

# *Accented futures. Language activism and the ending of apartheid*

By Carli Coetzee

Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

---

*Mariana Kriel*

*Department of Applied Language Studies, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University*

As part of an ongoing research project, I tried recently to critique a scholarly article on Afrikaans language activism published in 2013 by one of Afrikaans's leading activists, Wannie Carstens. I use the term *language activism* here as it is used in sociolinguistics – to refer to organised action aimed at language promotion, including the planning, institutionalisation and maintenance of a language, and the defence of language rights. Titled “The story of Afrikaans: Perspectives on the past, present and future”,<sup>1</sup> Carstens's article propagates reconciliation among Afrikaans speakers, arguing that it can be achieved inter alia by telling the “objective”, complete and inclusive story of Afrikaans – the story of its “white and brown and black speakers”. For too long, the author claims, the white history of Afrikaans has been represented as *the* history of the language to the detriment of its “brown and black” speakers *and* to the detriment of the language itself. For Carstens, non-racialism, inclusivity and unity are both goals in themselves and means to another (more important?) goal: the survival of Afrikaans. By the author's own admission, his article proceeds from the premise that “without reconciliation in the Afrikaans community, there can be no future for Afrikaans” (2013:22).

As a white Afrikaans speaker, reading this left me embarrassed. Why? Why does one cringe when Carstens calls on his readers – and then especially when

---

1 Carstens, W.A.M. (2013) Die storie van Afrikaans. Perspektiewe op die verlede, hede en toekoms. *Tydskrif vir Nederlands en Afrikaans*, 20(1):21–49.

he calls on his black (or what he calls brown) readers – to escape from the trap of the past, to make peace with the errors and injustices of yesteryear, and to accept that apartheid belongs to the dustbin of history (2013:32)? Why does it leave a bad taste in the mouth to hear that the time is ripe for Afrikaans speakers to create a shared history out of their divided histories and to focus on the future – on “the Afrikaans of 2060” (2013:35)?

It is easy to dismiss Carstens’s approach, which is shared by a host of Afrikaans language activists, as opportunism at best and self-serving, self-forgiving paternalism at worst, but that would not constitute an intellectually sophisticated critique. This, in my view, is what makes Carli Coetzee’s latest book so timely: even if it had not been its intention, it provides the tools for such a critique.

While it also hopes to reach a lay(ish) audience, *Accented futures. Language activism and the ending of apartheid* is primarily written for scholars in the fields of literary and cultural studies, translation studies and education studies, and it will no doubt leave its mark on these disciplines. To me, however, a great deal of the value of this book lies in what it has to offer sociolinguists and scholars of language politics, particularly those interested in the contemporary South African context.

Contrary to what the references to “accent” and “language activism” in the title might lead one to expect, Coetzee’s work does not draw on the existing body of sociolinguistics literature. In fact, as the author emphasises early on in the book, she understands accent in a figurative sense, “which is at odds with the ways in which the term is defined in linguistics” (p. 7). In *Accented futures*, accent is, “in the first place, understood as resistance to absorption” (p. 7) or containment; accenting is understood as a form of activism, and in South Africa today it implies activism that is always aware of the violent apartheid past and its asymmetrical legacies. Accenting – i.e., accented thinking, reading, writing, conversing and teaching – acknowledges that conflict may exist under the surface. Accented discourses embrace, rather than shy away from, difference, discord and disagreement, even disappointment, because “these moments are [...] seen for what they reveal about the apartheid’s past enduring reach” (p. 168). Carstens’s activism, with its emphasis on forgiving and forgetting, is thus not accented activism, for accentedness is not “a drive to reconciliation and homogeneity; instead it is an attitude that [...] aims to bring to the surface conflictual histories” (p. 7). Accentedness “seek[s] out resistance, non-cooperation, performances and experiences of misunderstanding, as productive of, rather than as the opposite of, transformation” (p. 12).

Transformation is the key word here: its commitment to transformation – or, phrased differently, its commitment to “the long ending of apartheid we are [still] living through” (p. 62) – is what defines accented activism for Coetzee. Apartheid,

she argues persuasively, has not ended in 1994. Her intention is not “to diminish what has been achieved already, but instead to contribute to developing ways of thinking forward, and modes of writing, reading and teaching that are actively and positively engaged in the further work of this ending” (p. ix).

Coetzee terms this “work” language activism. Like accent, language activism has a much broader range of meanings in her book than in sociolinguistics, of which “the pursuit of multilingualism” (p. 14) is but one. Taking into consideration the sheer scope of texts and contexts to which the author applies her theory of accenting as activism – research and teaching projects, fictional and critical literature, art works and films – language activism is perhaps a misnomer. But that is a minor point of criticism. The major point here is that the analysis in each of the chapters is original and challenging, and that the book as whole displays a remarkably coherent line of reasoning, despite the diversity of focal points.

A review of this length cannot do justice to the novel and profound ways in which Coetzee interprets the texts, artefacts and sites that she had chosen for her study. Perhaps the most thought-provoking chapters are those that argue against translation by demonstrating how “refusal to translate or resistance to being translated” (p. 1) can be a form of accented language activism. Given my own interest in what I can now term unaccented Afrikaans language activism, I enjoyed Chapters 3 (Njabulo Ndebele’s ordinary address) and Chapter 8 (The multilingual scholar of the future) most. The latter reflects on the subversive ways in which Afrikaans was used by black people under apartheid (as reported by Jacob Dlamini in *Native nostalgia*), while the former focuses on Njabulo Ndebele. Here, Coetzee reads the English Academy of South Africa’s invitation to Ndebele to be the keynote speaker at its jubilee conference in 1986 as an attempt to “make *him* conform, to contain his difference and neutralise his accented” (p. 51). The suspicion and mistrust with which Ndebele viewed the invitation is eerily reminiscent of the way in which intellectuals such as Jakes Gerwel and Hein Willemsse reacted when the *Sud-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* [South African Academy for Science and the Arts] tried to recruit them in the early 2000s. Their refusal to be co-opted, rather than the white attempt to co-op them, constituted moral and constructive language activism.

### Acknowledgement:

I read *Accented futures* during November 2014 while spending time at the Centre for Multilingualism and Diversities Research (University of the Western Cape) on invitation of Christopher Stroud. A special word of thanks is due to him and his colleagues for providing a very stimulating research environment.