

# Language and Identity – The Afrikaans Community in the UK

**Ernst Kotzé**

School of Language, Media and Communication, University of Port Elizabeth, Port Elizabeth,  
South Africa

## ABSTRACT

*The role of language in the identity package of Afrikaans-speaking South African expatriates in the UK is investigated in this paper. A description of the community is provided and the domains of use of their first language identified. The main research problem is the relationship between language and identity in a diasporic community such as this. The main findings of the study: In all modes of communication, the percentage of Afrikaans (in a bilingual relation with English) progressively decreased the closer the ties between the interlocutors became. The identification of 73% of all respondents with positive language-related statements correlated with 82% of the group's support for various types of cultural activities involving visiting South Africans. In conclusion: The mix of functions pointed to a more complex configuration of bilingual and monolingual domains, with some elements of a heterolocal cultural enclave, in which similar domain types are maintained in parallel, but with differences in actual context of usage.*

**Key words:** *language, identity, Afrikaans, bilingualism*

---

## Introduction

This paper explores language, and in particular the home language, as a component of the cultural and personal identity of South African expatriates of Afrikaans extraction who live in the United Kingdom, either temporarily or permanently.

Worldwide, the numbers of South African expatriates have increased to such an extent that the term »diaspora« has on

various occasions been used. No-one knows how many there are already living in the UK, but evidence from a 2000 publication suggests there could be as many as 300,000<sup>1</sup>.

During the long colonial history of Britain, various attempts have been made to fully anglicize the rather heterogeneous population of South Africa. Although these attempts appear to have

failed in the sense that 11 official languages are today recognised in that country, the legacy of bi- and multilingualism, of which English forms an important component in the case of the urbanised population, has created a link with the Anglophone world. And this link seems to be utilised more and more by Afrikaans-English bilinguals, for a variety of reasons, some of which are addressed in this study.

#### *Why English, why language?*

One ostensible reason is their familiarity with English as the lingua franca of the SA business world, which would also explain their preference for countries such as the United States, and the other Anglophone Commonwealth countries Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Whatever other reasons might be advanced, the central role of language, both as a motivation for emigration and as an identification feature of this group, is not to be denied. Against a wider background, research has shown that language is increasingly being recognised in the post-modern world as a central element in identity construction as other traditional markers of identity are being destabilized<sup>2</sup>.

For these reasons, then, it was decided to investigate the nature of the relationship between language and identity among Afrikaans-speaking expatriates in the UK.

#### *The role of bilingualism*

Because this community emigrated as bilinguals to start with, it could be assumed that a pre-existing relation between English and Afrikaans would have formed part of their linguistic identity even before they entered the UK. In one sense, the change to a different linguistic environment would have been less traumatic than in the case of monolinguals from non-Anglophone countries. In an-

other, a realignment of language loyalties and patterns of use could have been expected<sup>3</sup>, because certain options have fallen away, options which would have reinforced the use of their first language in a variety of contexts.

#### *The research questions*

This problem generates a number of questions, such as:

1. What is the demographic composition of this community?
2. How is this community integrated into the wider societal context of the host country? What are the reasons for and the nature of its diasporic existence?
3. What is the role played by the home language in the various contexts of communication?
4. What attitudes, explicit and implicit, are displayed towards the language of the native country?
5. And lastly, in which ways do the attitudes and usage patterns correlate, and consequently contribute to the composition of the group's cultural identity?

#### **Method and Sample**

A questionnaire to elicit factual data (binary and scalar) as well as open-ended responses was circulated on the Internet via an Afrikaans electronic monthly periodical which is read by approximately 10,000 South Africans in 20 different countries. The three main foci of the questionnaire were biographic details, patterns of language usage and language attitudes. The completed questionnaire was e-mailed to the authors. The information captured in this way was converted to spreadsheet format, quantified and basic statistics were calculated by means of an appropriate software programme. Because of time limitations which applied at the occasion of the conference, only a selection of the findings will be reported here.

A total of 185 useable questionnaires formed the basis of the present investigation. The gender distribution of respondents was fairly balanced, with 51.6% of the respondents being male and the remaining 48.4% being female. The average age of the respondents was 31.8 years, a figure which realistically reflects both the large numbers of twenty-something South Africans who find themselves in England on so-called »working visas« at any one time and the significant number of generally (slightly) older individuals and families who have settled in England. Half the respondents were married, with Afrikaans being the language spoken by the majority of couples (65.7%). Only 16.6% of the respondents had English-speaking partners. On average, respondents had been in England for nearly 3 years (34.6 months) and the majority (56.1%) were employed in a professional or semi-professional capacity.

## Results and Discussion

### *Ties with the mother country*

From responses to questions pertaining to the group's physical link with their country of origin, it is clear that among those who responded, some sense of identity with their geographical origins is still in evidence. A large majority (89%) indicated that they return to South Africa one or more times a year.

### *Spoken or written language?*

In attempting to identify the role played by language in this link with the L1 speech community by and large, one important factor was considered. The view that *spoken* language is the primary ma-

nifestation of linguistic knowledge/competence is well established in linguistic spheres<sup>4,5</sup>. The same is true of the assumption that speech is the mode which is maintained longest for primary functions in contexts of language shift, while the use of such language for secondary functions (i.e. graphic communication at various stylistic levels) is readily sacrificed.

The questionnaire was therefore structured in such a way that information on the *spoken* communication of respondents was elicited first, followed by questions on the frequency of the use of both Afrikaans and English for *written* communication.

### *Proximity as a variable*

Likewise, a distinction was made between communication in both these languages with close and more distant *relatives* on the one hand, and with *friends and acquaintances* on the other. In all contexts, a distinction was also drawn between interlocutors *living in the UK* and those *in South Africa*. In this way, all the variables influencing the physical and psychological *proximity* of interlocutors were, as far as possible, taken into account.

### *Frequency of use*

In order to calculate the frequency of use of Afrikaans and English, respectively, respondents were asked to select one of the options regarding the choice of language in the various contexts of usage (Table 1).

TABLE 1  
CHOICE OF LANGUAGE IN THE VARIOUS CONTEXTS OF USAGE

a) Always Eng	b) More Eng than Afr	c) Equal amount of Eng and Afr	d) More Afr than Eng	e) Always Afr	f) Situation dictates
---------------	----------------------	--------------------------------	----------------------	---------------	-----------------------

*Choice of language in the household vs. communication with friends and relatives*

An important communicative setting to consider is the immediate *household*, since this is where future habits are likely to be cultivated. The results for this category will be discussed firstly, after which the various patterns of usage *vis-à-vis* other relatives and friends will be summarized.

Although option (e), viz »Always Afrikaans«, figures predominantly in all the relevant *household* scenarios, it is significant that in *spoken* conversation, this is only true in the case of 49.4% of all respondents. In other contexts, i.e. in spoken and written communication with *relatives* and *friends*, the percentage varies between 64.1% and 86.9%. It is also in the *household* context that *English* is spoken in addition to Afrikaans in 41.1% of all cases, and even to the exclusion of Afrikaans by 4.3% of the respondents. A comparison between the extent to which *English* is spoken to interlocutors who are (a) members of the same household, (b) relatives living in the UK, and (c) relatives from South Africa reveals a clear trend: Whereas it is spoken by 41.1% in the case of members of the same household, this figure decreases to 18.2% in the case of relatives living in the UK, and further to 9.2% in the case of relatives from South Africa. The norm for the maintenance of the »ancestral« language is seemingly influenced, then, by two opposing forces: the *new* (socio-)linguistic environment as well as the (perceived) need/desire to conform with the *tradition* associated with the erstwhile country of domicile. The stronger the latter, the less *English* is used; the stronger the former, the more the speakers are inclined to adapt

to the wider linguistic environment. Although no multivariate correlation tests have been carried out, this pattern seems to indicate that the inclusion of language in the composite identity of individuals is largely dependent on personal choice in dealing with the forces mentioned above.

*Closeness of interlocutors and mode of communication*

There are two further variables which could influence the extent to which the ancestral language is either maintained or compromised, namely the closeness (socially and/or geographically) of the interlocutors, and the mode of communication (spoken or written)\*. If we start with the first, and compare the statistics for the same mode of communication (spoken) as they apply to conversation with *relatives* in the UK with those relating to conversation with *friends* in the UK, the choice in favour of »Afrikaans only« ranks slightly, probably negligibly, higher in the case of the latter (66.5% as against 64.1%). However, when speaking to *friends from SA*, the choice in favour of »Afrikaans only« rises to 76.4%. This is a further indication that there is a possible degree of inverse covariance between the distance (both psychological and physical) separating the speakers from their interlocutors on the one hand and readiness to be integrated linguistically on the other.

If *mode of communication* is selected as the independent variable, the effect of the distance associated with the *written vis-à-vis* the *spoken* mode is further demonstrated by the statistics. Here, the fluctuations in the exclusive use of Afrikaans are even more marked if the results for the same group are compared. For instance, the percentage of respondents using only Afrikaans in *writing* (by way of

\* These two variables are in fact closely related, since written communication implies greater physical and/or psychological distance than the immediate spoken mode.

letters or e-mail) to relatives *within the UK* amounts to 74.7% as against 64.1% in the *spoken* mode. Likewise, 86.9% use only Afrikaans in writing to relatives from SA as against 79.2% who do so vocally; furthermore, 83.6% write to their friends in the UK exclusively in Afrikaans as against 66.5% who communicate solely via Afrikaans in *viva voce* contexts, while 85.2% write to their friends from SA only in Afrikaans as against 76.4% who prefer to speak exclusively Afrikaans to such friends.

This observation is apparently in direct contradiction of the assumption expressed earlier, namely that the spoken form of the ancestral language might be expected to be maintained longer than the written form since the written, or cultivated form, is not as closely associated with the speaker's linguistic identity as the spoken, primary form. The function of the spoken language, particularly in the intimate context of the home, it seems, is far more *pragmatic* in nature than *symbolic*, and thus escapes the preserving effect of the need to maintain group solidarity. Whether the increase in the use of English in the intimate household context will necessarily lead to language shift, is a question that requires further investigation.

#### *Functions of use*

Frequency of usage, as far as the amount of time spent on the activity is concerned, does not, however, necessarily reflect the value of the language for anything other than basic socialisation<sup>6</sup>. For a language to be of value over and above the level of social interpersonal communication and to allow entrance into a variety of spheres in public life – in other words, to provide a »home« to the speakers outside the confines of the hearth – it needs to fulfil a variety of *functions*.

In addition to determining the *extent* to which Afrikaans is used by its speak-

ers in the UK, it is therefore necessary to determine the *functions* for which Afrikaans is used by the respondents in the UK, not least since this choice will further determine the nature of the relation between the language and identity (if, indeed, such a relation exists).

#### *Ranking of functions*

A calculation of the responses resulted in the listing of functions for which Afrikaans is used, in descending order of prominence (Table 2).

TABLE 2  
USAGE OF AFRIKAANS

	%
In the household	90.2
For religious purposes	74.9
Reading for information (on SA)	73.4
Private entertainment	62.5
For reasons of privacy	53.5
Reading for entertainment	53.3
Solidarity with compatriot from SA	42.9
For sentimental reasons	38.6
Public entertainment	37.2
Other reasons	12.5
Studies	10.9

Since the availability of Afrikaans study material in the UK, as well as opportunities to use it as a medium for study there could be regarded as negligible, the position of »Studies« at the bottom of the list above is not a reliable ranking indicator of function.

However, the ranking of the rest of the functions does provide an indication of the level of functional use. Apart from the use of the language in the household (a low function), which is located at the top of the hierarchy, its use for religious purposes and for information retrieval in the second and third places, respectively, are clear indicators of relatively higher functions, and thus of a more encompassing

identification with Afrikaans as a multi-functional medium.

Responses to the open-ended option provided some of the clearest indices of a strong link between language and personal identity as experienced by the speakers.

#### *Language and attitude*

Having looked at the role of language, and in particular, of Afrikaans, as a medium of communication in the individual and communal linguistic enclave in which the speakers find themselves, the next step was to investigate the various links between (a) the *language* as it is used by the speakers and (b) the *attitudes* displayed by the speakers as manifested in statements which reflect these attitudes.

From definitions such as those by Baker<sup>7</sup> and Allport<sup>8</sup>, it is clear that attitude is something which can only be observed indirectly, either by way of self-reportage, actions or association with expressed statements. In this part of the survey, then, the latter approach was followed, and an index of attitudes was compiled on the basis of association or non-association of respondents with preformulated statements.

#### *Eliciting attitudes*

Respondents were presented with two lists of statements, one expressing a range of sentiments towards Afrikaans, and another a range of non language-related sentiments. They were asked to mark each statement with which they could identify themselves. All statements which were marked in this way were then summated and ranked according to frequency (calculated in the form of a percentage of all possible responses). In this way, all factors which contribute to the overall ex-

perience of both a range of language-related sentiments and non language-related views could be listed and numerically assessed in terms of their relative importance to the survey group. Three kinds of statements (negative, neutral and positive) were deliberately scrambled on the questionnaire so as not to create any pattern-forming or leading question sequences, essentially to prevent the well-known Pygmalion effect\*.

#### *Attitudes emanating from listings*

The preferences of respondents represent an interesting mix, the precise motivations for which would require follow-up questions. Suffice it to say that the support of 73% of all respondents for positive language-related statements correlated with 82% of the group's support for various types of cultural performance by visiting South Africans. The findings on this count will be discussed in more detail in a separate publication.

### **By Way of Conclusion**

The choice of language for various communicative purposes displayed a most interesting pattern. In all modes of communication, the percentage of Afrikaans (in a bilingual relation with English) progressively decreased the closer the ties between the interlocutors became. This means that more Afrikaans was spoken to friends (especially distant) than to relatives, and that the component of Afrikaans in bilingual communication with family members in the household was least of all. The same pattern obtained in the case of spoken and written communication, but the self-monitoring effect of written communication brought about a higher incidence of Afrikaans usage in

---

\* The bias of the researcher is inclined to project into his methodology that subtly shapes the data into the direction of his forgone conclusions<sup>9</sup>.

written contexts, regardless of the type of interlocutor.

Domain-specific use of two languages<sup>10</sup> could be indicative of a diglossic situation, where there is a clear demarcation between higher and lower functions. The results of the survey, however, showed that this distinction could not be made, since the use of Afrikaans for certain higher functions (e.g. for religious purposes and written information retrieval) was maintained. The mix of functions pointed to a more complex configuration of bilingual and monolingual domains, with some elements of a hetero-local cultural enclave<sup>11</sup>, in which similar domain types are maintained in parallel, but with differences in actual context of usage.

The cultural cohesion of the survey group was particularly evident in the way

they responded to statements reflecting negative, neutral and positive attitudes to Afrikaans. Insofar as language forms part of the cultural complex of human activity, the role of language in the identity of its speakers seems to be determined by a wider spectrum of allegiance factors pertaining to the speech community's culture, along the lines of Murphy's definition of culture<sup>12</sup>, namely that it:

*refers to the norms, values, standards by which people act, and it includes the ways distinctive in each society of ordering the world and rendering it intelligible.*

And finally, since this allegiance manifests itself in a peculiar way by the stronger language maintenance of respondents towards interlocutors who are further away, it seem to underscore the old adage of »absence makes the heart grow fonder«.

## REFERENCES

1. GRANT, I., South Africans abroad: Exporting the rainbow nation. (<http://www.futurecompany.co.za/2000/08/25/covstory.htm>, 2000). — 2. WARSCHAUER, M.: Language, identity, and the Internet. In: KOLKO, B., L. NAKAMURA, G. RODMAN (Eds.): Race in Cyberspace. (Routledge, New York, in press). — 3. WEINREICH, U.: Languages in contact: Findings and problems. (Mouton, The Hague, 1968). — 4. BLOOMFIELD, L.: Language. (Holt, New York, 1933). — 5. DE SAUSSURE, F.: Course in general linguistics. (The Philosophical Library, New York, 1959). — 6. FERGUSON, C., Word 151 (1959) 325. — 7. BA-

KER, C.: Attitudes and Language. (Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, 1992). — 8. ALLPORT, G. W.: Attitudes: In: MURCHISON, C. A. (Ed.): A Handbook of Social Psychology. (Clark University Press, Worcester, Mass, 1935). — 9. ROSENTHAL, R., Psychology Today 7 (1973) 56. — 10. FISHMAN, J. A., Journal of Social Issues 23 (1967) 29. — 11. ZELINSKY, W., B. A. LEE, International Journal of Population Geography, 4 (1998) 281. — 12. MURPHY, R.: Culture and Social Anthropology: An Overture. (Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1986).

*E. Kotzé*

*School of Language, Media and Communication, University of Port Elizabeth,  
ZA-6031 Port Elizabeth, South Africa  
e-mail: ernst.kotze@upe.ac.za*

## **JEZIK I IDENTITET – AFRIKAANSKA ZAJEDNICA U VELIKOJ BRITANIJI**

### **S A Ž E T A K**

U ovom se članku razmatra uloga jezika u identitetu afrikaanskih južnoafričkih iseljenika u Velikoj Britaniji. Opisana je sama zajednica i određene domene uporabe njihovog prvog jezika. Glavni problem istraživanja je odnos između jezika i identiteta u zajednicama dijaspore kao što je ova. Rezultati pokazuju da se u svim načinima komunikacije postotak uporabe afrikaanskog (u dvojezičnom odnosu s engleskim) postepeno smanjivao što su veze među sugovornicima postajale prisnije. 73% svih ispitanika s pozitivnim izjavama vezanim uz jezičnu uporabu koreliraju s 82% grupne potpore za ostvarivanje niza različitih kulturnih aktivnosti, uključujući i posjet Južnoj Africi. Može se zaključiti da mješavina funkcija ukazuje na složeniju konfiguraciju dvo- i jednojezičnih domena, s nekim elementima heterolokalne kulturne enklave, u kojoj su neke slične domene paralelno zadržane, no s razlikama u kontekstu stvarne uporabe.

## **Appendix**

### **Questionnaire**

This questionnaire forms part of a research project which is aimed at determining the role played by Afrikaans in the way Afrikaans speakers living abroad perceive themselves. The first part of the project therefore focuses on such expatriates living in the United Kingdom.

We would be very grateful if you could answer the questions below anonymously. Most questions simply require the making of a cross in the appropriate block. It should not take more than 10 minutes to complete this questionnaire. When the questionnaire has been filled out, it should be sent as an attachment to one of the e-mail addresses at the end of the questionnaire. You will be informed of the findings of the project by means of *Klets* or otherwise.

#### ***PART 1 – Biographic details***

1. Gender (M/F)
2. Age (years)
3. Marital status (Single/Married/Co-habiting – Offspring: Number)  
If single, go to Question 5.
4. Primary language spoken by partner: (Afrikaans/English/other)
5. Occupation
6. Period resident in the UK (in months)
7. Original reason for coming to the UK
8. Near to which large city do you live?
9. Nature of residence in the UK (Temporary/Semi-temporary/Permanent)
10. Frequency of visits to SA (Never/seldom/once per year/several times per year)
11. I grew up with Afrikaans as a first language/second language



**PART 2 – Patterns of language use**

**2.1. The context of the household**

1. Which language do you use when speaking to your parent(s)/children living here? (always English/more English than Afrikaans/equal amounts of English and Afrikaans/more Afrikaans than English/ always Afrikaans/situation dictates)
2. Which language do you use when speaking to other relatives who speak Afrikaans at home?
  - (a) *in the UK*: (always English/more English than Afrikaans/equal amounts use of English and Afrikaans/more Afrikaans than English/always Afrikaans/situation dictates – specify)
  - (b) *from SA*: (always English/more English than Afrikaans/equal amounts of English and Afrikaans/more Afrikaans than English/always Afrikaans/situation dictates – specify)
3. Which language do you use in correspondence (e-mail, letters) with relatives who speak Afrikaans at home?
  - (a) *in the UK*: (always English/more English than Afrikaans/equal amounts of English and Afrikaans/more Afrikaans than English/always Afrikaans/situation dictates – specify)
  - (b) *from SA*: (always English/more English than Afrikaans/equal amounts of English and Afrikaans/more Afrikaans than English/always Afrikaans/situation dictates – specify)

**2.2. The wider social context**

1. Which language do you use in conversations (specify if necessary) with friends who speak Afrikaans at home?
  - (a) *in the UK*: (always English/more English than Afrikaans/equal amounts of English and Afrikaans/more Afrikaans than English/always Afrikaans/situation dictates – specify)
  - (b) *from SA*: (always English/more English than Afrikaans/equal amounts of English and Afrikaans/more Afrikaans than English/always Afrikaans/situation dictates – specify)
2. Which language do you use in correspondence (e-mail, letters) with friends who speak Afrikaans at home?
  - (a) *in the UK*: (always English/more English than Afrikaans/equal amounts of English and Afrikaans/more Afrikaans than English/always Afrikaans/situation dictates – specify)
  - (b) *from SA*: (always English/more English than Afrikaans/equal amounts of English and Afrikaans/more Afrikaans than English/always Afrikaans/situation dictates – specify)

**2.3 General**

1. How often do you use Afrikaans? (never/infrequently/ quite frequently/every day/situation dictates – specify)
2. For which functions do you use Afrikaans? (Mark each category that applies.)
  - Conversations at home and with relatives
  - For religious purposes
  - Public entertainment (concerts, karaoke, etc.)
  - Private entertainment (videos, CDs, etc.)
  - Light reading
  - Reading to keep abreast of SA news (magazines and the Internet)
  - Study
  - For reasons of privacy (so that British people will not be able to understand me)
  - For sentimental reasons
  - To demonstrate solidarity with someone from SA
  - Another reason (name it): .....
3. How much Afrikaans do you read? (none /very little/quite frequently/every day/ situation dictates (expand))

**PART 3 – Attitudes towards afrikaans**

1. Mark each statement with which you can identify

- Afrikaans has no place in London.
- Afrikaans is a vibrant/rich/expressive language.
- Afrikaans is a racist/conservative language.
- Afrikaans speakers in Britain speak a lively form of the language which includes words reflecting their British living conditions.
- Speakers of Afrikaans in Britain do not speak a pure form of Afrikaans any more.
- Speakers of Afrikaans in Britain are inclined to forms cliques.
- Afrikaans speakers in SA should insist on their language rights
- Afrikaans speakers in SA should ensure its continued existence as a public language.
- If I have children, I would like them to have a good command of Afrikaans.
- I regard myself as an Afrikaner.
- I am aware that my English betrays my Afrikaans background.
- I think in Afrikaans.
- I express myself better in Afrikaans than in English.
- I don't have the self-confidence to speak Afrikaans any more.
- I enjoy hearing Afrikaans.
- I enjoy reading Afrikaans.
- I enjoy speaking Afrikaans.
- I am aware that I do not know the Afrikaans terms for the technological and other concepts which I am working with here.
- I am quite fluent in English, compelled by necessity.
- I am quite fluent in English and proud of it.
- I am proud of being identified as a South African, but prefer not to be caught out as an Afrikaans-speaking South African.
- I find it impractical to cling to Afrikaans.
- English has a dearth of certain vocabulary which exists in Afrikaans and which is useful/meaningful to me.
- Afrikaans medium education is second-rate education.
- When I hear Afrikaans being spoken, it evokes pleasant memories.
- When I hear Afrikaans being spoken, it evokes unpleasant memories.
- When I am old, I will still use Afrikaans.

2. If the opportunity arises, I will attend/support the following (mark wherever applicable):

- The UKkaside Festival\*
- Freedom Day celebrations (April 27th)
- An Afrikaans church service
- An Afrikaans literary discussion group
- An Afrikaans pre-school group
- A dinner in a typically South African restaurant
- A rugby or cricket match in which the SA team participate
- An arts performance (e.g. music, dance, drama) by visiting South Africans
- Anything else (mention): .....

---

\* An annual cultural festival for Afrikaans expatriates in the UK which was first held in 2001. The name is a deformation of »okkaside«, the Afrikaans counterpart of »occasion« which is, however, semantically closer to 'event'. Hence the interpretation 'UK event'.