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Department:
Sport, Arts and Culture
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OPEN CALL FOR PROPOSALS: HUMAN LANGUAGE TECHNOLOGY PROJECTS 2025 – 2028

Proposals are hereby requested for projects in Human Language Technologies (HLT) for the development of innovative projects that seek to integrate language and technology in all the official South African languages.

Funding is available for projects over a period of one to three years for the Financial Years 2025/26, 2026/27, 2027/28 and 2028/29.

Proposals should cover the following:

- Projects that develop language systems or applications that promote multilingual and multimodal communication in the public sector.
- Projects that address language barriers affecting service delivery in government, healthcare, legal, and educational contexts.
- Projects that improve access to information and services for speakers of African or marginalised languages through inclusive language technologies for the vision and hearing impairments.
- Projects that are complementary to the Use of Official Languages Act (Act 12 of 2012).
- Projects that produce assistive devices for people with disabilities.
- Projects that provide solutions to IT related challenges.
- Projects that develop resources that contribute to the Basic Language Resource Kits (BLaRKs) for South African languages.

Factors that will be considered when evaluating the proposals include the following:

- The practical importance and potential impact of the proposed project in terms of its support of the implementation of the Use of Official Languages Act.
- Scientific/Development track record of applicant(s).
- Contribution to the development of HLTs for all official languages of SA.
- The alignment of the project to the Intellectual Property Rights from Publicly Financed Research and Development Act No. 51 of 2008 ("IPR Act"), in terms of the applicant's intentions to commercialise and/or use the project's outputs to the benefit of the citizens of South Africa.
- Incorporation of applicable international standards & best practices.
- Releasing the basic resources developed under open-source licence to licence to the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR).
- Evaluation of project outputs by an independent party to ensure quality and adherence to international best practices.
- Value for money where cost consideration of the whole project life, quality in meeting a specification which is fit for purpose and sufficient to meet the public's requirements.



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Proposals should clearly state the approach that will be taken, and the following should be highlighted:

- Tasks to be undertaken;
- Milestones and deliverables;
- Licensing: details of outputs that will be released to the DSAC to be distributed under an open-source licence, and outputs that will not be released into the public domain.
- Costing and budget;
- Management and governance; and
- Evaluation processes of the deliverables.

Successful applicants will be required to enter a contract with the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture.

The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture reserves the right to, within reason, request changes to shortlisted proposals. Such requests may be directed at, amongst others, specifications, deliverables, budgets, and evaluation criteria of project deliverables.

The Department is not bound to accept any of the proposals submitted and reserves the right to annul the call process and reject all proposals at any time prior to funding.

All applications to be submitted to: HLTCFP@dsac.gov.za

The deadline for submission of funding applications is **15 January 2025 at 12h00**

Enquiries may be directed to Romeo Mohare, email addresses: romeom@dsac.gov.za Tel: 012 441 3871 (during office hours).



Template: Call for Proposals for HLT projects

Executive summary

Describe the objective of the project in layman's terms. List the main deliverables, duration and total cost.

Project motivation

What is the problem statement and the project's objective, in terms of its research and development aims.

Relationship to existing research and development

What relevant work have you or your peers undertaken prior to this proposed project?

Alignment with DSAC/HLT programme

Explain how the project is relevant to the DSAC/HLT programme's priorities, these being:

- Complementarity to the Use of Official Languages Act
- Development of applications that have the potential to make a considerable impact. This could be by demonstrating the potential of HLT in service delivery, creating awareness of HLT, or offering a service to vulnerable communities
- Development of resources that contribute to the Basic Language Resource Kits for SA languages, and release under open-source licences.

Approach and workplan

Elaborate on all activities, their timeframes and their associated milestones or outputs. Approaches, methods and techniques should also be described.

The narrative should be concluded with a summary in the following table:

Deliverable	Description	Prerequisite item	Target date (no. of months from starting date)
E.g. Evaluation plan	A document describing how each output will be evaluated. Signed by project leader, and DSAC's HLT unit.	N/A	E.g.: 3 months

Evaluation

DSAC-funded projects are required to have deliverables evaluated by an independent party. Our preference is that such evaluation be done by the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR), but each project is different, and we will consider appropriate alternative plans. This requires you to come up with quality criteria for deliverables, e.g. accuracy or error rates.

Explain what the quality criteria for each of the outputs are and how this project's outputs will be evaluated to ensure that project deliverables meet these quality criteria. You may opt to incorporate this under "Approach and workplan".



Potential impact on Human Capacity Development (HCD)

Outline the impact this project may have on HCD in terms of training and development for undergraduate students and post-graduate students in HLT and related fields. Also elaborate on the involvement of participants from various disciplines, for example linguistics. Finally, give an indication of the project's intention regarding redress and equity in terms of race and gender.

Potential outcomes

Indicate the relevance of the project, in relation to its contribution to research and building the knowledge base, and the exploitability of outputs: how and by whom will these be used, and who stands to benefit.

Scientific and/or development track record of the applicant

What qualifies you to undertake this project and gives DSAC the assurance that the project will be executed successfully in terms of responsible utilisation of the funds, adherence to the project plan and timely delivery of the appropriate quality outputs?

Management and governance

Explain what systems and support are in place to properly support the project and enable it to succeed. Also specifically deal with expenditure and accounting (how will you produce financial statements and audited financial reports?), project management (who will keep the project on track, on time and within budget?), infrastructure (office space, computer equipment, IT support, data backups etc), intellectual property rights management and ethical matters (if applicable, such as consent).

Release and/or exploitation

The Intellectual Property Rights from Publicly Financed Research and Development Act No. 51 of 2008 dictates that the IP emanating from DSAC-funded projects be "identified, protected, utilised and commercialised for the benefit of the people of the Republic, whether it be for a social, economic, military or any other benefit".

How will this requirement be satisfied in this project: What will happen to the project outputs at the end of the project? Are there plans to exploit them commercially? Are there outputs that will be released under open-source licences?

Note that the word "commercialised" should not necessarily be interpreted to mean that open-source work is prohibited. Release of outputs under open-source licences is encouraged and keenly supported. There are cases where open-source release makes more sense, and others where there is a strong argument in favour of keeping it proprietary.

Standards and best practices

What international standards and best practices will be referred to in the development work? ISO, for example, actively develops standards for language resource development and management, and there are numerous standards applicable to HLT. How will you ensure that where applicable there is alignment with international standards and practices, interoperability etc.?

Budget

Give a detailed breakdown of the project costs per year. Also indicate overheads and indirect costs if applicable. In addition to the above, give an alternative breakdown, namely cost per deliverable.



Referees

Provide a list of referees whom DSAC can contact to get more details about your experience on language technology related projects.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. WHAT IS HUMAN LANGUAGE TECHNOLOGY?

Human language technology (HLT) is a field that uses computer science, linguistics, and other disciplines to enable computers to process human language:

What it does:

HLT allows people to interact with automated systems using their own language, whether spoken, written or signed. It can also be used to translate texts and documents.

How it works:

HLT combines areas like computer speech recognition, natural language processing, and text-based information retrieval. It also incorporates artificial intelligence, machine learning, and statistics.

2. WHAT IS *THE USE OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT*?

The Use of Official Languages Act 12 of 2012 regulates and monitors the use of official languages by the national government for government purposes.

The act also aims to:

- Promote equal treatment and esteem for the official languages of the country
- Ensure equitable access to national government services and information
- Promote good language management to meet the needs of the public and for efficient public service administration

The act requires national departments, national public enterprises, and national public entities to adopt a language policy. It also establishes the functions and structure of a National Language Unit, as well as language units within these entities.

3. WHAT ARE THE INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS FROM PUBLICLY FINANCED RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT ACT?

Section 2(1) of this act reads as follows: "The object of this Act is to make provision that intellectual property emanating from publicly financed research and development is identified, protected, utilised and commercialised for the benefit of the people of the Republic, whether it be for a social, economic, military or any other benefit "utilised" and commercialised" in this context should not be interpreted narrowly. On a case-by-case basis it should be determined whether pure commercial exploitation or unrestricted open-source release would serve South Africans best. In some cases, it is preferable that intellectual property be protected from exploitation by international players, to nurture the local economy and ensure affordability for South African users. In other cases, an open-source release will maximise uptake. As a rule of thumb, the DSAC would like to see that a project releases reusable language resources and core technologies into the open domain so that other researchers and developers can use them to do other research and products for the benefit of South African languages, while there is an undertaking to exploit final products in some way that ultimately benefits South Africa best.



How a project proposal responds to this act is an important aspect in the evaluation and awarding of funding in this programme.

4. WHAT ARE BASIC LANGUAGE RESOURCE KITS?

A BLARK is the basic set of language resources required to do any useful research and development. This includes text and speech corpora and core technologies such as taggers and text-to-speech systems.

For more information on BLARKs and the South African position, please consult the following articles:

- Krauwer, S. 2003. The Basic Language Resource Kit (BLARK) as the First Milestone for the Language Resources Roadmap. Internet: <http://www.elsnet.org/dox/krauwer-specom2003.pdf>
- Sharma Grover, A., Van Huyssteen, G.B. & Pretorius, M.W. 2009. The South African Human Language Technologies Audit. Internet: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/13273429/GepubliseerdeArtikels/ArticleRESSharmaGroverVanHuyssteenPretorius2011a.9.9.9.GBVH.2011-06.28.Final.pdf>
- Sharma Grover, A., Van Huyssteen, G.B. & Pretorius, M.W. 2010. An HLT profile of the official South African languages. Internet: <http://aflat.org/files/grover.pdf>

5. WHAT IS THE SOUTH AFRICAN CENTRE FOR DIGITAL LANGUAGE RESOURCES?

The South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR) is a national centre supported by the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) as part of the new South African Research Infrastructure Roadmap (SARIR).

SADiLaR has an enabling function, with a focus on all official languages of South Africa, supporting research and development in the domains of language technologies and language-related studies in the humanities and social sciences. The Centre supports the creation, management and distribution of digital language resources, as well as applicable software, which are freely available for research purposes through the Language Resource Catalogue.

