

**Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC) Volume 14 No. 2 September 2025**

**pp.318-320 [ersc@mandela.ac.za](mailto:ersc@mandela.ac.za)**

**ISSN: 2221-4070**

**DOI: <https://10.17159/2221-4070/2025/v14n2/a21>**

## Conference Report

### **ALASA Conference: African languages beyond expansion and preservation in the digital age**

**Polokwane Royal Hotel, Polokwane, South Africa**

**08-11 July 2025**

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The 26th International Conference of the African Language Association of Southern Africa (ALASA) was held at Polokwane Royal Hotel, Polokwane, from Tuesday, 08 July to Friday, 11 July 2025.

The theme, African Languages Beyond Expansion and Preservation in the Digital Age, highlighted the urgent need to advance African languages from mere preservation and expansion to active scholarship in academic spaces. It provided delegates the opportunity to demonstrate the maturity of African languages for such endeavours from the perspectives of literature, translation terminology and lexicography, language policy and planning, language in society, language and decolonisation, language and technology, and theoretical linguistics. The conference engaged with issues around language policy; languages of learning, teaching, and science; Indigenous African languages online; and localised digital content. There were 211 paper presentations and five keynote addresses. The conference sub-themes were:

- The literature and literary scholarship of African languages.
- The language of languages in translation, terminology, and lexicography.
- The implications of language planning in African languages development and strengthening.
- Societal forces in communities and elitist structures of education in the utility of African languages.
- The development and strengthening of African languages in the digital space.
- Structural systems of African languages.

#### **Keynote Speakers**

There were five keynote speakers drawn from different aspects of African language focus and specialisation, and all keynote addresses were of high quality.

#### **William Jethro Mpfu**

The opening keynote address was delivered by William Jethro Mpfu, a researcher and Teaching and Learning Coordinator at the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, at University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He emphasised the decolonial urgency of addressing the marginalisation of African

languages in the intellectual space. He advocated negotiating African space within the Eurocentric knowledge economy, noting that many European advances have their roots in African origins.

#### **Monicca Thulisile Bhuda**

Monicca Thulisile Bhuda, an expert in Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), currently attached to the University of Mpumalanga, delivered a scintillating address on the centrality of language as a vehicle for IKS. Her address was contextualised in isiNdebele, one of the minority African languages whose development requires urgent acceleration. She charged the delegates to embrace the African ethos to sustain a balanced identity and redress distorted conceptions of Africanness.

#### **Kwesi Kwaa Prah**

Kwesi Kwaa Prah, Emeritus Professor, founder and former Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS) based in Cape Town, bemoaned the sorry state of African languages, shaped by fragmented orthographies crafted by missionaries as part of their complicit colonial agenda. His address reminded the conference of the unfinished project of harmonising the orthography of African languages to increase literacy levels and increase their utility as languages of science, technology, and intellectual pursuit.

#### **Nomalungelo Isabel Ngubane**

Nomalungelo Isabel Ngubane, Director, Academy for Multilingualism, University of the Free State, shared her experiences in the implementation of the language policy mandate. She underscored the importance of not waiting for all resources to be available, but of always starting somewhere, with the principal aim of contributing to the development of African languages and providing access to the many students for whom the dominant language is a barrier to education.

#### **Tshisikhawe Dzivhani**

Tshisikhawe Dzivhani—an accomplished South African Sign Language (SASL) interpreter and former SASL lecturer with over a decade of experience in language facilitation, curriculum development, and Deaf community advocacy, currently based at the Reakgona Disability Centre, University of Limpopo—explained the conditions experienced by the Deaf community in many sectors of society. She explained how the shortage of SASL interpreters marks the exclusion of the Deaf community.

#### **Impressions of Some Paper Presentations**

The presentations were interactive and marked a truly multilingual setting. Presenters used Northern Sotho, Xitsonga, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Tshivenda, siSwati, and isiNdebele in addition to English. There were robust debates, which were beneficial for many postgraduate students who presented their master or doctoral projects.

There was a good balance of papers from literary studies and language focus. There were also veteran scholars from across the length and breadth of South African universities and neighbouring SADEC institutions alongside novice researchers who were being inducted into academia. Some presenters came from government departments and agencies, and brought a nuanced perspective on the state of African languages.

Some presenters grappled with the African scholarship from the perspective of classic literary giants whilst others delved into the current digital space and the positioning of African languages. The common thread that resonated with most presenters was the viability of African languages and the dismantling of the fallacy of inadequacy. As such, presenters touched on educational, identity, economic, cultural, political, and linguistic issues from the central position of African languages.

#### **Organisation**

The ALASA Local Organising Committee of the 2025 conference was superb. With the setbacks of having to change the conference venue twice, they managed to find Polokwane Royal Hotel—a far better alternative for the conference. What more, Polokwane Royal Hotel offered to shuttle delegates from across Polokwane City to the conference venue. This came as a huge relief for the majority of the delegates

who would have incurred extra transport costs and inconvenience. The shuttle service was available in the morning and afternoon for the duration of the conference, which allowed delegates to attend conference events that were scheduled late in the night.

### **Food**

The conference provided for morning and afternoon tea, and lunch for all delegates for the duration of the conference. The gala dinner was sponsored by the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture in Limpopo. This was indeed meticulously executed at the level of royalty.

### **Entertainment**

The disc jockey treated the delegates with local music genres, who could not resist swaying this way and that with the rhythmic sounds of Africa. These were interspersed with contemporary genres that almost sent the young at heart into uncontrollable jives.

### **Areas for Reconsideration**

One keynote speaker presented online, which limited engagement with participants. This was mainly due to audibility on both ends, with the speaker unable to hear the questions raised by delegates. Being physically present would have enhanced the engagement and made the interactions more useful.

It was noted that the programme was not user-friendly for the delegates. There were a number of presenters who appeared in the programme but were physically absent from the conference. Unfortunately, some delegates who were present in the conference did not feature in the programme despite being promised inclusion in the revised version. One such delegate stayed the entire conference and ended up not presenting. This reflected negatively on the LOC.

Whilst it may not be within the powers of the LOC to designate breakaway session rooms, it was noted that some venues were inconveniently placed such that to access them, you needed to go past another venue in session. This had a bearing on the attendance of certain sessions. Thus, some delegates ended up presenting in venues that were not allocated for them in the programme, which conflicted with other presenters. Perhaps, it would be helpful to have a programme team that ascertains that all delegates' requirements match venue allocations, and that venues themselves are suitable and not inconveniently placed.

Despite the few glitches, the conference was overall, a worthwhile experience and engagement of minds in the timely subject of the utility of African languages.