

Afrikaans in Belgium: Ghent Centre for Afrikaans and the Study of South Africa

YVES T'SJOEN

Ghent University / Stellenbosch University

Yves.TSjoen@ugent.be

Since the academic year 2017-2018, the decision of Ghent University's Executive Board has been in force, which stipulates that a recognised Chair South Africa: Languages, Literatures, Culture and Society must be organised officially. In view of the importance of the Chair for the cooperation between South African and European researchers, we outline objectives, past history and perspectives below.

The establishment of an academic Chair 'South Africa: Languages, Literatures, Culture and Society' is based on Ghent University's scholarly research and academic teaching in the field of Afrikaans and the study of South Africa in a multilingual and multicultural context. The Ghent Centre for Afrikaans and the Study of South Africa, a university partnership established in the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy in 2013 and a research group from 2016, facilitates international seminars, scientific colloquia and guest lectures in the field of Afrikaans language and literature in a multilingual perspective. In addition, the board members of the university research group apply their expertise to offer the academic teaching of Afrikaans at home and abroad and for cultural associations. The research centre now plays a coordinating role at European level and brings together researchers working in the same field.

The establishment of the position contributes significantly to the academic and social recognition of the diverse scientific and cultural activities undertaken by Ghent University for the study and teaching of Afrikaans and, by extension, of South Africa in an intercultural context.

The Chair focuses explicitly on the multilingual and multicultural context of South Africa. In addition to Afrikaans and English, the Chair also focuses on Bantu languages. The research group is, by definition,

research-related (organisation of symposia, workshops, application of projects and research mandates) and has focused on Afrikaans since its inception and in view of its title (language and literature, social, political, cultural and artistic history of South Africa). Members of the research group will simultaneously address topics such as language politics and language policy in South Africa, corpus linguistics and lexicography relating to South African languages, theatre and cultural discourse in South Africa, as well as the challenges of multilingualism in South Africa from a political, social and historical perspective. The professor holding the Chair specialises in Afrikaans linguistics and literature and/or in one of the fields that are relevant to the expertise of the research group.

In view of the nature of the academic appointment, the position associated with Ghent University's Chair is focused on teaching. The professor offers guest lectures, engages in social services (lectures for scientific and cultural associations) and makes the expertise available to add more depth to academic teaching and to promote knowledge of the multilingual and multicultural South African context. The structurally conceived chair, established for at least five years from October 2017, adds considerable value to the university research group's operating radius in Ghent, given its focus on academic teaching, social services and scientific research.

The establishment of the South Africa Chair is the product of a long process. For more than a decade, starting from the academic year 2007-2008, the course unit Afrikaans: Language and Literature has been offered in the third bachelor year of the Linguistics & Literature and (Afrikaans) Languages and Cultures programmes. Every academic year, between 30 and 60 students at Ghent University include the course in their programme. A proportion of them prepare a master's thesis in the field of Afrikaans linguistics and literature. Since 2018-2019 the university also schedules a master course entitled Languages and Literatures of South Africa. The courses are run by university lecturers from the Departments of Literary Studies, Linguistics and Languages and Cultures, with the participation of scholarly researchers in history, theatre studies and translation scholars.

The Ghent Centre for Afrikaans and the Study of South Africa was founded in 2013. In the preceding years, the scholars involved from Ghent University organised International Afrikaans Seminars. These seminars, in which lecturers from South Africa taught at the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy for one week, took place in 2011, 2012 and 2013. The initiative was taken over by Luc Renders (University of Hasselt), who, together with his wife, organised the seminars for ten years. Given the public reception of the seminars and the recognition of the initiative in South Africa and Europe – with speakers and participants from, for example, the Netherlands, Poland, the Czech Republic and Great Britain – it was then decided to set up a research centre.

For the past three years (2014-2016), the Centre has been organising international and well-attended

conferences on Afrikaans language and literature and the history of South Africa. The first symposium marked the institutional honorary doctorate that was awarded on 3 December 2014 to the South African/French writer and painter Breyten Breytenbach by the university community of Ghent, through rector prof Anne de Paepe. The day after the ceremony, the two-day study *Die taal se stiltes* was organised in the auditorium. In the subsequent years, scholarly study days also took place in Ghent. In October 2019, the sixth colloquium took place with the literary focus on Breyten Breytenbach and linguistic attention for Afrikaans language variation. In addition to the symposia, there are cultural activities, such as the establishment in the faculty of the Reading Circle for Afrikaans Literature and the South Africa Film Evenings. Ghent Centre's board members actively participate in the activities of the Africa Platform of the Ghent University Association, the regional platform that unites the university's Africa expertise in several academic disciplines with that of the associated colleges of higher education. Starting in 2014, the Africa Platform will organise a Mandela Lecture, offered by Breytenbach in 2019, and will coordinate an interfaculty steering committee that will reflect on, and formulate proposals for, interdisciplinary cooperation with South Africa. In this way, the activities of the Africa Platform and the Centre for Afrikaans are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

In the academic year 2016-2017, in response to a call from the Sarton Committee, the research centre supported the nomination of Steward van Wyk. On the eve of the colloquium in October 2016, Van Wyk (University of Wes-Kaapland) received the 2016 Sarton Medal.

The centre's organisation is based on four pillars. Researchers who sit on the board are affiliated to six departments: Literature; Linguistics, Languages and Cultures; Art; Music and Theatre Studies; History; and Translation, Interpretation and Communication. The list of members and associated members, which can be consulted on the website, shows that the centre meets with broad support both within the faculty and in the (inter)national academic field (www.afrikaans.ugent.be).

Until 2014, Ghent University participated in a ten-year VLIR-UOS project, in which the volume of research within the University of Wes-Kaapland (UWK, Bellville-Kaapstad) was increased. In recent years, Ghent University has also invested in academic and general-cultural networks, as well as in bilateral framework agreements with universities in South Africa (UWK, Stellenbosch University, North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus), Pretoria, UNISA, University of the Free State (Bloemfontein)). The inter-university partnership enables lecturers to conduct research and offer lectures at associated academic institutions. Within this international mobility between Belgium and South Africa, students are privileged partners. Every year, Ghent University sends students and lecturers to South Africa. By the same token, South African academics and (honours) students are

given the opportunity to conduct research, to give guest lectures and to attend courses at Ghent University. It has been agreed with the Dutch Language Union (Taalunie – The Hague) that from now on, South African students are entitled to an allowance for study stays in the Low Countries (one semester). As of July 2017, Ghent University also facilitates the South African Youth Project. Together with the University Centre for Language Education (Dutch abbreviation: Universitair Centrum Talenonderwijs), the Ghent Centre offers a week of lectures and workshops in collaboration with Ghent students who have followed the course Afrikaans language and literature (first semester). The summer course for South African students is financed by the Flemish-South African Association and the Dutch Language Union.

The establishment of the Chair ‘South Africa: Languages, Literatures, Culture and Society’ is rooted in the outlined teaching and research context. The position strengthens the academic renown of scientific research and academic teaching at Ghent University in the field of South Africa from a multilingual and intercultural point of view. The Chair meets the objectives of the Stichting Zuid-Afrikahuis Nederland (Dutch South Africa House Foundation in Amsterdam), with which the Ghent Centre has been working closely for several years now. Since November 2016, for example, teachers and students pay an annual working visit to the South Africa House at Keizersgracht in Amsterdam, co-funded by the Ghent Centre and the Flemish Government Representation in the Netherlands, where they are treated to a guided tour in the library and the archives and attend a lecture. At the University of Amsterdam, a chair in South African history, literature and culture has been held for some time now. This chair exists with the financial support of the South Africa House. Initiating a chair with its own accents at a Belgian university adds significant complementary value. Not only is the position of visiting professor vacated annually in Ghent, so that experts from various disciplines can introduce the necessary stimuli for teaching and research for students and researchers alike. In addition, for the Ghent Chair, the emphasis is on language and literature rooted in a socio-cultural, artistic and political context, and renowned academics are invited to fill this Chair, as are literary writers and translators in South Africa (Daniel Hugo 2018, Bettina Wyngaard 2018, Jolyn Phillips, postponed until 2021). Interaction and consultation with, and participation of, academics in the South African field are crucial for the success of the Ghent Chair.

In the meantime, Ghent University has manifested itself as the institution where the expertise in the field of South Africa study outside South Africa has developed in the broadest sense of the word. The fact that a Belgian academic institution organises such a chair is important for supporting Afrikaans as a language of science and culture in South Africa. In addition, since Belgium has no colonial history in South Africa, academic support for Afrikaans is free from ideological prejudices. However, this is not a chair ‘Afrikaans’.

The study of Afrikaans and, by extension, the multilingual context of South Africa is, by definition, done in a social context. Afrikaans language and literature is studied and taught at Ghent University, as at other universities and (academic) study centres in the Low Countries (Amsterdam, Antwerp, Leiden) and also outside the Dutch-speaking region in Europe (e.g. Budapest, Cambridge, Essen, Olomouc, Poznan, Prague, Vienna). Ghent University has taken the initiative of creating a meeting place and, thus, a platform for consultation between these institutions and actors (researchers, lecturers and students). There is sound cooperation with these universities and departments. At the University of Amsterdam, since the retirement of prof Ena Jansen (2016), the emphasis has been on the history, literature and culture of South Africa (in particular, Afrikaans). Since 2017, Margriet van der Waal (University of Groningen) has been appointed extraordinary professor. At Leiden University, after the retirement of Eep Francken, modules are being taught as of 2016 under a cooperation agreement between the Suider-Afrikaanse Vereniging vir Neerlandistiek (SAVN) and Leiden University. Ghent University works in tandem with colleagues in Leiden, Amsterdam and Antwerp (where South African guest lecturers from North-West University are active) and is involved in the exchange of guest lecturers via the SAVN. In this way, the Ghent Centre initiates an inter-university axis in the Low Countries (Ghent-Antwerp-Leiden-Amsterdam-Groningen) in order to broaden and deepen research and teaching. Joint PhDs and academic activities, such as workshops and joint study days, are being organised.

Given the unique position of the Ghent Centre for Afrikaans and the Study of South Africa in a European perspective, along with its coordinating and facilitating role, the establishment of a chair contributes to the many undertakings on the international forum concerning Afrikaans and in a far broader sense multilingualism in South Africa.

The chair is established (initially) for a period of five years and is vacated every year. Every academic year, in the first semester when the Bachelor's course Afrikaans: Language and Literature and the newly established Master's course Languages and Literatures of South Africa (from academic year 2018-2019 onwards) are taught, the advisory board nominates a scholarly researcher who holds the position of chairholder and guest professor for three months. He/she is involved in the organisation of the annual conference at Ghent University (financed by the Neerlandistiekfonds (South Africa), Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) and the faculty) and gives a keynote lecture at the start of the symposium (Hein Willemse 2017, Wannie Carstens 2018 and Louise Viljoen 2019). Due to the pandemic in 2020 we were not able to invite the lecturer who was appointed by the Chair advisory board and the faculty. Quentin Williams (UWK) will be the next Chair (postponed till the academic year 2021-2022). Dr Martina Vitackova is the guest lecturer in October-December 2020, teaching Afrikaans language and presenting, together with visiting scholar dr Marni Bonthuys

(UWK), two guest lectures for Ghent master's students. In addition, the lecturer gives a series of guest lectures for students and is invited for lectures at the universities of Leiden and Amsterdam, the Flemish Parliament and at the Royal Academy for Dutch Language and Literature (KANTL). With regard to the South Africa study, the inter-university axis provides for two-way traffic in the Low Countries. Leiden University invites colleagues and students of the modules to attend the activities within the framework of the Ghent Chair. Similar agreements will be made with the University of Amsterdam as soon as the guest lecturer is appointed. Furthermore, it is obvious that in the near future, more joint research will be undertaken and the basis will be laid for new research perspectives and projects.

The board of the Ghent Centre is responsible for the nomination of the candidate who qualifies for the guest lecturer position. An advisory board has been set up of stakeholders who have the necessary academic expertise in the field of the study of Afrikaans and South Africa's multilingual and multicultural context in South Africa, the Netherlands and Belgium.

The Chair is financed by private sponsorship and the following institutions: Afriforum, Afrikaanse Taalraad (African Language Council), Algemeen Nederlands Verbond (General Dutch Alliance), Afrikaanse Taal, kultuur, kennis en kreatiwiteit Suid Afrika (ATKV) (Afrikaans language, culture, knowledge and creativity South Africa), Fonds Neerlandistiek (Dutch Studies Foundation), Stichting Zuid-Afrikahuis Nederland, Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns and the Vlaamse Zuid-Afrikaanse Vereniging (Flemish South African Association). Numerous organisations in the Netherlands and abroad offer support in many ways and ensure broad support for the chair.

www.afrikaans.ugent.be

With thanks to Timothy Coleman, Jacques van Keymeulen and Annelies Verdoolaege.

Editor's note: In 2020, Quentin Williams was elected as the fourth Distinguished Chair in Afrikaans (2020/2021) at the Ghent Centre for Afrikaans and the Study of South Africa at Ghent University. Dr Williams is a member of the stilet.digital editorial collective (previously: editorial board) in the term 2019-2022. stilet.digital is proud to highlight the dual roles dr Williams is situated in. WS & EB.