Pioneering study of the multilingual ecology of the Cape

Achmat Davids (ed. by Hein Willemse and Suleman E. Dangor), ***The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims from 1815 to 1915***

Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2011
318 pp
ISBN 978-1-86919-236-5
R220.00

The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims from 1815 to 1915 is the edited version of Achmat Davids' (1939–1998) impressive MA dissertation of 1991. The text provides a comprehensive introduction to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arabic-Afrikaans (i.e. Afrikaans written in Arabic script), building on earlier philological research by Adrianus van Selms and Hans Kähler. While much of the discussion focuses on issues of transcription (chapters 4 and 5), Davids' most inspiring contribution is the way in which he contextualises the Arabic-Afrikaans texts with regard to the *longue durée* of their genesis. This stretches back to the early days at the Cape; the slow and gradual formation of a distinct slave society; the role played by prominent Muslim leaders and other "free blacks"; the rise of Islam after the emancipation of the slaves (1838); and the importance of local *madrasahs* from the late eighteenth century onwards (chapters 2 and 3). The editors, Hein Willemse and Suleman E. Dangor, have edited the original lightly and included English translations for all Afrikaans texts. The volume also includes a short foreword by Theo du Plessis (Davids' supervisor at the University of Natal) and a concluding commentary by Christo van Rensburg.

The 1990s, when Davids wrote his thesis, were a time when the history of Afrikaans was studied with renewed interest and its complex nature – not quite a creole, but close to it – became accepted in mainstream Afrikaans historical linguistics. The groundwork for this shift was carried out from the 1980s onwards by South African

linguists such as Christo van Rensburg, Theo du Plessis and Ernst Kotze, as well as Hans den Besten (Netherlands) and Paul Roberge (USA). Davids' thesis was an integral part of this collective rethinking of the history of Afrikaans, and was widely read and cited by linguists at the time. However, as a thesis it remained out of the public eye, available only to those who had access to university libraries.

Re-reading Davids' work almost 20 years later reminded me how far we have come in Afrikaans historical linguistics. That the history of Afrikaans is "essentially the story of communication between black and white in the early history of the country" (p 259), is no longer doubted by any serious linguist, and when we teach Afrikaans historical linguistics today we focus in our lectures on contact and interaction in a linguistically diverse colonial society. However, in our quest to understand the complex history of Afrikaans, we were, perhaps, also a little insular at times. We were focused rather single-mindedly on tracing the genesis of Afrikaans and thus approached other languages primarily under the old creolist heading of "substrate" (as opposed to the "superstrate", Dutch). In other words, Khoesan, Malay, and Creole Portuguese were of interest to linguists mainly because their lexicon and structures left traces on Afrikaans. Yet, these languages were more than simply "substrates": they were vibrant community languages which were spoken, and sometimes written, until the mid- to late-nineteenth century. As historical sociolinguists it is time to turn our attention to these languages and begin to study them as an integral part of the multilingual ecology of the Cape, rather than as mere building blocks of Afrikaans. Davids' discussion of Malay especially raises questions such as the following: What kind of Malay was spoken and written at the Cape? How was it shaped by successive generations of slaves and exiles from Indonesia, by new migrations as well as locally born slaves and "free blacks"? And what was the influence of Afrikaans on Malay, rather than vice versa?

Of great interest to the historical sociolinguist are also Davids' observations regarding the use of Bugis/Buginese, an Austronesian language spoken in Indonesia (chapter 2). Although Bugis/Buginese was not a *lingua franca* (like Malay), it was also not a short-lived or

marginal language at the Cape. For example, Tuan Guru, who was banished to the Cape in 1780, made use of Bugis/Buginese in the interlinear translations of his Arabic writings, and "Jan of Boughies signed his will in the Buganese script as late as 1843" (p 53). An important factor for the survival of Bugis/Buginese was the existence of a literary tradition among the Indonesian slaves. Although only a few documents have survived, one has to concur with Davids' interpretation that a "network of written correspondence must have existed among the Buganese slaves" (pp 78f.). Davids' research further suggests that literacy at the Cape was not limited to Dutch, Malay and Bugis/Buginese. There is also evidence that slaves were literate in Makasar, a language closely related to Bugis/Buginese, and Sunda, a language of Java. Davids' meticulous documentation broadens our linguistic archive in significant ways and suggests directions for future work in historical sociolinguistics.

In chapter 3, Davids traces the broad history of Afrikaans writing for Muslim religious instruction. He provides a useful periodisation of this genre:

- *1815 to the late 1870s:* application of the *Jawi* script, a version of the Arabic alphabet which was already used for writing Malay. These texts show considerable linguistic variation.
- *From the late 1870s onwards:* the so-called post-Effendi period in which writers tended to follow the linguistic conventions established by Abubakr Effendi in his text *Bayān al-Dīn* ("Exposition of the Faith", 1877). This led to a decrease in orthographic and grammatical variation.
- *From the late 1890s onwards:* publication of religious texts in Roman script. This period began in 1898 with a text published by Iman Abdurakib ibn Abdul Kahaar. Linguistically, writings in Roman script drew more strongly on Dutch than those written in Arabic script, and were directed at recent converts (p 100).

It is important to note that several of these texts were written by individuals who came to the Cape only as adults, and thus learned

the local vernacular as a second language. As a result, the writings show traces of "learner Afrikaans" (Christo van Rensburg, p 296). For example, Davids comments as follows with respect to Abubakr Effendi: "his Afrikaans was certainly not free from the English he learned to speak while he was writing *Bayān al-Dīn* ... the language of *Bayān al-Dīn* is not typical of Cape Muslim Afrikaans in the 1860s" (p 119). In addition to strong and unusual admixture from English, Effendi's text also shows syntactic influence from Arabic (p 246). Thus, when interpreting nineteenth-century Arabic–Afrikaans texts, we need to be mindful of linguistic proficiency and cross-linguistic influence, as well as the fact that the texts were frequently published – and thus probably also edited – abroad: "in Bombay, Cairo and Constantinople" (p 120). However, rather than a "problem" which detracts from local authenticity, the non-native status of many writers bears witness to the global embedding of local Muslim communities.

I was somewhat puzzled by Davids' strong assertion that the Afrikaans in Arabic script is "almost like audiotape-like recordings of the spoken Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims" (p 17). While (vocalised) Arabic script was certainly used in highly innovative ways at the Cape to represent Afrikaans phonology as accurately as possible, it cannot be described as a "phonetic script" (p 17) which conveys sounds with "absolute accuracy" (p 154). An important reason why the Arabic script cannot be described as phonetic is the presence of persistent orthographic variation. Variation is, by definition, not a feature of any phonetic transcription method. In the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) each sound is represented by precisely one symbol, and each phonetic symbol tells the reader, unambiguously, how a particular sound should be produced. This was not the case for Arabic Afrikaans. For example, Davids discusses the widespread combination of two vowel diacritics in the texts: the *fatha* (indicating [æ] in Arabic) and the *kasra* (indicating [i]). If the Arabic–Afrikaans writing system was indeed phonetic, then this particular grapheme combination should have corresponded to one sound only. However, according to Davids' discussion, it could stand for two different sounds: a mid-central vowel (as in *met* [mət]) and a mid-front vowel (as in *het* [hɛt], see p 185). Davids himself acknowledges the existence

of orthographic variation in the texts. Thus, he writes about the "misplacement of graphemes" (p 158), "spelling mistakes" (p 159), less than "meticulous ... placement of vocalic symbols" (p 242), as well as the uncertainty of the reader who has to apply "imagination to the reading matter", i.e. rely on knowledge outside of the actual orthographic representation in order to produce the sound intended by the writer (p 159). This caveat, however, does not distract from the enormous orthographic inventiveness which is so carefully documented by Davids: writers of Arabic Afrikaans found creative ways in which they could "bend" the Arabic script and make it suitable for writing Afrikaans.

Theo du Plessis refers to Achmat Davids in his Foreword as a "community researcher" (p 13). Socio-historical work of the type and depth presented by Davids not only requires community support and participation (the "[m]any people who opened their cupboards of family heirlooms", p 11), it is also deeply transformative and changes the way we imagine ourselves as South Africans. The impact of the text goes well beyond Davids' humble aim of raising "an awareness of the existence of Cape Muslim Afrikaans" (p 16). Davids' careful research reminds us of the deep complexities of our past and thus the challenges of our future – the "community" includes all of us.

Ana Deumert
University of Cape Town