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Editorial Note:

This latest issue of the Journal of Contemporary Society Education (JCSE) arrives at a moment when the boundaries between the academic, the social, and the urgently practical have never been more porous. A glance at the twenty-one articles in this forthcoming collection reveals a publication that understands its mandate: to serve not merely as a repository of scholarship, but as a sharp, coherent lens through which to examine the pressing complexities of contemporary society, with a firm grounding in education as a transformative force.

What distinguishes this issue is its refusal to settle for disciplinary comfort. The contributions, drawn from institutions across Africa, demonstrate a welcome intellectual restlessness. We see scholars interrogating the intimate, such as Mudau et al.'s exploration of language as a source of family conflict within Vhavenda families alongside those grappling with structural questions, such as Sikwela and Diedericks' critical look at performance management as "a mirror of inertia" in public administration. This range is not a sign of incoherence; it is a testament to the journal's understanding that societal education occurs in classrooms, in homes, in municipal water governance (as Zulu and Nojiyeza's work on Zululand shows), and in the very language we use to communicate.

Several pieces stand out for their conceptual bravery. Maungedzo's reframing of academic literacy through sociocultural theory for rural teacher development tackles a perennial challenge with fresh theoretical rigour. Similarly, Lubombo and Zethi's work on "linguistic justice" and the Disciplinary Literacies framework asks a question that South African higher education can no longer afford to postpone: how do we re-imagine instructional communication not as a barrier, but as an equitable foundation? These are not abstract debates; they are core pedagogical interventions.

The journal also demonstrates a commendable commitment to surfacing marginalised voices and experiences. Nkumane's exploration of intersectionality and the lived experiences of Black women scholars at UNISA, and Sibango's ethnographic look at how belonging is negotiated in Anthropology departments, remind us that the university itself is a site of intense social contestation. When Lekoa and Nojiyeza connect off-campus housing to "ecologies of distress" affecting student mental health, they do what good contemporary scholarship must: they trace the material conditions of life directly into the outcomes of education. If there is a through-line to this collection, it is the insistence that no social phenomenon, whether climate governance under the AU (Yemisi and Ani), the antinomies of decolonisation in literature (Moopi), or the gendered nexus of marital status and poverty (Dunga), exists outside the purview of rigorous inquiry. The JCSE is building a platform where scholars can hold those complex phenomena up to the light.

This volume does not offer easy answers. It offers something more valuable: a coherent, sharply focused set of questions, pursued with methodological care and regional relevance. For a journal of contemporary society and education, that is precisely the work that matters.

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TABLE OF CONTENT

1. Exploring the Influence of Language on Family Conflicts Among Vhavenḁa Families Mudau S.D., Raphalalani M.R., Tshikota S.L., & Mathabi Mashudu	6-22
2. Academic Literacy Reframed: Sociocultural Theory and Rural Teacher Development Robert Maungedzo	23-39
3. Analysis Of Omission Errors In The Academic Writing Of Level One Student s At A South African University Ndishunwani Vincent Demana, Ernest Kwesi Klu, Mzamani Johannes Maluleke	40-57
4. The Perceptions of Students on Sexual Harassment at the Rural University Mudau Thizwilondi Josephine	58-88
5. Understanding how belonging and originality are negotiated in three South African Anthropology Departments Asemahle Sibango	89-101
6. Employee Retention and Talent Management In The Hospitality Sector. Does Employer Branding Matter? Costa Hofisi&Munyaradzi Chikove1, Lilliosah Dowo	102-129
7. African Union (AU) and Climate Change Governance in Africa, 2002-2022 Olawale Yemisi, Kelechi Johnmary Ani	130-149
8. A Gendered Analysis of the Nexus of Marital Status and Poverty Hannah Mayamiko Dunga	150-167
9. The Influence of Authenticity, Credibility and Cultural Relatability on Consumer Trust and Purchasing Behaviour Aphelele Hlengwa and Andrisha Beharry-Ramraj	168-188
10. Performance Management: A Mirror of Inertia and a Lens on Public Administration's Evolution and Progress in South Africa Shereen Sikwela, Melvin Diedericks	189-211
11. The Underrepresentation Of Women's Leadership In Water Governance: A Case Study Of Zululand District Municipality, South Africa Nomfundo Nomcebo Zulu, Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza	212-234

12. Intersectionality and Academic Marginalisation: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Black Women Scholars at the University of South Africa
Dr Khabonina Grace Nkumane

235-251
13. A Philosophical Appraisal Of René Girard'S Archetypal Scapegoat Hypothesis In The Light Of Nigerian Migrants In Germany
Stanley Ekwugha & Kingsley Ekene Amaechi

252-268
14. The Effect Of Flood Risk Management Control On Property Protection In Lagos State, Nigeria
Margaret N. Jinadu & Akinseye Olowu

268-285
15. Antinomies of Afro-radical and liberal democratic decolonization in Zimbabwe and South Africa in Sue Nyathi's The Gold-Diggers (2018)
Peter Moopi

286-304
16. A Collaborative or Disputed Space? Teacher Unions and The Professionalization of School Leadership
Theminkosi Zwane, David Matsepe, Mugwena Maluleke

305-325
17. Dialectics On Humanitarian Action: A Necessary Action To The Less Privileged Nations In Crisis
Anselm Oyon, Kelechi Johnmary Ani

326-338
18. Music As A Pedagogical Tool And Epistemology Within A Multiliteracies Approach To University Education
Maricel Botha

339-353
19. Ecologies Of Distress: How Off-Campus Housing Affects Student Mental Health In Rural South Africa
Mammusa Rosinah Lekoa & Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza

354-370
20. Post-COVID-19 Challenges Faced by Enterprises in Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal
Selena Moodley, Beharry-Ramraj, A

371-388
21. Linguistic Justice And Higher Education Futures: Leveraging The Disciplinary Literacies Framework To Re-Imagine Instructional Communication In South African Higher Education
Musara Lubombo, Thato Zethi

389-408

LINGUISTIC JUSTICE AND HIGHER EDUCATION FUTURES: LEVERAGING THE DISCIPLINARY LITERACIES FRAMEWORK TO RE-IMAGINE INSTRUCTIONAL COMMUNICATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Language remains a central site of struggle in South African higher education. Despite progressive constitutional and policy commitments to multilingualism, African languages are largely excluded from formal teaching and learning, relegated instead to symbolic or supplementary roles while English and Afrikaans continue to dominate as media of instruction. This exclusion creates a persistent paradox: while graduates must engage professionally and socially through African languages in workplaces, communities, and civic life, their academic training equips them primarily in colonial languages. This paper offers a conceptual and theoretical analysis of this paradox by applying Airey's Disciplinary Literacies Discussion Matrix (DLDM) to interrogate this persistent disjuncture between the language of academic training and the linguistic demands of professional and societal participation. The DLDM, which highlights the communicative demands of disciplines across three sites - the academy, the workplace, and society - and exposes the epistemic injustices that arise when instruction is misaligned with these linguistic realities is used as a heuristic framework to examine how communicative demands across disciplinary sites shape linguistic inclusion and exclusion. Drawing from Southern theory (Connell, 2007) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) critique of colonial-language dominance, the paper argues that the marginalisation of African languages sustains epistemic inequality and undermines higher education's social justice mandate. In response, the paper advances a multilingual pedagogical framework that embeds African languages into disciplinary teaching through translanguaging practices, curriculum redesign, and digital mediation. Such reform goes beyond additive bilingualism by positioning African languages as central to knowledge creation, professional competence, and epistemic sovereignty. The paper offers a novel lens for reimagining instructional communication as a site of transformation. It demonstrates how disciplinary literacies can be reconfigured to affirm African languages as vital infrastructures for higher education futures.

Keywords: *African Renaissance, instructional communication, decolonisation, epistemic justice, multilingualism, NWU language policy, disciplinary literacies.*

Introduction

Although apartheid formally ended in 1994, South African universities remain deeply shaped by colonial legacies, with curricula and epistemologies still largely anchored in Western knowledge systems. Scholars argue that African education remains trapped in colonial epistemology, functioning like what Nyamnjoh (2012) calls ‘potted plants in greenhouses’ that constrain African creativity and knowledge while compelling Africans to internalise Western standards, thereby reproducing Eurocentric dominance (also see Hurst, 2016; Heleta, 2016). One of the most visible expressions of this epistemic violence is found in linguistic practices. Despite progressive policy frameworks recognising eleven official languages and explicit institutional commitments to multilingualism, English and Afrikaans persist as the dominant media of instruction across all types of South African universities, including historically white, historically black and universities of technology (Xulu-Gama, 2022; Maseko and Siziba, 2023; Rakgogo, 2024), compelling students most of whom are non-native speakers of these colonial languages to negotiate intellectual spaces through languages that do not reflect their own conceptual frameworks (Heugh, 2002). This condition forces students to think academically in one language while functioning socially and professionally in another, an onto-epistemic coloniality that alienates them from their cultural heritage and produces what Meighan (2023) terms *coloniallingualism*.

For us, coloniallingualism is not merely pedagogical. It is also political. It symbolises the unfinished project of decolonisation and highlights the limited extent to which higher education has transformed in ways that affirm African languages, epistemologies, and identities. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements of 2015/16 marked an important decolonial turn in South African higher education (Zondi, 2021; Vorster and Quinn, 2017; Maldonado-

Torres, 2011). These movements foregrounded language as a critical dimension of transformation (Heleta, 2016; Turner, 2023). Yet, nearly a decade later, epistemic violence persists, with universities continuing to operate within colonial frameworks reinforced through what may be termed *linguistic apartheid*.

Turner (2023) and Reddy and Adanlawo (2018) note that instructional communication is one of the most visible sites of this epistemic coloniality. English and Afrikaans remain entrenched as languages of instruction, marginalising indigenous African languages that are vibrant in everyday life, workplaces, and cultural production (Ministerial Committee on Indigenous African Languages, 2003: 7–9; Higgs, 2016). For Higgs (2016), privileging Western languages and epistemologies constitutes a continuation of colonial hierarchies of knowledge within higher education where certain linguistic forms are implicitly treated as more legitimate vehicles of scholarship and intellectual authority. It silences African intellectual traditions and sustains the colonial order. Scholars have long argued that colonial languages cannot serve as instruments of epistemic transformation or justice (Ngũgĩ, 1986; Cloete & Maassen, 2002; Kaschula, 2016).

Against this backdrop, this paper interrogates the paradox of African languages being dominant in society and workplaces yet largely excluded from academic instruction. Drawing on Airey’s (2011) *Disciplinary Literacies Discussion Matrix* (DLDM), we re-purpose a tool developed in Northern contexts to re-imagine its possibilities within a Southern one. We argue that the continued exclusion of indigenous languages from higher education constitutes what Ngũgĩ (1986) calls a *cultural betrayal*, perpetuating epistemic injustice, constraining cognitive development, and inflicting psychological and educational harm. By leveraging the

DLDM, this paper seeks to open space for imagining alternative communicative practices that affirm African languages as legitimate carriers of disciplinary knowledge. The following section grounds this critique by examining how multilingualism is positioned and implemented within South African higher education, focusing on both policy frameworks and institutional realities.

Language and epistemic power in (South African) Higher Education

A growing body of scholarship has examined how language functions as a mechanism of epistemic inclusion and exclusion within higher education systems. In the South African context, research has consistently shown that the dominance of colonial languages as the primary media of instruction persists across universities (Xulu-Gama, 2022; Maseko and Siziba, 2023; Rakgogo, 2024). This linguistic dominance shapes not only access to learning but also the forms of knowledge that are recognised as academically legitimate. Xulu-Gama (2022) and Mugwaze (2025) among others contend that the failure to meaningfully implement multilingual language policies has limited the epistemic participation and belonging of students whose primary linguistic repertoires lie outside colonial languages.

Scholars of decolonial education emphasise that language is inseparable from the politics of knowledge production. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) famously argued that the colonial imposition of European languages functions as a form of cultural and intellectual domination because language carries the memory, worldview, and epistemological frameworks of a people. When African languages are excluded from academic discourse, the knowledge systems embedded within them are simultaneously marginalised. This insight resonates with broader decolonial scholarship, which views language hierarchies as constitutive of what

Anibal Quijano (2000) terms the colonality of power, the enduring structures through which colonial forms of domination persist beyond formal political independence.

Within higher education research, the linguistic dimension of epistemic inequality is also increasingly framed through the concept of epistemic justice. Scholars argue that the privileging of a narrow set of academic languages limits whose knowledge counts and whose voices can meaningfully participate in scholarly debate (Fricker, 2007; Mbembe, 2016; Shezi et al., 2025). Thus Mbembe (2016) emphasises that transforming knowledge systems requires confronting the linguistic infrastructures through which disciplines organise and transmit knowledge.

In this regard, multilingualism is often theorised as a transformative technology capable of interrupting colonial relationships and creating spaces for empowering communication across difference (Stroud & Williams, 2017). On this basis, South African universities have adopted policies that ostensibly promote multilingualism and foreground African languages as legitimate media of instruction (Maseko and Siziba, 2023; DHET, 2020; Madiba, 2010; Mthombeni & Ogunnubi, 2020). Yet a decade after the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements reignited the decolonial imperative, colonial linguistic hierarchies remain entrenched. English and Afrikaans continue to dominate as the primary languages of instruction (Drummond, 2016; Thamaga-Chitja & Mbatha, 2012; Docrat & Kaschula, 2020).

This persistence is reinforced by constitutional caveats such as Section 29(2) which permits instruction in any official language only “where reasonably practicable” (Maseko and Siziba, 2023). Universities frequently invoke this clause to justify inaction, citing the supposed lack of intellectualisation or digitalisation of indigenous languages (Maseko and Siziba,

2023; Turner, 2023). Such reasoning reflects what Nyamnjoh (2012) identifies as an internalised sense of inadequacy, a colonial hangover that devalues African creativity and knowledge systems. From a Southern theory perspective, this represents what Connell (2007) terms the *metropole–periphery relation*: while African languages are vibrant in everyday life and workplaces, they are positioned as peripheral to the “universal” knowledge production associated with colonial languages.

Institutional practices across the sector illustrate this uneven terrain. At one end are approaches that remain largely symbolic or translation-focused, preserving colonial hierarchies. North-West University (NWU), for example, has sought to widen access by translating Afrikaans materials into English (NWU, 2015, 2022). This strategy expands reach but sustains a hierarchy where indigenous languages remain marginal (Heugh, 2015; Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). Similarly, the University of Cape Town (UCT) - despite being the epicentre of #RhodesMustFall - continued to privilege English and Afrikaans in its language policy until 2025 when isiXhosa was finally added as an official language. Initiatives such as the *Masithethe isiXhosa* staff training programme and limited disciplinary pilots (e.g., isiXhosa for Law and Social Work) (Madiba, 2010; UCT, 2025) remain peripheral to the epistemic core of the institution. Stellenbosch University (SU) and the University of South Africa (UNISA) follow comparable patterns. Despite formal endorsements of multilingualism, reforms have largely shifted dominance from Afrikaans to English while relegating isiXhosa and other African languages to supportive or supplementary roles (Maseko and Siziba, 2023; SU, 2016; UNISA, 2010; Docrat & Kaschula, 2020).

A second cluster of universities demonstrate partial innovations that normalise African languages in limited contexts without fully dislodging English dominance. The

University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) introduced a compulsory isiZulu module, celebrated as a symbolic affirmation of local linguistic realities. Yet the absence of developed isiZulu academic registers and uneven faculty uptake restricts its transformative reach (Kaschula & Maseko, 2014; Maseko & Kaschula, 2019). At Nelson Mandela University (NMU), student protests in 2017 centred on language politics, leading to a renewed commitment to isiXhosa in professional domains such as health sciences and law (NMU, 2017). However, here too, curriculum-wide integration remains constrained by resources and uneven implementation (Maseko & Siziba, 2023). The University of Witwatersrand has taken deliberate steps to position isiZulu and Sesotho through digital language use guides which, as Dladla and Khetoa (2025) put it, serve as transformative instruments that promote inclusivity and mitigate language degradation. These efforts represent progress but still stop short of embedding African languages into disciplinary knowledge production (Drummond, 2016).

A smaller set of institutions have pursued more ambitious experiments, though these too face systemic limits. Rhodes University, while English remains the primary medium of instruction, has explicitly positioned isiXhosa as a language of teaching and learning alongside English (Mawonga, 2026). Pedagogical resources designed to support disciplinary engagement at the university include bilingual materials, vocational isiXhosa programmes for Pharmacy and Law, and staff development courses (Turner, 2023; Kaschula, 2016). Yet even here, English predominates in core disciplinary spaces, leaving isiXhosa’s role more symbolic than structural (Nyika, 2015; Mawonga, 2026).

The above cases reveal a sector marked by progressive rhetoric but fragmented practice. Universities invoke constitutional caveats, resource constraints, and underdeveloped registers as reasons for slow implementation,

yet such justifications reproduce the colonial logic of linguistic peripherality. Connell's (2007) Southern theory reminds us that such arrangements are not accidental: they reflect a global pattern in which knowledge practices of the metropole are universalised, while those of the periphery are treated as supplementary or local. In this way, multilingualism is acknowledged in principle but rarely mainstreamed in practice. The result is epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Makhanya & Zibane, 2020): students are denied full participation as knowers in academic spaces, compelled to expend greater cognitive effort, and often to rely on English-dominant AI translation tools (Selwyn, 2023). At the same time, the absence of African languages as full media of instruction limits the development of specialised disciplinary literacies (Airey, 2011; Prah, 2009), curtailing graduates' readiness for workplaces where African language proficiency is essential.

Thus, while multilingualism is celebrated as a progressive marker of transformation, its practical implementation remains largely symbolic, supplementary, and experimental. Although several South African universities have begun experimenting with multilingual pedagogies and discipline-specific terminology development, the systematic use of African languages as full languages of instruction remains limited, with the University of KwaZulu-Natal representing the most sustained institutional attempt to implement such a model. To move beyond this impasse requires reimagining multilingualism not merely as inclusion but as a matter of linguistic justice and epistemic sovereignty.

Linguistic justice and Higher Education futures

Linguistic justice is increasingly recognised as central to the future of higher education in South Africa. As already highlighted, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) described colonial-language dominance as a "cultural bomb"

that erodes heritage, disrupts knowledge continuity, and perpetuates epistemic servitude. Embedding African languages into higher education strengthens cognitive development, deepens conceptual understanding, and affirms identity. Together, these outcomes are prerequisites for producing graduates capable of critical thinking, contextual innovation, and epistemic agency (Alexander, 2003; Heugh, 2015; Makhanya & Zibane, 2020).

African futurism provides a valuable lens for imagining these futures. Too often, Africa's futures have been narrated through Western frames (Okorafor, 2019; Eshun, 2003). Locating African languages at the centre of university instruction disrupts this colonial temporal framing, positioning higher education as a site of epistemic sovereignty rather than dependency. Mbembe (2016) similarly calls for universities that are planetary intellectual nodes yet grounded in African languages, knowledge systems, and archives. From a Southern theory perspective, this is a matter of dismantling what Connell (2007) terms the *metropole - periphery relation*: rejecting the relegation of African knowledge practices to the margins of a Eurocentric order. International comparisons underscore this point. In countries such as Germany, France, Japan, China, and Egypt, national languages function as full media of instruction (Bamgbose, 2011; Ministerial Committee, 2003). By contrast, South Africa's reliance on English and Afrikaans departs from this global norm and constrains both knowledge production and cultural autonomy (Higgs, 2016; Turner, 2023).

Realising linguistic justice requires more than symbolic inclusion. It entails deliberate curriculum redesign, investment in African-language academic registers, lecturer development, and technological innovations that enable multilingual teaching and learning (Heugh, 2015; Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). As Stroud and Williams (2017) argue, multilingualism is not merely additive but a

transformative technology for imagining alternative futures. Framed through African futurism, the incorporation of African languages becomes strategic infrastructure for higher education — enabling technological innovation, epistemic agency, and social justice.

This orientation underscores that linguistic justice is inseparable from broader educational and technological justice. Without such transformation, African higher education risks reproducing epistemic servitude, where African intellect continues to be mediated through colonial linguistic codes (Ngũgĩ, 1986). By contrast, making African languages central to instruction situates universities as engines of an African Renaissance: technologically adept, intellectually autonomous, globally connected, and firmly anchored in the continent's linguistic heritage.

The persistence of colonial linguistic hierarchies despite progressive policies reflects not only resource constraints but also a lack of political will (Maseko and Siziba, 2023). To move beyond symbolic gestures towards epistemic sovereignty requires a

systematic framework for demonstrating how African languages are indispensable to disciplinary teaching and learning. Airey's (2011) *Disciplinary Literacies Discussion Matrix* (DLDM) offers such a framework by foregrounding instructional communication as central to knowledge access, disciplinary practices, and epistemic participation. Repurposed within the South African context, the DLDM provides a novel lens for interrogating the exclusion of African languages and reimagining higher education futures grounded in justice, transformation, and sovereignty.

Disciplinary literacies and the African language paradox

Airey's (2011) DLDM provides a productive heuristic for rethinking instructional communication. Unlike generic literacy models, disciplinary literacies foreground how language functions within knowledge practices, enabling participation in the communicative life of a discipline. Airey distinguishes three primary sites where disciplinary communication occurs - the academy, the workplace, and society - each with both local and international dimensions.

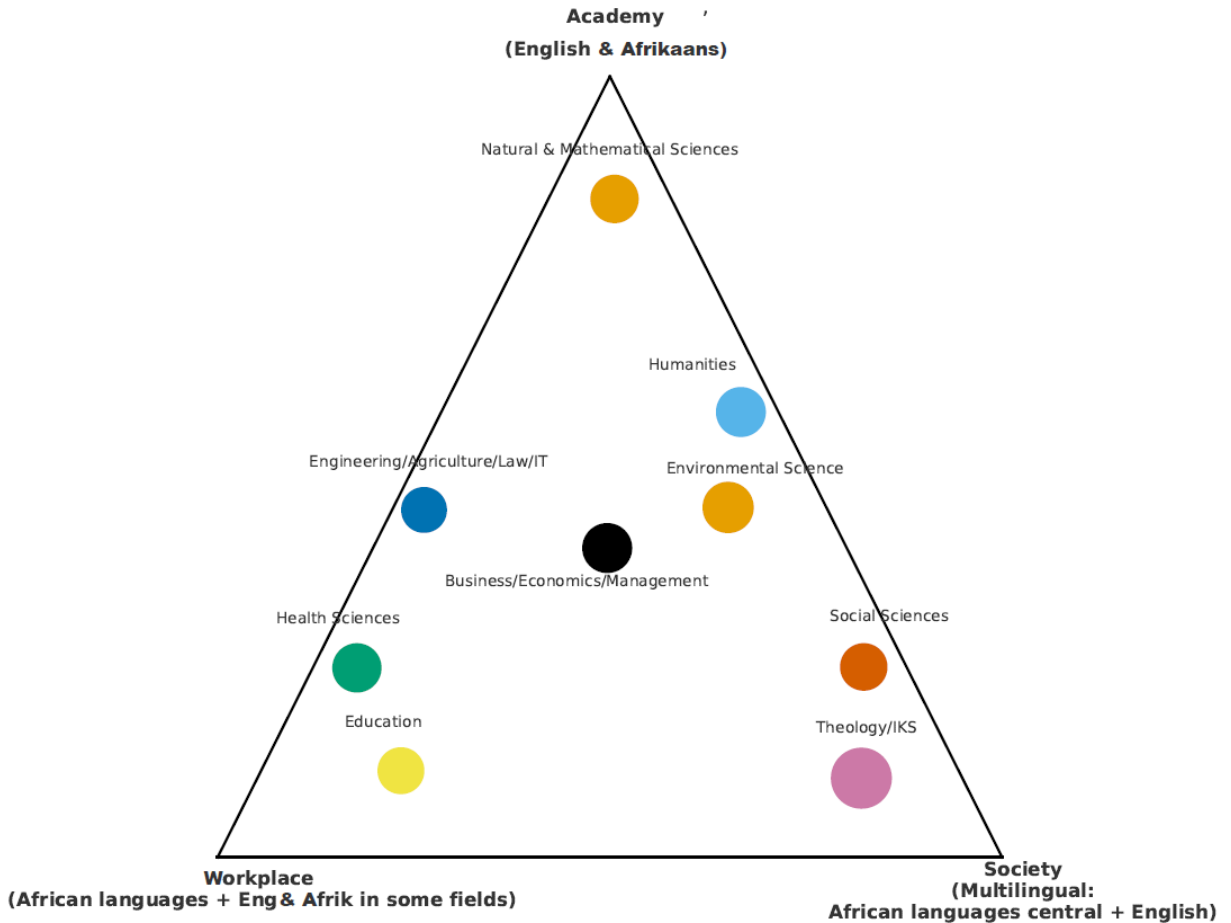


Figure 1: Degree clusters in Airey's sites of disciplinary practice

While the international domain is typically dominated by English, the local domains involve one or more national languages. Figure 1 is a triangular illustration of how different degree programmes cluster differently within Airey's three sites.

Applied to South Africa's multilingual context, the DLDM exposes a striking paradox. African languages dominate in workplaces, political administration, legal systems, health services, and everyday community life, yet remain marginalised within academic training. Students are taught almost exclusively in English or Afrikaans, even when their future professional and

societal roles require fluent African-language communication. This disjuncture produces what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) calls a "cultural betrayal," alienating students from their linguistic repertoires while under-preparing them for real-world engagement.

The paradox of language use in higher education manifests differently across disciplines. In academy-oriented fields such as the natural sciences, engineering, and mathematics, instruction and scholarly communication are primarily geared towards international audiences, which entrenches English as the dominant medium and limits the pedagogical space for African languages.

Humanities disciplines, by contrast, operate at the intersection of academic inquiry and cultural engagement, where African languages retain both epistemic and pedagogical relevance, supporting teaching, local scholarship, and engagement with community knowledge systems. The Disciplinary Literacies Discussion Matrix (DLDM) illuminates these contrasts by mapping the communicative demands of each discipline across three sites—the academy, the workplace, and society—revealing how linguistic choices privilege certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others. By situating disciplines within this matrix, it becomes clear that language policies and instructional practices must be sensitive not only to disciplinary norms but also to the broader social and cultural functions of knowledge production, highlighting the structural inequities that arise when African languages are excluded from disciplinary instruction.

In academy-oriented fields such as natural sciences, engineering and mathematics, instruction and scholarly communication are primarily geared towards international audiences, which indubitably entrenches English as the dominant medium and limits the pedagogical space for African languages. Humanities disciplines, by contrast, operate at the intersection of academic inquiry and cultural engagement, where African languages retain both epistemic and pedagogical relevance, supporting teaching, local scholarship and engagement with community knowledge systems. Here, it becomes clear that language policies and instructional practices must be sensitive not only to disciplinary norms but also to the broader social and cultural functions of knowledge production.

Workplace-focused disciplines including health sciences, education, law, engineering, and agriculture occupy a dual linguistic space that reflects broader sociolinguistic realities in multilingual societies. In professional and community settings, African languages are often indispensable for effective patient care, classroom communication, legal consultation,

and community extension work, where meaningful engagement with local populations depends on learners' and practitioners' full linguistic repertoires (Heugh, 2015; Maphela & Adanlawo, 2024). At the same time, these disciplines continue to rely on English for accreditation, regulatory compliance, and specialised technical registers. This reflects the globalised norms of professional communication and the dominance of English-medium certification standards (Pennycook, 2017). Recognising these dynamics underscores the need for multilingual pedagogical strategies that integrate African languages while maintaining access to globalised technical and professional discourses.

In fields oriented toward societal engagement, such as political science, theology, development studies, and indigenous knowledge systems, African languages are essential for maintaining legitimacy and ensuring meaningful community reach. In these domains, language functions not merely as a tool of communication but as an epistemic medium through which local histories, moral frameworks, and socio-political imaginaries are expressed and negotiated (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Mbembe, 2016). By contrast, disciplines such as business and environmental studies occupy hybrid positions spanning the academy, the workplace, and society, requiring graduates to navigate both local linguistic contexts and globalised professional registers, thereby demanding multilingual competence across registers (Canagarajah, 2013; Hornberger & Link, 2012). Concrete examples illustrate these dynamics in practice. Nursing graduates, for instance, must convey complex medical concepts to patients in isiZulu, Setswana, or other local languages, while education graduates often navigate between English policy discourse and vernacular classroom practice. Similarly, theology students rely on African languages to engage congregations, transmit moral and epistemic traditions, and preserve local knowledge systems (Mbembe, 2016; Heugh, 2018). Yet the majority of these students receive

instruction almost exclusively in colonial languages, leaving them underprepared for the multilingual demands of their professions.

Table 1: Mapping of South African Higher Education Disciplines by Site of Language and Practice

<i>Faculty / Discipline</i>	<i>Primary Site(s) of Practice</i>	<i>Languages of Instruction</i>	<i>Languages of Practice (Workplace & Society)</i>
<i>Natural & Mathematical Sciences</i>	Academy (international communication); some workplace	English (dominant), Afrikaans (residual)	English (technical/scientific registers); African languages minimal but important in outreach (science communication, community projects)
<i>Humanities (Philosophy, History, Languages)</i>	Academy + Society (cultural/public discourse)	English, Afrikaans	African languages (isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Setswana, etc.) in cultural, historical, and literary discourse; English for publication
<i>Health Sciences (Nursing, Pharmacy, Psychology, Social Work, Medicine)</i>	Workplace + Society (patient/client interaction)	English (dominant), Afrikaans in some provinces	African languages critical for patient care, counselling, community health (e.g., isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Setswana)
<i>Education</i>	Workplace + Society (schools, communities)	English (policy language, instruction medium), Afrikaans (some contexts)	African languages widely used in classrooms, communities, and parental engagement (isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi, etc.)
<i>Engineering, Agriculture, Law, IT</i>	Workplace + Society + Academy (applied research)	English (dominant technical medium); Afrikaans in some legacy institutions	African languages for client engagement, agricultural extension, community law clinics, IT end-user communication; English remains central for accreditation & technical registers
<i>Social Sciences (Political Science, Sociology, Development Studies, Communication)</i>	Society + Academy (policy debates, public discourse)	English (dominant), Afrikaans (some contexts)	African languages indispensable for legitimacy, civic engagement, grassroots research (e.g., isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Tshivenda)

<i>Theology & Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)</i>	Society + Workplace (churches, communities, traditional institutions)	English, Afrikaans (dominant in curricula)	African languages crucial for sermons, rituals, cultural practice (isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Setswana, etc.)
<i>Business, Economics, Management Sciences</i>	Academy + Workplace + Society (hybrid site)	English (dominant), Afrikaans (legacy institutions)	African languages in HR, marketing, community business development, informal markets; English in corporate/finance contexts
<i>Environmental Sciences & Sustainability</i>	Workplace + Society (community engagement, policy)	English (dominant), Afrikaans (residual)	African languages in community projects (farming, conservation, rural sustainability), English in global policy/science
<i>Law (detailed)</i>	Workplace + Society (courts, client communication)	English (dominant in legal instruction), Afrikaans (historical/legal legacy)	African languages constitutionally recognised in courts, but unevenly implemented; everyday client consultation in isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Setswana
<i>Creative Arts (Drama, Music, Fine Art, Media)</i>	Society + Academy (performance, cultural production)	English, Afrikaans (dominant in curricula)	African languages in theatre, music, media, film, and oral traditions; English in publishing, international distribution
<i>ICT / Computer Science</i>	Workplace + Academy	English (programming, technical content)	African languages in user-interface design, community IT projects; English for technical registers

Table summary

1. In the academy: English (Afrikaans in some institutions) dominates as the language of instruction, research, and assessment, privileging international communication.
2. In the workplace: African languages + English dominates. In applied and professional fields such as health sciences, education, law, agriculture, African languages are essential for effective practice with clients, patients, and communities.
3. In society: African languages dominate. For cultural, political, and religious engagement, African languages anchor legitimacy, trust, and resonance.

Paradox: Students are trained in English-dominant academic contexts but expected to operate multilingually in their professions and civic lives. This produces “cultural betrayal” (Ngũgĩ, 1986) and epistemic injustice.

The disjuncture most heavily affects speaking and listening, which underpin interpersonal engagement, and extends to reading and writing, where learners must constantly navigate between the technical registers of English or Afrikaans and the conceptual structures of African languages (Canagarajah, 2013; Mawonga, 2026). This misalignment not only undermines students' professional agency but also reproduces epistemic hierarchies, privileging colonial languages while marginalising the knowledge systems embedded in African languages.

This systemic paradox presents several practical and epistemic challenges. Graduates frequently encounter difficulties maintaining conceptual accuracy when required to express specialised knowledge in African languages for which they have received little formal training. Those educated primarily in English or Afrikaans often must improvise explanations of technical concepts in professional or community settings, increasing the risk of miscommunication or simplification of critical content (Heugh, 2015). For instance, a social worker may be called upon to explain legal rights in Setswana without structured preparation, potentially undermining clarity and precision. These challenges underscore the persistent tension between the linguistic orientation of higher education and the multilingual demands of professional practice, highlighting the urgent need for intentional multilingual pedagogical strategies.

The exclusion of African languages from higher education has profound epistemic and practical consequences. Indigenous knowledge embedded in these languages is often sidelined, limiting students' ability to engage community-based insights in professional practice (Prah, 2009; Alexander, 2003). Language, as Alexander (2003) emphasises, carries culturally specific ways of knowing; when African

languages are absent from instruction, these epistemologies are effectively erased.

This exclusion also imposes serious practical challenges. Graduates are frequently required to improvise explanations of technical or legal concepts in African languages, despite being trained primarily in English or Afrikaans, creating risks of miscommunication, semantic loss, or conceptual dilution (Bamgbose, 2011; Alexander, 2003). In professions such as law or healthcare, where precision is critical, reliance on ad hoc translation or code-switching can compromise both effectiveness and outcomes.

Beyond practical challenges, students experience cognitive and identity tensions. Heugh (2015) describes this as "epistemic double consciousness," where learners operate academically in one language but socially and professionally in another—a phenomenon Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues generates alienation. This dual cognitive navigation reflects broader structural inequalities: English continues to dominate the academy, while African languages are relegated to peripheral or supplementary roles. From a Southern theory perspective, this reproduces the metropole-periphery dynamic in knowledge production, privileging colonial epistemologies at the expense of local ones (Connell, 2007).

The Disciplinary Literacies Discussion Matrix (DLDM) makes these tensions visible by showing how linguistic hierarchies constrain the development of disciplinary literacies and perpetuate epistemic inequality. Addressing this paradox requires integrating African languages into curricula not symbolically, but as essential tools for cultivating the communicative and conceptual repertoires students need to navigate the academy, professional environments, and wider society.

Reimagining instructional communication: Towards a multilingual pedagogical framework

Building on the insights of the DLDM, this section turns from diagnosis to solutions, outlining how South African higher education can reimagine instructional communication through a multilingual pedagogical framework. Confronting the persistent language gap in South African higher education necessitates a radical reconceptualisation of teaching and learning, one that places African languages on equal footing with English within disciplinary instruction. Rather than treating indigenous languages as ancillary or decorative additions, universities must develop multilingual pedagogical frameworks that actively leverage students' full linguistic repertoires for learning, reasoning, and knowledge production. Translanguaging, as outlined by García and Wei (2014), provides a powerful conceptual and practical tool for this purpose, allowing learners to navigate and interweave multiple languages to construct meaning, interrogate concepts, and engage critically with disciplinary content. Such a framework is not merely aspirational; it is anchored in constitutional principles recognising eleven official languages, reflected in the National Language Policy Framework (Department of Arts and Culture, 2003), and reinforced by UNESCO's (2022) call for mother-tongue-based multilingual education as a cornerstone of cognitive development and equitable learning outcomes.

Integrating African languages is both a pedagogical necessity and an epistemic intervention. Evidence from multilingual education research demonstrates that translanguaging improves comprehension and critical engagement, particularly in disciplines where concepts are abstract or technically dense, such as law, engineering, and health sciences (Probyn, 2015; Madiba, 2014). Moreover, recognising and

legitimising students' home languages fosters identity affirmation and counters the alienation and cognitive dissonance that often characterises English-dominated classrooms (Heugh, 2021; Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). By incorporating Setswana, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, and other regional languages into teaching and learning, universities create spaces where students' lived linguistic realities are valued, while simultaneously maintaining engagement with global knowledge production. This dual positioning enhances the relevance, accessibility, and epistemic legitimacy of higher education.

Implementing such reforms requires coordinated action across curricula, pedagogy, and technology. At the curricular level, African languages must be embedded as core epistemic resources rather than supplementary annotations. Course design should intentionally scaffold multilingual competencies, integrating linguistic practice with disciplinary reasoning and assessment. Pedagogically, lecturers must be supported to employ translanguaging strategies that allow students to move fluidly across languages in response to the communicative demands of complex tasks (Mbirimi-Hungwe & Matariro-Mutanha, 2024). Technology can play a complementary role, offering bilingual glossaries, lecture notes in multiple languages, and subtitling or annotation tools that reduce dependence on English as the sole vehicle for authoritative knowledge (Makalela, 2018). Critical to success is capacity building. Educators require professional development in multilingual pedagogy, while students need structured opportunities to develop academic literacy in both African and colonial languages.

Practical examples from South African universities illustrate both the possibilities and constraints of such approaches. At UKZN, isiZulu modules have been introduced to embed African languages into disciplinary teaching, though inconsistent

implementation and uneven faculty engagement have limited impact (Kaschula & Maseko, 2014). Rhodes University has positioned isiXhosa within some courses, yet English continues to dominate core lectures, assessments, and high-status academic forums (Turner, 2023; Chaka & Adanlawo, 2024). Similarly, at UCT, isiXhosa has been incorporated into certain professional programmes, but often remains peripheral, serving more symbolic than constitutive functions within the curriculum (Madiba, 2010; Heugh, 2015). These examples highlight that without deliberate and sustained curriculum redesign, African languages risk being relegated to the margins, reinforcing rather than challenging the epistemic dominance of English.

Ultimately, reimagining instructional communication in South African universities requires positioning African languages at the epistemic core of knowledge production and teaching. Multilingualism should be understood not as a challenge to be managed, but as a strategic resource for fostering intellectual sovereignty, pedagogical equity, and the African Renaissance in higher education. As Heugh (2015) emphasises, students achieve deeper understanding and engagement when learning is mediated through languages in which they are cognitively and culturally grounded. Recognising this principle has profound implications for transforming the linguistic hierarchies embedded in higher education, promoting both justice and inclusivity while enhancing disciplinary learning.

Conclusion

Linguistic justice is not merely a policy aspiration; it is foundational to the decolonial project and to the construction of higher education futures that are genuinely inclusive, equitable, and socially transformative. Without the meaningful integration of African languages into the epistemic core of universities, the colonial and apartheid-era hierarchies embedded within the academy remain unchallenged, reproducing exclusion and constraining the sector's potential for transformative impact (Madadzhe, 2019). Beyond symbolic recognition, the absence of African languages undermines the very structures through which knowledge is produced, transmitted, and validated, perpetuating epistemic inequities that extend from classrooms to workplaces and broader societal engagement. Translanguaging offers a concrete and practical mechanism for bridging this divide, allowing educators to connect students' lived linguistic realities with disciplinary knowledge, and to affirm African ways of knowing across multiple communicative and cognitive domains (García & Wei, 2014; Mbirimi-Hungwe & Matariro-Mutanha, 2024).

Viewed through Connell's (2007) Southern theory lens, the dominance of English and Afrikaans as media of instruction exemplifies the persistent privileging of metropolitan languages over those of the periphery, sustaining epistemic dependency and limiting the capacity of higher education to nurture locally grounded knowledge systems. To reverse this entrenched hierarchy, African languages must be recognised as central infrastructures of knowledge production rather than peripheral or supplementary instruments. Embedding them at the heart of teaching, learning,

and research enables universities to support cognitive diversity, develop disciplinary literacies attuned to local and global contexts, and cultivate graduates who are both professionally competent and culturally literate.

Reimagining instructional communication in South African universities is thus simultaneously a pedagogical and decolonial imperative. It requires sustained, systemic engagement at multiple levels: curriculum design that integrates African languages as essential tools of knowledge construction, pedagogy that supports translinguaging and multilingual literacy development, and institutional culture that values linguistic pluralism as a cornerstone of academic and social justice. Such integration affirms student identities, enables critical engagement, and expands the repertoire of knowledge production to encompass both local epistemologies and global disciplinary standards. In alignment with Higgs' (2016) vision, African languages must be treated as pillars of inclusive, equitable, and forward-looking higher education, positioning universities as intellectually sovereign, socially responsive, and deeply rooted in the cultural and linguistic heritage of the continent.

Ultimately, achieving linguistic justice in higher education is inseparable from the broader project of decolonisation: it is about dismantling epistemic hierarchies, legitimising African knowledge systems, and constructing institutions capable of producing knowledge that is simultaneously globally relevant and locally resonant. By foregrounding African languages in all dimensions of academic life, South African universities can embody a truly African epistemic project, advancing pedagogical excellence, social equity, and the long-term vision of the African Renaissance.

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