future opportunities as the son of the farmer”.

In our part of the world the chances are good that the daughter will be coloured and Afrikaans speaking – and also poor. If we are serious about our pursuit of justice, isn’t it so that we have no choice but to make Stellenbosch University home to her as well?

Those who raise the concern that Stellenbosch is bleeding Afrikaans to death are wrong. We could never do that – not because we are devoted to the language, but simply because Afrikaans speakers gain access to higher education through the language.

Higher education supports progress in the country, thus where the need for development is the greatest is where higher education is needed the most.

A large percentage of poor coloured people in the rural areas are heavily burdened by poverty, but unfortunately the participation rate of Afrikaans-speaking coloured learners in higher education is extremely low. In fact, it is the lowest of all race groups.

In the age group 20 to 24 years, only 5% of Afrikaans-speaking coloured learners participate in higher education. The participation rate for black learners is 12%, for Indian learners it is 48% and for white learners it is 57%.

When SU goes about recruiting Afrikaans-speaking coloured learners it is not a gimmick to improve the racial composition of our student corps. It is our moral duty.

In our experience, pure single-medium Afrikaans schools are on the decrease. The reality is that coloured learners increasingly have English as home language and choose it as their language of instruction.

Increasing numbers of schools that traditionally were Afrikaans have become parallel medium or English medium. Afrikaans is no longer the language of preference of coloured learners, particularly in suburban areas.

Our Centre for Prospective Students visits about 250 schools every year, of which easily 40% are historically disadvantaged coloured schools. The percentage of Afrikaans coloured learners who qualify for university admission is very low, however.

What are we doing about these problems? We provide assistance to schools and support our students:

- Our First-year Academy is the first of its kind in the country. In the Faculty of Health Sciences alone, this initiative has improved the first-year pass rate from 92% to 96% over the past three years.
- SciMathUS opens the admission doors to students from disadvantaged communities who do not meet the admission requirements but who are prepared to work very hard. The 10-month-long programme has place for 100 students per year.
- We provide about 300 bursaries to predominantly coloured students on the basis of academic merit.
- Through our schools partnership project we are involved in 24 schools in the Stellenbosch region. Among others we help to build the capacity of teachers and school principals.

- In collaboration with the Western Cape Education Department, our Division for Interactive Telematic Services broadcasts live lectures by top teachers to 120 schools over weekends. In this way, 14 000 Grade 12 learners receive extra tuition in six school subjects. The project is so successful that we have received requests for it to be expanded to the Free State and Eastern Cape.

## AFRIKAANS AND STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

**SU is committed to the use and sustained development of Afrikaans as an academic language in a multilingual context.** In November 2009 the SU Council accepted a proposal for the maintenance of a minimum undergraduate offering of 60% in Afrikaans for the foreseeable future.

**Let me state this very clearly: Stellenbosch remains a university where Afrikaans is the main language of instruction.**

The 60% figure is the minimum – not the maximum. It guarantees the position of Afrikaans in the undergraduate curriculum and enables the University to say that, at SU, a student can study in his mother tongue at the undergraduate level, but **also with exposure to English in the learning situation.**

We cannot use or protect Afrikaans in isolation. Afrikaans can only be protected if it is viewed as a language among other languages – thus a type of linguistic ubuntu. That is to say, a language is a language through other languages.

### We are not like that

People often compare us with universities in other countries – the Netherlands, France, Germany – where unilingual universities in languages other than English are strong. But that is like comparing the proverbial apples with pears.

South Africa is not a unilingual country. And the irony is that even in unilingual countries such as the Netherlands, “internationalisation” has increasingly become the watchword in higher education. English is increasingly being used to accommodate a diverse group of students.

Our situation is not like that in Belgium, where Flemish is in conflict with French. Afrikaans is not in conflict with the other languages of the country; Afrikaans is seeking a home among South Africa’s other languages. The language struggle in Belgium is tearing that country apart. We have had enough of such divisiveness. Here we want to build a nation, and that is an endeavour in which multilingualism has a big role to play.

### Language planning

Stellenbosch University manages language in a responsible manner by tackling multilingualism in a conscious manner. SU probably has the most sophisticated language planning of all the universities in the country. Esteemed experts have acknowledged us for our language planning.

We don’t just talk; we do. We spend considerable resources on language – R27 million this year. I do not think that there is another university in South Africa that spends so much money on language.

At SU we provide good language support. SU's Language Centre is the only one of its kind in the country. Good support is provided to both lecturers and students to gain proficiency in Afrikaans and English – and increasingly in isiXhosa – as academic languages in a multilingual context.

The trilingual book on soccer terminology that was published by the Language Centre recently is but one example of our contribution to multilingualism. Others trilingual terminologies have also been published in Psychology, Sociology, and Economic and Management Sciences.

This is language ubuntu in action – solidarity between Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa, which can help unite the speakers of these languages.

On behalf of Prof Leon de Stadler, Director of our Language Centre, I extend an open invitation to all of you to come and have a look at the exciting things that we are doing for Afrikaans and multilingualism.

I would also like to make use of this opportunity to commit SU to use its expertise to the benefit of South Africa's indigenous languages.

At the inauguration of our Chancellor, Dr Johann Rupert, in February, Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr Blade Nzimande called the development of Afrikaans from humble roots to a higher-function language “a truly impressive historical event”. And he called for the expertise that had been built up in this regard to be used for the promotion of indigenous African languages.

Stellenbosch University is already doing this. I now give the undertaking that we will continue with these efforts.

## CONCLUSION

In 1976 I was a member of the students' representative council of the University of the Western Cape (UWC), where the shockwaves of Soweto also had an effect. I saw what the consequences of an unjust language dispensation could be, and learnt a lesson from this.

When I was appointed rector of Stellenbosch 31 years later, I received the opportunity to ensure, along with my colleagues, that redress could take place and justice could triumph.

What we wish to achieve is transformation *in* Afrikaans. At stake is not only language, but also the upliftment of an entire country and continent. We regard Afrikaans as a language that can offer hope.

Stellenbosch University wants to contribute to human development. And in this way we prove Ken Owen wrong. Afrikaans is extremely relevant for the country and its people – as long as we do not again form a laager, but rather reach out to others and include them.

Chairperson, I think I have said enough for now. Now I would like to hear what you have to say.

REFERENCES

Claassen, G, Muller, P, Van Tonder, M. 2007. *Die groot aanhalingsboek*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.