

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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First Impressions: The Importance
of Afrikaans

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29 Bay View Avenue
Tamboer's Kloof
Cape Town, South Africa

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

I hadn't realized, when I was busy with Afrikaans records in Virginia, just how important the language is to an understanding of the Republic of South Africa.

Many people, here as well as in the States, have assured me that I needn't bother learning the language. Most Afrikaaners speak at least some English, and it is possible to live quite comfortably without knowing a word of Afrikaans. It is spoken by a decidedly small portion of the world's population. Outside of a few ex-patriots now living in the Rhodesias and East Africa, I would meet very few Afrikaans-speaking people outside the Republic. Learning the language would seem at best to be a courtesy.

Today, however, the uni-lingual person in South Africa is missing the very heart-beat of the country. Much of the life of white South Africa is rooted in the Afrikaans language. It is not a dying language, but very much alive and growing.

It is the language of the Coloured as well as the majority of Europeans.

With incomplete knowledge of Afrikaans, I must get my news solely from the English Press, which is often quite different in interpretation from its counterpart in the Afrikaans Press. The recent and much discussed books, Die Eerste Steen, by Adam Small, and Ras, Volk en Nasie, in Terme van die Skrif, by J.C.G. Kotze, are lost to me. There are many speeches I cannot judge for myself. I would find it difficult to take courses at two of South Africa's leading Universities: Pretoria, the largest University in Africa south of the Sahara, and Stellenbosch.

Afrikaans has a growing and vital literature. Recently I was taken through the publishing offices and local plant of Nasionale Bookhandel, and was most impressed by the quantity and variety of its publishing. This book company, with Nasionale Pers and affiliates, publishes in Cape Town an excellent daily newspaper, (Die Burger), three adult magazines with wide circulation, a children's weekly, reference books, children's books, novels, school texts, music, etc. An encyclopedia especially about South Africa is now being prepared.

Tafelberg-Uitgewers, one of the affiliates, has had some of its stories about South African children purchased for translation into English. American publishers have translated Afrikaans books, such as novels by F.A. Venter (The Black Pilgrim, etc.) Tafelberg-Uitgewers has also added to the quality of Afrikaans children's literature by buying prize-winning American and European children's stories and translating them into Afrikaans.

A film of the history of the language has just finished playing in Cape Town, and an Afrikaans comedy, "Basie", is currently at a leading down-town movie house. In addition to these original works, an excellent Afrikaans production of "Antigone" is being presented as I write, as part of an Arts Festival in Stellenbosch.

The first sign to greet me on arrival in Cape Town was a large "Nie Rook Nie" (No Smoking) in the Customs Shed. Most of the signs in the city are in two languages, but they are often used interchangeably. Most public servants speak Afrikaans, unless they are dealing with someone who speaks only English. More and more of the business world speak Afrikaans, and bi-lingualism is requisite for employment in many fields.

This has been my experience in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria. In much of the outlying country, the language is almost completely Afrikaans.

As it is also the language of the present Nationalist Party government, it has increased in usage as that party's power has grown. Since our arrival, about two months ago, the language policy of the two government controlled non-commercial radio stations has changed. Previously one had English broadcasts; the other, Afrikaans. Beginning the first week in September, the separation of languages has ceased and both stations are bi-lingual. The commercial station has been bi-lingual for some time.

There is no television in South Africa. The Government says there will be none for at least five years because of the expense. Many people here, however, seem to believe that a problem of bi-lingualism is also involved. There is a need of Afrikaans films and program pilots, so that the program schedule won't be top-heavy with British and American films and packaged programs. The feeling is that when the Government has a backlog of Afrikaans programs which can be used, South Africa will be able to "afford" television.

The history of the language is to a large extent that of Afrikaner Nationalism. It is the romance of the Afrikaner, his development of a cultural consciousness and identity. His language is more than a means of communication, it is the source of the spirit which has united him, generally, in his social life, in his religion, his politics, business and education.

Beginnings of a language

Its history began with the arrival of the first Dutch settlers on the Cape some three hundred years ago. The British took over the control of the Cape about one hundred and fifty years later, at the beginning of the 19th Century. They, by policy, with the help of English immigrants, sought to anglicize the people as much as possible.

In the process of time, and in contact with people speaking other languages than Dutch, ancestors of the Dutch settlers had developed the beginning of a language of their own by the time the British arrived. It was, of course, akin to Dutch, but different from that of Holland. This early Afrikaans was held in contempt by most English as being "kitchen Dutch". Even the Cape Dutch, after two generations of British rule, came to look upon this language, which many of them used in the privacy of their homes, as being inferior. They preferred to use Holland Dutch, or English, in public.

Thus, when a group of relatively young men started a movement in the early 1870's to expand the use of Afrikaans, their effort was not appreciated by the English or most of the Cape Dutch. They founded "The Society of True Afrikaners" ("Die Genootskap van Regis Afrikaners"), which had as its motto, "write as you speak." It sought to raise the Cape Dutch, the Afrikaners, out of their lethargy about their mother tongue, and to encourage the use of Afrikaans in writing. Members of the Society, headed by a clergyman of the Dutch Reformed church, hoped for an Afrikaans version of the Bible, but they received no support from the church. Even in 1910, Langenhoven, one of the primary leaders of the later Afrikaans movement and author of "Die Stem van Suid Afrika", the National Anthem, thought it would not be fitting to translate the Bible into Afrikaans, and this translation didn't become a reality until 1933. The Society published a journal, "Die Afrikaan Patriot" and some other materials so that people would become familiar with the language in print. While they did much to prepare the way for its later acceptance, they were too early to be successful in their hopes.

It is interesting to note here that the first book to be published in Afrikaans was a handbook on Islam. It was printed in 1856 in Arabic characters. Afrikaans is now to be used here as the language of the Holy Qur'an (Koran), since most of the Moslem Cape Malays speak Afrikaans. The first Afrikaans book in Roman letters was published one hundred years ago, 1861. It was L.H. Meurant's Zamenspraak tusschen Klaas Waarzegger en Jan Tuyfelaar (Dialogue between Nick Truthteller and Jack Doubter).

The main language problem of the Afrikaners during the eighteen seventies and eighties was persuading the British controlled government to accept the use of High Dutch along with English. Dutch was finally recognized, at least in the Cape, by the end of the century.

Then came the Anglo-Boer War. Afrikaner women and children were interned by the British in camps where epidemics killed thousands. After the war the British Government returned to a policy of strict anglicization. The Afrikaners were defeated militarily and they felt defeated spiritually. They had lost much. Their families had been shattered. Their homes were destroyed. Their government had been taken away. The British, after the war was over, were trying to take away one of their last personal possessions, their language. The result of the British policy was a greater attachment of Afrikaners to Afrikaans. It became their identity. If it was lost, the Afrikaner was lost.

It is easy to draw an analogy between the Afrikaners and the men of the Confederacy. The Southerners were also defeated in a war. Each lost their political independence for a time, because of the war. They share similar attitudes about white and non-white relationships. They have each developed a strong historical consciousness about what was done to them, and their own particular achievements. They each have a tendency to fight the war over again, and are somewhat suspicious of outsiders. The great difference between the two groups is, of course, the fact that the Afrikaner had his language to unite him. Imagine what differences might still exist if the Southerners, at the time of the Confederacy, had developed a language of their own, and that language had helped them to unite and win a Federal election, and you get a feeling of the power of the language here in South Africa.

General J.B.M. Hertzog became the political leader of the language movement after the war. He never ceased in his demand that Afrikaans be accepted equally with English. He saw it as a battle for survival, for to him Afrikaans was "the vehicle of a people's distinctive culture and separateness." He expressed what many of his fellow Afrikaners felt about the attempt of the government to do away with the language: "Anyone who is lacking in respect for the language in which I grew up is lacking in respect for me, and without respect there can be no friendly cooperation between the people of South Africa and the newcomers."

Thus, after the war many Afrikaans language associations were formed. The S.A. Akademie vir Taal, Lettere en Kuns (S.A. Academy for Language, Literature and Art) was formed in 1909 to give direction to the form of the language as well as to spelling. Afrikaans developed rapidly, became the language of the Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church, the language of the political party which gained control of the government in 1948, and the language in which Afrikaner children were educated.

The Afrikaner has had to struggle for over a century and a half to have his language and himself accepted. He has felt the need to prove that he and the language which represents him are equals of the Englishman and English. In this process, he

had to withdraw into a group consciousness for security and personal meaning. He became suspicious of outer contacts that might weaken or destroy his group.

His group solidarity was strengthened by the close relationship between his churches, his political affiliation, his schools (where a Christian National Education has been associated with the use of Afrikaans), his businesses and his social life. They all played an important part in his advancement.

Afrikaner culture

Just as the Jew is more than a member of a religion, or a citizen of a State, so also, it seems to me, is the Afrikaner. He, as the Jew, is part of a culture which includes a particular religious orientation based upon the authority of the Holy Book, a historical tradition, a language which is related to the religion and historical heritage, a dream of an independent political state in which he would be free from oppression, a school system in which his children will learn the language, beliefs and traditions of his people.

Just as Hebrew is important to the Jew, so Afrikaans is to the Afrikaner. Just as Israel is a dream come true for many Jews, and calls for spiritual allegiance, so the Republic of South Africa is a dream come true for the Afrikaner, and calls for his spiritual allegiance in a political way. Just as the Jews have gained strength from their cultural solidarity and their separateness, so the Afrikaner believes he also has gained strength from the cultural bonds which unite his people.

And the language is the key. I believe that in understanding something of the importance of Afrikaans to the Afrikaner it is possible to better understand why he has been so anti-British, why he feels with such intensity the necessity of having an independent republic, why he so strongly believes in separate group development for the Africans and the Coloureds, and why he has desired separate language medium schools.

"We want our language", General Hertzog said over fifty years ago, "because we want our honor. We wish to maintain our language because we want to see our rights maintained. We want our language respected so that our nation may be respected. We demand our language in the schools because we value the proper education of our children.....In a word, our language is dear to us because it is essential to our national existence."

Today, with the Republic, the Afrikaner has achieved his goal of national existence. His language is accepted equally with English. In striving for his goal, he has helped separate the people of his country not only into racial groups of Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Europeans, but also into language groups.

He has considered himself well-meaning by locating Africans in separate group areas where each tribe is expected to use its own language and develop along the lines of its own culture. This is the carrying out of his belief, gained from his own experience, that only through cultural solidarity can a people have any pride and self-respect. The present government has sought to provide separate language schools, for every child should be educated in the cultural environment of his own language. Thus, Africans are divided into three major tribal languages, with a college for each. Europeans are separated into two major languages, English and Afrikaans, and there are schools and colleges, also, for each language.

This kind of separation has created a major problem of what to do with the Coloured people. They have been considered generally an extension of the European community until recently. They present a sticky problem since their culture and language has been from the start primarily Afrikaans. Some Coloureds call themselves "Coloured Afrikaners". Nationalists have talked vaguely about a Coloured "community of interest", indicating that since this exists, the Coloureds should be separated to assist in the development of their own people. This distinction has not been appreciated by many Capetonians, White and Coloured, and "special consideration" will be given to it in the coming election campaign.

The two White races

I had expected this kind of racial problem. However I was surprised to hear South Africans talk of the "two white races", so defined on the basis of language. When you speak of race relations in South Africa you must distinguish between White-vs-White relations and White-Non-White relations. There is enough division between the two white language groups that people who bridge it are exceptions. This dichotomy between English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans seems to have developed to a great extent out of the Afrikaner push for language recognition. He found it necessary not only to form language societies, but many other groups as well in which he would be at home in his own language. Thus in Johannesburg, for example, the English-speaking and the Afrikaans-speaking businessmen each have their own Chamber of Commerce.

The language groups have their own social, cultural, educational and civic clubs which are parallel. There are separate scouting organizations, separate national councils of women, separate music societies, separate institutes for the study of race relations, and separate academies of literature and language, etc.

Bi-lingualism obviously presents many problems. There is constant concern among both language groups that perhaps their language is being impaired or restricted by its association with the other. An English Academy was formed recently to help keep

English pure and clear. There is a need for it as there is for the Afrikaans Academy (Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns). When I visited Johannesburg and Pretoria two weeks ago, I was told by both English and Afrikaans speaking people that there has been a deterioration in the use of English. This has occurred primarily in Afrikaans communities where the people have had little contact with English. In urban areas, educated Afrikaners can usually use both languages well, while the educated English speak little or poor Afrikaans. It is hoped that the present educational system will produce a more bi-lingual generation.

Single-medium schools

Children, as I have mentioned, are separated into schools which use primarily one language, although the other language is taught as a subject. There are few schools left - in Krugersdorp, and in localities where there are not enough students for separate schools - where both languages are used. This kind of schooling is generally argued to be a handicap for the child, for he comes to know neither language well, and is inclined to mix them without knowing which is which.

The pattern for separate schools was established, perhaps, when English-speaking parents, not wanting their children to attend a school which had predominantly Afrikaans-speaking students, sent them to private English-speaking schools. On the other hand, the government belief that children do not receive a good education unless they are taught in their own home language has, in its way, helped to separate the children. In the Orange Free State and Transvaal, parents have no choice to which language medium school they must send their children. It is determined by the home language they speak.

To the outsider it seems that the development of bi-lingualism has been hampered, instead of aided, by children attending separate language schools. I noticed last week that the Transvaal Women's Agricultural Union, in their Congress, passed a motion calling on Afrikaans schools to devote more time to spoken English as a second language. It was stated that those children who had finished school and were working where they were brought into contact with the public were not sufficiently bi-lingual. The WAU suggested greater contact between Afrikaans children and their English-speaking contemporaries, and even the use of the two languages on alternate weeks in school. English-speaking school children with whom our son associates, speak Afrikaans about as well as an American child would speak French after a year or two of formal schooling. There is a singular lack of interest in learning the second language.

Teachers are also separated into their respective language speaking teachers' associations. However, the executives of both groups do meet together regularly. They now jointly encourage parents of both language groups to have their children spend some time visiting in homes where the other language is spoken.

Language and the Church

South African Europeans are also separated into Afrikaans and English-speaking churches. The Dutch Reformed Church has been most important in the advancement of the Afrikaner. It gave leadership not only to the language movement, but also to Afrikaner political parties. Dr. Malan, the first Nationalist Party Prime Minister, was also a Dutch Reformed Dominee. It is also reported that most of the Dutch Reformed clergy are members of the Broederbond, the ultra-secret brotherhood which supposedly has the furtherance of Afrikanerdom as its goal. Thus most Afrikaners are members of one of the three major Dutch Reformed Churches (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk is the largest, Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk is next in size, and the Gereformeerde Kerk, commonly known as the Doppe Church, the smallest). On the other hand, the Church of the Province (Anglican) has, as one would expect, the largest number of English-speaking members among the Europeans, although they do have some Afrikaans-speaking Coloured members.

There is little practical or official contact between the Afrikaans Dutch Reformed Church and the English Church of the Province, as ecclesiastical organizations. The lack of any real communication between the clerical leaders of these faiths surprised me. They seem, to this 'buitelander', to have little understanding of each other.

Anglican clergymen are noted for their vocal condemnation of "apartheid". The predikants of the Dutch Reformed churches generally, with more and more exceptions, give active or passive spiritual support to the government's race policy. The English Church, as the Anglican church is considered here, has been an active participant in the World Council of Churches, and has accepted the statements on race made by the South African Church delegates to the Council. The Transvaal Synod of the N.G. Church and the Hervormde Church, which were members of the World Council, have now withdrawn. Many members of these two church bodies consider the Council to be "exactly the same as communism." They considered the statements made by representatives of the Council, which met in Johannesburg last December, as proof. The Cape N.G. Synod, the only Dutch Reformed Church group which still belongs to the World Council of Churches, meets on the day after the October election. It is expected to rebuke its delegates to the Johannesburg Conference and vote to withdraw from the World Council.*

The English and Afrikaans churches seem to be moving further apart. Yet some sympathy and understanding is developing among many English clergy and laymen for the Afrikaans Dutch

*Two of the delegates were the Moderator, Dr. A.J. van der Merwe and its Secretary, the Rev. A.W. Landman. It is predicted that they will not be re-elected to their positions. The new Moderator is expected to be the Rev. J.D. Vorster, brother of the newly appointed Minister of Justice. Both brothers were interned during the last World War for their pro-Nazi (or anti-British) activities.

Reformed Dominees who have been attacked for their moderate views on race and the World Council by the members of their own church.

Language division in party affiliation

Political party affiliations are along language lines to the extent that the Nationalist party is, as of now, completely Afrikaans. Afrikaners are members of the United Party, some quite important ones having recently joined with them in their alliance with the National Union Party. There are also some Afrikaners with the Progressives and the Liberal Party. But the Nationalists have remained uni-lingual. While there are undoubtedly English-speaking supporters for Nationalist Party policy, no one with whom I have spoken has been able to name an English-speaking South African of any repute who is affiliated publicly with the Party. The attitude of the English-speaking Europeans was recently reflected when it was rumoured that the Prime Minister was considering the possibility of appointing an English-speaking European to his cabinet (All cabinet officers at present are Afrikaners). The reaction was almost overwhelming. Any English-speaking South African accepting such an invitation would be a traitor to the whole English community.

The United Party is practically bi-lingual. It uses both languages equally at all meetings, public and private. The Nationalist Party, in speaking for all Afrikaners, has used only Afrikaans. One of its earliest political cries was "Africa for the Afrikaner!" It has tried to make its nationalism an intrinsic part of the Afrikaner's religion.

However, now that the Republic is a reality, the government is trying to unify the white population under one banner. The Prime Minister, in his address to the Transvaal National Party Congress, said he would welcome the support of both European language groups. He would not consider anyone a traitor among the Afrikaners who sought to support another party, nor should any English-speaking person be considered one for supporting the Nationalist Party. He spoke out for the need of the two language groups to heal their differences. It will be interesting to see what will happen to the 'inviolable upholder of Afrikaner rights' if English-speaking Europeans do join the party in any number. At the least, it would mean that the Nats would have to use English as well as Afrikaans in their meetings.

David Marais, political cartoonist for the Cape Times, illustrates in the following cartoon an even more serious consequence (a deep-rooted fear in many Afrikaner hearts). They cannot think of the idea of the English 'infiltrating' without believing inwardly at least, that it will lead to domination.



★ "Well, YOU said there was nothing to prevent the English from joining the Nationalist Party— and then we were infiltrated."

Dr. Verwoerd's party platform is now "South Africa for the White Man". He has said, "Let me be very clear about this: When I talk of the Nation of South Africa, I talk of the white people of South Africa." Dr. Donges, Cape Leader of the Nationalist Party, has told Cape Nationalists that the language division in South African politics is becoming less important. The choice, he says, is between a subordinate white minority in a multi-racial state and the preservation of a smaller white South Africa. The Nationalist Party has not yet achieved its final aim, although South Africa is now a Republic. The fight has changed its character from a struggle of the people into a nation, to a struggle in which the fight is for the consolidation of a white nation in the Republic. A new approach, new spirit, new strategy and new weapons are necessary. Old quarrels must be buried and old opponents must now become allies, he concluded.

The Nationalist thus now stand as the White Man's Party, rallying all Europeans against the rising peril of Black Nationalism. Afrikaners are asked to drown their fear of English domination in the larger fear of Black domination.

Multi-lingualism or perhaps a new language?

The English also have a fear. I have heard expressed many times the belief that the Government will eventually make the country completely Afrikaans-speaking. This would, of course, simplify administration. However, while Afrikaans will undoubtedly grow in usage and prestige, the Government needs a language with which to communicate with the rest of the world, and it seems

only practical that English will continue to be spoken. This view is held by a number of Afrikaners who have told me they are the greatest protectors of the English language since for them it is a necessity. Interestingly enough, SABRA members, at one time active apartheid apologists, are tackling these white-vs-white language problems at their Congress in Bloemfontein this month.

I have also heard that Xhosa, or one of the African dialects will be the language of the future. Certainly it will have an important place, but there are many reasons why English will continue to be spoken, at least as a second language, even in the event of eventual government take-over by one or another of the African groups: There are sixteen different native languages in the country; Native African leadership has been mostly educated in English and American Universities; English will probably be the language of most of the East African countries now emerging. It is interesting, however, that recently a prominent Dutch Reformed predikant told me he thought children should learn one Native (African) language in addition to Afrikaans and English. A series by Dr. A.C. Jordan on Xhosa in the Weekend Supplement of the Cape Times has been well received, showing a growing awareness of the possible future necessity of multi-lingualism.

Another possibility, and a most probable one, is that the language here will become a combination of English, Afrikaans, and perhaps German (There has been an influx of German immigrants since the Nationalists came to power). I have been at parties in Afrikaner homes where the three languages have been used in the same sentence in the course of conversation, and where no "pure" language of any kind predominated. This, of course, both language groups abhor, but an emergence of a new language such as grew out of the combination of Saxon and Norman might be a possibility - and the one factor that could bring the two groups together.

I have been told that it is too soon to expect Afrikaners and English to forget their differences. Consider the differences that still exist between the French and English in Canada after almost a century of official bi-lingualism. Perhaps, comments a columnist recently in the Cape Times, South Africa might follow the example of Switzerland. Then from a Canadian newspaper he quotes: "A multi-lingual nation is one of the most difficult types of state to achieve and preserve. Many have floundered. Only Switzerland has had conscious success. It has done this, not only by fostering strict equality of all her cultures, but also by making every citizen aware that he is the inheritor not of one, but of three cultures."

It was believed by many South Africans that only after their country became a Republic could the division between the two language-culture groups be healed. Now that the Republic is a fact, it will be interesting to see in what new ways the white people will cooperate with one another. And, more important, how they will live with those who are not English or Afrikaans in origin, but are of a third culture.

*Sincerely,
James C. Brewer*

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