

Freedom Day reflections: language, expression and responsibility

Spiderman hit the nail on the head when he said something like “with great power comes great responsibility”. The same applies to freedom, as Eleanor Roosevelt rightly said: With freedom comes responsibility.

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While we're living, learning and thriving (and, well, sometimes, surviving) in a democratic, multilingual South Africa, we also have the responsibility to grapple with the concept of freedom and the responsibilities that true freedom brings with it, particularly when we reflect on what Freedom Day, celebrated on 27 April, means to us.

Freedom of expression

According to Article 19, an international think-do organisation concerning itself with freedom of expression, “freedom of expression enables dialogue, builds understanding, and increases public knowledge”. We as the Language Centre agree: Being able to share ideas and information freely makes us all smarter and helps our communities thrive.

As South Africans we have the benefit of many hard-won freedoms in our country today, not least the freedom of communicating in our mother language or a chosen language. More than that, there is space for many voices and many opinions – space to be heard.

What does freedom mean to us at the Stellenbosch University (SU) Language Centre?

To us, freedom is not merely a concept; it is a guiding principle that shapes our interaction with the world around us as well as our approach to learning and teaching. It begins with freedom of expression – the fundamental right to articulate our thoughts, emotions and ideas in a language of our choosing. In the modules, workshops and short courses that we offer, we strive to create spaces where participants feel free and safe to express themselves authentically, to ask questions, and to engage in meaningful dialogue with those around them. We also endeavour to create such spaces across campus with our language and interpreting services.

Creativity

Freedom also encompasses the liberty to be creative – to explore new linguistic landscapes, experiment with different modes of expression, and push the boundaries of traditional language conventions. We encourage those with whom we collaborate – students, participants and clients alike – to unleash their imagination and harness the power of language to convey their unique perspectives and experiences, be it in isiXhosa, Afrikaans, English or SA Sign Language.

Freedom is not only the absence of external constraints but also the presence of enabling creative conditions that allow us to realise and express our full potential. This means that we need to create inclusive environments where diverse voices and languages are not just heard and seen, but welcomed. It comes down to fostering and encouraging a culture of tolerance and respect, and promoting fair access to opportunities and resources, not least when it comes to language – essentially a multilingual mindset. At SU and the Language Centre, this for example translates to having access to interpreting services during lectures as well as the opportunity to hear many languages, both local and international languages, used freely on campus and in our communities.

A very human longing

The concept of freedom contains within itself our fundamental human longing for autonomy, dignity and self-expression. It is a dynamic and evolving principle that lies at the heart of our human experience, driving progress, justice and the pursuit of a more just and equal world. A world where all voices have a place, and all stories can be told and appreciated. In short – a multilingual and multicultural world.

Join us at the Language Centre as we embrace the transformative power of language and learning from the authentic voices of those around us, on campus, in our classrooms and in our homes – also about freedom.

Feel the freedom!

This piece is also available in [Afrikaans](#) and [isiXhosa](#).

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