

## Mens moet maar aanpas – Recent changes in Afrikaans generic pronoun use

Many Germanic languages have, and some had, a generic pronoun that derived from a noun meaning "human", like German, Swedish and Norwegian *man* and Dutch *men*. In early Afrikaans, the inherited Dutch form *men* was still used, but at the time of the initial standardisation of Afrikaans early in the twentieth century, it had been largely replaced by a new Afrikaans innovation: (*'n*) *mens* [literally: (a) human]. Since then, the Dutch form *men* has disappeared from Afrikaans completely.

Similar to Dutch and English, Afrikaans also permits the use of second person pronouns as generic pronouns, such as *jy* and *jou* [you sg.] and to some extent the formal equivalent *u*. Sometimes, (*'n*) *mens* and *jy* or *jou* co-occur, as in the examples:

(1) 'n Mens kan mos nie vir jou eie oë en ore sê hulle bedrieg jou nie.

[One cannot tell your own eyes and ears that they are deceiving you.]

(2) Mens word seker maar in die hel gestraf wanneer  jy eers dood is.

[One will probably be punished in hell when you are dead.]

During the past century, there has been changes regarding the frequencies of *mens* vs. *'n mens*, as well as the frequency of *jy* and *jou* used as generic pronouns.

Regarding another aspect of Afrikaans generic pronoun use, there has also been changes in the use of gendered third person pronouns as generic pronouns: the male third person singular *hy* and *hom* is on the decline in the written Standard, while the female third person singular *sy* and *haar* is on the rise, albeit with certain constraints. Combination forms such as *hy/sy* [he/she] or *hy of sy* [he and she] and *hom/haar* [him/her] or *hom of haar* [him or her] also recently gained more traction than before, although it is still not particularly frequent.

All of these changes, some of which are quite significant, warrant an in-depth examination of the profile of Afrikaans generic pronouns, how it has changed in the century since initial standardisation, and how it is used today.

This paper will present findings based primarily on the analysis of corpora of written Standard Afrikaans from the decades 1911-1920, 1941-1950, 1971-1980 and 2001-2010, which are all similar in size and categories of text types. Some spoken data

will also be compared to the two more recent written corpora as far as it is viable. Meaningful explanations for the significant changes will be attempted, involving theory on language change, other recent grammatical changes in Afrikaans as well as the relevant socio-cultural context of the use of Afrikaans. Where relevant, the recommendations or prescriptions and proscriptions of prescriptivists will also be taken into account, especially when considering possible differences between formal and informal language use, and written and spoken language use.