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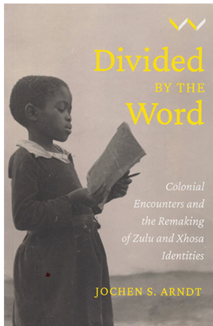
Better together: Xhosa and Zulu – languages or dialects?

BOOK TITLE:
Divided by the word



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Divided by the Word is an important book. I wish it had been there when I started my career teaching Xhosa as a second language more than 30 years ago. Students identifying as Zulu would register for my beginner (and second- and third-year) courses in Xhosa, not attend a single lecture or tutorial, and pass with 100%. To me, they *were* Xhosa – or were they Xhosa Zulu?

Jochen Arndt answers this question with magnificent scholarship and clarity of argument: people only began to identify as Xhosa and Zulu once these separate **languages** were created in the mid-1800s. Before (and even some time after) the arrival of missionaries and settlers, people identified according to their clans, their *izibongo* (clan names) and social statuses. "Nguni speakers formed political communities that united people...from very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds", so what would make a difference to your social rank would be your personal genealogy, **not** your language (p.33–34). People did recognise differences in the way they spoke, but these were not mobilised as markers of identity and in fact did not matter that much: Arndt refers to these differences as "*soft* markers of *vague* regional identities" (p.37).

So how has it come to pass that conflicts arise in which the opposing parties are identified purely in terms of whether they speak Xhosa or Zulu (as happened on the Rand in the early 1990s)? And another question (not specifically stated in the book, but one that arises implicitly, and frequently confronts me as a teacher of African languages): Why are African language departments not teaching a general Nguni language course, instead of focusing on either Xhosa or Zulu?

Arndt answers these questions with meticulous attention to historical sources, which means that he has to bravely confront the term "Caffre" (with its notorious variants) and explain its meaning and role in unravelling complex realities. He acknowledges that because of its recent history the word "is rightfully considered hate speech" (p.38) but explains that at the beginning of European contact with the southern African region it referred to a **single language continuum** that included what we now know as the Nguni languages. In the course of his detective work, Arndt makes illuminating references to writings from explorers, naturalists and philologists. For example, in 1779, the Dutch explorer Robert Jacob Gordon observed that the "Caffres" north and east of the Cape Colony spoke "the same" language "but a different dialect" (p.50), while the geographer and linguist John Barrow acknowledged that "perhaps no nation on earth ... can provide so fine a race" (p.52). So what separated this language, this race? The answer can be found in the Bible.

Arndt's gripping narrative – honestly, sometimes it reads like a thriller! – interrogates the evidence: it was the late 18th and early 19th centuries that saw the dawn of the missionary enterprise and its concomitant need to make the message comprehensible to potential converts. The notion of a single language was strengthened when missionaries interacted with "people of European and African descent who migrated throughout this region and who used their skills in the speaking practices of the people from one end of the coastal belt to communicate successfully with the people from the other end" (p.57–58). The missionaries started to learn the languages of the people whose souls they wanted to win, but they still had to employ multilingual interpreters who were able to communicate with most people in the region because of language skills acquired during "trading, intermarriage, and political incorporation" (p.109).

Arndt notes that the communities that gave birth to these interpreters "practiced bilingualism and language mixing" and "did not demand that their members speak one specific language only and purely" (p.115). Inspired by their interpreters' and their own observations, Wesleyan missionaries began work on linguistic harmonisation to "transcend the differences between the speaking practices of the Xhosa, Thembu, Mpondo, Mfengu, Natal Africans, and Zulu" (p.117). This kind of work had already been done in England, "where the translation of the Bible had created a written language that unified a wide range of spoken dialects" (p.117).

However, in 1854, the American Board missionaries rejected the Wesleyan missionaries' proposal to work together to produce a translation of the Bible that would accommodate all Nguni speakers. The reasons behind this spurning of what would appear to be a logical solution to the problem of many dialects is that they had for some time "tied their identity to the 'Zulus' only" (p.125) and needed a way to distinguish "Zuluness" other than just culture (p.123). Their rejection of the proposal to create a Bible in a common language focused on unfamiliar words and differences in orthography which Arndt argues represented a "man-made obstacle that had little to do with people's actual speaking practices and their mutual intelligibility" (p.130).

In the rejection letter to the Wesleyan missionaries' proposal "to develop a single literary language for the coastal region", the writer comments that Zulu was superior "because it did not contract words" and because of "a smoothness and a beauty in the (King's) Zulu which they had not discovered in the other [dialect]" (p.146). After it was clear that the Wesleyans had failed in their attempt to translate the Bible using a single literary language, there were "separate standardizing projects that eventually culminated in the emergence of distinct Zulu and Xhosa literary languages and language-based identities" (p.171).

So the two languages, Xhosa and Zulu, were standardised, the Bible translated into both, and dictionaries for each created. Finally, the last nail in the coffin of a harmonised language was hammered in: mother-tongue education for the first years of schooling. This sounds like a pedagogically sound idea, but the fact that education only became compulsory for Africans in 1981 (whereas for white children it had been compulsory

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since 1904) (p.187) meant that people had to rely on missionaries for their education and accept the language chosen by them as the standard. Understandably there would be a mismatch and "pupils began to consider their home dialects inferior variants" – a situation that continues to this day. I am frequently saddened by students who feel the need to tell me that "I don't have a proper mother-tongue" – meaning that they happen not to speak the standard Xhosa or Zulu that is taught at schools and universities.

In his concluding paragraph, Arndt takes us back to the Rand violence of the 1990s and argues that even though people associated the conflict with "South Africa's historical Zulu and Xhosa polities and clans, they were in fact modern identities – the products of the intense language mapping, standardization, and education activities European, American, and African-born actors had carried out since the early nineteenth century" (p.203).

Rarely have I felt as deeply grateful to an academic writer as I now do to Jochen Arndt. In *Divided by the Word* he has answered my questions with grace and insight – and immense scholarship. He has done a great job. *Wenze umsebenzi omkhulu.* (That last sentence is exactly the same in Xhosa and Zulu – of course!)