



## Ambivalence among second-year students at a South African university about writing academically in an African language

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### Abstract

The new language policy for higher education advocates the use of African languages in different academic discourses as a means of developing and intellectualising these languages in academia. Academic writing is one of the important discourses through which students construct and access knowledge in higher education. However, this domain has largely been dominated using English at the expense of African languages. This study therefore seeks to explore ambivalence about writing academically in isiZulu among second-year students majoring in mother-tongue isiZulu modules. The study draws from the language-as-problem and language-as-resource conceptual framework to explore students' perspectives on academic writing. The findings show that, on the one hand, students are caught up in a nexus of multiple linguistic cultures influenced by globalising forces and racialised societal discourses that denigrate indigenous languages. On the other hand, they provide examples of the affordances of embracing students' multilingual repertoires in academic writing and further show evidence of changing ideologies and hope for language re-intellectualisation. Ambivalence needs to be studied further as a means of dealing with linguistic cultures that have a negative influence on the functional status of indigenous African languages.

**Keywords:** Academic writing; African Languages; Ambivalence; Higher Education; Multilingualism; South Africa.

### Introduction

The purpose of the study was to explore ambivalence towards and associated influencing factors affecting the use of isiZulu for academic writing at a South African university. Over the years, the South African higher education landscape has been characterised by the dominance of English as the language of academia. This situation is not peculiar to South Africa, but is evident throughout the African continent, where English and French have dominated as languages of teaching and learning across the educational spectrum. The dominance of former colonial languages has continued, despite the multilingual nature of the African continent, and to the detriment of the indigenous African languages. In response to the continued dominance of English in the South African education sector in general, numerous policies and legislative imperatives have been formulated. Following the language policy for higher

education of 2002 (Department of Education [DoE], 2002), a new, revised language policy has been adopted that advocates the use of African languages in different academic discourses as a means of developing and intellectualising these languages in the academy (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2020). These developments have seen the increased adoption of African languages as languages of teaching, learning, assessments and research. However, there seems to be a lot of ambivalence regarding the use of African languages in the above-mentioned roles. Therefore, the main research questions that the study sought to address are as follows: How is ambivalence reflected in students' views about academic writing in isiZulu, and what factors influence such ambivalence? In responding to these pertinent questions, the study draws from the 'language-as-right, language-as-problem and language-as-resource' conceptual framework. I argue that the linguistic landscape of South African education, dominated by English, has created a

nexus of multiple linguistic ideologies that is influenced by globalising forces and societal discourses that denigrate indigenous languages.

The paper begins by providing a detailed background of South Africa's multilingual profile and the associated higher education linguistic landscape. This is followed by a literature review of documents dealing with the concept of language ambivalence. Thereafter, the theoretical underpinning of the study is explored, followed by a description of the methodology. The paper then analyses language ambivalence based on students' perceptions, followed by an exploration of factors that influence such ambivalence.

## Background

South Africa is a multilingual country in which an estimated 25 languages are spoken, falling into three major groups: European languages, African languages, Asian languages (Kamwangamalu, 2001) and Sign Language. Of the estimated number of languages spoken in the country, 11 are officially recognised in the South African democratic constitution (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). These include nine indigenous African languages (isiZulu, isiXhosa, seSwati, xiTsonga, chiVenda, isiNdebele, Sepedi, seSotho, seTswana) and two former colonial languages (English and Afrikaans). However, the granting of official status to the nine indigenous languages, alongside Afrikaans and English, has not yet achieved the goal of parity of esteem among all the official languages (Khumalo & Nkomo, 2022).

In the context of the above, government departments in South Africa have made a commitment to constitutionally recognised multilingualism, through the formulation and adoption of a plethora of language policy frameworks aimed at promoting the functional status of African languages in the broader society. More specifically, within the context of the higher education domain, examples of such policies and legislative provisions include the Education White Paper 3 of 1997 (DoE, 1997); the Language Policy for Higher Education of 2002 and 2020; the Ministerial Committee Report on the Development of Indigenous African Languages as Mediums of Instruction in Higher Education; the Ministerial Committee Report on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of

Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (DoE, 2008); the White Paper on Post-Secondary School Education and Training (DHET, 2013), and the 'report on the use of African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education' (DHET, 2015). The language policy for higher education of 2020, which is a paradigm shift from the language policy for higher education of 2002, states particularly that:

Language continues to be a barrier to access and success for many students at South African higher education institutions. Despite their status as official languages, indigenous languages have in the past and at present, structurally not been afforded the official space to function as academic and scientific languages (DHET, 2020, p. 9).

The new language policy for higher education (DHET, 2020, p. 15) further calls for "... the need for higher education to value all indigenous languages as sources of knowledge, capable of informing learning of the different disciplines ..." and the need for "... the nurturing of an environment where multilingualism is not seen as a problem, but as a resource to facilitate cognitive development, epistemic access, inclusiveness, transformation, social cohesion and respect for all languages ...."

However, what has been of concern for many is that the implementation of language policies in ways that promote multilingualism and parity of esteem among the official languages remains elusive (Khumalo & Nkomo, 2022). This is supported by Desai (2016), who argues that, while South Africa is a multilingual country with 11 official languages, language practice in higher education continues to perpetuate the legacies of the apartheid era more than two decades after the attainment of democracy (Desai, 2016). The perpetuation of colonial and apartheid legacies is evident in the fact that English and Afrikaans remain the default languages of teaching and learning, despite the fact that more than 76% of the South African population are speakers of African languages (Desai, 2016; Heugh, 2003). The nine indigenous African languages continue to suffer marginalisation through denial of space to function as languages of the academy (Desai, 2016; Heugh, 2003).

It is in the context of the above assertion that the language question has unveiled a predicament that embroils students in the dilemma of multiple linguistic cultures and ideologies, rooted in colonial and apartheid legacies, as well as globalising forces and the societal discourses concerning the role of African languages. The following section therefore explores the concept of language ambivalence and how it has been treated in research.

### **Language Ambivalence: A Literature Review**

The term ambivalence is normally used in the field of psychology to denote the simultaneous existence of differing evaluative attitudes in relation to a person, object or situation (Smirnova & Tolochin, 2018). Thus, ambivalence can be characterised by "... a state of mind in which the existence of those two feelings is in opposition to one another—a state of mind that would presumably make it difficult for a person to evaluate the object" (Albertson, Brehm & Alvarez, 2005, p. 29). In the context of language learning, ambivalence can be viewed as a form of confusion that learners experience when they are confronted with a choice between two languages (Ndebele, 2020). Numerous studies have been conducted on language ambivalence across the globe, and many different themes have been explored in this regard. However, for the purposes of the current study, this section will focus only on studies that explore ambivalence in language learning, and ambivalence that is associated with the use of native or minority languages in general.

Scholars such as Hedman and Magnusson (2019), Luk (2012) and Macintyre, Burns and Jessome (2011), among others, have explored the ambivalence linked to language learning. MacIntyre et al. (2011) used the focused essay technique to examine ambivalence about communicating among adolescent French immersion students between the ages of 12 and 14 years. Students were requested to describe situations in which they were most willing to communicate, and situations in which they were least willing to communicate. The responses revealed complex interrelations among linguistic development, second-language self-development, and the non-linguistic issues that typically face adolescents. Students described feeling excluded as a result of their status as immersion students, but

at other times they used language to form a group in order to exclude other people. Students also described competence and error correction as major issues affecting their confidence in communicating (Macintyre et al., 2011).

Luk (2012) collected views about culture and language teaching from 12 secondary school English teachers in Hong Kong, with the sample including native and non-native English speakers. The findings of this study revealed that the teachers had a positive attitude towards the motivating power of culture in language teaching, but also revealed ambivalent feelings about the means and the end of culture-integrated TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) in relation to what cultural resources to draw from; the connection between examinations and cultural components; and what role the teachers play. The findings suggest the need for EFL teachers to consider deploying culture as a discursive resource for meaning-making, and to consider culture pedagogy as interlingual and intercultural exploratory dialogues with the students (Luk, 2012). In addition, Hedman and Magnusson (2019) explored student perspectives and experiences of Swedish as a second language in upper secondary schools at which the subject is voluntary and taught by highly qualified teachers. The findings revealed ambivalence towards the subject, which is related to conflicting discourses surrounding it. On the one hand, the discourses show that the subject may be associated with negative societal discourses on immigration and second language use, while on the other, they provide examples of the affordances of learning Swedish as a second language (Hedman & Magnusson, 2019).

Other scholars, such as Madiba (2012), Marshall, Moore and James (2019), Ndebele (2020) and Jahreie (2021) have focused on ambivalence linked to the use of a minority or marginalised language, particularly in relation to a dominant and hegemonic language. Marshall et al (2019) analysed how first-year students exercised their plurilingual competence in the context of using Chinese languages as learning tools at a university in Vancouver Metro, Canada. The study found that ambivalence was embedded in the university's structures, and this increased its central role in its wide reproduction by students. In the same light, the findings reveal that it was more

likely that plurilingual students were structurally conditioned by these ambivalent discourses, which they then internalised and reproduced more often. The authors concluded that the tension between the use of Chinese languages during the process of learning, and academic English for assessment, were the driving factors of ambivalence around which student participants viewed and employed plurilingualism.

Another important study was conducted by Jahreie (2021), who explored how early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers approach the language assessment of minority-language children and how their everyday experiences are part of institutional relations and processes that transcend their local contexts. The study identified three sources of ambivalence, namely ambivalence towards the ready-for-school discourse; ambivalence towards professional autonomy and the use of discretion; and ambivalence towards integration policy and the ideological code of 'the standard child'. Jahreie (2021) argues that these types of ambivalence not only relate to teachers' personal discretion, but are also linked to antagonistic discourses regarding the social role of preschools under changing political circumstances.

In the South African higher education context, Madiba (2012) in his discussion of the various perspectives on indigenous African languages as languages appropriated for academic purposes, argues that ambivalence is still dominant among learners, teachers, parents and government about the use of these for academic purposes. This ambivalence is evident from the existing national language education policies, school language policies, language curricula and language practices in schools (Madiba, 2012). Ndebele (2020) also investigated the perceptions of students on the inclusive use of isiZulu, an African language, as a language of teaching and learning. The study found ambivalence in students' responses through their conflated views relating to the affordances of teaching and learning in isiZulu, and the challenges associated with it. In the following section, I present the conceptual framework of the study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of the study is drawn from Ruiz's (1984, 2010) language-

planning orientations: language as problem, language as right, and language-as-resource. The language-as-problem orientation is a set of ideals that originate from a monolingual approach and assimilationist viewpoint (Hult & Hornberger, 2016). This orientation views linguistic diversity as an impediment to national unity, which is supposedly achieved through the use of a single, dominant and homogenous language (Ruiz, 1984). Language policies that are aligned with this orientation are aimed at limiting or eliminating multilingualism in society, while encouraging the development of the dominant language (Ruiz, 2010). Speakers of non-dominant languages in this context, are viewed from a deficit perspective that puts emphasis on their lack of linguistic abilities in the dominant language, and their languages are not seen as an asset, but rather as an impediment that needs to be eliminated (Ruiz, 1984). Within the educational context, the goal of the language-as-problem orientation is to fix the supposed linguistic deficiencies among speakers of non-dominant languages through subtractive language teaching that emphasises the need for transition to the dominant language (Hult, 2014). The goal is to compensate for a linguistic deficit by focusing on assimilation and transition to a dominant language (Hult & Hornberger, 2016).

The goal of the language-as-right orientation is to address linguistic inequities using compensatory legal mechanisms (Hult & Hornberger, 2016). The orientation advances the view that language is an important factor in an individual's ability to access the life chances afforded by a society through, inter alia, health care, employment, jurisprudence, education, media, voting and education (Ruiz, 1984). Progressive language rights may be advanced through legislation by guaranteeing individuals the use of their language in all domains of society, thereby advancing the status of non-dominant languages, expanding their functions and ensuring equality of access for their speakers (Hult & Hornberger, 2016). In South Africa, language rights are enshrined in the country's democratic constitution and Bill of Rights (RSA, 1996). Language rights are also framed in relation to international charters, conventions, covenants, declarations and treaties, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages or the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Hult, 2014; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).



The language-as-resource orientation is fundamentally a direct opposite of the language-as-problem orientation. In this orientation, multilingualism and cultural diversity are viewed as important resources that are compatible with national unity (Ruiz, 2010). Speakers of the non-dominant languages are viewed as a source of specialised linguistic expertise that is necessary for their communities, themselves and society in general (Ruiz, 1984). Linguistic diversity is thus viewed as beneficial, not only for speakers of non-dominant languages, but for everyone in society (Cummins, Chow, & Schecter, 2006). Further, this orientation does not pit languages against one another, but is an additive perspective that puts emphasis on the development of advanced bilingualism in the dominant language and the non-dominant languages (Hult, 2014; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). To that end, the language-as-resource orientation embraces the development and expansion of new multilingual resources as well as the maintenance of existing resources, as language is both a national and personal resource (Ruiz, 1984, 2010).

### Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach within the interpretive paradigm. According to Bryman (2012), a qualitative research approach is naturalistic and seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as a real-world setting in which the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest. A case study research strategy was employed by focusing on a group of students enrolled in one of the second-year isiZulu modules in the Department of African Languages. Open-ended questionnaires were employed for data collection. The choice of an open-ended questionnaire as a data collection tool was based on maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents, as well as to avoid bias, since the researcher was involved with the students as a lecturer. To mitigate any conflict of interest, the departmental administrator was requested to distribute the online questionnaire among the respondents. The questionnaires, which were made available in both isiZulu and English were completed and submitted anonymously over a period of four weeks.

The respondents who participated in this study were registered for an isiZulu second-year module, and 95% of them had isiZulu as a major. The respondents were drawn largely from the faculty of the Humanities. The choice of this particular group of students was based on the assumption that they already had experience of academic writing in isiZulu in their first-year modules. A total of 40 respondents participated in this study.

The participants were informed that the study sought to solicit their views about writing academically in isiZulu. The questionnaire was structured around three language orientation themes, namely: language-as-problem, language-as-right, and language-as-resource. The analysis of data was based on the above-mentioned themes. There was no desire to generalise the findings. The researchers appreciate that different groups of students have divergent views, and therefore one cannot aim at generalising findings across the board.

### *Language Ambivalence Among Second-Year Students*

The findings of the study reveal that there is a mixture of opinions about engaging in academic writing through the medium of isiZulu. These sentiments are centred around conflicting views about language-as-problem and language-as-resource. When asked about their views on their choice between writing an academic essay in English or isiZulu, some students revealed that they would choose isiZulu because of its affordances. Some of the responses were as follows:

*Ngingakhetha isiZulu ngoba uma ngibhala ngesiNgisi kudingeka ngibheke isichazamazwi eduze ngoba amanye amagama adinga incazelo ukuze ukwazi ukuwasebenzisa. Kanti-ke uma ngibhala ngesiZulu ngiwazi kangcono amagama nanokuthi achaza ukuthini.*

*[I can choose isiZulu because if I am writing in English, I need a dictionary near me because some words need to be explained before I can use them. However, if I am writing in isiZulu, I know the words and their meanings much better.]*

*I will choose to write in isiZulu because it is my home language. I understand and write better if I am using it.*

*[I will choose] isiZulu [because] it would be much easier for me to paraphrase someone's words and put [them] in my own words ... most of the information on Google is written in English, so [it is difficult] to paraphrase if put in English ...*

*[I will choose] IsiZulu because [it is] my home language, and my first ... language. In English, [it is sometimes ... hard to [write] an essay. You end up writing essays [using] poor English. E.g. in History, [one is required] to know English very well and be a human dictionary.*

In the above extracts, students state that using isiZulu for academic writing enhanced their understanding of the question and provided them with a wider choice of vocabulary because of their familiarity with the language. They further stated that it enabled easy paraphrasing of ideas, as opposed to doing so in English. On the other hand, some students revealed that they would prefer English for academic writing even though isiZulu was their first language. Some of the responses in this regard are as follows:

*I will choose English because [it is] simpler and most ... English words are short ... [and] ... quicker than Zulu words.*

*[I will choose] English because of how well I know it and it has been taught to me since a young age.*

*I will choose English [because] according to me, it is much easier to write an essay in English compared to isiZulu.*

*In the above extracts, the choice of English is based on the fact that the students were accustomed to using English throughout their entire education and hence had more communicative currency in English than in isiZulu. In addition, some students felt that English words are easier to write compared with isiZulu words, which are longer because of the agglutinative characteristics of the language. There was also evidence of some form of confusion at the individual level, as illustrated below:*

*IsiZulu ilona limi oluhamba phambili kimi kepha ngingazikhetha zombili ngoba lolu olunye lulula imiqondo ngakweminye imikhakha okuwukuthi ayitholakali ngolimi lwesiZulu. Futhi*

*lolu limi lwesiNgisi luyasiza ukuze sixhumane nabanye abangasikhulumi nhlobo isiZulu.*

*[IsiZulu is the preferred language for me, but I would choose both languages because this other language [English] expresses concepts in other disciplines easily which cannot be done in isiZulu. English also helps to facilitate communication with speakers of other languages who cannot speak isiZulu at all.]*

In the above extract, the student acknowledges isiZulu and its affordances as a first language, but rather prefers the use of both languages because of the belief that isiZulu is not able to fully express some concepts and ideas. In addition, the student believes that English is a common language that can facilitate communication between people who speak different African languages.

When students were asked about their experiences of writing the essay in isiZulu, some students stated that they found it easy, while some felt that it was difficult. Some of the responses are as follows:

*Ngizizwa engathi ngisekhaya, ngingasabi ukudlulisa umbono wami futhi ngiyakhululeka ngingasabi ukungashayi khona.*

*[I feel at home, with no fear to express my idea and I feel free without fear of making mistakes.]*

*Ekuqaleni kuye kwaba nzima ngoba bengingakajwayeli kodwa emva kosizo luka thisha nabasizi bakhe ukwenze kwabalula kimi nabanye ukuthi sikwazi ukubhala umsebenzi wesiZulu.*

*[It was difficult at the beginning because I was not used to it but after getting help from the [lecturer and the tutors], it was easy to write in isiZulu for me and others.]*

*I have found it interesting because I have [learnt] more about my home language and ... found it easier because it is a language I understand ...[and] everything was clear.*

*It was not difficult at all but referencing becomes a bit tricky [since] you do not find a lot of articles or sources [written in isiZulu] that you*

*[would] need when writing an academic essay in isiZulu.*

Students who found writing an academic essay in isiZulu easy, indicated that isiZulu enabled them to articulate their views eloquently without any fear of making mistakes when writing. Some of the students indicated that they found it difficult at first because they had not done it before. However, after consultations with the tutors and the lecturer, the writing process became much easier. Others also indicated that, while it was easy to write in isiZulu, the lack of sources written in isiZulu presented a challenge. On the other hand, students who found academic writing in isiZulu difficult had the following to say:

*I found it challenging since it was my first-time learning isiZulu.*

*Nervous but it's worth the try.*

*Ngesinye isikhathi kubanzima ngoba isiZulu akuyona into elula ukusibhala nokusikhuluma kuhlukile.*

*[Sometimes it is difficult because it is not easy to write isiZulu, and speaking it is something different.]*

In the above extracts, students indicated that the difficulties they experienced were a result of unfamiliarity with academic writing in isiZulu, as well as nervousness. Some students associated the difficulties with the differences in genres in the belief that spoken language is easier than written language. However, some indicated that, although it was difficult, it was a valuable process worth undertaking.

Students were also asked for their opinions on the use of isiZulu for academic writing in other disciplines beyond the discipline of isiZulu. Their responses were as follows:

*Akusiwo umqondo omuhle ngoba esiZulwini kunamagama angekho asuselwa esiNgisini bese kufika esiZulwini ebe ngumfakelo.*

*[It is not a good idea because there are English concepts that cannot be expressed in isiZulu words because they are borrowed from English hence such words are just loaned in isiZulu.]*

*Kungcono uma sisibhala esifundweni sesiZulu kuphela.*

*[It is better if we use it for writing in the isiZulu discipline only.]*

*... I prefer that Zulu should be only applicable in the Zulu module.*

*Some people will not understand isiZulu because they speak other languages.*

*I think isiZulu should be allowed to be used in other modules' questions papers for more understanding. I will not be limited in the number of words, and I believe [that] ... [my essay will flow].*

*I feel like it will help in advancing isiZulu .... I believe all languages should be treated equally in [academia].*

*It would be easy as long as equivalent discipline [terminologies] are there because sometimes they are not available.*

The above extracts reveal conflicting views on the use of isiZulu as an academic language and a language of academic writing. On the one hand, some students believe that isiZulu should be used for assessments in order to facilitate understanding and advance the development of the language along with the domain. On the other hand, some students were against the use of isiZulu in other knowledge disciplines, mainly because of the belief that isiZulu lacks adequate terminology to express some concepts that can only be explained in English. As such, they felt that the use of isiZulu as an academic language should be limited to the discipline of isiZulu.

In the following section, the paper explores the linguistic cultures and ideologies linked to students' responses in this study.

### ***Ideologies And Linguistic Cultures That Create Ambivalence***

The discussion in the preceding section points to persistent language ambivalence as a result of competing linguistic cultures and ideologies in the South African higher education domain and other domains of life. People acquire different linguistic cultures and ideologies owing to socio-economic, political and cultural norms,

values, ideas, symbols, images and thoughts, among other things, attached to different languages in society.

English hegemony across the South African education sector has created and entrenched the view that it is the de facto language of academia in South Africa. In this case, other languages are viewed as a problem and not necessarily resources that can enhance teaching and learning. As such, they are used as languages to scaffold understanding, and not as languages to create, access and engage with disciplinary knowledge. This has been exacerbated further by the formulation of language policies, which have been reduced to compliance documents because of escape clauses and their relegation of African languages to additional languages in the guise of promoting multilingualism.

The continued undisrupted dominance of English as the de facto language of the academy at the expense of African languages is also justified through the presumed exorbitant cost of implementing multilingual education. Proponents of monolingual education, as opposed to multilingual education, believe that the adoption of African languages into the education system will be costly because of the financial resources required for the training of human resources and the development of learning material. This monolingual orientation has been advanced without paying due diligence to the benefits and affordances of multilingual education, particularly in the context of most students having English as a second or third language. In countering the view of the exorbitant cost of multilingual education, Mackenzie and Walker (2013) argue that enormous amounts of infrastructure, teaching material and teaching time are wasted when learners repeat grades, fail to attain targeted outputs and drop out of school as a result of the use of a language that is an impediment to their learning processes.

African languages have also been viewed as an impediment to effective learning because of their presumed inability to communicate complex meanings that characterise academic discourse (Kioko, Ndungu, Njorogo & Mutiga, 2014). This view of African languages hinges on the belief that these languages lack the necessary intellectual prowess to deal with concepts in the social,

economic, technological and scientific spheres of modern life. However, contrary to the above view, Nkomo (2019) argues that African languages were unquestionably able to serve their speakers optimally in all their intellectual engagements in the precolonial context with a stable African epistemological order, better than English in England during Johnson's time. This therefore means that, in the new intellectual order, African languages still possess the ability to do the same, provided that space is allowed for their unlimited functionality. In support of the above, Kaschula and Nkomo (2019) argue that what is needed now is the re-intellectualisation of African languages in the context of the new intellectual order, which is based on multiple epistemologies. This is further highlighted by Mahlalela-Thusi and Heugh (2002, p. 255), who maintain that efforts to re-intellectualise African languages should "take ... cognisance of the huge amount of work that has already been undertaken in the past ... as [t]here could be much value in a thorough analysis of both terminology and materials published in the past as this could speed up the process of producing modern and appropriate resources".

The view of African languages as lacking the intellectual abilities to function in high-status domains has given rise to negative language attitudes among the speakers of the languages themselves, thus relegating them to the functions of social life and home (Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2014). This is evident in various studies that have been conducted in South Africa that have indicated that mother-tongue African language-speaking parents and students often opt for English as a language of teaching and learning as opposed to their mother-tongue (Barkhuizen, 2001; De Klerk, 2000; Heugh, 2000; Madiba, 2012; Webb, 1996). In most cases, English is viewed as a gateway to upward socio-economic mobility, which African languages supposedly cannot offer. The negative attitudes towards the use of African languages as languages of teaching and learning have slowed down the process of fully realising the full functional capacity of these languages. Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) therefore state that English hegemony, which was imposed through colonialism in Africa, has empowered English with unquestionable prestige, while African languages, on the other hand, have been affected disastrously through the distortion of educational possibilities and the weakening of the value that



these languages possess. These effects have further given rise to psychological harm amongst speakers of African languages, such that the inferiority of their languages has become an acceptable normality (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998).

## Conclusion

An important point of departure for this analysis of students' perceptions of writing academically in isiZulu, is that an exploration of language ambivalence not only provides information about the status quo, but also reveals how discourses about languages in multilingual contexts could serve as a platform for shaping and contesting language ideologies.

The main objective was to explore ambivalence about writing academically in isiZulu among second-year students majoring in mother-tongue isiZulu modules. The findings derived from the reflective narratives of the students show that they are caught between viewing language-as-resource and language-as-problem. The findings show that, on the one hand, students are caught up in a nexus of multiple linguistic ideologies influenced by globalising forces and societal discourses that denigrate indigenous languages. On the other hand, their responses provide examples of the affordances of embracing students' multilingual repertoires in academic writing, and further show evidence of changing ideologies and hope for language re-intellectualisation. Students feel trapped between a language that they need and may even like, and a language that is dominant in the educational space and other facets of life.

In this regard, it is important to note that ambivalence is central to student ideologies of language and identity formation, and should be viewed as part of multilayered post-colonial identities. This ambivalence was seen to be embedded within the entire South African educational system and its associated policy framework, and this ambivalence is discursively reproduced by students. The study also illustrates the symbolic nature of language, as linguistic practices come to play a symbolic role in facilitating or impeding effective learning in the classroom. The challenge therefore is to try to address this ambivalence by creating a form of language awareness that may be crucial in helping students deal with the imposing nature of English.

Such an awareness should be founded upon an investigation of students' understandings of language and an exploration of the ambivalent feelings that students often have towards language, and then to further explore what it might mean to decolonise language ambivalence. Language awareness initiatives should be embedded in all aspects of the South African basic education and higher education curricula.

Given the large number of students who are speakers of indigenous African languages in the South African higher education sector, and in the education system as a whole, it has become a moral obligation for the education system to adopt a transparent multilingual approach for social justice, epistemological access and success for all students.

I recommend that more in-depth studies should be conducted across the South African education system. While this particular study has explored the concept in the South African higher education context, its limitation is that it used a small sample of students in a single setting. A large-scale study characterised by in-depth understanding of students' language practices, and the role of individual, shifting language ideologies could shed more light on the issue. Such knowledge could be integral to the re-intellectualisation of African languages, because if ideological orientations can change over time, it also means that students may reactivate their passive linguistic knowledge, which is usually undermined when using the dominant language.

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