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REFRAMING MULTILINGUALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A ‘WHAT’S THE PROBLEM REPRESENTED TO BE?’ ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This article uses Carol Bacchi’s ‘What is the Problem Represented to Be?’ (WPR) approach to analyse how language is constructed as a policy problem in higher education, drawing on national policy developments in South Africa and institutional implementation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The analysis foregrounds the theoretical value of WPR for multilingualism scholarship by demonstrating how policy texts produce problem representations that shape institutional action, constrain possibilities for linguistic justice and reproduce global hierarchies of academic English. Although the South African case is context-specific, the findings speak to international debates on multilingual higher education, decoloniality and the structural dominance of English in knowledge production. The analysis reveals a shift in national policy from framing language as a barrier to student access (LPHE 2002) to framing institutional under-implementation as the core problem (Revised Framework 2020). At institutional level, African languages such as isiZulu are represented as ‘developing resources’, generating deficit assumptions that limit transformative multilingualism. These representations produce discursive, subjectification and lived effects that echo global patterns in multilingual universities. The article argues for a reframing of multilingualism as an epistemic and decolonial project, requiring sustained investment, policy coherence and institutional cultures that challenge, rather than accommodate, English dominance.

Keywords: multilingualism; language policy; higher education; WPR; decoloniality; epistemic justice