

Theorising the Use of Indigenous Languages in South African Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the long-term educational, economic and political implications of the Language Policy of 2020 in higher education in South Africa. Drawing on experiences with language policies in three post-colonial countries in Asia and recent research on the language policy emphasising multilingualism in South African universities, the paper questions the effectiveness of teaching and learning in local languages that are still in the process of scientific cognitive development and examines the economic implications in the context of globalisation as well as the potential political outcomes in the context of nation-building. The paper argues that while enfranchising indigenous languages has immediate practical communication and psychological advantages, adopting them as languages of teaching and learning has far-reaching consequences and could result in what the authors call 'the dark side of mercy', where the potential negative outcome defeats the noble intentions. There are potential cognitive, economic, and political consequences. Cognitively, there is a glaring absence of conceptual equivalents in African indigenous languages that can constrain teaching and learning. The economic consequences could be a loss of competitiveness in a global economic environment dominated by English as the preferred language of the economy. Politically, there exists the potential for Balkanisation in a country like South Africa, where competitive ethnic formations quickly resort to primordial affiliations whenever convenient. Therefore, while developing indigenous languages as intellectual languages capable of mediating teaching and learning is plausible, the policy application calls for review in the light of authentic experiences.

Keywords: Politics of language, Indigenous languages, Multilingualism, Teaching and learning, Dark side of mercy, South Africa

1 Introduction

This paper addresses the politics of language in higher education in the context of the educational, socio-cultural and economic imperatives of the 21st century. Notwithstanding the questions of identity and the need for language enfranchisement, especially given the unpleasant experiences of colonialism and later apartheid, this paper interrogates the long-term educational, economic and political implications of the current policy in South Africa. Besides political and economic dominance, colonialism also brought about cultural dominance where colonial languages were used in all official spheres of life, including education. With emancipation, driven by the spirit of decoloniality, some post-colonial nations such as India, Malaysia and the Philippines in Asia have attempted to offset the cultural domination by implementing multilingualism and making indigenous languages official languages of communication.

Despite the dominance of European languages, such as English and French, as sole languages of teaching and learning in higher education, while the use of indigenous languages is generally limited to primary schools, universities have played a significant role in the promotion of local languages in Africa. Bamgbose (1983) remarked that even though West Africans do not use indigenous languages as mediums of instruction, "there is a tolerance of teaching and research in the indigenous languages at the university level" (*ibid*). The situation is generally the same in East Africa, except for Tanzanian Universities, where Swahili is used as a medium of instruction. In Uganda, the University of Makerere championed the creation

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of a new language called Runyakitara by amalgamating four “linguistically intelligible” Bantu languages that were spoken in the western part of Uganda (Bernsten, 1998; Muzoora, 2016).

Therefore, nations are making efforts to develop indigenous languages into languages of teaching and learning, to develop them conceptually and lexically according to their levels of development in science and other intellectual endeavours. The South African Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions of 2020 was conceived in this spirit. This policy was promulgated by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as a review of the Language Policy for Higher Education of 2002, recognising the significant role of higher education institutions in the promotion of multilingualism for social, cultural and economic development. The policy encourages universities and other higher education institutions to adopt local indigenous languages as official languages of communication and develop indigenous languages into intellectual languages of teaching and learning. The application of the policy has varied across institutions of higher learning, ranging from translations to attempts to build new concepts in indigenous languages where none exist in the lexicons, to code-switching or translanguaging in the lecture halls.

Some research has already started, particularly in the arts and the social sciences, where pilot projects of teaching in indigenous languages have been undertaken with some degree of reported success, although with subjective outcome measures. Works purporting to be reviews of progress made in this endeavour include papers by scholars who believe that their universities have made progress in the implementation of the Language Policy of the National Department of Higher Education and Training. These works are mainly from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Khumalo, 2017; Madlala & Mkhize, 2019; Mthombeni & Ogunnubi, 2020) and the University of South Africa (Seti et al., 2015; Zondi, 2014). The works are either reviews of progress in multi-lingual education or are on attitudes on teaching and learning in indigenous languages. While some of the publications, particularly those from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, appear to address inherently educational variables such as the development of lexicons or terminologies, we contend that core variables in language development are still missing, particularly in a situation where the indigenous languages predate the new concepts developed in a different cultural environment and milieu, what Luke (2005) refers to as the problem of synchronicity.

The paper draws on experiences with language policies in three post-colonial countries, India, Malaysia and the Philippines, as well as previous research work on the language question in South Africa, including an unpublished report based on research we conducted about the language policy of a University of Technology in South Africa. The first objective was to interrogate the effectiveness of teaching and learning in languages that are still in the process of scientific cognitive development. Secondly, we discuss the economic implications of teaching and learning in local languages in the context of globalisation. Thirdly, we discuss the implications of the language policy on nation-building.

This discussion is particularly significant in the context of language politics in post-colonial societies, which are sometimes driven more by emotional than rational sentiments. This is understandable, given the humiliation, debasement and oppression that indigenes suffered under colonialism’s social closure, with emancipation bringing boundless self-assertion expressed in the language of decoloniality. With the newly acquired self-assertiveness, the lines between language as an educational tool and language as enfranchisement become blurred. Further, the politics of language can overshadow the communicative value of language, particularly in multilingual societies where language and identity are interwoven as part of nation-building.

In this paper, we argue that while enfranchising indigenous languages has immediate practical communicative and psychological advantages, adopting them as languages of teaching and learning has far-reaching consequences and could result in what has been called ‘the dark side of mercy’ (Fulton, 1968), where the potential negative outcome defeats the noble intentions. Admittedly, all languages are developable, and all have developed in the past. This makes it futile to try preserving any language, indigenous or not, in its present form. The problems arise in the application. Two significant observations stand out as long-term potential risks in applying the language policy as practised by some institutions: first, the capacity of the South African indigenous languages as languages of teaching and learning, and second, the disjuncture between the problem statement and the policy framework.

2 The capacity of the South African indigenous languages

The capacity of the South African indigenous languages as languages of teaching and learning in the present milieu is constrained by two factors. On the one hand, the languages do not have the requisite conceptual equivalents, as the vast majority of concepts used across the various academic disciplines did not evolve within these languages. On the other hand, the indigenous languages themselves are evolving to cope with the demographic imperatives in an industrialising and urbanising society and, hence, have lost traction in their original formulation. Practically, a) there is a visible distinction in speech between the rural and urban versions of the languages, and b) the rural versions themselves are evolving and changing all the time, despite being less exposed to the developments that drive rapid change in urban areas. This observation weakens the argument that accentuates the intrinsic value of language preservation.

In compliance with the Language Policy of 2002, universities have responded in various ways, ranging from adopting a bilingual or multilingual policy in communication within the university and with stakeholders, i.e., parents and the outside world, to adopting bilingual approaches (code-switching or translanguaging) in teaching and learning. There should be no problems with the broader communication, and in practice, there are none. It is with regard to the intellectualisation requirement that the problem statement lies. In the reviewed policy, the DHET requires that indigenous languages be developed into languages of teaching and learning, which means the “intellectualisation” of the languages. In practice, the intellectualisation of indigenous languages in teaching and learning encounters three major issues.

The first concerns public perceptions of the value of an education provided in the vernaculars, and the second relates to the intellectual capacity of the indigenous languages to function as languages of teaching and learning in an academically competitive and scientifically-laden global environment, particularly as indigenous languages predate modern organised pedagogy, science and technology; hence, problems of creating and in some instances matching conceptual equivalents arise. Thirdly, there are no publications in indigenous languages in almost all disciplines in higher education, nor in disciplines at the high school level, for that matter. While it is axiomatic that all languages are developable into intellectual languages in the long term, the question is whether such a task is tenable in the short to medium term. For instance, English started out as an “indigenous” language of illiterate farmers and Latin, then a “colonial” language, was adopted for literary works in theology and philosophy. Latin words and intellectual concepts slowly seeped into the English language until eventually, Latin was no longer needed as a language of learning. However, present circumstances are very different, as we now: a) are confronted with academic and economic globalisation, and b) have a great need for a lingua franca, which makes English even more relevant practically. The big question is, would promoting English equal the death of indigenous languages?

There is yet a fourth problem in the policy as it stands: the risk of balkanising a country whose social cohesion is at best tenuous and at worst fragmented. South Africa is not without latent tribalism and ethnocentrism that raise their ugly heads whenever egoistic populist demagogues wish to advance their self-interest. Part of the success of some politicians in the country can be attributed to this sentiment.

Reasons for this scepticism lie in the complexity of the task at hand. Questions arising from the literature survey include the fields and disciplines favourable to translation and development, as well as issues of culture and language in concept formation. For instance, we have in mind linguistic authorities such as Quine (1970, 1987), who posits the indeterminacy in translation, and Bernstein (1998), whose work in categorising disciplines into knowledge structures has led to the rethinking of language as an instrument of articulation in specific knowledge domains. Quine (1970, 1987) posits that much is lost in translation, such that exactitude suffers when translating from one language to another, even where the translation does not involve abstraction or is from the known to the known. Where the translation is from the known to the unknown, as in the development of abstract new concepts that did not exist before, the problem is aggravated. Whereas Quine’s thesis relates to exactitude, Bernstein’s thesis probably affects conceptual clarity, where specific languages are more conceptually exact than others in specific domains of knowledge, most probably because the language structure allows for greater conceptual flexibility or elasticity in that domain.

3 The disjuncture between the problem statement and the policy framework

One of the most contentious issues facing the language question in education is the disjuncture between the problem statement and the policy framework, or locating the problem where it does not exist and, therefore, devising a misplaced solution. In this instance, learning new concepts in a foreign language is presented as the problem, whose resolution lies in developing new concepts in the students' native languages. In articulating the problem statement, proponents of indigenisation posit that speakers of indigenous languages encounter problems in clearly understanding concepts taught in a foreign language or a second language, as is the case in South African universities, where most students are second-language speakers of English. This articulation constitutes the policy's conceptual framework, spelling out the relationships between language, concepts, and learning as part of the cognitive process. This articulation is negated by two issues in language and learning in higher education.

The first is that concepts learned at the university level are equally complex for all newcomers to the university system, irrespective of language origins, as most of these concepts are specific to disciplines and not necessarily language-specific. For instance, while concepts such as projection, reaction formation and displacement are commonly used in Psychology, and concepts such as socialisation, asymmetry, relativity and morphogenesis in Sociology, etc., these words are not commonly used by ordinary speakers of English. The situation is even worse in the natural sciences, where concepts and phraseology are strange to everybody. For instance, which ordinary English speaker speaks of "this is inversely proportional to"? The disjuncture happens because the problem statement does not comprehend the complexity of the conceptual framework. Developing new concepts in a language falls into the sphere of jargon, which is discipline-dependent. The second issue is that learning in a second language does not practically present conceptual problems. The issue is merely that of articulation, of subject-verb conjugation or sentence construction, which takes very little time to teach to subjects who already have a working knowledge of the language of teaching and learning.

We are thus left with the question of whether indigenisation or developing indigenous languages into languages of teaching and learning is a cognitive and therefore an educational issue, or a nationalistic and therefore an identity issue. We do not pass judgment on either; the question lies in the motivation, as this would require different pathways to the solution. If the problem is cognition, the solution lies in improving the status quo by enhancing the capacity to articulate in English, the present second language and the language of teaching and learning, which is short-term and requires little energy and not much cost. Addressing the cognitive issue by developing indigenous languages into languages of teaching and learning requires long-term and substantial investment in human and financial resources to develop appropriate conceptual equivalents in the nine indigenous languages presently existing in South Africa. This would be consistent with language enfranchisement, which is a political and not a cognitive issue. Add the capacity to publish books and other reference material, including the costs.

There is yet another puzzle. Suppose the argument is that students who have been exposed to English for twelve years have a problem grasping the concepts explained in English; what is the possibility of the same cohort understanding materials published in English for post-graduate studies, which require extensive referencing? This is relevant in the absence of publications in the indigenous languages. It reinforces the observation that it will take almost a century to achieve the feat of developing indigenous languages into languages of teaching and learning, assuming that the other problems mentioned above do not exist. Furthermore, even when the indigenous language has been fully intellectualised, there is no indication that students who have difficulty with specialised concepts in English will find it easier to acquire these concepts in an indigenous language.

4 Theoretical perspective

The paper is framed within a theoretical perspective of 'the dark side of mercy', which relates to the grave potential risk that individuals on the one side and policymakers on the other create when trying to do what they consider desirable and appropriate in the immediate present, but without considering that in the long

run, they may end up with the opposite consequences to what they intended. This moral paradox is taken from Antony Fulton's 1968 book *The Dark Side of Mercy* (Fulton, 1968), which gives a chilling account of mistakes made by people believing that they were carrying out their mandate nobly and justifiably, but ended up with the opposite outcome. Two narrations stand out in the book. In the first, Michael Dugan, a Catholic doctor just qualified at the University of the Witwatersrand, takes up a locum position in Lesotho as the resident medical officer goes on leave. On his first evening in the village, Dugan is called to assist with the birth of a child for a woman at her home. On arrival in the company of an orderly, he establishes that the woman has a condition known as cephalo-pelvic disproportion, where the foetal head is too big to go through the maternal pelvis. Under normal conditions, the doctor has two choices. He can either perform a caesarean section or drag out the baby using a forceps. The latter has the risk of crushing the foetal head. However, Dugan cannot perform a caesarean section in a hut without an appropriate operating theatre. As he ponders what to do, the orderly who usually accompanies the resident doctor points at the forceps in the pack of instruments and says, "Doctor, the old doctor generally uses this when confronted with this condition." Dugan is a staunch Catholic and would not dare risk killing the baby, an inherent risk in using the forceps. The alternative is equally risky, as performing a caesarean section without adequate apparatus may result in the mother bleeding to death. Dugan opts for the latter risk, gives the woman a strong local anaesthetic, cuts her and drags the baby out. She bleeds profusely, and the baby is suffocated in the process. The end is that he loses both mother and baby.

The second, on the same day as this debacle happens, Lube, a Catholic migrant worker from the village and on holiday, is summoned to the chief's palace. The country has experienced a severe drought. Under such circumstances, a traditional medicine man is called to mitigate the disaster. The Ingaka (traditional medicine man) recommends that a pregnant woman be killed, the foetus extracted, and the contents brought to him to complete his kit for the treatment of the weather. Lube and another man are assigned this task, and the Ingaka tells them where to find the woman. They waylay her as she goes to fetch water from a spring near her home, kill her and extract the foetus and contents for the purported medical weather treatment. On the same night, Lube is in bed with his wife. He hears her breathing warmly, and his heart pounds rapidly as he remembers the tragedy that has befallen the village. Two women have dreadfully died: "one as a sacrifice to the god of the white man and the other as a sacrifice to the god of the black man."

5 Experiments with language policies from other post-colonial contexts

A review of literature on the intellectualisation of indigenous languages in post-colonial societies (India, Malaysia, and the Philippines) shows mixed results, with no demonstration of encouraging or successful experiments. In efforts to "decolonise" the lingua franca, India, Malaysia, and the Philippines sought to reduce the dominance of English, seen as a symbol of colonial hegemony, and promote indigenous languages as official languages, which would also be used for teaching and learning at all levels of education. English, the official language inherited from the colonial administration, was relegated to a second language status in the three countries. However, in practice, this became very complicated to the extent that, despite serious efforts by the governments in the three countries, to date, English still enjoys a hegemonic status in teaching and learning.

In India, the language policy of 1950 proclaimed Hindi as the official language, while English was permitted to "continue as the language for all official purposes" for 15 years (Dwivedi, 2015), p. 11). However, relentless opposition to Hindi as the sole official language resulted in the continued application of English for 15 years. The country declared English the second or "associate official language" in 1965 (Ibid., 2015, p. 14). As the government's preferred official language, Hindi competed with the other regional languages, with opposition to the policy coming from non-Hindi-speaking states which resented Hindi dominance. To placate opposition and "to protect the linguistic interests of each state", the Central Advisory Board on Education introduced a 'three-language formula' in 1956 (Dwivedi, 2015), p. 12). As established in the National Education Policy of 1968, the formula prescribed Hindi as the official language, English as the second language, and any of the regional languages as the "mother tongue of the residents of each state

and union territories” (Dwivedi, 2015)). Accordingly, students in Hindi-speaking states were to learn Hindi, English, and one (or any) state language. Similarly, students in non-Hindi-speaking states would learn Hindi, English, and their state language (Delican, 1998). This three-language formula is one of the distinctive features of India’s multilingualism that sets this country apart from Malaysia and the Philippines.

However, the shift from the colonial English-centred monolingual policy to the post-colonial multilingual policy in India has been more apparent than fundamental (Delican, 1998; Jayaram, 1993). Delican (1998, p. 125) maintained that despite government efforts to develop and promote indigenous languages, “English stayed as a *de facto* official language in India” (Delican, 1998). Because of cultural, historical, and political differences between Hindi- and non-Hindi-speaking states, despite the abundant resources put into the programme, the Indian experiment suffered two essential setbacks: political and linguistic. In addition to the political contestations described above, linguistic issues entailed conceptual and lexical challenges, especially where there were no conceptual equivalents between Indian languages and English as the official language of teaching and learning. To obviate the linguistic problem, the government provided resources to educational institutions to support the implementation process of the country’s language policy. The resources included financial assistance and the establishment of key language institutions (boards and centres) tasked with:

- writing original books and translations in the Hindi language; supplying textbooks at all levels, particularly college and postgraduate levels;
- providing incentives for non-Hindi speaking writers and students to use the Hindi language; and
- developing mass media, film, television and radio with content in Hindi and employing language planners to focus on codification and standardisation of Hindi.

These efforts resulted in a “newly standardised Hindi” with “new grammatical rules, new sounds, artificially increased lexical stock, and Sanskritization of the language, which was different from commonly spoken Hindi” (Delican, 1998), p. 126). The second result was economic, where the population preferred international universities teaching in English, as the language offered opportunities to graduates of these institutions above what local universities teaching in indigenous languages could offer. The overall result is that English remains the dominant language of teaching and learning in the Indian education system despite massive investment in the development of Hindi and other indigenous languages.

Finally, the National Education Policy 2020, which addresses multilingualism, suggests a new policy orientation in India. “All languages will be taught with high quality to all students; a language does not need to be the medium of instruction for it to be taught and learned well” (Government of India, 2020), p. 13). The policy goes further to state that “India’s languages are among the richest, most scientific, most beautiful, and most expressive in the world, with a huge body of ancient as well as modern literature (both prose and poetry), film, and music written in these languages that help form India’s national identity and wealth” (Government of India, 2020)). In this way, the policy separates the cognitive from the political function, thus allowing schools and universities to decide on what they deem an appropriate medium of instruction, provided that they intensify the teaching and learning of indigenous languages.

In Malaysia, the problems were political, linguistic, and economic. On the political front, the contest was among the numerous indigenous languages competing for hegemony. Malaysia tried to offset this obstacle by developing a new encompassing language, Bahasa Malaysia, derived from Malay, as the sole official language. Malay is the indigenous language that was spoken by the majority ethnic group, the Malays (nearly 50% of the population), who also wielded political power and considered themselves sons of the soil (Tollefson & Tsui, 2003). The language was preferred over other indigenous languages and English as a unifier because it had been used for interethnic communication and as the language of administration, high culture, literary knowledge and religion for centuries by the Malay people (Tollefson & Tsui, 2003)). While the new language was proficient in the humanities and social sciences, it was deficient both in the concepts and the corpus of the natural sciences, prompting the government to invest in the process of developing these. It took ten years for Bahasa Malaysia to be implemented as a first language in teaching and learning, with English as the second language, with the University of Malaysia championing the course.

Notwithstanding these developments, problems remained. The first was that the flow of publications in English outpaced the translation services in Malaysia (Tollefson & Tsui, 2003). The second was economic internationalisation; first, international students were reluctant to study in Bahasa Malaysia. Second, locals believed that studying in Bahasa Malaysia constrained their chances for international study and employment, causing educated people to vote with their feet. The population preferred international universities teaching in English over local institutions teaching in Bahasa Malaysia to the extent that the University of Malaysia had to proclaim that “English is the primary medium of instruction for all courses and study programs conducted at the private higher educational institutions” (Kirkpatrick, 2014), p. 20).

The Philippines faced a similar situation to India and Malaysia. By the 1990s, the Philippines had a dichotomous relationship with language, where English was perceived as the language of modern economic development and Filipino as the language of national independence (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Hence, in 1994 a new regime placed English at the centre of the country’s economic and political policies to achieve economic expansion and integration into the global economic system. Therefore, the language policy in higher education was “intimately intertwined with national concerns” in the Philippines (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

However, the intellectualisation of Filipino, as Professor Sibayan, a renowned Filipino linguist, argued, still had a long way to go before it was adopted as a sole medium of instruction. Hence, English and Filipino remained necessary (Kawahara, 2000; Sibayan, 1991). According to Sibayan (cited in Kawahara, 2000, p. 129), an intellectualised language is a “language which can be used for educating a person in any field of knowledge from kindergarten to the university and beyond”. While admitting to the irreplaceability of English as a medium of instruction in the Philippines, Sibayan estimated that the intellectualisation of Filipino will require about 100 years.

In this regard, the Philippine government issued an Executive Order (No. 210 series of 2003) which compelled higher education institutions, including the Commission on Higher Education, Universities and Colleges, “to strengthen the use of the English language as a medium of instruction.” (Besa, 2014), p. 93). The purpose was “to ensure quality education and economic growth” (Besa, 2014)). The reason was that English is highly valued in the Philippines because of its functionality, practicality, and affordability as “a skill that can be used to increase one’s position, respectability and marketability”, with better chances of career advancement (Maramag-Manalastas & Batang, 2018), p. 88). Hence, English remains the dominant language for teaching and learning in the Philippines as English-medium institutions have mushroomed. Kirkpatrick (2014, p. 21) estimated them to be about 90 institutions listed on “the relevant web page of the Entrance University Website” (Kirkpatrick, 2014). These include even the University of the Philippines. This most prestigious public university had championed and experimented with promoting and developing Filipino as the official language and medium of instruction. The university had even encouraged staff to use the indigenous language for publication. Yet, it gave up on this medium as it became unpopular among staff and students, and private universities became more attractive because of their English medium (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

In a review of papers on decolonisation, globalisation, language policy and practice, the book by Lin and Martin (2005) (Lin & Martin, 2005) takes a post-colonial theory position on language development and practice, a position also taken by scholars writing on Africa. A plethora of papers purporting to be critical analytical approaches to language in education and language planning and policy in the post-colonial epoch, particularly in Africa and Asia, present two problems. The first is the difficulty of any grand theory to generalise to conditions as diverse as those in Africa and the rest of the post-colonial world. The second is that, notwithstanding the necessity and possibility of developing indigenous languages as intellectual languages of knowledge production, cross-national and cross-continental comparisons are not the ideal framework to work from, as unique variables affect languages and cultures differentially. While the marginalisation of indigenous languages cuts across all colonial experiences, particularly post-Berlin 1884, material conditions in the colonies were too diverse, and indigenous languages were not, and still are not, on par in terms of development across the former colonies. The key question thus becomes: Can we attempt to generalise across educational systems, political economies, cultural discourses and language systems?

Commenting on papers purporting to be critical analytical approaches to language education as

well as to language planning and policy in the post-colonial epoch, Alan Luke, Professor and Dean at the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Planning at the National Institute of Education in Singapore, lists four observations on the possibilities of post-colonial language education: (1) enfranchising the disenfranchised; (2) efforts to find a theory; (3) the absence of historical, temporal and spatial synchronicity; and (4) the question if postcolonialism is a sufficient theory upon which to build the future. Luke avers, “Much of the work of scholars from historically marginalised communities or writers from the political and cultural diaspora is tied to local and regional struggles to secure and elaborate speaking positions.” (Lin & Martin, 2005), p. XV). While empathising with the drive for enfranchisement, Luke maintains that the language issue is too complex to be solved just by a single post-colonial theory of education, essentially because unequal political and economic forces mediate the complexity of the cultural-linguistic contact. He continues asserting that “there is much in modern scepticism of grand narrative in a sanctification of the local by opponents of globalisation, and indeed in cultural essentialism of ‘voices’ that would discourage us from undertaking such research” (Lin & Martin, 2005), p. XV).

6 The South African language question: New concepts, new forms of expression?

South Africa presents a complex case in that while the nine official indigenous languages are well-developed as written and spoken communication languages, they predate science and technology, including the social sciences, thus rendering them deficient in conceptual equivalents and precision of expression. This renders even simple translation difficult, as translation is generally from the known to the known. Beyond translating material from English to the indigenous languages and some ad hoc work on developing new concepts in the indigenous languages by some universities in South Africa, there is no systematic, well-funded programme for developing indigenous languages as was the case in India, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Besides, westernisation found the Asian countries well advanced in scientific and technological culture, judging by their literature, sophisticated architecture in their palaces, and other artefacts. This would have given Asian languages an advantage over the language-concept situation in South Africa.

Arguably, all languages are developable. However, the methods South Africa has adopted are sometimes questionable with regard to intellectualisation or, for that matter, facilitating conceptual understanding. First, code-switching: While this may make it easy for the listener to follow sentences, it does not contribute in any way to language development. On the contrary, it could pollute the language. However, and more importantly, code-switching works in a linguistically homogeneous population, which is hardly the case in a typical university. Secondly, there is an adaptation, where an approximate concept or expression is used instead of the English one. In this instance, the danger is indeterminacy, and the exact meaning is sacrificed. An example is that of a language developer in one of the universities, speaking confidently at a conference, referring to the translation of the abdomen as “proximal to the stomach.” The anatomists present must have been bewildered. Regrettably, students at that institution would have been using the term without much ado. Thirdly, there is coinage, where a totally new word is invented. In this case, the danger is totally missing the meaning, as there is no equivalent concept in the indigenous language to which the word is attributed. Research by Finlayson and Madiba (2002) on the intellectualisation of the indigenous languages of South Africa lays emphasis on the political, institutional and constitutional framework. Still, it provides very little insight into the cognitive linguistic elements of the task. For instance, how does one negotiate the problem of conceptual equivalence, which is essential in abstract situations?

As if to make the situation more complicated, rigorous research on the language question is scant in South Africa. Besides being weak in methodology, published material in the form of research papers concentrates on the political desirability of multilingualism or takes it as a matter of fact that it is desirable and possible to use indigenous languages as languages of teaching and learning (e.g. Madadzhe (2019); Madlala and Mkhize (2019); Makalela (2020); Mthombeni and Ogunnubi (2020); Mutasa (2015)). Most have been “vague and unclear” on language’s substantive cognitive and pedagogical requirements, which constitutes the problem in the language policy. A majority of, if not all, the papers are autobiographic or qualitative studies based on extremely small samples by scholars immersed in programmes promoting the

intellectualisation of indigenous languages. Scholars who have conducted empirical research on the status of indigenous languages at South African universities include Mutasa (2015), who avers:

- Academics who teach content subjects other than languages perceive it as anathema to use indigenous languages to teach their subjects. In addition, academics believed that the timeframe for developing indigenous languages into intellectual languages of teaching and learning would be around fifty to a hundred years.
- Students harbour negative attitudes toward studying indigenous languages, least of all using indigenous languages as languages of teaching and learning. The rationale was that indigenous languages have no market value and do not possess academic value as they are easy and not intellectually challenging (Mutasa (2015)).

Unpublished research carried out by the Maurice Webb Race Relations Unit at the University of KwaZulu-Natal at one university of technology gave insights into students' thinking on the language question in higher education in South Africa (Zulu et al. (2022)). While participants welcomed the development of new concepts in indigenous languages for political and ideological purposes, they did not think this would help speakers of indigenous languages, contending that the new concepts would be as strange as the same concepts in English, thus imposing a double task on learning. This reinforces our assertions earlier in this paper that the new concepts learned at the university are language-neutral and affect speakers and non-speakers of the language of teaching and learning equally. Participants in the research further alluded to not using the translated material, as they found this doubled their learning tasks. More pragmatically, participants maintained that they were not in education to be constrained to the local environment. They experience that this is what learning in indigenous languages would engender. It can be further argued that university students look forward to employment upon completion of their studies, and the command of English is a gateway to a better-paying job in a context where English is the language of the economy.

7 The dark side of mercy

The dark side of mercy manifests at two levels: one relating to the country as a nation-state and the other pertaining to future generations. The country-level problem pertains to the possibility of creating new identities or reinforcing primordial affiliations. At the generational level, the question is the extent to which the language policy considers the cognitive and economic limitations it might impose on future generations in a globalized world. In all instances, the well-intended policy might cause more harm than good.

7.1 *The cognitive valence*

The cognitive valence presents a logical puzzle in the language policy. Admittedly, the present generation of new entries into the university system experiences problems articulating ideas in English as the language of teaching and learning. The irony is that the generations before them produced intellectual giants such as Thango Jabavu, Walter Rubusana, John Langalibalele Dube, Alfred Bikisha Xuma, Anton Lembede, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, Oliver Thabo, Nelson Mandela and others, all trained and nurtured in English. This begs the question of whether the problem is inherently linguistic or is a function of poor teaching and learning in the present milieu. Hence, given the claim that second-language speakers are still cognitively disadvantaged despite more than ten years of exposure to English in school and beyond, how would effective learning occur in indigenous languages without reference to published material in these languages?

7.2 *The economics of English as an international language*

While nation-states can and do control politics and ideology, regrettably, they do not control the economy, which global multinationals do. The lessons in India, Malaysia and the Philippines demonstrate this truism in education. Even in South Africa, much "voting with the feet" is already taking place with the proliferation

of private universities and the overwhelming support the country's indigenous elite gives these institutions. There are clear reasons for this. The relationship between credentials and the marketplace is axiomatic. This is essential where global conglomerates accentuate management, research and technology, which demand uniformity or standardisation in curriculum development to ensure interaction with a global rather than ethnic or national audience/clientele, which generally require a global lingua franca, such as English, rather than indigenous languages for communication.

This is most visible in the scientific and economic disciplines, which demand international uniformity in content and methodologies of knowledge production, thereby favouring uniform epistemologies where English dominates. The globalisation of the economy has brought mobility and prestige to a cadre of personnel internationalised by their command of specific knowledge. For instance, managers in finance, human resources, engineering and other professionals at Unilever, Shell, De Loitte and Touche, and other multinationals routinely traverse international boundaries. This requires uniformity in the knowledge that they command, and English is the lingua franca. Confronted with this reality, most participants in a language policy research conducted in a South African university of technology indicated that they prefer English as the primary medium of instruction for three critical reasons (Makanishe and Zulu (2025)). The first is cognitive, where English was perceived as more convenient for learning compared to African indigenous languages, whose lack of conceptual equivalence in some disciplines complicates efforts to translate content in English publications. The second reason is pragmatic, where learning in indigenous languages in higher education was regarded as not practical for students who have used English as the medium of instruction in their primary and high school. The third reason is existential, considering participants' perception of their future economic prospects and academic engagement as contingent on their proficiency in English.

7.3 The potential of balkanising the country

Regrettably, the direct answer to this thorny and sensitive question is firmly in the affirmative. Proponents of decoloniality have religiously promoted the new language policy, the use of "own language" and the decline of the hegemony of English as equivalent to freedom. Besides Afrikaans, which has European roots, South Africa has nine indigenous languages. Having each geographical region develop its local language and given the lurking spectre of ethnocentrism often rearing its ugly political head, this could have dire repercussions on the fragile nation-building project often referred to as social cohesion. There is a further complication to the logic. The political question is that currently, English is the only language common among all South Africans, and given the existence of the nine indigenous languages, which one of these will assume primacy in the commons? Realising that none would, the logical deduction is that each region will gradually become a separate linguistically independent enclave at the expense of national social cohesion.

8 Conclusion

Three specific issues derive from this presentation. The first is: whose interests does the policy promote? The second is the extent to which the policy is compatible with or promotes the nation-building project. The third is that when confronted with the reality that we have failed our people with regard to education, postcolonial theory with language as the central theme becomes our default position. The paper is written within the theoretical framework of the dark side of mercy, where, despite our noble intentions of language enfranchisement, linked rhetorically with an inconclusive cognitive advantage, policy decisions with uncertain consequences have been taken. We maintain that both at the conceptual level and existentially, there is a disjuncture between these policy considerations and the existential imperatives of the 21st century. Conceptually, the policy has not rigorously addressed the cognitive aspects of language in education and has relied more on subjective aspirations drawn from intuitive experience rather than rigorously researched evidence. For instance, the claim that people learn more easily when taught in their native language calls for the identification of those materials and subjects of learning for which this is or is not true. A thorough

examination shows that the claim is only valid if what is being learned is part of the cultural ensemble. For learning foreign material unrelated to the learner's daily experience, the claim falls on its face.

Existentially, education has instrumental objectives of well-being expressed in material acquisitions ranging from basic needs to aspirational entrapments. To this end, parents and students realise the value of education in English as the language of the economy. This is not peculiar to South Africa; internationally, there is a continuing move towards English as the language of research and publication. Actually, this movement toward English already started in the late 19th century and continued, slowly, throughout the 20th century, driven mainly by the rise of the United States. What we observe today is that this trend is continuing despite the catch-up of non-Western countries and former colonies, driven by globalization and the resulting need for a lingua franca. One has to visit international conferences and observe the significant decline in simultaneous interpretation services, as these have almost become redundant. All papers are presented in English. Considering these arguments and the evidence drawn from the review of international literature, whom does the policy benefit? And whose interests are we promoting? Given the economic considerations and degree of unemployment in the country, not the young students on whose behalf claims are made. And politically, not the nation-state project of the "rainbow nation" that we aspire to.

In an appraisal of the possibilities of post-postcolonial language education, Luke (2005) maintains that while postcolonial theory has salience, "its potential educational power depends upon the demands, constraints and revolutionary possibilities of particular local material and cultural conditions." We maintain that the South African Language Policy does not consider these conditions thoroughly.

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Declaration of interest statement

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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