

A Language Called “Afrikaans”

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What was the first thing that came to mind when you learned there is a certain language called “Afrikaans”? Did you consider it a language of the African people, or did you think it is just another European, Asian or Mesopotamian language coincidentally bearing the communal name of the people of Africa - Africans (In this case **Afrikaans**).

Researchers have found that there are roughly six thousand five hundred (6,500) languages in the world, and of course, Afrikaans is one of these numerous languages that make the world a diverse and beautiful place.

However, whether you think Afrikaans is the language of the African people, or you think it is some European or Asian language, you are indeed not far from some kind of actuality. So...

How and Where did Afrikaans Originate?

Once upon a time in the 17th century, some Dutch-speaking foreigners from the Netherlands visited the Cape area in Southwestern South Africa, and there, they became settlers. In a bid for the locals to find a common means of communication with the Dutch settlers, they shaped Dutch into a language initially known as “Cape Dutch”, but today called “Afrikaans”.

The name “Afrikaans” means “African” in Dutch. For the longest time, Afrikaans has always been referred to as the “kitchen language” or the “backdoor language” due to its borrowed phonology from the original Dutch language.

In fact, studies show there has been quite a lot of misconception amongst language scholars regarding Afrikaans. Some linguists believe Afrikaans was originally developed first as a pidgin, and then as a creole that provided a common means of communication between the Dutch settlers and their African workers. Other scholars think that Afrikaans retained too much of the basic structure and vocabulary of Dutch to be considered a creole.

The origin of Afrikaans remained misconstrued until 1925 when it was officially recognised to be a distinct language from Dutch.

Today, Afrikaans is one of the eleven official languages of South Africa alongside English, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Swazi, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu. Researchers have posited that it is spoken by 6.9 million people as a first language, and by 10.3 million people as a second language.

Interestingly, Afrikaans is also spoken in Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Swaziland and Zambia and its origin in these countries isn't so dissimilar from that of South Africa.

Let's Talk Dialects!

Afrikaans is a language considered to have several mutually intelligible dialects which developed due to contact with different immigrant groups and indigenous local languages. Researchers have generally identified three dialects including:

- ❑ **Cape Afrikaans:** This was influenced by the language of Malay slaves who were brought to work on sugar plantations, and who spoke a Portuguese-based pidgin.
- ❑ **Orang River Afrikaans:** This was influenced by the neighboring Khoi languages
- ❑ **East Cape Afrikaans:** This dialect is thought to have developed as a result of contact between Dutch and English settlers, and the Xhosa tribes of Southern and Eastern Cape areas in South Africa.

“Afrikaans”, a Language of Division

Let's take you on a trip down memory lane, a lane that opens the historic chapters of “Apartheid” in South Africa during the 20th century.

If you don't already know, apartheid was a social policy that governed relations between South Africa's white minority and nonwhite majority, sanctioning racial segregation and political and economic discrimination against nonwhites (i.e. the black and coloured folks in South Africa).

Afrikaans became the language caught in the middle and deployed as a tool of tribalism in the service of the divide-and-rule policy. Hence, it became sadly, and socially tainted as a result of being associated with Apartheid.

One of the most outstanding occurrence during the era of Apartheid that left the rest of the world to think, assume or even conclude that Afrikaans was a language that indeed created division between the South African Blacks and South African Whites was the 1976 riots in the black town of Soweto, where students rebelled against being taught in the Afrikaans language. The implications of this was clear, Afrikaans was a language widely known at the time to be for the South African whites, and they were obviously trying to impose this language as a medium of instruction in black schools where it was barely understood, and as a result starting the riot which was met with fierce police brutality and killing of more than 176 students who participated.

The Soweto uprising of June 16th, 1976 caused quite a shock to both South Africans and the rest of the world. Therefore to commemorate the victims, June 16 was declared as the annual Day of the African Child in 1991 by the Organisation of African Unity which is now known as the “African Union”.

Owing to all these, Afrikaans is today perceived as the most controversial language amongst all eleven languages in South Africa.

However, studies show that there has been considerable debates on the linguistic identity of Afrikaans language speakers inside and outside South Africa. Apartheid was associated with white Afrikaner nationalism for the best part of the 20th century, but over 50% of Afrikaans language speakers today are not classed as “white”.

Most of these ‘coloured’ Afrikaans speakers live in the Western Cape and Northern Cape provinces. More so, according to Hein Willemse, a Professor in the Department of Afrikaans in the University of Pretoria, at least six in 10 of the almost seven million Afrikaans speakers in South Africa are estimated to be black.

South Africa is a multilingual country, and lots of researchers have attempted to distribute each language amongst the citizens through a myriad of statistics which can of course be found on the internet. Till date, South Africa still carries the tag as the only country with some unique linguistic problems which of course stemmed from the apartheid policy.

Did You Know...

Are you curious as to whether you’ve heard someone speak, or you’ve probably read a book that had some text written in Afrikaans? Well you know what they say, “curiosity killed the cat”; so, how about we satisfy your curiosity.

Do these films ring a bell?:

- Mad Buddies, a 2012 South African comedy starring: Leon Schuster, Kenneth Nkosi and Alfred Ntombela.
- The iconic 1992 film titled “Sarafina”, a South African musical depicting students involved in the 1976 **Soweto Riots**, in opposition to apartheid. Starring: Leleti Khumalo & Whoopi Goldberg.

Popular South African comedian and TV Host, Tevor Noah is one of those most admired celebrities that speak the language “Afrikaans”. He also wrote a best-seller autobiography in 2016 titled “Born a Crime”.

Are you thinking of travelling to South Africa or the neighboring countries that speak Afrikaans? See below translations of some courteous Afrikaans words & phrases you might want to use:

- Thank you very much - Baie Danke
- Please - Asseblief
- Excuse me - Excuse me
- Hello - Hallo

Did you enjoy learning about the Afrikaans language? There’s more where that came from. Click [HERE](#) to see interesting facts about other languages you might love.

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