

# South African Language Rights Bulletin



Welcome to the eleventh issue in the third volume of the South African Language Rights Bulletin (SALRB). The aim of the monthly Bulletin is to provide the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) with an overview of the developments on the language front in South Africa, as reflected in the country's mainstream newspapers. English- and Afrikaans-language newspaper records are drawn from the SA Media database, while Zulu records are collected from the bi-weekly *Ilanga*, as well as the daily and Sunday newspaper, *Isoleswe*.

Although the main focus is on language rights, the Bulletin also covers other language-related problems. The contentious issue of name changes in contemporary South Africa, though related to the issue of language problems, is dealt with separately. Newspaper coverage of aspects of language promotion, language research and language (rights) activism also receives attention.

Owing to the complex data-processing system of SA Media, the collection of printed media records analysed in this Bulletin is not complete, and conclusions reached are of a preliminary nature. Adjustments will be made in the corresponding annual South African Language Rights Monitor (SALRM), which will be prepared for PanSALB once the data-collection process has been completed. In the meantime, the SALRB aims to help PanSALB to remain abreast of language (rights) developments in the country.

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## It is Pretoria, not Tshwane, SABC told

Following a complaint by AfriForum, the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa ruled that Pretoria should not be referred to as Tshwane in SABC news bulletins. Should the state broadcaster ignore the ruling, it could face a stiff fine (*Beeld*, 01, 02/07/09; *Times*, 02/07/09). During 2005, the ANC-led Tshwane Metro Council resolved that South Africa's administrative and diplomatic capital would be renamed Tshwane, and that only the Central Business District would retain the name of Pretoria – a recommendation that was approved by the National Geographical Names Committee, though not, at that stage, by the Minister of Arts and Culture.

## Tuks's new principal committed to multilingualism

At the University of Pretoria (UP), the student wings of the DA and the FF+ made it clear that they expected nothing less from their new principal than a commitment to the preservation of Afrikaans as an academic language. Sasco, on the other hand, expressed its concern about the "other languages here at the university, which are being undermined while there are still degrees being taught in Afrikaans" (*Pretoria News*, 30/07/09).

To allay fears, the incoming vice-chancellor and principal of the UP, Cheryl De la Rey, told *Beeld* (31/07/09) that the promotion of multilingualism at the historically Afrikaans institution would be high on her priority list. Although an English-speaker, she claimed to embrace both Afrikaans and Sepedi. The promotion of the latter, she said, should entail more than naming practices and other forms of symbolic recognition.

## Lourens v Government – latest developments

In a letter to President Jacob Zuma, the Afrikanerbond objected to a statement made by the Director-General of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Themba Wakashe, to the effect that the government was not to blame for the unequal status of Afrikaans and English. Claiming to speak on behalf of his own department, parliament, the Minister of Justice and the president, Wakashe had expressed this view in a written submission to the Constitutional Court. The government is opposing an application by a Brits-based attorney, Cornelius Lourens, to present his case before the Constitutional Court. Lourens is requesting the court to enforce the finalisation and promulgation of a national language law as prescribed by the Constitution (*Beeld*, 08, 13/07/09).

"[...] Springbok coach Peter de Villiers has been told to cut down on colourful metaphors, tone down the rhetoric, stop feuding with the media, focus on picking a winning team and stick to Afrikaans during interviews.

Springbok media manager Anthony Mackaiser yesterday said sticking to Afrikaans would be coach De Villiers's own choice, but that the South African Rugby Union (Safa) would be more than happy to provide him with a translator [read: interpreter] if he chose to do so.

'The gist of what we're saying is that, should De Villiers feel that his answer to a particular question will come across more clearly in Afrikaans, he is well within his rights to [use the language]', said Mackaiser.

'This is not at all unusual – the French and Italians, for instance, also use translators. Afrikaans is De Villiers's first language, and he is fully entitled to respond in it if he wishes'.

AfriForum was quick to welcome the move."

– Ügen Vos, *Citizen*, 22/07/09

## Building bridges to the future

The Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy, in partnership with the International Literacy Institute of the University of Pennsylvania, launched the *Bridges to the Future Initiative* on 23 July. This multimedia education programme, which aims to promote literacy and other learning skills through the use of the mother tongue, is supported by the national education department. The focus of the programme will fall on poor and rural communities. Since it will first be introduced in the Limpopo province, learning materials have been developed in Pedi, Venda, Tsonga and English. Similar materials will soon be available in the remaining official languages (*Beeld*, 27/07/09).

## Winners of English Olympiad announced

The top 100 De Beers English Olympiad winners were announced at an official prizegiving ceremony held in Grahamstown on Thursday 16 July. More than 5 300 high-school learners from across the country and neighbouring states participated in the competition. The annual Olympiad, which aims to “enrich learners through the study of English”, is organised jointly by the Grahamstown Foundation and the South African Council for English Education (*Daily Dispatch*, 20/07/09).

## The elusiveness of coherence and inclusivity – Reflections on the Afrikaans language movement

Outside parliament, the story of Afrikaner nationalism is largely a story of language activists establishing so-called *taal- en kultuurorganisasies* [language and cultural organisations] whose objectives were, typically, to preserve the identity of the Afrikaner nation and to protect its interests. Of these organisations, all the major ones outlived apartheid, albeit in a reinvented form; and in the post-apartheid era, their ranks have been augmented by a number of newcomers, notably AfriForum – a civil-society initiative of the trade union Solidarity, which aims to give communities a voice “in a society where minorities – such as the Afrikaners and the Afrikaans community – are increasingly being ignored” (<http://www.afriforum.co.za/watis.htm>; own translation).

“At a press briefing in Durban this week, the KwaZulu-Natal branch of the South African Democratic Teachers’ Union (Sadtu) stated that the process of marking matric papers is unfair because it does not recognise that English isn’t the mother tongue of most pupils. Markers in every subject, said Sadtu provincial secretary Mbuyiseni Mathonsi, ‘mark English before they mark content’.

[...]

Of course, one has sympathy for people struggling to express themselves [publicly] – whether verbally or on paper – in a language not their own.

Recently, the courts have recognised the problem and have extended their language policy in the hope that the administration of justice will improve.

[...]

[However,] the logistical demands of a multilingual exam system, and the complexity of the requisite resource backup, are mind-boggling.

## Afrikaans language movement (cont.)

AfriForum's definition of the in-group (the group of primary identification) as "the Afrikaners and the Afrikaans community" suggests that the organisation is careful not to exclude potential members or supporters on the basis of race. Of the older Afrikaans/Afrikaner organisations – as *Akademie* chair H.P. van Coller recently noted in a letter to the *Volksblad* (14/07/09) – many are actively trying to recruit "non-white" members. According to Van Coller, the establishment of the *Afrikaanse Taalraad* [Afrikaans Language Council – ATR] and the cooperation between the *Akademie* and the *Stigting vir Bemagtiging deur Afrikaans* [Foundation for Empowerment through Afrikaans – SBA] may serve as examples of successful liaisons between "brown" and white Afrikaans language activists.

The SBA, it should be borne in mind, was created by the Afrikaner Broederbond in 1991 as the *Stigting vir Afrikaans* [Foundation for Afrikaans – SVA]. The first chair of the SVA, Tom de Beer, became the last chair of the Broederbond (and the first chair of the Afrikanerbond) in November 1993. A decade after its establishment, however, the SVA was transformed into the SBA, which has had a "brown" leader ever since – initially Christa van Louw and currently Christo van der Rhee. Van der Rhee also serves on the executive committee of the ATR (est. 2008), as do Hendrik Theys, Michael le Cordeur (as deputy chair) and Danny Titus (as treasurer). The latter has been the ATKV's (*Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging* [Afrikaans Language and Culture Association]) executive director of culture since 2008.

Does this involvement of "brown" Afrikaans-speakers in organised language activism suggest that the Afrikaner nationalist movement has disintegrated and that the ideal of a "seamless and non-racial Afrikaans-speaking community" (*Burger*, 05/04/06) embracing an inclusive language maintenance movement has been realised? In his letter to the editor, Van Coller concedes that "pain about the past" and "prejudices from both sides" continue to exist in the primary Afrikaans speech community. His fellow Afrikaans language activist, Leopold Scholtz, likens "the two sides" – i.e., "browns" and whites – to two oxen pulling the Afrikaans wagon. However, in Scholtz's view, there is nothing to prevent "brown" speakers of Afrikaans from becoming members of the white nation: "I am an Afrikaner", he writes, "and I want to see the *Afrikanervolk* survive. And if there are brown people who want to become part of the *volk*, they are more than welcome" (*Rapport*, 12/07/09).

Not only is this a rather condescending stance to adopt, as Koos Kombuis has pointed out (*Rapport*, 12/07/09), but Scholtz also fails to understand the dynamics of nationalism. To unite and mobilise a linguistic community as a nation, and to sustain its identity and cohesion over time, a shared history – or rather, shared myths – are needed. Johann Rossouw once formulated the problem as follows:

So, although it must be agreed that the current arrangement is not ideal – and is especially hard on those from schools where English teaching is poor – pragmatism must rule. One possibility is that English [...] might become the required medium of communication for subjects relating to commerce and science, while there might be a mother tongue option for other subjects, both in the classroom and the examinations. Hand-in-hand with a system of this kind should surely go a continuing search for new ways of assessing intellectual development and competence so that, ultimately, a fairer and more complete picture of aptitude and ability can be gained."

– Editorial comment in the *Witness*, 15/07/09

## Afrikaans language movement (cont.)

Any “attempt to create a new community [...] solely around Afrikaans would probably strike against too immense a historical reality” (*Burger*, 14/02/06). According to Rossouw, the interests of Afrikaans would best be served through the creation/maintenance of two self-conscious communities and a redefinition of “brown” identity.

While Rossouw could also be criticised for being patronising, at least some prominent coloured speakers of Afrikaans seem to share his view. Last year, Richard van der Ross called on South Africa’s coloured community to proudly assert their identity as creoles (persons of mixed descent), as other people in similar circumstances across the globe have done (*Burger*, 03/04/08). More recently, Danny Titus rejected “liberal colour-blindness” in a newspaper article, arguing that “the existence of Xhosas, Zulus, Afrikaners and brown people and our extensive racial diversity” cannot be ignored (*Beeld*, 02/07/09). According to this view, “brownness” constitutes not only a racial but also an ethnic identity.

Particularly noteworthy in Titus’s article is his description of AfriForum as a racially exclusive organisation. Thus, the assertion made by the ATR deputy chair, Michael le Cordeur, that the majority of Afrikaans-speakers, “brown” and white alike, are presently joining forces “to promote the interests of Afrikaans” (*Rapport*, 14/06/09), is perhaps premature. The extent to which “brown” and white Afrikaans language activists remain polarised is clear from Christo van der Rheedé’s reaction to a ministerial report on racism at South African universities. It is worth quoting here at length:

The ministerial commission’s report on racism at South African universities, released recently, is one of the most comprehensive and balanced reports on the conditions undermining social cohesion, successful integration and, in particular, academic performance at our universities.

It deals extensively with the role of language as a medium of instruction and states that “... the language issue is undoubtedly one of the main obstacles to academic success for the majority of black students”.

The language struggle at Stellenbosch University and other historic Afrikaans universities is therefore merely the tip of the iceberg.

Moreover, the preoccupation with the preservation of Afrikaans as a language of instruction and science at these institutions by language lobbyists or so-called *Taalstryders* and the prominence [that this issue] has received in the Afrikaans newspapers have diverted attention from the real issue.

“I believe that the need to recognise the great work of national and international icons such as Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje has deepened.

In so doing, we will be acknowledging his lifetime contribution to find[ing] answers to the land and language questions in SA and abroad.

[...]

The fact of the matter is that languages are a great source of our cultures and should be preserved and developed to the highest degree possible to support those future generations who are eager to acquire [languages] and develop [multilingualism] as Sol Plaatje did.”

– Gilbert M Isaka,  
Chairperson of the Northern  
Cape Language Committee, in  
a letter to the *Diamond Fields  
Advertiser*, 01/07/09

## Afrikaans language movement (cont.)

It is not only an Afrikaans problem, but as long as the Taalstryders fail to grasp the complexity of the language problem by focusing only on Afrikaans and regard[ing] transformation as an assault on Afrikaner heritage and identity, the language struggle at these campuses will be labelled reactionary.

[...]

A shift in emphasis – from language struggle to language support – is now of the utmost importance.

Universities should take collective responsibility for developing viable solutions for a problem they all share. In this way, it should be possible to transcend the parochial boundaries holding the language struggle at historic Afrikaans universities captive.

[...]

All concerned with our indigenous languages and the role they can play in reconstructing power relations and a just society must start working together.

[...]

The report holds all South African universities responsible for the situation in higher education, and urges these institutions to find solutions instead of paying lip service to the promotion and protection of our indigenous languages, which include Afrikaans.

In the process, the language struggle by a few white Taalstryders could give way [to] a nonracial collective lobbying for language support. While the former is embroiled in controversy and hidden agendas, the latter is intent only on academic excellence and nation-building (*Cape Times*, 29/07/09).

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