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Revisiting the South African book market: towards a change of tongue?

In this overview of the South African book market, based on publications until July 2006, the publication of novels is divided into three language categories: English, Afrikaans and African languages. As regards the last two categories, a multilingual book market with the possibility of being translated into the world's most important literary languages, would be considered ideal. Historical, social and personal reasons for choosing a language other than the writer's mother tongue are investigated. A tendency amongst writers from these language groups to write or to begin writing in English solely for financial reasons is also investigated.

'n Blik op die Suid-Afrikaanse boekemark: 'n ander tongval in die vooruitsig?

In hierdie oorsig van die Suid-Afrikaanse boekemark gebaseer op bronne tot en met Julie 2006, word die publikasie van romans verdeel in drie taalkategorieë: Engels, Afrikaans en Afrikatale. Wat laasgenoemde twee kategorieë betref, word 'n meertalige boekemark met 'n sterk vertalingskultuur na die belangrikste literêre tale van die wêreld, as 'n ideaal gestel. Historiese, sosiale en persoonlike redes waarom skrywers verkies om in 'n ander taal as hul moedertaal te skryf, word ondersoek. Daar word gewys op 'n tendens onder skrywers uit hierdie taalgroepe om suiwer om finansiële redes in Engels te skryf of te begin skryf.

Om te begin lees is 'n fyn proses van oog en brein, bepaal deur oorerwing en kultuur, met taal en opvoeding as vormende faktore. Dit word in die vaste, tot boek bekeerde leser 'n eie geskiedenis van tekste wat die belewenis van die lewe verander, van boeke wat onthou word omdat dit deel word van die leser se eie geskiedenis.¹

Die boek in Afrikaans, rondom 2000 — Hannes van Zyl

South Africa is a multilingual society and the only country in the world with 11 official languages, excluding the Asian and European languages also spoken locally.² This language diversity is not reflected in the corpus of novels published in the course of the past 100 years (the time-span of South African literature). Reasons include the fact that the previous educational system favoured particular (racial) groups,³ that a reading culture cannot be taken for granted in a culturally diverse society with a strong oral tradition,⁴ that there are high levels of poverty and a general shortage of books⁵ as well as a lack of appro-

- 1 Reading begins as a delicate process of eye and brain, determined by heredity and culture, with language and education as formative factors. It becomes the personal textual history of the established, book-converted reader, changing the way he experiences life, as the remembrance of books becomes part of his own history (Van Zyl 2000).
- 2 A special word of thanks is due to: Prof José Lambert (University of Louvain) for arousing my interest in the book market; Profs Peter Johan Lor (UP), H P van Coller, J J Steyn, Das Steyn, J Lubbe, Drs E Truter (UFS) and Francis Galloway (UP), Colleen Hendriksz (Editor: Bookmark), Magdalena Steyn and Ida Meiring, for communicating useful sources; Dr E M Visagie (UFS) for his meticulous proofreading; French Section student assistants Cilliers van den Berg, Leonie Jacobs (for transforming data into the tables used in this study), Elize Joubert and Frans Botha (for their assistance in updating the data used in this article).
- 3 "Bantu Education" did little to foster a love of books and of reading, as the emphasis was on functional reading and writing skills rather than conversance with good literature and creative writing.
- 4 At least 30% of the population is illiterate, making it impossible for many parents to communicate a reading culture to their children.
- 5 The *Masifunde Sonkwe* campaign was started in 2001 to "build a sustainable culture of reading and writing that affirms South African languages, history, values and development" (Stringer 2002: 72). Public efforts to pressurise government into exempting books from the 14% value-added tax or VAT have been unsuccessful thus far. According to Prof Paul Lor, campaigns of this kind tend to monopolise media attention and divert attention from other possibilities, such as the Norwegian initiative of state acquisition of a significant number of copies of every book published in minority languages, subsequently donated to libraries countrywide (research notes made available to the author).

priate means for distributing books to an African clientele⁶ and that South African authors do not necessarily write in their mother tongue and are not always published in South Africa.

South African literature is seen as being dominated by white authors writing in Afrikaans or English.⁷ Of the 19 South African authors' works listed under *Africa's 100 best books*⁸ (fiction and non-fiction) of the twentieth century, only two were written in African languages (Benedict Wallet Vilakazi's *Amal'ezulu* and Cyril Lincoln Sibusiso Nyembezi's *Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu*). The best-selling black author is multiple award-winner Zakes Mda, who writes in English, although he spoke isiXhosa as a child and later Sesotho when his father went into exile in Lesotho. Mda's "change of tongue", like that of many black South African writers, was prompted by greater fluency in the adopted language, English.⁹ The reasons for Afrikaans writers' "change of tongue" will be discussed below.

1994 was a watershed year in the field of publishing, ushering in the era of official multilingualism — while at the same time heralding the elevation of English (the home language of fewer than 10% of South Africans)¹⁰ to the status of the language of documentation and thus, in effect, also to that of national language. Most black South African authors (Africans, South African Indians and coloureds) use English for creative writing, as can be deduced from the most recently available publication data:¹¹

6 According to Riana Barnard, editor (Tafelberg).

7 Facts and figures in this sub-section were gleaned principally from former Kwela Publisher Annari van der Merwe's analysis "Ons is van uiteenlopendheid aan-mekaargesit" (Van Heerden 2000: 236-46).

8 Cf <<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/africa/cuvl/Afbks.html>>.

9 Cf Ricard 2004: 148 for an analysis of Njabulo Ndebele's choice of English over Zulu, elegantly phrased by Ricard as an attempt "to add his text to the universe of common references". Quotations are taken from the English translation of Alain Ricard's 1995 publication, *Littératures d'Afrique noire*.

10 According to Koos Bekker (Mbeki *et al* 2004: 142), the largest language groups in the country are: Zulu 23.8% (10 662 400 speakers); Xhosa 17.6% (7 884 800); Afrikaans, 13.3% (5 958 400), and Sepedi 9.4% (4 211 200), followed by English (no percentage provided by author), with 3 673 600 speakers.

11 Cf Van der Waal 2006: 53-4 for statistics and tables.

In 1989, 78 per cent of all books published in South Africa were written in either English or Afrikaans. This situation has not changed fundamentally after 1994, despite the constitutional recognition of nine other South African languages as official languages. [...] The statistics clearly show a healthy production of Afrikaans and English literature in comparison to a very meagre output in the nine different African languages (Van der Waal 2006: 53-4).

At the risk of overly abbreviating the African literary past, the following remarks may offer some perspective on the present situation.

A map of South Africa's former missionary stations serves as a palimpsest of centres of literary activity in the African languages. The rich history of Xhosa and Sesotho literature owes much to the missionary presence; the first black authors (Vilakazi, Plaatje, Soqa) were pupils of the nineteenth-century missionary school system favouring Christian teachings rather than ethnic culture. The first "Xhosa reading sheets", which would develop into the *Lovedale Kaffir Readers*, were printed at the Lovedale Mission, followed by an English-Xhosa dictionary (1846) and a Bible translation (1857). *Chaka* (1925), the very first novel in an indigenous language, was written in Sesotho by Thomas Mofolo, the first Sotho and African novelist (Ricard 2004: 105). Zulu literature only developed when missionaries dared to venture into regions still bearing the scars of Shaka's wars. The first book by a Zulu author, Fuze, a student of Bishop John Colenso, was *Abantu abamnyamalapha bavela ngakbona* ("Black people: where they come from"). Although written in the nineteenth century, it was only published in 1922 (Ricard 2004: 112). Along with the miners seeking employment on the Witwatersrand, Zulu literary activity moved to Johannesburg where intellectuals like B W Vilakazi and H I E Dhlomo made African literary history.

Ricard (2004: 118) finds political reasons for the differences in literary output as far as the nine official African languages are concerned. The development and promotion of Zulu and Xhosa (as well as Sesotho, Setswana and Seswazi) cannot be separated from the awakening of a black political and cultural consciousness. Xhosa, Sotho and Zulu constitute three of the four languages (the fourth being Amharic) selected for their literary output by the renowned Belgian scholar, Albert Gérard (1971) in his ground-breaking work, *Four African Literatures*. Ricard (2004: 118) distinguishes between the latter languages and,

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the recent development and promotion of Venda, Tsonga (and to a lesser extent, Sepedi), [which] correspond to the apartheid regime's need to provide distinct languages for the separate entities of the racial South Africa that it planned to construct. Xhosa and Zulu writers were more confident about their cultural legitimacy, and could refer to a prestigious past.

In the past, critics and historians considered the use of Venda and Tsonga to be restricted to textbooks which did not reflect the concerns of the uncensored world; less prominent than Xhosa, Zulu or Sesotho, their role within the book market could thus also be expected to be secondary.

The National Party's censorship system, supported by the Internal Security Act (1976), resulted in banned authors' works no longer being published or quoted, effectively withholding the work of an entire generation from the local reading public. *The Drum* generation of the 50s (the only coherent group of black South African writers) was silenced by a stricter enforcement of apartheid policies, resulting in exile or a premature end to the literary activities of authors such as Mphahlele, Maimane, Themba, Nakasa and Matshikiza.

Compared to the output of the rest of the continent, South Africa's (Afrikaans) publishing industry is doing well. Supported by Afrikaner capital, South African companies (such as Nasionale Boekhandel, renamed NB Publishers) were developed alongside the impressive number of multinational publishing houses (Oxford University Press, Macmillan, Heinemann, Longman). The collapse of the prescribed book market following the implementation of new school curricula¹² resulted in the closing down of several publishing houses, costing the industry half its jobs (Land 2002: 93).

Since 1994, the ranks of NB Publishers and Lapa have been joined by, among others, Protea Boekhuis (1999), Praag (2000), Bent (1996), Suider Kollege Uitgewers (2001), Fenomeen (2001) and Litera (2002). BEE (black economic empowerment) groups made their entrance on the publishing stage when Perskor and HAUM-De Jager were taken over by KAGISO (in turn taken over by Maskew Miller Longman). Since 1994, survival strategies have been forcing publishing houses to take commercial as well as literary or cultural values into account, re-

12 Land (2002: 93) confirms that the change to outcomes-based education or OBE was widely interpreted as implying that textbooks were unnecessary.

sulting in less poetry being published in Afrikaans (although the number of publications in this regard is superior to the number of poetry publications in English and African languages). In recent years, a number of literary prizes (such as the *M-Net* and *Nasboek*) could not be awarded, owing to the lack of novels and poetry published in African languages. As apartheid ended, so did funding for arts and culture especially from Scandinavian donor organisations. NB Publishers took the initiative to fund a “Community publishing project” which offers subsidies for publishing books of interest to particular communities, resulting in nine books since 2001 (Van der Waal 2006: 46).

The South African book-buying market is small, involving only 5% of the South African population.¹³ Writers aiming for the international market often prefer overseas publishers to local publishers. Coetzee, Brink and Gordimer’s books are mostly published in Britain and then re-imported into South Africa, further weakening the ailing local market, which is flooded by imports (Venter & Galloway 2003: 7). Even Nelson Mandela’s best-selling *Long walk to freedom* did not benefit local publishers, as the author sold the rights to an American publisher in order to raise money for the ANC.¹⁴

The evolution of the South African book market can be illustrated by means of a juxtaposition of publications in the different language groups: English, Afrikaans and African languages.

1. Before and after 1994

1.1 The English book market

Ironically, South African authors writing in English were better served by apartheid than by contemporary South Africa, as political interest in the country during apartheid created a market for books (Van der Merwe 2000: 241). This interest was mostly restricted to the themes of politics and discrimination. Since 1994, “committed” literature has

13 Stringer 2002: 77, attributes this to illiteracy, the lack of a reading culture and the cost of books.

14 According to Shaun de Waal, the *Mail & Guardian’s* literary editor, in the South African Arts, Culture and Heritage 1997 Calendar, <<http://www.chico.mweb.co.za/mg/saarts/literature1.htm>>.

fallen from grace, leading to the closure of Ravan and Skotaville publishers, while David Philip has been forced to become more commercially viable. The ranks of internationally acclaimed South African writers have recently been joined by authors who prioritise the local publication of their work, such as Achmat Dangor,¹⁵ Bridget Pitt, Rayda Jacobs and Arthur Maimane.

1.2 The Afrikaans book market

In contrast to the English book market, Van der Merwe (cf Van Heerden 2000) and Van Zyl (cf Van Heerden 2000) describe the Afrikaans book trade as little less than a miracle. This 81-year-old language (it obtained “official” status in 1925), with its five million speakers, has an impressive list of titles to its credit, and its book trade is an example to the rest of the continent. Van der Merwe (2000: 241) attributes this to the language’s European roots, which have provided it with a centuries-old literary tradition. Unlike English publications, Afrikaans books do not have the disadvantage of having to compete with overseas imports. The diverse publications in Afrikaans include academic textbooks, poetry, recipe books, dictionaries, children’s literature and tourist guides, to name but a few. Afrikaans authors have also been translated into an unexpected number of languages. Statistics show that the most important target languages for translating works by Afrikaans authors are English, Dutch and German, which all have particular historical links with Afrikaans.¹⁶ The most frequently translated Afrikaans authors (Brink was the first to sustain long-term interest [1964-1997], closely followed by Breyten Breytenbach) also belong to the category of “committed” authors, as is evident from statistics¹⁷ dating from the 1970s onwards (translations from Afrikaans were sparse until the fifties). The novels of Deon Meyer (*Infanta*, *Orion*, *Proteus*, *Feniks*) have an even wider audience and have been translated into English, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Danish,

15 Dangor also “changed tongue” from Afrikaans to English. According to Van der Merwe (Retief 2004: 1), coloured authors are at a loss to explain why they write in English; however, they have no examples or role models in Afrikaans, nor do they have the confidence to write in this language.

16 Cf the University of the Free State website <<http://www.uovs.ac.za/ANDF>> (click on Documents: Afrikaans translation tables).

17 Cf the University of the Free State website <<http://www.uovs.ac.za/ANDF>> (click on Documents: Afrikaans translation tables).

Norwegian, Czech, Romanian, Slovakian and Bulgarian. He was also awarded two French prizes (the *Prix mystère de la critique* and the *Grand prix de littérature policière*). Future research will probably show that this acceleration in translations is linked to particular events such as political changes, the awarding of literary prizes, and so forth.

Certain authors follow specific translational routes outside South Africa: Karel Schoeman and (recently) Dan Sleigh are doing well in the Dutch market; Etienne van Heerden, Dalene Mathee, Annelie Botes, Marlene van Niekerk and Marita van der Vyver have achieved commercial success in America.

1.3 The book market in African languages

Under apartheid, mother-tongue instruction at primary school level was encouraged and supported by (state-subsidised) prescribed readers in the various African languages. Since the collapse of the prescribed book market, there has been no demand for these publications, and this has exacerbated the precariousness of the African book market. Notwithstanding their often moralistic nature, these books added to the language corpus; African languages do, however, seem to have become trapped in a school-based and radio-drama market (cf Galloway 2001). Van der Waal (2006: 55) goes as far as to state that:

Beyond the school market, literature in African languages has no established market. Various factors, such as the legacy of the specific function of literature in Bantu education, adult illiteracy, and the hegemonic function of English — considered to be a requirement for upward-social mobility — are all partly responsible for this situation.

A culture of reading in the African languages cannot exist in a vacuum: except for a brief period towards the mid-1990s (Van der Waal 2006: 60) the metropolis of Soweto (three million people, ranging from squatters to millionaires) does not have a single book store.¹⁸ The well-stocked book stores are in the affluent suburbs.¹⁹ The accessibility of books will be a determining factor in establishing a market for novels in the African languages. Van der Waal (2006: 61) contends that book buying is linked to culturally transmitted habits of reading and to the

18 Cf the Praag website <<http://www.praag.co.za/opstelle73.htm>>.

19 In 2000, a commercial directory, *Braby's*, recorded 180 retail book stores in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town.

spread of affluence, and thus that the South African pattern still follows racial lines. Empirical research is needed to establish whether the emerging black middle class has become part of the book buying public.

Libraries (one of the three book-buying sectors, together with public and tertiary institutions) could play an important role, but they face the problem of limited budgets with which to expand collections and to improve and relocate facilities (which are often too far away from the rural areas). The recent crisis in the publishing industry curtailed the opening of book-selling outlets in the rural areas; potential contributions to a reading culture were lost when several African trainee publishers, editors and designers were made redundant (Land 2002: 107).

Van der Waal (2006: 55-6) approaches the South African book market from the angle of the literary field, and observes that the latter is marked by economic motives:

While Afrikaans and English-language publishing is dominant, [literary] publishing in African languages, which mainly has an educational purpose, takes a subordinate position and thereby also marks a subordinate position of participants who represent African languages in the field.

In the opinion column of the April 2005 issue of *Bookmark* (all the summaries below are from page 10), representatives from the South African book industry were invited to express their opinions on the question of access to and demand for literature in the 11 official languages. Not surprisingly, their answers were mostly restricted to the problematic African book market. According to Yolisa Madolo (author and co-editor), new books in the African languages are not visible in bookshops, schools or libraries, while prescribed book lists in the Eastern Cape have remained unchanged since 1994. Although the rural population and some teachers and academics read books in the indigenous African languages, most other readers consider it a waste of time and prefer reading English books; the near absence of reviews on African languages books in the media is also considered an aggravating factor.

Hugh Rivers-Moore, Deputy Director: KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Public Library and Information Service, highlights the fact that English-speaking learners of Zulu are the greatest users of picture books, while mother-tongue Zulu speakers prefer reading English books. A recent (and quite touching, almost medieval) phenomenon is that of children making their own hand-written copies of library books, as their parents

cannot afford a replacement in case of loss or damage. He emphasizes that, without a strong demand for the purchasing and owning of books, potential publishers of books in the African languages will remain less than enthusiastic.

Dave Ryder, Managing Director of Shuter and Shooter Publishers, echoes these sentiments. The lack of general readership in the African languages limits the latter to the school market, but even this option is an uncertain one, as books require a state of completeness (and thus extensive financial input) before being screened by education departments. The current restriction of prescribed titles to four (per grade, language and genre) results in a lack of exposure for non-selected titles. The recently introduced, strict criteria for title screening (which effectively excludes all previously published indigenous literature titles) is another stumbling block. On the positive side, public libraries are increasingly acquiring indigenous literature titles, a first step towards a culture of reading. He does not agree with the statement that publishers are loathe to publish indigenous language books because of the risk involved and provides relevant publication statistics to prove his point. Among the latter, the lack of general books is, however, cause for concern.

In his contribution, Professor Seth Manaka, Manager of Moratiwa Bookshop, Chairman of the National Council of Library Information Services, considers the link between publications in indigenous African languages and the lucrative school market as less than positive, as it excludes the tastes of general readers and because it could incite writers to follow a particular writing trend.

Tessa Dowling (PhD in African languages), Director of African Voices, a multimedia language development company dedicated entirely to the development of materials for South Africa's African languages, confirms earlier sources consulted for the purpose of this article: statistics show that very few young people are learning African languages as second or third languages. If today's learners are the readers of the future, they will not be reading many novels in isiXhosa or Sesotho, as 503 Western Cape schools offer Afrikaans as a second language, while 81 have Xhosa at that level. In the populous province of Gauteng, Sesotho as a second language is offered in only five schools.

Many mother-tongue speakers of African languages do not condone the use of these languages in an official or educational context, while

urbanised blacks seem to reserve African languages for the home and for communication within the social group. African languages seem to be considered as backward and non-progressive by their own speakers, while English is seen as a sophisticated language, giving access to international markets and literary success.

2. Are Afrikaans writers changing tongue?

This section is devoted to Afrikaans writers' motivations for auto-translation or, in the case of certain authors, a complete change of tongue.

2.1 Digraphia/auto-translation

Opposition to state censorship and pre-1994 politics compelled Afrikaans authors such as André P Brink (whose works have been translated into 26 languages; 95% of his royalties come from overseas sources), Breyten Breytenbach and, more recently, Achmat Dangor to write in English. (The latter author effectuated the change so successfully that his novel, *Bitter fruit*, was short-listed for the 2004 Man Booker Prize.) Brink's own English translation of *Kennis van die aand* earned him reviews in *Newsweek* and *Time*. Since 1973, he has translated all his Afrikaans texts into English.²⁰

Post-1994 South Africa seems to require/incite a change of tongue, either by means of digraphia or through translation (it is true that the two sometimes overlap, as in Brink's case). Antjie Krog has embraced multilingualism not only as a writer, but also as a translator. *A change of tongue* was written in Afrikaans and translated by her son, Andries, who was commissioned to preserve the Afrikaans "echo" in the English version (the translator's name does not, however, appear on the title-page). Initially, only extracts from the original Afrikaans version were published, but the work as a whole has since been published by Tafelberg. Krog does not comment on this double change of tongue in the preface; the only paratextual element in this regard refers to passages in English translated into Afrikaans by Janneke Engelbrecht.

20 Translations are never mirror images of the original text, especially in the case of Afrikaans and English. Brink has admitted, for example, that he "tones down" the use of swear words in the Afrikaans version (Loots 2004: iv). This practice may provide interesting material for the Translation Studies specialist.

Krog's ideas on the necessity of translation echo her ideological pre-occupation with inclusion: Afrikaans writers are being ignored by the majority of South Africans and are not exposed to the greater community. The unavailability/scarcity of good translators who can be commissioned to translate texts from Afrikaans into the African languages is, however, an obvious stumbling block. Publishers often prefer translators to be well known, or to be writers themselves.

Quoting herself and other interlocutors who participated in the Malian "Writer's Caravan", Krog's (2003: 270) observations regarding translation provide discussion points and material for future research. On the positive side, these include the following:

- Translation is one of the key strategies for language survival;
- The absence of a strong translating tradition will ultimately alienate a language's best writers;
- If English becomes the language of empowerment and communication, the exponents of smaller languages should demand the right to write in their own language and to be translated in order to make themselves heard.

On the negative side:

- The desire of a minority-language writer to be read in a major language such as English is experienced as treason or infidelity; "and", adds Krog (2003: 270), "I am not clear how much of it has to do with a resistance to colonization, giving in to power, being owned, accepted by the colonizer's hand";
- Translation involves power-play: "The more a language is threatened, the stronger the urge becomes to translate from that language. The mightier the language, the stronger the urge to be translated into that language" (Krog 2003: 269).

In an interview following the successful publication of her novel *Vaselinejies*, Anoeschka von Meck announced her imminent change of tongue for financial reasons: "I want an Afrikaans voice in English. I'm going to try to say things as I would have said them in Afrikaans" (Loots 2004: iv).²¹

21 "Ek wil 'n Afrikaanse stem in Engels hê. Ek gaan dinge probeer sê soos ek dit in Afrikaans sou gesê het."

2.2 The future of the Afrikaans book

The implicit question is whether writing in Afrikaans is still (commercially) viable. Afrikaans book sales have dropped by 25 to 30%²² since 1997; poetry is becoming increasingly difficult to sell; and the publication of plays is an exceptional occurrence. Experimental writers have little chance of making a market breakthrough. The production database of Pretoria University's Department of Information Science confirms that the component of literary prose titles published between 1990 and 2001 amounted to 10.4%, while poetry accounted for 7.9% (thanks to NB, Protea Publishers and private initiatives) and drama for 1.5% (owing to a drop in student numbers at tertiary institutions, in prescribed plays and a lack of public interest in the printed version) (Venter & Galloway 2003: 7). In some quarters (cf Venter & Galloway 2003: 7 and Scholtz 2003: 76), it is thought that initiatives such as novel-writing competitions ("Jong Afrikaanse Skrywersprys", "Groot Romanwedstryd") are the main factor keeping the production graph of literary prose from levelling out.

A disturbing aspect of the current Afrikaans book market, highlighted by the young writer, Jaco Jacobs, on *LitNet's* "Jong stemmeberaad vir skrywers jonger as 35",²³ is that of an ageing generation of writers and little emergence of new, younger talent. There should be more encouragement for young writers on the part of the publishers; Afrikaans literature should become more conscious of its environment, world literature and other media forms such as the internet (Engelbrecht 2004: 18).

Dan Roodt (2003: 8) suggests that Afrikaans novels should be translated into various world languages, and that translations of world literature into Afrikaans should be encouraged. His ideal in this regard would be to follow the Dutch, French and Italian example, creating jobs for translators and support for local book markets.

Novels aimed principally at the Afrikaans market are becoming increasingly less viable. The overseas market is, however, a very com-

22 Statistics provided by Kerneels Breytenbach of Human & Rousseau (Fourie 2004: 214).

23 "Conference for writers younger than 35"; cf the LitNet website <<http://www.litnet.co.za>>.

petitive one. According to Van Zyl (2000: 264), translations account for less than 1% of all the books sold annually in London. In America, only 2% of books sold are foreign translations. According to European Union statistics for 2003, provided by the publisher, Nicol Stassen,²⁴ 40% of the Union's members did not read a book during that year; and on average, €120 per year was spent on books.

2.3 The future of books in the African languages

Ricard (2004) maintains that African authors should write in their mother tongue (even, or especially, if this gives birth to a “creolised” text, and thus, to a new language reflecting the history of the country as well as that of the author), and await translation. Taking up the torch from Albert Gérard, Ricard (2004: 120-1) urges African language communities to agree about the standard language, produce unilingual dictionaries and write treatises on metalanguage, thereby creating the necessary instruments of literary expression. He looks forward to a future novel of significant length, as narrative fiction in the African languages seems to restrict itself to texts of 200 pages, prompting questions of a generic and linguistic nature, pertaining either to the possibly imperfect mastering of the genre or to the difficulties inherent in oral languages when writing long prose passages.

3. Conclusion

For centuries, the language question revolved around two extremes: finding the one “perfect” language for communication and understanding (taking into account the perpetually shifting centre(s) of the universe, this language ranged from Latin to Esperanto, as documented by Umberto Eco (1994) in *A la ricerca de la lingua perfetta*, published simultaneously in Italian, French, English and German), or adhering to the ideal of multilingualism, manifesting itself in the (legal, social) recognition of the language diversity of a country or continent (if not in the overnight rebirth of its citizens as fully-fledged polyglots!). Translation would seem to constitute the golden mean.

24 Member of Panel 2: Publishers and Booksellers, *Translation-transnation, 1994-2004, 10 years of literary exchange. South Africa-France-Netherlands*. Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (Wiser), Johannesburg, South Africa, 29-30 March 2004.

In his biography of the Afrikaans writer M E Rootman (MER), J C Steyn records an exchange between MER and the Indian dignitary, S V Srinavasa Sastri. In the passage in question, MER states that she cannot understand why one would want to describe feelings of the heart in a foreign language, while Sastri considers that, if one's own language is inferior and under-developed, one should make use of a richer language which provides the power for extensive expression. In a land of many tongues such as India, English ensures that one is understood everywhere (Steyn 2004: 166).

It would seem that, in the new millenium, many Afrikaans-speakers are following Sastri's Indian example by their preference for English, eliciting disappointed reactions from teachers of African languages. Prof Mohlomi Moleleki, Head of African Languages at Free State University and chairman of PanSALB or Pan South African Language Board, defines the move to English as disquieting, as it could sound the death knell for indigenous languages struggling for establishment as fully-fledged languages (Coetzee 2003: 5). Afrikaans is considered a model; a reduction in the number of speakers of a developed language will have a negative influence on previously disadvantaged languages.

At this point in time, as far as translation into the 11 official languages is concerned, the most notable investment seems to be in software, for use in meetings, the civil service, banks, hospitals, and so on. One such a project, developed by Bloemfontein businessman and member of council, Thabo Olivier, and worth R330 million, was bought by PanSALB in 2006 (Sauer 2006: 5). Words and sentences from the 11 official languages are translated and accompanied by a pronunciation sound bite. Although this would seem to make multilingualism more of a reality, artificial intelligence will not prepare future writers and readers of African languages.

Modern-day Afrikaans and African writers seem to depend on translation (auto- or otherwise) into the major languages for economic survival, as they shift their focus to Europe and America as markets for their English and/or translated novels. Although one cannot but applaud the objective of linguistic multiplication via translation, the latter often leaves the reader with a sense of nostalgia for the lesser-known or exotic original language which has since disappeared. The reading of the foreign equivalent is thus reminiscent of an epitaph, as in the

case of Antjie Krog's English and Afrikaans translations of five /Xam poets, originally transcribed by the nineteenth-century German linguist Wilhelm Bleek. According to the poet Diä!kwain, language is a string, and once it is broken, you become a foreigner in your own country. Krog's Afrikaans and English versions read as follows:

mense was dit
wat die snaar vir my gebreek het
daarom
het die plek vir my só
geword
[...]
daarom
voel die plek nie meer vir my
soos die plek eens vir
my gevoel het nie
people were those
who broke the string for me
therefore
the place became like this to me]
[...]
[therefore
the place does not feel to me
as the place used to feel to me
(Krog 2004:13)

It is possibly an even sadder occurrence when (Afrikaans, African) writers break their own string by no longer using the languages that are intrinsic to a certain space, and choose instead to express themselves in “the language of the conqueror [which] in the mouth of the conquered is the language of slaves” (Steyn 2004: 167). Or, as the Afrikaans writer, Etienne van Heerden, puts it: “Is a writer’s true integrity measured by his refusal to be translated?”²⁵

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