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# Reclaiming Language

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## Reclaiming Language · *Etienne Van Heerden*

AS YOU HAVE HEARD, I come from South Africa, where several languages are spoken. It is the country known for the language of Apartheid; but also, thankfully, and increasingly, for the language of Liberation.

From what I have said, you could deduce that I am going to employ the term language in more ways than one: first, language as a specific language; and second, language as a broader concept: language as a set of strategies used by writers or poets. For example: the language of the realistic novel, or the language of Realism. These days we get the language of Postmodernism which tries to subvert the language of the realistic novel. I will come to that. But I would also like to use language in a third way, and this is language as a discourse, a way of thinking, or perceiving the world around us. As is any dominant way of thinking in a society, it is sometimes called a metanarrative. Therefore I speak of the language of Apartheid or the language of Liberation.

Let us start with language as specific language. I write in Afrikaans, which is one of many languages in South Africa. Other languages include English, Zulu, Sotho and Xhosa. The biggest single language groups in our country are the Zulu and the Afrikaans speakers. If I may be personal and tell you about my own experience of specific language in South Africa, my father was Afrikaans and my mother, English. In a patriarchal and phallographic society like South Africa it would be inconceivable that in such a home the children are reared English — at least at the time when I grew up. So I grew up Afrikaans. My wife is of German-speaking descent and although as a small child I could speak some Xhosa, an African language, I have lost it as I was siphoned away by the apartheid school and university system and professional circuit. Apartheid was so successful, that my third language is now German, a language from Europe, and not Xhosa, a language from the continent on which I live. That is an indication of how successful Apartheid has been in isolating my generation, the first generation born after Apartheid became law.

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Talk given on 9.10.90 to the International Writing Program, The University of Iowa, USA.

Let me speak to you about the Afrikaans language. But let me begin by telling you a story. About seven years ago I bought a beautiful painting at an exhibition in Cape Town. It is a painting of a group of people sitting under trees in front of a Cape Dutch building in my country. Cape Dutch is a style of architecture in South Africa. I liked the painting because the colours in it never stayed the same. It had strong reds and greens that kept changing as the light fell on it. This should have been a warning to me. Nevertheless, after two years, I met the painter and she told me that this painting is of the famous Daljosafat School in the Paarl Valley (near Cape Town) where Afrikaans was first used as a medium of instruction. This school is now something of a national monument. And when I was at school I learned about the Daljosafat School and the men (no women) who, in that valley, started the First Language Movement—a movement to promote Afrikaans as the national language. At school I learned that Afrikaans was a white language, spoken by white people to other white people. The subtext which was not exposed to us schoolkids was the fact that this language was being used for the mobilization of an ethnic identity, Afrikaner Nationalism, that it was developed and used as a vehicle for political designs. It became the language of the National party, which came to power in 1948 and immediately started to legislate the Group Areas Act, the Population Registration Act, etc.

But back to my painting. A few years ago, research findings were announced that Afrikaans was actually first used as a medium of instruction in Muslim schools—Black schools—in Cape Town quite some time before this Cape Dutch school building was even built. The first Afrikaans documents, it now seems, are Arabic texts translated into Afrikaans by a well-known educational leader, Abu Bakr, who lived in Cape Town. He was the leader of what is now known as the Muslim-Afrikaans Language Movement.

My painting is, therefore, quite ironic.

Let me quote the Afrikaans writer André Brink: “More and more, the Afrikaans language of Apartheid became eroded by newspeak, by the necessary distortions imposed by the adherence to an ideology which has to shape the world to its own image. In simplistic terms, the language of Apartheid, colonized by the imperialistic activities of politicians, has now become the Language of the Lie . . . the establishment’s voice is the one that resounds in the world. And so Afrikaans has become identified, more

and more, in the mind of the world, with Apartheid ideology.”

What Brink is saying is that the Afrikaans language has become stigmatized by the manipulations of politicians, most particularly politicians who have designed the Apartheid system. So Afrikaans has been reduced to Apartheid language.

To reinforce the idea of Afrikaans as a white language, strategies of canonization were used. Canonization is the process by which certain literary works are granted significant status: they are the works that are published by the big publishers, win the prizes, are prescribed at school, are referred to as the language’s classical texts. So the texts canonized in the Afrikaans literary system are mostly texts by white writers, or, in the case of black writers, these writers were often contained, colonized if you wish, by referring to them, in the literary histories, under a separate heading, “Coloured Writers.”

This brings me then to the Afrikaans writing and Afrikaans writers who were ignored by the white cultural strategists who wanted to hijack Afrikaans writing as a political vehicle. They are the black writers who write in Afrikaans, and who have been doing so for many decades.

The Afrikaans language, of course, mostly comes from the Dutch language—Dutch being the language spoken by the white settlers that came to South Africa in the 17th century and later. Anthropologically then, Afrikaans is a Germanic language. But it is also a language which has a lot of non-Germanic roots—I have referred to Abu Bakr, the Eastern scholar. The indigenous languages of the Khoisan (derogatively referred to as the Hottentots and the Bushmen) also serve as strong roots for Afrikaans. All this was ignored by linguists for many years. Only in the past decade or so has there been new research generated in these roots of the Afrikaans language. There is new appreciation of the influence of these languages on Afrikaans.

The black writers who write Afrikaans mostly write in Cape Afrikaans. It has been, for many years, derogatively called Coloured Afrikaans, and referred to as a dialect spoken by Coloured People because it differs from what is called standard Afrikaans. When these poems, written in a particularly Cape form of Afrikaans were read, whites would smile paternalistically about this separate language, this separate literary tradition developing. One of the first poets who wrote in Cape Afrikaans was Adam Small. He would differentiate between his intensely personal and more social

poetry. His personal poetry he would write in Standard Afrikaans, but his social poetry in Cape Afrikaans. But he has now been followed by a very militant generation of black writers who are using Cape Afrikaans in all their poetry—thus reclaiming the language as their personal language. These writers are, as the white Afrikaans writers who belonged to the First Language Movement were, very conscious of language and culture as a means to mobilize the people. The writer or poet—they are almost exclusively poets—is very aware of him or herself as a member of society, as one of the people, which is a concept of the artist far removed from the traditional Western idea of the artist as a romantic, lonely individual or outsider. As such these writers are working in the tradition of orature, oral literature, which is such an important tradition in Africa. The poetry is often not as dense, not as complicated, as the poetry which the New Critics would like to unravel—rather it uses rhetorical techniques, repetition, other oral techniques; it is an articulation of suffering and fear, but also of hope and solidarity and in this way it becomes a powerful instrument of political mobilization. Let me read to you what one of these poets, Beverly Jansen, has written: “To answer the question why do you write in Afrikaans I would like to give the audience an idea of my background. My parents . . . were . . . essentially Afrikaans-speaking. They decided that the success of our schooling depended on choosing English as a medium of instruction. After primary education, I was enrolled at a rather posh high school where English was the dominant medium of instruction. Any pupil who spoke Afrikaans was treated with contempt by some teachers and most pupils. So naturally one attempted as far as possible to hide the fact that you were Afrikaans-speaking. On leaving high school I decided never to speak Afrikaans unnecessarily. This was my protest against the Afrikaner government, the Volk and the system in this country. Later in my development I came to realize that workers on the farms speak Afrikaans. Workers on the Cape Flats (near Cape Town) and elsewhere speak Afrikaans. I became aware of the fact that if I wanted to identify with the struggle of the working class I had to speak, understand and write the language we all know.”

I am thus trying to tell you about this process of reclaiming the Afrikaans language not as the language of Apartheid but as the language of Liberation. We remind ourselves that German is still beautiful and sublime, despite Hitler, and English is still lyrical despite the history of English colonialism.

Let me now come to the second concept of language—that is the language of literature in the sense of strategies employed by writers. As we know, literary form is never ideologically innocent—the form the writer gives to his work tells as much of his ideology as that which he actually says in his work. Thus the form of the Realistic novel, using an authoritative narrator who controls all his material with no hint of self-consciousness or ambivalence, presupposes a certainty about the order of things, and a certainty about the ability of the novel and language to portray the world outside the text. The postmodernist novel, on the other hand, subverts this certainty, this conceit that language can truthfully mirror the outside world. With playful plurality and the self-conscious strategies of metafiction the postmodernist writer subverts the accepted truths of a literary tradition.

This is exactly then the procedure which is being followed by Afrikaans prose writers, writers who have pink skins such as I.

J. M. Coetzee talks of *White Writing*, and with this term he wants to say that white writing in South Africa is (although not always) in certain ways different from black writing.

The young generation of white writers to which I belong tries to reclaim the Afrikaans language as a language of Protest by doing one important thing, by subverting the literary practice of seeing the text in isolation. You have all heard of the New Critics and their methods of close reading. The text is a world in words and can be dissected like an insect or taken apart like a watch. The surrounding text, the political and historical text, is not important. Under Apartheid we also had, in South Africa, this strategy of reading. It fell into step with the system very well—literature was conveniently seen as something apart from social reality.

Now my generation of writers writes faction, documentary fiction. We want to reclaim the world outside, the world of discrimination, militarism and lies as the domain of creative language; we want to break down the borders between fiction and the real world. We say, as the American writer Philip Roth said: “Actuality is outdoing our talents.” We cannot ignore the ravages of Apartheid. Thus our fictional works absorb the plurality of documents in our society—the text of the military, a newspaper report on violence, a cartoon from Peanuts, and so on.

We try to break through the ontological borders between text and reality.

Of course our metafiction can be very self-conscious, even narcissistic,

and because of this it is often criticized, especially by Marxist literary critics. But to my mind the metafictional text causes the text itself to become a terrain of struggle, brings the Struggle into the domain of language, and breaks this Apartheid of the literary language. To illustrate: One of these metafictional short stories was written by the young writer Koos Prinsloo. It is about a writer sitting in front of his word processor, trying to write a story about a love affair. But mysteriously his text on the screen is constantly interrupted by news items flashing onto the screen, news items about the turbulent world outside. Thus the act of writing this most private of stories, of a love affair, is interrupted by the political text, the socio-historical text. The message: the language of literature cannot be a private, elitist language, an Apartheid language. We must reclaim the language of literature to also include our social responsibilities.

Let me finish by telling you that I have only very glibly and shortly touched on the most important debates about literature in my country. We debate, for example, the political potential of postmodern fiction and the necessity to return to more realistic modes of fiction to portray a whole and healed society. Then, the meeting of two aesthetic traditions in poetry make for a more or less parallel case. The more Western-oriented aesthetic tradition of poetry as a dense text stands on one side, on the other is the tradition of the *imbongi*, the oral poet embedded in his social structure, who must mobilize his people and instill in them a sense of pride and solidarity.

This debate, as all debates, often tends to simplify. To my mind these are not necessarily opposing strategies, but rather, seen more eclectically, possibilities or inputs into that space that we are all trying to create: a free and truly South African National Culture.

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