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Misconceptions, Misalignments, and Mismatches: Theory, Praxis, Policies, and Models of Language, Languaging, and Multilingualism in a Neoliberal Education

Sibusiso Clifford Ndlangamandla
ORCID No: 0000-0001-5259-9711
University of South Africa
cndlanga@unisa.ac.za

Berrington Ntombela
ORCID No: 0000-0002-8099-402X
University of Limpopo
Berrington.ntombela@ul.ac.za

Nomalungelo Ngubane
ORCID No: 0000-0002-7255-4673
University of the Free State
NgubaneNI@ufs.ac.za

Abstract

There are mismatches between ontologies of language and languaging, on the one hand, and language policy or language teaching, on the other. South Africa has a proliferation of policies in both the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training, with limited implementation and desired outcome, in other words, a misalignment of policies with curriculum. In addition, institutions tend to follow a populist and simplistic misdiagnosis of problems, and misconceptualisation of language and multilingualism and therefore perpetuate the mismatches of policies and implementation. Consequently, these policies have failed to achieve equity and social justice in higher education. In our view, this is a context where ideologically, language policy is influenced by a love for both monolingualism and multilingualism by institutions and government. Language sciences, such as sociolinguistics and the entire field of applied linguistics and linguistics were meant to focus on monolingualism. Language dialects and official languages are contested in post-apartheid South Africa against the historical unequal apartheid legacies of universities, which influenced them based on racialised laws and desegregation. The paper is underpinned by three questions: "What is a language?" "What ontologies/theories and models of language, languaging, and multilingualism inform multilingual policies in education?" and "How can Southern ontologies of language, languaging, and multilingualism promote equity, justice, change, and transformation?" In answering these questions, we draw on the coloniality and decoloniality of language and communication, and explore what it could mean to decolonise language and communication in a university context, despite the abiding and enduring existence of the project of capitalist neoliberal principles and policies governing higher education. For instance, the intersection of translanguaging, neoliberalism, and decolonisation seen in the historically diverse institutions of higher learning in South Africa militates against social justice and equity. Therefore, this paper argues for ontological models of language, languaging, and multilingualism for justice, transformation, and equity.

Keywords: ontologies of language, languaging, models of multilingualism, Southern multilingualism

Introduction

South Africa is currently in a multilingual turn. Every person who is involved in education, including all stakeholders of language education, has opinions about concepts such as language, multilingualism, and language policy. These opinions may be academic or non-academic. Therefore, in a schooling and university setting, definitions of language and multilingualism should inform language theories, praxis, policies, and models of multilingualism when applied to the various types of educational institutions in order to achieve the goals of justice, equity, and decolonisation, among others. In the presence of a myriad of definitions, hegemonic Western voices tend to dominate. Exploring the ontology of language and multilingualism may help in delineating the trajectory of equity, transformation, and social change. Ndlangamandla (2022) expressed discontentment (including misconceptions) with mainstream views of languages, multilingualism, and transformation that are expressed through language policies and language teaching in the democratic South Africa, and invited further research. The following research questions are advanced in this conceptual and theoretical paper.

1. What is a language?
2. What ontologies/theories, and models of language, languaging, and multilingualism inform multilingual policies in education?
3. How can Southern ontologies of language, languaging, and multilingualism promote equity, justice, change, and transformation?

In South Africa, neoliberalism is mystified through politically correct terms like social justice, empowerment, decolonisation, and transformation. This is despite evidence that suggests neoliberalism manifests in the form of commercial values, competition, monetisation, and metrification (e.g. Knoetze, 2024). Therefore, policies that appear to be for social and public good are created without implementation while at the same time, perpetuating epistemic injustices and inequality due to misalignments, misconceptions, and mismatches. There is a need to interrogate concepts by expanding conceptual categories to embrace Southern theory. According to Makoni et al. (2023, p. 1), "Southern theory emerges from its advocates' experiences and understanding of colonization and is empowered by the moral argument against colonization and its successor states." Southern theory has ushered in a pluriversal understanding of the Global North and Global South. The term "Global South" has multiple geographic and geopolitical connotations. We use it to refer to the context of South Africa, which is still suffering from the legacy of both apartheid and colonialism, particularly for the majority of Indigenous languages. In the Global South, a Southern multilingualism goes beyond Western understandings of language, into non-linguistic matters, to bring about genuine change, decolonisation, and transformation. Reilly et al. (2022) described the situation in many countries in postcolonial African countries where multilingualism is acknowledged but not empirically evident in education. They advocated for a rethinking of multilingualism that should result in language policy implementation. Our approach is grounded in the ontological turn in second language acquisition, world Englishes, multilingualism, and language policy (e.g. Ortega, 2018). The paper is organised into the seven sections as follows: conceptualising language as an analytical and empirical category; models of multilingualism across basic and higher education and outside education; multilingual language policies; alignment and mismatches in multilingual language policies; equity, transformation, social change in a neoliberal and/or decolonising perspective; Southern multilingualism: limits and possibilities; and a conclusion.

Conceptualising Language as an Analytical and Empirical Category

Language is at the centre of human existence, human dignity, rights, justice, economy, science, decolonisation, transformation, neoliberalism and so on. Experts and non-experts claim "expertise" in language by virtue of speaking, studying, birthright, mother tongue, identity, and so forth. Once terms, words, and concepts expand or shift in semantics, there are bound to be contradictions, misconceptions, and mismatches in any application, especially an applied linguistics application of "language" that purportedly originates from what can be regarded as the source or predecessor in the discipline of linguistics. Before engaging with the focus of the paper, we preface the discussion with Fanon (a trained psychiatrist, widely cited in decolonisation), together with his teacher Aime Cesaire, will provide evidence of the uses of language:

> To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. (Fanon, 1967, pp. 17–18, cited in Singh, 2017, p. 70)

According to Fanon, the act of speaking is locational, and it carries the historical (colonial) pressure encompassed by language. The speaker is situated in time and space (spatio-temporal) and is also entangled with the power of language: "The colonized subject who speaks a language he has inherited by force comes to 'exist absolutely' for his master" (Fanon, 1967, pp. 17–18, cited in Singh, 2017, p. 70).
Aime Cesaire (who was, importantly here, Fanon's teacher) described his use of French as innovative:

> Whether I want to or not, as a poet I express myself in French, and clearly French literature has influenced me. But I want to emphasize very strongly that—while using a point of departure the elements that French literature gave me—I have always striven to create a new language, one capable of communicating the African heritage. In other words, for me French was a tool that I wanted to use in developing a new means of expression. I wanted to create an Antillean French, a Black French that, while still being French, had a Black character. (Cesaire, 2001, p. 83, cited in Singh, 2017, p. 83).

Both Fanon and Cesaire emphasised contextualisation and adaptation of what it means to speak a language in a colonial setting. They further presented an alternative view of how to name and describe the types of languages that emerge in contact zones, such as Antillien French or Black French. These views from what has come to be known as decolonial approaches help to clarify the research problem in this paper.

Language theorisation must be applicable to solving and/or analysing language problems in higher education. In South Africa, English was introduced through settler colonialists, and several scholars have attributed this to the continuation of the coloniality of English (Hurst-Harosh, 2015; Ndlangamandla, 2024,). The continuing use of English as a medium of instruction in South Africa is contrary to multilingual language policies. Moreover, language acts as a barrier to some of the educational goals, therefore language leads to epistemic injustices in higher education (Ndlangamandla, 2024). A form of multilingualism with English is gaining ground in South African higher education. Yet various issues have led to misconceptualisation, misalignments, and mismatches resulting in the failure to implement multilingualism through language policies. We therefore propose an ontological shift through raising the questions: "What is language?" "Or, what is its nature?"

These are ontological questions that are ignored by many professionals in applied linguistics and yet they (applied linguists and non-applied linguists, alike) teach language, assess language, implement language policies, and research language acquisition. Ortega (2018) explored how both second language acquisition and World Englishes have been preoccupied with essentialist ontologies for decades, starting from Saussurean structuralism (referring to Ferdinand De Saussure's 1912 introduction) going onto Chomskyan generativism (referring to Noam Chomsky's 1956 Universal Grammar), and many others. Examples of essentialist approaches to language are language as a system, language as a structure, language as bounded, and language as fixed. We also add Western universalism to this list. Decolonialising language, and multilingualism, will require a shift to non-essentialist ontologies. Ndlangamandla (2024) argued that ontologies of language have received less attention in the contexts of both monolingualism and multilingualism, in a paper that drew on ontological decolonisation and relational ontologies (e.g. Escobar, 2016).

Language planning tends to be based on language as a fixed and static code. Makoni et al. (2022) rejected the idea of language as a fixed code and an autonomous system; instead of thinking of language as an autonomous system, they regarded language as a product of communication activity. This is a radical view of language and communication, which has more appeal to Southern theories and epistemologies, integrational linguistics, and decolonial linguistics (c.f. Makoni et al., 2021. Pennycook (2020) asked ontological questions such as, "What is the relation between the instantiation of English as a static, fixed, tested, and taught subject and its flexible, plural, diverse, and chaotic use?" This question is in line with disinventing and reconstitution of languages (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). Pennycook and Makoni were

concerned with the disinventing of Western categories and discursive metaregimes of languages and instead, invited a reconstitution of African languages.

Some scholars have made philosophical and empirical arguments that language is a verb and not a noun, and some even go further into the verbiage by using the construct *languaging* (Madsen & Norreby, 2019; Swain, 2006). Both language and languaging are worth an ontological excavation. Languaging refers to a broad cover term for speaking, reading, listening, signing, and interpreting sign language, and "languages are products of reflection on languaging brought into being by and through languaging about languaging" (Love, 2017, p. 117). Gynne and Bagga-Gupta (2015, p. 518) explained languaging as the dynamic and social use of different linguistic features for creating and negotiating meaning, observing that languaging "is both heteroglossic and chained in the sense that different linguistic varieties and modalities are employed and interconnected in the practice." Languaging and heteroglossia can also overlap (Gynne & Bagga-Gupta, 2015). Some scholars choose one or the other when investigating similar situations of language as a social practice.

Languaging has been widely described from various approaches, for example, sociolinguistics, pedagogical, sociocultural, and dialogical (e.g. Dahlberg & Bagga-Gupta, 2014; Madsen & Norreby, 2019) and, in this paper, language teaching and language policy implementation in higher education. In language teaching, some scholars have considered the issue of "languaging language" in language teaching (Madsen & Norreby, 2019, p. 4), and further used the notion of translanguaging by locating it in two opposing views—one from sociolinguistics and another in education. Such disconnection and dissonances could be said to be epistemic, that is, descriptive and prescriptive, or even drawing on the notion of centrifugal and centripetal (Bakhtin, 1981). Moreover, others have investigated languaging without languages (Sabino, 2018). Views about languaging were complexified by Pennycook and Makoni (2020, p. 44) when they maintained that languaging practices can be divided into abstract and concrete language features. For example, they made a distinction between "first-order" activities and "second order" concepts, with "the first referring to real communicative activity, and the second to the kind of abstraction that leads to the naming and claiming of languages."

The notion of languaging in higher education has been featured in a compendium of chapters (e.g. Makoni et al., 2022), who argued that the:

> Creation and development of multilingual practices in the context of institutions of knowledge production and dissemination play an important role in the problematization of the hegemony of English as an academic and economic lingua franca.

There is a plethora of scholarship on languaging (Sabino, 2018), which has partly been caused by the global interest and the ubiquity of (trans)languaging. However, prior to the onslaught of translanguaging, the concept of languaging was already used in applied linguistics (e.g. Makoni, 2003). Our view is based on language as social action, as activity, as observed through social interaction, by drawing on dialogicality and sociocultural theories. We draw on several scholars to support this view. For instance, Madsen and Nørreby (2019, p. 4) observed:

> Languaging as verb (rather than language as noun) signals that language itself is a practice and that exact meaning is not inscribed or encoded a priori in language but created in its situated use.

Such first-order activities include "a whole range of bodily resources that are assembled and coordinated in languaging events together with external (extrabodily) aspects of situations, environmental affordances, artifacts, technologies, and so on" (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020, p. 44). And in the second order, they observed that the main problem comes when:

> We get this sequence the wrong way round and assume that language use is a second-order instantiation of the first-order things called languages, rather than understanding languages as second-order abstractions of communicative activity. (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020, pp. 44–45)

Conceptually, these languaging practices can further be theorised as belonging to abstract and concrete language features. Similarly, Anward and Linell (2016, p. 37) exclaimed:

> We advocate a first-order (primary) level of actions/activities and languaging (signings, wordings, etc. for those who wish to have more verb-derivatives) and a second-order (secondary) level of utterance patterns but also abstracted linguistic resources such as signs and sign concatenations (words, grammatical constructions, etc.).

Anward and Linell (2016) argued that languaging is primary to the second-order language system. This language system is different from what traditional linguists have ascribed; rather, it consists of more dynamic linguistic resources.

Distinguishing the abstract from the concrete, Ndlangamandla (2020) illustrated the first order as the actual online language use, and the second order as the naming, sociopolitical, policy, policing, and so forth. He argued that the binary and dialectic between first order and second order is what leads to the mismatches when it comes to language policy and teaching through technology. However, this view has to be further interrogated; there is no clear division between first order and second order, primary and secondary, the two exist in a continuum. For example, Makalela and da Silva (2023) provided a Southern theoretical apparatus of ubuntu translanguaging based on the African value system of ubuntu—an interconnectedness of empirical beings found in the slogan: "I am because you are: you are because I am" (Makalela, 2016, p. 191). However, this view points to infinite and transversal relations of dependency between languages, and does not provide sufficient guidelines on measurability, actual practices, and implementation.

Furthermore, there is a growing body of literature on multilingual literacies and technology in the Global South (e.g. Martin-Jones et al., 2011; Ndlangamandla, 2023). Martin-Jones et al. (2011) described a critical, multi-layered approach to the study of language policy as the first special issue collection of papers to focus on literacy and language policy in multilingual and multiscriptal settings in the Global South. Ndlangamandla (2023) described a combination of socio-technologies, technolinguistic practices, and digital literacies as the mainstay of language and technology, especially in online learning where access and diversity are crucial. Studies of language policy must include multiliteracies. Therefore, the above debates on language and education provide an opportunity to investigate the models of multilingualism necessary for education to deliver on its mandate of access, redress, and equity while acknowledging the complex political and neoliberal context of higher education.

Models of Multilingualism Across Basic and Higher Education and Outside Education

Not many studies focus on models of multilingualism, yet models and frameworks are crucial in contextualising language policy implementation. Storto et al. (2023) argued that a model is an abstraction or a conceptual representation of how multilingualism should be understood, taught, practised, implemented, and researched. Very few studies on multilingualism in South Africa are of a conceptual nature (e.g. McKinney et al., 2024) and offer a model; a majority of scholars and "bureaucrats" are only jumping on the band wagon and using biases, idiosyncratic ideology, and in most cases, the neoliberal capital system, especially the translanguaging band wagon. Aronin and Moccoret (2021, cited in Storto et al., 2023, p. 5) described models as "forms of representation of the world created to explain and facilitate the understanding of phenomena that are usually too complex and multi-faceted to observe directly."

In our view, how multilingualism is defined and understood translates into or impacts existing beliefs, including the monolingual bias, for instance, Aronin and Moccoret (2023, p. 1070, explained that multilingual individuals "have language proficiency that is not simply the sum of their skills in the several languages they have mastered or are mastering." Therefore, Storto et al. (2023, p. 6) argued that this synergistic effect suggests that whole "multilingual proficiency" is always more than the sum of its parts.
A theory of multilingualism, or multilingualism as a theory, should lead into a coherent model. Some theories of multilingualism may not be useful for language education and other decolonial agendas. Southern epistemologies have also weighed into this debate by appealing to sociopolitical concerns and social impacts of language in the Global South. Previously these contexts have been marginalised in the grand theorisation of Western linguistics. Ngué Um (2020, p. 110) made a viable argument that if Saussure's mind had been informed by Wolof or Basaa (both African languages in Cameroon) worldviews, perhaps some of the dichotomies about langue and parole would have been postulated axiomatically, for example, by acknowledging that speech in many African languages is "a cognitive representation of the verbal experience like a fluid, dynamic and complex rather than a monolithic entity."

The discipline of sociolinguistics has given less attention to multilingualism, and not foregrounded this because of being preoccupied with its methods. Reilly et al. (2022) described the situation in many countries in postcolonial African countries, advocating for a rethinking of multilingualism that should result in language policy implementation. This is because sociolinguistics and indeed, the entire field of applied linguistics and linguistics were meant to focus on monolingualism. Makoni and Pennycook (2020, p. 237) explained that many of the languages in South Africa, for example isiXhosa, have numerous spoken dialects. Abdelhay et al. (2020, p. 3) argued:

> Any institutionalised choice of a linguistic variety as official medium of conducting formal politics and education has significant stratificational effects on the groups and individuals whose varieties are systematically excluded and devalued.

However, even when sociolinguistics is the focus, the fields of sociolinguistics and language policy do not always have a synergy (e.g. Bhatt et al., 2022). This has been identified as the dynamism of sociolinguistics in a languagised world (e.g. Jaspers & Madsen, 2016). In our view, technologies and language usage are exposing the weaknesses of top-down policies in South Africa, which tend to favour a limited version of multilingualism, or parallel monolingualism (e.g. Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). If sociolinguistics is fully utilised, any variety or dialect can be selected and, under the right institutional conditions, the official policy can be implemented, (Abdelhay et al., 2020).

Therefore, this paper concerns itself with both languaging and multilingualism as theories that may provide a conceptual model and a theoretical framework for teaching multilingually, learning multilingually, and doing away with English-medium instruction. For example, Liu (2018) observed that both language policy and English-medium instruction have a major impact on internationalisation of higher education to the exclusion of local languages, and including the failure of existing national language policies in South Africa.

Critical studies on language policy and language use question the relevance of advocating heteroglossia in educational and public policy contexts (Bhatt et al., 2022; Jaspers, 2019; Jaspers & Madsen, 2016). Jaspers (2019) called for some political justification of the selections that are made in the sociolinguistic realities, more consideration of values than facts, and a critical view of language policy against language education as a multiple/multidimensional ongoing relationship between policymakers and teachers. Teachers, or lecturers in the case of universities, must make choices about language policy. Makoni and Pennycook (2024, p. 19) observed:

> We need instead models that question the very foundations that underpin such linguistic simplifications, research that looks at different ways of understanding language, that takes on board Southern insights about language chains, communicative repertoires, and the need to pluralize not so much languages as the notion of language itself.

There are several models of multilingualism that are European in nature (e.g. Dominant Language Constellation and Dynamic Model of Multilingualism), however, we call for more research on Southern multilingualism (e.g. Makoni & Pennycook, 2024; McKinney et al., 2024). In the Global South, scholars have warned against universal definitions of multilingualism: “the very idea that multilingualism could refer to the same thing in diverse contexts of communication is revealed as an absurdity.” (Makoni & Pennycook, (2020, p. 191).

There is a growing body of scholarship that seeks to depart from the idea of code-based depictions of linguistic behaviour, and highlight (trans)languaging, languaging as assemblage, temporality, and materiality of language through an ontological approach. Gurney and Demuro (2019) argued that both translanguaging and assemblage analysis are making a significant contribution in the ontological turn of language/languaging for particularly sociolinguistic and language policy research. Instead of viewing language as a code, they focus on dynamic processes, and practices that attempt to explain the complexity, materiality, and temporality of language. By moving away from orthodox views of language ideologies, they open a gap for language, communication, technology, and language policy—especially what continues to be labelled as English and multilingualism. They argued that language cannot only be viewed as practice. Instead, it can be practice, product, or other.

Multilingual Language Policies

Multilingualism is undoubtedly the organising idea in the understanding of language realities in South Africa. Its centrality in the South African Constitution is a departure from the bilingual language policy that characterised the apartheid regime (Matshanisi & Ntombela, 2024); its justification in the Constitution is legitimated by a project of redressing linguistic imbalances of the past. The imbalance was caused by the recognition of only Afrikaans and English in the bilingual language policy as the only official languages. The two languages were languages of the privileged Whites whose advantage has continued in perpetuity.

However, there has been a marked resistance by institutions of higher learning to adopt the aspirations of multilingualism as enacted in the Constitution. The obvious reason for that is the fact that institutions of higher learning are by and large the constructions of the apartheid regime, in which language played a pivotal role. In terms of language, institutions of higher learning in South Africa were largely divided into English and Afrikaans. Demographically, institutions were divided into urban and rural, where the rural catered for Black South Africans with meagre amenities compared to their urban counterparts. Rural Black institutions were aligned to the Afrikaans language, for example, Hlatshwayo (2020) argued that proper policies are still required to address institutional differentiation and fragmentation between historically White universities and historically Black universities.

The officialisation of the nine African languages alongside English and Afrikaans meant unequal development where higher institutions of learning opted for the status quo. The status quo was found to be convenient because it played on the aspirations of globalisation and internationalisation, which operate in the same way as the imperialistic colonial expansion. Therefore, both these languages (Afrikaans and English) are a gateway for neoliberal policies.

Social movements and protests have forced institutions to address transformation and decolonisation, for example, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall in 2015. Events outside universities and social movements have challenged institutional language policies and often resulted in court cases. Court judgements then precipitate and propel language policy actions. Wu (2024, p. 4) asserted that “language policy is a metalinguistic practice (language practice regulating language practices), and that the regulation of language is entrenched within an ecology of extra-linguistic processes.” He further claimed that language policy rarely has language as an end but often rather, as a means to maintaining transgressing and creating societal boundaries.

Multilingual policies are precipitated by extra-linguistic factors, political changes, and constitutional imperatives, and they sometimes perpetuate historical inequalities of higher education. Nonetheless, lecturers and students have been shown to be agents and active in implementing innovative and transformative pedagogical approaches, for example, Mendelowitz et al. (2023) described theory and course design through language narratives and shifting multilingual pedagogies. They demonstrated how language narratives capture students’ identities against hegemonic English, and show agency through multilingual realities and intersectional identities of place, time, and sociopolitical landscape.

Alignments and Mismatches in Multilingual Language Policies

At times, theories contradict each other, do not fit social realities, and undermine the goal of Indigenous communities who want to revitalise their languages by, for example, translanguaging (see Bonnin & Unamuno, 2021; McKinney et al., 2024). For instance, there seems to be a mismatch between ontologies of language and languaging, on the one hand, and language policy or language teaching, on the other. Somlata (2020) observed that the continued use of English as a medium of instruction results in unequal access to education, high dropout rates, low academic performance, and therefore, the perpetuation of a post-apartheid unequal society. Heugh (2015, p. 281), in a special issue of *Language and Education*, expressed a mismatch “between what seem to be policies and practices borrowed from the north and realities of the contemporary south.” Kiramba (2016) described similar mismatches with language policies geared towards young children in primary schools in Kenya. Mkhize (2022) described these as fluid and flexible multilingualisms in higher education in South Africa.

The coloniality of language has been observed as a major instrument of colonialism and Western linguistic imperialism (e.g. Veronelli, 2015). Therefore, Chaka and Ndlangamandla (2025) called for Southern

multilingualisms as a counterbalance to Eurocentric and colonial nation-state views for framing and for theorising language. They cautioned against essentialising and romanticising terms like "African languages," and "Indigenous languages" where these languages are not granted any recognition politically, economically, educationally, and so on. Such an understanding of language would require an ontologically Southernised view of languages and a Southern approach to applied linguistics (Hamid et al., 2024; Pennycook, 2023).

Equity, Transformation, Social Change in a Neoliberal and/or Decolonising Perspective

The history of inequality in higher educational institutions has never been resolved, even after the demise of the apartheid regime (Shaik, 2020). With its moorings on the Eurocentric logics, which thrive on individualism and capitalist orientation, higher education institutions in South(ern) Africa have not been able to unbundle themselves but have continually worked in complicit to promote the marketisation and capitalisation of knowledge at the expense of social change. The outcry of students to decolonise education has fallen on deaf ears, as administrators of higher education seem to have struck off their agenda the notion of decolonisation of education (Heleta & Dilraj, 2024; Ntombela, 2020). It goes without saying that the gap between the haves (in the form of historically White institutions) and the have-nots (which are historically Black institutions) continues to widen, reflective of the societal dynamics of the rich and poor.

What then is the envisaged social change in the neoliberal university? If a university's current situation is the result of years of immersion in neoliberalism, its version of social change will inevitably conflict with the aspirations of society. Therefore, universities have been the sites of alienation for students, especially those of African grounding (Ntombela, 2020). Africanness has been frowned upon in universities as representative of barbarism; thus, the project of universities has been seen as a project of civilising, thereby alienating students from their African cultural heritage. Language has been and continues to be at the centre of marginalising African students. That is, in a neoliberal arrangement, English continues to be the default language with economic cache, regardless of its dehumanising outcomes as barrier to epistemic access for the majority.

Therefore, the mandate to transform remains elusive for universities sold to a neoliberal arrangement. Part of that lies in the fact that universities, previously and now, remain sites of protest for students whose representation is obscured within the capitalist foundation of institutions. Institutions under a neoliberal system operate with a managerial hierarchical top-down system that mutes the voices of the subordinate and subaltern. Consequently students, as well as academics, are only seen as implementers of policies that descend from those who executively run institutions—and the whole idea of knowledge engagement, critique, and thinking is dismissed as insubordination, rebellion, and antagonistic. Thus, institutions are only seen as companies that must churn out the graduate product in terms and conditions laid out by executives who must also toe the line marked by regulators, watchdogs, government, and donors. Graduates must, in turn, satisfy the needs of the markets—even if such needs are alien to self and society.

Southern Multilingualism: Limits and Possibilities

Although there has been historical denial of multilingualism as the reality in linguistic societies, due to the Western notion of organising nation-states in singular languages, nations in the Global South lived with multilingualism for centuries (Probyn, 2019). Whilst multilingualism has been approached from a problematic orientation, seen as a disturbance from a singular language establishment, it continues to be seen as a resource by various communities in the Global South (Ngubane & Ntombela, 2024). In fact, linguistic diversity and cultural multiplicity are phenomena that are celebrated in the Global South.

Nonetheless, the education system the world over continues to be hinged on Western notions of civilisation and ethos built on singularity of thought and individualism (Ntombela, 2017). As a result, education is conceived to be the mastery of knowledge wrapped in a singular language. Because education was used as a civilising agent in the colonial expansion, the language of the coloniser continues to preside over all forms of knowledge to the extent that to know is tantamount to knowing the colonial language. Unfortunately, this obliterates the advantage of multilingualism if it does not involve a colonial language.

Notwithstanding such a complex situation, approaching multilingualism from a decolonial perspective promises to elevate marginalised languages to an equal footing with hegemonic languages (de Vos & Riedel, 2023). In South Africa, the Constitution has used multilingualism to achieve parity of status in all official languages including the formerly marginalised African and Sign languages. This of course has not been without resistance. Higher institutions of learning have often used escape clauses in the Constitution and language in education policy to maintain the status quo. Even with the new framework for language policy in higher education, there is reluctance to break from colonial languages as sole media of instruction—African languages are often conceived merely as pedagogical scaffolding, especially for struggling students. Kamwangamalu (2025) described escape clauses as those elements in language policies that covertly favour English in the country's educational system—including student protests that call for the fall of Afrikaans at the continued increase of English, and at the expense of Indigenous languages. With time, nevertheless, and with the right decolonial tools, multilingualism involving only African languages should be a future reality.

Conclusion

This paper raises ontological questions and does not seek to reify categories such as "language," "languaging," and "multilingualism" that have let down transformation and decolonisation. Reification, which is widely pervasive in language scholarship, creates the opposite problem. It leads us to assume that the things/practices/concepts we have named have a reality that precedes (and presumably persists beyond) the life of our empirical and theoretical explorations (Makoni et al., 2023). To dismantle monolingualism and assure in multilingual language policies, and attain the ideals of the South African constitution, there needs to be research, conceptualisation, ontological frameworks, and contextual definitions of multilingualisms—especially Southern multilingualisms because the Global North cannot articulate solutions for the Global South. A recent publication (Makoni et al., 2023) has proposed seven principles to develop models of language that are appropriate to a pluriversal world: 1) innovation, 2) animation, 3) transgression, 4) infiltrate, 5) elevate, 6) appropriate, and 7) population.

This ontological shift will require an ontological framework that can inform the models of multilingualism for future research and application. We are aware that there may well be very little of this happening in institutions of higher learning presently. We therefore, encourage these democratising sites (Soudien, 2024) to expand, infiltrate, and allow social change.

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