

Tongue-tied: Language-Based Exclusion at a South African University

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Abstract: The post-apartheid government in South Africa adopted a multilingual education policy to provide education in learners' home languages as a foundation for learning while promoting proficiency in at least two additional official languages. This marked a paradigm shift from the apartheid regime, which was characterised by racial segregation and discrimination, prioritising Afrikaans and English at the expense of indigenous African languages. Although widely celebrated, achieving the multilingual promise ushered in by the democratic dispensation remains a challenge for post-apartheid South African higher education. This study explored students' experiences of language-based discrimination at a selected South African university. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected from 20 purposively sampled final-year students through an open-ended questionnaire that was distributed electronically to students in the Education faculty and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that minority language speakers grappled with feelings of invisibility, alienation, frustration, and exclusion in their academic and social lives, making it difficult for them to engage fully in university life. Various coping mechanisms were also reported, demon-

strating the agency of these minority groups; however, these were found to be insufficient. The study thus recommended prioritising inclusive language policies and training that foster lingua-cultural empathy among students and staff, among other things.

Keywords: Exclusion, higher education, Indigeneity, language, multilingualism.

1. Introduction

Language is integral to all aspects of student life – from academic settings to personal relationships – because it is the basis for communication, culture, and expression (Wang et al., 2019; Asghari, 2022). According to Xu et al. (2022), language proficiency is essential for students to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions effectively. This proficiency allows them to articulate their views clearly and concisely, which is particularly important in writing assignments and classroom discussions (Mulvey, 2021; Weber & van Mol, 2023). Moreover, a strong command of language enables students to understand and interpret complex concepts and instructions, which is vital for academic success (Mayaba et al., 2018). It also facilitates critical thinking, analysis, and meaningful academic and personal growth. Language proficiency is also crucial for social interactions, enabling students to communicate and collaborate effectively with their peers (Asghari, 2022; Mkhize & Balfour, 2017). It has been reported that students proficient in language are more likely to engage in meaningful discussions, share their perspectives, and contribute to group projects (Mulvey, 2021; Wang et al., 2019). This engagement not only enhances their academic performance but also improves their interpersonal skills, which are valuable in both personal and professional contexts. Studies such as Bekiyeva (2022) and Berger and Packard (2022) argue that language is an essential tool for cultural understanding and appreciation. Students proficient in multiple languages are more likely to grasp and respect diverse perspectives and ideas, thereby increasing empathy, tolerance, and cultural awareness – skills that are essential in a globalised world.

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During South Africa's apartheid era, language-based discrimination was a significant issue that further exacerbated racial segregation (Dlamini & Tesfamichael, 2021; Thobejane, 2013). The apartheid policies implemented by the National Party government sought to divide the population based on race, with Whites, Coloureds, Indians, and Blacks occupying different social, economic, and political spheres (Maylam, 2017). According to Giliomee (2009) and Ndimande (2013), this division was achieved through the privileging of Afrikaans and English, which were viewed as the languages of power, at the expense of indigenous African languages. The apartheid government-enforced policies aimed at suppressing the use of African languages in education, government, and other areas of public life (Christie & Collins, 1982; Worden, 2011). So ruthless was this approach that Indigenous learners were forced to learn in Afrikaans, a foreign language, and were often punished for speaking their home languages (Clark & Worger, 2022; Brown, 2016). This policy met with widespread resistance, eventually culminating in the 1976 Soweto Uprising, where learners protested against the imposition of Afrikaans – widely seen as the language of the oppressor – as a medium of instruction (Ndlovu, 2017; O'Halloran, 2017). Language was also employed to further divide and separate different racial groups (Shoole & Adeyemo, 2016). The government perpetuated the notion of racial superiority, with Afrikaans and English regarded as superior languages (Simbao, 2007; Thobejane, 2013).

Since the transition to democracy in 1994, attempts have been made by successive democratic governments to amend higher education policies (Makoni et al., 2023; Rudwick, 2021). However, these policy amendments have not translated into material benefits in equitable access for most previously disadvantaged Black people in South African society (Madadzhe, 2019; Posel et al., 2022). A glimpse at the curricula of South African universities reveals a heavy bias against Indigeneity, manifesting in both the content taught and the languages used to deliver it (Mutongoza et al., 2023a; Manathunga, 2020; Meda et al., 2019). According to Cloete (2014), access, participation rates, and equity issues for Indigenous students remain prominent in debates about the South African higher education system. In the context of specific South African universities, which have diverse student populations representing various linguistic backgrounds, there is a need to explore the impact of language-based exclusion on these institutions (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019; Robertson & Graven, 2020). Despite progress in addressing historical inequalities, language policies and practices in South African universities sometimes result in exclusionary outcomes for minority student groups (Madadzhe, 2019; Rudwick, 2021). This necessitates exploring how language-based exclusion manifests within South African universities and its implications for student access, participation, and success. While some studies have focused on broader issues of transformation and decolonisation in higher education (Makeleni et al., 2023; Makoni et al., 2023; Mutongoza et al., 2023b), the researcher found that more context-specific research is needed to examine the role of language as a potential barrier to equal educational opportunities.

1.1 The concept of discrimination

When discussing discrimination, it is essential to differentiate the concept from prejudice and stereotypes. Although these concepts are closely related, psychologists define prejudice as unjustifiable negative attitudes towards a group and its members (Stangor, 2016; Nelson, 2006), while stereotypes are generally defined as beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people, which consist of overly generalised, inaccurate, and resistant to facts (Bhatia, 2017; Al Ramiah et al., 2010). On the other hand, discrimination is behaviour – directed toward category members – that has an impact on their outcomes and is done so without regard for their qualities or reciprocity, but instead just because they happen to fall into that group (Dhanani et al., 2018; Correll et al., 2010). This means that discrimination, in effect, denies victims the ability to enjoy their rights and freedoms simply because of an unjustifiable distinction expressed in policies, laws, or treatment. Examples of this can be drawn from the apartheid era in South Africa, where discrimination was entrenched and perpetuated through the means of laws (Clark & Worger, 2022). Al Ramiah et al. (2010) add that the

language and experience of discrimination revolve around the idea of 'deservingness', which is packaged not as an objectively determined standard but rather one with roots in social standards and historical and contemporary injustices. While the victims themselves may disagree, the perpetrators of discrimination may believe their actions are justified by the targets' deservingness (Palumbo & Manna, 2020; Cheung et al., 2016). As a result, writing about the context of schools in South Africa, Hendricks (2022) confirms that the actions and behaviours that some judge as discriminatory will not be seen as such by others.

1.2 Research questions

The following questions guided this research:

- How do students perceive and describe language-based exclusion at their university?
- What are the consequences of language-based exclusion?
- What strategies do minority language speakers adopt to navigate language-based exclusion at their university?

2. Methodology

To effectively explore student experiences of language-based discrimination at the selected university, the researcher relied on the interpretive paradigm and a qualitative approach, as these provided more detailed insights into the discrimination experiences of students. According to Leavy (2017), the most significant benefit of the qualitative approach is that it enables researchers to better understand human behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs. The study was framed within a phenomenological design due to its ability to explore the essence of human experiences and the meanings people attribute to their lived experiences (Leavy, 2017). In the qualitative phase, a purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 final-year Bachelor of Education students based on their reported experiences of language-based exclusion at the university. Below is Table 1, presenting the biographical data of the participants.

Table 1: Participants' demographics

Pseudonym	Home language	Age	Gender
Sipho	SiSwati speaker	23	Male
Lerato	Setswana speaker	25	Non-binary
Ntsako	Xitsonga speaker	23	Female
Palesa	Sesotho speaker	28	Female
Jaco	Afrikaans speaker	25	Male
Annelie	Afrikaans speaker	22	Female
Tshepo	Sepedi speaker	25	Male
Lungile	SiSwati speaker	23	Male
Mpho	Sepedi speaker	22	Non-binary
Zanele	SiSwati speaker	25	Female
Karabo	Setswana speaker	24	Female
Refilwe	Sesotho speaker	28	Female
Lebogang	Sepedi speaker	27	Female
Hlaysiseka	Xitsonga speaker	29	Male
Thandiwe	Setswana speaker	31	Female
Dineo	Setswana speaker	27	Female
Kelebogile	Sesotho speaker	23	Female
Charlene	Afrikaans speaker	26	Non-binary
Gugu	SiSwati speaker	23	Female
Pieter	Afrikaans speaker	23	Male

After obtaining ethical clearance (MAK001-23) and requisite gatekeeper permissions, data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire that the researcher generated to answer the research

questions. The researcher piloted the questionnaire with five students in the third year of the same programme and adjusted the questions that were unclear to the students. The questionnaire was designed to be answered anonymously, and participants were encouraged to provide as much detail as possible about their experiences. It was designed using Google Forms and distributed in student WhatsApp groups and online learning platforms. The questionnaire settings were configured to limit respondents to one response to avoid getting more than one response from a participant. After this, the data were analysed using thematic analysis as follows:

- Familiarising with the data
- Generating initial codes
- Generating themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- The writing of the narrative.

3. Presentation of Results

This section seeks to present and discuss the findings of this study. The section is arranged according to the themes of the study, and after the presentation of findings, the discussion was used to make sense of the findings. The following themes that were drawn to respond to the research questions that guided the study will inform the presentation and discussion:

- Indicators of language-based exclusion
- Consequences of language-based exclusion, and
- Coping mechanisms utilised by linguistic minorities

3.1. Indicators of language-based exclusion

When the participants were asked about their perceptions of what constituted language-based exclusion, their responses revealed that they felt their languages were not being acknowledged and that linguistic diversity was not being celebrated. These views were echoed by students who indicated that being speakers of minority languages made it difficult in both social and academic settings. This was illustrated by Karabo, who lamented:

I often get the impression that IsiXhosa is seen as the 'default' language here. It is as though if you do not speak IsiXhosa, you do not belong to the university community – you are made to feel like you are not enough. It makes it difficult to participate fully in group discussions or even casual conversations on campus (Karabo, Setswana speaker).

It is also essential to consider the sentiments offered by Palesa, who said:

I was having a conversation with my friend in our home language in one of the buildings, and the security passing by stopped and rudely said, "Don't be speaking funny things we don't understand here. Speak so we can understand; don't bore us" in IsiXhosa and mind you we were talking amongst ourselves and not with anyone so everyone around us laughed. Yoh, I was so embarrassed (Palesa, SiSwati speaker).

More sentiments were offered by students who revealed difficulties within the classroom space where other African languages were seemingly overlooked. One can draw from Lebogang, who noted:

Every day, I feel excluded...the language barrier makes it difficult for students to find their ground in a new environment. There is this unspoken rule that if you do not speak IsiXhosa, you are not considered important. And you need to speak the language eloquently. It is frustrating during lectures because sometimes the lecturers switch to IsiXhosa without thinking, leaving those of us who do not understand behind (Lebogang, Sepedi speaker).

This was supported by Ntsako, who believed:

I have noticed that IsiXhosa dominates everything, even in student societies and events. It is like a barrier for us who do not speak it fluently. When we try to contribute to our languages, people either ignore us or respond in IsiXhosa (Ntsako, Xitsonga speaker).

Pieter added:

I often feel out of place. English is everywhere, but even that is better than how IsiXhosa dominates social interactions. As an Afrikaans speaker, it sometimes feels like there is no space for me, not even during discussions with classmates (Pieter, Afrikaans speaker).

Other students pointed out that there was blatant exclusion of other African languages, and being from other provinces, they felt disregarded and alienated. Refilwe noted:

You can definitely feel the exclusion when lecturers and peers assume everyone understands IsiXhosa. When lecturers make isiXhosa examples while teaching it is easy for me to get lost. Sometimes they code switch between English and isiXhosa. This results in me not only reviewing my slides when I am alone but literally studying it as if it is the first time that I see it. It is like our languages, like Sesotho, do not exist here. It limits how much we can engage or ask for help when we are struggling with something (Refilwe, SiSwati speaker).

3.2. Consequences of language-based exclusion

When asked about the consequences of language-based exclusion on their student lives, the participants revealed that such experiences left students isolated from both the learning and social environments, thereby affecting their well-being. For instance, Zanele commented that:

It affects my confidence a lot. Due to the language barrier, I feel it is much better to isolate myself at times and be in my own space. Academically, the language barrier is not much of an issue until we are placed in groups whereby some refuse to speak English and opt to communicate in IsiXhosa. When I do not understand something, I just stay quiet. It is isolating because you end up feeling like an outsider in your own university. (Zanele, SiSwati speaker)

The problems with collaborative work with other students were also emphasised by Lerato, who commented,

When group members are chosen for us in group assignments, I hardly voice out my opinions. I mostly just follow my group members' opinions as most of them usually have their discussions in IsiXhosa. I do not have a problem with them doing that as I understand the language, I just have a hard time speaking it especially due to my troubles with pronunciation and them laughing when I pronounce something incorrectly. Some people make unnecessary comments when you only speak English, such as "Haibo! Islungu manje?" [Wow! Why the use of English?], so I always avoid that (Lerato, Setswana speaker).

Other students also noted that this exclusion was evident in classrooms where lecturers further alienated linguistic minorities. The sentiments offered by Hlaysiseka were telling in this regard:

It [language-based exclusion] has impacted my academic performance. Sometimes I miss out on important discussions and explanations because they are done in IsiXhosa. In most cases, I have to refer to a friend to understand what is being spoken to fully comprehend what is being taught. It is tiring to constantly ask for translations or explanations, so I just stop asking (Hlaysiseka, Xitsonga speaker).

This was supported by Kelebogile, who added the social cost of language-based discrimination by noting:

I feel invisible. It is hard to make connections with peers or lecturers, and that has affected my academic success. I often feel like I am not being heard, which leads to frustration and a lack of participation. It affects my academic performance because this exclusion means I first have to learn

and understand IsiXhosa for me to ask for help from fellow students who understand the language used by some lectures (Kelebogile, Sesotho speaker).

More experiences of exclusion at the university were also highlighted by students like Mpho, who noted:

I have started to feel resentment towards this university because I do not feel seen or heard. During classes, most lecturers prefer to use their home language, which makes it difficult for me to participate since they expect my response to be in their language, which I cannot properly speak (Mpho, Sepedi speaker).

Jaco also highlighted the effects of exclusion on academic and social life by saying:

There is this constant sense of exclusion that affects both my academic and social life. I have become more withdrawn because I feel like the university is not a welcoming space for people who do not speak the dominant language...it has been four years now, but the clicks in Xhosa still dribble me. Eventually, what happens is that you end up with camps based on language, and the whole idea of diversity dies (Jaco, Afrikaans speaker).

3.3. Coping mechanisms utilised by linguistic minorities

Having identified the experiences and effects of language-based exclusion at the university, it became important to explore the agency of linguistic minorities and their coping mechanisms in the face of exclusion. One can consider the mechanisms employed by Siphon, who noted:

I have started forming study groups with other students who speak minority languages, so at least we can help each other understand the material. It is not ideal, but it is better than feeling lost all the time. I have tried using online dictionaries and Google Translate; making friends is difficult, but some people are willing to teach us their language (Siphon, SiSwati speaker).

This position was supported by Dineo, who said:

I have resorted to sticking to groups where a common language is spoken...I always gravitate more to the people that are comfortable speaking English as I know I will not have much trouble. And most of my friends are Sesotho and Setswana speakers so I do not have much trouble with that, but I guess I have to settle with having only them as my friends for my whole university life. It limits my exposure, but it is a way to survive in an environment where I constantly feel excluded (Dineo, Setswana speaker).

Other students revealed that they had taken to forging friendships regardless of the language differences, and in these friendships, they were learning the dominant language while teaching these friends their languages. This strategy was best presented by Gugu, who revealed:

I often rely on friends who speak IsiXhosa to translate or explain things to me, especially during lectures or discussions. I have increasingly found myself associating with people who are willing not only to teach me their language but also to learn mine to make communicating exciting for us. It is not easy, but it helps me to keep up (Gugu, SiSwati speaker).

This initiative was supported by another student who said:

I have started learning basic IsiXhosa phrases to get by, but it is still difficult. I also rely heavily on English, even though it is not my first language, to ensure I am not left out (Thandiwe, Setswana speaker).

Other students also revealed their attempts at speaking up for themselves within classrooms. This can be found in the responses of students such as Tshepo, who reported:

I have tried to speak up in classes, reminding lecturers and other students that not everyone understands IsiXhosa. It is uncomfortable because you are forced to correct someone who is older than you. I even have instances where I have been greeted with hostile attitudes, but sometimes it is the only way to get the point across (Tshepo, Sepedi speaker).

Other students noted that they had taken to only using English in order to fit into the university community. One can draw from Charlene, who explained:

I have become more used to English, even though it is not my preferred language. It is a way to bridge the gap, but I still feel like I am compromising part of my identity just to fit in. (Charlene, Afrikaans speaker).

4. Discussion of Findings

The findings from the study reveal a deep sense of marginalisation among the participants due to the dominance of IsiXhosa within the university context. Due to its privilege as a majority language in the province, Matshikiza et al. (2021) indicate that minority languages are inadvertently and systematically marginalised, leading to both academic and social exclusion. The experiences of exclusion reported here are supported by studies such as Drożdżowicz and Peled (2024), who describe feelings of invisibility and alienation that arise from experiences of exclusion. The findings indicate that the lack of acknowledgement of their home languages often results in emotional consequences such as embarrassment, isolation, and diminished self-worth. This is further supported by Kumar (2021), who highlights that the hierarchical positioning of languages in South Africa underscores the broader issue of linguistic inequality, where access to participation in both academic and social spaces is restricted based on proficiency in the dominant languages. While the use of Indigenous languages in classes may dismantle English-dominant instruction in higher education, practitioners must guard against fostering exclusion by undermining students' sense of belonging and creating barriers to academic success (Lasagabaster & van der Walt, 2024). The invisibility of minority languages reflects a failure by the institution to celebrate and embrace linguistic diversity, further reinforcing a culture of exclusion. These findings demonstrate the need for inclusive language policies that recognise and respect linguistic diversity in a way that ensures inclusivity, regardless of linguistic background.

The findings reveal the emotional and academic consequences of language-based exclusion on students who speak minority languages at the university. In line with studies on segregation, such as Mutongoza (2024), participants expressed how this exclusion isolates them from the academic environment and affects their well-being and social engagement. Students reported feeling alienated in group settings where IsiXhosa dominates, often choosing to remain silent due to difficulties with pronunciation or fear of ridicule. These findings concur with studies highlighting how language exclusion impacts confidence and one's ability to contribute meaningfully to learning and social activities (Malik, Guzmán, & Vo, 2024). Furthermore, some students noted their academic disadvantages when lecturers switched from English to IsiXhosa to simplify explanations of concepts, leaving them reliant on peers for translations. According to Hlas, Neyers, and Molitor (2019), this continuous need for clarification contributes to fatigue and frustration, as students struggle to keep up with content not delivered in a language they fully understand. Socially, the exclusion has led to feelings of invisibility and a lack of connection with peers and lecturers, further undermining students' participation and success. Over time, as Palardy, Rumberger, and Butler (2015) note, this linguistic segregation fosters resentment and withdrawal, as students feel they do not belong to the learning community. These findings thus point to the cumulative effects of exclusion, where academic performance and social well-being are compromised, leading to student divisions and eroding the institution's potential for championing diversity.

The findings reveal that minority language speakers at the university adopt various strategies to cope with exclusion in academic and social contexts. Some students form study groups with peers who share similar minority languages, providing academic support but limiting their interaction with the broader student body. As Hwang, Castle, and Karunakaran (2022) suggest, while these adaptations help students navigate academic challenges, they also reinforce linguistic silos – hard language-based boundaries that lead to growing differences in cultures and norms. Others rely on translation

tools and online dictionaries to compensate for the dominance of majority languages in the classroom. Masala (2023) highlights that while technology can aid participation, it underscores the deep isolation felt by minority speakers. Social groupings based on shared language preferences, especially English, serve as neutral spaces; however, this approach deepens divisions, excluding students from interactions where IsiXhosa dominates. Some students attempt to learn the dominant language to adapt, forging friendships that involve mutual language learning. This strategy, argued by Lockley and Yoshida (2016), fosters cultural exchange but exposes the unequal power dynamics between languages. These coping mechanisms reflect resilience but also demand sacrifices, as students often forgo aspects of their cultural and linguistic identity to function within an exclusionary environment.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to explore the university experiences of linguistic minorities at a selected university in South Africa. The findings revealed significant social justice implications tied to language-based exclusion in the university setting. Minority language speakers consistently described feelings of marginalisation and invisibility, reflecting a failure of the institution to uphold inclusivity and equal treatment for all linguistic groups. The widespread use of IsiXhosa, while intended to dismantle the hegemony of English, was found to reinforce systemic inequalities, leading to social isolation and academic challenges for students from other language backgrounds. These students not only perceived the exclusion as a form of discrimination but also experienced its effects on their confidence, well-being, and ability to participate in the university community. The study highlighted the need for institutional responsibility to ensure that all students, regardless of linguistic background, have equitable access to academic resources, social participation, and a sense of belonging.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that the university prioritise developing and implementing inclusive language policies that promote linguistic diversity and equal representation. First, implementing multilingual teaching practices and providing multilingual academic resources will be essential in supporting minority language speakers academically. Language support programmes offering peer tutoring and translation services should also be established to reduce academic disadvantages for students from minority linguistic groups. To engender lingua-cultural empathy, staff and students must undergo cultural sensitivity training to foster a more inclusive campus climate. Finally, creating spaces for cross-linguistic collaboration and exchange would promote mutual understanding and respect among students, contributing to social cohesion and the university's commitment to social justice.

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Data availability: In accordance with ethical standards and the stipulations outlined in the consent agreement with participants, the data must be maintained as confidential. Nevertheless, individuals seeking further information may contact the corresponding author.

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