Progress in Language and Progress in Communication

The Case of Afrikaans

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Introduction

Among the seminal works of the 1890s is Otto Jespersen’s *Progress in Language* (1894), a book that now ranks as a genuine classic in linguistics. Like several other studies from the same era, such as Michel Bréal’s *Essai de sémantique*, published in 1897, and Frederik van Eeden’s *Redekunstige grondslag van verstandhouding* (‘The logical basis of mutual understanding’, also published in 1897). Jespersen’s book deals, at least in part, with human communication and language criticism. Bréal’s work on semantics was based on the ideas concerning general linguistics and language usage he had propounded from the late 1860s onwards, and van Eeden’s Dutch ‘tractatus logico-psychologicus’ was an ‘anti-rationalistic essay’ which can be regarded as an early study in ‘significs’, a movement studied most thoroughly by Walter Schmitz in the 1980s. As a matter of fact, Jespersen’s book covers a wider variety of topics. As his study was written ‘with special reference to English’, more than half the book was devoted to the history of English. However, it also includes a chapter on ‘The history of Chinese and Word-Order’, one on ‘Primitive Grammar’, dealing with Bantu languages from South Africa, and the famous final chapter on ‘the origin of language’. [210]

What Jespersen actually had in mind was to deal with ‘the system of the old school of philology’ (1894: 126) by pointing out that ‘progress’ in language existed, rather than ‘decay’, as celebrated scholars such as August Schleicher (1821-1868) had maintained. The virtue of a language, he argued, is not measured by its full and rich forms, but by its efficiency; that is, ‘the art of accomplishing much with little means, or, in other words (...) to express the greatest

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amount of meaning with the simplest mechanism’ (1894: 13). The gist of his critical comments is, to put it briefly, that one particular language structure is to be preferred to another because it has a definite advantage with regard to language learning and communication.

Jespersen’s working hypothesis is the following:

I shall try to show that we are justified in (...) saying the fewer and shorter the forms, the better; the analytic structure of modern European languages is so far from being a drawback to them that it gives them an unimpeachable superiority over the earlier stages of the same languages (1894: 14).

Jespersen claims that modern English is superior to Latin, Hottentot, or the oldest English (22), because its privileged analytical structure renders the task of speaking easier, and involves less effort on the part of the listener (111). It saves a considerable amount of brain work for all English-speaking people, and especially for every child learning the language (19). From this point of view, to give one concrete example, the loss of case endings in the course of history, deflexion, is not a sign of decay (Schleicher’s Verfall) but of progress.

In the following I will discuss Jespersen’s thesis that progress in language implies progress in communication by comparing it to the opinions on deflexion held by other contemporary linguists: Max Müller, his Dutch disciple Johannes Brill, and the leader of the first Afrikaans Language Movement, S.J. Du Toit. Secondly, I will use this case study, limited as it may be, to shed some more light on the development of general linguistics in South Africa in the late nineteenth-century, still relatively a terra incognita. As the Dutch linguist Etsko Kruisinga (1905: 176) once put it: ‘Das Südafrikanische hat (...) Bedeutung für die Sprachforschung im allgemeinen’.2 [211]

**Jespersen on Afrikaans**

Jespersen speaks of ‘progress’ as a universal law of linguistic development. But as English is the actual language under investigation – not without reason, the subtitle of his book is *With special reference to English* – his focus is mainly on that language. In the early twentieth century, however, Jespersen sought to apply his hypothesis to another most deflected language – to wit, Afrikaans.

In his *Language. Its nature, development and origin* (1922) Jespersen notes that ‘European Dutch (...) is in many respects behindhand as compared with African

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2 In this paper I will not go into the works on Khoi-San and Bantu languages by comparative philologists such as Wilhelm Bleek (1827-1875), the most influential African philologist of the nineteenth century. Gilmour (2006) discusses ‘grammars of colonialism’ in South Africa in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
Dutch’. He speaks of ‘a progressive evolution’ that has taken place (Jespersen 1922: 364-365). Many years before, in 1908, Jespersen had made a more extensive remark on Afrikaans when observing that in South Africa,

we find a language which has perhaps thrown off more of the old flectional complexity than any other Germanic language, English not even excepted, namely Cape Dutch or ‘Afrikaansch’ (...). The total absence of distinction of gender, the dropping of a great many endings, an extremely simple declension and conjugation, which has given up, for instance, any marks of different persons and numbers in the verbs, and other similar traits, distinguish this extremely interesting language from European Dutch (1908: 608; italics added).

His interest in Afrikaans had probably been aroused by his reading and review of the 1901 study Die Sprache der Buren by Heinrich Meyer. However, what Jespersen must have noticed, but did not mention in 1908, was that as early as 1875 a young Dutch linguist, Johannes Brill, had drawn a similar parallel between English and Afrikaans. Both languages were indeed fully deflected, but the Dutch scholar had forcefully argued that one should not judge languages by their copiousness of grammatical forms (Brill 1875: 80). As Brill is a relatively unknown linguist today, I will first present some information about the life and times of this learned Dutch expat. [212]

**Johannes Brill**

Johannes Brill (1842-1924) was the son of the Utrecht professor of Dutch language and national history, Willem Gerard Brill (1811-1896), and a nephew of the founder of the renowned Leiden publishing company that bears the family name. In 1867, following his studies in classical languages at Utrecht University, he was awarded ‘magna cum laude’ for his defence of a traditional doctoral thesis of some 130 pages entitled Commentatio literaria inauguralis continens quaestiones scenicas ad choragiam pertinentes, with his own father acting as his ‘Doktorvater’. Appointed a classics teacher at the Stedelijk Gymnasium in Deventer, he was invited by the Board of Governors to deliver an official annual lecture on 15 July 1868; it appeared in press in the same year under the title of Over de classificatie der talen (‘On the classification of languages’). However, this publication has remained relatively obscure to linguistic scholarship at large.

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3 Jespersen had learned some Dutch from Henri Logeman (1862-1936) whom he got to know while he was studying at Oxford (1887-1888). In the 1895 volume of the Dutch periodical Taal en Letteren Logeman published an abstract from Jespersen’s book under the title ‘Decay or development of language?’. Actually, it was Logeman who, having read the Danish Vorlage of this work, drew it to the attention of the London publishing house Sonnenschein, suggesting that an English version should be prepared. So it was at his initiative that Jespersen’s Progress was written.

4 Cf. Jespersen 1903. Unfortunately, this text was not accessible to me.
In his treatise Brill presents a brief overview of the development of the ‘modern science of language’, focussing on ‘the classification it proposes of the languages spoken all over the face of the earth’ (Brill 1868: 6). It is not difficult to discern who Brill’s principal mentor was in this matter; namely, the most decorated linguist of the nineteenth century, the German-English scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), whose *Lectures on the science of language* (1861-1863) were immensely popular in the Netherlands at the time. Having characterized the Oxford professor as one of the most brilliant contemporary language researchers, Brill quotes his celebrated formulation about the true object of the science of language, which also includes ‘dialects which have never produced any literature at all, the jargons of savage tribes, the clicks of the Hottentots, and the vocal modulations of the Indo-Chinese’ (Brill 1868: 17; cf. Müller 1877, I: 25). It is clear that from his youth Brill had studied the *Lectures* with a fervour similar to other young Dutch linguists following the publication of this two-volume work (cf. Noordegraaf 1985: 419-423).

In early 1873 Brill left the Netherlands for South-Africa, having accepted an offer to become headmaster (‘skoolhoof’) of Grey College in Bloemfontein. The city of Bloemfontein was the capital of the Republic of the Orange Free State (in Afrikaans: Oranje-Vrystaat), an independent Boer state in southern Africa that existed during the second half of the nineteenth century. Both Boer republics, [212] Oranje-Vrystaat and Transvaal, or the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (‘South African Republic’), had maintained Dutch as their official language. 5

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5 From 1893 onwards the South African Republic was even subsidizing (£ 250 per annum) the voluminous Dutch-Flemish *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (‘Dictionary of the Dutch language’), an enterprise that started around 1850, but was not finished until 1998.
It is therefore not surprising that the year 1876 saw the publication of Brill’s *Beknopte Nederlandsche spraakkunst voor schoolgebruik in Zuid-Afrika* ("Concise Dutch grammar for the use of schools in South-Africa"), a modest book without any theoretical pretensions. However brief his Afrikaans experience may have been at that time, Brill, who was a most competent educator, had understood that an adapted grammar book was needed for teaching Dutch in South Africa. Obviously, the local dialect caused quite a few problems for his Bloemfontein students, who were obliged to master the official ‘Hoog-Hollans’, the ‘High Dutch’ variety. Evidently, European Dutch and Afrikaans had drifted far apart.

**In defence of Afrikaans**

Around 1882 it was rumoured in the fatherland that Dr Brill was engaged in the ‘Abfassung einer Kapholländischen Grammatik’. When he was asked, however, he had to inform the interested German linguist Hugo Schuchardt (1842-1927) that the rumour was a false one. Be that as it may, Brill had been seriously engaged with Afrikaans. In contrast to his distinguished father, who considered the Dutch variety spoken in South Africa to be just a ‘corrupted’ dialect, young Brill had stood up for the *landstaal*, the vernacular language, i.e. ‘de Zuid-Afrikaansche taal’. In May 1875 he gave a lecture in Bloemfontein in which he ‘die landläufigen Vorurteile gegen die Burensprache als ein verderbtes Holländisch vom wissenschaftlichen Standpunkte widerlegte und ihr die Möglichkeit einer glänzenden Zukunft in Südafrika zuerkannte’, as Meyer (1901: 21) summarized. Meyer added a positive comment: ‘Der Vortrag ist ausgezeichnet durch gründliche Kenntnisse und Einsicht in Sprachleben und Sprachgeschichte’.

In the first part of his 1875 lecture on the ‘landstaal’ Brill points out that in the light of modern linguistics any language species, including Afrikaans, is fully worth the attention of the scientific researcher. Referring to Müller’s *Lectures* and repeating what he had stated several years before (cf. 1868: 17) Brill argues [214] first of all that ‘from a linguistic point of view the language of the songs of Homer or Cicero’s prose is in itself not more important than the screams of savage tribes or the clicks of the Hottentots’ (1875: 29, cf. Müller 1877, I: 85). To the linguist, all languages are equal, as the present-day maxim goes.

Secondly, although it had abolished the official grammatical forms Afrikaans should not be seen as ‘a peculiarly corrupted branch’ of standard Dutch. There is an obvious parallel, Brill remarks, between English and South African Dutch. Having said that, he immediately adds that nobody has the right to look down on English as a declined and formless language: English possesses a very rich literature and is able to express whatever deep feelings its speakers wish to express. One should not evaluate a language in terms of the copiousness of its grammatical forms, Brill concludes – ‘it is the law of the growth of language that language is bound to increasingly decline and to free itself from its case forms and declensions; whereas on the other hand this decay does not detract from its usefulness to express human thought’ (1875: 31). Thus, Afrikaans may have become structurally different from Holland Dutch, but it is definitely an adequate instrument for linguistic communication, and that is all that matters.
A letter to Hugo Schuchardt

Eager for data with regard to Afrikaans, in the summer of 1882 Hugo Schuchardt (1842-1927), the distinguished German creolist and ‘esprit vraiment moderne’ (Bréal) turned to Brill for information. The ‘K.K. Universitätsprofessor’ from Graz had a ‘lebhafter Interesse’ in Afrikaans and he was driven by his wish ‘die Ursache der grammatischen Versetzung des Kapholländischen festzustellen’.

‘Ihr geehrtes Schreiben von 9 Juli kam mir letzte Woche zur Hand’, Brill replied on 23 August 1882,


One of the major issues to be discussed was the question of what kind of language Cape Dutch Vernacular actually was. It is pure Dutch, Brill claimed, ‘nur in entarteter grammatischen Form’ (cf. Brill 1875: 32). External influences played hardly any role in its development. ‘Weder die Hottentotische noch die Kaffersprache hat den geringsten direkten Einfluss auf sie gehabt (...’). So, with regard to Cape Dutch, Brill claimed an autonomous, internal development.

When Schuchardt presented his Dutch informant with the well-known Afrikaans construction in which the preposition vir (Dutch ‘voor’) marks a direct object, Brill explained this syntactic innovation by the well-known development from synthetic to analytic language forms, from the ‘allgemeinen Neigungen der modernen flexionslosen Sprachen, Präpositionen zu gebrauchen, wo die älteren sich mit einem bloszen Casus begnüngen’, in other words, from deflexion.

Max Müller on language change

As might be expected, Brill’s remarks concerning the development of language appear to have been inspired to a large extent by Max Müller. When Müller discusses language change in the second chapter of his Lectures, he speaks of ‘the growth of language’, contrasting it for methodological reasons from ‘the history of language’. Language, or any other production of nature, admits only of growth (Müller 1877, I: 40).

* This letter can be found in the University Library Graz, Nachlass-Sammlung Schuchardt (with many thanks to Mag. Thomas Csanády, Graz).
Such growth is beyond the control of individual speakers. Language change is a natural process that takes place at all times and in all countries (36), and it is subject to fixed laws. As Müller sets forth, when discussing ‘the growth of language’ two processes should be pointed out: phonetic decay and dialectic regeneration (44).

With regard to phonetic decay or phonetic corruption, Müller starts from the Humboldtian assumption that ‘everything in language originally had a meaning’, which he considers to be ‘the most essential characteristic of all human speech’. Initially, all language elements are fully transparent as far as their meaning is concerned. One speaks of decay as soon as this ‘one form-one meaning principle’, the ideal state of a language, is affected and as soon as language submits ‘to the attacks of phonetic change’ the whole nature of language is destroyed by it (47). Phonetic decay may therefore be considered to be one of the principal agents that change languages from isolating to agglutinative, and from agglutinative to inflectional. To give just one more example of the process of decay: the English word meaning ‘twenty’ is not ‘two-ten’ and the Latin word is not *duo-decem*. In English ‘twenty’ is indicated by *twenty* and in Latin by *viginti*. These words consist of the remnants of formerly transparent parts:

> [T]he most essential parts of the two component elements are gone, and what remains is a kind of metaphoric agglomerate which cannot be understood without a most minute microscopic analysis. Here, then, we have an instance of what is meant by phonetic corruption (…) (47).

Müller’s second basic assumption, much less discussed in historiographical literature, is that it is only in the dialects that the ‘real and natural life of language’ (52) is to be found. From its very beginnings, language existed only in the form of dialects, therefore, dialects are definitely not corruptions of the literary language; in fact, they feed that literary language (55; cf. 1888: 9). Müller then sketches a linguistic landscape which is characterized by a large variety of dialects. The process of what we would now call ‘selection’ is then described as one of these dialects being raised to ‘that temporary eminence which is the result of literary cultivation’ (59).

Müller appears to attribute a prominent role to the dialects. To him, spoken language, in particular a dialect, is characterized by a variety of forms and means of expression. This variety sharply contrasts with the conservatism and stagnation that written languages undergo. One example must suffice here. As soon as the classical Latin dialect was written and codified it became

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7 This is not merely a question of terminology (it has to do with Müller’s much-debated view on linguistics as a natural science), but it is beyond the scope of this paper. Brill and Du Toit don’t go into this matter.

stationary and stagnant. It could not grow, because it was not allowed to change or to deviate from its classical correctness. It was haunted by its own ghost. Literary dialects, or what are commonly called classical languages, pay for their temporary greatness by inevitable decay (65).

When a language is first and foremost a spoken language – a dialect – the tremendous variety and richness that characterize dialects in general may [217] substitute for and supplement the phonetically declined forms, as a sort of counterbalance, one might say.

Müller’s appreciation of dialect as the real locus of the life of language is reminiscent of the Humboldtian concept of *energeia*. This concept was also used by Jespersen, three decades later, when he took as his guiding idea ‘an idea expressed long ago and with considerable emphasis by Wilhelm von Humboldt, that language means speaking, and that speaking means action on the part of a human being to make himself understood by somebody else’ (Jespersen 1894: 13). It is clear that, in this matter too, Müller owes a considerable debt to Humboldt ‘in the central tenets of his theory of language change’ (Sutcliffe 2001: 26).

Note that Müller also had a keen eye for certain ‘progressive’ developments. In the growth of the modern Romance languages out of Latin, Müller (1877, I: 71) observes, we can perceive not only ‘a general tendency towards simplification’, but also a natural disposition to avoid the exertion that pronouncing certain consonants, and especially groups of consonants, entails on the part of the speaker. This sounds like Jespersen’s ‘simplest mechanism’.

In summary, to evaluate Brill’s defence of Afrikaans in light of Müller’s linguistic propositions: first, it is clear that Brill used Müller’s authority to argue that Cape Dutch or Afrikaans deserved to be studied in its own right. Second, following Müller’s exposition of the universal law of phonetic decay, Brill could reassure his cultured Bloemfontein audience that the loss of case forms in Cape Dutch was just a natural development and did not detract from its usefulness in expressing human thought (1875: 31). He referred to English as an example of a language which had preserved the full capacity to express the highest and deepest matters that man could wish to express, without any eroded grammatical forms. Third, given Muller’s exposition of the relationship between dialect and cultivated language, Brill emphasized that the Cape Dutch dialect could in due time be elevated to a language of its own, also having its own literature (1875: 39). All in all, I venture to say that Brill applied the insights of the ‘new science of language’ (cf. Brill 1868: 6) to the Afrikaans vernacular, the ‘landstaal’.

A few comments should be added here. Brill emphasizes that the developments under discussion do render the language less beautiful to a poet or a rhetorician – its ‘plasticity’ declines, for instance – but that in various respects its usefulness for the average citizen increases to a considerable degree (1875: 32). Subsequently, Brill points out many ‘remarkable simplifications’ (gender, verb system, pronunciation), all of them ‘advantages’ (33) that were mentioned by Jespersen only twenty years later. However, as far as I can see, Brill does not [218] claim ‘progress’ for Afrikaans, nor does he characterize languages in terms of ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Each language is a language in its own right (33).

As a cautious representative of an emancipatory movement, Brill’s standpoint comes close to
that of eighteenth-century rhetoricians such as the Scot Hugh Blair (1718-1800), whose Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783) was translated and reprinted far into the nineteenth century. To Blair, clarity in communication is ‘the end of Speech’ (I: 121). When dealing with the ‘Progress of Language’ in his Lecture VI he compared the ‘antient and modern languages’ and observed an ‘alternation in the structure of Language’. Here Blair shows he is keenly aware of the pros and cons of deflexion. ‘Language is become in modern times, more correct, indeed, and accurate; but, however, less striking and animated: In its antient state, more favourable to poetry and oratory; in its present, to reason and philosophy’ (I: 124-125), is his well-balanced assessment. Their loss, our gain.

**S.J. du Toit on ‘progress in language’**

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the Afrikaans questione della lingua, the battle for the recognition of the Afrikaans vernacular as a cultural language, take on an organized form. Those who were preparing the foundation of the Genootskap van Reë Afrikaanders (‘the Society of True Afrikaners’) in the village of Paarl, not far from Cape Town, felt that Brill’s treatise was most stimulating. ‘Following this speech by Afrika’s grootste taalgeleerde (“Africa’s greatest linguist”) it will not be necessary anymore to take notice of those opponents who in their foolish unwisdom maintain that Afrikaans is not a real language, or a Hotnotstaal (“Hottentot’s language”), as Reverend Stephanus Jacobus Du Toit (1847-1911), a most prolific author and one of the founding fathers of the Genootskap, remarked in 1880 (Du Toit 1880: 40). One of the aims of the society, which developed into an active pressure group, was to elevate spoken Afrikaans to the level of a fully-fledged cultural language. Consequently, the Genootskap, founded on 14 August 1875, published a concise [219] grammar, co-authored by Du Toit, and prepared an Afrikaans dictionary. Afrikaans was definitely not the ‘disabled, mutilated and impoverished dialect [of Dutch], which sounds like the speech of someone with a speech impediment’, as a Dutch literary critic deemed later on (Noordegraaf 1996: 88). Afrikaans should not be regarded as a dialect, on the contrary, it was felt to be an autonomous and ‘good’ language (cf. Deumert 2004: 61).

The year 1891 saw the publication not only of Jespersen’s Studier over Engelske Kasus, the ‘Vorlage’ of Progress in Language, but also of Du Toit’s programmatic Afrikaans ons Volkstaal (‘Afrikaans, our national language’). Consisting of some 130 pages, this essay included the 71

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* Similar observations can be found in, for example, in Francis Bacon’s 1623 De dignitute et augmentis scientiarum (VI, I), and Adam Smith’s ‘Considerations concerning the First Formation of Languages, and the Different Genius of Original and Compounded Languages’, first published in 1761. Cf. also Hüllem 2002: 256n.
theses he had submitted as a contribution to an 1890 linguistics conference in Cape Town, which he had been unable to attend. Above all, this publication presented the elaborate linguistic arguments needed to support his concise theses – one-liners, we would call them today. They deal with all relevant aspects of Afrikaans: as a language in its own right, as the national language, as a mother tongue, as a written language, etc. To date, Du Toit’s linguistic treatise has hardly ever been studied: ‘Die boek is doodgeswyg en het geleidelik in die vergetelheid geraak’ (‘The book has been smothered up and has fallen slowly into oblivion’, D’Assonville 1998: 301). Without any doubt, this is due to Du Toit’s controversial stance vis à vis the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902).

As an appendix Du Toit included an essay by Francis William Reitz (1844-1934), then Chief Justice of the Free State, in which he stood up for the ‘barbarian patois’, i.e., Afrikaans. As it appears, Reitz was well acquainted with the works of the ‘great authority in linguistics, professor Max Müller’ (Reitz 1880: 3). Here I briefly draw attention to Du Toit’s thesis VI. This thesis comes from the introductory section ‘Afrikaans as a language’ and states:

The fixed law followed by all languages in all ages is simplification, which does away with inconvenient inflectional forms and endings, so that the language becomes more useful for the convenient expression of thought. In this way the Germanic language is much simpler than the ancient Indo-Germanic language stem from which it has sprung; and in its turn Dutch is simpler than German, and English simpler than Dutch, so that English has hardly any inflectional forms left (Du Toit 1891: 17; italics added). ¹⁰

With regard to this ‘fixed law of simplification’ it is clear that Du Toit based his ideas on Brill’s paraphrase of Müller’s explanations. As a matter of fact, Brill is the author who is quoted most frequently in Du Toit’s book. [220]

In the section on ‘Afrikaans as a language’ Du Toit enthusiastically sings the praises of Afrikaans; compared to him Brill is just an optimistic but sober-minded scholar. Among other things, Afrikaans excels in its brevity, purity, copiousness of words and euphony; it is even the ‘purest offspring of the Germanic branch’ (1891: x). So one might conclude that the various historical developments had led to excellent results, which satisfy all the relevant linguistic criteria (cf. thesis IX) for a full-fledged ‘good’ language (cf. Hüllen 2002: 201 sqq.). This amounts to Du Toit’s acceptance of the notion of ‘progress in language’, a phrase that is not actually used in his treatise. At any rate, structurally and formally Afrikaans had become a superior language. Understandably, then, Du Toit (1891: 68) could claim that Afrikaans is easy to learn. But what about the semantic aspect, and ‘progress in communication’? Here another well-known linguistic concept enters the picture.

Du Toit’s 71 theses are characterized by a conspicuous and pervasive nationalistic slant. An eclectic and self-taught linguist, Du Toit was right in quoting a host of European scholars for

¹⁰ He draws an explicit parallel between Afrikaans and English (Du Toit 1891: 66).
help in his battle to establish an autonomous Afrikaans. However, he absorbed something else as well from contemporary nineteenth-century linguistics: its notorious concept of ‘national spirit,’ or *Volksgeist*. As many nineteenth-century linguists understood it, language was the mirror or the expression of the soul of the people. It is not surprising, then, that Du Toit’s second thesis runs as follows: ‘Language is a portrait of the mind and the life of a people, a reflection of the character and the mental development of a nation’ (1891: 5), because language has developed according to the character of the land and the needs of the people (cf. 1891: 60 sqq.). This is reminiscent of what a contemporary German linguist, Carl Abel (1837-1906), had remarked in 1880: language is ‘the most accurate photography of the intellectual world peculiar to each nation, and more or less common to its various members’ (Abel 1880: 18). So each ‘good’ language is able to adequately express the thoughts and feelings of the people by whom it is spoken, and consequently optimal communication can only be realized when all speakers share the same mentality and *Weltanschauung* (‘world view’). Only then each member of that society is able to perfectly understand his countrymen. – ‘All the words of every language have meanings belonging to them alone’, as Abel (1880: 18) has it. All in all, it is safe to conclude that Du Toit’s treatise is a strong plea for nation-building.

I think we can point out a direct connection between the linguistic concept of *Volksgeist* and the establishment of Afrikaans as a *witmanstaal* (‘white man’s language’), an unambiguous ‘marker of white Afrikaner ethnicity’ (cf. Deumert 2004: 42, 72). However, we may also conclude that when involving [221] the romantic concept of *Volksgeist* Du Toit moved substantially away from Jespersen’s rational hypothesis on progress in language.

**Final remarks**

*Müller undoubtedly exercised a pervading and lasting influence at home and abroad*

Kurt Jankowsky (1979: 353)

In this contribution I have pointed out that the notion of ‘progress in language’, as it was understood from Max Müller’s popular *Lectures on the science of language* (1861-1863), was put to crucial use by linguistic scholars in South Africa during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. By applying Müller’s Humboldtian insights on phonetic decay and dialectic regeneration to Cape Dutch they sought to legitimize their efforts to elevate this mainly spoken variety of Dutch to a full-fledged autonomous language, Afrikaans. Whereas Jespersen starts from a rational, empirically underpinned hypothesis in 1894, his contemporary Du Toit turns in a more romantic direction by calling up the concept of *Volksgeist*. In this way he sought to present the theoretical underpinnings of the possibility of optimal communications within the community of Afrikaans language speakers.

The works of Johannes Brill, Max Müller and Hugo Schuchardt may demonstrate the contacts that existed between Dutch and German scholars; the present paper is the evidence of the
continuation of these long-standing German-Dutch relations.

References


