

Scaffolding African Language Intellectualisation: The Case of Sesotho and Setswana at a South African University

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Abstract—The call for the intellectualisation of African languages has become a topical agenda towards their use as languages of teaching and learning in institutions of higher learning in Africa. In their enunciation of language policies, South African universities are guided by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)'s Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (LPPHEI). The thrust of this paper is to interrogate how the language policy of one university in South Africa enables the intellectualisation of African languages. The study deploys Ruiz's notion of language as a resource to examine the potential embedded within the university's language policy to foster the intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana for use as LoTLs in a variety of disciplines. The university is one of the institutions of higher learning with the most recently revised language policy approved in 2022, hence its selection as the case study. The paper concludes that an enabling language policy that speaks to the linguistic realities, coupled with a variety of support structures within the university and also spelling out the implementation plan is what will result in the fruitful re-intellectualisation of African languages.

Index Terms—intellectualisation, African languages, university language policy, re-intellectualisation, languages of teaching and learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)'s directive on language policy, there has been an increasing trend to promote the use and advancement of African languages as Languages of Teaching and Learning (LoTLs) in South African universities. This drive has also amplified the debates about and efforts towards their intellectualisation. This paper analyses the language policy of a university in South Africa (The University) to establish the extent to which it provides for the intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana. Metz (2015) avers that one of the key tools that universities can use to Africanise their institutional culture is through policing language use. Subsequently, there have been calls by various researchers for the intellectualisation of African languages to function alongside ex-colonial languages in all academic discourses instead of merely teaching them as language subjects at certain academic levels. Accordingly, Alexander (2007) reiterates that intellectualised languages are capable of use in any academic discipline as LoTLs at all levels of education without any challenges. Similarly, Bamgbose (2011) notes that the intellectualisation of languages extends their use to wider domains. Intellectualisation is therefore a process of modernising languages so that they can function effectively in communicating ideas in all fields of academic discourse to share knowledge. Khumalo and Nkomo (2022) aver that the term 'intellectualisation' in relation to African languages is problematic because it presupposes that these languages have always been inherently deficient and incapable of functioning in higher-order domains. They argue that this attitude is a product of colonial ideologies that sought to discredit African languages and project them as inferior to English, leading to their stifled growth. The term 're-intellectualisation' is thus proffered to embody that dynamic (Khumalo & Nkomo, 2022). Alexander (2003) is of the view that every official language of South Africa should be used in the same way as English and Afrikaans. The most effective way to implement the use of African languages as LoTLs is to begin by re-intellectualising them.

Debates on the use of African languages as LoTLs or as Languages of Instruction (LoIs) at various academic levels and disciplines have been ongoing. Gumbi and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2015) argue that the use of ex-colonial languages as the sole LoTLs in schools in South African schools impedes access to education by learners who speak African languages as their first languages (L1s). Alexander (2003) therefore posits that all universities in South Africa should consider using African languages as LoTLs alongside English and Afrikaans. Scholars such as Alexander (2003) have therefore continued to agitate for the use of African languages together with English and other ex-colonial languages as LoTLs in academic contexts. One of the objectives of this paper is to demonstrate that a more realistic approach to the

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re-intellectualisation of African languages will be to consider the co-existence of languages. All languages that make up the institutional linguistic repertoire have to be utilised for teaching and learning in the classroom to facilitate effective communication.

It has been highlighted that proper implementation of a language policy without a firm policy in place is impossible (Kaschula & Maseko, 2014). This paper therefore argues that successful implementation of African languages as languages of academic discourse will not be possible if there are no effective institutional language policies to support the cause. It has been observed that the major challenge in the development of African languages for use as academic languages is also hampered by their lack of terminologies. Madadzhe (2019, p. 205) argues that “the use of African languages in higher education still leaves much to be desired”, while Khumalo and Nkomo (2022, p. 135) concur that “the use of African languages as academic languages in the country’s universities, remains handicapped by terminological problems”. There is therefore a need for universities to enact language policies that will provide roadmaps on how terminologies will be developed. University language policies that are predominantly based on status planning without paving the way for corpus planning and implementation may not be the best answer for the re-intellectualisation of African languages.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The intellectualisation of a language entails “the development of new linguistic resources for discussing and disseminating conceptual material at high levels of abstraction” (Liddicoat & Bryant, 2002, p. 1). Bamgbose (2011) views the intellectualisation of a language as a process that would empower it, improve its status and extend its functionality to intellectual contexts. According to Khumalo (2017, p. 252), “intellectualisation entails a carefully planned process of hastening the cultivation and growth of indigenous African languages so that they effectively function in all higher domains as languages of teaching and learning, research, science and technology”. The idea of language intellectualisation is to enable its use beyond general everyday conversation to other special domains such as academia, commerce, development, and compliance with technological advancements.

As already alluded to, the term ‘intellectualisation of African languages’ is problematic as it implies that these languages were never sufficiently developed to serve effective daily and specialised communication needs for their speakers. Khumalo and Nkomo (2022, p. 137) note that “in the precolonial context with a stable African epistemological order, African languages would undoubtedly serve their speakers optimally in all their intellectual activities”. One can therefore argue that African languages only began to appear inefficient with the advent of colonialism as they were now expected to carry the burden of communicating foreign concepts that were alien to them. On that note, Kaschula and Nkomo (2019) argue that because of colonisation, African languages were de-intellectualised hence the need to re-intellectualise them to catch up with English and Afrikaans and be able to handle the new intellectual order. Now that Sesotho and Setswana have to facilitate communication in a variety of disciplines in the academic arena, there is a need to scrutinise how the institution’s language policy facilitates and enables their re-intellectualisation.

In the South African academic context, the re-intellectualisation of African languages should entail the development of terms in various fields of knowledge to enable the functionality of these languages. Khumalo and Nkomo (2022) point out that terminology development and practical lexicography are the most important aspects of language re-intellectualisation. Practical lexicography is the actual process of dictionary compilation that also entails terminology development. It is not limited to the development of general dictionaries, but it also extends to specialised dictionaries in specialised fields of knowledge. Practical lexicography in this context does not entail the compilation of general dictionaries because terms for use in everyday speech are readily available in non-specialised African language dictionaries. Because African languages have been made to assume roles in academic spaces, their re-intellectualisation is imperative if they are to effectively function in these intellectual spaces. By conceptualising the development and promotion of African languages within the frame of re-intellectualisation (Khumalo & Nkomo, 2022), this paper scrutinises how the focal university’s language policy provisions support and feed into the re-intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana to function as academic languages.

Before a focused discussion on how the university’s language policy facilitates the re-intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana, it is prudent to provide a brief overview of how African language re-intellectualisation has been proceeding in other universities in South Africa. Letsoalo (2020) examined the intellectualisation of African languages at the University of Limpopo and found that although being a multilingual and multicultural institution of higher learning, the university did not adhere to its language policy as there was no parity between African languages and English. The language policy of the University of Limpopo recognises eight languages and aims to ensure parity and to promote the equitable use of English, Sesotho sa Leboa (Sepedi), Xitsonga, Tshivenda, isiNdebele, Setswana, SiSwati and Afrikaans as the main languages in the university’s hinterland (Letsoalo, 2020). The language policy stresses the need for multilingualism and equity between the co-existing languages, but this has not been fully implemented (Letsoalo, 2020). The current paper argues that there is a dialectical relationship between African language intellectualisation and university language policy implementation. This is because a language policy that calls for the use of African languages may foster their intellectualisation. On the other hand, an intellectualised language can be easily implemented for use as an academic language.

Nkwashu, Madadzhe and Kubayi (2015, p. 14) observe that, just like other official languages of South Africa, Xitsonga has undergone processes of standardisation and development so much that it can now be used in various fields of knowledge at both primary and secondary levels. However, Nkwashu et al. (2015, p. 8) note that the data that they collected “indicate that the majority of Xitsonga speakers believe that Xitsonga should not be used as a medium of instruction in tertiary education”. This is because both learners and lecturers at universities have established comfort in the use of English to the extent that it has become “extremely popular in higher education because it is viewed as the language of the corporate world as well as the language of science” (Nkwashu et al., 2015, p. 8). It is also believed that English facilitates upward social mobility and access to better economic opportunities (Lafon, 2008; Janks, 2014). It has been noted that this trend is not unique to South Africa but is also evident in other countries of the world (Groff, 2017; Kaveh, 2020). Other studies have also shown that some students have negative attitudes towards the use of African languages as academic languages. Lafon (2008), Heugh (2013), Mhlauli et al. (2015), Prah (2017), and Makhanya and Zibane (2020) argue that these negative attitudes are attributed to colonialism’s deliberate subjugation of African languages. However, Pillay (2017) notes that language attitudes are not static, but they shift as circumstances change. The dominance of English does not entail that African languages are abandoned by their speakers. Posel, Hunter and Rudwick (2020) conclude that there is no evidence that the L1 speakers of African languages have shifted to English as their L1. They also state that the English language shows no dominance in the everyday communication of African people. Ngcobo (2014) also observes how tertiary-level students’ attitudes towards the use of African languages as academic languages have been ameliorating. There is a noticeable shift from the perception of African languages by learners as incapable of functioning as academic languages. This positive attitude can be further buttressed if African languages are re-intellectualised.

The University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) has recorded successes in putting its language policy into practice and made strides towards the intellectualisation of isiZulu. Nkosi (2017) reports that in the College of Humanities, School of Education at the UKZN the use of isiZulu in teaching and learning is now taking place. Khumalo and Nkomo (2022) also note the successes of UKZN in the development and implementation of an institutional language policy and the subsequent intellectualisation of isiZulu. They note that UKZN has moved to intellectualise isiZulu through the successful compilation of three discipline-specific dictionaries. The compilation of discipline-specific dictionaries is important in the intellectualisation of a language because the process largely involves terminology development. Nkosi (2017) observes that the UKZN has also begun to offer tutorials in isiZulu. Three modules in Early Childhood Development (ECD), a component of the Post Graduate Certificate in Education, and four modules in the Bachelor of Education Honours Degree in the Languages and Arts cluster are also taught in isiZulu (Nkosi, 2017). While it may be a positive move to promote isiZulu to the status of English as an academic language, it can also be problematic by projecting isiZulu as a counter-hegemonic language that reproduces the cycle of dominance over other African languages in the university (Rudwick, 2018). It can also be another form of monolingualism that is disguised in a multilingual agenda. It could also feed the perception that the university is more interested in promoting isiZulu only as if there are no students from outside KwaZulu Natal (KZN) province who speak other African languages as their L1. The UKZN has also managed to have honours, master’s and PhD students write their dissertations in isiZulu. However, an interesting observation is that it is mostly students of literature or linguistics who write their research work in isiZulu (Nkosi, 2017). The journey towards the full intellectualisation of isiZulu should result in students from disciplines other than literature and linguistics also writing their dissertations in isiZulu. Naidoo and Gokool (2020) note that apart from the use of isiZulu as an academic language by L1 speakers, the university introduced a compulsory basic isiZulu language studies module for non-mother tongue speakers and basic isiZulu for medical students enrolled in the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) programme. However, Naidoo and Gokool (2020) note that some students have an aversion to the basic isiZulu language module because they feel the language will be of not much use after the completion of their academic programmes.

What the above reveals is that although the language policy directive from the DHET has been heeded by all public higher learning institutions in South Africa what remains problematic is the implementation of these language policies to an extent that they translate to the tangible transformation of university spaces (Drummond, 2016; Makalela & McCabe, 2013; Maseko & Siziba, 2023). In particular, the implementation of African languages as LoTLs is complicated by various factors including the attitudes of students and staff towards African languages and the colonially inherited ideology of English as the legitimate language that is equipped to handle all complex and scientific concepts, something that African languages are thought to lack (Dyers & Abongdia, 2015; Madadzhe, 2019; van der Merwe, 2022).

III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The arguments advanced in this paper are informed by Ruiz’s language as a resource orientation of language planning (Ruiz, 1984). Language as a resource is one of the three orientations to language planning with others being language as a right and language as a problem (Ruiz, 1984). The language as a resource orientation entails that every language should be valued as a “precious possession and a quintessential aspect of our humanity – one that ensures achieving or fulfilling social, economic, governmental and educational objectives (Mutasa, 2015). The language as a resource orientation is viewed in this paper as a foundation for viewing all languages as capable of communicating

knowledge in a variety of academic disciplines. For the resourcefulness of a language to be fully achieved, there is a need for it to be intellectualised in the process. The full functionality of a language in all spheres of life will render it a valuable resource. However, a language will never reach the level of full functionality without going through the process of intellectualisation first. It is therefore prudent to utilise the notion of language as a resource to understand the university's dispositions and attitudes towards indigenous African languages and their value in teaching, learning and research within the university.

IV. METHODOLOGICAL PATH

The paper uses a qualitative case study research approach as its methodology. The method of data collection is qualitative document analysis. We critically analysed the recently revised language policy of the university to make sense of its commitment to the intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana and foster their use as LoTLs. The chosen case is interesting because as a Historically White University (HWU), there are high expectations regarding inclusion of historically marginalised African languages in the university. HWUs are described as those universities that previously enrolled white students only (Makalela & McCabe, 2013). It is also used as a synonym for Afrikaans medium universities that used and promoted Afrikaans as a medium of instruction (Mwaniki, 2012). The university has also recently adopted its revised language policy in 2022. It is thus interesting to examine the changes that have occurred in the language policy in line with the ongoing discourses on the transformation of South African universities and initiatives aimed at eliminating language as a barrier to access and success for African language-speaking students who constitute a majority in universities (Thamaga-Chitja & Mbatha, 2012).

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current revised language policy of the university was adopted in June 2022 and is set to be reviewed in 2025. The first language policy of the university came into effect in 2006 and it spelt out the commitment to transform the university into a genuine functionally multilingual institution (Mutasa, 2015). Just like the previous policy, the current university policy aims “to pursue and provide for a fair and functionally multilingual university language environment” (The University, 2022, p. 1). Among other universities in South Africa, the university's language policy seems to be the only one that explicitly spells out the intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana as part of its goals. As part of its objectives, the university's language policy seeks to:

5.3. within the parameters of the principle of functional multilingualism, employ English, Setswana, Sesotho and Afrikaans as the University's languages of choice. (The University, 2022, p. 2)

According to the policy the “university's languages of choice” refers to the four languages identified by the university to be acquired, learned and developed (The University, 2022, p. 1). However, among these four languages, one gets a sense that the policy endeavours to protect English and Afrikaans as it cautions that the development of Sesotho and Setswana should not be at the expense of English and Afrikaans, even though the two languages have historically developed at the expense of African languages generally. The objective captured in section 5.4 below speaks to this disposition:

5.4 without diminishment of the use of English and Afrikaans, develop Setswana and Sesotho as languages of communication, engagement, and teaching and learning, understanding that:

5.4.1 as part of the development of Setswana and Sesotho, [the university] must develop regional, national and, where practicable, international partnerships and collaborative language development programmes with other universities and language bodies; and

5.4.2 such partnerships will aim to assist in the sharing of information and data relating to language and terminology development for various disciplines among such institutions and bodies, and

5.5 view the intellectualisation of African languages as a development concept that is given effect in an organised and organic manner.

(The University, 2022, p. 2)

By definition, “intellectualisation of African languages” refers to:

[] a language planning programme whereby the university's African languages of choice are developed and implemented to be languages for administrative, teaching and research purposes, but in particular to measures designed to ensure the scholarly use of the languages in such a way that it fosters the academic self-respect and values regardless of language preferences. (The university, 2002, p. 1)

From the above definition, one can deduce that the attitude of the policy is that African languages have some catching up to do. This policy disposition reproduces colonial ideologies that tend to project African languages as inherently lacking intellectualisation. This could also be a valid explanation for the protection of English and Afrikaans implied in section 5.4. However, several strengths can be derived from the university's language policy, the first being its acknowledgement and commitment to upholding the co-existence of the university's languages. Its explicit commitment to foreground and promote the intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana is an important indicator of the university's changing attitude towards African languages. However, its intention not to dislodge the dominant English and Afrikaans language tends to deflect from its original intention and therefore risks perpetuating the status quo.

In its endeavour to promote and develop Sesotho and Setswana, the policy commits to support the development of terminologies in the two languages. As noted by Khumalo and Nkomo (2022), terminology is a key aspect of language intellectualisation. Khumalo and Nkomo (2022, p. 142) also note that “terminology development remains a major priority enterprise in the intellectualisation of African languages”. When compared to the language policies of other universities, the language policy of the university stands out for its explicit and deliberate endeavour to intellectualise named African languages, whereas other universities merely proclaim their commitment to implement African languages as languages of instruction and only to have them taught as subjects in limited areas. The approach to the intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana by the university as spelt out in the policy is not intended to be haphazard, but one that should be pursued in a systematic, organised and organic manner (The University, 2022). One of the weaknesses of most institutional language policies in South Africa is that they do not specify their implementation plans (Mutasa, 2015). However, the language policy of the university is clear on implementation plans. As part of its objectives, the policy seeks to “provide a framework for the development and implementation of language plans” (The University, 2022, p. 2). The strength of the language policy is that it emphasises implementation, which is the bane of language policy in most South African universities (Dyers & Abongdia, 2015; Maseko & Siziba, 2023; Zungu, 2021).

As part of its implementation plan, the university envisages a language management environment in which “the language realities at the different campuses are continuously taken into account for practical implementation purposes” (The University, 2022, p. 2). The mention of ‘language realities’ means that the statistics of the speakers of each language present at each of the three campuses of the university are taken into consideration when implementing the language policy. This also entails that the intellectualisation of African languages may not only be limited to Sesotho and Setswana but extended to other languages that may have a significant number of speakers. However, the identification of only four languages as being the “languages of choice” for the university invisibilises and excludes languages that are not identified for development (Siziba & Maseko, 2023). However, the strength of the policy lies in its respect and acknowledgement of the institution’s language realities in its implementation plans, notwithstanding the limitations imposed by the notion of ‘languages of choice’.

As indicated in its language policy, the plans for the university are that:

7.1 Each Faculty and support department of the university must develop and implement a language plan approved by Senate in consultation with the University Management Committee (UMC),

7.3 Faculties and support departments are responsible for the operationalisation of and reporting on their plans to Senate and the UMC,

7.5 The Vice-Chancellor must annually submit a progress report to Council on the implementation of this policy.

(The University, 2022, p. 2)

The fact that the university strategically assigned the UMC to be responsible for implementing the language policy guarantees that the policy will be operationalised since there is a body that is responsible for overseeing policy implementation. The UMC is also tasked with ensuring sufficient resource allocation towards the development, implementation and monitoring of the policy. On roles and responsibilities, the policy tasks the Senate Committee for Language Planning and Advisory Services (SCLPAS) within the university to oversee the intellectualisation of African languages. Section 7.1 obligates all faculties to comply with the language policy. This means that the use of Sesotho and Setswana as LoTLs is provided for by the policy. Section 7.3 raises the question of roles and responsibilities towards the initiation of the intellectualisation and use of Sesotho and Setswana as academic languages. To this end, the roles of students, lecturers, heads of departments, deans and other stakeholders in the faculties are spelt out. The section also lays down protocols to be adhered to, including specifying whether the approach will be a top-down or bottom-up approach initiative. The requirement that the Vice-Chancellor submits yearly reports to the university council clarifying the progress on policy implementation is a positive aspect of the language policy as this will potentially foster accountability and commitment from top management.

Although it has its weaknesses, the university’s language policy should be applauded for its commitment to promoting the intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana languages. Its explicit directive for the setting up of support structures to enable implementation is also a welcome development that sets it apart from other universities. These support structures include the Vice-Chancellor, the UMC, SCLPAS, the Language Directorate, Faculties and Departments. All these structures have the mandate to contribute to the operationalisation and implementation of the language policy. If these support structures can also collectively work towards the intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana, there is no doubt that these languages would develop into effective LoTLs in a variety of academic disciplines and contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the role of university language policies as scaffolds toward the intellectualisation of African languages. Through an interrogation of the language policy of a selected university in South Africa, the study sought to examine how the policy provisions enable the intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana as part of the university’s four languages of choice together with English and Afrikaans. Findings reveal that the recently revised language policy is explicit in its commitment to fostering the intellectualisation of Sesotho and Setswana. Not only does it specify

language development imperatives such as the need to support terminological development of the languages as part of African language intellectualisation, but it also spells out implementation plans. However, the paper has argued that the selection of Sesotho and Setswana goes against the dictates of promoting organic multilingualism since this approach excludes other languages spoken on the university's three campuses. This is in light of the university's language audit which has shown a growing number of isiZulu and isiXhosa-speaking staff and students in its campuses. There is therefore a need for these languages to be considered for intellectualisation as well. While the policy spells out implementation plans and support structures to operationalise and ensure adherence to the policy, there remains a lot that needs to be done for Sesotho and Setswana to be developed to the level of English and Afrikaans, which ironically are protected from diminishment in the university by the policy. However, there is hope that once these languages are intellectualised, then they will be used as LoTLs. There also needs to be clear timelines regarding when the two African languages will begin to be used as instructional languages in different academic disciplines within the university. This is important to transform the policy from being a mere statement of intent as most policies have turned out to be.

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