

## MULTILINGUALISM: AN AFRICAN REALITY

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### ABSTRACT

*A plethora of studies, locally and internationally, concur that multilingualism is a global phenomenon. Multilingualism has become ubiquitous even in parts of the world where a monolingual stance has been prevalent. However, the hegemony of English is maintained in countries historically colonised by the British Empire. This paper examines the various reasons why multilingualism is not taken into account, especially in South African institutions of higher learning. The qualitative study discussed in this paper utilised only one respondent stationed at a university in South Africa as its participant. Data were collected through a strategic conversation analysis with the student. The results show that the multilingual student treasures his inherent multilingualism and enjoys acquiring more languages into his repertoire. In addition, the results debunk some researchers' scepticism towards promoting multilingualism for fear of language interference. The findings further indicate the need to recognise the reality of multilingualism in South Africa and Africa, which should be treated as such.*

**KEYWORDS:** Multilingualism; multilingual education; translanguaging; higher education; translingual pedagogy

### INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism is a catchphrase in the language field and is defined differently among scholars and in various policy documents globally. Oksaar (1982) defines multilingualism as any degree of linguistic ability arising from an equally good command of two or more languages. Multilingualism is the study of the social contract in which two or more languages are known and used by the speakers, according to Moore and Gajo (2009). The European Commission (2007) defines multilingualism as the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage regularly with more than one language in their day-to-day lives. In South Africa, the Language Policy of Higher Education (2020) defines the term multilingualism as the effective use of multiple languages, either by an individual or community. At this juncture, it is worth noting that there is no agreed-upon definition of multilingualism among South African scholars and from a South African perspective (Ndlhovu & Makalela 2021). Ndlhovu and Makalela (2021) emphasise the importance of perceiving and working with multilingual speakers from the Global South from an understanding of their inherent multilingualism, influenced by their language practices, cultural beliefs and traditions. Therefore, it is important to formulate a definition of multilingualism that suits the South African context.

As pointed out earlier, multilingualism has become the norm globally. Lamb (2015: 292) explains that global migratory movements have become unprecedented in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Due to global migration, European and North American countries that were constructed as monolingual are now recognised as highly multilingual (Garcia & Wei, 2009). Even urban centres such as London in the United Kingdom have become superdiverse (Vertovec, 2007). Gogolin (2002: 124) justifies multilingualism in Germany by virtue of the 15 different

nationalities present in schools, with learners speaking up to 20 home languages. Moreover, Hedman and Magnuson (2019: 453) explain that Sweden has between 150 and 200 languages. Europe, where various languages from different parts of the world are spoken, has become an attractive target for migrants (Gogolin, 2002).

More than 2000 indigenous languages are spoken across the African continent. Onyango (2022: 3) explains that Africa has 2000 living indigenous languages, of which 522 languages are spoken in Nigeria, 275 in Cameroon and 217 in the Democratic Republic of Congo—the country with the third most spoken languages. There are four language families among the 2000 languages (Crystal, 1998: 24), namely Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Khoisan and Niger-Congo. These language families have a history that groups them. For example, the Bantu languages spoken in South Africa and other sub-Saharan countries are classified under the Niger-Congo family (Onyango, 2022: 4).

South Africa's official languages consist of nine indigenous languages, classified as Bantu languages. In addition, two West Germanic languages, i.e., English and Afrikaans, were accorded official status alongside the nine indigenous languages (Mohlalho & Ditsele, 2022). South Africa has 12 official languages: isiXhosa, isiZulu, isiNdebele, xiTsonga, tshiVenda, Setswana, Sepedi, Siswati, Sesotho, English, South African Sign Language and Afrikaans. In essence, South Africa has been a multilingual country since the enactment of the Constitutional Act 108 of 1996 of the Republic of South Africa, granting official language status to 11 of these languages and sign language in 2012. Given the language situation in South Africa, Mohlalho and Ditsele (2022: 2) question whether the multilingual approach was implemented successfully in the country. Their doubt arises from the endoglossic approach that South Africa adopted. Heine (1992: 25) describes an endoglossic approach as languages (*indigenous languages*) previously denied official status being granted official status alongside West Germanic languages. Mohlalho and Ditsele (2022) argue that investment in promoting the indigenous languages of South Africa is insufficient, which means those languages are not accorded the same status of power and prestige as English. The English language is still hegemonic in both the education and business sectors (Mohlalho & Ditsele, 2022).

Given the background provided above regarding the origin of the 12 official languages in South Africa, one might wonder why a multilingual approach to education is not being implemented successfully. South African universities still rely heavily on teaching and learning in the English language (Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2021). Students who are not proficient in the English language are required to undergo remedial education (Ndlhovu, 2017: 142). In essence, regardless of how many languages a student might speak, their academic success is determined by their proficiency in the English language. One might question why English continues to enjoy a higher status than other languages when the constitution grants all 12 languages the same official status. The literature refers to what Baetens-Beardsmore (2003: 10) calls a 'fear of multilingualism'. The upcoming section outlines the differing fears of multilingualism locally and globally against this backdrop.

## FEAR OF MULTILINGUALISM

Gogolin (2002) provides an overview of European cultural and linguistic diversity. According to Gogolin (2002: 125), a third of the European population has an immigrant background. In a normal German school in Hamburg, 50% of the students represent 15 nationalities and speak about 20 home languages (Gogolin, 2002: 125). This background shows the cultural and linguistic diversity in schools, which mirrors contemporary European nation-states because of refugees and migrants entering the continent. Thus, linguistic and cultural plurality is a reality in Europe; however, the idea of a nation-state resulted in diversity no longer being considered

a normal feature of society. Feinstein (2023: 188) defines a nation-state as a territorially bounded sovereign polity, i.e., a state ruled in the name of a community of citizens who identify themselves as a nation. In this regard, a nation-state problematises diversity because of its emphasis on the territorial boundedness of a group of people. Feinstein (2023: 188) further explains that not all residents of the state belong to the core national group (sometimes not even all citizens are part of the nation), and some reside in other states. Due to this reality, nations cannot control that as citizens associate with citizens from other nations, they will always exchange languages, resulting in citizens becoming multilingual.

The fear of multilingualism has led European states to advocate for the homogeneity of a people where everything is viewed with uniformity (Gogolin, 2002: 125). The author notes that due to the notion of nation-building in European states, the education system has been made to believe that multilingualism in early childhood might be detrimental to individuals' linguistic and cognitive development.

Blackledge (2001) refers to a monolingual ideology by pointing out the literacy policy in the United Kingdom, which considers English the only language with symbolic capital. In the United States of America (USA), the English language continues to be accorded a higher status than other languages (Lamb, 2015). Souto-Manning (2006: 443) claims that the USA has 30 years of empirical evidence of the benefits of multilingualism, but education professionals continue to propagate the discourse of the negative consequences of multilingualism. One of the reasons given is that when attempting to communicate in a second language, learners often transfer elements of the native language (Drobot, 2022: 5). Murphy (2003: 3) strengthens the fear-of-multilingualism argument by explaining that students who rely on existing knowledge based on their first or second language (supposedly) become distracted from acquiring new knowledge.

As previously mentioned, South Africa has incorporated indigenous languages as official languages. However, the reality in South Africa still exhibits some hesitation in allowing the utilisation of all 12 languages in all spheres. For example, many teachers, learners and parents still believe that the English language holds the key to better life prospects in South Africa. Klapwik and Van der Walt (2016: 65) explain that the belief still exists that English has the linguistic capital to facilitate a better future for all students. Phakeng (2022), the former Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, questions the hegemony of the English language in South Africa. Phakeng (2022: 3) probes the Language Policy of Higher Education (2020) that seems to equate all languages as languages of teaching and learning, whereas, in reality, there is still a fear of implementing the policy. The scholar explains that in South Africa, a student might be fluent in six of the country's 12 official languages yet is denied an opportunity to join the army because their matriculation English mark was 45% (Phakeng, 2022: 3). The policy does not consider that the students may have attained a 78% in their home languages. Despite the policy calling for the recognition of all languages at the student's disposal, the English language still finds its way to the top of the hierarchy.

Mazak and Herbas-Donoso (2014: 699) maintain that there is nothing inherently academic about the English language granting it preference over other languages. Despite this assertion, in South Africa, access to higher education, which is emblematic of employment prospects and progressive social mobility, depends on English language proficiency (Klapwik & Van der Walt, 2016: 67). In addition, the Bantu education policies enacted during the apartheid era entrenched the beliefs and attitudes of many South African parents that the use of indigenous languages for teaching and learning is tantamount to substandard education (Kotze, 2014: 18). Similarly, Klapwik and Van der Walt (2016: 68) explain that many South African students entering university are aware that English is the 'linguistic currency' for obtaining success.

Based on such beliefs and perceptions, English is considered superior to other languages in South African society and academic institutions.

It is essential to mention that the African language scenario is unique. According to Wolff (2017), about 50 languages across Africa are cross-border languages spoken across 20 countries. Therefore, African indigenous languages are not bound or confined to a territorial space; rather, the languages are shared across the continent, thereby making it difficult to implement the nation-state ideology.

Thus, the reasons mentioned in this section explain the fears of multilingualism both in South Africa and across the globe. It is important to provide facts and suggestions that might alleviate some of the fears of multilingualism. At this juncture, this paper has demonstrated that multilingualism is a reality of which its existence is thwarted at both educational and political levels.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This section presents the methodology applied in the qualitative study in which one student participated. The participant took part in an intentional strategic conversation to explore his inherent multilingualism.

This student was learning to speak French, Portuguese and chiShona. The study employed an intentional strategic conversation analysis to collect data. The research obtained ethical clearance from the institution's ethics clearance committee. The researcher and participant had a conversation regarding how the participant used the 14 languages in his repertoire and how he was coping with being a speaker of 14 languages. Kyprianou, Graebner and Rindova (2016: 3) explain that strategic conversation, when used as a data collection method, allows for both verbal and nonverbal naturally occurring conversation where the content is of strategic importance. In addition, a strategic conversation is unscripted (Kyprianou, Graebner & Rindova, 2016: 5). Although the researcher directed the conversation to focus mainly on the participant's multilingual journey, no script was followed. Fishman (1978: 398) contends that verbal interactions between two or more people are critical to the study of both language and human action. Strategic conversational analysis allows for using questions as a technique to obtain the required information in a conversation (Fishman, 1978). In this study, the researcher allowed for a natural flow of conversation and asked questions at strategic instances whenever particular information was required. Gurteen (2018:18) explains that a strategic conversation can be designed intentionally to address a significant issue. The conversation between the researcher and the participant was recorded; three hours of recording is available. However, for this paper, only the sections relating to the participant's multiple languages acquisition journey are reported.

### **Participant**

In this study, the participant is a student of the researchers who participated when the researcher was collecting data for her PhD research. At that time, the researcher approached him to participate in this study; he was a first-year medical student and is now in his fifth year of study. During a focus group discussion in a previous study, the participant had indicated that he spoke all official 11 languages and was also learning to speak chiShona, meaning he had 12 languages in his repertoire but, at the time of the present study, the student had added two more languages, i.e., French and Portuguese.

Although the conversation between the researcher and the participant was an unscripted discussion, the researcher intentionally directed the conversation at certain instances to obtain crucial information regarding the participant's acquisition of various languages. The researcher

wanted to ascertain if the participant had continued to acquire more languages after their previous encounter in 2017 and further to learn if the participant had taken classes or personal instruction to learn Portuguese and French. In addition, the researcher wanted to determine whether or not the student became confused in any way while using the 14 languages in his repertoire and, lastly, how the participant viewed the hegemony of the English language as the language of teaching and learning. The conversation with the participant was recorded, and the participant was assigned a pseudonym, Tshepo, for the conversation.

### Data Analysis

Conversational analysis allows for various methods of analysing the collected data through conversations. Since the data were collected using the intentional strategic conversation technique, the researcher utilised grounded theory for data analysis. Generating grounded theory involves the iterative analysis of data and existing literature to develop new constructs and relationships inductively (Eisenhardt, 1989:544). According to Heydarian (2016: 4), grounded theory is an approach whereby the researcher refers to the literature relevant to the research topic and qualitative observations throughout data collection and analysis. Accordingly, the researcher referred to literature relating to the study's findings during data collection and generated two themes relating to the available literature.

## RESULTS

### Excerpt 1

During the conversation, the researcher began by asking the participant how he had been coping with the pressures of life and work:

Tshepo: *Maam ndiri bho zvangu* (chiShona). I am trying by all means to keep my head above the water. *All I know kuri ke haufi ke dream yaka* (English and Setswana mixed).

The participant knew the researcher was Shona-speaking and greeted them in chiShona, although the researcher's greeting was in English. Notably, the participant's response in the newly acquired chiShona language was effortless, for Tshepo did not show any discomfort.

The participant mentioned in passing that he was dating a Portuguese-speaking lady.

### Excerpt 2

During this conversation, Tshepo informed the researcher that he was learning to speak another language. The need to add Portuguese to his repertoire was influenced by a romantic relationship that had developed between himself and a Portuguese lady.

*Tshepo*: I have met someone I enjoy spending time with, and it seems we have a future together.

*Researcher*: I am happy to hear. Love is a beautiful thing and you just need to enjoy the relationship. Does she speak English or any of the languages you speak?

*Tshepo*: *Ma'am zvakaoma*, It is difficult (Shona) *kodwa ngizama*. But I am trying (isiZulu) to speak to her in her language. [He laughs] I have to impress the lady.

*Researcher*: So, how did you learn to speak Portuguese?

*Tshepo*: The lady has friends whom we hang around with and they all speak Portuguese. This is how I have been learning to speak the language.

This excerpt shows that Tshepo is learning to speak other languages through social interactions. As he socialises, he is acquiring new language practices. This confirms that languages do not have to be learnt/acquired in formal settings such as schools, but rather, that languages can be acquired during a socialisation process.

### Excerpt 3

During this conversation, the researcher followed up on the participant's linguistic repertoire, which he continued to expand by including more languages.

*Researcher:* Tshepo, the last time we spoke, you were speaking 12 languages and today you are saying you have added two more languages that you can speak now. Do you make an effort to learn to speak these languages? Do you have any benefits that you have realised from acquiring these languages?

*Tshepo:* For me, I feel that being restricted to a particular number of languages one can speak is not fair. I learn to speak any language as and when I need the language. I have benefitted a lot because I have found the love of my life through being open to learning other languages.

*Researcher:* I know that acquiring the Portuguese language came with great benefits [both laughed] but do you think the other 13 languages are of any help to you?

*Tshepo:* Honestly speaking, when I learnt to speak Shona, it was because I have many friends who speak Shona. The benefit of learning to speak the language is when I meet patients from Zimbabwe who are not fluent enough to explain their medical problems in any of the 11 official languages in the country. I do not face communication barriers when I meet such patients.

*Researcher:* Does the same apply to French and the other 11 languages?

*Tshepo:* I have plans to go and work in one of the overseas countries that speak French. Learning to speak French was a deliberate decision to enhance my chances of migrating to Canada after I qualify as a medical doctor.

This excerpt shows two aspects constituting multilingualism. One aspect is that some multilingual speakers use their acquired languages to assist them in gaining access to better professional prospects. The second aspect is that multilinguals do not see any disadvantages related to the languages in their repertoires. Indeed, multilingualism provides significant benefits to them.

### Excerpt 4

The participant led this conversation and included the languages his fiancée spoke. Although the discussion was not about the fiancée, the research allowed the participant to express himself.

*Tshepo:* You know I enjoy talking about my fiancée; she means a lot to me. [he laughs]

*Researcher:* Go ahead. Let me hear from you: how many languages does your fiancée speak?

*Tshepo:* Well, I was going to talk about that; she speaks Portuguese, English, isiZulu *mina ngi ngumZulu* (isiZulu). As my future wife, she wants to be able to communicate with my people. She also speaks French; hence, I am learning to speak French because

of her. She can also greet and speak a bit of Shona because I sometimes speak to her in Shona.

Although this conversation intended to discuss the participant's engagements with various language practices in his repertoire, that had been influenced through socialisation. This excerpt shows that languages cannot be contained and confined to a group of people but, rather, that multilingualism is inherent in all humans. Tshepo's fiancée is becoming multilingual through socialisation and contact with people from different backgrounds. This reality confutes the nation-state ideology that promotes linguistic homogeneity.

The upcoming section discusses themes emanating from the presented data: (1) Multilingualism opens social and professional opportunities. (2) Multilingualism transcends nation-state ideology.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Multilingualism opens up social and professional opportunities.**

Several scholars have expressed the belief that the English language provides access to social benefits, such as higher education, jobs, international opportunities, status and many other prestigious aspects (Klapwijk & Van der Walt, 2016; Lamb, 2015; Vilhanova, 2018; Mohlahlo & Ditsele, 2022). This view has led to society shunning all other languages and placing the English language in a position of power. However, recent research conducted in South Africa by Mohlahlo and Ditsele (2022) indicates that multilingual participants from government departments cherish their inherent multilingualism and do not wish their indigenous languages to be dismissed. From the conversation between one of this paper's authors and Tshepo, English cannot be the only language regarded as essential to success and happiness. Tshepo expressed that his social life has been enhanced because he now in a relationship with a Portuguese-speaking lady whom he says brings him happiness. Tshepo's circles of association have grown because he has some Shona-speaking friends who influenced his decision to acquire the language. Of note is also that Tshepo's career development would be enhanced if he was proficient in French. Tshepo aspires to work abroad in one of the French-speaking countries, hence his urge to speak French proficiently. Thus, regarding the English language as the key to success would be imprecise; instead, all languages present opportunities in life, depending on one's aspirations and dreams.

On a professional level, Tshepo has become confident in treating some Shona-speaking patients visiting the hospital because he can communicate effectively with them. It is noteworthy that the fear of multilingualism has been supported by scholars who fear language transfer during communication (Drobot, 2022). In truth, Drobot (2022: 8) explains that when attempting to communicate in a second language, learners transfer elements of their native language onto the speech patterns of the target language. Tshepo has 14 languages in his repertoire, with French being his latest acquisition. The conversation with Tshepo reveals that he indeed transfers some elements of not only his first language but also of all the languages he has acquired as he manoeuvres through communication. This is supported by Ndhlovu and Makalela (2021), who explain that the ways of knowing from the cultural background of a speaker influence the way they speak. Tshepo, being African, also influences his linguistic repertoire despite the languages he speaks.

During the discussion, Tshepo used linguistic features from his repertoire as and when he needed them to communicate (Garcia, 2009). Tshepo did not confuse any of the languages in his communication repertoire. This aspect fits well with Makalela's (2015: 211) assertion that

languages are fluid in a multilingual speaker's mind and that the speaker can control how he wants to use the languages. For example, Tshepo knew that the researcher spoke Shona as one of her languages, and thus, he included some Shona phrases in some conversations with the researcher. Further, it is worth noting that the conversation was not solely in English, but at some point, the participant chose to use only English in the discussion. Mbirimi-Hungwe (2021) argues that labelling languages as a first language (L1), second language (L2), and so on does not represent the reality of languages in a multilingual speaker's mind. Makoni and Pennycook (2020: 43) emphasise that languages in the Global South should not be viewed from the perspective of multiplied languages, whereby the northern singularity of languages is multiplied in the South. Rather, multilingualism should be embraced from a Global South viewpoint based on Africans' ways of knowing that do not allow for the separation of languages. In this study, Tshepo has 14 languages in his repertoire, and the question arises: Is it feasible to label the languages in his repertoire in the correct order from L1 up to L14? Answers to this question can be considered using Ndhlovu and Makalela's (2022) assertion that multilingual speakers have their own ways of knowing, which cannot be dictated by anyone, not even teachers who are averse to accepting and acknowledging multilingualism for fear of language transfer, as well as confusion.

During the conversation, the participant indicated that his language acquisition occurred during socialisation processes. He mentioned that he had learnt to speak Shona through some Shona-speaking friends with whom he had attended school. Tshepo acquired the Portuguese language from his association with friends and his fiancée. The other 11 official South African languages were acquired through associating with friends and relatives while growing up. This scenario is the reality for many multilingual speakers. Gogolin (2002: 124) explains that multilingualism in Europe is a phenomenon that cannot be controlled, nor can it be denied. When children go to school, they meet and associate with other children from homes where more than two languages are spoken. Therefore, children will gain language practices through association with speakers of those languages, thereby acquiring the languages. Zano (2022: 1585) concurs that language learning or acquisition is limitless and cannot be confined to one or two languages. In this study, neither Tshepo nor his parents or his teachers and lecturers designed his inherent multilingualism; rather, the acquisition occurred organically, as he associated with different people. It would be untenable to control multilingualism in society. Garcia and Wei (2014) explain that globalisation and the movement of goods and people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have made multilingualism the norm.

### **Multilingualism transcends nation-state ideology.**

The literature shows that the British elevated the status of English over other languages in striving to maintain political stability in the United Kingdom (Gracia, 2019). The British Empire amassed power in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, thereby rendering any non-native English speaker speechless (Garcia, 2019). According to Gogolin (2002), multilingualism is a reality in Europe, but for nations to forge a nation-state ideology, they must maintain the linguistic homogeneity status quo. When multilingual states such as South Africa promote the use of the English language in education and business over other languages, they are complicit with the concept of a nation-state ideology introduced by the British. The question remains: How can nations be developed while using one foreign language, English, when, in the case of South Africa, 12 languages must be considered?

The reality of multiple languages can be observed with Tshepo, whereby his language acquisition prowess demonstrates that languages allow speakers to bring their inherent multilingualism into any society. Tshepo's fiancée is from Portugal and speaks Portuguese; however, her relationship with Tshepo has introduced her to an entirely new culture with a



variety of language practices. Tshepo and his fiancée have transcended the monolingual ideology perpetuated by the European nation-state ideology; their transcendence has rendered the concept of the nation-state dysfunctional (Gogolin, 2002), i.e., before the fiancée met Tshepo, Portuguese was the only language in which she was fluent, while she acquired more languages through socialisation at school and with friends outside school. Therefore, she could go beyond monolingualism to becoming multilingual. Multilingualism and cultural plurality have replaced the monolingual habitus perpetuated by the nation-state ideology (Gogolin, 2002: 125).

Nation-state ideology does not work in a multilingual landscape, such as the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where immigration is taking place across the world for various reasons (Wolf, 2017: 5). Tshepo's fiancée came to South Africa to study medicine and met Tshepo during her course; subsequently, they planned a future together. They now share the languages each speaks as they share a life. Tshepo and his fiancée's situation apply in several instances, thus making the nation-state ideology generally unfeasible.

## CONCLUSION

This study intended to unveil reasons why multilingualism is a shunned reality. By using the grounded theory, the study suggests that instead, multilingualism is a gateway to social and professional opportunities versus the hegemony of the English language. In addition, this study's findings concur with what the literature purports, namely that the linguistic landscape has changed because the world has become a global village. Hence, one can no longer control the association between people as they exchange goods and services; ultimately, they exchange language and cultural practices, as is the case with Tshepo and his fiancée. After all, many languages are spoken across the African continent. It is important to realise that multilingualism is an idiosyncratic reality in post-colonial Africa and should be treated as such to neutralise the fear of multilingualism created by European leaders with an agenda of wanting to control citizens. First, the education system, especially in South Africa, should recognise all 12 languages for matriculation. If a student passes an indigenous language with a mark of 50% or above, it should be considered a pass, unlike currently, whereby a student must pass the English language together with one other language to matriculate. All languages should be considered a means to success—not just English. In addition, as previously mentioned in this paper, there is no definition of multilingualism from an African perspective; thus, I urge scholars to collaborate and devise a definition that applies to the African context.

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