

## Being 'Afrikaans': A contested identity

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### Extended abstract

'Afrikaner' is a term closely associated with South Africa's colonial past, and, more recently, with South Africa's apartheid-era. In contemporary media, stereotypes of Afrikaner abound: not the least the white gun-toting, khaki-clad farmer protesting against a 'black' government. Such stereotypes belie the diversity and complexity that constitutes Afrikaner identity, and do little to improve intergroup communication.

It is posited here that negative stereotypes and stigmatisation of the Afrikaner increase their social solidarity and dependence on each other (Buttny, 1999) and prevents them from integrating and participating fully in contemporary society. Indeed, it is argued that Afrikaners, as a social group, have been identified to possess certain stigmatised traits such 'racist', 'separatist', 'insular' and 'arms bearing', which have led to identity engulfment (Rintamaki & Brashers, 2010) to the extent that their communication and behaviour is filtered through that lens. While they may make an effort to refute such stereotypes through education or performance (Rintamaki & Brashers, 2010), the perceived low legitimacy of their social identity, low status stability and relatively low group boundary permeability leads to increased social competition, which results in, among others, negative outgroup descriptions (Reid & Anderson, 2010).

The concept 'Afrikaner' was appropriated by the National Party (*Nasionale Party*) to appeal to poverty-stricken and disenfranchised white people in the aftermath of the South African War, establishing a strong social identity based on culture and race—two significant elements that guide intergroup behaviour (Hubbert, Gudykunst & Guerrero, 1999). Consequently, Afrikaner Nationalism became the vehicle for maintaining Afrikaner identity (Verwey & Quayle, 2012), developing what Cloete (1992) referred to as a 'set of master

symbols'. These symbols, she argued, aided in the construction of this identity, promoting what she viewed to be a (false) sense of homogeneity.

Fundamental to being recognised as an Afrikaner were the requirements to be 'white' and Afrikaans-speaking (Cloete, 1992). These two master symbols are of particular interest to the study—especially since the historian Giliomee (2009, p. 658) pointed out that, “[a]s of 2002 there were six million speakers of Afrikaans as their first language, 15 per cent of the total population, forming the third biggest language community”, adding that “[m]ore blacks and coloreds than whites now spoke Afrikaans as their first language”. Yet, based on the master symbols, anyone not 'white' would effectively be excluded from identifying as Afrikaner; the exclusion being made more severe since under Afrikaner Nationalism 'whiteness' was accompanied by the ideas of racial purity, superiority and autonomy (Cloete, 1992).

Integral to the construction of Afrikaner identity is the recurring theme of being under threat (Cloete, 1992), suggesting a fight for survival and harking back to the struggle to have Afrikaans acknowledged as a language (*taalstryd*). More recently, the purposeful and methodical removal of external symbols of Afrikaner identity (Orman, 2008), have reignited questions about what it means to be an 'Afrikaner' in a post-apartheid era. These changes, such as renaming towns and streets, and repurposing monuments and public holidays, have effectively led to changes in the structures “necessary for reproduction of a language, culture and ethnic community” (Giliomee, 2009, p.658). The question then arises how those who view themselves as Afrikaners might renegotiate and reconstruct their identity, assuming that they—like most social groups—would like to achieve a positive identity and increase the legitimacy of that identity.

In their research about the production of Afrikaner identity in post-apartheid South Africa, Verwey and Quayle (2012) concluded that respondents made a conscious effort to discard certain visible aspects of Afrikaner identity such as Afrikaner stereotypes, history and culture, overt racism, and downplaying the importance of Afrikaans. At the same time, however, respondents maintained 'whiteness' as central to Afrikaner identity, and recycled discourse underlying apartheid ideology, such as black incompetence and whites under threat. Blaser (2012) disputed that there is such a single narrative, and upon interviewing young Afrikaners concluded that incongruities and ambiguities suggest that Afrikaner identity is

neither stable nor homogenous. Both studies point towards complex cognitive processes and intergroup behaviour at play.

While Verwey and Quayle (2012) considered “backstage talk” (p. 552), i.e. talk during social gatherings with friends and family, this research is more interested in the “public talk”, i.e. discussions that are played out in the public sphere and specifically on social media. It is assumed that where there is a strong ingroup, social identity is salient; a stronger outgroup will restrict such saliency (Rössler & Schulz, 2014). It is also assumed that many who perceive themselves as ‘Afrikaners’ have fallen silent in the face of negative public opinion (Rössler & Schulz, 2014) and associations with an apartheid past, i.e. in the face of stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963). For example, Afrikaans has become a stigmatised language because of its association with an apartheid-past (Verwey & Quayle, 2012), and ‘Afrikaner’ as an identity has become subject to what Reid and Anderson (2010) call ‘ethnophaulisms’ or derisive ethnic slurs. Not only do these ethnophaulisms “actively contribute to social exclusions and inequality” (Reid & Anderson, 2010, p.100) but arguably contribute to a loss of self-esteem, negative emotions, and “feelings of responsibility for one’s failure to meet society’s standards” (Rintamaki & Brashers, 2010, p. 162) where ‘society’s standards’ can be interpreted as the disposal of Afrikaner identity’s master symbols. “By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human” (Goffman, 1963, p15), and consequently, discrimination is perceived as moral and appropriate.

Thus, the study asks:

RQ1: How do Afrikaners define themselves in the public sphere?

RQ2: Which master symbols, if any, are under dispute?

To answer these questions, a qualitative pilot study was undertaken. Firstly, an extensive search using Google Search Engine was conducted, searching for discussions in both English and Afrikaans specifically focused on ‘Afrikaner identity/*Afrikaner identiteit*’. Initially, the majority of search results led the researcher to a number of ultra-conservative, separatist movement websites, such as [www.boerevryheid.co.za](http://www.boerevryheid.co.za) and [www.volkstaat.org](http://www.volkstaat.org). These groups displayed aspects typical of minority groups with a strong sense of solidarity and dependence (Buttny, 1999): their boundaries are impermeable and their ingroup identity is salient. Since it was evident that the master symbols of Afrikaner identity (Cloete, 1992)

were not only recycled but reinforced on these sites, the search was continued, hoping to find a site where Afrikaner identity was indeed being re-contextualised for post-apartheid society.

In the end, two key stimuli were identified that contained sufficiently rich information to allow for a thematic analysis: an art exhibition entitled *Jong Afrikaner* (Young Afrikaner) which had reviews, commentaries, and visuals published across various platforms, and a commentary 'Afrikaner-identiteit, wat is dit?' ('Afrikaner identity, what is it?') published on 19 October 2012 in the Afrikaans Sunday newspaper *Rapport*. The commentary was written by an author only identified as *Pienk vlooi* (pink flea), and solicited 93 comments from readers.

A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted, using a coding process whereby the social media text was scrutinised for "recurrent themes, topics, or relationships" and then coding similar passages for "later retrieval and theory-building" (Lapadat, 2010, p. 927). The aim was to identify themes by finding commonalities and overarching patterns in the discussions, and linking them deductively to the master symbols of Afrikaner identity documented by Cloete (1992).

While the reviews and commentaries for the art exhibition *Jong Afrikaner* were mainly in English, the responses to the *Rapport* commentary were mainly in Afrikaans thus limiting participation to those who were familiar with the code, i.e. shared references and language (Afrikaans). This also meant that a level of code fluency was required for an in-depth analysis. For example, references to celebrities and historical figures required familiarity of the socio-political circumstances, popular culture and history. The presence of such a code served the secondary purpose of signalling the existence of a group and drawing clear boundaries (Dubé-Simard, 1983), restricting discussions about an ingroup issue to those who were accustomed to ingroup conventions and code.

Findings were subsequently clustered into themes, and four key themes were identified: 1) the Afrikaner as a homogenous group, 2) Afrikaans as a requirement, 3) 'whiteness' of the Afrikaner, and 4) shared heritage and history. While the first three reflected three master symbols, the fourth one was new.

It was evident that participants challenged the notion of Afrikaner being a homogenous group, thus supporting Blaser's (2009) view that they are not. Not only did participants strongly argue *for* diversity, devaluing the opinions of those who disagreed as *verkramp* (ultra-conservative) but they took offence at small, unconnected (*los*) groupings Theunissen, P. (2015, May). *Being 'Afrikaans': A contested identity*. Paper presented at the International Communication Association Annual Conference, San Juan, Puerto Rico. 21-25 May 2015.

who wanted to create the impression that *they* represented the 'typical' Afrikaner. Many argued that this led to stereotyping and stigmatisation (*klad*). Thus, they recognised and acknowledged the presence stigma but did not distance themselves from their social identity; rather they made an effort to refute the stereotypes (Rintamaki & Brashers, 2010) as being non-representational of the majority.

Within this discussion, two recurring sub-themes emerged: the legitimacy of the proclaimed identity and the lack of national identity. To be recognised as Afrikaners, the majority had to recognise them as such. Legitimacy of identity is therefore obtained through numbers, and being a member of a fringe group undermined that legitimacy. While homogeneity is consequently disputed, the fact that there is none is equally problematic. Furthermore, that there was no national Afrikaner identity seemed to sadden participants.

The second theme of speaking Afrikaans was closely connected to the third theme of 'whiteness', both reminiscent of the master symbols. Being able to speak Afrikaans was evidently not sufficient; there had to be more, but whether one had to be 'white' was heavily disputed. Mostly disputed was whether 'coloureds' (*Kleurlinge*) can, or even *want*, to be called 'Afrikaner'. It was interesting to note that while Giliomee (2009) points out that more 'coloured' and 'black' people spoke Afrikaans, the thought of 'black' Afrikaners was not entertained at all. Thus, race and particularly 'whiteness' still seemed closely linked to Afrikaner identity. Ironically, Afrikaner Nationalism promoted the notion of racial purity when, biologically, 'purity' of race—particularly of those with the oldest ancestry in South Africa—is rare. In fact, genetically, 'white' Afrikaners and 'coloureds' share the same progenitors. As one participant put it:

*Enigiemand wat 'n bietjie navorsing doen kom gou agter ons het ons  
sogenaamde suiwer blanke bloed meer te danke aan selektiewe voorvaderlike  
amnesie as aan genetiese werklikheid...[NW]*

[Anyone who does some research will quickly discover that our so-called pure white blood is the result of selective ancestral amnesia rather than genetic reality...]

The fourth theme was less controversial but nevertheless an important one: to be an Afrikaner one had to share a heritage, i.e. values, history and cultural icons. While it is therefore possible for an outgroup member to claim social membership by virtue of

his or her skin colour and ability to speak Afrikaans, the boundaries were made less  
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permeable by including heritage as a requirement for social identity. Without a shared heritage, the group is unlikely to fully acknowledge a newcomer as a member.

Thus, three master symbols of Afrikaner identity—racial purity, speaking Afrikaans and homogeneity—were under dispute, suggesting that the permeability of the ingroup boundaries were being renegotiated. While there was a new proviso of shared heritage, the increased permeability of their identity is a step towards meaningful integration and positive future intergroup communication.

It is therefore important to not only provide opportunities where Afrikaners can discuss and debate their identity in public—without the threat of sanction or stigmatisation—but also to *encourage* them to do so. Regrettably, many moderate Afrikaners appear to have gone silent, and the loudest voices are often those with strong ingroup saliency where apartheid master symbols are zealously recycled. It is often these voices that shape public opinion; contributing to identity engulfment and subsequently negative intergroup communication.

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