

Chapter 3

How did Afrikaans come to Namibia?

There has been a widespread perception that the Afrikaans language was imposed upon Namibia – or South West Africa, as the country was formerly known – by the South African regime after the South Africans took control in 1915. This is not correct as it became clear through recent research that the language took root in this part of the world much earlier, as a matter of fact already by the middle of the 18th century.



Ernst L.P. Stals

Professor Ernst Stals received his training as historian at the University of Stellenbosch and taught at that university and the Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg. Between 1978 and 1992 he was involved in teaching and research at the Windhoek Teachers' College and the University of Namibia. He has been doing research in Namibia over a period of more than four decades and lives in Windhoek. His publications cover various themes in Namibian history, amongst which the book *Só het Afrikaans na Namibië gekom* (Thus came Afrikaans to Namibia), with professor F.A. Ponelis as co-author, in 2001.



Distribution of Afrikaans in Namibia before 1884

Source: Stals ELP and F.A. Ponis, *Só het Afrikaans na Namibië gekom*, Windhoek, 2001. Map by Bart Hendrix.

The origin of a language.

Afrikaans is an offspring of 17th century Dutch, which was brought to the Cape of Good Hope after the Dutch East India Company (VOC) established a refreshment post in Table Bay in 1652. It gradually attained an own character through the influence of French Huguenots, who fled from religious persecution in their home country to Holland and found a new future as colonists of the VOC. More inputs came from the language of the Khoi (known as 'Hottentots' at the time), as well as the vernaculars spoken by slaves from Malaysia, which carried a strong Portuguese heritage from earlier colonial days. Last but not least an internal process of indigenization by the middle of the 18th century resulted in sufficient local flavour and vocabulary for outsiders to observe that a new dialect of Dutch was being spoken at the Cape. Apart from new words and expressions which differed from Dutch, colonists and their servants simplified the spoken word by dropping or contracting the ending of words. This occurred especially at the level of basic communication among employers and employees. Cape Dutch was born and bred in the first place at the lower levels of society, though it also filtered upwards into the ranks of the middle class. Formal High Dutch, however, remained the language of government, church and education.

The VOC ruled the Cape Colony for nearly a century and a half. Not being an agent for development in the first place, it nevertheless saw the transformation of the Cape settlement from a mere refreshment station for passing trading vessels to an agricultural colony and, from the beginning of the 18th century, also an expanding society of hunters and sheep and cattle farmers. This forced the government repeatedly to shift the colony's frontiers further and further into the interior. A frontier society, consisting of farmers and their servants, intermixing with individuals and small groups of San (Bushmen), Khoi (Namaqua) and gradually also elements of mixed origin (called Oorlams and Basters), occupied an open frontier zone. The language which they spoke, and in many ways helped to form, was a variation of Cape Dutch, now being characterised as *Afrikaans-Hollands*, which literally meant the Dutch spoken in Africa. Gradually, as this dialect increasingly took on its own character (including grammatical construction), it was referred to as merely *Afrikaans*.

Afrikaans expands into Namibia.

As a result of the vast distances which separated frontier societies eastwards and northwards from Cape Town the variation of Afrikaans spoken by people in the Sandveld and Little Namaqualand up to the Gariep, or Grootrivier (Great River), certainly contained words, expressions and pronunciations of its own. White farmers, but especially Khoi, Oorlams and Basters, steadily moved northwards, for reasons like restrictive laws, occupation of land for farming purposes, and a strong sense of freedom and independence. Early in the 18th century already the vicinity of the lower Gariep became occupied by people using Afrikaans, alongside the Khoi language as indigenous mother tongue, partly as mother tongue, but also as language of general communication. Thus, one of the earliest functions of this language was the bridging of ethnic and cultural barriers between the various peoples of the region.

The language moved with the people. At first individuals or small groups reached and crossed the splendid valley of the Gariep into the sparsely inhabited plains lying north of it. The territory of present day Namibia was at that time occupied by a variety of peoples, living separately from each other: Owambo in the north, Herero and Damara in the central parts and Nama mainly in the south. Each of these entities at different stages in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries came from elsewhere to occupy their new homes, bringing with them their own languages. It was onto this scene that Afrikaans gradually intruded as speakers of the language moved in.

Although Afrikaans speakers certainly came to Nama country at an earlier stage, the first record of their presence dates back to the year 1738, after which hunters, traders and curious travellers increasingly visited the country, while Namaqua families and others settled in the area. Robert Gordon, an officer of the VOC, named the Gariep the Orange River in 1777, after the royal House of Orange of the Netherlands. During the 1780's three Dutch-Afrikaner farmers settled temporarily as far north as Swartmodder, the present day Keetmanshoop. By 1796 a large group of Oorlams, who called themselves Afrikaners, settled just north of the Orange River in the south-eastern corner of today's Namibia. Part of



Nama settlement

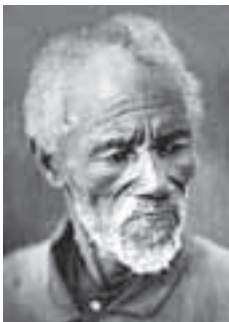
Picture of a Nama community along the Orange River in 1836. Dutch-Afrikaans took root in small communities like this since the 18th century. J.E. Alexander: *An expedition of discovery into the interior of Africa*, 1, p. 82, courtesy of National Archives of Namibia.

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Otjimbingwe

Otjimbingwe in 1865, where Herero, Nama, Damara, Basters and white people met. Dutch-Afrikaans was mainly the common language in which they communicated. Afrikaans was a medium of instruction at the Augustineum, which was established there in 1864. *Rheinische Missionstraktate*, 33 (2), courtesy of National Archives of Namibia.



Moses Witbooi (Gibeon)

Moses Witbooi, leader of the Witboois at Gibeon, where Afrikaans was the common every day language amongst the people. *Palgrave album*, National Archives, Namibia.

this Afrikaans speaking community later in 1835 would emigrate northwards to establish their home at Aigams and name it Windhoek, which from 1890 would serve as capital of the new German colony South West Africa and now independent Namibia.

Other Oorlam groups from the Cape Colony, which was conquered by the British in 1806, followed over time to settle at places like Bethany, Gibeon and Naosanabis (near Gobabis), thus spreading their language over practically the whole southern part of Namibia. Since the 1820's increasing numbers of Basters from the Colony also found a new home in Namaland, as far as Walvis Bay at the coast. Their main concentrations were at places like Rehoboth south of Windhoek and Rietfontein on the fringe of the Kalahari Desert in the east. As with most of the Oorlams, Afrikaans was the Basters' mother tongue.

Meanwhile certain developments created a need for a medium of general and wider communication in the hinterland of the only feasible harbour along the Namibian coast, Walvis Bay. The bay was known by this name as early as 1793. Due to the dominant position of the Afrikaner-Oorlams of Windhoek, as well as the presence of Afrikaans speaking elements along the Swakop River, which was the main route between the coast and the interior, Afrikaans became something of a necessity for travellers, traders and hunters visiting Herero and Damara country. Travellers like Sir Francis Galton, Charles John Andersson, James Chapman and William Coates Palgrave needed the services of interpreters conversant in Afrikaans to get around the country.

The use and status of Afrikaans in Namibia during the 19th century were enhanced by several factors. Missionary societies like the London, Wesleyan and Rhenish Missionary Society consecutively introduced the Christian faith in the southern (since 1805) and central (since 1842) parts of Namibia. While endeavouring to master and use indigenous languages like Nama and Herero in their teaching and spiritual labour, everyone of these societies found it prudent to employ Afrikaans, or Dutch, in their work and intercourse with people. This also happened at the training institution, the Augustineum, which was established in 1864 at Otjimbingwe, the hub of intercultural mixing on the bank of

the Swakop River. Nama captains like David Christiaan of Bethany and Oorlam leaders like Jonker Afrikaner (Windhoek) and Moses Wibooi (Gibeon) insisted that Afrikaans ("Hollands") should be taught to the children by the missionaries. Another factor was the fact that trade took place mainly through Afrikaans, thus making it the lifeblood of commerce. Jonker Afrikaner, leader of the Oorlams at Windhoek, played an important role to enhance trade, for example by building good roads to traverse the mountainous parts of the Auas and Khomas Highlands surrounding his capital. A third factor which strengthened the status of Afrikaans showed itself in the fact that not only higher functions like education and religion were conducted in it, but also formal negotiations and treaties. Important peace treaties between Nama, Oorlam, Baster and Herero parties were written in Dutch/Afrikaans and so were documents of land sales. In the south government by captains and their councils was conducted in Afrikaans. In a way Afrikaans informally took on the status and function of an official language in a period preceding colonisation. It also operated as mother tongue and language of common intercourse, education and religion over two thirds of present day Namibia.

While a number of traders, mostly of English origin, settled at various places throughout the country, Afrikaans speaking whites, also known as Afrikaner-Boers, gradually infiltrated from the south from 1885 onwards. They would become part of Namibia's population through hiring and buying land from Nama, Oorlams and Basters and settling permanently in the country as farmers.

The era of language policies.

It can truly be said that Namibia's linguistic pattern developed largely in a natural and unforced manner during the 18th and most of the 19th century. New forces, however, came with the colonial period, which was introduced when Germany took possession of the country lying between the Kunene River in the north, the Orange River in the south, the Kalahari Desert in the east and the Atlantic Ocean in the west. This was accomplished by means of a treaty system through which indigenous groups subjected themselves to the

Afrikaans is 'here to stay'



When at independence English became the official language of Namibia, the former official language Afrikaans was denounced by some as the mother tongue of the South African occupier. "Back then Afrikaans became a victim of politics," reflects Chris Jacobie, chief editor of the Windhoek-based Afrikaans daily newspaper *Die Republikein*. "Now Afrikaans is no longer the official language and being stripped of its privileges, the stigma has gone benefiting the language." In fact, claims the editor, the position of Afrikaans in Namibia is stronger than ever. To make his point he mentions the increased number of Afrikaans broadcasting stations and print media.

But the recent and future evolution of Afrikaans is more complicated. On the one hand the language is "flourishing" on grassroots level, explains the head of the Afrikaans Department at the University of Namibia (UNAM) Chrisna Beuke-Muir. On the other hand she sees Afrikaans has all but disappeared from the official levels like courts and politics. "In a certain sense Afrikaans is not stronger. Even the young generation of mother tongue Afrikaans speakers can write nor speak Afrikaans properly anymore. In school English has a more privileged position. I doubt if Afrikaans will remain the lingua franca, the language that the majority uses to communicate, for the younger generation."

Although her colleague Professor Aldo Behrens, former dean of the Humanities Department at UNAM, acknowledges that Afrikaans will be spoken less and less in the future, he highlights that the language is booming in the religious and artistic sectors. "There are more publications, books, articles, and theatre pieces in Afrikaans. Religious communities across Namibia continue to worship in Afrikaans."

With approximately 75 percent of the Namibian population speaking and understanding Afrikaans it is still the second language in the country. "They want to speak it," says newspaper editor Jacobie. The notion that Afrikaans still is regarded as the language of the oppressor is too far fetched according to him. "When someone speaks Afrikaans it doesn't mean that person is a white man or oppressor. Most often he or she will be black or brown." To make his point the editor picks up a copy of his newspaper and flips through the pages. He points out the photographs where people of all colours are featured, he points at the letters page where readers have written in Afrikaans as well as in English. And finally Jacobie shows the classifieds page with congratulations and death notices where a cross section of the Namibian society is displayed. Furthermore, he argues, Afrikaans is still an important business language. Namibia's main business partner is South Africa where Afrikaans still is one of the official languages. "At the moment most Namibians don't speak English. And to inform a society you must use a language people can understand otherwise the information is useless."



Even though English has been gaining ground since independence and will continue to do so, Afrikaans will never disappear. The language might eventually be spoken by less people and even evolve into another, more modern form of Afrikaans due to English influences. Says Beuke-Muir: "It's a pity that the language is not needed any longer in the higher functions. I'm sorry that people are no longer forced to think in Afrikaans. But as a school subject it will never disappear and the number of students learning Afrikaans at UNAM is still growing. There's still a market to train for." Afrikaans is "strong enough to stand on its own", concludes her colleague Behrens. "I am proud to be an Afrikaans speaker. We just have to be innovative in keeping the language alive."

Interview and photos by Arjen de Boer

German Emperor and accepted his protection in turn. Some of the communities, like the Oorlams under Witbooi and Koper and Herero in the Gobabis area, resisted German rule, but by 1894 the colonial administration was established over the whole of the country south of the Etosha Pan.

Although it was part of the new rulers' policy to give the country a specific German character by establishing German-like institutions and encouraging Germans to settle as colonists, it was acknowledged during the early years that Afrikaans could be used in official matters like correspondence, negotiations and even contracts and agreements. By the turn of the century, however, German officials were instructed to further the cause of German as only official language and to demand that the missionaries of the Rhenish Missionary Society replace Afrikaans with German in their schools. While introducing German as a subject, missionaries strongly advised that it would not only be pedagogically wrong to enforce a foreign language as means of instruction, but also unwise to discard a language which had long been established in all walks of life.

Language manipulation, therefore, proved to be a matter to be handled with care, not only during the German period (1884-1915), but also after the colony was taken over by the adjacent Union of South Africa as a

mandated territory under the League of Nations after World War I. As was the case in South Africa, both Dutch and English were proclaimed official languages in the territory of South West Africa. Initially, up till the 1920's, mainly English was used by the new authorities in their administration, after which Afrikaans, which replaced Dutch as official language after 1925, increasingly came into use. During the three decades roughly between 1948 and 1978, when under South African rule, Afrikaans in Namibia became associated with the *apartheid* policy of racial discrimination. This was not necessarily a true reflection of the sentiments of the people in the country speaking the language.

Afrikaans lost its status as official language when Namibia became independent in 1990. In 1991, out of a total literate population of 765 000 in the country nearly half were literate in Afrikaans. The population census of 2001 showed that the language, always spoken by many more non-white than white people in the country, remained vibrant and token of an early heritage of Dutch forebears as well as an indigenous cultural and genealogical admixture. The vibrancy is also illustrated by the fact that the Afrikaans daily newspaper *Die Republikein* is the largest selling newspaper after the English language *The Namibian* and the *Namibia Broadcasting Corporation* continues an Afrikaans service.

