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Reclaiming Academic Autonomy in South African Higher Education: Decolonial Multilingualism as Counter-Hegemonic Praxis against Neoliberal Market Forces

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Abstract

South African higher education is entrenched in neoliberal market forces that commodify knowledge, reinforce linguistic hierarchies, and perpetuate colonial epistemic dominance. Despite constitutional and policy commitments to multilingualism and decolonisation, English remains the dominant language in research and teaching, marginalising Indigenous African languages. The study examined the role of decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic strategy for reclaiming academic autonomy in South African higher education. Drawing on decolonial theory, critical pedagogy, linguistic justice, and translanguaging, the research employed a systematic literature review and qualitative document analysis. Institutional language policies from four public universities, national policy frameworks, and activist reports were analysed to examine the gap between commitments to multilingualism and everyday academic practice. Findings reveal that neoliberal funding models and global validation systems restrict the institutionalisation of Indigenous languages, reinforcing English hegemony. However, grassroots activism, translanguaging pedagogies, and alternative publishing platforms have created spaces of resistance that advance epistemic justice and diversify knowledge production. These initiatives demonstrate how multilingual practices can disrupt colonial and neoliberal hierarchies while expanding academic inclusion and reclaiming academic autonomy in South African universities. The study contributes to debates on language justice, decolonisation, and higher education transformation by emphasising the need for systemic reforms that acknowledge the global utility of English and institutionalise African languages as equal academic mediums.

Keywords: academic autonomy, counter-hegemonic praxis, decolonial multilingualism, English hegemony, language justice, neoliberalism, South African higher education

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Introduction

South African higher education operates at the complex intersection of historical colonial legacies, ongoing neoliberal reforms, and contemporary struggles for linguistic and epistemic justice. Since the end of apartheid, universities in South Africa have been tasked with transforming their structures and curricula to reflect the country's rich linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as to redress the inequalities entrenched by decades of racial segregation and colonial domination (Jansen, 2017). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) contended that central to this transformation is the commitment to multilingualism and decolonisation, which are seen as critical to reclaiming academic autonomy and encouraging inclusive knowledge production that is responsive to the needs of historically marginalised communities. However, these aspirations are increasingly challenged by the pervasive influence of neoliberal market forces that commodify knowledge, enforce linguistic hierarchies, and reproduce colonial epistemic dominance within higher education institutions (Akala, 2021; Munyaradzi, 2024). Hence, there is a need to explore decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic tool for reclaiming academic autonomy in South African higher education.

The language question in South African higher education is deeply rooted in colonial and apartheid histories that systematically privileged English and Afrikaans while marginalising Indigenous African languages. Kamwangamalu (2016) argued that colonial language policies, beginning with British colonial rule, promoted Anglicisation as a political strategy to consolidate power, epitomised by the 1825 policy establishing English as the first official language and the 1907 Smuts Education Act, which mandated English instruction. That Act set the foundation for linguistic hierarchies that excluded African languages from formal education and intellectual discourse. During apartheid (1948–1994), language policies reinforced segregation and disenfranchisement, with Afrikaans and English dominating education and administration, while African languages were relegated to inferior status and limited to the homeland or "Bantu" education systems (Madiba, 2024). The apartheid regime's language policies functioned as instruments of control and oppression, limiting access to higher education for Black South Africans and suppressing Indigenous languages as academic languages.

Post 1994, democratic South Africa adopted a constitutional framework recognising 11 official languages, including nine Indigenous African languages, signalling a commitment to multilingualism and social inclusion. The Language Policy for Higher Education (Council on Higher Education, 2002) aimed to redress past imbalances by promoting the development of African languages as academic languages and fostering multilingualism in universities. However, this policy has been criticised for its vagueness, lack of implementation, and reliance on conditional clauses, such as "where reasonably practicable," which have limited its transformative impact (Nkomo, 2023). Simultaneously, neoliberal reforms have reshaped higher education governance, emphasising market-driven priorities such as global competitiveness, efficiency, and commodification of knowledge. According to Munyaradzi (2024), these reforms have reinforced English hegemony given that English-language outputs are privileged in international rankings and funding systems, thereby perpetuating colonial linguistic hierarchies under new economic forces.

Currently, South African higher education policy and practice continue to be shaped by the overlap of coloniality and neoliberalism. While official policies endorse multilingualism and the development of Indigenous languages, institutional practices prioritise English as the lingua franca of instruction, research, and administration (Emsley & Modiba, 2024). This dominance is reinforced by neoliberal imperatives that value English for its global market utility, marginalising African languages to symbolic or peripheral roles. Universities struggle to translate policy commitments into practice due to resource constraints, lack of institutional will, and deep-seated attitudes favouring English, resulting in what scholars describe as declarations without implementation (Nkomo, 2023). The persistence of English or Afrikaans dominance

reflects a continuity of colonial language ideologies sustained by neoliberal market logic that together, limit epistemic diversity and academic autonomy.

The marginalisation of Indigenous languages in higher education is not merely a linguistic issue but also an epistemological one. Language is deeply intertwined with knowledge production, identity, and power. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argued that the privileging of English as the language of academia reinforces a colonial epistemic order that devalues African languages and knowledge systems, effectively silencing alternative epistemologies and limiting the scope of academic inquiry. This epistemic violence perpetuates inequalities and hinders the development of a truly inclusive and socially just higher education system that reflects South Africa's linguistic and cultural diversity (Heugh, 2018). Consequently, this raises questions about academic autonomy, understood here as the capacity of scholars and institutions to pursue teaching, learning, and research independent of political, economic, and market pressures. In the current climate, such autonomy is curtailed not only by state agendas but also by global neoliberal pressures that incentivise conformity and discourage risk-taking in pedagogy and language policy.

Against this backdrop, decolonial multilingualism emerges as a counter-hegemonic praxis to centre African languages and epistemologies within academia for resisting linguistic imperialism and reclaiming educational sovereignty (Stroud & Kerfoot, 2021). Decolonial multilingualism involves not only the recognition of multiple languages within academic spaces but also the transformation of pedagogical practices, research methodologies, and institutional policies to centre Indigenous languages and epistemologies (Mbembe, 2016). Reclaiming academic autonomy through decolonial multilingualism necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of what constitutes knowledge, language, and academic excellence in South Africa. It calls for moving beyond tokenistic policy commitments toward substantive institutional transformation that values Indigenous languages and epistemologies as central to knowledge production and social justice (Heugh, 2018). This transformative agenda challenges the neoliberal commodification of knowledge and seeks to create a higher education system that is truly inclusive, diverse, and reflective of South Africa's rich linguistic and cultural heritage.

This study investigates decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic strategy for reclaiming academic autonomy in South African higher education under neoliberal constraints. It critically examines institutional language policies, government frameworks, and grassroots interventions through the lenses of decolonial theory, critical pedagogy, and linguistic justice. The analysis clarifies how multilingualism functions as a decolonial intervention and identifies the challenges it encounters in academic contexts. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on decolonisation, language policy, and the transformation of higher education in postcolonial settings

Research Problem

The English dominance in South African higher education undermines efforts to promote equity, multilingualism, and epistemic justice. Despite constitutional recognition of 11 official languages and policy commitments to promote multilingualism, English remains the dominant language of teaching, research, and administration (Council on Higher Education, 2002). According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), this linguistic hegemony entrenches colonial legacies, marginalises Indigenous African languages, and restricts the possibilities for diverse forms of knowledge production. The privileging of English, while often justified in the name of efficiency and global competitiveness, reproduces epistemic hierarchies that constrain academic autonomy and perpetuate exclusion (Mbembe, 2016).

Despite the challenges, English functions as the international language of business, higher education, science, and digital communication (Phillipson, 2018). It provides individuals with access to global academic networks, economic opportunities, and cultural exchange. In an era where artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models are reshaping knowledge production, the limited presence of South African Indigenous languages in digital platforms highlights the practical challenges of decolonising language use

(Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021). The ability to use English fluently thus remains vital for participating in the global knowledge economy and for leading meaningful, connected lives in the 21st century.

The study addresses how South African higher education can reconcile its multilingual and decolonial mandates with neoliberal pressures that sustain linguistic inequality. It also raises the question whether decolonial multilingualism can serve as a counter-hegemonic praxis that both affirms the necessity of English for global engagement and restores African languages as equal academic mediums.

Thus the research questions are:

How are multilingual language policies in South African higher education institutions implemented in practice, and to what extent do they challenge linguistic hierarchies?

How do neoliberal market forces constrain multilingualism and academic autonomy in South African universities?

In what ways do grassroots activism, translanguaging pedagogies, and alternative publishing platforms serve as counter-hegemonic strategies to reclaim academic autonomy?

How can decolonial multilingualism be conceptualised as a form of counter-hegemonic praxis against the neoliberal commodification of knowledge?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to ongoing debates on decolonisation, language policy, and academic freedom in South African higher education. By examining the intersection of neoliberalism, multilingualism, and decoloniality, it highlights how policy commitments to linguistic diversity are often undermined by market-driven priorities and global validation systems. The analysis provides fresh insights into the contradictions between multilingual policies and institutional practices, offering a framework for reclaiming academic autonomy through decolonial multilingual praxis and epistemic plurality.

The findings have practical implications for policymakers, university leadership, and educators seeking to develop higher education settings that respect linguistic diversity and epistemic plurality. Furthermore, the study advances scholarly understanding of how decolonial multilingualism can serve as a counter-hegemonic strategy in postcolonial contexts, providing a model for other universities in the Global South that face similar challenges.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in a critical, decolonial epistemological perspectives that interrogate the entanglement of colonial legacies, neoliberal reforms, and contemporary struggles for linguistic justice in South African higher education. It draws on five interrelated theoretical traditions, which include decolonial theory, critical pedagogy, linguistic justice, translanguaging, and global Englishes to conceptualise decolonial multilingualism as both a counter-hegemonic praxis and a pragmatic response to global academic realities.

Decolonial Theory

Decolonial theory is a political, social, and epistemic project that challenges the enduring dominance of Western epistemologies and the coloniality of knowledge that persists in institutions of higher learning (Mignolo, 2011). According to Ndhlovu-Gatsheni (2018), the theory critiques the colonial legacy that privileges Eurocentric ways of knowing, producing, and validating knowledge while marginalising and erasing Indigenous epistemologies, histories, and languages. Coloniality highlights how colonial power structures continue to shape knowledge production and cultural institutions long after formal political independence, necessitating the decolonial option, which is a deliberate epistemic shift that centres knowledge on the Global South (Mignolo, 2011).

Furthermore, Mbembe (2016) critiqued African universities for maintaining colonial epistemic frameworks and called for their transformation to reflect local histories and knowledge systems.

Decolonial theory thus positions language as central to the project of epistemic justice and academic transformation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) contended that language plays a central role in this colonial matrix because it is not merely a medium of communication but a carrier of worldviews and cognitive legitimacy. In this regard, decoloniality demands that African languages be repositioned not only as tools for access but as legitimate languages of knowledge production and critique. However, epistemic decolonisation remains an ongoing and contested struggle because it challenges deeply entrenched institutional structures and dominant paradigms without a singular blueprint for transformation (Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016).

While decolonial theory (Mignolo, 2011) remains central in conceptualising coloniality of knowledge and the pluriversity of epistemologies, the framework also acknowledges critiques and alternative frameworks. Chibber (2013) cautioned against overextending decolonial theory's explanatory power without adequately accounting for materialist dimensions of global capitalism, while Gopal (2019) emphasised the need to foreground class, race, and intersectional concerns in discussions of epistemic justice. Engaging these perspectives enables a more comprehensive mapping of the field beyond uncontested decolonial voices, balancing epistemic critique with socio-political realities.

Critical Pedagogy and Humanising Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy intersects with decolonial theory by emphasising the position of education as a practice of freedom that challenges oppressive structures and empowers marginalised communities (Freire, 1970; Heleta, 2016). In the South African context, humanising pedagogy extends this by focusing on reclaiming colonised knowledge-making and cultivating learning environments that affirm the identities, languages, and experiences of historically excluded students (Heleta, 2016). However, tensions and paradoxes arise when decolonial pedagogical practices operate within neoliberal university structures that prioritise market-driven outcomes, efficiency, and global competitiveness over social justice and epistemic diversity. According to Maluleka (2024), this scenario creates a dilemma in which educators must navigate institutional demands while striving to enact transformative, decolonial teaching practices that resist the commodification of knowledge and affirm Indigenous epistemologies.

Language Justice and Multilingualism

Language justice theory foregrounds linguistic hierarchies as a form of epistemic violence that sustains inequalities in access to knowledge and participation in academic discourse (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Achieving linguistic justice involves disrupting colonial language hierarchies and ensuring that Indigenous languages are not only present but are valued as legitimate mediums for knowledge production and academic engagement. In South African higher education, the privileging of English and Afrikaans reproduces colonial linguistic dominance, marginalising Indigenous African languages and limiting epistemic diversity and social inclusion (Rakgogo, 2024). Madiba (2024) contended that multilingualism, when enacted through translanguaging pedagogies, offers a means to resist the neoliberal commodification of knowledge by validating multiple languages and knowledge systems within academic spaces. This approach challenges the monolingual norms of global academia and promotes epistemic justice by enabling students and scholars to draw on their full linguistic repertoires as resources for learning and knowledge production (Heugh, 2018).

Translanguaging Theory

Translanguaging theory provides both a theoretical and pedagogical lens. It recognises that multilingual speakers draw flexibly from their full linguistic repertoires rather than treating languages as separate, bounded systems (García & Wei, 2014). Madiba (2024) argued that in higher education, translanguaging affirms students' linguistic identities, deepens epistemic access, and resists monolingual norms tied to colonial and neoliberal logics. By viewing language as practice and resource, translanguaging

highlights the agency of multilingual students and educators in reclaiming linguistic sovereignty. Translanguaging is thus a critical site of epistemic sovereignty and social justice, empowering multilingual speakers in contexts where coloniality and neoliberalism marginalise Indigenous languages, making it a vital tool in decolonial praxis and linguistic justice in South African academia.

Global Englishes

The global Englishes framework complements decoloniality by situating English within global, postcolonial, and digital contexts (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Rather than treating English as a monolithic standard, this perspective recognises diverse, localised varieties shaped by sociocultural contexts. Scholars argue that while English enables access to international networks, academic visibility, and employability, it also entrenches hierarchies that marginalise other languages and epistemologies (Canagarajah, 2017; Phillipson, 2018). In South Africa, this duality underscores the tension between English's instrumental value and its role in perpetuating epistemic exclusion.

Counter-Hegemonic Praxis

The notion of counter-hegemonic praxis, rooted in Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony, underpins the study's focus on resistance. Gramsci conceptualised hegemony as the subtle and pervasive dominance of ruling ideologies, which are naturalised through institutions, language, and cultural norms. Counter-hegemonic praxis, then, refers to deliberate actions that challenge and subvert dominant ideologies, whether colonial, neoliberal, or monolingual. In this study, counter-hegemonic praxis is understood as the deployment of decolonial multilingualism not only as a policy ideal but as a strategic and political intervention.

Conceptual Framing

The theoretical perspectives illuminate the contradictions of language policy and practice in South African higher education. Decolonial theory exposes colonial continuities, critical pedagogy foregrounds the emancipatory potential of education, linguistic justice highlights structural inequities, translanguaging demonstrates practical strategies for inclusion, and global Englishes situates English as both a resource and a hegemonic force. This integrative stance enables a comprehensive understanding of decolonial multilingualism as both counter-hegemonic praxis and pragmatic negotiation with global realities. It recognises the necessity of English for global participation while insisting on systemic reforms that elevate Indigenous African languages as co-equal carriers of epistemic authority.

Grassroots initiatives, translanguaging pedagogies, and alternative publishing platforms illustrate how Indigenous languages are reclaimed as legitimate mediums of knowledge production. Importantly, student voices continue to shape these practices. While #FeesMustFall (2015–2017) was pivotal in linking access, decolonisation, and linguistic justice (Heleta, 2016), contemporary student concerns have shifted toward institutionalising translanguaging, ensuring epistemic access for non-native English speakers, and interrogating the digital exclusion of African languages from AI-driven systems (Emsley & Modiba, 2024). In sum, the framework integrates sociocultural theories of language, translanguaging, decoloniality, and critiques of global Englishes, while foregrounding the new digital terrain where linguistic hierarchies are reproduced. It recognises both the enabling and constraining roles of English, engages with critiques beyond decolonial voices, and situates contemporary student activism as central to linguistic justice. By extending the lens to include AI and digital language technologies, the framework highlights the urgency of ensuring that Indigenous African languages are not only valued in academia but also encoded into the infrastructures of the 21st-century knowledge economy. The study is positioned within current intellectual debates by extending decolonial voices (Mignolo, 2011) through engagement with critiques and dialogues (Chibber, 2013; Gopal, 2019), and by emphasising the evolving nature of multilingual activism, including more student voices that transcend earlier social movements like #FeesMustFall.

Literature Review

Neoliberalism's Impact on Higher Education in South Africa

Neoliberalism in higher education refers to the adoption of market-oriented principles and practices that emphasise competition, efficiency, accountability, and commodification of knowledge (Jansen, 2017). Neoliberalism has reshaped South African higher education by entrenching market-oriented logic and practices that prioritise competition, efficiency, and the commodification of knowledge. Steynberg et al. (2024) contended that this ideological shift has transformed universities into entities that must align their goals with global economic demands, often at the expense of social justice and inclusivity. The adoption of neoliberal reforms has introduced performance management systems, funding models tied to research outputs, and governance structures that emphasise accountability to market forces rather than public good (Hlatshwayo, 2022). These changes have led to what some scholars described as "modern academic slavery," where academic staff face exploitative labour conditions driven by intensified productivity demands and diminished academic freedom (Steynberg et al., 2024, p. 8).

According to Akala (2021), the neoliberal university in South Africa is also characterised by the commodification of education, where students are positioned as consumers and higher education is treated as a private good rather than a public service. This shift has exacerbated inequalities in access, as rising tuition fees and reduced state funding make higher education unaffordable for many historically marginalised groups. Student protests such as #FeesMustFall highlighted the tensions between neoliberal policies and demands for equitable access and transformation (Jansen, 2017). Furthermore, neoliberalism's emphasis on global rankings and English-language research outputs reinforces linguistic hierarchies and epistemic exclusion, privileging Western knowledge systems and marginalising Indigenous African epistemologies (Akala, 2021).

Despite policy frameworks that nominally support transformation and multilingualism, neoliberal imperatives undermine these goals by privileging market-driven skills and English as the dominant academic language. The deep-rooted presence of neoliberalism in governance and funding structures restricts universities' ability to implement major decolonial changes and scholarship in Indigenous languages. Thus, South African higher education remains caught in a paradox where the rhetoric of transformation coexists with neoliberal practices that perpetuate colonial and capitalist inequalities.

Language Policy and Multilingualism in South African Higher Education

South Africa's post-apartheid language policies officially endorse multilingualism and the inclusion of Indigenous African languages in higher education, reflecting constitutional commitments to linguistic diversity and social justice (Council on Higher Education, 2001). Universities have developed language policies that recognise languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Sesotho alongside English and Afrikaans (Cele, 2021). However, the implementation of these policies is uneven and constrained by institutional inertia, limited resources, and the dominance of English in teaching, learning, and research.

Ntombela (2024) and Heleta (2016) posited that the global hegemony of English, closely linked to neoliberal globalisation, has resulted in English becoming the lingua franca of academia, marginalising Indigenous languages and epistemologies. This linguistic dominance is reinforced by funding models and academic validation systems that prioritise English-language publications and international rankings, creating disincentives for Indigenous language scholarship. Consequently, Indigenous languages are often relegated to a symbolic status in policy documents, lacking substantive institutional support and integration into mainstream academic practices (Council on Higher Education, 2025).

Decoloniality challenges these entrenched linguistic hierarchies by advocating for epistemic justice and the recognition of Indigenous languages and knowledge systems (Heleta, 2016; Mignolo, 2011). According to Madiba (2024), decolonial multilingualism emphasises the importance of integrating multiple languages in academic spaces through pedagogical approaches such as translanguaging, which allow fluid

movement between languages to enhance learning and knowledge production. Translanguaging presents promising avenues for challenging linguistic hierarchies by enabling students and educators to use multiple languages fluidly in the teaching and learning process. Nonetheless, these initiatives face major challenges in scaling up within neoliberalised higher education systems that prioritise market-driven outputs and English-language dominance.

Conceptualising Academic Autonomy and Decolonial Multilingualism

Academic autonomy refers to the capacity of higher education institutions to govern themselves independently in relation to their core academic functions, such as curriculum design, research agendas, and admission policies, without undue external interference (University of the Free State, 2023). It encompasses institutional self-governance exercised through leadership structures, such as councils and senates, which are responsible for upholding academic standards and institutional values. Academic autonomy is closely linked to academic freedom, which protects the rights of academics and students to pursue knowledge, engage in critical inquiry, and express ideas without fear of censorship and reprisal (Adewumi & Duma, 2024). In South Africa, autonomy is understood as "substantive autonomy," meaning that universities should serve public and social purposes while safeguarding scholarship and academic freedom rather than being subordinated to political and market-driven goals. However, this autonomy is conditional and not absolute, recognising the legitimate role of the state in steering the higher education system through procedural controls while respecting institutional independence in intellectual matters. Decolonial multilingualism is a transformative approach that challenges the dominance of colonial languages and epistemologies in higher education by promoting the use of Indigenous African languages alongside others. According to Madiba (2024), decolonial multilingualism involves not only policy commitments to linguistic diversity but also pedagogical practices such as translanguaging that enable the fluid use of multiple languages to encourage inclusive learning environments and epistemic justice. It functions as a counter-hegemonic praxis that resists neoliberal commodification of knowledge by affirming the epistemic value of Indigenous languages and challenging linguistic hierarchies entrenched by colonial and neoliberal forces (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021).

Gaps in Empirical Research

While a growing body of literature exists on language policy, neoliberalism, and decoloniality in South African higher education, empirical research linking these areas remains limited. Few studies have systematically examined how neoliberal funding models and global academic validation systems constrain the implementation of multilingual policies and decolonial interventions. Moreover, the role of grassroots activism, translanguaging pedagogies, and alternative publishing as practical counter-hegemonic strategies has not been sufficiently documented and analysed in relation to institutional policy and practice. This gap limits understanding of how academic autonomy can be reclaimed through decolonial multilingual praxis within the neoliberal university context.

Furthermore, there is a need for more empirical investigation into the institutional factors that facilitate or hinder the establishment of language units and centres, which are critical for supporting the implementation of language policies. The disconnect between policy commitments and classroom realities, as well as the experiences and perspectives of students and academics navigating these linguistic landscapes, also requires deeper qualitative and quantitative exploration (Xulu-Gama & Hadebe, 2022). Addressing these gaps would provide valuable insights into how South African universities can move beyond symbolic multilingualism towards substantive linguistic and epistemic transformation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design combining document analysis and a systematic literature review that examined the intersection of neoliberalism, multilingualism, and decoloniality in South African higher education. The systematic literature review complemented the document analysis by synthesising existing scholarly research to contextualise findings and identify gaps. Together, these methods enabled a comprehensive analysis of institutional language policies, government frameworks, activist interventions, and academic debates relevant to decolonial multilingual praxis under neoliberal constraints.

Data Collection

A purposive sample of 30 documents was analysed, comprising institutional language policies from public universities, national policy frameworks, and reports from activist organisations. The selection included universities with explicit language policies reflecting different linguistic contexts, such as the University of Cape Town (UCT), University of Pretoria, University of KwaZulu-Natal, and University of the Free State. Documents were sourced from official university websites, government portals, academic databases, and activist platforms to ensure a broad and representative sample. The timeframe focused on documents produced between 2000 and 2024, allowing the study to trace continuities and shifts in policy discourse from early post-apartheid reforms to more recent neoliberal and digital transformations.

The decision to concentrate on public institutions was based on major differences between public and private universities in South Africa, principally regarding access to policies, language use, and social mandates. In addition, public universities were prioritised because they operate under stronger government mandates regarding multilingualism and decolonisation, making them central to the study.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. A coding framework was developed using deductive categories drawn from the theoretical framework. The analysis identified recurring patterns around policy–practice gaps, the dual role of English, neoliberal constraints, and emerging counter-hegemonic practices such as translanguaging and Indigenous language scholarship.

Ethics Consideration

The study relied exclusively on publicly available documents and did not involve human participants. According to institutional guidelines, this type of research is exempt from formal ethical review. Nevertheless, all sources were handled with integrity, accuracy, and respect for scholarly standards.

Limitations

The study relied on publicly available documents, which may not fully capture internal institutional dynamics and unpublished grassroots efforts, potentially introducing selection bias (Bowen, 2009). It also focused on public universities, excluding private institutions, which could have different language policies and neoliberal pressures, limiting generalisability. Additionally, document analysis inherently interprets texts created by various actors with potential biases and agendas. However, reflexivity and triangulation were employed to increase trustworthiness.

Results

Policy–Practice Disconnects

Despite South Africa's progressive multilingual language policies, as enshrined in the Constitution and the National Language Policy Framework (Department of Arts and Culture, 2003), a major gap persists between policy and practice within higher education institutions. Numerous studies highlight that while multilingualism is formally mandated, its implementation is weak and inconsistent, resulting in the continued dominance of English in academic teaching, research, and administration (Kaschula, 2013).

A key finding across multiple investigations is that institutional language policies exist more as symbolic commitments than as drivers of substantive linguistic transformation. University of the Free State and University of KwaZulu-Natal have multilingual policies that recognise Indigenous African languages alongside English and Afrikaans. Nonetheless, English remains the predominant language of research output and instruction (Cele, 2021). This disconnect is attributed to several factors including limited resources, a lack of academic materials in Indigenous languages, insufficient staffing, and inadequate institutional support structures.

Moreover, sociolinguistic research indicates that students and parents sometimes perceive Indigenous languages as less important or less useful in academic and professional contexts, which further undermines efforts to implement multilingual education (Kaschula, 2013). The low number of graduates majoring in African languages, especially at postgraduate levels, reflects this trend and signals a broader challenge in shifting attitudes and institutional cultures (Kaschula, 2013).

Recent scoping reviews confirm that while some universities, such as University of KwaZulu-Natal, have made strides in integrating Indigenous languages into teaching and administrative practices, many others struggle with effective implementation (Zondo et al., 2025). However, dominance of English is sustained by global academic publishing standards and funding systems that favour English-language research, leading to structural obstacles in promoting Indigenous languages in academia. Furthermore, accountability mechanisms for policy implementation remain weak. While universities are required to submit institutional language policies aligned with the national framework, this often results in compliance rather than genuine commitment (Nkomo, 2023). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is mandated to develop funding mechanisms to support multilingualism, however, progress has been slow, further hindering implementation and preserving the dominant position of English in research outputs and academic discourses (Nkomo, 2023).

Neoliberal Constraints

The neoliberal framework governing South African higher education has entrenched English as the dominant language of teaching, learning, and research, largely due to funding models and global academic validation systems that prioritise English-language outputs. Ntombela (2024) argued that despite policy commitments to multilingualism and the promotion of Indigenous languages, universities continue to operate within a neoliberal logic that equates academic success with English proficiency and international visibility. This dynamic creates structural barriers for Indigenous language scholarship because funding agencies and institutional subsidies are often tied to research published in internationally recognised **English-language journals.**

The Language Policy for Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2020) explicitly promoted multilingualism. However, it elevates English as the de facto medium of instruction and research, as part of the broader global Englishes phenomenon reflecting neoliberal market demands and global academic norms. This contradiction results in a policy crisis where Indigenous languages are marginalised in practice, limiting epistemic access for students whose first language is not English and perpetuating linguistic hierarchies rooted in coloniality (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2009). The neoliberal emphasis on efficiency, competitiveness, and global rankings further entrenches English hegemony, as universities prioritise outputs that enhance their international standing over local linguistic and epistemic inclusion (Munyaradzi, 2024). This neoliberal linguistic commodification sustains epistemic injustices by limiting the production and dissemination of scholarship in African languages, thereby excluding large segments of the student population from meaningful participation in academic life.

Emerging Resistance

Grassroots Activism

In response to these neoliberal constraints, various forms of resistance have emerged within South African higher education, demonstrating partial successes in reclaiming linguistic and epistemic autonomy. Grassroots activism, notably student-led movements such as #FeesMustFall, has foregrounded language as a critical site of struggle, demanding the inclusion of Indigenous African languages in curricula and institutional practices (Heleta, 2016). These movements challenge the neoliberal and colonial status quo by advocating for epistemic justice and linguistic diversity as integral to decolonial transformation. Activists and communities engage in a continuous process of agency to assert the political and educational legitimacy of Indigenous languages, thereby subverting the hierarchical colonial relations embedded in conventional schooling and paving the way for plural epistemologies (Emsley & Modiba, 2024). This process enables Indigenous learners to connect scientific and academic concepts with their lived socio-ecological contexts, fostering deeper epistemological access and relevance.

Translanguaging Pedagogies

Pedagogically, translanguaging approaches have gained traction as a means to disrupt English monolingualism, and support multilingual learners by allowing the fluid use of multiple languages in teaching and learning (Madiba, 2024). University of KwaZulu-Natal has initiated isiZulu-medium courses that empower students to learn and express complex disciplinary knowledge in their home language, encouraging epistemic inclusion and identity affirmation (Emsley & Modiba, 2024). Similarly, University of Pretoria introduced a multilingual language policy to transition from an Afrikaans-English bilingual model to a greater inclusion of African languages. However, progress has been cautious and often met with institutional resistance, particularly from stakeholders defending the status of Afrikaans (du Plessis, 2021). At UCT, translanguaging has been piloted as a transformative pedagogic strategy that disrupts colonial language hierarchies by legitimising the use of isiXhosa alongside English in classrooms (Madiba, 2024). Recent developments, such as the revised language policy, reflect a growing commitment to linguistic diversity. UCT (2024) now recognises English, Afrikaans, and isiXhosa as official languages and has identified South African Sign Language, Khoekhoegowab, N|uu, and Afrikaaps for future development, aligning with national directives and funding initiatives to support multilingualism. Somtala (2022) argued that while these universities have introduced remarkable policies and programmes, implementation remains uneven and susceptible to institutional inertia, lack of funding, and the pressure to conform to global academic standards.

Alternative Publishing Platforms

Alternative publishing platforms also serve as sites of resistance, providing spaces for Indigenous language scholarship that operate outside the constraints of global English-language academic publishing. Journals like *Imbizo* and open-access repositories promote research in African languages, supporting epistemic pluralism and challenging the neoliberal commodification of knowledge (Ntombela, 2024). These platforms permit scholars to disseminate knowledge that is culturally relevant and linguistically accessible, contributing to the broader project of decolonial multilingualism. However, resistance faces challenges, emanating from limited institutional support, scarce funding, and the pervasive influence of neoliberal metrics that prioritise English-language outputs (Heleta, 2016). While grassroots activism and innovative pedagogies disrupt dominant paradigms, systemic change requires sustained commitment from universities, policymakers, and funding bodies to decentre English and institutionalise multilingualism as a core academic value.

Discussion

Neoliberalism and Restriction of Academic Autonomy

The findings confirm that neoliberal forces commodify knowledge in South African higher education by prioritising market-driven metrics, global rankings, and English-language scholarship, which collectively restrict academic autonomy. They reveal the persistent entanglement of South African higher education with neoliberal and colonial epistemic orders that constrain genuine transformation. Decolonial theory emphasises the need to expose and dismantle the coloniality of knowledge, which is an enduring structure that privileges Western epistemologies and marginalises Indigenous African ways of knowing and being (Mbembe, 2016; Mignolo, 2011). The evidence of policy–practice disconnects, neoliberal funding constraints, and English-language dominance in this study illustrate how coloniality continues to shape institutional autonomy and academic freedom under the guise of neoliberalism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The neoliberal commodification of knowledge, as shown in the findings, restricts academic autonomy by subordinating universities to market logics that prioritise global rankings, English-language outputs, and economic efficiency (Jansen, 2017). This aligns with critiques that institutional autonomy in South African universities is co-opted to preserve Western knowledge economies and suppress Indigenous epistemologies, thus perpetuating epistemic injustice (Nkomo, 2023). Decoloniality exposes how institutional autonomy, rather than enabling emancipation, can become a mechanism for maintaining colonial power structures when it is disconnected from public accountability and local realities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Rakgogo, 2024).

Structural and Cultural Barriers

The study also highlights the interaction between structural and cultural barriers. Structurally, neoliberal funding models and global validation systems prioritise English, leaving limited resources for African language development. Culturally, entrenched perceptions among students, parents, and academics frame Indigenous languages as less valuable for professional success (Kaschula, 2013). These perceptions undermine implementation even when policies exist. Without challenging both the economic structures and the cultural attitudes that sustain English dominance, transformation will remain elusive.

Decolonial Multilingualism as Counter-Hegemonic Praxis

In contrast, decolonial multilingualism emerges as an important counter-hegemonic praxis that challenges neoliberal and colonial epistemic orders by reclaiming Indigenous languages and knowledge systems within academic spaces (Heugh, 2018; Madiba, 2024). Drawing on decolonial theory, this praxis disrupts the monolingual and monocentric dominance of English by promoting multilingual pedagogies such as translanguaging, which enable students and academics to navigate and integrate multiple linguistic repertoires (Madiba, 2024). Translanguaging acts as a form of linguistic and epistemic resistance, promoting inclusivity and cognitive engagement while contesting the coloniality of language and knowledge (Madiba, 2024). Furthermore, grassroots activism and alternative publishing platforms amplify Indigenous languages and epistemologies, creating spaces that circumvent neoliberal academic validation systems and promote epistemic justice.

Several institutions and movements in South Africa have begun experimenting with forms of decolonial multilingualism, with varying levels of depth and commitment. The findings highlight the potential of decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic praxis that challenges these neoliberal and colonial constraints. Through translanguaging pedagogies, grassroots activism, and alternative publishing platforms, universities can begin to reclaim academic spaces as sites of epistemic justice and social inclusion (Madiba, 2024). The praxis resonates with critical and humanising pedagogies that seek to disrupt dominant knowledge hierarchies and affirm marginalised identities and knowledge (Freire, 1970; Heleta, 2016). However, neoliberal pressures have remained partially contested, requiring sustained institutional commitment and structural change (Madiba, 2024). Consequently, the praxis is not without tensions given

that it operates within institutions still constrained by neoliberal policies and global academic norms, requiring ongoing negotiation and resistance.

Decolonial Multilingualism and the Dual Role of English

The findings highlight the potential of decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic praxis that challenges neoliberal and colonial constraints by advocating for Indigenous languages and epistemologies. Translanguaging pedagogies, grassroots activism, and alternative publishing platforms enable students and scholars to contest English hegemony while affirming their linguistic identities and knowledge systems (Madiba, 2024). These practices disrupt the commodification of knowledge and open new pathways for epistemic justice and inclusion.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the dual role of English within this matrix. As the lingua franca of global academia, science, and digital communication, English remains an indispensable resource for South African scholars seeking participation in global knowledge economies (Canagarajah, 2017; Phillipson, 2018). Its role as a bridge to international collaboration, academic visibility, and access to digital infrastructures cannot be ignored. Thus, the challenge is not to reject English but to reposition it within a more pluralistic linguistic order that balances global participation with local epistemic sovereignty. Universities must therefore institutionalise multilingual pedagogies that leverage the advantages of English while dismantling its exclusivity.

Toward a Decolonial Academic Ecosystem

Building a decolonial academic ecosystem involves institutional transformation that goes beyond superficial policy changes to embed decolonial values in research, teaching, and community engagement. Community-engaged scholarship exemplifies this transformation by fostering reciprocal relationships between universities and local communities, ensuring that knowledge production addresses real-world challenges and reflects Indigenous knowledge systems. Transdisciplinary research further supports epistemic liberation by breaking down disciplinary silos and integrating diverse epistemologies, methodologies, and languages in collaborative knowledge creation (Heleta, 2016).

Policy reforms are essential to sustain and scale these initiatives. Increased funding dedicated to Indigenous language research and development is crucial for overcoming the resource constraints that limit the growth of multilingual academic programmes (Munyaradzi, 2024). Additionally, decolonial accreditation criteria should be established to recognise and reward scholarship that advances epistemic diversity and linguistic justice, challenging the dominance of English-language metrics and Western validation systems (Emsley & Modiba, 2024). Such systemic changes would enhance academic autonomy by freeing institutions from the constraints of neoliberal market logic, enabling them to serve as sites of epistemic sovereignty and social transformation.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

The findings call for a reorientation of higher education policy and practice to genuinely support decolonial multilingualism as a means of reclaiming academic autonomy. Policymakers must move beyond symbolic multilingual policies to provide concrete funding, infrastructure, and institutional support for Indigenous language scholarship, teaching, and publishing. This includes revising funding models to incentivise research in African languages and recognising alternative scholarly outputs that reflect local epistemologies. Higher education should adopt translanguaging and other inclusive pedagogies that validate students' linguistic identities and promote critical engagement with knowledge production (Madiba, 2024). Universities need to institutionalise language units and support grassroots initiatives that resist neoliberal commodification and promote epistemic diversity.

Implications for Academic Autonomy and Decolonial Transformation

The findings underscore that academic autonomy must be reconceptualised beyond neoliberal and colonial frameworks that equate autonomy with freedom from state control and market imperatives.

Instead, autonomy should be understood as relational and accountable to the social, cultural, and epistemic needs of historically marginalised communities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This means universities must balance institutional independence with a commitment to public accountability and epistemic justice, ensuring that autonomy serves transformation rather than preserving coloniality (Rakgogo, 2024). Additionally, decolonial transformation requires embedding multilingualism as a core principle of academic practice—not merely as policy rhetoric. This entails investing in language units, developing Indigenous language scholarship, and adopting pedagogies that support linguistic diversity and epistemic plurality (DHET, 2020; Heugh, 2018). Translanguaging and other inclusive pedagogies should be institutionalised to foster epistemic access and challenge English-language hegemony (Madiba, 2024). Furthermore, alternative publishing models must be supported to legitimise Indigenous knowledge production outside neoliberal academic validation systems.

The findings call for a systemic shift in funding and governance structures that currently reinforce neoliberal market logic. Policymakers and university leaders should develop funding models that incentivise multilingual scholarship and community-engaged research aligned with local epistemologies and social justice goals (Nkomo, 2023). This would help dismantle the structural barriers to decolonial transformation and enable universities to reclaim their role as sites of emancipatory knowledge production. Realising this potential requires reimagining academic autonomy as accountable and transformative, institutionalising multilingual pedagogies, and restructuring funding and governance to support decolonial aims.

Conclusion

The study examined the intersection of neoliberalism, linguistic hierarchies, and academic autonomy in South African higher education. It highlighted a persistent policy–practice disconnect where progressive multilingual policies remain largely unimplemented in practice, with English continuing to dominate academic research and teaching. The study foregrounds decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic praxis that challenges these neoliberal and colonial constraints. Through grassroots activism, translanguaging pedagogies, and alternative publishing platforms, Indigenous languages and knowledge systems are being reclaimed and revitalised as legitimate academic resources. This praxis disrupts not only linguistic hierarchies but also promotes epistemic justice and social inclusion, resonating with decolonial theory's call for epistemic freedom.

The study advances the conversation on decolonising South African higher education by demonstrating that reclaiming academic autonomy and fostering epistemic justice require sustained, systemic change that integrates multilingualism as a core dimension of decolonial praxis. Additionally, academic autonomy should be reconceptualised as relational and accountable, serving not only institutional independence but also the epistemic and social needs of historically marginalised communities. Such transformation is essential for creating universities that genuinely reflect and serve South Africa's linguistic, cultural, and intellectual diversity.

However, transformation requires a balanced recognition of the dual role English plays in higher education. While it perpetuates colonial hierarchies and neoliberal commodification, it also serves as an instrument for global access to academic networks, research visibility, and participation in the digital knowledge economy. The task is therefore not to eradicate English but to decentre its hegemony by embedding it within a multilingual academic ecosystem that values Indigenous languages as equal mediums of knowledge. Consequently, this means universities must simultaneously harness English strategically for global engagement while ensuring that African languages are institutionalised as legitimate academic languages. Only through such a dual strategy, can South African higher education reclaim academic autonomy, foster epistemic justice, and build universities that reflect both global participation and local epistemic sovereignty.

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