

Mother language, heart language

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This week, Mother Language Day was celebrated internationally on 21 February: A day dedicated to the language in which our very first thoughts were verbalised. We're so different, but this is something that we all share.



Our mother language is regarded as the language we hear most as a baby and toddler, and it's usually the language of the mother figure who was responsible for us when we were very little. It's also the language in which we would have said our first words, and the language that has, while we were acquiring it, established the blueprint for all the languages that we may learn later in life. Some people may even have two languages as mother languages, particularly when they come from a multilingual household. Mother Language Day creates a space for us to reflect on that very foundation of our language repertoire – something that also influences how we interact with the world around us. It's about a very deep emotional connection with our own language instinct, yes, but it's also about where language can take us.

When we connect with others, we bring our own language repertoire to the table. Our mother language becomes intertwined with the languages

we use in other spaces, for instance in the workplace. One could choose not to acknowledge this multidimensionality and suppress parts of oneself – however, recognising the richness of different experiences, ways of expression and points of view makes for much stronger and more agile individuals and teams that can communicate better with each other and with those they serve.



Photo credit: Stellenbosch University campus photo bank

In celebration of this unique strength and sense of possibility within each of us, some Stellenbosch University Language Centre staff shared something of their connection to their mother language:

The connection with identity

"I like to think of isiXhosa as my identity. I grew up loving my language without even realising it. That reflected in my essay writing or book analysis in high school. I even had a book where I would write isiXhosa poems. I remember my teacher showing off to her colleague about a book I had analysed while I was doing Grade 11. I would say it was all of this that inspired me to want to know and learn more about my language, as I ended up majoring in isiXhosa even at university. And at that time, I didn't even know that there are several jobs other than teaching that one could do with language, but I continued to study isiXhosa because of my love and passion for the language." – *Asiphe Sogiba, isiXhosa interpreter*

The joy of sharing it

"I am proudly Afrikaans. I grew up with a West Coast father who taught me words like 'snoek', 'bokkoms' [salted and dried mullet or harder, also known as Cape biltong] and 'galjoen' [galleon]. Today I still use his favourite expression, 'Siesa Skipper!', when someone has done something well.

I am now a lecturer with the privilege of teaching international students Afrikaans. The enthusiasm with which they learn my mother language astounds me time and again. And everything is 'LEKKER' [very enjoyable] to them! Nelson Mandela's words, 'If you talk to a man in his language, that goes to his heart', are so true. I regard it as my calling in life to touch people's hearts by introducing them to my mother language." – *Dr Vernita Beukes, Afrikaans lecturer*

A reflection of its speakers

"My mother language is English, and my father language is English too. That makes me different in my home country South Africa, where only around five per cent of the population have English as a first language.

Language has been a passion for me since I was very young. I first started my language journey paying extra attention to convoluted English spelling and pronunciation, and just loved trying to wrap my head around its difficulties. Very soon, though, as I began to learn French, Afrikaans and a bit of isiZulu, English became my guide in mapping out how languages differ from each other.

I slowly began to understand the richness that learning many languages brings; that the Englishness of beating around the bush and being polite had its origins in the French spoken in the royal court in England until a century or so ago, and left its traces in words like 'courtesy', 'liberty', 'fraternity', 'equality' and 'university', and many more words relating to civilisation, education and the law. I learned that the blunt Celtic earthiness of words like 'quaff', 'drink' and 'sit' were part of English's Germanic roots and were echoed in the directness of Germanic languages like Afrikaans and German. And, to my surprise, words of isiZulu origin like 'indaba' (conference, news) and 'donga' (a dry gully formed by the eroding action of running water), 'babbelas' (hangover, from the Zulu ibhabhalazi), 'bonsella' (surprise gift) were also part of the fabric of my variety of English, spoken at the southern tip of the African continent. My English, learned in my hometown of Johannesburg, also reflects the many immigrant cultures attracted to this mining town, where hustling is still the name of the game. So for me, Yiddish words used in SA English like 'chutzpah', 'schmuck', 'kugel', 'bagel', 'shabbat', 'platz' and 'meshugge' add a richness to my vocabulary and are like treasures waiting to be discovered." – *Dr Kim Wallmach, Director of the Language Centre*

A sense of coming home

"Afrikaans is something I learnt from my mother. She had a voice like a bell, and she spoke Afrikaans with the unpretentiousness and honesty of the Sutherland Karoo where she grew up – the Afrikaans of NP van Wyk Louw. During a recent family holiday in Swakopmund I was struck by how different it was there and how much I felt at home, all at once. One hears Afrikaans everywhere: in the street, in a conversation between two Herero women clad in traditional garb; from the Ovambo barista in the coffee shop: 'Is mevrou al gehelp... wat gaan dit vandag wees?' ['Have you been served yet... what will it be today?']. A woman ordering her coffee stands next to me and spontaneously starts chatting. Later she sits next to me and shows me photos of the Spitzkoppe. She says she grew up in Namibia, but lived in the Republic for most of her adult life. She has now returned and would soon start teaching at a school in Windhoek. Her words echo my own

experience: 'It feels like I've come home... I can breathe here.' In my case, this feeling had a lot to do with the fact that I could hear my language everywhere; spoken spontaneously and unselfconsciously: beautiful – mooi – Afrikaans.

While on a cycling tour through the Tsauchab river, I remarked to the Damara tour guide and my family how pretty the tamarisk trees in the riverbed were. In Afrikaans, a riverbed is a 'rivierloop', and the word 'loop' also means 'to walk' or 'to flow or run', in the case of a liquid. One of my children replied: 'Hier is nie water nie, hoekom sê Mamma die rivier loop?' ['There is no water here – why do you say the river is flowing?'] The tour guide stopped everyone and got off his bicycle. He spoke to the children: 'Your mother speaks Afrikaans beautifully – mooi Afrikaans. That is something you children should never lose.' When I asked him about his linguistic background, he replied that his family spoke Damara and English, and even a little German. 'Maar ons praat Afrikaans as ons lus is om Afrikaans te praat, as ons móoi wil praat.' ['But we speak Afrikaans when we feel like speaking Afrikaans; when we want to speak beautifully.']

To me, that Damara man was one of the highlights of our holiday. In his company, there was a general relaxed feeling, a sense of friendship, of familiarity and of mutual understanding; and even a sense of happiness. As I watched him cycling energetically ahead of me along the dusty path, I knew this: My beautiful – *mooi* – language is flourishing, just like the delicate, tough tamarisks in the dry riverbed of the Tsauchab." – *Dr Carmen Brewis, interpreter and researcher*

The language within

We also have a poem to share, and we chose not to translate the poem, but rather share it in its original Afrikaans form. This poem is about language as one's heritage and how one's language mentors (parents, teachers) also have a profound influence on what one regards as your own.

My taal, my erfenis

Afrikaaps is nie my taal nie.
Sommige woorde kan ek nie verstaan nie.
My taal
het ek geleer van kindsbeen af
saam met die klingel en tongklap
van die aksent
wat my streek rojal kweek.

Daar het ek begin verstaan
en geleer my ma en pa se taal.
Met my Afrikaanse onnie
wat berispel die spelreëls aanhaal,
nie tjent nie, maar kind,
nie tjy nie, maar jy.
Idiome sou ek goed onthou:
Iemand wat hard werk
is 'n werkesel,
anders was dit die roltang vir jou.

My taal kom uit die boeke wat ek lees.
Tussen die blaie
kon ek kies om iemand anders te wees.
Daar in die stilte van my drome
sonder die kletterende lawaai
in 'n omgewing sonder energie belaaie,
kry my taal sy lêplek
daar sonder die tjy en tjou,

daar lewe ek.

My komvandaan is eenvoudig,
tog is alles volop rondom en binne my.
Daar teen die Weskus het ek my asem gekry.
Daar is taal in my erfenis gebrei.
Nou kruip en klou
die wortels van my taal
diep en welig
sonder ophef of kabaal
lewe dit uit my pen
koester dit die erfenis wat ek ken.

– Anne-Mari Lackay, consultation coordinator at the Language Centre Writing Lab

At the SU Language Centre, we believe that it is language that brings us together, and we will keep on connecting people by improving communication and understanding.

This piece is also available in [Afrikaans](#) and [isiXhosa](#).

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