

WAT

CHERISHES

Afrikaans

“Language is like water – it flows where it wants.” These are the words of Dr Willem Botha, Editor-in-Chief of the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* (WAT). If language is like water, the WAT must be a dam – a reservoir that slowly catches every drop of Afrikaans, treasuring it and safeguarding it for Afrikaans-speaking generations to come, writes Anri van der Spuy.

This dam is being excavated ever deeper at 115 Banhoek Road, the building that the WAT is renting from Stellenbosch University (SU). Due to a collaboration agreement with SU in 1926, when the endeavour of creating an extensive dictionary was launched, there are still close ties between these two institutions. The WAT shares in the infrastructure of SU at reasonable tariffs and the chairperson of the board of the WAT is appointed by SU. Prof Magda Fourie (Teaching) currently occupies this position.

Being a comprehensive dictionary, the WAT exists to record the Afrikaans vocabulary in its widest scope. “It includes recording and processing not only standard Afrikaans,” Dr Botha explains, “but also regional speech, conversational language, the rich heritage of Afrikaans expressions and the different varieties such as Namaqualand Afrikaans, Cape Afrikaans and Griqua Afrikaans.” The WAT Trust confirms this on its website: “Despite continuous changes in society, this remarkable dictionary ensures that not one jot or tittle of the Afrikaans language is lost.”

This undertaking entails a lengthy process ensuring that all the words beginning with a particular letter of the alphabet are included, defined, combined with examples from written and spoken language and published in print and electronic format. The WAT team recently completed this process for the letter R – and will start working on the letter S in February 2009.


It is hoped that the dictionary will be completed in 21 years’ time, but that will depend on financing. Similar to the case of other modern and developed (and developing) languages, it is imperative that this comprehensive dictionary be published as a whole for us to come to the realisation of the full power of expression and extensiveness of Afrikaans. “However, the question is whether Afrikaans will be given that opportunity,” Dr Botha warns.

With the decreasing state subsidies of the past few years, there is a continuous risk that the WAT dam may dry up. Although the generosity of donors currently ensures that the endeavour continues, the WAT is, according to Dr Botha, not yet out of the deep end financially. His ideal is to use further donations to build up a capital fund of R30 million for ensuring that the WAT is completed up to Z and thereafter

regularly updated.

The WAT has a chance of being completed and surviving only “as long as people still speak Afrikaans,” Dr Botha says. It is for this reason that he wishes to ensure that the status and quality of Afrikaans as a subject in schools, particularly at previously disadvantaged schools, are maintained and even elevated. Workshops at which the Electronic WAT is used and which link up with the curriculum for Afrikaans are frequently held at schools, and in addition teachers are furnished with lesson plans. The WAT team is therefore looking for a sponsor that will finance, in collaboration with the Khanya project of the Western Cape Department of Education, the installation of the Electronic WAT at over a thousand schools.

It is after all today’s learners who will determine the future of, among others, this language. This generation of Afrikaans speakers time and again show that Afrikaans is cool – as one can see from the development of the Afrikaans rock movement and the Afrikaans music channel MK (channel 324 on pay television DStv). “The people on the street win the battle and determine the pace,” Dr Botha says.

Just like water, language follows the way of the least resistance, which makes the task of the WAT team more difficult, as there are continuous renewal and change in language. To ensure that Afrikaans is conserved, the language has to be recorded and studied fully. There is an old adage that reads as follows: If the dam is full, the fountain flows. 

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ABOVE: At the WAT, women lead the way! History was made this year when women were elected chairpersons of the board of the Bureau of the WAT, as well as of the WAT Trust. Prof Magda Fourie, Vice-Rector (Teaching) of the University of Stellenbosch, is the new chairperson of the board and Ms Erna Meaker is the new chairperson of the WAT Trust. Here are Prof Magda Fourie, Dr Willem Botha, Editor-in-Chief and Executive Director of the WAT; and Ms Erna Meaker.

BELOW: Every three months the WAT hosts a word-fun event at which an Afrikaans writer, singer or narrator performs. This year Deon Meyer, Dana Snyman, Daniel Hugo, Carina Diedericks-Hugo and Nico Nel entertained the guests. Here are Dana Snyman (middle), Afrikaans writer and travel editor of the outdoor magazine *Weg!*, together with his wife Naomi and Prof Jerzy Koch of Poland, who lectures Afrikaans and Dutch at the University of Wroclaw and the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poland.

Where does one get the WAT?

The WAT is available from www.woordeboek.co.za at a subscription fee of R150 a year. The Electronic WAT (on CD) can be bought at R399. An etymology dictionary of Afrikaans (*Etimologiewoordeboek van Afrikaans* (EWA)) is available on CD as well. Visit www.wat.co.za for more information.

Fill up the dam

The WAT is dependent on the financial support of its donors. Maties alumni who wish to make a contribution to the conservation of Afrikaans may make a donation to the WAT. Visit the website of the WAT at www.wat.co.za and click on the WAT Trust, or contact Dr Botha at 021 887 3113.

Get in gear!

To ensure that Afrikaans stays relevant, the ideal is to keep on adding new words. In this way, the word “palwisselratkas” is recorded as the Afrikaans form of the English “constant velocity transmission”. Send your words to Dr Botha at wfb@sun.ac.za.