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South African Universities at a Crossroads: The Imperialist Global Knowledge Economy as a Barrier to Multilingual Higher Education

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Abstract

There are several global, regional, and local policies on the promotion of inclusive and equitable education in Africa. However, African universities in general and South African universities in particular, are at a crossroads 30 years into democracy due to the dominance of English as the language of research, teaching, and learning in higher education. English is used as the dominant language of science, research, epistemological pedagogy, and embodiment of knowledge. In this study, I examine how colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy have contributed to marginalising Indigenous languages in South African universities, thereby constraining multilingual higher education. South African universities' over reliance on English has hierarchised languages in ways that relegate Indigenous languages to the periphery. South African higher education is at a crossroads because on one hand, the global knowledge economy characterises universities as marketplaces whereas on the other hand, student movements demand transformation and decolonisation. In this paper, I employ a critical discourse analysis (CDA)–social justice frameworks to review the vision and mission statements and institutional language policies of a South African historically Black university, historically White university, and a university of technology. The CDA–social justice frameworks approach unmask the deeply institutionalised global market competitive posture of universities, and unravels the social injustices. A key finding is that the imperialist global knowledge economy is a barrier to multilingual higher education.

Keywords: decolonisation, English language, South African languages, South African universities, transformation

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Introduction

The post-colonial African university, like South African universities, has been accused by students of promoting coloniality under the guise of providing them with education, skills, and knowledge (Ndlovu, 2018). This means that the colonial master's language remains the dominant language in African universities, long after the nations gained their independence. Language is central from a social and epistemic access perspective. Its significance cannot be downplayed. However, colonial conquest and its influence in Africa and other parts of the Global South entrenched a hierarchy of languages. In their study on the epistemic access and success challenges in South Africa, Themane & Mabasa (2022) lamented that increase in access to higher education has not been matched by student academic success. Mzangwa (2019) further observed that the National Plan on Education (National Planning Commission, 2012) has not provided material benefits for most previously disadvantaged Black students in terms of access, equity, and participation in higher education.

One barrier to transformation in higher education, given the unequal and multilingual nature of the South African society, is the dominance of English as language of instruction. Mthembu (2024)'s study explored the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance of first-year public relations diploma students at a South African university of technology (UoT). That author found that many of the students who were not proficient in English, the language of teaching and learning, displayed poor academic performance. The ongoing challenge of multilingualism in South African higher education (SAHE) provides insight on the nature, character, and architecture of the curricula.

The Council on Higher Education (2025, p. 9) reported that "curriculum architecture reflects how teaching and learning are structured, organised, weighted and assessed within the defining parameters of the university and external regulatory environment." In this article, in light of the curriculum challenge of the dominance of English, I pose the question: "How do colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy influence the marginalisation of Indigenous languages in South African universities?" I subsequently make the case that universities in South Africa find themselves at a crossroads in their time. There is limited scholarship that critically examines university vision and mission statements to reveal their neoliberal orientations and the discourses that marginalise Indigenous languages.

Universities are at a crossroads due to the neoliberal and corporatist logics of the knowledge economy, which characterise them as marketplaces. However, Black working-class students in South Africa demanded radical transformation and decolonisation through the unprecedented Must Fall movements (Baleni, 2025). Such competing narratives construct universities as contested terrains. Methodologically and conceptually, I employ a critical discourse analysis (CDA)–social justice frameworks to the language, mission, and vision statements of a historically Black university (HBU), historically White university (HWU), and a university of technology (UoT). The CDA–social justice frameworks allowed me to move beyond plain text on the reviewed institutional documents to conceive the emerging discourses and their implications on multilingualism. This enabled me to explore how colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy have contributed to the marginalisation of Indigenous languages in South African universities and constrained multilingualism.

I have systematically structured the paper to guide the reader through the research process and findings. Firstly, I give an overview that establishes the foundational context and significance of the study. Secondly, follows a brief rationale on the research site. In the third section, I introduce the theoretical framework, detailing the key concepts and theories that underpin the study's approach and analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach, outlining the strategies employed to collect and analyse data. The fifth section presents the findings, offering a comprehensive account of the results obtained, followed by an analysis that interprets these findings in relation to the research questions. Finally,

I conclude the paper with a summary of findings, highlighting the key outcomes, the broader implications for SAHE, and areas for future research and policy development.

Setting the Scene: An Overview

It is unimaginable today to conceptualise Africa, or to research, theorise, and celebrate African humanity, unity, or history outside the colonial legacies that make and unmake our being as Africans. African humanity, like all other humanities globally, is characterised by cultures, values, and knowledge systems that are intricately woven together and expressed through the continent's diverse Indigenous languages and vibrant cultural expressions. Bamgbose (2011) asked why African languages have low status and restricted roles. In this paper, I answer that important question, which equally captures my mind. Bamgbose (2011, p. 1) bluntly said: "It is well known that colonial powers imposed their language in each territory they governed as the language of administration, commerce and education." Mzangwa (2019) drew on recent studies to address Bamgbose's question, noting that English is predominantly spoken and therefore, its usage as a language of instruction becomes a rational option compared to multilingualism, which is seen as unaffordable to implement.

Tabé and Emekako (2025) reminded us how the League of Nations divided Cameroon between Britain and France, and posited that the French system of colonial rule alienated the local population and created a sense of cultural and political disconnection. These scholars' assertion sets the scene for this paper, and illuminates the reader's appreciation of the foundational basis of this study, which is to provide a thesis of monolingualism from a CDA–social justice perspective. Tabé and Emekako further asserted that the French controlled the more significant portion of Cameroon, and pursued a policy of assimilation that imposed their language, culture, and administrative systems. Of significance, is an appreciation of the imposition of the colonial master's language in the critical systems and institutions of administration, commerce, education, and societal culture as also articulated by Bamgbose (2011).

Celestin (2025) provided an important historical context through an elaboration of the Berlin Conference's provisions (such as the "effective occupation") that formalised the domination of African territories by European nations without regard for African sovereignty. According to this scholar, the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 led to the partitioning of Africa between European powers, which left a profound and lasting impact on the East African Community region (comprising Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda).

For this paper, I am interested in illuminating how the language question remains the epicentre of contestation in higher education using three South African universities. I elaborate on the sampling criteria at a later stage in the relevant section. Bamgbose's (2011) thesis that a colonial outcome is that African languages took a secondary position in status and domains of use is critical for this paper in that,

Of 53 countries, Indigenous African languages are recognised as official languages in only 10 countries, Arabic in 9, and all the remaining 46 countries have imported languages as official languages as follows: French in 21 countries, English in 19, Portuguese in 5 and Spanish in 1. . . . Additional evidence of the continued dominance of imported languages is the medium of education which remains substantially in these languages, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels. (Bamgbose, 2011, p. 2)

In a timely policy review of language in education in 20 years of liberation, Ramoupi (2014) made some important findings in relation to the South African context that are equally critical for this paper. The scholar argued that despite the post-apartheid Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) providing for Indigenous official African languages to be in the curricula as equal languages of teaching and learning, that mandate had not been accomplished. English and Afrikaans, which were used in the education policies

of apartheid South Africa, had remained the dominant languages in the curricula at the expense of the Indigenous official languages of South Africa (Ramoupi, 2014).

Cele (2021) noted findings of previous studies on language dominance in both African and South African contexts. He argued that the development of language policy for transformation and social inclusion in South African universities failed to achieve the ideal outcome through a lack of robust monitoring and systematic implementation. The call for transformation and decolonisation of curricula in South African universities has remained in the spotlight before and after the Must Fall student protests of 2015–2016 that called for radical and immediate change to the broader university system. One of the contributing realities to social exclusion in South Africa, as observed by Cele, is the fact that university curricula and forms of knowledge production are not sufficiently situated within the African contexts. Instead, they are dominated by Western worldviews entrenched in the use of English and Afrikaans. Consequently,

This has recently been further exacerbated by the implicit positioning of English as a main unifying neutral language in South African universities when new language policies at the University of Stellenbosch, University of South Africa, University of Pretoria and the University of Free State elevated the status of English in their language policies. (Cele, 2021, p. 29)

In view of this brief overview of Indigenous language marginalisation across the African continent through conquest and the elevation of English and other colonial languages as dominant languages in business, administration, education, and other domains of use, I now briefly shine the spotlight on the research site for this study.

Rationale for Research Site Selection

The overarching aim of this study was to examine how colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy contribute to the marginalisation of Indigenous languages in South African universities, while also highlighting the need to advance multilingual higher education. The selection of a HWU and a HBU is deliberate, aligning with the study's aim to explore the challenges and opportunities of multilingualism in SAHE. This is because the apartheid system operated on a racial divide with HWUs exclusively White while HBUs catered for Black students but used English as medium of instruction. This selection provides an opportunity to explore the level of transformation towards multilingualism.

Various scholars, including Mkhize (2018), noted that following the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, a bilingual English-Dutch state emerged, leading to the Department of Education mandating a bilingual education policy that made English and Afrikaans official languages. Mkhize further explained that the institutionalisation of the National Party's separate development policy resulted in ethnolinguistic enclaves, where universities were classified as White, Black, Indian, or Coloured. White universities were further divided into English or Afrikaans institutions based on the medium of instruction adopted. In contrast, Black, Indian, and Coloured universities predominantly adopted English as the medium of instruction (du Plessis, 2006, as cited in Mkhize, 2018).

This historical context justifies my selection of institutions from both of the colonially oriented university categories in South Africa. Additionally, the post-apartheid restructuring of higher education, including mergers and the establishment of UoTs has led to significant reconfigurations within the sector. Considering these developments, the inclusion of a UoT in this study provides an opportunity to examine the evolving language discourses in the context of SAHE.

Theoretical Framework

The SAHE landscape has been marked by persistent multilingual language policy challenges, notably the dominance of English and Afrikaans as colonial languages that tend to manifest into institutional social injustices. In this study, I was guided by the CDA–social justice frameworks. The frameworks enabled me to critically examine the colonial language and its hegemonic power beyond its mere usage as a medium of communication, to illuminate its mechanism of power, identity formation, and social injustices within SAHE. For example, linguistic hierarchy has marginalised African language-speaking students, leading to epistemic injustices of alienation and exclusion (Cele, 2021; Mkhize, 2018; Ramoupi, 2014). To critically examine the social phenomenon of the hierarchisation of language and its injustices, it was imperative to analyse key institutional documents such as vision and mission statements, as well as language policy texts.

Various scholars have significantly contributed to the engagement, development and expansion of CDA as a methodological and analytical framework. For example, Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000, p. 447) noted that “CDA emerged in the late 1980s as a programmatic development in European discourse studies spearheaded by Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk, and others.” They further highlighted Fairclough’s (1992) influential contribution to CDA by reconceptualising it as a social theory of discourse, and established a methodological framework foundational to this study. Fairclough’s three-dimensional model consists of discourse as text, discursive practice, and social practice, and remains central to contemporary discourse analysis.

Fairclough’s (1992) three dimensions of CDA which are widely adopted and expanded upon by scholars, are deployed to examine how texts from institutional documents such as mission statements, visions, and language policies convey meaning and perpetuate marginalisation and social injustice through ideological and hegemonic processes within universities. This CDA dimensional analysis is further subjected to Fraser’s social justice framework dimensions of redistribution, recognition, and representation as articulated by Thrift and Sugarman (2019) and others. Similarly, Lester et al. (2016) argued that education policy scholars have increasingly focused on issues of justice and equity, particularly relating to marginalised populations. This perspective resonates with my own theoretical orientation, shaped by my experiences as a first-generation university student. Reflecting on these experiences, I recognise the profound impact of colonial language policies on African language speakers, necessitating a critical examination through CDA. In the next section, I outline the methodological process employed in exploring this theoretical intervention of a critical social justice discourse perspective on multilingualism in SAHE.

Methodological Approach

Recognising that power is inherently embedded in language, both spoken and written, I employed a dual-method approach—the document review and the empirical narrative—to explore the multilingual challenges and opportunities within SAHE, using a case study design. The focus for this study was to examine how colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy contribute to the marginalisation and constraining of Indigenous languages in South African universities while also highlighting the need to advance multilingual higher education. Ridder (2017) observed that case study research scientifically investigates real-life phenomena using in-depth methods for individuals, groups, or organisations, for example, in an intrinsic case study approach, the case itself is of interest. This relates to my study because the case of how colonial legacies manifest in mission, vision statements, and institutional language policies to impact on students’ real-life experiences is of interest to me.

Document Review Method

Initially, I conducted a comprehensive document review focusing on institutional vision and mission statements, as well as language policies from one HBU, one HWU, and one UoT—all accessed from

the respective institutional websites. This review aligned with the study's aim of exploring the challenges and opportunities of multilingualism in SAHE. Thus, these three institutions were a representative sample in view of the current key categories of institutions in South Africa. This selection helped me to examine institutional narratives and their alignment or misalignment with the social justice theory dimensions of redistribution, recognition, and representation. The review approach, as delineated by Saidi (2022), is a secondary research method that synthesises data from primary sources. Similarly, employing a review approach was particularly effective in summarising and reconciling diverse information, thereby providing a robust foundation for subsequent analysis.

Empirical Data

To complement the document review, I drew empirical data from a study I had conducted before (see Baleni, 2024). In that study, there were 11 student participants, three of whom were enrolled at the universities whose documents I analysed for this study. I gathered narratives of research participants who were either first- or second-year undergraduate students at this study's institutions during the COVID-19 lockdown period. These narratives offer insights into the lived experiences of students, highlighting issues of access, equity, and inclusion. The findings of the previous study highlight how participants navigated an online model of teaching and learning based on English as the medium of instruction, and complement the current review of vision and mission statements and institutional language policies that continue to be barriers to multilingualism in higher education.

Analytical Framework

I analysed data through a deductive application of CDA–social justice frameworks. CDA assisted me to examine how institutional texts constructed and perpetuated power dynamics, while the social justice framework provided a normative basis for evaluating these constructions in terms of equity and inclusion. Together, these frameworks enabled a critical assessment of how institutional policies and student experiences intersected to either challenge or reinforce existing power structures within SAHE. By using a deductive approach, I adopted an analytical framework that was guided by pre-established theoretical lenses of CDA and social justice, rather than letting themes emerge solely from the data.

Presentation of Findings

This section is divided into four related but self-contained sections namely, 1) insights from institutional visions, 2) the discourse of institutional mission statements, 3) a case study account of institutional language policies, and 4) a critical social justice empirical narrative.

Insights from Institutional Visions

These findings are explored in relation to the main research question: “How do colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy shape the marginalisation of Indigenous languages in South African universities?” To address this research question, for example, the UoT's (2016, p. 1) Annual Report captured its vision as “A preferred University for developing leadership in technology and productive citizenship.” The HWU's (n.d.) website stated that the

University's vision is to be an outstanding internationally respected academic institution which proudly affirms its African identity, and which is committed to democratic ideals, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, sound moral values and social responsibility.

The vision of the HBU (n.d) was expressed as “Our vision is to be a distinctive African university advancing excellence and innovation in research, teaching, learning, administration and social engagement.” The three vision statements of these case study institutions are branded by the logics of competitiveness and excellence—“preferred university,” “outstanding internationally respected university” and “a distinctive African university advancing excellence.” Vision statements are ways, systems, and

practices by which institutions express their mandates and purposes. This review shows that these institutions portray a drive towards international acclaim within a market-oriented logic of excellence and productivity.

These logics of competitiveness and excellence emerging from the institutional vision statements align with Hlatshwayo's (2022) criticism of the SAHE policy and legislative framework. His view was that both the policy and legislative frameworks of SAHE are neoliberal in nature and are mainly designed to reinforce market-oriented logics and discourses. I argue that the extent to which a university assumes the status of a preferred institution, be outstanding, and become internationally acclaimed and distinct from others in the areas of research, teaching, learning, and administration reinforces a market orientation and a competitive edge. Hlatshwayo qualified his criticism of the neoliberal logic entrenched in policy and legislative framework in SAHE by clarifying that beyond the neoliberal discourse being colonial, oppressive, alienating, and unsustainable particularly for scholars in the university, neoliberal discourse tends to manifest itself in institutional practices. Vision statements are forms of practice that give institutions mandates and forms of power to pursue certain ideologies such as reaching the destiny of being the premier hub of technology, explicit in the UoT's vision.

In the case of UoT's vision of being a preferred university for developing leadership in technology and productive citizenship, Mthembu's (2024) recent master's thesis paints a different picture from both a distributive and recognitive justice perspective. The poor academic performance of first-year public relations diploma course students (largely due to their non-proficiency in English language as a language of instruction, in Mthembu's findings) shows the misrecognition of Black students' mainly Zulu and Xhosa languages and cultures in the distribution matrix of the public relations curriculum. This defeats the notion of being a preferred institution from Fraser's (2009) social justice founding principle of participatory parity.

The Discourse of Institutional Mission Statements

Mission statements play significant institutional roles and, for the purposes of this paper, are viewed as carriers of the power to control, rule, manage, and decide as illustrated in the first set of extracts from the mission statements of the three case study institutions below and in the subsequent sections. Drucker (cited in Alegre et al., 2018) described a mission statement as a written declaration used to communicate the purpose of an organisation. Those scholars observed that mission statements are widely used in practice but poorly researched in theory.

Premised on this study's objective to subject mission statements to CDA and apply a social justice lens to articulate the challenges and opportunities presented by the following mission statements of the institutions under review:

The [UoT's] mission is to excel through, a teaching and learning environment that values and supports the University community, promoting excellence in learning and teaching, technology transfer and applied research, external engagement that promotes innovation and entrepreneurship through collaboration and partnership. (UoT, 2016, p. 1)

Our mission (HBU) is to provide quality education and conduct innovative research in niche areas, contributing to socially and contextually relevant knowledge with a strong emphasis on applying digital technologies. (HBU, n.d)

The [HWU] will strive to produce outstanding internationally accredited graduates who are innovative, analytical, articulate, balanced and adaptable, with a life-long love of learning; and to strive, through teaching, research and community service, to contribute to the advancement of international scholarship and the development of the Province and Southern Africa. (HWU, n.d.)

Important themes that emerge from the above institutional statements are noteworthy. For example, the notion of community exists in the mission statements, as university community for the UoT, community service for the HWU, and implicitly as socially and contextually relevant knowledge. To put this to context, this notion of community featuring in the institutional mission statements can be better illuminated by borrowing from Pearce & David's work (cited in Alegre et al., 2018) relating to recommendation of the key components that can be deployed to understand mission statements some of which are 1) the specification of target customers and markets, 2) the identification of principal products and services, 3) the specification of the geographic domain, and 4) the identification of the core technologies. This is understandably so because mission statements initially emerged as business models and entered academia in the 1980s and 1990s. On a similar note, the community is specified and targeted as customers and part of the local market however with an emphasis on the advancement into the international scholarly market for the HWU.

In this matrix of institutional mission statements, knowledge, which is generally bound by language, is identified as the principal product used to penetrate the international market and the university community. This does not conceptually refer to the physical location of the institution but is left implicit as a university community to be served by this principal product. On the above fourth dimension of categorisation of mission statements in respect to the identification of core technologies used to advance the missions, the HBU expresses that knowledge, as is its principal product, shall be produced through the advancement and application of digital technologies. Interestingly another HBU with a very broad mission statement includes the following excerpt in its mission statement on its website:

We enhance access to higher education for under-prepared, socially and economically disadvantaged students in particular and we provide academic support services to all students of the University to ensure success in their studies.

What is important to note is that although the mission statement is crafted as student-centred, there is stark difference with its language policy which states:

In terms of the current Language Policy, [the HBU] uses English as the medium of instruction except in African languages programmes and modules and one programme: Contemporary English Language Studies and Multilingual Studies. (HBU, 2021)

The Case of Institutional Language Policies

The National Language Policy for SAHE requires universities to promote and develop South African languages as academic and scientific languages (Theledi & Masote, 2024). Of the three institutions under review, the UoT had no accessible language policy, the HBU had a very brief mention of language in its amended institutional statute of 2020, and the HWU had its language policy for a while, and its 2019 policy is the latest accessible version. This language policy vacuum stands in contradiction to the vision and mission statements and, at the same time, acts as an effective institutional practice for promoting monolingualism. For both the vision and mission statements already outlined in the preceding sections, this policy review section, affirms the tensions between the pursuit of the vision and mission for international excellence, and the neglect of multilingualism in university language policies.

The HBU's amended statute (2020, p. 10, n.p.), in the sub-section Language Policy, reads:

The language of tuition of the University is English, except where a particular language is taught, in which event that language is also used. The languages of communication of the University are English and [Indigenous language stated] depending on the nature of communication and practicability.

The University is committed to promoting multilingualism and the academic development of the official languages of South Africa through its programmes.

Section 1.2 of the HWU's (2019, n.p.) policy document states that the language policy is predicated on the following principles:

The University's language of learning and teaching is English, and the University's official business is conducted in English; Creation of an environment where language is not a barrier to equity of access, opportunity and success; Promotion of multilingualism and furthering the development of academic languages and literacies of the languages of South Africa where necessary and practicable; Creation of conditions for the use of particularly [Indigenous language stated] as a language of learning and teaching.

In this paper, I understand language as the medium through which hidden power relations are constructed and reinforced in the policy texts, and discourse as those specific ways in which language is used (Brissett & Mitter, 2017). In both the above HBU's and HWU's language policy excerpts, there is a discourse of subordination and erasure of South African Indigenous languages. English in both instances is elevated and described as the language of tuition. It is also used for conducting official university business for the HWU, and for communication purposes at the HBU.

Interestingly, the HWU's policy excerpt cited above constructs English as the supreme language and hides its superiority in an ambiguous text which states that its policy "is predicated on the principle of the creation of an environment where language is not a barrier to equity of access." The challenge with this policy text is that the historical and social context of the HWU is such that English has been, and remains the language of teaching and learning as well as language of official university business transactions. There already is language disparity both historically and in the current dispensation because teaching and learning, as well as all university business, is officially conducted in English, and the notion of equity is mentioned in disguise.

A similar disguise is expressed in the HBU's use of language in the text that states: "The languages of communication of the University are English and [indigenous language stated] depending on the nature of communication and practicability." Fairclough (cited in Brissett & Mitter, 2017, p.187) states that "CDA exposes how policies arise out of and are shaped by asymmetrical relations of power of competing discourses." The asymmetrical language power relations suggest that the choice of the language of communication depends on the nature of communication and its practicability. What are the chances that the local Indigenous language or any other Indigenous South African language would have an equal chance in practical terms to be used as an official language of communication or teaching and learning with English language which is the HBU's official language?

In another HWU's (2016, p. 6) language policy, the notion of practicability towards its implementation is vividly pronounced. The policy states:

The Language Policy and its implementation are informed by what is reasonably practicable in particular contexts. Relevant factors to be considered include . . . the number of students who will benefit from a particular mode of implementation; the academic language proficiency of the students involved; the availability and academic language proficiency of staff members; timetable and venue constraints; and the university's available resources and the competing demands on those resources.

What emerges as in the other three institutions reviewed, but more vividly, is that multilingualism is conditional and is downplayed by various human capital, infrastructural, and economic resources all beyond the control of students themselves. For example, should the university indicate that there was no

budget, the teaching of courses in Indigenous languages would not be implemented. There is therefore similarly no equitable access to Indigenous language use for academic purposes.

A Critical Social Justice Empirical Narrative

The concept of social justice has become increasingly common in education, with more education institutions integrating social justice orientations into their mission statements and practices (Spitzman & Balconi, 2019). The vision and mission statements and the challenges of multilingualism expressed in the institutional language policies have implications for social justice. Some of the empirical narratives emerge from the experiences of research participants who were students in these respective case study institutions in a different study.

A student participant (P1) who was an undergraduate at the HWU during the COVID-19 pandemic was asked a question relating to his teaching and learning experience at the time. He stated:

There was an overall sense of consideration, where a lot of learning material was made available and accessible. (Personal interview, April 2, 2023)

Another participant (P2), who was in Grade 12 in the first year of the pandemic and first year at the UoT in the following year, related his own teaching and learning experience at university:

At high school it was the first time to be introduced to the use of personal protective equipment and teachers were no longer audible [in] their masks. This worsened the following year at university because I could hardly hear lecturers who were English first language speakers whom I was exposed to for the first time, and it became a challenge listening to them in class and to their video lecture slides. (Personal interview, April 6, 2023)

P3 was doing her postgraduate diploma studies at the HBU and she narrated her online teaching and learning related experience during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown:

It was a matter of figuring out the new different technological approaches and platforms because different lecturers preferred different teaching platforms and as student one remained uncertain whether the class session was going to be conducted on MS Teams, Blackboard, or otherwise. (Personal interview, 02 April 2023)

The technological infrastructure in the country was or is still not ready to accommodate the various digital ways of teaching and learning and it made one remain uncertain if material would be delivered and class sessions held as scheduled. (Personal interview, April 2, 2023)

In reading P1's narrative above that the HWU had considered making learning material accessible, we need to go back to the principles of social justice in teaching and learning. Spitzman & Balconi (2019) helped us to do so by asserting that social justice in teaching and learning accounts for the power imbalances inherent in communication and the multi-faceted nature of identities of students so that they are all able to learn from the same curriculum. Although P1 mentioned that learning material was made available to learners, this study established that English was the HWU's language of tuition. Themane & Mabasa (2022) perceived access as more than a physical concept but as the creation of an enabling environment by providing resources. Thus, although learning material was distributed and made physically accessible (provision of digital gadgets for online teaching and learning), multilingualism was not used as an enabling environment to uphold social and justice teaching and learning principles.

The English-based tuition system of universities was lamented by P2 as cited above who found it difficult to comprehend English-based video course materials developed by lecturers who were English-first-language speakers. The video course material was a challenge from Fraser's (2009) redistributive social justice perspective. For example, Tabe and Emekako (2025) related Fraser's concept of redistributive justice

to calls for equitable access to resources. The monolingual nature of institutional curricula hindered equitable epistemic access for students, particularly Black students like P2, who faced a dual challenge: firstly, of navigating the barrier of English language, and secondly, of grappling with content-related challenges compared to their native English-speaking peers.

Universities adopted “online teaching and learning models which exposed the depth of digital divide and digital inequality among students from different socio-economic backgrounds” (Baleni 2024, p. 6). This was echoed by P3, who reflected on her experiences with infrastructure-based technological challenges, alongside the demand for basic ICT skills required for students to participate in the various online teaching and learning models used and preferred by different lecturers. Tabe and Emekako (2025) emphasised that Fraser’s (2009) notion of recognition refers to the acknowledgement of marginalised groups and their experiences. The institution, although historically disadvantaged itself, failed to acknowledge that its diverse student population was from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Some were first-generation university students without any basic ICT basic knowledge or digital technological appreciation.

P3’s elaboration of the digital remote teaching challenges the HBU experienced during the lockdown, which left students uncertain if they would access course materials or get connected to online classes as scheduled, speak to the question of representation in Fraser’s (2009) social justice theory. Tabe and Emekako (2025) further clarified that Fraser’s social justice dimension of representation makes an emphasis on the importance of consideration of the voices of those marginalised in decision making processes. Similarly, there was no social justice representation in the digital remote teaching strategies for the accommodation of students who had no ICT skills or who had ICT-related infrastructural challenges to access internet services to connect to online classes.

Analysis of Findings

In the previous section, I presented the findings drawing from vision statements, mission statements, and institutional documents and an empirical section on the experiences of students at the institutional case studies during the COVID-10 pandemic. In this section, I was guided by the CDA–social justice frameworks, to interrogate how language is used, not merely as a medium of communication, but as a mechanism of power, identity formation, and exclusion within SAHE. I explored how institutional texts reflect, reproduce, or challenge broader social injustices in the context of multilingual transformation. The integration of CDA and social justice frameworks allowed for a nuanced interrogation of institutional language use, going beyond discourse production to explore how meaning is constructed around the challenges of multilingualism in what Hlatshwayo (2020) and Maluleke (2021) described as the unequal, fragmented, and intersectional SAHE landscape.

The findings revealed several discourses of injustice. The first key finding relates to the English-only orientation of all mission and vision statements of all the case study universities. This exclusive use of English implies a deliberate marginalisation of local languages, reinforcing the dominance and supremacy of English as the sole language of academic and institutional life, which reinforces similar findings highlighted in Mthembu’s (2024) thesis. There is a sense that what is meant by language in the institutional texts does not translate to the reality social of social recognition, representation, and distribution justice.

The second major theme emerging from the findings concerns institutional autonomy in language policy. While universities are at liberty to choose their language of instruction, depending on geographic context, this autonomy rarely benefits African languages. As Mzangwa (2019) observed, no subjects, modules, or courses (aside from African language studies themselves) are taught in local languages, even in institutions located in predominantly African-language-speaking areas. The institutional language

policies remain barriers of multilingualism in this context, as teaching and learning remain in mainstream English language.

In this study, this institutional autonomy manifested in uneven policy practices. Only the HWU had an accessible language policy. The UoT had no policy, and the HBU (2020) made only passing reference to language in its amended statute. This suggests that multilingual transformation is not a current institutional priority in SAHE. All three institutions reviewed were explicit that English was their official language of teaching and business. Furthermore, their mission statements reinforced a commitment to providing quality education and innovative research using digital technologies—again, framed entirely through an English-language lens.

This continued monolingual orientation undermines national calls for transformation and decolonisation in higher education. In practice, the push for multilingualism to achieve decolonisation and transformation remains largely driven by grassroots activism, particularly from movements such as the Must Fall student movements. As Baleni (2025, p. 102) noted, “the framing of transformation as a radical act of immediacy, as opposed to the politics and processes of gradualism,” calls for urgent, far-reaching changes to undo the marginalisation of South African Indigenous languages.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stark revelation of these language injustices. It reinforced how the dominance of English continues to hinder equitable epistemic access, particularly for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The findings underscore that universities have not just maintained, but have actively entrenched a monolingual posture, perpetuating social injustice through the continued marginalisation of Indigenous languages in teaching, learning, and institutional identity.

Conclusion

The overarching argument is that SAHE stands at a crossroads, faced with a disjuncture between national legislative frameworks that call for transformation and the continued monolingual orientations of institutions. The dominance of English in SAHE has facilitated both self-preservation and the marginalisation, and in some cases, possible extermination of African languages in academia. The absence of a comprehensive language policy at the UoT suggests an implicit belief in the higher education community that Indigenous languages lack the sophistication required for science and technology and are, therefore, not viable for research, teaching, and learning.

Like higher education institutions globally, SAHE operates within a neoliberal economic context that promotes the corporatisation of universities. This global competitiveness, driven by international rankings, often comes at the expense of local cultures, knowledges, and languages. This study provided a foundational perspective on these dynamics. Future research should build on this baseline by exploring empirical dimensions of pedagogy, technology, and curriculum development, for example, to explore academic possibilities and alternatives that can be modelled to enhance non-proficient English speakers' academic performance in English-based curricula. Such work should consider what a truly multilingual African university might look like administratively, globally, financially, and in terms of the composition and identity of its student body.

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