



Language practices and the linguistic marginalisation of ethnic minorities in South Africa

Matefu Lefty Mabela¹  & Gabriel Babili¹ 

¹ Department of African Languages, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the treatment of the official languages of South Africa in crucial areas of public life and discusses how multilingualism can be promoted without infringing on the language rights of ethnic minority language populations. The study is grounded in Language Management Theory and explores the experiences and perspectives of speakers of isiNdebele, Xitsonga, siSwati and Tshivenda. Quantitative research was used, and a standardised questionnaire was administered to students and staff at a University in Gauteng. Seventy-four questionnaires were evaluated using descriptive statistics to look at language use, language policy awareness and attitudes towards language practices in South Africa. The data demonstrate that perceptions of linguistic inequality remain, notwithstanding constitutional requirements for linguistic parity. In the government, education and media areas, respondents indicated that minority official languages are not treated fairly. English was considered the dominant language, particularly among younger generations. Minority languages were considered to lack support and visibility. The survey also showed low levels of public awareness of language policies and language management structures. The findings include raising public awareness of language rights, extending the capacity of language planning organisations, increasing the media presence of minority languages and encouraging language development projects in the education and digital areas. The study contributes to the literature on language policy and planning by providing empirical evidence of the ongoing marginalisation of ethnic minority languages and the disparity between constitutional language provisions and linguistic realities in South Africa.

Keywords: Language Policy and Planning, Linguistic Rights, Language Practice, Linguistic Minorities, Language Marginalisation

INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa provides equal status and treatment of all official languages and requires affirmative action to promote the development of the historically disadvantaged indigenous languages.¹ This constitutional pledge embodies South Africa's broader aim of promoting multilingualism, cultural diversity and social cohesion in a linguistically diverse community. However, even with this progressive framework, questions remain as to how far language equality has been achieved in practice. Therefore, it is vital to examine whether this is the case for all official languages

¹ Republic of South Africa, "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa," *Government Gazette* 378, no. 17678 (1996).

in different areas of public life and whether the promotion of multilingualism is in line with the protection of the linguistic rights of minority language populations.

South Africa has 12 official languages, many of them associated with relatively small speech populations. These include isiNdebele, Xitsonga, siSwati and Tshivenda, with speakers constituting roughly 1.6%, 2.5%, 2.8% and 3.6% of the population, respectively.² These languages have official recognition alongside the country's more widely spoken languages, but there have been concerns voiced about their visibility, representation and use in different areas of society. Some languages continue to be marginal despite constitutional protection, as shown in previous research that highlighted discrepancies in the usage of official languages in government communication, education, radio and other public institutions.

South Africa's multilingual language policy is widely acclaimed internationally for its commitment to language rights and linguistic diversity. But experts have long noted a disconnect between policy provisions and execution. While the legislative and institutional framework is in place to support multilingualism, the practical achievement of linguistic equality is nonetheless affected by obstacles related to language planning, resource allocation, public awareness and institutional commitment. Consequently, dominant languages, especially English, have a higher visibility and influence in many areas of public life.

Previous research has focused on language policy implementation in specific contexts such as broadcasting, higher education, local government and Parliament. Little research has been done on the perceptions of speakers of multiple minority language communities about the treatment of official languages in different domains of daily life. It is also important to study whether the lived experience and perspectives of speakers of historically marginalised language communities reflect constitutional promises to linguistic equality.

This study seeks to fill this vacuum by exploring the perspectives of isiNdebele, Xitsonga, siSwati and Tshivenda speakers on the treatment of official languages in South Africa. The study contributes to the scholarship on language policy and planning with empirical evidence on linguistic equality, multilingualism and language rights from the perspective of minority language communities. Moreover, it provides guidance on how to develop multilingualism without violating the language rights and cultural identities of ethnic minorities.

The research questions that guide this study are as follows: i) To what extent are different languages treated equally in diverse areas of everyday life as provided for in the South African Constitution?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguistic Marginalisation and Minority Languages

Linguistic marginalisation is the exclusion or differential treatment of specific linguistic groups in social, political, educational and economic spheres. In multilingual societies, dominant languages have more institutional backing and prestige, and minority languages have few prospects for development and use. Linguistic marginalisation is associated with power relationships; some languages are given prestige and economic capital while others are restricted to marginal roles.³ Such imbalances may result in language shift, diminished intergenerational transmission and gradual disintegration of linguistic and cultural identity.

Studies in Southern Africa show that minority languages are excluded even when they are recognised by the constitution or law. For example, Hlophe revealed that the under-representation of Siswati on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) was mostly a result of broadcasters' focus on languages that garnered greater audiences and advertising revenue.⁴ Similarly, Tshivenda speakers felt that their language was not well represented in the media, even though it was officially recognised.⁵ More recently, Xeketwana and Anthonissen have found that while many South African

² Statistics South Africa, *General Household Survey 2018. Statistical Release P0318*. (Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2019).

³ Stephen. May, *Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Language*. (London: Longman, 2001).

⁴ Sihle Hlophe, "The Representation of Minority Languages on SABC 1: The Case of Siswati" (2014).

⁵ Nkhangweleni Luvhengo, "Linguistic Minorities in the South African Context: The Case of Tshivenda" (Rhodes University, 2012).

universities self-identify as multilingual institutions, multilingual practices in teaching and learning spaces are more likely to recede rather than expand and lead to experiences of linguistic conflict and marginalisation among speakers of African languages.⁶

However, additional research shows that the symbolic recognition of languages does not always lead to meaningful linguistic inclusion. Masombuka's research on multilingualism in the South African Parliament revealed that the use of historically marginalised languages remained confined despite constitutional commitments to multilingualism, raising doubts about the efficiency of institutional language practices. These data demonstrate that linguistic marginalisation still prevails in numerous fields despite efforts to promote language equality.⁷

Multilingualism and Language Rights

Multilingualism is often seen as an asset for enhancing cultural diversity, social cohesion and democratic involvement. The Constitution of South Africa recognises 12 official languages and promotes parity of esteem and equitable treatment for all linguistic populations. However, multilingualism also poses issues in terms of allocation of resources, language planning and implementation.

Language rights academics argue that linguistic diversity is only preserved when people may use their languages in education, government, media and public life. Phillipson argues that linguistic human rights are necessary to combat linguistic imperialism and to safeguard minority communities from assimilation to dominant language groups.⁸ Similarly, Crystal contends that languages need institutional support to thrive in increasingly globalised environments.⁹

In the South African context, multilingualism has been under the shadow of the supremacy of English. English, as a language of greater communication and social mobility, has increasingly gained influence and has been associated with language shift among indigenous language populations. Mabela and Ditsele showed that while most respondents acknowledged the significance of indigenous languages as identity identifiers and vehicles for cultural preservation, many expressed a preference for English due to its accessibility, prestige, and perceived financial advantages.¹⁰ Their findings indicate that while language diversity is typically promoted theoretically, it is limited practically by the social and economic benefits of English.

Recent studies have also begun to question whether present understandings of multilingualism effectively address questions of equality and social justice. Ndlangamandla, Ntombela and Ngubane suggest that South Africa's multilingual policies are often marked by a disconnect between policy goals and implementation methods, leading to little progress towards linguistic fairness.¹¹ They argue that despite the existence of progressive language frameworks, myths about multilingualism and language policy continue to reproduce persistent inequities.

Language Policy Implementation in South Africa

South Africa's language policy framework has been hailed as among the most progressive in the world. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa provides equal recognition of all official languages and requires the state to take real steps to improve the status of historically marginalised indigenous languages.¹² Subsequent legislation, such as the Use of Official Languages Act, 2012, also called for the promotion of multilingualism within government organisations.

⁶ Simthembele Xeketwana and Christine Anthonissen, "Linguistic Marginalisation and Multilingual Policy Gaps: African Language Speakers' University Experiences Explored," *Language Matters* 56, no. 3 (September 2, 2025): 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2025.2545782>.

⁷ Elizabeth Lucy Masombuka, "A Critique of Multilingualism in South Africa's Post-Democratic Parliament with Particular Reference to the Use of Selected Minority Languages" (2017).

⁸ Robert Phillipson, "Globalizing English: Are Linguistic Human Rights an Alternative to Linguistic Imperialism?," in *Language Rights*, ed. Phil Benson, Peter Grundy, and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, 1st ed., vol. 20 (: Language Sciences , 1998), 101–112.

⁹ David Crystal, "Language Death" (Cambridge, 2000).

¹⁰ Matefu Lefty Mabela and Thabo Ditsele, "Language Policy, Media, and Attitudes in South Africa: Navigating Linguistic Diversity," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no. 4 (2026): 1016–31.

¹¹ Sibusiso Clifford Ndlangamandla, Berrington Ntombela, and Nomalungelo Ngubane, "Misconceptions, Misalignments, and Mismatches: Theory, Praxis, Policies, and Models of Language, Language, and Multilingualism in a Neoliberal Education," *Educational Research for Social Change* 14, no. 2 (October 8, 2025): 260–74, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/v14n2a18>.

¹² Republic of South Africa (RSA), *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (Pretoria: Government Printing Works, 1996).

However, despite these policy pledges, experts have time and again pointed out a gap between policy conception and execution. According to Bamgbose, the language policy in South Africa is well designed but not ideal, as execution is not uniform.¹³ Similarly, Ngcobo observes that policy aims are often hampered by poor institutional ability, inadequate finance and weak monitoring systems.¹⁴

Empirical research also confirms these implementation issues. Mhlongo's study on the implementation of language policy in a municipality in Mpumalanga revealed that multilingual practices were mostly informal and English was prevalent in official meetings, written communication, signage, websites and social media communication.¹⁵ The study revealed that the implementation of language policy was incomplete and constrained by resource limitations, language ideology that favoured English and negative attitudes towards some indigenous languages.

Research has also revealed that in many public spheres such as higher education, government communication, business and the media, English continues to be the dominant language. In a study on language policies of government departments, Ramuedzisi revealed that these tend to be in support of dominant languages, with very limited attention paid to historically disadvantaged official languages such as Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Siswati and isiNdebele.¹⁶ Similarly, Mabela and Ditsele note that although many South Africans are not aware of language policies, they are in favour of linguistic diversity, indicating a gap between policy and popular involvement.¹⁷

The media sector is another example of implementation issues. Dibetso and Smith observed that national broadcasting outlets significantly under-represent minority languages in comparison with dominant languages.¹⁸ Therefore, speakers of minority languages often regard themselves as excluded from essential places of communication and cultural representation. Such trends show that constitutional commitments to linguistic equality have not materialised in fair language practices in major spheres of society.

Research Gap

The existing work has made essential contributions to understanding language policy, multilingualism and minority language representation in South Africa. However, a lot of the research has concentrated on specific areas like media, higher education, local government or unique language groups. Previous studies have also tended to focus on individual minority languages (e.g. Siswati, Tshivenda or Xitsonga) without comparing perceptions across numerous minority language groups.

Furthermore, contemporary research has also been concerned with the implementation of language policy at specific organisations such as universities, municipalities or Parliament. While these studies point to persistent discrepancies between policy and practice, little research has explored how speakers of various minority language communities perceive the overall treatment of official languages in numerous domains of daily life, including government, media and education. There is also a need to investigate whether South Africa's commitment to multilingualism is being fulfilled in ways that preserve the language rights of ethnic minorities.

This study attempts to fill these gaps by investigating the perspectives of isiNdebele, Xitsonga, siSwati, and Tshivenda speakers of language policy and practice in South Africa. Focusing on a number of minority language communities, the study contributes to existing discussions on linguistic fairness, multilingualism and language policy implementation in South Africa by investigating perceptions of language treatment across different areas of society.

¹³ A. Bamgbose, "Language and Exclusion: The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa." (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000).

¹⁴ Mtholeni N Ngcobo, "Language Planning, Policy and Implementation in South Africa," *Glossa: An Ambilingual Interdisciplinary Journal* 2, no. 2 (2007): 156–69.

¹⁵ Nobuhle Mhlongo, "The Implementation of the South African Language Policy by Local Government: A Case Study." (University of Cape Town, 2021).

¹⁶ Lutamo Shadrack Ramuedzisi, "An Analysis of the Impact of Section 4(2)(b) of the South African Use of Official Languages Act of 2012 (on Previously Marginalised Indigenous Official Languages)," *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 40, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 275–87, <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2022.2058567>.

¹⁷ Mabela and Ditsele, "Language Policy, Media, and Attitudes in South Africa: Navigating Linguistic Diversity."

¹⁸ L T Dibetso and T Smith, "Lack of Diversity (Repeat). Analysis of SABC News and Programming," *Media Monitoring Africa Report*, 2012.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study focuses on Language Policy and Planning (LPP) for minority languages in Africa. The study has adopted Language Management Theory (LMT) as a framework. Language management is defined as “any specific efforts to modify or influence language practice”.¹⁹ Furthermore, language management is defined as any activity aimed at language or communication, i.e., language as a system and language use (or, more simply, “behaviour toward language” or “metalinguistic behaviour”).²⁰

As a response to Language Planning Theory's emphasis on top-down approaches, Jernudd and Neustupny created the framework for Language Management Theory.²¹ Instead of focusing on the actions of governments or other organizations, they favoured a bottom-up approach, which prioritized the interests of language users. According to their theory, Language Management is comprised of responses to language issues and occurs in cycles. These (1) begin with the occurrence of a problem (deviation from a norm, etc.); this deviation may then be (2) noted by the participants and (3) evaluated; if the evaluation is unfavourable, (4) a corrective measure may be devised and (5) implemented. Afterwards, a new language administration cycle could begin. There may be similar cycles between the discourse level, where problems emerge, and the level of organizations, authorities, etc. (the macro level).

This theory is applied to actions on discourse, such as self-corrections by speakers, referred to as “simple management,” and to language management on an organized level, such as in corporations and other organizations, and through state policies (“organized management”). “LMT requires organized management to rely on simple management as much as possible”.²² Consequently, from an LMT perspective, problems can be attributed to the omission of management cycle stages or the failure to connect the macro level of organized management to the micro level of speakers and participants.²³

Mwaniki argues that language management can also be conceptualized as a practice, i.e., a method of ‘doing’ language politics.²⁴ Language management is further described as a practice that can be defined as the critical and creative development and deployment of management, sociolinguistic, and development-oriented methodologies and strategies in addressing language-related challenges in society and in the harnessing of language resources in society, taking into account the majority, if not all, of the variables that influence language at the individual and societal levels.²⁵ The ultimate objective of the methodologies and strategies is to expand people's options. This is true not only at the micro level of individual language use, individual freedom and advancement, access to services, information, and knowledge, or transmission and application, but also at the macro level of governance, development, and democracy.

The Language Management Theory provides a valuable theoretical framework for language policy and planning in South Africa's multilingual context. By applying LMT principles, policymakers can create more effective strategies for managing linguistic diversity, promoting language rights, and addressing the challenges presented by the country's various language communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research technique using a survey design to explore attitudes toward the handling of official languages and the promotion of multilingualism in South Africa. A quantitative method was considered appropriate as it allowed the collection of data in a standardised way from a

¹⁹ Bernard Spolsky, *Language Policy* (Cambridge university press, 2004).

²⁰ Jiří Nekvapil and Tamah Sherman, “An Introduction: Language Management Theory in Language Policy and Planning.”, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2015, no. 232 (2015): 1–12.

²¹ Björn H Jernudd and Jiří V Neustupný, “Language Planning: For Whom,” in *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Language Planning* (Québec: Les Press de L'Université Laval, 1987), 69–84.

²² Jiří. Nekvapil, *From Language Planning to Language Management* (Sociolinguistica 20, 2006).

²³ Markus Giger and Marián Sloboda, “Language Management and Language Problems in Belarus: Education and Beyond,” *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 11, no. 3–4 (2008): 315–39.

²⁴ Munene Mwaniki, “Language Management in Africa: The Dialectics of Theory and Practice,” *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 29, no. 3 (September 2011): 243–57, <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2011.647487>.

²⁵ Munene Mwaniki, “Language Planning in South Africa: Towards a Language Management Approach.” (University of the Free State, 2004).

number of participants and enabled the discovery of patterns and trends in linguistic attitudes and experiences.

The study was carried out at a university in Gauteng Province of South Africa. The university was picked because it draws students and faculty from a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including speakers of historically disadvantaged official languages such as isiNdebele, Xitsonga, siSwati and Tshivenda. The target population consisted of students and staff members who identified as speakers of one of the four specified language groups. The final sample for analysis consisted of 74 participants who completed the questionnaire.

The study used purposive sampling. Participants were recruited on the basis of speaking one of the language communities under consideration and were therefore able to contribute relevant information regarding language use, language rights and attitudes of linguistic equality in South Africa. Potential volunteers were asked on campus to participate in the study voluntarily. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their informed consent before participation. Participation was completely voluntary, and no incentives were given.

The inclusion requirements were that participants had to:

- Be enrolled students or employed staff of the University;
- Be at least 18 years old;
- State that they are isiNdebele, Xitsonga, siSwati or Tshivenda speaking; and
- Be willing to give informed consent. Participants who did not belong to either of the specified linguistic groups or those who submitted incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the study.

Although the study used a very small sample (74 participants), the objective was not to obtain statistically generalisable conclusions for the general South African population, but rather to explore perspectives among speakers of selected minority language communities. The sample was deemed sufficient for an exploratory investigation of a particular population group and provided adequate data to discern patterns and trends relevant to the research concerns. Similar sample sizes have been used in related exploratory studies of language attitudes and language policy, which have examined particular linguistic communities. The researcher's initial sample size was 100 participants; however, some questionnaires were never returned.

Structured questionnaires with closed-ended and Likert scale items were used for data collection. The questionnaire asked about demographic variables, language use, views of language equality, awareness of language policies and attitudes towards multilingualism. The data collected were captured and evaluated using descriptive statistics. Participants' responses were summarised using frequencies, percentages, averages and graphs to discover trends across variables. Descriptive statistics were deemed suitable since the study's primary purpose was to describe and understand participants' perceptions, rather than testing causal linkages or making statistical generalisations beyond the study population. The data are consequently provided as descriptive patterns that reflect the perspectives of the participants and not as statistically typical of all speakers of isiNdebele, Xitsonga, siSwati and Tshivenda in South Africa.

Ethical clearance was granted for researchers to conduct the research in university premises. It was indicated in the informed consent form that participation in the study was entirely voluntary. In addition, they were made aware that their anonymity and confidentiality would not be violated in any way.

Response rate and profiles of the respondents

Respondents' Profiles

The total number of questionnaires handed out was 80; out of this number, only 74 were returned and usable. The Gauteng-based university students and staff were the main target groups, with 15 respondents for interview questions from the language sections. The University students and staff were divided into four ethnic affiliations, namely, Ndebele (amaNdebele), Tsonga (vaTsonga), Swati (amaSwati), and Venda (vhaVenda), as they were considered ethnic minorities. This study had filled out

and returned questionnaires from 19 isiNdebele L1 speakers, 20 Xitsonga L1 speakers, 20 siSwati L1 speakers, and 15 Tshivenda L1 speakers.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings sought to address the following research question:

- i) To what extent do different languages receive equal treatment in various domains of daily life, as stipulated by the South African Constitution?

The quantitative findings were described, explained, and interpreted using descriptive data analysis.

Likert Scale Data

Likert scale is represented by the table below. The following legend was used to assess the responses to the statements: Strongly disagree: 1; Disagree: 2; Not sure: 3; Agree: 4; Strongly agree: 5.

Table 1: Attitudes towards language policy and practice in South Africa (n=74)

Statement	Mean
1 The language policy of South Africa is fair.	2.4
2 All 12 official languages are treated equally.	1.7
3 The language structures employed by government are working.	2.7
4 Multilingualism can exist without any inconvenience to anyone.	2.8
5 The media, in general, promote all 12 official languages equally.	2.1
6 SABC TV specifically promotes all official languages.	2.8
7 Indigenous languages are growing rapidly.	2.8
8 English gets preference with the new generation.	4.6
9 The language policy of South Africa is being successfully implemented.	2.8
10 Action is being taken to develop all Black South African languages.	2.9

The findings revealed four broad themes related to language policy implementation, linguistic equality, media representation, and the growing dominance of English in South Africa.

Perceptions of Language Policy and Its Implementation

Participants expressed generally negative views regarding the effectiveness and implementation of South Africa's language policy. The statement that "the language policy of South Africa is fair" obtained a mean score of 2.4, while the statement that "the language policy of South Africa is being successfully implemented" received a mean score of 2.8. Similarly, respondents expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of government language structures (mean = 2.7) and the extent to which action is being taken to develop Black South African languages (mean = 2.9).

These findings suggest that participants perceive a significant gap between constitutional commitments to multilingualism and the practical implementation of language policy. Many respondents appeared unaware of language policy provisions and language planning structures, while others questioned their effectiveness. The findings indicate that policy initiatives aimed at promoting linguistic equality remain insufficiently visible to the public and are perceived to have limited impact on everyday language practices.

Linguistic Equality and the Status of Indigenous Languages

The strongest indication of dissatisfaction emerged from responses relating to language equality. The statement that "all 12 official languages are treated equally" produced the lowest mean score in the study (mean = 1.7), indicating strong disagreement among participants. Respondents also expressed reservations about whether multilingualism can exist without inconvenience (mean = 2.8) and whether indigenous languages are growing rapidly (mean = 2.8).

These results suggest that participants perceive significant inequalities in the treatment of official languages despite constitutional guarantees of parity of esteem. Respondents generally believed that indigenous languages continue to occupy a marginal position in public life and that efforts to promote

their development have yielded limited success. The findings also indicate concerns about the long-term vitality of indigenous languages in a social environment where dominant languages enjoy greater institutional support.

Media Representation and Language Promotion

Participants also expressed dissatisfaction with the manner in which languages are represented in the media. The statement that "the media, in general, promote all 12 official languages equally" obtained a mean score of 2.1, while the statement that "SABC TV specifically promotes all official languages" obtained a mean score of 2.8.

These findings indicate a perception that media institutions continue to favour certain languages over others. Participants generally believed that English and other dominant languages receive greater visibility, while minority languages receive comparatively limited representation. Although some respondents acknowledged the multilingual nature of SABC programming, they nevertheless felt that media representation remains uneven and does not fully reflect the constitutional commitment to linguistic equality.

English Dominance and Language Shift

The strongest consensus among the participants was related to the growing dominance of English. The statement that "English gets preference with the new generation" produced the highest mean score in the study (mean = 4.6), indicating strong agreement among respondents.

This finding suggests that English is widely perceived as the preferred language of younger generations due to its association with education, employment opportunities, technology, and social mobility. Although respondents valued their indigenous languages as markers of cultural identity, they simultaneously recognised the increasing practical importance of English. Therefore, the findings point to a tension between multilingualism as a constitutional ideal and the growing dominance of English in everyday life. Participants expressed concern that continued preference for English may contribute to language shift and weaken the intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages.

DISCUSSION

The study investigated how far South African society goes to ensure equal treatment of official languages in various contexts. Based on Language Management Theory (LMT), the findings reveal that there is a gap between South Africa's constitutional commitment to multilingualism and the language experiences of isiNdebele, Xitsonga, siSwati, and Tshivenda speakers. The findings show that, despite significant statutory and institutional measures to promote language equality, many respondents believe that linguistic inequities persist in government, media, education, and other public sectors.

One of the most significant findings is that South Africa's language policy is not being effectively enforced. Respondents questioned the fairness of the country's language policy, the usefulness of the government's language frameworks, and the extent to which real efforts are being made to nurture indigenous languages. These findings support previous studies that found a gap between language policy formulation and implementation in South Africa.²⁶

According to Language Management Theory, this result indicates issues during the implementation stage of language management. South Africa has a comprehensive policy framework to promote multilingualism and linguistic equality, although respondents found little evidence of this in their daily lives. Thus, the statistics support the claim that language policies alone are insufficient unless accompanied by actual action, monitoring, and awareness-raising efforts. The apparent lack of trust in language planning organisations demonstrates that language management attempts have not been adequate to translate constitutional commitments into tangible results.

²⁶ Ayo Bamgbose, "A Recurring Decadal: English in Language Policy and Planning," *The Handbook of World Englishes*, 2019, 657–73; Mhlongo, "The Implementation of the South African Language Policy by Local Government: A Case Study."; Ndlangamandla, Ntombela, and Ngubane, "Misconceptions, Misalignments, and Mismatches: Theory, Praxis, Policies, and Models of Language, Linguaging, and Multilingualism in a Neoliberal Education."

The study's main finding was that respondents strongly disagreed that all 12 official languages are treated equally. Participants reported significant disparities in the visibility, use, and promotion of languages in public spaces, demonstrating that constitutional guarantees of parity of respect have not resulted in linguistic equality in practice.

This finding complements prior research that found minority language populations to be marginalised despite constitutional status.²⁷ There has also been concern about the under-representation of indigenous languages in public institutions, higher education, and government communication. The findings, in turn, add credence to the hypothesis that mere official acceptance does not imply meaningful linguistic inclusion.

Language Management Theory highlights the distinction between language policy as a norm and language practices in society. Although the constitutional rules require nominal equality among the official languages, language practices continue to favour some languages over others in practice. According to the responses, minority languages remain disadvantaged in terms of institutional backing, visibility, and functional use, limiting their ability to compete with dominant languages in public life.

The findings also indicate dissatisfaction with the role of the media in promoting linguistic variation. In general, respondents disagreed on whether the media, particularly SABC television, promotes all official languages equally. This is consistent with previous research showing a scarcity of indigenous languages on media platforms in South Africa.²⁸

The media is an important method of language management since it influences language prestige, visibility, and intergenerational transmission. According to Language Management Theory, language maintenance is dependent on both recognition in formal domains and recognition in powerful social situations. Languages that are under-represented in media environments may eventually lose their social worth and cultural importance. According to the findings, unbalanced media representation may contribute to the continued marginalisation of minority language groups while also hindering broader attempts at linguistic equality.

Another key finding was that respondents strongly agreed on the increased desire for English among the younger generation. Participants universally agreed that the youth chose English as a language of communication, reflecting broader social and economic shifts in South Africa.

This conclusion supports previous research that found that English is a unifying and marginalising force in multilingual society.²⁹ English provides opportunities for education, employment, technology, and global communication, but its rise may decrease the functional spaces available to indigenous languages. As a result, newer generations prefer English for socioeconomic progress, whereas indigenous languages are being reduced to cultural, familial, and symbolic relevance.

According to Language Management Theory, the growth of English is due to language ideologies that associate specific languages with power, status, and opportunity. If no active efforts are made to strengthen the prestige and functionality of indigenous languages in education, governance, media, and cyberspace, language shift may accelerate and destroy the viability of minority language groups.

The findings generally indicate that South Africa's constitutional and legislative framework provides a good foundation for linguistic equality, but there are issues to be addressed in converting policy commitments into action. The continuation of linguistic inequality, unequal media coverage, a lack of faith in language management institutions, and English's expanding hegemony all suggest that the constitutional goal of equitable language treatment has not been fully realised. According to Language Management Theory, these findings highlight the importance of greater implementation,

²⁷ Xeketwana and Anthonissen, "Linguistic Marginalisation and Multilingual Policy Gaps: African Language Speakers' University Experiences Explored"; Masombuka, "A Critique of Multilingualism in South Africa's Post-Democratic Parliament with Particular Reference to the Use of Selected Minority Languages"; Ramuedzisi, "An Analysis of the Impact of Section 4(2)(b) of the South African Use of Official Languages Act of 2012 (on Previously Marginalised Indigenous Official Languages)."

²⁸ Hlophe, "The Representation of Minority Languages on SABC 1: The Case of Siswati"; Mabela and Ditsele, "Language Policy, Media, and Attitudes in South Africa: Navigating Linguistic Diversity."

²⁹ Nkonko M Kamwangamalu, "Multilingualism and Education Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Language Problems and Language Planning* 21, no. 3 (1997): 234–53; Mabela and Ditsele, "Language Policy, Media, and Attitudes in South Africa: Navigating Linguistic Diversity."

monitoring, and institutional support if linguistic equality is to become a lived reality for all official language communities rather than just a policy goal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings underscore the need for more effective ways to make South Africa's constitutional promise of language equality a reality. Some recommendations are as follows:

- Government agencies and public organisations must strengthen the implementation of existing language policies and conduct regular evaluations of their efficacy. Despite South Africa's progressive legislative framework, respondents found a significant disparity between policy commitments and language practices. Appropriate monitoring and accountability procedures should be put in place at the national, provincial, and local levels to ensure that language policy standards are followed.
- The findings indicate that many citizens lack knowledge of the language regulations and control methods. As a result, government organisations, educational institutions, and language planning authorities should start public awareness campaigns to educate residents about their linguistic rights and the roles of institutions in supporting multilingualism.
- Minority languages such as isiNdebele, Xitsonga, siSwati, and Tshivenda require greater attention from both public and private media enterprises. This could be accomplished by increasing broadcast hours, producing multilingual shows, developing digital material, and providing greater financing for indigenous language journalism. Increased media coverage would help preserve languages, cultures, and linguistic equity.
- More investment is required in the development of indigenous languages, particularly those that are still disadvantaged. This should include the creation of educational materials, technical terminology, dictionaries, translation services, and digital language resources. These will improve the practical applications of indigenous languages in education, government, technology, and public communication.
- Educational institutions should continue to promote multilingual approaches that value indigenous languages alongside English. The use of indigenous languages in teaching, learning, and academic support services has the potential to enhance language development while also promoting cultural identification and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the extent to which official languages receive equitable treatment in South Africa from the perspective of speakers of isiNdebele, Xitsonga, siSwati, and Tshivenda. The findings support the idea that South Africa's constitutional promise of language equality has not been fully implemented in practice. Respondents expressed concerns regarding language policy implementation, the efficacy of language management organisations, imbalanced representation of languages in the media, and English's continued dominance in key socioeconomic areas.

The study also shows that official recognition alone is insufficient for substantive language equality. Although progress has been made through constitutional and legislative initiatives, minority languages continue to face issues of visibility, institutional backing, and functional usage. These findings are consistent with past research indicating disparities between language policy and language practice in South Africa.

The study, which is based on Language Management Theory, concludes that linguistic equality requires more than formal legislative commitments. Language management requires ongoing implementation, institutional support, public awareness, and regular monitoring of language use. Without increasing such efforts, the constitutional goal of equal regard across official languages will be difficult to achieve.

The study adds to the scholarship on language policy and planning by providing empirical data on the perspectives on language equality in modern South Africa among speakers of historically

marginalised language communities. It also sheds light on the continuous challenge of translating constitutional objectives into language-based reality.

Future Research Suggestions

The current study was limited to a small sample size from a single university. Future studies should use larger and more diverse samples from various institutions, provinces, and language communities to better understand linguistic equality in South Africa.

Future research could use mixed-method or qualitative approaches to deepen the experiences of linguistic inclusion and exclusion in the daily lives of minority language speakers. Such approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, and institutional factors that influence language attitudes and behaviours.

Furthermore, future studies should look into language policy implementation in specific areas such as higher education, government communication, digital media, and public service delivery. Comparative research on various experiences of the language community could help to better understand how linguistic injustices are replicated or addressed in South African society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bamgbose, A. "Language and Exclusion: The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa." Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000.
- Bamgbose, Ayo. "A Recurring Decimal: English in Language Policy and Planning." *The Handbook of World Englishes*, 2019, 657–73.
- Crystal, David. "Language Death." Cambridge, 2000.
- Dibetso, L. T., and T. Smith. "Lack of Diversity (Repeat). Analysis of SABC News and Programming." *Media Monitoring Africa Report*, 2012.
- Giger, Markus, and Marián Sloboda. "Language Management and Language Problems in Belarus: Education and Beyond." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 11, no. 3–4 (2008): 315–39.
- Hlophe, Sihle. "The Representation of Minority Languages on SABC 1: The Case of Siswati," 2014.
- Jernudd, Björn H., and Jiří V. Neustupný. "Language Planning: For Whom." In *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Language Planning*, 69–84. Québec: Les Press de L'Université Laval, 1987.
- Kamwangamalu, Nkonko M. "Multilingualism and Education Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *Language Problems and Language Planning* 21, no. 3 (1997): 234–53.
- Luvhengo, Nkhangweleni. "Linguistic Minorities in the South African Context: The Case of Tshivenda." Rhodes University, 2012.
- Mabela, Matefu Lefty, and Thabo Ditsele. "Language Policy, Media, and Attitudes in South Africa: Navigating Linguistic Diversity." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no. 4 (2026): 1016–31.
- Masombuka, Elizabeth Lucy. "A Critique of Multilingualism in South Africa's Post-Democratic Parliament with Particular Reference to the Use of Selected Minority Languages." 2017.
- May, Stephen. *Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Language*. London: Longman, 2001.
- Mhlongo, Nobuhle. "The Implementation of the South African Language Policy by Local Government: A Case Study." University of Cape Town, 2021.
- Mwaniki, Munene. "Language Management in Africa: The Dialectics of Theory and Practice." *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 29, no. 3 (September 2011): 243–57. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2011.647487>.
- . "Language Planning in South Africa: Towards a Language Management Approach." University of the Free State, 2004.
- Ndlangamandla, Sibusiso Clifford, Berrington Ntombela, and Nomalungelo Ngubane. "Misconceptions, Misalignments, and Mismatches: Theory, Praxis, Policies, and Models of Language, Languageing, and Multilingualism in a Neoliberal Education." *Educational Research*

for *Social Change* 14, no. 2 (October 8, 2025): 260–74. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/v14n2a18>.

Nekvapil, Jiří. *From Language Planning to Language Management*. Sociolinguistica 20, 2006.

Nekvapil, Jiří, and Tamah Sherman. “An Introduction: Language Management Theory in Language Policy and Planning.” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2015, no. 232 (2015): 1–12.

Ngcobo, Mtholeni N. “Language Planning, Policy and Implementation in South Africa.” *Glossa: An Ambilingual Interdisciplinary Journal* 2, no. 2 (2007): 156–69.

Phillipson, Robert. “Globalizing English: Are Linguistic Human Rights an Alternative to Linguistic Imperialism?” In *Language Rights*, edited by Phil Benson, Peter Grundy, and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, 1st ed., 20:101–112. Language Sciences, 1998.

Ramuedzisi, Lutamo Shadrack. “An Analysis of the Impact of Section 4(2)(b) of the South African Use of Official Languages Act of 2012 (on Previously Marginalised Indigenous Official Languages).” *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 40, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 275–87. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2022.2058567>.

Republic of South Africa (RSA). *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printing Works, 1996.

Spolsky, Bernard. *Language Policy*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Statistics South Africa. *General Household Survey 2018. Statistical Release P0318*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2019.

Xeketwana, Simthembele, and Christine Anthonissen. “Linguistic Marginalisation and Multilingual Policy Gaps: African Language Speakers’ University Experiences Explored.” *Language Matters* 56, no. 3 (September 2, 2025): 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2025.2545782>.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Dr Matefu Lefty Mabela is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of African Languages at the University of Johannesburg. He obtained a Doctorate in Language Practice in 2020, with research focusing on the relationship between language, discourse, and socio-political dynamics in contemporary South Africa. Dr Mabela is an established scholar whose research interests include sociolinguistics, language policy and planning, language development, terminology development, language revitalisation, discourse studies, and the intellectualisation of South African indigenous languages. His work contributes to ongoing debates on multilingualism, linguistic rights, indigenous language development, and the role of language in social transformation. He has published in accredited journals and has presented his research at national and international conferences, seminars, and symposiums. Among his notable publications are *Intellectualisation of Northern Sotho for Scientific Purposes*, *Language Policy, Media, and Attitudes in South Africa: Navigating Linguistic Diversity*, and *The Role of Code-Switching in South African Political Discourse: Linguistic Strategies of Populism*. Dr Mabela's current research focuses on the development and intellectualisation of African languages, language policy implementation, terminology development, computational approaches to indigenous language development, and the promotion of multilingualism in higher education and society.

Dr Gabriel Babili is a Lecturer in the Department of African Languages. He teaches grammar and literature in Sepedi, language translation and communicative studies. His research interests are diverse, but they somewhat revolve around linguistics, viz., South African sociolinguistics, forensic linguistics, and language education. Babili's work in forensic linguistics focuses primarily on courtroom interactions, the readability of police reports and restorative justice in the legal system. He supervises postgraduate students and gives presentations at local and international academic conferences. Dr Babili formed a network for Language, Research and Standards with entities such as the police and justice system to help attain international best practice. He collaborates with higher institutions of learning to ensure that research and language education are developed and sustained.