

South African Language Rights Bulletin



Welcome to the ninth 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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Linguistic and cultural rights in South Africa: two diverging perspectives

I

The existing SALRM database for May contains, in separate records, the reflections of two prominent former politicians on the issue of linguistic and cultural rights. Speaking in Brussels on 30 April 2009 at the official opening of a foreign relations office for Afrikaans, F.W. de Klerk expressed the view that South Africa had, in reality, only one and not eleven official languages. De Klerk said that his Foundation for Constitutional Rights had recently re-examined the Constitution to identify all the stipulations about language and culture, only to find that the government was neglecting its duty: neither at the national nor at the provincial level were two official languages used; PanSALB was “underfinanced and under pressure”; and, according to De Klerk, “little or nothing has been done to date to develop our indigenous languages” (*Rapport*, 03/05/09; cf. also *Beeld*, 01/05/09).

The former state president added his voice to the chorus of those who had expressed their concern about the future of single-medium Afrikaans schools and predominantly Afrikaans universities: “I am particularly worried about the erosion of Afrikaans at our universities. The truth is that Stellenbosch, Pretoria, the Free State and Potchefstroom will cease to be predominantly Afrikaans in the foreseeable future unless our language community works together to develop a clear preventative strategy” (*Rapport*, 03/05/09).

It is safe to assume that the speaker’s definition of “our language community” was a racially inclusive one. In another talk, given a month earlier in Centurion (“What is the Credo of the Afrikaners in 2009?”, declaration to the IFP Forum, 27/03/09), De Klerk had claimed that “Afrikaans now comprises a much wider community than ever before and is proudly spoken as a home language by more than seven million brown, white and black South Africans” (*Consensus* 6(1):12). However, not all these Afrikaans-speakers are in-defined as Afrikaners, as is clear from the way in which the introduction to the Centurion speech invokes the core myths of Afrikaner nationalism:

We as Afrikaners have had sad, disquieting and even glorious moments in history. We experienced and survived many crises: on the borders of the Eastern Cape; during the *swoeg en sweet* of the Great Trek; at Dingaans’ [sic] kraal and at Weenen; on the battlefields and in the concentration camps of the Second War of Independence (*Consensus* 6(1):11).

Was it about the survival of this national/cultural identity that De Klerk was concerned when he told his audience in Brussels that “the struggle to preserve our diverse identity in an increasingly homogeneous world is the greatest challenge of this century”? (*Rapport*, 03/05/09).

Tribute to Pallo Jordan

“I am very sorry Pallo Jordan is no longer in Parliament. He has done much for this country.

He is the only minister in our democratic country who contributed to developing and upgrading township libraries.

Our kids no longer have to travel to city libraries to study and seek information, as our libraries are equipped.

One of Jordan’s missions was to provide internet access in all township libraries.

The access is now affordable, unlike at internet cafés.

Jordan also promoted the publishing of books in indigenous languages.

Because of him, South Africa boasts a world-class National Library, accessible to all.”

– Wendy Sibeko (Rethabile, Pretoria) in a letter to the *Star*, 22/05/09

II

It is interesting to compare De Klerk's speech of 30 April (a summary of which was published in the *Rapport* of 3 May) to another record in the database on the topic of constitutional rights. Written by former transport minister Mac Maharaj and entitled "Our curious cultures don't have to be a parting of the ways", it appeared in the *Sunday Times* of 31 May. Like De Klerk, Maharaj values linguistic and cultural diversity in South Africa ("our national pride and asset") very highly, although – unlike the former president – he does not seem to think that the state is denying its citizens their linguistic and cultural rights. Nor does he suggest, as De Klerk does, that globalisation poses a serious *threat* to linguistic and cultural diversity worldwide, or that the picture looks *grim* for South Africa, or that the *onslaught* of English calls for a language *struggle*.

Rather than assuming a protectionist stance ("how is one to protect one's personal identity that is so deeply rooted in and dependent upon one's culture and language?" – De Klerk), Maharaj subscribes to a philosophy of cultural dynamism: "Culture is never static", he writes; "[i]t is continually evolving, developing and adjusting to its environment". To Maharaj, the question is: "In this web of development and change, how do we ensure that our culture thrives, grows our humanity and commands appreciation?". The answer, as he sees it, lies in the stipulation in the Bill of Rights that no one exercising his/her linguistic and cultural rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill. This "overarching condition of our Bill of Rights", rather than the content of the various rights themselves, comprises the focus of Maharaj's argument: through this basic rule – that no one should claim for him-/herself what he/she would not grant to others – the Bill of Rights creates an environment within which "the co-existence of cultures [can] become the wealth of our nation". Adherence to the rule "would unlock the potential in the diversity of our cultures to weld us into a nation at ease with itself; [it] would change our world and change us as a people".

These final phrases of Maharaj's contribution reveal another significant dissimilarity between his approach and that of De Klerk: in Maharaj's view, the "own" linguistic or cultural group does not constitute the primary group of identification. While De Klerk directs his appeal for language and cultural activism to Afrikaans-speakers/Afrikaners, Maharaj calls on all South Africans to mobilise more resources, to encourage talent, to enable the development and use of languages, to uphold achievements in the arts and to cultivate a participating and supportive public. Many commentators would defend the latter *modus operandi*, arguing as Haines and Wood do that broad-based social movements which represent a coalition of different interests united behind a single issue are preferable to negative appeals to ethno-particularism (1998:viii). The problem is that successful projects of language and cultural promotion have virtually always been associated with ethno-nationalist movements. In South Africa, it remains to be seen whether activism is likely to occur where the nationalist impetus is absent.

Prescribed Xhosa drama takes to stage

"The play involves adultery, deceit, lies and clashes between educated people and tribalists [...] I enjoy [my role] because it's all about our language [...] This play has perfect isiXhosa [...] The writer plays with words. It's challenging and beautiful. We get to exercise in our own language and it also takes us back to our roots [...] I have been doing plays for a few years, but this is one of the most beautiful [...] It is quite static, but it has a lot of music and dance, and even a bit of poetry. Our culture is just so rich [...] The educated people often undermine the tribalists. I think we can really relate to that. It starts discussions about our culture. The women don't talk a lot in the play, but it's set in 1974 and 1976, so things were different from how they are now [...] We should do more isiXhosa plays. Not only for the learners, but for theatres. We have some legends in the theatre."

– Award-winning actress Zoleka Helisi on her role as Malimakhwe in *Amaza*. The drama by Z.S. Qangule, which has been prescribed this year for Grade 12 learners of isiXhosa, has been adapted for performance on stage. The director is Itumeleng Wa-Lehulere (*Cape Times*, 04/05/09).

More on Afrikaans's foreign office

Afrikaans's foreign office in Brussels is an initiative of Afrinetwerk [Afri-network] aimed at mustering support for the language in Europe. According to office manager Ingrid Scholtz, the overall objective is the socio-economic emancipation of all South Africans through a racially inclusive struggle for language rights. As "the Flemish can understand the defence of language rights", Belgium was the obvious choice of location for the office (*Beeld*, 01/05/09; *Rapport*, 10/05/09).

Coinciding with the establishment of the office, a letter inviting Flemish linguists to a round-table conference was sent out by Ludu Helsen, the vice-governor of the province of Antwerp and the regional deputy responsible for culture, technology and international liaisons. The conference, which was to take place in Antwerp on 19 May, would focus on the future of Afrikaans and ways in which Flanders could help to strengthen the position of the language. Said Helsen: "Afrikaans will disappear if we do not intervene [...] From Flanders we must send a clear signal that a heart is beating here for Afrikaans" (*Rapport*, 10/05/08).

Stellenbosch: the debate continues

At a meeting held early in May, the council of the University of Stellenbosch (US) upheld an earlier decision (taken in February 2009) that the university's larger faculties should introduce parallel-medium tuition in first-year classes in 2010 (*cf.* SALRB March 2009). Having anticipated the outcome of the meeting, and unhappy about the implication that students in their senior years would be taught in both Afrikaans and English on a 50-50 basis, members of two student associations – Adam Tas and TBAK (*Tygerbergers vir die Behoud van Afrikaans in die Klaskamer*) – staged a protest at the Castle in Cape Town to coincide with the council meeting. Adam Tas compared the perceived imposition of English on Afrikaans-speaking US students to the imposition of Afrikaans on black schoolchildren in 1976 (*Burger*, 02, 05/05/09).

The student council of the US also rejected the proposed new language policy. In a motion adopted at a special meeting, the student leaders listed the practical, financial and time-related implications of parallel-medium tuition as their major concerns. The practice of duplicating classes, they warned, would also contribute to racial segregation. Recommitting itself to the promotion of Afrikaans as an academic language, the student council proposed interpreting services for non-Afrikaans-speaking students as an alternative course of action (*Burger*, 07/05/09).

Short-listed for M-Net literary awards in the category of African languages

Mulovha a si namusi (Yesterday is not today) by F.N. Bologo, published by Maskew Miller Longman in Venda

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Xilondza (Wound) by C.N. Lubisi, published by Maskew Miller Longman in Tsonga

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Marabe a jewa ke bana (If there is little food in the house, parents will leave their portion for their children) by Motlhatlego Victor Molele, published by M.V. Molele in Southern Sotho

*

Polaneteng ya Boraro (The planet) by Sonti Monakishe, published by Seeteolo in Northern Sotho

*

Nne na inwi (You and I) by Tsireledzo Mushhoma, published by Tafelberg in Venda

*

Babuši ba Lehono (Today's leaders) by Mathete Molepe Piet, published by Zebra in Northern Sotho

Source: *Volksblad*, 04/05/09

Meanwhile, the highly emotive debate about the future of Afrikaans at the US continues to be waged in the letter columns of the *Burger*. The debate about the position of Afrikaans at other universities also continues. In the wake of South Africa's fourth general election, role-players speculated about what the appointment of Blade Nzimande as minister of higher education and training would mean for Afrikaans (*Rapport*, 17/05/09). Shortly before being dropped from the cabinet, André Gaum assured the readers of *Rapport* (10/05/09) that the government was committed to the promotion of multilingualism in higher education. The same, he claimed, could not be said about the managements of most South African universities – a sentiment that was echoed by Theuns Eloff, vice-chancellor of North West University and this year's presenter of the annual D.F. Malherbe memorial lecture. Speaking at the University of the Free State, Eloff noted that while government policy created enough space for Afrikaans in higher education, undergraduate tuition in the language was limited to six institutions. He ascribed this to political pressure at the local level, as well as poor language management (*Rapport*, 17/05/09).

From Ermelo to Hoopstad

As the Mpumalanga education department and Hoërskool Ermelo await their day in the Constitutional Court, conflict has erupted between yet another Afrikaans school and a provincial education department. Early in April 2009, the *Volksblad* (02/04/09) reported that the district head of education in the Northern Free State had been putting increased pressure on Hoërskool Hoopstad to change its policy of single-medium tuition to a parallel-medium policy. On behalf of the school, Fedzas took the case to the Free State High Court, which held, as the Appeal Court had done a few days earlier in the Ermelo case, that language policies were the exclusive prerogative of school governing bodies. The High Court ordered education authorities in the Free State not to intervene (*Volksblad*, 03/04/09). In the township Tikwana, disgruntled teachers established the Tikwana Action Group, which organised two protest marches – one illegal and one legal (*Volksblad*, 25/04/09; 01/05/09). About 600 people, including many learners from schools in Tikwana, participated in the legal march. According to the *Volksblad* (06/05/09), the slogans on their placards included the following:

We want to be educated like you white people; High school is not only for millionaires; We are sick of racism in Hoërskool Hoopstad; Our children must learn through English; Stop racism, the high school belongs to us as well; Open the school to us black people; The high school is not a farm, it is a state school.

Hoërskool Hoopstad's argument is that, apart from being *the only Afrikaans school* and *the best school* in the district (with a 100% matric pass rate since 1985), it is also the district's *only multiracial school* (*Volksblad*, 02, 25/04/09; 06/05/09). Yet one suspects that those who perceive language as a mechanism of exclusion from *the best school* will remain unconvinced.

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