

A Smart Translator's Reunion

Another language & translation blog (but probably the only one from Reunion Island)

Afrikaans Language Monument

Posted by **Catharine Cellier-Smart** in **language, travelling**

During a recent trip to South Africa, I realised I would be passing not far from the [Afrikaans Language Monument](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afrikaans_Language_Monument) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afrikaans_Language_Monument), and being the curious language professional I am, I decided I couldn't *not* visit it 😊



The monument's main obelisk seen from the surrounding gardens

Like many non-South Africans, I tend to associate the [Afrikaans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afrikaans_language) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afrikaans_language) language with a repressive period of the country's history, and so, on the one hand, I wasn't wonderfully happy about seeing a monument which might be as much about glorifying apartheid (ironically the language's

most famous word) as Afrikaans itself, however, on the other hand, I love all things language-related and **the “Taalmonument” is thought to be the only monument in the world dedicated to a language.** Plus I’m a great believer in seeing things for my own eyes (<http://travelssmart.blogspot.com/2010/11/north-of-border.html>) so that I can make my own mind up. Lastly, according to some linguists, Afrikaans is technically a Creole language (<https://asmarttranslatorsreunion.wordpress.com/category/creole/>), and that’s another interest of mine.



The mounds to the left represent African languages, while the pillars in the centre of this photo represent European languages

Here are a few facts that I learnt about the language and the monument:

- Afrikaans is one of Africa’s youngest languages. It originated as a dialect of Dutch, brought to the Cape area by settlers from the Dutch East India Company in the late 17th century. “Afrikaans” is the Dutch word for “African,” and the language was once called “Cape Dutch.” Over time, Afrikaans evolved into a distinct language
- One of Afrikaans earliest written forms was actually in Arabic script (imams wrote religious texts in what was then called “Cape Afrikaans” to make studying the Quran easier)
- Approximately 13.5% of the South African population (7 million people) speak Afrikaans as a first language, making it the third most common natively-spoken language in the country, after Zulu and Xhosa
- Census data show that the majority of Afrikaans speakers are not White: it is spoken as their first language by 60.8% of Whites (2.7 million people) and 75% (4.8 million people) of Coloured South Africans as well as small percentages of Blacks and Indians
- It has the most diverse geographic and racial distribution of the country’s 12 official languages, and is widely spoken and understood as a second or third language (although Zulu and English are thought to be understood as a second language by a higher proportion of the population)
- It is the majority language of the western half of South Africa, and overall is the third most spoken language in South Africa



Note the 'rapidly ascending curve' of the main obelisk (right). It meets the European pillars to form a bridge symbolising the fusion of the languages of the two continents

- Located near Paarl, in the Western Cape Winelands, the granite monument was built in 1972-1974, and unveiled in 1975 to commemorate 50 years since Afrikaans was declared an official language of South Africa (it's also spoken in Namibia (<https://asmarttranslatorsreunion.wordpress.com/2016/04/24/the-languages-of-namibia/>))
- The main column is a 57m-high obelisk, with a "rapidly ascending curve" representing the eternal growth of the language, and an opening at the top because the language is still growing
- The shorter column next to it is 26m high, and symbolises South Africa, the birthplace of Afrikaans. It is open to the north to indicate dialogue with the rest of the African continent
- The feet of the two largest columns rest in a fountain, as water symbolises life
- Three shorter columns symbolise the diminishing influence of European languages on Afrikaans (mainly Dutch, but also French, German and Portuguese)



This photo gives a more proportioned idea of the monument's scale, and shows the column representing South Africa (far right)

- The wall on the stairs symbolises the influence of SE Asian languages on Afrikaans (primarily Malay, as during the 17th and 18th centuries Muslim slaves were brought to the Cape)
- The domes on the stage symbolise the growing influence of African languages on Afrikaans (Khoi (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khoekhoe_language), seSotho (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sotho_language), Xhosa, Zulu, Nguni (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nguni_languages), etc.)



The wall in between the “African mounds” and “European pillars” represents Asian languages and is meant to join, rather than separate, them

My visit to the Taalmonument revealed a complex narrative. Built as a tribute to the language, it seeks to shed the stigma of Afrikaans being reserved for white Afrikaners. As a public entity, the monument aims at inclusivity, hoping that all South Africans will appreciate Afrikaans in the context of a larger, multicultural society, and it works to encourage and support Afrikaans among young people and non-mother-tongue speakers. It reaches out to other indigenous language communities, endeavouring to establish mutual respect, by, among other things, acknowledging the reciprocal influences of languages on each other. In the end, this unique monument underscores the power of language to bridge divides and bring people together. It’s a reminder that language, like the monument itself, is a dynamic, ever-growing entity that reflects the diversity and unity of a multicultural society.



View from another angle

P.S. There's also an Afrikaans language museum (<http://www.taalmuseum.co.za/visitor-information/>) in Paarl, but it was closed at the time of my visit

Further reading:

- "SAfrican" English (<https://asmarttranslatorsreunion.wordpress.com/2013/05/27/safrican-english/>) (my blog post)
- Taalmonument official website (<http://www.taalmuseum.co.za/>).

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