

South African Language Rights Bulletin



Welcome to the tenth 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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Poor language skills – a result of early education in a language other than the mother tongue?

South African learners and students are battling with language. According to a report published by *Beeld* (25/06/09), approximately eight in every ten learners in grades three and six are achieving less than 50% for language skills. The report, which was based on the 2008 results of one million learners in 7 000 schools, found that “[b]oth grade three and grade six pupils are functioning at very basic cognitive levels, which are limited to directly deducing information from texts and visual cues. Complex cognitive skills, such as understanding a text, inferring implied messages, making predictions and drawing conclusions have not yet been developed” (*Witness*, 25/06/09).

Another report – that of the ministerial commission on racism at South African universities – suggests that the situation does not tend to improve as learners pass through the grades. At university level, according to the report, “[t]he language issue is undoubtedly one of the main obstacles to academic success for the majority of black students”. This report induced SBA head Christo van der Rheede to call on Afrikaans language activists to shift the focus of their project from language struggle to language support. The main cause of concern, as he sees it, should be “the inability of our universities to promote multilingualism and [...] to follow out a practical strategy for language support” (*Rapport*, 14/06/09).

Coverage of language rights issues in Zulu newspapers

On 2 June, the language rights of accused persons came under the spotlight in Kuloba uMpumelelo Mbatha’s regular column in *Isolezwe*. Later on during the month (18/06/09), the newspaper reported that employees of a First National Bank in Durban were facing disciplinary action following their refusal to accept a Zulu document from a client. FNB apologised and assured the public that the bank tried to accommodate all of South Africa’s official languages.

Local film receives international awards

The South African film *Izulu Lami* (*My Sky*) received the Audience Award at the Tarifa International Pan African Film Festival. *The Citizen* (10/06/09) reported that the film had also won the Best Actress Award for its 11-year-old starlet, Sobahle Mkhabase. Written by Julie Frederikse and Madoda Ncayiyana and produced by Dv8 Films and Vuleka Productions, the film features mainly children. It tells the story of two rural children who travel to the city after their mother’s death. *Izulu Lami*, whose first local screening took place at the Durban International Film Festival in July, will be released in cinemas in August.

Performance of South African learners in language, maths and science

Grade 3 Numeracy

0%-34%:
35% of learners

70%-100%:
15% of learners

Grade 3 Literacy

0%-34%:
37% of learners

70%-100%:
15% of learners

Grade 6 Science

0%-34%:
54% of learners

70%-100%:
6% of learners

Grade 6 Language

0%-34%:
53% of learners

70%-100%:
10% of learners

Source: *Witness*, 25/06/09

The right to form, join and maintain linguistic associations exercised in PE

It has been remarked that, outside the Afrikaans-speaking community, the constitutional right of South Africans to “form, join and maintain [...] linguistic associations” has seldom been exercised since 1994 (Kriel 2003:165). An exception occurred during 2006, when the Limpopo African Languages Alliance (Lala) was founded in Polokwane in response to the debacle at Capricorn High School (cf. SALRM 2006). 2009 saw another exception, this time in the Eastern Cape. Determined to revive literary Xhosa, residents of Port Elizabeth formed the organisation Ibutho in February. Four months later, the *EP Herald* (01/06/09) reported that Ibutho had drawn about 50 members from the ranks of teachers, lecturers, SABC employees “and everybody who loves the language”.

Like most of its Afrikaans counterparts, the newly-founded Xhosa organisation is concerned about the status of the mother tongue in public life, and particularly in education. According to Noluthando Mpola, a senior manager in the provincial department of sport, recreation, arts and culture, “Xhosa is facing extinction because of many factors, the major one being the exodus of Xhosa children to the former Model C schools”. Ibutho’s main focus, however, seems to be the promotion of Xhosa literature. One of the organisation’s objectives is to encourage authors to write in the language. At the monthly meetings, Xhosa texts are read and discussed and Xhosa poetry recited. “The turnout of people has been fantastic,” said Mpola, “but we need more people to join in”.

Akademie celebrates its centenary

From 23 to 27 June, the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* [South African Academy of Science and the Arts – henceforth: *Akademie*] celebrated its hundredth birthday in Bloemfontein – the city where the organisation was founded in 1909 (*Volksblad*, 19/06/09). As part of the festivities, two publications were launched: Pieter Kapp’s history of the *Akademie* entitled *Draer van ’n droom* [Bearer of a dream], as well as the tenth edition of the *Afrikaanse Woordelys en Spelreëls* [Afrikaans Word-List and Spelling Rules – AWS] – the ultimate authority on Afrikaans orthography. The first edition of the AWS was published by the *Akademie’s Taalkommissie* [Language Commission] in 1917 (*Volksblad*, 25/06/09). Prior to that, as Steyn pointed out in a *Volksblad* column (10/06/09), Afrikaans authors and newspapers often had to apologise to their readers for inconsistencies in their spelling. The current status of Afrikaans, particularly in education and academia, was a recurring theme in speeches at the centenary celebrations (*Volksblad*, 26, 28/06/09).

Loyal to South Africa, but also to Afrikaans

“I have never been a soccer fan – simply because I do not understand the game. However, I have decided to follow the Confederations and World Cup Soccer Tournaments loyally on TV because my country is hosting them and my country’s team is participating. This morning I was shocked to learn that the management of the South African soccer team had shortened ‘Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrica’ at the insistence of Fifa. My question is: Why cut the Afrikaans part? If our soccer bosses do not change this decision they can forget it – I will not watch another single game” (letter to *Beeld*, 17/06/09).

“In our own country we as South Africans are robbed by Fifa of our national anthem [...] How arrogant. Either play the whole anthem or do not play it at all” (letter to *Beeld*, 17/06/09).

International Afrikaans conference planned

Arts and Culture Minister Lulu Xingwana announced that the government would be hosting an international Afrikaans conference in cooperation with the Netherlands and Belgium. The theme of the conference, which will take place from 21 to 23 September at the University of the Western Cape, will be “Spreek, Thetha, Talk”, and leading Afrikaans and Dutch academics will be invited. The conference is part of a broader project which aims to stimulate intercultural dialogue between South Africa, Namibia, the Netherlands, Belgium, Surinam and the Antilles – countries where Afrikaans is spoken or understood (*Beeld*, 20/06/09; *Burger*, 23/06/09).

Latest developments in the Stellenbosch language debate

In the Afrikaans newspapers of June 2006, the debate about the status of Afrikaans as a language of tuition at the University of Stellenbosch (US) was repeatedly represented as a war. On the 7th of the month, under the heading “White and brown fight over Afrikaans”, *Rapport* reported that the head of the *Stigting vir Bemagtiging deur Afrikaans* [Foundation for Empowerment through Afrikaans – SBA], Christo van der Rhee, had expressed his indignation about the fact that “only certain (white) organisations” had been invited to a high-profile discussion on the future of Afrikaans at university level. The event, which took place at Zevenwacht outside Kuilsriver on 25 May, was organised by the F.W. de Klerk Foundation. Van der Rhee had three questions: “Why were representatives of all the Afrikaans communities not invited and why was the discussion not facilitated by the ATR [*Afrikaanse Taalraad* – Afrikaans Language Council]? And why the suspicion towards Prof. Russel Botman?”.

Some of the ATR’s member organisations were represented at Zevenwacht, including the *Akademie*, the *Afrikanerbond*, *Solidariteit*, *Afriforum*, and the *Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging* [Afrikaans Language and Culture Association – ATKV]. Also present was Afrikaans’s leading language activist, Hermann Giliomee. In an interview with the *Burger* (16/06/09), Giliomee admitted that the absence of “brown” and black Afrikaans-speakers was a mistake. It was therefore decided to refer the matter to the ATR. He denied accusations that the meeting was part of an attempt to reclaim the US for the Afrikaners: “All serious participants in the language debate are concerned about only one thing: How can the university reconcile its quest for excellence with two duties: transformation and the promotion of Afrikaans?”.

“And there I actually sat... Afrikaans-speaking and a staunch rugby supporter in front of the television watching the opening ceremony of the Confederations Cup Tournament. What a fiasco [the playing of the national anthem was]. Who are the ‘bosses’ anyway, to tell us what our anthem should be like? The rainbow nation now *sommer* has two colours less” (letter to *Beeld*, 17/06/09).

“The [...] audacity of Fifa, tampering with our country’s national anthem, supposedly to ‘keep it shorter’. And that for two lines. I find the lack of respect for people these days worrying. It is *our* country, *our* anthem. Enough of the Confederations Cup, I would rather watch Cartoon Network” (letter to *Beeld*, 17/06/09).

Stellenbosch language debate (cont.)

However, from the debate in the newspapers it is clear that some Afrikaans language activists have other agendas. In his reaction to Van der Rhee­de’s statement, Dan Roodt of *Praag* [Pro-Afrikaanse Aksiegroep – Pro-Afrikaans Action Group] claimed that Afrikaners deserved at least two universities – one in the north and one (Stellenbosch) in the south. Not only did they “establish, finance and maintain” South Africa’s historically Afrikaans universities, but as a nation they are entitled to their “own educational institutions” (“*die Afrikaner se volkereg­telike aanspraak op eie onderwysinstellings*”), at least according to Roodt’s interpretation of the Constitution and international law. A request for an Afrikaans university or school, Roodt argued, represented a claim to self-determination, which was a much stronger argument in favour of the maintenance of Afrikaans at the US than the argument of transformation (*Rapport*, 07/06/09).

If it is true, as ATR deputy chair Michael le Cordeur claims (*Rapport*, 14/06/09), that the majority of Afrikaans-speakers, “brown” and white alike, are presently joining forces “to promote the interests of Afrikaans”, Dan Roodt is not one of them. His efforts aim to promote the interests of the “Afrikaner cultural community” (*Rapport*, 14/06/09). The latter, and not the Afrikaans language community, is clearly the group of primary identification. In fact, Roodt seems to regard non-white speakers of Afrikaans not only as outsiders but as foes. Two years after posing the question as to whether the Afrikaner needed any enemies “with friends like Jakes Gerwel, Allan Boesak, Hein Willemse and Neville Alexander” (quoted in Willemse 2008:27), he is propagating the idea that the recently appointed vice-chancellors of the Universities of Stellenbosch (Russel Botman, 2006) and the Free State (Jonathan Jansen, 2009) are Trojan horses who will facilitate the Anglicisation of these institutions (*Rapport*, 07/06/09).

Not everybody on the executive committee of the ATR seems to agree with Le Cordeur that the “brown”/white divide in the Afrikaans-speaking community is something of the past. According to Van der Rhee­de, “the unity between white, brown and black Afrikaans-speakers” in the ATR is fragile, as distrust between “the different Afrikaans communities” prevails (*Rapport*, 07, 14/06/09). As Van der Rhee­de and other “brown” commentators see it, the US has a special responsibility towards poor rural and working-class speakers of Afrikaans – a position that has been dismissed by Roodt as a “brown-nationalist welfare project” (*Rapport*, 14/06/09).

Van der Rhee­de, like the editorial team of the *Burger*, supported a decision that was taken by the US council earlier this year to introduce a policy of parallel-medium tuition in first-year classes in the faculties of Economic and Management Sciences, Engineering, Science and Agrisciences (*Rapport*, 07/06/09; *Burger*, 15/06/09). The Faculty of Law, as the *Burger* (26/06/09) reported late in June, would in future follow the so-called *tweetalige* [dual-medium] or T-option, in terms of which the same class is taught in both Afrikaans and English on a 50-50 basis (at least in theory).

Latin, long judgments hinder justice: Hlophe

– Mpumelelo Mkhabela
(*Sunday Times*, 14/06/09)

“Western Cape Judge President John Hlophe has criticised what he termed the ‘complex and scholarly’ manner in which the Constitutional Court writes its judgments.

Judge Hlophe said the court had a responsibility to write simple and accessible judgments which could be understood by ordinary people.

Speaking about the transformation of the judiciary yesterday at the Goedge­dacht Forum for Social Reflection, Judge Hlophe said that complex judgments were among several issues hampering access to justice.

He said that the Constitutional Court judges were aware of these shortcomings. Judge Hlophe said the rationales for some of the court’s opinions were not clear and were sometimes ‘ridiculously long’.

‘We have to keep our judgments simple: not too scholarly. I am one person who is opposed to using a lot of Latin in our courts. Who speaks Latin these days? It’s a dead language,’ he said.”

Stellenbosch language debate (cont.)

To Giliomee and other like-minded language activists, including the management of the convocation of the US, the T-option is nothing but “a fig-leaf for Anglicisation” (*Rapport*, 14/06/09). They insist that 75%-80% of undergraduate teaching should be in Afrikaans (*Burger*, 16/06/09). Giliomee is, by his own admission, also trying to convince the US council (on which he serves) to introduce effective mechanisms to monitor the language situation on campus, as well as proficiency tests in Afrikaans. As some see it (cf., *inter alia*, J.P. Landman in the *Burger*, 18/06/09), the latter would amount to an exclusionary practice.

Towards the end of June, an ATR delegation led by Le Cordeur met with Russel Botman for what was afterwards described as “a fruitful discussion with important points of agreement” (*Burger*, 14/06/09). In a statement issued before the meeting, the ATR distanced itself from any attempt aimed at the exclusion of non-Afrikaans-speakers from the US “through the misuse of Afrikaans”. The organisation also claimed that, in the Afrikaans-speaking community, “the lines of division regarding language issues do not coincide with colour lines” (*Burger*, 16/06/09). The extent to which this is true remains to be seen.

Krügerstrasse renamed “in an attempt to denounce racism”

During June, street-name changes in South Africa did not receive prominent media coverage. However, the decision of the city of St. Gallen in Switzerland to rename Krügerstrasse after the Swiss dramatist Friederich Dürrenmatt did make the headlines. Krügerstrasse bore the name of Paul Kruger, who was president of the South African Republic (Transvaal) when the Anglo-Boer War broke out in 1899. He died in exile in Switzerland in 1904. Prominent South African historians, including Johan Bergh (*Burger*, 10/06/09), Fransjohan Pretorius (*Beeld*, 13/06/09) and Johann Tempelhoff (*Beeld*, 13/06/09), told newspapers that they found the step regrettable. In his reaction, journalist Max du Preez asked: “How many leaders of the late 1800s were not sexists, racists or ethnic chauvinists?”.

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