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The SABC and Afrikaans news - a matter of language economy in action?

ABSTRACT

Afrikaans and English television news started in 1975 with equal airtime. In 1996 after an SABC policy change, the Afrikaans TV news bulletin was relegated to a lesser and infrequent time slot. Many Afrikaans-speaking viewers perceived these changes as a threat to the future of Afrikaans and pressure was exerted by cultural organizations and Afrikaans newspapers. There are also indications that economy of language played a major role in the re-establishment of a regular time slot for Afrikaans television news.

Economy of language is a field of study probing the relationship between linguistic and economic variables. The role of language in people's involvement in the economy is diverse but fundamental. On the one hand language empowers or disempowers people to join the national economy, and on the other hand people's language preferences sometimes determine their consumer decisions. The SABC's Afrikaans television news is a prime example of language preference becoming an economic determinant.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Afrikaans TV, which enjoyed airtime roughly equal to that of English until 1996, was effectively swept away in January of that year following a quick policy adjustment that all the petitions, demonstrations and smashing of TV sets in front of the SABC headquarters could not undo.

Seen against the background of conflict about maintaining Afrikaans that has surfaced periodically throughout South Africa's history, the scaling down of that language in the mid-nineties could have been another potential source of conflict. This article explores the possibility that the economy of language might have contributed significantly to prevent the scaling down of Afrikaans. The focus will be on television news in Afrikaans.

Before 1996 English and Afrikaans television broadcasts were allocated approximately equal airtime. Afrikaans and English news broadcasts alternated according to a set pattern, each language group having been allocated a bulletin on six of the seven days per week. On Sundays, the languages were alternated. The 1996 changes left Afrikaans speakers with fewer bulletins, broadcasts in irregular and unfamiliar slots on a channel where they could not understand a large portion of the programmes. English speakers retained the familiar viewing schedules and gained those slots previously occupied by Afrikaans.

The merits of the 1996 rescheduling are not at issue in this article. Instead, the disruption of Afrikaans-speaking viewers is considered along with the perception that a language threat emanated from it – and the contribution that the economy of language made to reverse the position to a large degree.

2. LANGUAGE AS A SOURCE OF CONFLICT

The notion that language is not merely a means of communication is evident from the emotional charge displayed by language identity over the ages. The recorded history of peoples all over the world contains examples of language stigmatization and idolization. The word barbarian, for example, originated from ancient Greek and denoted people speaking another language, or 'someone uttering meaningless sounds'. And in the late eighteenth-century France, the perception existed among French speakers that their language was the *universal* language.

In Solé's (1995:111-137) description of the rise of nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe, he points out the accompanying heightened awareness of ethnocultural values and attitudes. He indicates that a surge of nationalism resulted in among others the view that language was regarded as a community's highest form of inner expression and the manifestation of their identity. Solé (1995:111) notes in this regard:

Linguistic nationalism, sign and symbol of political nationalism, was legitimized upon ethnolinguistic authenticity and ideological, instrumental, and affective considerations. Within the first category language was legitimized upon ethnocultural authenticity and pride. Ideological support, however, was sought in and sustained by historical arguments, the cultural, literary, philosophical, and scientific achievements of a people.

Communities experiencing such a surge in language nationalism nurse their language not for what the language is or for its associated intrinsic value, but for its affective values, that is, because the language has been bedded in their memories since their childhood, interwoven with intimate family relationships and all those experiences relating to the personal inner life (cf. Solé, 1995:112).

When a community feels threatened, language is often elevated to a symbol and is as such subject to idolization. Ethnic, social, religious or other forms of delimitation within a community are either concealed or accentuated by language. Language symbolism can be manipulated for confirmation or expression of language identity. For speakers of a language, language loyalty can serve as a convergence/focal point in conscious and stated resistance to change, and such loyalty emerges strongly in situations posing a real or perceived threat to that language (Dua, 1996:6).

Several examples of language idolization are to be found in the South African history since the establishment of colonial communities. The history of the origin and development of Afrikaans shows that Afrikaans speakers had to a greater or lesser degree oftenentertained the perception that English threatened their language.

Verhoef (1997:29) quotes the example of Lord Milner propagating open Angliciation of the entire South Africa at the start of the twentieth century. Already the *Nasionale Pers* was established in 1915 with the ideal of enhancing Afrikaans in the fields of language, literature, arts and science (cf. Van Staden, 1992:75). Another press group was established in 1935 when *Die Transvaler* was initiated in the then Transvaal. In the standardizing process of Afrikaans, the Afrikaans newspaper became so entangled with the standardiation of the language that it was correctly observed at one stage that Afrikaans newspapers and periodicals *were* written Afrikaans (cf. Van Staden, 1992:73-108).

Steyn (1987:92) postulates that the nine years under United Party government (1939 to 1948) were characterized by active anti-Afrikaans policies aimed particularly at changing all single-medium Afrikaans schools to double medium.

Against this background the constitutional changes started taking place in the late eighties and early nineties. And while it is not suggested here that all Afrikaans speakers entertained the perception of an English threat to Afrikaans, it is true that several signs

of dismay were evident in segments of the Afrikaans-speaking community and particularly Afrikaans cultural organizations at that stage. The constitutional negotiating process before 1994 ran against a background of circulating petitions, conferences, publications and in-depth articles in the Afrikaans media, a large portion of which was devoted to the future (-lessness) of Afrikaans.

Due to the perception that Afrikaans was threatened, the Afrikaans-speaking community actively participated in the language debate (cf. Du Plessis & Van Gensen, 1999, where the language negotiating process between 1989 and 1993 was recorded). Du Plessis (2000:103) reached the conclusion that the eleven-language policy did not really reflect the ANC's preferences. Instead, it was merely a compromise between the ANC's covert preference for English and the overt Afrikaans insistence by the Afrikaans community.

The concern for the future of Afrikaans among some members of the Afrikaans-speaking community is clear from Afrikaans newspaper reporting at the time. Jackson (1997:4) reported, following a poll by the market research organization MarkData, that only five per cent of white Afrikaans speakers regarded government's respect for their mother tongue as 'adequate'. Thirty-one per cent of the respondents in the poll felt the government 'was neglecting my mother tongue' and 33 per cent said the government was 'promoting another language'.

Amid all this language trepidation among large portions of the Afrikaans-speaking community, the SABC introduced its rescheduling. The changes came into effect in February 1996. The unacceptable perception of white channels and black channels was broken down by separating the programming segment for English speakers from that of Afrikaans speakers and grouping each segment separately with an African language family. English, identified as the most common language in urban areas, occupied the entire SABC3. SABC3 has, however, the smallest footprint (reception area); hence, English programmes were also accommodated on SABC1 and SABC2. Prime time was primarily devoted to news and current affairs. Language blocks were scheduled around news and current affairs broadcasts.

For perspective, the TV set-up prior to 1996 needs to be explained.

3. THE AFRIKAANS NEWS ON TV

The SABC's test transmissions started in 1975 in preparation for the official inception of South African television in 1976. Trial runs were also planned for news, but those were only scheduled to start in mid-1975.

On 28 April 1975 the Protter drama occurred that led the SABC news staff to decide on a much earlier starting date for TV news. The first lead story read:

At lunch-time on Monday, April the 28th, a security guard at the Israeli Consulate in Johannesburg, David Protter, occupied the Consulate offices. Protter held his position for 16 hours, and during his reign of terror one person was killed and 37 were wounded (first news broadcast, 5 May 1975).

This news event was recorded as a news bulletin on 2 May and broadcast on 5 May. In closing that bulletin the next news was promised in Afrikaans a week later.

Afrikaans and English news alternated until 1996 with Afrikaans always having the greater viewership.

In the following graphic, dark grey denotes Afrikaans news and light grey English. The two languages alternated on Sundays.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
18:00							
			15 min.		15 min.		15 min
19:00							
20:00	15 min.	30 min.		30 min.		30 min	
	15 min.						
21:00							
22:00							

A graphic portraying one week's Afrikaans and English bulletins prior to February 1996.

The SABC's policy change and rescheduling came into effect on Friday 2 February 1996. Afrikaans news was to share a channel with the Sotho languages and was allocated five bulletins per week: two fifteen-minute bulletins at 18:30 and three thirty-minute bulletins at 20:30. So, for the first time in some 21 years, on two days a week, Monday and Thursday, there was no Afrikaans television news.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
18:00				15 min.			15 min.
19:00							
20:00							
20:30	30 min.		30 min.			30 min	
21:00							

A graphic portraying one week's Afrikaans bulletins post February 1996.

Another rescheduling, this time in January 1997, added to the confusion. The most successful fifteen-minute bulletin in Afrikaans, on Saturdays at 18:30, was scrapped. In fact, Afrikaans was to broadcast no news on a Saturday. A thirty-minute slot was created at 19:00 on Wednesdays. The other slots were fifteen minutes and scheduled for Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 21:30.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
18:00							
19:00				30 min.			
20:00							
21:00							
21:30	15 min.	15 min.	15 min.		15 min.	15 min.	

A graphic portraying one week's Afrikaans bulletins post January 1997.

3.1 Afrikaans news on TV: results of the rescheduling

This series of changes caused great turbulence in the Afrikaans community. There were, however, other consequences that manifested themselves mainly at an economic level. The change from an English/Afrikaans audience and African languages audience to an

English/Nguni and Afrikaans/Sotho audience caused languages to be grouped together that were not understood by their target audiences. The advertisers did not know where the various viewer segments were as determined by the Living Standards Measure (LSM) of the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF).

The uncertainty of advertisers about the composition of target audiences is evident from the following report by Cornelissen (1997:3), which is about submissions to the Independent Broadcasting Authority. Cornelissen writes:

Advertisers are cautious to advertise on SABC TV because they don't know who the viewers are at whom they are aiming their advertisements, said the Association of Marketers, which represents advertisers [...] to the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) (own translation – EvS).

And later in the report:

Mr Derek Dickens of the above association said advertisers followed audiences if they knew who the audience was. He said advertisers did not know who watched which programmes since the SABC had made radical changes in February last year to its three TV channels. This is the case although the SABC has more viewers now than before the changes. They earn less advertising money. The SABC gained black viewers and lost white viewers (*own translation – EvS*).

The rebelliousness of viewers was at that stage also reflected by the newspapers. *Beeld* (23 May 1996:s16) reported that the income of Afrikaans newspapers increased significantly and that experts believed it was because of the discontent of Afrikaans speakers with the new language policy of the SABC. According to the report and the figures of the Adindex survey for January to March of that year, Afrikaans weekend papers' advertisement figures increased by 61,5 per cent and those of the daily papers by 11 per cent. English weekend newspapers showed only half the increase of that of their Afrikaans equivalents with its 30,3 per cent. In total, the share of the print media and radio in the advertisement market increased by 18,4 and 12,9 per cent respectively. Television's share declined to a mere third of the total market. Despite the increase of 12,9 per cent in the expenditure of advertisers, the television advertisement expenditure only increased by 5,4 per cent. According to the report, the change in the advertising expenditure pattern indicates the concern of advertisers about the changes and resultant fluctuations in viewer numbers. The media groups that benefited from the changes were M-Net, which would offer a safer choice for advertisers, and the Afrikaans weekend newspapers – as a result of the concern and discontentment that Afrikaans speakers expressed about the reduction of Afrikaans programme and broadcast time (own translation – EvS).

The media also reported on the estrangement between the SABC and Afrikaans-speaking viewers. Cornelissen (1997:4) reported that more than 400 000 people, who paid their licences in 1995, had not renewed their licences by late January 1996. According to the report, the loss in revenue in licence fees amounted at that stage to R75 million. Pirate viewing increased from 29 per cent in 1991 tot 60 per cent in 1996. Cornelissen (1997:4) added the following about the role of Afrikaans in this regard:

The problems with the payment of licences can be blamed on the reduction of Afrikaans on TV. The SABC expected that the number of Afrikaans licence payers would decrease from 735 000 last year to 588 000 this year. It appears to be even less (*own translation – EvS*).

Minko (1997:4) reported that some million people were dissatisfied and that the SABC was in financial trouble nine months after the change in policy. During this time, tariffs for advertising flashes decreased by between 50 and 74 per cent.

3.2 Afrikaans news on TV: economy of language at work

It can undoubtedly be accepted that the economy of language played a role in the change that was made to the SABC's broadcasting policy in 1997. There was clearly a great deal of pressure from Afrikaner ranks and as can be seen from the above reports, also from Afrikaans newspapers. The Task Group for the Empowerment of Afrikaans (Tabema) also negotiated with the SABC about Afrikaans (cf. Du Toit, 1997:15).

Tabema's arguments were based on the fact that alternative sources and methods of information and entertainment are available and viewers tune in on overseas channels. This also applied to advertisers who found an Afrikaans market by means of other media and channels. Tabema's discussion during the negotiations was based (at least partly) on the principles of the economy of language.

According to Du Toit (1997:15), the SABC once again realized that it should be financially successful and market oriented. An important section of this market was the Afrikaans community with its strong socio-economic interest in the information industry.

Shortly thereafter Zwelakhe Sisulu, the then group executive, announced the new vision and mission of the SABC in its staff journal, *SABC Intercom*, of 22 August 1997. The vision said that the SABC wanted to be 'the Pulse of Africa's Creative Spirit' in future. The manner in which this had to be achieved was stated by the mission, namely 'by delivering distinctive and compelling programming through sound business practice'.

In October 1997 the Afrikaans slots were again changed – this time favourably: Mondays and Wednesdays at 21:00 – 30 minutes; Sundays and Fridays at 21:00 – 15 minutes; and Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at 19:00 – 30 minutes.

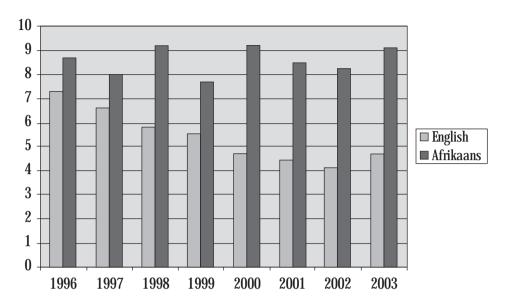
	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
18:00							
19:00			30 min.		30 min.		30 min.
20:00							
21:00	15 min.	30 min.		30 min.		15 min.	
22:00							

A graphic portraying one week's Afrikaans bulletins post October 1997.

While the Afrikaans news bulletin and its viewers spent the majority of 1996 and 1997 on an electronic odyssey, the English bulletin enjoyed consistency. English news alone occupied all the slots it had previously shared with Afrikaans, for example the late bulletin and the bulletins in the breakfast programme. It is also true, however, as was mentioned before, that in the case of evening bulletins it lost the larger transmitter footprint of the old TV1 – now SABC2 – for SABC 3's smaller and predominantly urban footprint.

By 1998 English had three evening bulletins and by 1999 it was on air at 10:00, 13:00, 16:00, 18:00, 20:00 and 22:30.

For reasons such as competition from other broadcasters, the availability of BBC, CNN, Sky News and others, as well as other causes, all of which fall outside the parameters of this discussion, the English news viewership went into a steady decline. The following graphic compares the performance of the English and Afrikaans main bulletins (SABC Audience Research Department 2003; SABC Audience Research Department 2000, SABC Audience Research Department 1996–2002).



Comparison: Afrikaans and English news viewership from 1996 to 2003 (courtesy of SABC Audience Research Department).

But in order to explore the involvement of economic forces in establishing an improved time slot for the Afrikaans news bulletin, the *economy of language* as an economic phenomenon should be examined.

3.3 The economy of language

It is evident that language plays a fundamental role in all areas of human existence. Joseph, DeStephano, Jacobs and Lehiste (2003:viii) describe language as the phenomenon at the heart of a number of social issues that are an inescapable part of human growth, interaction and development 'including access to economic opportunity and education, development of literacy, elimination of prejudice and bias, formation of individual and group identity (including ethnicity, gender, nationality and religion), sharing in power structures of societies, and more'.

Language intersects with the field of economy in both direct and indirect ways. The cost of studying a language is for instance quantifiable: tutor fees, books, etc. The emotional strain, though, is not quantifiable, and may vary from significant for one individual to completely insignificant for another. Equally, the salary raise gained from studying the language is quantifiable, while admiration or happiness is not.

3.4 Language and the economy: human capital

Breton (2003:2) points out that the economic analysis of language has thus far always depended strongly on concepts derived from the mainstream of economic theory. Language as such is viewed in an economic framework mostly as a form of human capital developed in the same way as any other productive skill.

The achievement and maintenance of certain skills during the training of individuals requires a capital input that may be termed an investment in their person. Those skills contribute to their financial ability, and as such also to that of their society (Ghosh, 1993:362).

In economic studies the indirect contribution of people to economic growth by means of the personal skills they possess has become known as *human capital*. And as a form of *human capital*, languages greatly influence the process of empowering people. Their ability in the language required by the workplace could determine to what extent they will or will not be involved in the country's economy. When someone invests in people's language training (i.e. in *human capital*), it is possible to calculate the investment's potential yield.

However, language is also involved at a totally different economic level, and this economic facet of language is relevant to this article.

3.5 Language and the economy: supply and demand

Linguistic entities themselves (e.g. languages, dialectal varieties such as Queen's English) can earn capital in that their use can translate into economic, political or social gain (Queen, 2003:203).

Consequently, language may be regarded as a commodity able to generate dispensable income and create jobs. Naturally, the language itself is not traded, but rather those activities of people to which language is central. Some activities are language neutral, like using public transport to travel from point A to point B (cf. Grin, 2003:1). Others require knowledge of a specific language to take part in activities like reading children's stories (the example used by Grin, 2003:1) or making sense of a TV news bulletin in a particular language.

In his authoritative work on the economy of language Coulmas (1992:77-78) wrote:

... languages have market value. That is the exchange value a certain language has as a commodity, or the index of its appreciation by a relevant group as compared to other languages.

So consumers' preferences (or index of appreciation as Coulmas put it) for products and services in a particular language determine their economic viability – and this has to do with the basic principles of supply and demand.

However, when drawing from the mainstream of economic terminology and applying to language the key concept of supply and demand, one must bear in mind that the traditional economic model – where demand is measured on a quantitative scale, is normally linked to a declining price and dependent on a set of variables like price, income and preference – is not applicable to this entire analogy. Contrary to the traditional economic model where limited availability may stimulate the demand, the limited availability of language- specific products and services normally leads to a decline in the demand for them (Grin, 2003:2).

Language is a supercollective property inasmuch as its communication value increases along with the number of its speakers. The more speakers use a certain language, the greater the economic justification for an increase in language-specific products and services, and the more useful second-language speakers find the learning of that language. So the process perpetuates itself.

Such a public property displays the characteristic of generally benefiting the language community - in the words of Breton (2003:2): 'a good, like a sunset, whose quantity is not reduced when someone consumes some of it'.

Grin (2003:2) points out that a large demand for a language-specific service (like a television service) will arise especially where consumers do not regard the language as backward or deficient. And Vaillancourt (1983:165) writes that demand and consumption in a certain language occur if the consumers know the language, if goods and services are available in that language, and if the consumers prefer the language for a specific use.

The potential yield of a language-specific product or service is usually calculated according to the size of the specific market, which is determined by the number of buyers plus their purchasing power and their preferences (Vaillancourt, 1983:165).

Due to the biannual surveys of the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF), information about the size of a language niche market as well as its purchasing

power is readily available. In addition the SABC in 2000 commissioned a poll, which indicated the language preferences of South Africans. This was a poll of the language usage and interaction of South Africans, conducted by Schlemmer and it involved a group of 2 160 South Africans, selected according to a principle of stratified probability and hailing from all urban and rural social categories (Schlemmer, 2000:1).

3.6 Language preferences of South Africans

According to Schlemmer's research a significant portion of the South African population at that time expressed dissatisfaction owing to a lack of services in their own language in certain situations.

On this he wrote (Schlemmer, 2000:4):

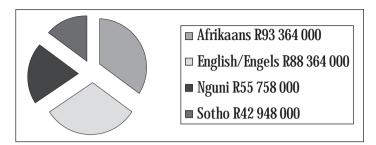
Hence one may identify situations that are rather more problematic than the average situation in that high or fairly high proportions of people are not accommodated in their home languages and high or fairly high proportions of people not accommodated feel negatively about the situation.

Schlemmer (2000:4) indicates six situations that particularly upset these people:

- The medium of education
- Signs, notices and advertisements
- Job-seeking activities
- Service provision in banks
- Union meetings
- News broadcasts

In reference to the Afrikaans TV news bulletin, the size of the potential market (i.e. the number of Afrikaans-speaking South Africans according to the 1996 census – which contained the most recent census figures available at that stage) was 14,4 per cent; thus, in the third position after isiZulu, 22,9 per cent and isiXhosa 17,9 per cent (Statistics South Africa, 1998). According to these figures the Afrikaans-speaking niche market comprised 5 811 547 potential viewers.

Large viewership equals great exposure for advertisers. Furthermore, the South African Advertising Research Foundation AMPS (All Media and Product Survey) shows that Afrikaans news viewers generally earn a high income. The following graphic illustrates expendable income according to language of South Africans in 1997, at which stage these changes took place.

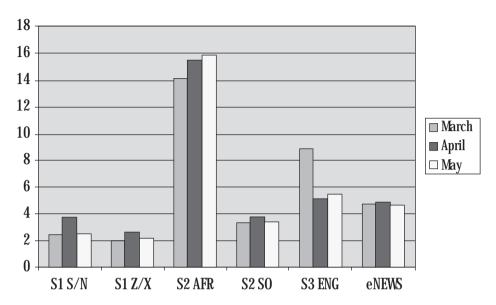


Annual income according to language group (in thousands). (Source: AMPS, 1997)

If Mr Sisulu's announcement in the August issue of *SABC Intercom* was to be taken seriously, it would make sound business sense to establish a regular time slot for the Afrikaans news where advertisers could be relatively sure of the attention of an affluent target group. The advertisement duration for the first Afrikaans bulletin on Monday 6 October 1997, after the October 1997 rescheduling, totalled one minute and two seconds. One week later, on Monday 13 October, advertising already totalled more than four minutes (Afrikaans TV news 6 October 1997; Afrikaans TV news 13 October 1997).

Eventually in 1999 Afrikaans gained its own fixed slot at 19:00. Its viewership by far exceeded both those of its English counterpart and that bulletin's new competitor, e.TV. Even when in April 2003 the English bulletin moved from its originally ideal 20:00 slot to 19:00, the Afrikaans bulletin did not suffer noticeably from the addition of a third 19:00 bulletin (Blaauw & Meyer, 2003:6).

The most telling consideration for the economy of language may not necessarily be viewership, but revenue. Advertisers naturally favour high-income viewers prepared to spend some of that income on advertised products. Consequently, Afrikaans and English news remain the two major revenue pillars bearing the TV news financial structure. But the fact that those two bulletins now compete directly for viewers and revenue highlights another interesting difference between them. The Afrikaans news has almost three times the viewers from the highest income groups (ISM 9–10) (SABC Audience Research Department, 2003:15).



TV News: Viewers ISM9–10 (courtesy of SABC Audience Research Department).

4. CONCLUSION

For the past six years these favourable viewer figures seem to have made economic sense for the SABC and the healthy economic principle of supply and demand in this field of language-specific services.

While acknowledging the pressure that the Afrikaans press and cultural organizations brought to bear on the SABC, it may be concluded that there is enough evidence to accept that the economy of language played a significant role in the restoration of the Afrikaans TV news bulletin to a regular and consistent time slot on the SABC programme schedule.

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