

# Afrikaans in Patagonia: voices of displacement

*A team of scholars at the University of Michigan led by **Nicholas Henriksen** explores the unique linguistic traits of a bilingual South African community in rural Patagonia, Argentina.*

**T**here are few cars on the roads of Patagonia, a thousand miles south of Buenos Aires. As we drive inland from the coastal city of Comodoro Rivadavia, we pass fields of small pumpjack oil rigs, bobbing up and down ceaselessly like hungry chickens pecking at the land. They are the only clear sign of industry in what at first appears an otherwise stagnant, barren world. Apart from these pumps and the paved road, the landscape is little changed from how it must have looked a century ago, although the journey inland was very different. Traveling by mule train without roads into unsettled land would be challenging enough. Doing so thousands of miles from home

with little knowledge of Spanish, Tehuelche, or any other language spoken in the area is daunting beyond imagination.

We are a small team of scholars studying the descendants of the settlers who in the early twentieth century were lured by the prospect of cheap land to settle in the Chubut region of Patagonia. We ride in relative comfort, but when settlers made this journey a century ago, it was across the Atlantic in steamships and overland in covered wagon and on muleback. They came after the end of the Anglo-Boer war (1899–1902), when the two remaining independent Boer republics (the South African Republic and the Orange Free State) were subjugated to British rule. In the first five years

after the war, approximately 600 Afrikaans speakers left South Africa and settled in the Patagonian areas of modern-day Comodoro Rivadavia and Sarmiento (about 150km inland from Comodoro Rivadavia), where they acquired land as part of a settler program intended to prevent resettlement by displaced native populations.

Although some brought savings, most of them made the journey with little money and few belongings, establishing themselves as sheep farmers in small Afrikaans-speaking communities that integrated little into Argentine society until recent decades. Because, at the time of their settlement, this region of Patagonia was virtually uninhabited, the community remained functionally

monolingual in Afrikaans for the first several decades of its existence. Families maintained Afrikaans cultural practices (music, food, traditional dances, etc.) and religious affiliation, remaining primarily Reformed, like their forebears in South Africa, rather than adopting the more dominant Catholic tradition of Argentina. During our drive, we discuss the ironic fact that the Boers, themselves a product of European colonialism in Southern Africa, were displaced by the British in another colonialist wave, only to wander into yet a third colonialist project in Argentina.

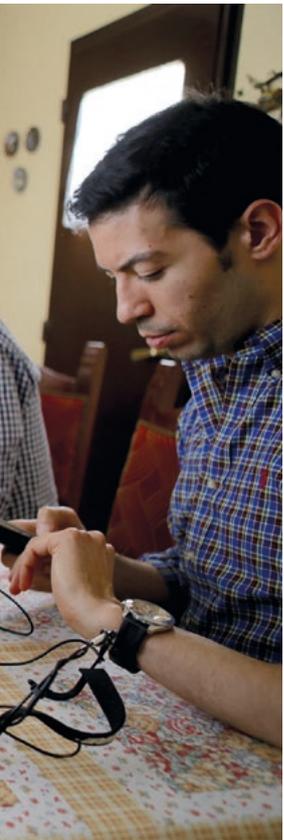
When we arrive at the town of Sarmiento, the families we come to interview – prominent names include the Dickasons, the Krugers, the Blackies and the Schlebusches – speak to us in a curious mix of Spanish and Afrikaans. As third and fourth generation descendants of the original Boer settlers, their continuous use of Afrikaans is striking, but as we quickly realise, neither their Spanish nor their Afrikaans is quite what we had expected. The former is at times inflected in accent and syntax by the influence of Afrikaans, and the latter is antiquated and formal, a relic of a former age. We are immediately surprised by how unique both of their languages are, and also how easily they can switch between the two, not mixing and code-switching, but jumping entirely between one language and another with ease. Even before we begin to collect data in a systematic way, we are excited to find that in the middle of Patagonia, virtually unstudied and unheard, there is a unique cocktail of languages not found anywhere else in the world. Suddenly what had struck us as a barren landscape now seems



rich and promising. Like the oil pumps scratching at the dusty land, we must scratch below the surface to find untapped reserves of immense value.

Yet unlike oil reserves, which can wait thousands of years before being found, these linguistic reserves are disappearing quickly. In the second half of the twentieth century, commercial oil drilling brought Spanish speakers into the region, causing a gradual shift from Afrikaans to Spanish among the settled population. Although today the descendants of the original Afrikaans-speaking settlers are still concentrated around the Patagonian municipalities of Comodoro Rivadavia and Sarmiento, and have maintained a strong cultural Afrikaans identity, the youngest generation has begun a decisive shift toward monolingual use of Spanish. The older generation (typically over sixty years of age, born between 1935–1955) acquired

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Andries Coetzee (left), Nicholas Henriksen (second right), and Lorenzo García-Amaya (right) prepare for their first data collection in Afrikaans and Spanish with Esther (Hetta) Norval (second left) and Sara (Sarie) De Langer (centre). Picture taken May 2014, © Richard Finn Gregory. Used with permission.

Afrikaans as their first language and Spanish as a second language upon entering school (varying in age from six or seven into early teenage years). Most members of this generation migrated into town in early adulthood for economic reasons, and since most married Spanish speakers and raised their children in the now Spanish-dominant towns, their children were raised with Spanish as their first language and have, at most, limited receptive abilities in Afrikaans. The oldest generation therefore represents the last speakers of Afrikaans in this community. Even though this generation acquired Spanish as a second language, most of them (other than the handful of individuals who married a fellow Afrikaans speaker) have been Spanish-dominant for the last four to six decades of their lives, and typically now have very limited opportunity to use Afrikaans in their daily lives. The exact number of Afrikaans speakers

remaining in the community is difficult to estimate. This is due to two main factors: the degree of integration with the Spanish speaking community in urban areas, and the geographical isolation of rural speakers living on large farms. Based on our fieldwork experience in Patagonia and on conversations with community members, we estimate the number of remaining fluent speakers to be no more than forty, and probably fewer than this.

The Afrikaans community in Argentina is extremely valuable for research. There are various reasons for this, not least the perspective it gives us on the earlier history of the Afrikaans language. When our speakers left South Africa, Afrikaans was not yet recognised officially as a language by the South African government. At the turn of the twentieth century, Dutch was still used as the language of government and religion, and also taught in school. Although there was some Afrikaans literature (newspapers advocating for the recognition of Afrikaans, for instance), there was no standardised orthography, and few tools to develop one – no dictionaries, no school textbooks, no Bible translations. It was only in 1925 (over two decades after the founders of our Argentine community left South Africa) that the South African government declared Afrikaans an official national language, beginning the process of standardisation and leading to a wealth of written records in Afrikaans beginning in the 1930s. Our Patagonian speakers therefore represent one of the few records we have of what Afrikaans might have been like *before* it was standardised and disseminated in writing.

Because of this unique history, the Afrikaans spoken in Patagonia today contains many archaisms, left over from an earlier era that has long since been lost in South African Afrikaans. The Patagonian community uses older words that now have a nostalgic ring to the present-day South African ear. For example, rather than *onderwyser*, the Patagonians use an older term for ‘teacher’, *leermeester*. For ‘government’ they use *goewerment* – considered an ‘Anglicism’ since the language’s standardisation – rather than the more recent Afrikaans term *regering*. At the same time, they have incorporated their own Afrikaans neologisms for things that were not yet in existence when their ancestors left South Africa. For example, the speakers in the community were all very interested to talk to us about the *lugskip* (literally ‘airship’) in which we arrived at the *lugskipstasie* (‘airship station’), but in South African Afrikaans these words do not exist. Rather, the terms *vliegtuig* (‘airplane’) and *lughawe* (‘airport’) are used.

The pronunciations of Patagonian Afrikaans also often reflect an earlier era, as this variant has not undergone the sound changes that swept through Afrikaans in South Africa during the twentieth century. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Afrikaans regularly inserted a [j] glide between the consonant [k] and certain vowels, giving pronunciations like [kjənt] for *kind* (‘child’). This [j]-glide has been all but lost in South Africa but is still strongly present in Patagonian Afrikaans. Similarly, between vowels the letter *g* is now pronounced as a voiceless fricative (like in Scottish ‘loch’) in South Africa, while some older Patagonian speakers still have

the occasional voiced plosive [g] pronunciation. The number *nege* ('nine') is therefore pronounced [niəxə] in South Africa, but [niəgə] in Patagonia. These archaisms in their language help us to date when sound changes occurred in Afrikaans – any changes that are not reflected in Patagonian Afrikaans must have happened in the twentieth century after the ancestors of the Patagonian speakers left South Africa.

Patagonian Afrikaans also differs from South African Afrikaans in ways that most likely reflect Spanish influence. In Afrikaans, most nouns form their plural by the addition of either an [-s] or [-ə] (the 'schwa' found in the last syllable of English 'banana'), while Spanish uses only [-s]. We note that our Patagonian speakers are replacing [-ə] with [-s] in many words. Instead of *trokke* ('trucks') they have *troks*, instead of *skoene* ('shoes') they have *skoens*. There is also a possible Spanish influence in the syntax. Afrikaans uses double negation: every negative sentence requires two copies of the negative particle *nie* – one usually coming immediately after the verb and a second at the end of the sentence. As in Spanish, Patagonian Afrikaans speakers often form negative sentences with only one *nie*. Instead of *Ek gaan nie plaas toe nie* ('I go not farm to not' / 'I don't go to the farm'), it is typical in Patagonian Afrikaans to say *Ek gaan nie plaas toe*.

Regarding their use of Spanish, all speakers use linguistic features typical of Argentinian (or Rioplatense) Spanish. For example, all speakers use *voseo* instead of *tuteo*, which means that they use *vos* as the second person singular pronoun instead of *tú* and also shift the stress pattern

of present tense verb forms (i.e. for a verb form such as 'you sing', these speakers say *vos cantás* rather than *tú cantas*). Also, it is very common to hear *zheismo* (with an initial voiced prepalatal [ʒ], as in the English word 'beige') or *sheismo* (with a voiceless prepalatal [ʃ], as in the English word 'ship') for the letter combinations *ll* and *y*, and weakening of syllable-final /s/. In the latter case, speakers produce an aspirated variant [h] or even delete the /s/, especially before another consonant (e.g. *este* ('this-masc.') is typically produced as [ehte]). Regarding possible influence from Afrikaans, there is quite a bit of individual variation – whereas some speakers show hardly any influence from Afrikaans in their spoken Spanish (i.e. they could pass as native monolingual speakers of Argentinian Spanish), for other speakers there is systematic evidence that Afrikaans has influenced their Spanish. The most notable phonetic influence from Afrikaans is the pronunciation of /b d g/ between vowels. Whereas Spanish produces these phonemes as 'softer' approximant sounds ([β ð ɣ], as in modern Spanish *lava*, *cada* and *agua*, respectively), Afrikaans produces /b d/ as plosives ([b d], as in the English 'berry' and 'do', respectively). Thus while some of the bilinguals, especially those in the city of Comodoro rather than in the rural area of Sarmiento, produce words such as *todo* ('all') and *globo* ('balloon') as a monolingual Spanish speaker would ([toðo] and [gloβo]), many other speakers use the telltale hard plosives they carried over from Afrikaans, saying instead [todo] and [globo]. The most telling example was, ironically, *Sudáfrica* ('South Africa'), which most pronounced as [sudafrika]

rather than [suðafrika]. Moreover, for some speakers, the use of Spanish morphosyntax shows features typical of second-language learning (and thus possible influence from Afrikaans): inconsistent gender agreement (e.g. *descendencia francés* rather than *descendencia francesa* ('French descendants')), reflexive morphology (e.g. *han casado con* rather than *se han casado* for 'they got married to'), and regularisation of verbal morphology (e.g. *venieron* as the third-person plural form of *venir* ('to come') rather than *vinieron*).

While the Afrikaans-speaking Argentine community is aware of its linguistic difference, many of the oldest generation firmly identify as Afrikaners more than Argentines. The slow incorporation of Spanish into the community was partly the result of necessity. As one community member named Ester recalls, her husband insisted she speak Spanish with their son *para que no sufra* ("so he does not suffer"). But even today, many older members of the community identify strongly with Boer cultural history. This was clearly evident at a party hosted for us by one of the older men, Martin, on the final night of our visit. At one point, Martin began singing *My Sarie Marais*, one of the most iconic Afrikaans folk songs, which tells the story of an Afrikaner man held in a British prisoner-of-war camp, dreaming of returning to his beloved. Martin grew sentimental as he belted this song out with great vigor and pride, and it was clear the song carries the same meaning for him as it does for South African Afrikaners today. But, curiously, Martin seemed unaware that the melody and the words of the song were slightly different from the standard South African version. The Boers

of Argentina have preserved their culture in exile, but it has not remained static. Their culture has grown in new directions in the soil of Patagonia, producing novel linguistic fruit that is recognisable yet also unique to its surroundings.

Over the course of our two-week stay, our research itinerary mimicked the journeys of the Boer community itself over the last century, first inland from the coast toward Sarmiento and then slowly back to the city of Comodoro Rivadavia, where Afrikaans is now spoken comparatively little. On the evening drive back to Comodoro, we again pass the oil rigs, now barely visible in the fading dusk. Working tirelessly on the dark horizon, they now seem – as one of us comments – like a symbol of the ineluctable sweep of history, and of the inseparable mechanisms of language change. As we discuss our research trip, the team members begin to voice a sense of urgency about the need to document the unique bilingualism of the Argentine Boer community before it is lost through integration into a monolingual Spanish culture. As we play back some of the collected recordings, the words of Catalina, a sunny and jovial woman in her seventies whom we interviewed along with other family members, resound with a sense of foreboding. *Ja, maar Afrikaans gaan doodloop hierso. Hy gaan doodloop, heeltemal oor die jare. Ons al hom nie meer hoor nie en ook nie sien nie. Maar dit gaan doodloop oor onse kinders is met Spaanse mense getroud* (“But Afrikaans will die out here. It will die out completely over the years. We won’t hear it anymore and we won’t see it anymore. It will die out because our children married Spanish people”).

The next morning, we catch our plane north to Buenos Aires, and as we rise over the land, which now looks bright and peaceful in the morning light, we talk about the next steps of the project. The restlessness of the group seems to disappear as we work through the interview transcripts and come across the words of Hetta, a grandmother now in her 80s, who muses in Spanish, *Si bien nosotros nos integramos completamente con los argentinos, me parece que siempre hay algo que nos queda a nosotros de nuestra infancia, de esas cosas que nos han inculcado, siempre* (“Even if we integrate completely with the Argentines, I think there will always be something that remains to us of our childhood, of those things that they taught us, always”). Her optimistic words echo those of many community members whom we interviewed. Even among third and fourth generation members in the city, even among those who have left Comodoro for Buenos Aires, there remains a clear sense that Afrikaans – *their* Afrikaans, antiquated and halting, but unique and intimately linked to Boer history – is a venerable marker of identity and a deep source of pride. One might say the same for their Spanish, which is uniquely marked by its interaction with Afrikaans. As we continue with the project, the question that looms large is how this sense of the persistence of identity through time might manifest itself in the structures of language itself. For another grandmother from the community, Katie, who lives alone in Comodoro and whose children and grandchildren in Buenos Aires do not speak Afrikaans, her unique linguistic heritage is the foundation of her identity, something kept alive in

her memories, even as the world around her continues to change: *Uno lo tiene acá en el corazoncito* (“One keeps it there in one’s innermost heart”). ¶

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**Nicholas Henriksen, Andries Coetzee, Lorenzo García-Amaya, Paulina Alberto, Victoria Langland, and Ryan Szpiech** are faculty members at the University of Michigan, where **Joshua Shapero** is currently a postdoctoral researcher. They are working together as part of the Humanities Collaboratory initiative at the University of Michigan, which is supporting this research project about the Afrikaans speakers of Patagonia (Principal Investigator: **Nicholas Henriksen**).

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## Find out more

### Books

Brian M. du Toit (1995) *Colonia Boer: An Afrikaner Settlement in Chubut, Argentina*, Edwin Mellen Press.

### Articles

Andries W. Coetzee, Lorenzo García-Amaya, Nicholas Henriksen and Daan Wissing (2015) ‘Bilingual Speech Rhythm: Spanish-Afrikaans in Patagonia’, in The Scottish Consortium for ICPhS 2015 (editors) *Proceedings of the 18th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences*, The University of Glasgow.

Nicholas Henriksen, Lorenzo García-Amaya, Andries W. Coetzee and Daan Wissing (forthcoming) ‘Language Contact in Patagonia: Durational Control in the Acquisition of Spanish and Afrikaans Phonology’, in Fernando Martínez-Gil and Sonia Colina (editors) *Handbook of Spanish Phonology*, Routledge.

### Online

Visit the project website at the University of Michigan – [umich.edu/~aacollab](http://umich.edu/~aacollab) – which profiles the project’s development of a multimedia archive preserving the language use of the Argentine Afrikaner community – [aacollabarchive.humin.lsa.umich.edu/omeka](http://aacollabarchive.humin.lsa.umich.edu/omeka)

See also the award-winning documentary film about the community, *The Boers at the End of the World/Boere op die Aardsdrempel*, available at [vimeo.com/ondemand/boersfilm](http://vimeo.com/ondemand/boersfilm)