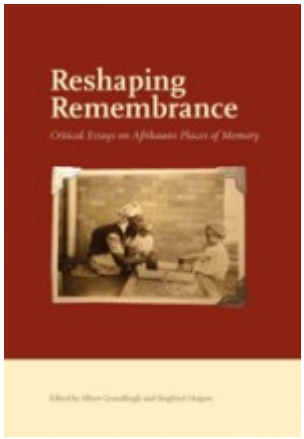
Reshaping Remembrance ~ English



1.

There is something rather uneasy about the thought of English as a space of memory or memorialisation for Afrikaans. One can't easily dispel a vague feeling of embarrassment at the idea that bilingualism features prominently in the specific language-memories of Afrikaans communities. English and Afrikaans are strange bedfellows: over time the relationship has been marked, either simultaneously or in turn, by admiration, amazement and reproach – and this continues right into the present. Of course, the complex relationship between the two languages and the two language communities dates back quite a long way. After 1806 the Cape was no longer Dutch, but the Dutch-speaking inhabitants stayed on. The British government that took constitutional control of the Cape after 150 or so years of Dutch East India Company rule, was obliged to seek a way of peaceful coexistence between the earlier established Dutch community and the new colonists. From the very beginning of European settlement everything that is characteristic of language contact situations was there. Afrikaans is the product not only of gradual language shift or dialect change, but also of the sustained interaction with indigenous languages, with slave languages and with English.

As early as 1910, eight years after the end of the Anglo-Boer war, the decision on official languages in the newly established Union of South Africa reflected the reality of two strong, separate language communities (notably, the indigenous African languages were not considered at the time). In spite of a British victory in 1902 over the largely Dutch-speaking Boer republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free State,**[i]** and their inclusion in a consolidated British colony, a compromise arrangement was accepted when it came to the language policy of the Union. Rather than following a winnertakes-all principle that would recognise English only, both Dutch and English were made official languages. In 1925 – fifty years after the establishment of the 'Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners' (GRA) in Paarl with the explicit aim of propagating Afrikaans as a language in its own right –

Afrikaans replaced Dutch as an official language. Then already the relationship between Afrikaans and English and between the language communities that were identified by each of these languages showed tell-tale signs of an ambivalent history. The introduction of Afrikaans as an official language was preceded by almost 100 years of its sporadic usage in popular texts that illustrated local language variation, specifically the colloquial Cape Dutch.**[ii]** For those who had been educated in Dutch and could read and write the language well, Afrikaans instead of Dutch as an official language, was hardly acceptable. For them, Dutch was the standard language; Afrikaans did not have the required kind of social and educational prestige. Others preferred English as the language of literacy and social progress, and thus chose to migrate from Dutch to English. For many living in the rural districts Afrikaans had become their only language; it had, however, never been the only language in any part of the country. For this reason, Afrikaans can never be considered without contrasting it and taking into account its relation with the other South African languages; one can hardly think of Afrikaans in South Africa without some or other contrast to Dutch and finally also to English, the only other Germanic language in the country.

A large part of the 20th century's memory of the relationship between English and Afrikaans is coloured by the memory of a war. After 1866, following the discovery of mineral wealth in the interior beyond the colonial borders, the British policy of non-expansion was revised. The young Republics of the Transvaal (ZAR) and the Free State that were established on an ideal of independence from British government, became interesting to British statesmen like Rhodes and Milner in a new way. It was not the unequal competition between British troops and Boer soldiers for control over gold and diamond fields that became prominent in the collective memory; the aspect of the conflict between Boer and Brit (1899-1902) that shaped attitudes towards and memories of English for more than fifty years afterwards, was the hardships that women and children endured at the hands of members of the British forces. Grundlingh**[iii]** points out that a shared language contributed significantly to the development of Afrikaner unity as did other factors such as the perception of a shared past, and shared religious convictions and practices. Even so, in the process of rebuilding infrastructure and communities before and after the unification of 1910, and in the political development of the early 20th century, white English and Afrikaans communities were dependent on each other. For Afrikaners, English was friend and foe, ally and oppressor, language of education and domination, sign and signal of what

could be achieved and what was unattainable.

Against this brief, sketchy background, I shall examine English as a space of memory from three perspectives, namely personal memory of the acquisition of linguistic identity in an Afrikaans-English household, memories of English in the development of Afrikaans writers and poets, and memories of the 70 year long period in which, as official languages, Afrikaans and English divided and united communities in public domains.

2.
Developmental Psychology and mnemonic analysis often reflect on the question as to how early the first conscious childhood memories are established, and what it is that determines a specific experience as one that will become fixed in the individual consciousness so that it stands out as a memory. One of my earliest and very lucid memories that often surfaces, is one relating to language and emotion: we are sitting around the dining room table, mother, father and three little girls building a puzzle – one with a picture of a Union Castle passenger liner in blue and grey and white colours. As was the custom at the time, in adult conversations children were seen and not heard. The effect is that one becomes semi-transparent, that one overhears adult conversation as if one is eavesdropping. You don't ask questions and you don't risk making a contribution. The topic of discussion is the child that has to go to school the following year, and the question is whether she will be enrolled in the English or Afrikaans class at the dual-medium school in our little town in Natal. According to dad it would be the Afrikaans class – no argument. But, is my mother's defence, she cannot speak Afrikaans. Then, dad finds, it is high time that she learns.

I can't remember having any specific language preference at school, with family or with friends, before or after that conversation. My father was Afrikaans, my mother English. To her we spoke English, to our father – also English, even though he spoke only Afrikaans. I have no recollection of stress or distress, of conflict or misunderstanding in managing the two languages. The neighbours' children, the Andersons, were English and spoke only English; the older cousins on the farm were Afrikaans and spoke only Afrikaans. I don't recall language being an 'issue' in those communicative spaces. Nor do I remember how beyond understanding, I eventually started speaking Afrikaans. What I do remember, is the shock and dismay I felt on that same day when my mother, following my father's instruction, started consciously and persistently to speak Afrikaans to me.

There was a scene in the kitchen where I realized that she was deliberately addressing me in Afrikaans, and that she didn't want to answer me in the language that had been established as our 'first language'. The feeling of alienation and rejection was too much for my five-year-old equilibrium, so I started to cry; in English I shouted that she shouldn't speak to me like that, that I didn't like it.

Three months later I was sitting in Class 1 in the Afrikaans class. As far as I know there was nothing wrong with my English or my Afrikaans. The one remnant of our early English-as-home-language, was that us children used 'jy' and 'jou' (the tu-form of the pronoun) in addressing our parents – if one could use the English 'you' without being impolite, then the direct equivalent was probably in order. I always found my friends' 'ma, wat maak ma' or 'pa, sal pa my help'**[iv]** style rather comical. In any case, the memory of the little outburst in the kitchen where I stamped my feet and screamed in frustration, and the conversation that lead up to it, is an enduring one. My protest had been in vain. We never used English systematically in our home again. The younger brother born in my grade 1 year was introduced to Afrikaans as his first language. What kind of emotion is woven into the use of a language (any language) so that a calculated change in linguistic behaviour is interpreted as betrayal, as a violation of agreement, a breach in one's sense of security? In a novel that topicalises the question of 'how we became as we now are', Christa Wolf**[v]** points out that it cannot be answered without consideration of such early, intense memories.

One can't escape asking about the nature of the relationship between language and identity. Language is widely recognized as one of the central markers of personal, but also of social and cultural identity. Referring to the experience of so-called 'Latinos' in the USA, Anzaldua writes 'ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language',**[vi]** and Ramsdell writes 'language is identity and identity is political'.**[vii]** I am not alone within the Afrikaans memorial community if I identify myself as 'Afrikaans', and simultaneously remember very dear English grandparents who found it difficult to follow the Afrikaans that their grandchildren were speaking to one another. The relationship between English and Afrikaans may have been tricky, at times even painful, but it was always intimate.

3.

Wolf concerns herself with questions about the historicity of identity. She

draws attention to the fact that at some or other mostly unidentifiable moment, every person starts to perceive himself/herself historically, that is, as being intricately part of the period in which they are living.**[viii]** She suggests an answer to the question of how we come to our present identity. According to her, one kind of answer would be found in a list of book titles that stand out as having been formative. In the literature, the poetry and prose of a community, you are likely to find a memorial space. In the transition from personal memory to collective memory I will reflect on English as a language which Afrikaans writers inevitably had to take into account.

I grew up with A.A. Milne's *Christopher Robin* and *Winnie-the-Pooh*, with *Nursery rhymes* and *The wind in the willows.* The bedtime stories, nursery rhymes, fairy tales and fables remain seated somewhere in a safe, trusted space. Later, but with less emotional attachment, there were Afrikaans stories such as *Huppelkind and Die wonderlike motor van Barnabas Bombas.* We were introduced to the legacy of the icons of Afrikaans literature. Completely un-chronologically, we were guided into the work of (amongst others) Langenhoven, such as *Sonde met die bure* and *Herrie op die tremspoor* – novels that were consciously written as part of a project intended to establish Afrikaans as a literary language. There were M.E.R's Karlien-en-Kandas rhymes and Eitemal's *Jaffie*. At some stage there was also Eugène Marais, Leipolt, N.P.van Wyk Louw, W.E.G. Louw, Eybers, Opperman – poets whose work confirmed that Afrikaans is a worthy language. The work presented to us in school was not focused as much on pride of the fact that Afrikaans could be independent of Dutch, as it was on pride of the fact that works like *Raka*, *Die Dieper Reg, Heilige Beeste and Belydenis in die Skemering* were proof that Afrikaans literature could keep up with and hold its own against English!

If one looks retrospectively at the space created by these first Afrikaans writers and poets, it becomes apparent that they owe much of their development as creative artists to contact with English. A community that claims the work of its artists to be shared cultural property has to accept, even embrace, the various sources from which the art originates. To illustrate how English functions as a memorial space I refer to the contact of a number of iconic Afrikaans literary figures with English during their formative years. My selection is to some extent random – as is the nature of most memories. The first writers who wrote in Afrikaans (rather than Dutch) often did so in a self-conscious and sometimes

openly pedantic way, not as full time writers or poets, but as journalists, teachers, doctors, lawyers, politicians.

Quite a number of Herzog prize**[ix]** winners received much if not all of their formal schooling through the medium of English. This was sometimes due to the fact that English institutions provided the only well established educational opportunities in a given context. So, for example, N.P. van Wyk Louw, even in his first school years in a predominantly Afrikaans Karoo town, Sutherland (1911-1919), received his tuition in English because it was the only option. However, Eugene Marais had his schooling in Pretoria in English even though there was a choice between Dutch and English schools.

The Louw family moved to Cape Town in 1920 where Wyk and Gladstone completed their high school years at SACS, and afterwards went to study at the University of Cape Town (UCT). I.D. du Plessis, who was born in Philipstown, completed his school education at Wineberg Boys High in Cape Town, and also went to university at UCT. Education through medium of English, even when the field of study was not specifically languages or social sciences, inevitably brought exposure to a different perspective from the local one. Most of these writers, in reflecting on their own development, refer to English writers, poets, and literary traditions. Also, their writing often bears traces of thematic and structural features of English works.

It is said of Leipoldt that he grew up in a polyglot household where Afrikaans, English, and German were actively used. As a young journalist, he was war correspondent from 1899 until 1901 for an English newspaper, *The South African News*, of which the owners were outspokenly pro-Boer. At the time there was a host of English leaders in Cape Town who sympathised with the Boer republics. So, for example, Leipoldt was supported by John X. Merriman as well as Fred Centlivres in his protest against the manner in which the British government and the local government in Cape Town waged the Anglo-Boer war. In contrast, there were people in the Cape such as S.J. du Toit, who vigorously supported the development of Afrikaans rather than Dutch, but who sympathised with the English cause during the war. The suggestion that political divisions were drawn along the same lines as language divisions, that English automatically represented imperialism, liberalism and anti-Afrikanerism, is a construction that is not borne out by the available evidence.

Leipoldt grew up in Clanwilliam, started working in Cape Town as a bilingual journalist who could write equally well in English and in Afrikaans, and eventually trained as a medical doctor and paediatrician in London. A.G. Visser, who started his career as a teacher and journalist in the north, also studied medicine in England. J.H.H. de Waal, a nephew of Onze Jan Hofmeyr, who opened the genre of historical romance in Afrikaans literature with his *Johannes van Wyk*, studied law in London and later practiced in Cape Town as a lawyer. So too did H.A. Fagan, who is seen as the founder of realistic drama in Afrikaans. He received the Herzog prize in 1936 for *Die ouderling en ander toneelstukke*, a compilation that included Ousus, which is considered to be his best play. A remarkable contribution in the form of Afrikaans animal stories came from the Hobson brothers, descendants of the 1820 Settlers in the Eastern Cape, who had grown up in an English speaking family in the district of Graaff-Reinet. The overwhelmingly Afrikaans speaking community in which they lived ensured that they were competently bilingual, and that their writing, which was based on experiences and observations from their environment, would be in Afrikaans. Already in 1930 they were awarded the Herzog prize for their literary contribution, specifically for *Kees van die Kalahari.*

Writers and poets of following periods in Afrikaans also produced creative work in contexts where English was used regularly and systematically. To name but a few: Jan Rabie, married to the artist Marjory Wallace, wrote to her in English while he was working on an Afrikaans novel, and explained in detail what he was planning, how he was progressing, and what he was battling with in his work.**[x]** André Brink taught at English institutions, Rhodes University (Afrikaans-Dutch, 1961-90) and the University of Cape Town (English, 1991-2000); later he also started writing in English and did the translations of his Afrikaans work into English, himself. Antjie Krog, who comes from a family of farmers in the Free State where memories of the Anglo-Boer war remained alive in all sorts of ways, was still at school when her first collection of Afrikaans poems was published. She finally published, in 1998 and in 2004, two non-fictional works articulating intensely personal observations and a new kind of identity, in English. She writes about her experiences as a radio journalist covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings (*Country of my Skull*), and about her impressions of the transformation process in the country (*A Change of Tongue*). Afrikaans translations of these books appeared at a later stage. After about 10 collections of poetry from her Afrikaans pen between 1970 and 2000, she exhibited the same

artistic flair in English with *Down to my last Skin* and later with *Body Bereft* (Verweerskrif). Neither did award-winning South African writers of English works escape the entwined relationship of English and Afrikaans and the effects of having shared spaces. For many their names already signal family histories in which an Afrikaans ancestry played a more or less recent role: J. M. Coetzee, Michiel Heyns, Rian Malan – to name but a few.

4.

If language is a space, a place in which people function, then it can also be, just like any other place, either safe, or threatened and threatening. My own memory is that simultaneous exposure to and use of Afrikaans and English in itself does not have to create conflict; the threat lies in the shattering of established, secure patterns. Spaces change over time – what was initially threatening can eventually become familiar, part of the trusted and appreciated. It took just over a hundred years to establish an Afrikaansliterary tradition; currently a lively publishing industry bears testimony to the success of the enterprise. In its own right, Afrikaans developed a literary space alongside and contrasting to English, and it is a space that has been enriched through continuous contact with English. Recognition that English has always been present in Afrikaans memories, and has always been rapping at the windows, crying through the locks, does not change the variety of feelings that are associated with it. Despite having achieved the kind of security that comes from owning an established space, English remains for Afrikaans a controversial space.

Memories are not necessarily less complex than reality itself. Leipoldt's introduction to English in the Hantam illustrates something of the versatility that many Afrikaans families elected and simply lived; however, that was not the rule within the rural Afrikaans environment. In the North-West, English is often jokingly referred to as a foreign language. In Calvinia, a Biology teacher of the 1960s and 1970s is remembered for, amongst other things, the way he referred to his own English as 'just enough for personal use' – not enough to share, nothing fit for the market, nothing that will generate capital or any other kind of profit. English may have enriched the literature that his colleague taught in the Afrikaans class, but to him only distant contact was safe. Introduce a most friendly and accommodating English guest, and the space would become insecure; ask Mr. Lenhoff to welcome the visitor in English and make him feel at home, and the space would become uncomfortably narrow. For some, English is a

reminder of boundaries, of being an outsider, also of unpleasant, even embarrassing histories that easily incense.

Maybe even more: in the early years of the 20th century, when English clearly dominated, there were people with Afrikaans as their first language who chose, for social reasons, rather to associate with English. They made a few shifts and adjustments If language is a space, a place in which people function, then it can also be, just like any other place, either safe, or threatened and threatening. My own memory is that simultaneous exposure to and use of Afrikaans and English in itself does not have to create conflict; the threat lies in the shattering of established, secure patterns. Spaces change over time – what was initially threatening can eventually become familiar, part of the trusted and appreciated. It took just over a hundred years to establish an Afrikaans literary tradition; currently a lively publishing industry bears testimony to the success of the enterprise. In its own right, Afrikaans developed a literary space alongside and contrasting to English, and it is a space that has been enriched through continuous contact with English. Recognition that English has always been present in Afrikaans memories, and has always been rapping at the windows, crying through the locks, does not change the variety of feelings that are associated with it. Despite having achieved the kind of security that comes from owning an established space, English remains for Afrikaans a controversial space.

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Maybe even more: in the early years of the 20th century, when English clearly dominated, there were people with Afrikaans as their first language who chose, for social reasons, rather to associate with English. They made a few shifts and adjustments within the linguistic spaces, sending children to English schools, accepting English as a home language, keeping little contact with Afrikaans speaking family and friends. In the second half of the 20th century, when Afrikaans was identified as the language of an authoritative government, many felt that if they had to choose between the two official languages of the time, then English was the safest, perhaps in terms of conscience the only, choice. Jan Rabie, who is regarded as the first of a new generation of Afrikaans writers that emerged in the 1960s and was referred to as the 'Sestigers', was already a critical thinker as a student – or as some would say, he liked controversy. Even in his criticism of the Afrikaner establishment, he persistently worked and gave his critiques in Afrikaans. After a lifetime of protest against Afrikaner Nationalism, he came with the credo: 'My name is Jan Rabie. Without Afrikaans I am nothing'.**[xi]** The same form of protest in Afrikaans was not possible for everyone.

There is another group, namely the coloured and black speakers of Afrikaans whose political space was limited in that they either were never assigned the right to vote, or were disenfranchised after 1948. More concretely, the denial of the right to vote materialised in (e.g.) limitation of movement, housing, employment, quality of life chances. Those affected could not easily dissociate language from political space. For many speakers of Afrikaans their first language no longer provided the sense of security that it once had done. English then became a place of refuge. Today it is clear that, in response to no longer feeling at home in their own language, a significant number of Afrikaans first language speakers consciously made a linguistic shift. Parents that grew up with Afrikaans have started to speak English to their children when the infants are still in the cradle.

David Crystal estimates that two thirds of all children in the world grow up in a bilingual milieu,**[xii]** and Grosjean is of the opinion that roughly half of the world's population know at least two languages.**[xiii]** According to Crystal's calculation, for 41% of the people that know more than one language, English is one of the two,**[xiv]** and according to Romaine, of all the people that have a relatively good command of English more than half have it not as a first, but as a second language.**[xv]** As second language speakers of English, Afrikaans

speaking South Africans fit this mould well. At least in this respect we are not alone in the universe, nor unique in our relationship with English.

A constitution that officially recognizes 11 languages manifestly has the intention to maintain the variety of languages spoken in the country, at least to a reasonable extent and also in the public domain. Thus the South African constitution provides for a number of opportunities in which one can simultaneously find personal expression in Afrikaans, and gain access to a bigger space by means of a world language like English. In Africa, as in many other multilingual communities, besides the practical benefits offered by multilingualism, a certain amount of prestige is associated with the knowledge of more than one language. Proficiency in two or more languages is largely seen as 'a sign of intellectual or cultural superiority'.**[xvi]** Even so, a significant number of historically Afrikaans speakers, more specifically families in the coloured communities, have over the past 40 years increasingly chosen to raise their children as virtually monolingual speakers of English, rather than as bilingual speakers of Afrikaans and English. This has been confirmed in relatively lengthy interviews with members of three generations in family context in 2003**[xvii]** and in follow-up data collected since then. For people who were cast as the lesser members of the Afrikaans language community for too long, English opens new horizons. The decision to replace Afrikaans as the family's first language and raise a second language to that position often represents more than mere protest against what is experienced as Afrikaner domination; it is also a reminder of the fact that a new language can create new spaces, and this offers people within confined spaces the opportunity to shift boundaries.

In 2003 a colleague and I interviewed a young mother whose father used to admonish her if her Cape-Afrikaans dialect was too prominent. She was reminded that she should speak the standard, notably the white standard. Her linguistic consciousness had clearly been shaped by such a family history – she recognises the shibboleths of the different varieties of Afrikaans spoken in the region, is adeptly bilingual and when it suits her, she speaks the most beautiful idiomatic Afrikaans. We specifically asked her about her and her husband's decision to speak English to their children and to send them to an English school. My question was whether she didn't feel a little sad about her children's loss of Afrikaans, and whether the development of strong Afrikaans-English bilingualism was not a consideration for them. She paused for a moment, tilted her head, and

gave an answer that made it apparent that the recent 20th century experience counts more than the now distant memories of the 19th century Cape history when identity with Afrikaans was outspoken in the coloured community. Her remark was that they had never had such a 'thing' going for 'the Language' as the Boers had.

NOTES

i. Cf. D. Denoon, A Grand Delusion. London: Longman, 1973, 75-79, for a description of the futile attempts, specifically of Milner after the war, to Anglicise the Dutch/Afrikaans community.

ii. A. Deumert. 'Language variation and standardization at the Cape (1880-1922): A contribution to Afrikaans sociohistorical linguistics', in American Journal of Germanic Linguistics and Literatures, 13.4 (2001): 30152.

iii. A.M. Grundlingh, 'Afrikaner Nationalism and White Politics', in: B.J. Liebenberg en S.B. Spies (eds), South Africa in the 20th Century. Pretoria: J.L.van Schaik 1993, 268.

iv. Although the vous form in Afrikaans is technically 'u', it is general practice in Afrikaans to use the title rather than the pronoun in directly addressing an older person, thus 'ma, wat maak ma' ('Mother, what is mother doing') rather than 'ma, wat maak u' ('Mother, what are you doing'), or 'pa, sal pa my help' ('Dad, will dad help me') rather than 'pa, sal u my help' ('Dad, will you help me').

v. C. Wolf. Kindheitsmuster. Darmstadt: Luchterhand 1976, 12-15 ff.

vi. G.E. Anzaldua. Borderlands/La Frontera:The Neroi Mestuza. San Francisco: Aunt Lute 1987, 59.

vii. L. Ramsdell. 'Language and Identity Politics: the Linguistic Autobiographies of Latinos in the United States'. In Journal of Modern Literature 28:1 (2004), 166.

viii. […] 'sich selbst historisch zu sehen; was heißt: eingebettet in, gebunden an seine Zeit' […] one (begins) to see oneself historically; i.e. embedded in, bound to one's own time. C. Wolf. Nachdenken über Christa T. Darmstad: Lucheterhand 1968, 95.

ix. The Herzog prize, arguably the most prestigious award for creative writing in Afrikaans, is decided annually by the Suid Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (South Afrikan Academy for Arts and Sciences). See http://www.akademie.co.za/new_page_2.htm#Hertzogprys

x. J.C. Kannemeyer, Jan Rabie. Kaapstad, Tafelberg, 2004, 287-8.

xi. 'My naam is Jan Rabie. Sonder Afrikaans is ek niks.' J.C. Kannemeyer. Jan Rabie. Kaapstad: Tafelberg 2004, 459.

xii. D. Crystal. English as a Global Language. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1997, 172.
xiii. F. Grosjean. Life with Two Languages: an Introduction to Bilingualism. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press 1982, 11.
xiv. D. Crystal. English as a Global Language. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1997, 173.
xv. S. Romaine. 'The Bilingual and Multilingual Community', in Bhatia en Ritchie, The Handbook of Bilingualism, Oxford, UK: Blackwell 2004, 395.
xvi. N.C. Dorian. 'Minority and Endangered Languages', in Bhatia en Ritchie, The Handbook of Bilingualism, Oxford, UK: Blackwell 2004, 446.
xvii. See C. Anthonissen & E. George, 'Family Languages: Bilingualism and Language Shift', in: Coetzee, A. (ed.) Proceedings of the 21st World Congress of the World Federation of Modern Language Associations – Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes (FIPLV) (in CD format) 2004, 1-17.

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