



Language policy, media, and attitudes in South Africa: Navigating Linguistic diversity

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how South Africa's language policy and media representation influence public attitudes towards linguistic diversity and English dominance. The purpose is to examine the extent to which media narratives and language policies shape identity, cultural preservation, and social cohesion in a multilingual society. A quantitative survey design was employed, using a structured questionnaire administered to 74 Black South African participants aged 20–35 in Soshanguve, Pretoria. Descriptive and thematic analyses were used to interpret demographic and attitudinal data. The findings reveal that 80% of respondents value their indigenous languages in the media, yet 66% prefer English for reading due to accessibility and prestige. Although most participants reject language superiority, persistent perceptions of hierarchy and limited awareness of language policies hinder linguistic equality. The study discusses the implications of English's dominance as both a unifying and marginalising force and recommends stronger policy communication, inclusive media representation, and active promotion of indigenous language use in education and media. This research contributes to scholarship by providing empirical evidence on how media discourses and public attitudes intersect with language policy implementation, highlighting the ongoing challenges and opportunities for achieving linguistic democracy in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: Language Policy and Planning; Language Attitudes; Linguistic Diversity; Language Ideology; Language Dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

The present linguistic landscape in South Africa provides a distinctive opportunity to investigate the representation of various linguistic codes and their efforts to establish legitimacy and presence in social domains that are contested and negotiated.¹ South Africa, a nation renowned for its rich cultural tapestry and historical resilience, is a testament to the dynamic interplay of languages within its borders. With a linguistic landscape as diverse as its people, the country grapples with the multifaceted challenges of managing and nurturing linguistic diversity through the lenses of language policy, media representation,

¹ Brahim Chakrani, *A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Language Attitudes among Youth in Morocco* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010).

and societal attitudes.² This research endeavours to delve into the intricate relationships between language policy, media discourse, and public attitudes, unravelling the nuanced dynamics that shape linguistic landscapes in this vibrant nation.

According to the National Language Policy Framework (NLPF) and Implementation Plan, the South African government aims to promote linguistic diversity and linguistic rights through functional multilingualism, focusing on language preference, use, and proficiency.³ This approach ensures optimal use of the country's linguistic resources, respecting linguistic diversity and promoting linguistic rights.

With 12 official languages, South Africa is a country where language is important for more than just communication. It is essential for the formation of identities, cultural preservation, and social cohesion. Apartheid's historical legacy has permanently altered the linguistic landscape, making a careful analysis of post-apartheid language policies imperative. Knowing how language policies have changed over time is essential to understanding how modern linguistic dynamics reflect or contradict historical inequalities.

The media, a powerful tool for spreading culture, is crucial in influencing how the general public views and feels about language. The spread of linguistic ideologies is greatly aided by the omnipresence of media platforms, which can be both traditional and digital. To illustrate this influence, Wasserman contends that huge socioeconomic disparities that still exist in the rest of South African society are reflected in the media, particularly in print media, which has been charged with primarily catering for the elite.⁴ The purpose of this study is to examine how languages are portrayed in South African media and determine how this affects society's attitudes and views. This study aims to investigate media narratives in order to reveal the linguistic ideologies that are propagated across different domains, both explicitly and implicitly.

Moreover, this study acknowledges the significant influence that linguistic attitudes have on social relationships, educational programmes, and employment prospects. Given that there are several official languages in South Africa, it is necessary to investigate public opinion towards linguistic diversity since it influences the opportunities and difficulties that various language communities encounter. This study attempts to represent the dynamic character of linguistic views in modern South Africa because language attitudes are not static but rather vary in response to societal changes.

In essence, this study does a thorough investigation of the relationship that exists between language policy, media discourse, and societal attitudes in South Africa. Through deciphering the complexities of linguistic diversity, this research hopes to provide insightful information that can influence policy decisions in the future, promote inclusive media practices, and build a community in which linguistic diversity becomes a source of strength rather than division.

The study sought to answer the following question: How does media representation of languages in South Africa shape public attitudes toward language policy, linguistic diversity, and English dominance? This study explores the development of language policy in South Africa, its impact on media representation, and South Africans' views towards linguistic diversity. This study examines the relationship between language policy, media, and public views to emphasise the long-term effects of apartheid-era policies and the ongoing quest for true linguistic equality. The study uses a quantitative survey conducted in Soshanguve, Pretoria, to investigate how media representation influences public views, preferences for English over indigenous languages, and understanding of current language policies. Ultimately, this study emphasises the need for inclusive language policies and increased media coverage of indigenous languages to promote social cohesion, cultural preservation, and a more equal linguistic landscape in South Africa.

² Kathleen Heugh, "Multilingual Education Policy in South Africa Constrained by Theoretical and Historical Disconnections," *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 33 (March 29, 2013): 215–37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190513000135>.

³ "National Language Policy Framework (NLPF) and Implementation Plan." (Pretoria: Department of Arts and Culture, 2003).

⁴ Herman Wasserman, "The State of South African Media: A Space to Contest Democracy," *Publizistik* 65, no. 3 (August 2, 2020): 451–65, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11616-020-00594-4>.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Perspectives on Language Policy in South Africa

South Africa's language policy has deep historical roots in the country's colonial and apartheid past. During apartheid, Afrikaans and English were elevated as the sole official languages, while indigenous African languages were confined to regional or informal use.⁵ This policy established racial segregation by linking linguistic privilege with political and socioeconomic power. Language became both a tool of control and a marker of hierarchy, shaping access to education, employment, and citizenship.

South Africa's ethnolinguistic diversity, comprising groups such as the AmaZulu, amaXhosa, amaNdebele, Basotho, Batswana, Bapedi, Vhavenda, Vatsonga, and amaSwati reflects a rich linguistic heritage divided into four major Bantu language families: Nguni, Sotho, Tsonga/Shangaan, and Venda. Despite this diversity, only Afrikaans and English received institutional support before 1994, with the Afrikaners' language planning efforts standing out as a deliberate project of cultural preservation and empowerment.⁶

The apartheid government's language policy systematically devalued indigenous languages, reinforcing social inequality and linguistic subjugation. According to Oso, such linguistic hierarchies became embedded in the social fabric, perpetuating dominance and marginalisation. This manipulation of ethnic and linguistic differences was further entrenched through apartheid's "homeland" system, formalised under the Black Homeland Citizenship Act of 1970, which stripped Black South Africans of citizenship and confined their languages to localised administrative domains.⁷

By the 1970s, Afrikaans had achieved social parity with English, while African languages were largely restricted to domestic and formal communication, representing less than 5% of media usage.⁸ The marginalisation of these languages in public life has produced a legacy of linguistic insecurity and uneven prestige that continues today.

The democratic transition of 1994 marked a critical turning point. The 1996 Constitution officially recognised 12 languages, signalling a political and moral commitment to linguistic equality, diversity, and nation-building.⁹ However, as scholars such as Ngcobo, Heugh, and Docrat and Kaschula observe, the practical implementation of multilingualism remains inconsistent.¹⁰ English continues to dominate education, governance, and media spaces due to its perceived neutrality, accessibility, and global status.¹¹

As a result, South Africa's post-apartheid language policy is always caught between constitutional multilingualism and functional English monolingualism. Understanding this historical trajectory is essential to interpreting contemporary attitudes toward language, media representation, and linguistic identity in the country's ongoing struggle for equity and cultural recognition.

Media Representation and Linguistic Diversity

The influence of the media on public attitudes toward linguistic diversity is an emerging field of study. Research has indicated that media representations of language can either reinforce or challenge societal norms by influencing attitudes towards the language. In the specific context of South Africa, where a multitude of languages coexist, it is critical to comprehend the ways in which media representation either validates or contests linguistic hierarchies.

⁵ Theodorus Du Plessis, "Mismatch or Misfit? Critical Perspectives on Language Policy Development in South Africa," *Living through Languages. An African Tribute to René Dirven*, 2006, 37–53.

⁶ Kwesi Kwaa Prah, "The Challenge of Language in Post-Apartheid South Africa," Retrieved July 19 (2018): 2023.

⁷ Lai Oso, "A Political Economy of Indigenous Language Press in Nigeria," *Indigenous Language Media in Africa*, 2006, 175–95.

⁸ Prah, "The Challenge of Language in Post-Apartheid South Africa."

⁹ Republic of South Africa, "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa," *Government Gazette* 378, no. 17678 (1996). Chapter 2, Section 29(2)

¹⁰ Mtholeni N Ngcobo, "Language Planning, Policy and Implementation in South Africa," *Glossa: An Ambilingual Interdisciplinary Journal* 2, no. 2 (2007): 156–69; Heugh, "Multilingual Education Policy in South Africa Constrained by Theoretical and Historical Disconnections"; Zakeera Docrat and Russell H Kaschula, "'Meaningful Engagement': Towards a Language Rights Paradigm for Effective Language Policy Implementation," *South African Journal of African Languages* 35, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.2015.1056455>.

¹¹ Nkonko M. Kamwangamalu, "One Language, Multi-layered Identities: English in a Society in Transition, South Africa," *World Englishes* 26, no. 3 (August 27, 2007): 263–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2007.00508.x>.

During the apartheid era, the media contributed to the maintenance of linguistic hierarchies. The prevalence of Afrikaans and English in the media contributed to the exclusion of indigenous languages from public discourse. The media's biased portrayal sustained a narrative that designated specific languages as preferable to others. Due to their perceived role as pace-setters or agenda-setters, the media should be regarded as vessels through which the authentic essence of African languages is manifested.¹²

In the mid-1830s, newspapers in local languages were initiated by black leaders, including Tengo Jabavu, Allen Soga, Walter Rabusana, Silas Molema, and Sol Plaatje.¹³ This marked the inception of indigenous-language media in South Africa. However, due to what some middle-class South Africans term as modernisation, indigenous-languages' print media is no longer what it used to be prior to democracy.

In the media landscape that followed apartheid, notable efforts have been made to increase the diversity of language representation. Nevertheless, obstacles remain, and specific languages may continue to be poorly or inaccurately portrayed in dominant media outlets. The influence of the media on language attitudes is of the utmost importance, as it can either validate or challenge linguistic hierarchies.

Concerning media diversity, the Constitution safeguards and stipulates the freedoms of expression, access to information, and media ownership. This is reinforced by the legislative framework that implements the Constitution, which consists of the Media Development and Diversity Agency Act of 2002, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) Act of 2000, the Broadcasting Act of 1999, and the Media Development and Diversity Agency Act of 2003.

Kamwangamalu argues that the sociopolitical history of South Africa has had a substantial impact on the linguistic patterns observed in the country's periodicals, television, and radio. Furthermore, he asserts that English is, by any metric, the most widely employed language in South African media and that this is because of its practical utility. Consequently, Afrikaans and other African languages do the same.¹⁴

Language Attitudes in Linguistic Diversity

The way in which particular language communities are received and treated by the public significantly influences their level of success or marginalisation. Scholarly investigations within this field examine the social, economic, and educational ramifications of language attitudes, elucidating the elements that contribute to the elevation or demotion of specific languages. Mbatha, *et al.* note that "language attitudes are largely influenced by conceptions, social superstructure, beliefs and practices in a given community."¹⁵ Fundamentally, Baker provides a definition of attitudes as complex concepts that can elicit either positive or negative emotions in response to a given language situation.¹⁶

Since attitudes can guide a plethora of linguistic matters, including who receives language rights and who does not, who studies another language and in what manner, and what language is spoken to whom and in what circumstances, even in the absence of formal legislation or policy, Spolsky refers to community beliefs regarding language as "policy with the manager left out."¹⁷

The significance of ideologies and attitudes in linguistic research comes from the fact that their effects are pervasive throughout the social spheres. Language policies implemented by governments tend to prioritise specific languages over others, influenced by nation-building ideologies and perceptions of the ethnolinguistic identity of a nation.¹⁸

Mncwango asserts that to date, the absence of a well-defined language policy in post-apartheid South Africa has posed challenges to the administration of linguistic diversity. He further notes that as

¹² Abiodun Salawu, "Essentials of Indigenous Languages to Journalism Education in Nigeria," *Global Media Journal-African Edition* 2, no. 1 (2008): 1–14.

¹³ Gilbert Motsaathebe, "When the Subaltern Speaks: Re-Examining Indigenous-Language Media as Alternative Public Sphere during Colonial South Africa," *Journal of African Media Studies* 10, no. 2 (2018): 169–83.

¹⁴ Kamwangamalu, "One Language, Multi-layered Identities: English in a Society in Transition, South Africa."

¹⁵ Getrude N Mbatha et al., "Exploring the Attitudes of IsiZulu First Language Students towards Learning Sepedi as an Additional Language at University Level," *South African Journal of African Languages* 41, no. 2 (May 4, 2021): 179–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.2021.1948220>.

¹⁶ Colin Baker, *Key Issues in Bilingualism and Bilingual Education* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1988).

¹⁷ Bernard Spolsky, *Language Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Spolsky, *Language Policy*.

a result, English and Afrikaans continue to dominate the socioeconomic and political spheres of our nation.¹⁹

Makhudu and Ntshangase, in separate studies, have noted that due to the dynamics of prolonged contact, language variations have changed internally, and new linguistic forms have emerged.²⁰ Examples of these are urban slang, the most well-known of which are Tsotsitaal, Sepitori (also known as Pretoria Sotho) and isiCamtho, which are derived from English and Zulu and Afrikaans and Sotho, respectively. However, Lafon noted that “in linguistically homogeneous areas, however, the medium is generally stable and predominantly African.”²¹

An individual's capacity for multilingual communication is not uncommon or regarded as a noteworthy skill in a nation where multilingualism is the norm. Sometimes people minimise or disregard their proficiency in a language for ideological purposes, such as to set themselves apart from a specific social group. Evans noted that “since the end of the Apartheid regime, many (especially younger) Black people have chosen not to use Afrikaans as a lingua franca with one another or to speak it with White or Coloured people.”²²

In a study that explores how isiZulu first language learners feel about picking up Sepedi as a second language for communication, Mbatha *et al.* found that the majority preferred to learn other African languages for better communication and joke-sharing, and they think it is necessary to become a part of a multicultural and multilingual nation. The study also shows that students' lack of motivation to learn other indigenous languages in South Africa is a result of English predominance.²³ The South African Constitution, particularly Section 29(2), encourages multilingualism.²⁴ The study recommended that learning more than one language gives access to a variety of cultures and knowledge systems, opening up educational and professional options. Additionally, some participants opined that learning Sepedi fosters nation-building, multilingualism, social cohesiveness, and the Africanisation of the continent's economy.

Similarly, a study conducted by Sambo *et al.* found that isiZulu HL speakers in South Africa do not have unfavourable opinions about other Black South African Languages (BSALs),²⁵ which lends credence to Ditsele's contention that Black South Africans' favourable views of BSALs are limited to group membership. The respondents thought that their province and schools were the only places where they were exposed to their HL, although they were eager to study other BSALs if given the chance. Additionally, the study showed that students spoke isiZulu in their interpersonal contact settings because they had a favourable attitude towards their home language. More than half of the respondents (59.3%) appreciated and thought that their language was connected to their identity and culture, and they felt that this relationship was positive. Despite their perception that isiZulu had a better status than other BSALs, the majority of participants did not appear to be haughty or conceited.²⁶

South African Language Policy Implementation and Impact

Analysing the efficacy of language policies requires a thorough investigation of how they are implemented and how they affect different domains, such as public life, government, and education. Research has examined the difficulties and achievements encountered while implementing language

¹⁹ Elliot Mthembeni Mncwango, “Language and the Current Challenges in the South African School System,” *Inkanyiso* 1, no. 1 (2009): 51–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228190903188536>.

²⁰ Dennis Papi Makhudu, “An Introduction to Flaaitaal (or Tsotsitaal),” in *Language in South Africa*, ed. Rajend Mesthrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 398–406; Dumisani Krushchev Ntshangase, “Language and Language Practices in Soweto,” *Language in South Africa*, 2002, 407.

²¹ Michel Lafon, “Linguistic Diversity in South Africa,” 2006. <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00120396>.

²² Moyra Sweetnam Evans, “Language Use and Language Attitudes in Multilingual and Multicultural South Africa,” *Heritage and Exchanges: Multilingual and Intercultural Approaches in Training Context*, 2015, 43–62.

²³ Mbatha *et al.*, “Exploring the Attitudes of IsiZulu First Language Students towards Learning Sepedi as an Additional Language at University Level.”

²⁴ Africa, “Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.” Act No. 108 of 1996. Chapter 2, Section 29(2). Pretoria: Government Printer.

²⁵ Mashadi Masha-Sambo *et al.*, “An Investigation of the Language Attitudes, Identity and Power Perspectives of IsiZulu Home-Language-Speaking Students towards IsiZulu and Other Black South African Languages,” *South African Journal of African Languages* 43, no. sup1 (September 3, 2023): 376–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.2024.2325836>.

²⁶ Thabo Ditsele, “Perceptions of Black South African Languages: A Survey of the Attitudes of Setswana-Speaking University Students Toward Their First Language” (Tshwane University of Technology, 2014).

policies in various settings, providing valuable perspectives on possible areas for improvement. This is expected; hence Dokrat and Kaschula note that the implementation of policies is a dynamic process by definition, given that language is an integral component of the mosaic of individuals, communities, and the nation.²⁷

Language Policy and implementation called for the advancement of equitable treatment and the usage of the 12 official languages, as well as the provision of remedies to individuals who had experienced discrimination and a pledge to uphold the rights of historically underprivileged linguistic communities. However, as Mda noted, there were numerous challenges in putting this policy into practice, particularly a shift in favour of English. Nevertheless, one observer believed that "the policy may succeed in promoting the use of African languages in South African schools."²⁸

According to Ngcobo, the implementation issue is the primary barrier to South African language policy.²⁹ The objective of the language policy is to promote political compromise and ethnic diversity.³⁰ He further asserts that this is a purposeful, politically motivated multilingual policy that seeks to fortify national identity in close relation to political authority at the national level (ibid). These sentiments were echoed by Mazrui when he reiterated that the goal of giving official recognition to nine African native languages was to promote nation-building.³¹ It should be noted that civil conflict can result from a policy that denies official status to indigenous or regional languages, as happened in Sri Lanka.³² However, Mesthrie contends that the policy's accomplishments so far have been more symbolic than tangible.³³

Among others, du Plessis has noted that the official multilingualism policy in South Africa is flawed, and the government is pursuing an unofficial policy of English monolingualism.³⁴ Policymakers face a difficult and endless task in trying to strike a balance between promoting English as a global language and preserving indigenous languages. This balance requires careful consideration of historical legacies, social justice issues, and the ambitions of varied linguistic communities.

According to Kamwangamalu, a significant issue during the post-apartheid era is the impact of the "all-powerful English language" on the continued existence of all other languages. The Pan-South Africa Language Board, which was established in 1995, is currently evaluating the ramifications of these concerns.³⁵ When considering African languages, it is critical to remove the stigma associated with their former inferiority status and elevate them to a higher status. However, it is important to acknowledge that equality alone does not guarantee the desired result.³⁶

There is a consistent trend towards English as opposed to African languages, according to numerous studies, and it has been argued that the language policy outlined in the Constitution was destined to fail. Consequently, an expanding proportion of Black South Africans have adopted English as their primary language, transforming it from a "they-code" to a "we-code" that serves as a means of communication and a signifier of their identity.³⁷

According to De Kock *et al.* and Mda, the enduring effects of the apartheid language policy in South Africa include instances where Africans rejected the indigenous languages.³⁸ Parmegiani agrees

²⁷ Dokrat and Kaschula, "'Meaningful Engagement': Towards a Language Rights Paradigm for Effective Language Policy Implementation."

²⁸ Thobeka V Mda, "Issues in the Making of South Africa's Language in Education Policy," *Journal of Negro Education*, 1997, 366–75.

²⁹ Ngcobo, "Language Planning, Policy and Implementation in South Africa."

³⁰ Mtholeni Nkosinathi Ngcobo, *Language Planning and the Politics of Compromise: A Critical Analysis of the South African Language* Policy* (State University of New York at Albany, 2003).

³¹ Ali A. Mazrui, "The Re-Invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond," *Research in African Literatures* 36, no. 3 (September 2005): 68–82, <https://doi.org/10.2979/RAL.2005.36.3.68>.

³² William W. Bostock, "Language Grief: A 'Raw Material' of Ethnic Conflict," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 3, no. 4 (December 24, 1997): 94–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537119708428519>.

³³ Rajend Mesthrie, "Trajectories of Language Endangerment in South Africa," *Globalization and Language Vitality: Perspectives from Africa*, 2008, 32–51.

³⁴ Du Plessis, "Mismatch or Misfit? Critical Perspectives on Language Policy Development in South Africa."

³⁵ Nkonko M Kamwangamalu, "Preface: Multilingualism in South Africa," 1998.

³⁶ Nkonko M Kamwangamalu, "Multilingualism and Education Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Language Problems and Language Planning* 21, no. 3 (1997): 234–53.

³⁷ Kamwangamalu, "One Language, Multi-layered Identities: English in a Society in Transition, South Africa."

³⁸ Tarryn De Kock, Yusuf Sayed, and Azeem Badroodien, "Narratives of Social Cohesion: Bridging the Link between School Culture, Linguistic Identity and the English Language," *Education as Change* 22, no. 1 (June 7, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.25159/1947->

with this viewpoint, contending that the official recognition of the 12 official languages in South Africa is merely a conceptual construct, given that "proficient English proficiency is frequently a prerequisite for gainful employment, academic achievement, and political engagement."³⁹

Docrat and Kaschula noted that irrespective of the calibre of the policy formulation, structure, applicability, and objectives, if the individuals entrusted with its execution lack the necessary expertise, the policy is doomed to fail during the implementation phase. Strategically positioned individuals who not only possess the requisite knowledge but are also cognizant of the intricacies associated with the successful execution of these language policies.⁴⁰

This literature review establishes a fundamental basis for comprehending the historical, theoretical, and empirical aspects that shape the intricate dynamics of linguistic diversity in South Africa, as we commence an investigation into language policy, media portrayal, and attitudes towards it.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of attitudes, media, and language policy is supported by a multitude of theoretical frameworks. According to the researchers, Language Policy and Planning (hereafter LPP) is the most appropriate theoretical framework for analysing these language dynamics. The domain of LPP pertains to the explicit and implicit policies that shape the values and rights associated with the languages spoken, in addition to the circumstances and manner in which they are utilised and by whom.⁴¹ By adhering to this framework, researchers will be able to approach the development and implementation of language policy and its effects with a structured understanding. This framework enables researchers to analyse the established formal language policy, as well as its historical background and the implications it has had on media representation and public attitudes pertaining to language diversity.

Language policy includes language practices, attitudes or ideologies, and planning or management. Furthermore, he regards Language Policy and Planning as "efforts by some members of a speech community who have or believe they have authority over other members to modify their language practice."⁴² Furthermore, Fettes conceives that the combination of Language Planning and Language Policy must be intertwined with the critical evaluation of language policy, with the former serving as a benchmark for rationality and efficacy, and the latter facilitating the development of more effective language planning models by comparing these concepts to actual practice. A more accurate description of this discipline would be "language policy and planning."⁴³

The adoption of LPP is applied to examine the connection between media representation, public attitudes, and language policy in South Africa. The theory examines the effects of language policy on public attitudes towards linguistic diversity and media representation. By employing this methodology, an extensive framework can be established to examine language practice in the media and public perceptions.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative approach employed in this study was the use of a survey questionnaire to collect data of the demographics, ideas, perceptions, emotions, opinions and attitudes of the research participants.⁴⁴ To align with the study's objectives, the questions presented pertained to South African language policies and attitudes, and the media. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions to facilitate

9417/2117; Thobeka Vuyelwa Mda, "Politics of Dominance: The Suppression and Rejection of African Languages in South Africa," 2010.

³⁹ Andrea Parmegiani, "Gender and the Ownership of English in South Africa," *World Englishes* 36, no. 1 (2017): 42–59.

⁴⁰ Docrat and Kaschula, "'Meaningful Engagement': Towards a Language Rights Paradigm for Effective Language Policy Implementation."

⁴¹ Kathryn D. Stemper and Kendall A. King, "Language Planning and Policy," in *The Handbook of Linguistics* (Wiley, 2017), 655–73, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119072256.ch33>.

⁴² Bernard Spolsky, "What Is Language Policy?," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511979026.003>.

⁴³ Mark Fettes, "Language Planning and Education," in *Encyclopedia of Language and Education: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education* (Springer, 1997), 13–22.

⁴⁴ Kobus Maree, *First Steps in Research* (Van Schaik Publishers, 2007).

the expansion of participants' perspectives, attitudes, and experiences, and closed-ended in order to collect statistical data and quantify responses, including language preferences and awareness of language policy. Questions that are open-ended offer participants the chance to provide a wide range of responses.⁴⁵

This study was conducted in Soshanguve township, Pretoria, in the Gauteng province. A total of eighty (80) questionnaires were distributed among Black South African language speakers, and seventy-four (74) were returned and completed. The sample consisted of 15 Tshivenda L1 speakers, 19 isiNdebele L1 speakers, 20 Xitsonga L1 speakers, and 20 siSwati L1 speakers. The participants were young adults between the ages of 20 and 35, including both males and females. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that the participants had basic knowledge or awareness of language policy, sociolinguistics, or multilingual practices in South Africa. The recruitment was carried out through academic networks, professional organisations, and personal invitations. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection.

Data was analysed through an integrated quantitative-qualitative approach. Closed-ended questionnaire responses were coded numerically and entered into Microsoft Excel for descriptive statistical analysis, which included calculating frequencies and percentages to identify key patterns in participants' language attitudes, media preferences, and policy awareness.

Open-ended responses were analysed using thematic coding techniques. Initial open coding was used to identify recurring words and phrases related to language prestige, media representation, policy awareness, and language equality. These preliminary codes were refined by axial coding to group related concepts into broader analytical themes that correspond to the study's research question.

To improve reliability and validity, the researchers independently coded a portion of the data (20%) to ensure consistency in interpretation. Any differences were discussed and agreed upon by everyone. The coded qualitative findings were then triangulated with the quantitative results to ensure analytical coherence and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of language attitudes and media influences. Therefore, the analysis process combined numerical summaries with interpretive insights, allowing the breadth and depth of the linguistic perspectives of participants to emerge.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

These were open-ended and closed questions. These questions required the participants to respond and elaborate on their answers, where required. The respondents could indicate more than one response.

Theme 1: Importance of Native Languages in Media

In Table 1, the respondents (80%) acknowledged that their native language or languages played a critical role in allowing them to completely comprehend and feel acknowledged. However, 20% of the respondents deemed their languages unimportant due to the fact that they are neither recognised nor taken seriously, and they rarely appeared in the media. Some lacked adequate comprehension of their native languages. This emphasises the difficulties of language marginalisation and the importance of more inclusive media policies.

Table 1: The importance of the respondents' ethnic language(s) in the media (n=74)

Responses	No.	%	Reasons
Very important	59	80	I understand it fully (39)
			I feel recognised (13)
			I want people to learn it (7)
Not important	15	20	It's rare in the media (4)
			Because it is not recognised/taken seriously (4)
			Because people don't understand it (3)
			I can't understand it (2)
			Because it is not dominant (2)

⁴⁵ Michael R Hyman and Jeremy J Sierra, "Open-versus Close-Ended Survey Questions," *Business Outlook* 14, no. 2 (2016): 1–5.

Theme 2: English as the Preferred Language for Reading Newspapers

Compared to the native languages of the respondents, English is preferred. Compared to their native tongues, 66% of respondents said they preferred English because it is simpler to read and comprehend. This dominance reflects Mbatha, *et al.*, who found that English predominance reduces motivation to learn indigenous languages.⁴⁶ Some respondents said they liked it because it helped them expand their vocabulary, while two others said they had no other choice because they had never seen a newspaper published in their mother tongues. Nine percent stated they "will understand fully" and favoured Tshivenda, probably since it was their mother tongue. With only 3% of respondents, Xitsonga had the lowest percentage. But speakers of other languages, such as isiNdebele and siSwati, thought they understood every word because those languages were their first.

Table 2: Language preference(s) for reading (n=74)

Language	No.	%	Reasons
English	49	66	It is easy to read and understand (40)
			To improve my vocabulary (5)
			I have no alternative (2)
			Because I'm educated (1)
			Because it is a medium of instruction (1)
IsiNdebele	9	12	I will understand fully (9)
Tshivenda	7	9	I will understand fully (7)
SiSwati	7	9	I will understand fully (6)
			I am proud, Swati and I want my language to be recognised (1)
Xitsonga	2	3	I will understand fully (2)

Theme 3: Role of English in Media and Cross-Cultural Communication

The majority (73%) of respondents indicated that knowing English made it easier for them to understand things from different cultures or languages, such as television show subtitles. To put it bluntly, they believed that knowing English helped them comprehend people from different cultures through the media. 20% of respondents indicated they had increased their vocabulary in English through the media; therefore, some were worried about it. One person said it was completely useless. Spolsky argues that language policies often prioritize certain languages for nation-building, which aligns with these concerns.⁴⁷

Table 3: The importance of English in the media (n=74)

Responses	No.	%
To understand anything from other cultures and languages	58	78.4
It improves my vocabulary	15	20.3
It does not help me	1	1.3

Theme 4: Awareness and Implementation of Language Policies

A substantial number of the respondents – 51, or 69% of the sample—said they were unaware of the new language policy when asked whether they were. This is because the majority of the respondents belonged to the generation that was dubbed "born-free," which prevented them from connecting the status quo of language use to earlier times. Of them, 31% knew about the new language policy.

Table 4: Respondents' awareness of South Africa's language policy (n=74)

Responses	No.	%
No	51	69

⁴⁶ Mbatha et al., "Exploring the Attitudes of IsiZulu First Language Students towards Learning Sepedi as an Additional Language at University Level."

⁴⁷ Spolsky, "What Is Language Policy?"

Yes	23	31
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Theme 5: Language Superiority Perceptions

The purpose of this question was to gauge the respondents' level of chauvinism. When asked this question, 66% of respondents said, "No," signifying that all languages are equal and need to be treated as such. Some said that because their languages were not acknowledged by the media, they could not consider them to be better. Because they believed it was significant to their people and impressive, 34% of respondents said "Yes" (considering their language superior), saying things like "maybe then it will be recognised" and "it defines me."

Table 5: Superiority of language(s) (n=74)

Responses	No.	%	Reasons
No	49	66	All languages should be treated equally (17)
			Because it is not recognised in the media (9)
			Because it is underestimated (7)
			Because it is not so dominant (3)
			Languages are not treated the same (3)
			Because my language is difficult to speak (2)
			Because it is still being developed (2)
			Because it is only dominant in one area (2)
			Because it is not well-known in most parts of the world (2)
			Is it not necessary for someone to learn my language (1)
			Because I cannot speak the language myself (1)
Yes	25	34	It is important to my people (9)
			Because it is impressive (5)
			Because it's very interesting (3)
			It is understandable to most people (3)
			Maybe it will be recognized (2)
			It defines me (2)
			Because it is my mother tongue (1)

Theme 6: Success of Government Language Policy Implementation

Most respondents (69%) indicated they did not know about the language policy or that all languages in the country are not treated equally, which is why they gave the "No" response. This indicates that, because the government failed to inform them of the language policy, in their opinion, the government is failing. Nonetheless, 31% of respondents said that the government was succeeding in implementing its language strategy into practice. They clarified that everyone has access to material in their native tongues when responding to questions. Some even went so far as to declare that "every language is treated equally." In contrast to the apartheid era, two respondents replied "Yes," but much work needs to be done.

Table 6: The success of South African language policy implementation (n=74)

Responses	No.	%	Reasons
No	51	69	Because I didn't know about it (17)
			Because they are not treated equally (16)
			Because dominant languages are being used for everything (10)
			Because I am not taught in my home language (3)
			Because some languages seem to be superior to others (2)
			Because we would like all languages included in everything (2)
			Because we still use English even when we speak the same language (1)

Yes	23	31	Every person has access to information in their language (9)
			Because all languages are treated equally (5)
			We have freedom of speech (4)
			Most languages are now promoted compared to the past (3)
			Compared to the apartheid era, more has to be done (2)

Theme 7: English as a Lingua Franca

As anticipated, English is the preferred language, with 18% having no problem with English functioning as a lingua franca and 55% indicating that its status as an international language makes its use advantageous. Their fear was that the procedure might compromise the integrity of ethnic languages. As others have stated, South Africa is a multicultural nation; consequently, English serves as a tremendous tool to overcome language barriers. A mere 6% felt dissatisfied with English being used solely as a lingua franca.

Table 7: Using English as lingua franca (in South Africa) (n=74)

Responses	No.	%
“It’s advantageous, because it is an international language”	41	55
“It is useful, because this is a multicultural country”	16	22
“It is good, but our indigenous languages should not be undermined”	13	18
“Is good, but they should add other languages as well”	2	3
“I do not support this because, in the process, our indigenous languages are discriminated against.”	2	3

Theme 8: Development of Previously Disadvantaged Languages

A majority of respondents (57%) opposed the development of previously disadvantaged South African languages, with 42 individuals holding this view. They believed that the development of only English, Afrikaans, and isiZulu resulted in their widespread use throughout the nation. Some believe that the perceived "superiority" of certain languages over others signifies the failure to develop languages that were previously disadvantaged. Since apartheid-era South Africa's official languages were English and Afrikaans, 43% of respondents indicated that they were being developed. Several individuals were of the opinion that although radio stations were operational in all 12 official languages, the nation was still in a considerable amount of development.

Table 8: The development of Black South African languages (n=74)

Responses	No.	%	Reasons
No	42	57	Because English, Afrikaans, and isiZulu are the only languages spoken everywhere (36)
			Because we are bound to know dominant languages when we move to some places (3)
			Because some languages are superior (3)
Yes	32	43	Because only English and Afrikaans were official languages during the apartheid era (14)
			There are radio stations in all official languages (11)
			But a lot has to be done (4)
			Because there are interpretations and translations in all languages (1)
			There are language courses (1)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that South Africa’s linguistic landscape remains deeply influenced by historical, political, and ideological legacies that continue to shape language use, identity, and public attitudes. The majority of participants (80%) acknowledged the importance of their native languages in

the media, aligning with Heugh's argument that language is integral to cultural preservation and identity formation.⁴⁸ However, the marginal visibility of indigenous languages in the media echoes Kamwangamalu's contention that English, due to its practical and global status, continues to dominate communicative spaces in post-apartheid South Africa.⁴⁹

The preference for English as the primary language for reading (66%) further underscores the enduring status of English as both a unifying and stratifying tool. While Prah and Parmegiani note that English proficiency is perceived as a marker of socioeconomic mobility.⁵⁰ This study reveals a nuanced ambivalence; participants appreciate English for its instrumental value yet remain concerned about the marginalisation of their home languages. This duality reflects Spolsky's observation that language policy often reproduces social hierarchies, privileging languages of power while relegating indigenous languages to the periphery.⁵¹

Participants' limited awareness of the national language policy (69%) corroborates Ngcobo's argument that South Africa's multilingual policy remains largely symbolic, hindered by poor implementation and weak public communication.⁵² Despite constitutional guarantees of linguistic equality,⁵³ the study's respondents perceive a gap between policy intentions and lived linguistic realities. As Docrat and Kaschula assert, effective policy implementation demands both institutional commitment and community engagement, two dimensions evidently lacking in participants' experiences.⁵⁴

The rejection of language superiority by most respondents (66%) signifies a positive shift in attitudes toward linguistic equality, in line with Mbatha et al.'s findings that young South Africans increasingly recognise the cultural value of learning and respecting other indigenous languages.⁵⁵ However, the persistence of perceived language hierarchies reveals the deep-seated ideological residues of apartheid, when linguistic privilege was institutionalised through Afrikaans and English dominance.⁵⁶ The findings indicate that while overt linguistic chauvinism is declining, structural inequalities remain embedded in the sociolinguistic order.

The perception of English as a lingua franca (endorsed by 55% of participants) reflects Kamwangamalu's claim that multilingualism in South Africa has become functionally hierarchical.⁵⁷ English serves as a bridge language across ethnic groups but simultaneously erodes the vitality of local languages. This phenomenon mirrors Mda's concern that post-apartheid education and media policies have inadvertently reinforced English's dominance under the guise of inclusivity.⁵⁸ In this sense, the study's results highlight a paradox: English promotes intercultural understanding while perpetuating linguistic inequality.

The view of the Respondents on the development of indigenous language reveal frustration with uneven progress. The majority (57%) believe that only English, Afrikaans, and isiZulu are being developed, reflecting Du Plessis's critiques that South Africa's multilingualism is unevenly implemented.⁵⁹ The limited institutional support for smaller languages such as Tshivenda and Siswati suggests that symbolic recognition has not translated into equitable investment, a situation also noted by Motsaathebe in his discussion of indigenous-language media decline.⁶⁰

⁴⁸ Heugh, "Multilingual Education Policy in South Africa Constrained by Theoretical and Historical Disconnections."

⁴⁹ Kamwangamalu, "One Language, Multi-layered Identities: English in a Society in Transition, South Africa."

⁵⁰ Prah, "The Challenge of Language in Post-Apartheid South Africa"; Parmegiani, "Gender and the Ownership of English in South Africa."

⁵¹ Spolsky, *Language Policy*.

⁵² Ngcobo, "Language Planning, Policy and Implementation in South Africa."

⁵³ South Africa, "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa." Act No. 108 of 1996. Chapter 2, Section 29(2).

⁵⁴ Docrat and Kaschula, "'Meaningful Engagement': Towards a Language Rights Paradigm for Effective Language Policy Implementation."

⁵⁵ Mbatha et al., "Exploring the Attitudes of IsiZulu First Language Students towards Learning Sepedi as an Additional Language at University Level."

⁵⁶ Du Plessis, "Mismatch or Misfit? Critical Perspectives on Language Policy Development in South Africa."

⁵⁷ Kamwangamalu, "Multilingualism and Education Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa."

⁵⁸ Mda, "Issues in the Making of South Africa's Language in Education Policy."

⁵⁹ Du Plessis, "Mismatch or Misfit? Critical Perspectives on Language Policy Development in South Africa."

⁶⁰ Motsaathebe, "When the Subaltern Speaks: Re-Examining Indigenous-Language Media as Alternative Public Sphere during Colonial South Africa."

Furthermore, the role of the media emerges as a crucial mediator between language policy and public perception. Participants' emphasis on seeing their languages represented validates Wasserman's and Salawu's assertions that media diversity is essential for democratic participation and cultural inclusion.⁶¹ The underrepresentation of indigenous languages in mainstream media contributes to their low prestige and limited transmission, reinforcing Deumert's observation that urban multilingualism in South Africa is increasingly shifting toward English dominance.⁶²

Collectively, these findings reveal that South Africans espouse egalitarian attitudes towards linguistic diversity, but structural and institutional factors continue to favour English. This imbalance underscores the "mismatch" identified by Du Plessis⁶³ between policy rhetoric and practice. The implications are profound; Without deliberate policy enforcement, community participation, and inclusive media strategies, linguistic democracy will remain aspirational rather than real. The findings call for rethinking language policy implementation as a participatory process grounded in awareness, representation, and equitable resourcing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study's findings and discussion identify numerous essential areas for development in South Africa's language environment. To solve these issues and capitalise on the potential found, the following proposals are made.

The media plays an important role in moulding public opinions and cultural identity. To guarantee that all South African languages are well-represented, media outlets should prioritise inclusivity by generating material in several languages. This includes news, entertainment, and educational programming. Subtitles, translations, and multilingual broadcasts can also help minority language speakers access media content in their original tongue. Indigenous language media outlets must also be supported financially and with resources to maintain their long-term viability and reach.

There is a huge gap between government actions and popular knowledge of language policies. To close this gap, national efforts should be initiated to inform the public about the new language policy, its goals, and benefits. These campaigns must be carried out in all official languages to achieve inclusion. Community leaders, educators, and local organisations should play an active role in distributing knowledge about language policies. Furthermore, incorporating language policy education into school curricula will assist future generations in recognising the value of linguistic variety and language rights.

To effectively implement language policies, all official languages must be treated equally. Government communications, educational institutions, and public agencies should offer documents, services, and information in different languages. Mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the execution of language policy should be implemented to ensure accountability and close any gaps or biases. Furthermore, training government officials and public service staff in multilingual communication will enhance service delivery and inclusivity.

Promoting linguistic variety demands more than just governmental changes; it also requires a cultural shift that honours and celebrates all languages. Language festivals, storytelling events, and multilingual poetry readings can contribute to a greater understanding of South Africa's linguistic legacy. Educational efforts that promote indigenous language learning in schools and colleges should be prioritised, with a focus on their cultural and historical value. Media campaigns can also help to raise awareness about the importance of indigenous languages and their significance in cultural identity.

Although English is a useful lingua franca and a tool for cross-cultural communication, its dominance risks marginalising indigenous languages. A balanced approach is required to ensure that the utility of English does not outweigh the development and use of indigenous languages. Economic incentives can motivate companies and organisations to employ indigenous languages in their operations, marketing, and communications. Furthermore, investment in research and development will

⁶¹ Wasserman, "The State of South African Media: A Space to Contest Democracy"; Salawu, "Essentials of Indigenous Languages to Journalism Education in Nigeria."

⁶² Ana Deumert, "Tracking the Demographics of (Urban) Language Shift—an Analysis of South African Census Data," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 31, no. 1 (2010): 13–35.

improve the usefulness and accessibility of indigenous language materials, such as dictionaries, grammar guides, and digital tools.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the complex interplay between language, media representation, and cultural identity in South Africa. It highlights the crucial importance of indigenous languages in promoting cultural recognition and affirming identity, while also drawing attention to the challenges of linguistic marginalization and the dominance of English.

A central finding is the influential role of media in shaping cultural identity. Participants consistently stressed the significance of seeing their native languages represented in media, viewing it as a validation of their heritage and a call for more inclusive and linguistically diverse content. The study also reveals the dual role of English in South Africa. While it functions as a practical lingua franca that facilitates communication across cultural groups, its pervasive use risks overshadowing indigenous languages. This tension underscores the need for intentional strategies that preserve the utility of English while actively supporting multilingualism and safeguarding local languages.

Additionally, the research identifies a notable disconnect between the understanding and execution of language policies. Many respondents expressed concerns about the lack of clarity and ineffective implementation, pointing to the need for better public engagement and transparent communication from institutions to ensure the success of language initiatives. Furthermore, the study frames South Africa's linguistic diversity as a national strength. The wide variety of languages enhances social unity and cultural vibrancy, making it essential to invest in the development and preservation of indigenous languages to ensure their continued relevance and growth.

Ultimately, the study advocates for inclusive language policies that recognize and support all of South Africa's official languages. Such policies are key to providing equal access to resources and opportunities for all linguistic communities and to fostering a more equitable and culturally representative society.

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