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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

1. INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism has become a defining concern in global higher-education debates, particularly as universities confront epistemic injustice, linguistic inequality and the overwhelming dominance of English as the language of academic prestige (Phillipson 2017; Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech 2015). Institutions across diverse regions, including Europe, East Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, seek to balance internationalisation imperatives with linguistic inclusion, yet they continue to default to English-medium instruction despite formal multilingual commitments. This tension between policy aspiration and institutional practice has made the question of how language is problematised in higher-education policy both urgent and globally resonant.

This article contributes to these international discussions by applying Carol Bacchi's WPR approach to examine how language is constructed as a policy problem in higher education.

Using South Africa as a case exemplar, the article analyses two national policy instruments: The Language Policy for Higher Education (LPHE 2002) and the Revised Language Policy Framework (2020) as well as institutional implementation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Rather than treating South Africa as an isolated case, the analysis situates its multilingual reforms within global patterns of symbolic multilingualism, limited resourcing, institutional inertia and entrenched hierarchies of English.

The contribution of the article is twofold. Theoretically, it demonstrates how WPR illuminates the assumptions, silences and effects embedded in multilingual policy, offering a critical lens through which to examine how policies actively construct language-related problems rather than merely responding to them. Empirically, it uses the UKZN case to show how policy representations shape institutional practices and how multilingual reforms are constrained by epistemic and structural factors that mirror those found in multilingual universities elsewhere in the world.

2. MULTILINGUALISM, POLICY AND GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 Multilingual Aspirations and Global Implementation Gaps

Across global higher education, multilingual policy ambitions frequently outpace practice. European universities, for example, have long endorsed multilingual repertoires in principle yet continue to expand English-medium programmes in ways that cement the centrality of English in teaching and research (Wächter & Maiworm 2014). Similarly, Asian higher-education systems promote bilingual and trilingual models but face persistent challenges in disrupting elite English norms that are closely tied to mobility, employability and global competitiveness (Kirkpatrick 2020). African universities formally promote Indigenous languages and commit to their development as academic and scientific languages, yet they struggle with chronic resource shortages and prestige hierarchies that privilege English and other former colonial languages (Adegbija 2004; Bamgbose 2011).

South Africa mirrors these global patterns. A growing body of research documents the persistence of English dominance despite progressive multilingual policy frameworks (Cele 2021; Universities South Africa (USAf) 2022; Madiba 2004). Multilingual reforms are frequently implemented in symbolic or limited ways, rather than as structural transformations of institutional culture and epistemic practice. This tendency is often attributed to limited funding, incoherent or fragmented policy implementation strategies and strong ideological attachments to English as the language of academic and professional success.

2.2 Epistemic Justice and Decolonial Perspectives

Across continents, multilingualism is increasingly framed as an epistemic project rather than a purely linguistic one (de Sousa Santos 2015; Makoni & Pennycook 2006). This shift brings to the fore questions about whose knowledge is legitimised, which languages are recognised as epistemically valid and how linguistic hierarchies reproduce broader patterns of coloniality. In many contexts, the promotion of local and Indigenous languages is articulated within discourses of rights, recognition and cultural heritage, but these languages are nonetheless positioned at the margins of academic knowledge production.

Research from Latin America, Scandinavia, Australia and Canada shows that local and indigenous languages are often represented as 'underdeveloped' or 'insufficient' for academic work (e.g. Hornberger 2000; González 2025; McCarty et al. 2025). Such representations generate deficit discourses that justify technicist solutions such as terminology development, language support programmes or limited bilingual offerings rather than epistemic transformations that would reposition these languages as fully legitimate media of knowledge. This phenomenon resonates strongly with South African policy texts and institutional practices, where African languages are frequently framed as resources in the making, continually in need of development and support, and rarely recognised as equal partners to English in research, postgraduate supervision and publication (Ndimande-Hlongwa et al. 2010; Ndebele & Zulu 2017; Roux 2016; Madiba 2010).

2.3 South African Higher Education in Comparative Perspective

South Africa's policy environment is internationally significant because it is anchored in explicit constitutional commitments to linguistic equality and the development of indigenous languages. Despite this strong normative foundation, implementation remains uneven, symbolic and poorly monitored. Scholars consistently highlight slow progress in developing African languages as academic languages, an overreliance on English as the language of research and postgraduate study, persistent staff and student resistance to multilingual initiatives and enduring policy - practice gaps across institutions (e.g. Nkosi 2017; Emsley & Modiba 2024; Cele 2021). Together, these dynamics underscore both the ambition and the fragility of South Africa's multilingualism project and provide a rich empirical and conceptual terrain for WPR analysis.

3. THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: THE WPR APPROACH

3.1 WPR as a Framework for Multilingual Policy Analysis

Carol Bacchi's WPR approach conceptualises policy as productive rather than reflective, arguing that policies actively create the 'problems' they purport to solve. This orientation enables analysts to move beyond surface-level descriptions of policy intentions and to interrogate the deeper logics through which particular issues are problematised. Within this framework, analysts attend to how problem representations are constructed, what assumptions are embedded in these representations, which aspects of a situation are rendered visible or invisible and what kinds of discursive, subjectification and lived effects follow from these constructions.

For multilingualism research, WPR is particularly powerful because language policies often present themselves as neutral or technical instruments concerned with efficiency, access or quality, while concealing deep ideological and epistemic commitments to English and other dominant languages. By treating policy as a set of problem representations, WPR makes these commitments visible and open to critique. It highlights, for example, how policies might represent African or Indigenous languages as deficient or less developed, how they naturalise English as the normative language of academic knowledge and how they individualise responsibility for multilingualism by focusing on students' or staff members' proficiency rather than on structural inequities.

3.2 Applying WPR to the South African case

Guided by WPR, this study analysed two national policy instruments, LPHE (2002) and the Revised Framework (2020) and UKZN's Language Policy and Language Plan (2014), alongside institutional artefacts such as reports from the University Language Planning and Development Office, documentation on the isiZulu National Corpus, materials from terminology development projects and policies governing the compulsory isiZulu module. These documents were read iteratively through the lens of Bacchi's six questions in order to identify how the "problem of language" is constituted at both national and institutional levels. The analysis combined diachronic comparisons, which traced shifts in problem representations between the 2002 and 2020 national policies, with vertical comparisons, which examined the translation of national representations into institutional contexts at UKZN. This approach made it possible to identify continuities and disjunctures in how language-related issues are framed over time and across different policy cycles, as well as to map the tensions, limitations and potential openings that these representations generate for multilingual transformation.

4. NATIONAL POLICY REPRESENTATIONS OF LANGUAGE

4.1 LPHE (2002): Language as a Barrier to Access

The LPHE frames language primarily as a problem of student access and success. In this representation, African languages are described as underdeveloped in their capacity to function as academic and scientific languages, while English and Afrikaans are positioned as dominant media of instruction and institutional communication. African-language-speaking students are thus cast as disadvantaged by a system that fails to recognise or develop their home languages, and the policy proposes solutions that centre on the development of African languages, the creation of academic terminology and the cultivation of multilingual institutional environments.

These proposed interventions, however, treat African languages as deficient and in need of upliftment, and they do so without fundamentally questioning the status of English as the default language of academic legitimacy (Heugh 2009; Kamwangamalu 2001). As such, the LPHE's problem representation resonates with remedial approaches to indigenous and minoritised languages in North America, Australia and Asia, where policy attention focuses on developing 'capacity' in local languages while leaving intact the structural dominance of English and other global languages of power (Makoni and Pennycook 2006).

4.2 Revised Framework (2020): Under-Implementation as the Problem

The Revised Language Policy Framework (2020) shifts the locus of the problem from linguistic inequality itself to institutional non-compliance with existing multilingual commitments. In this framework, the primary concern is that universities have not adequately implemented earlier policy mandates, and the text emphasises mechanisms for monitoring, reporting and enforceability to ensure that institutions take multilingualism seriously. While the Revised Framework rearticulates African languages as academic resources and

underscores their importance for social cohesion and epistemic justice, it does so within a logic that foregrounds institutional accountability and performance.
Despite this shift, the Revised Framework does not fully address the structural dominance of English, nor does it engage in depth with the global epistemic hierarchies that position English as the normative language of scholarly communication. This limitation mirrors critiques from diverse higher-education contexts showing that language policy reform, when framed primarily around implementation, monitoring and compliance, often leaves intact the deeper epistemic structures that sustain linguistic inequality.

Research from Europe, for example, demonstrates that parallel-language and multilingual policies coexist with the intensification of English-medium research, publication and postgraduate supervision, driven by global rankings, citation regimes and audit cultures (Hultgren & Thøgersen 2014; Airey et al. 2017). Similarly, studies in Latin America and Asia show that indigenous and national languages are formally recognised in policy, yet remain marginal to high-status knowledge production, as English continues to function as the unmarked language of scientific legitimacy (de Sousa Santos 2015; Kirkpatrick 2020).

At a global level, scholars argue that such policy approaches reflect a technicist orientation that treats linguistic inequality as a managerial or capacity-building problem rather than as an outcome of historical, colonial and political-economic power relations embedded in academic knowledge production (Phillipson 2017; Piller 2016). Consequently, policies that emphasise compliance without confronting English's epistemic dominance risk reproducing symbolic multilingualism, in which linguistic diversity is rhetorically valued but structurally marginalised.

5. EFFECTS OF PROBLEM REPRESENTATIONS: GLOBAL AND LOCAL INSIGHTS

Bacchi's framework draws attention to three interconnected categories of effects i.e. discursive, subjectification and lived, that emerge from how policies represent multilingualism. These effects are particularly visible in the South African case, where the national framing of African languages as 'developing' and institutionally 'under-supported' is reproduced within universities such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Even where institutions commit substantial resources to African-language development, including corpus construction, terminology projects and compulsory language modules, these interventions operate within discursive fields that privilege English and position indigenous languages as technically and epistemically incomplete (e.g. Nkosi 2017; Emsley & Modiba 2024; Cele 2021).

Discursively, the portrayal of African languages as emerging academic resources reinforces hierarchical distinctions between languages. English is constructed as inherently suitable for advanced scholarship, requiring no special intervention, whereas African languages such as isiZulu are framed as needing development to gain academic legitimacy. This discursive logic is deeply shaped by colonial and global epistemic histories and is mirrored in other contexts. In Latin America, Indigenous languages are similarly cast as lacking scientific vocabulary; in Scandinavia, national languages receive symbolic support yet are often overshadowed by English in research publication. These discourses shape what institutions

consider realistic, necessary or worth resourcing. Subjectification effects concern how policies construct particular academic subjects. Students are constituted as individuals who must cultivate multilingual competence, particularly in English and isiZulu in the UKZN case, in order to gain epistemic access. Staff are constituted as implementers of multilingualism, bearing responsibility for producing bilingual materials, integrating African languages into pedagogy, and sometimes acquiring new language skills themselves. Staff members frequently experience this as a form of additional labour, unevenly distributed across faculties, with language specialists, Education, Humanities and Health Sciences academics often carrying disproportionate burdens (Naidoo et al. 2018). These subject positions, while aligned with national multilingual ambitions, are seldom matched with the institutional incentives, training or recognition necessary for sustainable shifts in practice.

Lived effects emerge in the embodied, material and organisational consequences of how multilingualism is represented and operationalised within institutional policy frameworks. At the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the introduction of compulsory isiZulu modules for undergraduate students illustrates how policy commitments translate into uneven everyday experiences. While the compulsory module represents a significant symbolic intervention aimed at affirming isiZulu's status within the university and promoting social cohesion, student responses reveal ambivalence rather than uniform endorsement. Some students value isiZulu learning as an affirmation of linguistic identity, cultural belonging and future professional relevance within a multilingual South African society. Others, however, experience the requirement as an additional burden, particularly when it is perceived as disconnected from disciplinary knowledge, assessment priorities or academic progression within English-dominant programmes (Nkosi 2017; Naidoo, Gokool, and Ndebele 2018).

These divergent experiences highlight how multilingual policy initiatives, when implemented within an academic environment that continues to privilege English, can generate tensions between symbolic recognition and material academic value. For students whose disciplines remain firmly anchored in English, particularly in the sciences, commerce and professional programmes, the compulsory isiZulu module may appear peripheral to their core academic trajectories, reinforcing perceptions that African languages occupy a marginal or supplementary role in higher education. In contrast, disciplines more closely aligned with language, education and the humanities tend to provide greater space for bilingual engagement, thereby intensifying disparities in how multilingualism is experienced across the institution (Ndebele and Zulu 2017).

For academic staff, the lived effects of multilingual policy are similarly uneven. Lecturers tasked with implementing bilingual teaching practices report increased workloads, limited access to discipline-specific teaching materials in isiZulu, and insufficient institutional incentives or recognition for the additional labour involved in language development work. These pressures are often concentrated among language specialists and academics in selected faculties, producing a form of uneven labour distribution that mirrors broader structural inequalities within the university (Naidoo, Gokool, and Ndebele 2018). In this sense, responsibility for multilingualism becomes individualised, resting on the goodwill and capacity of particular staff members rather than being embedded within systemic changes to workload models, resource allocation or academic reward structures. Comparable lived effects are widely documented in multilingual universities beyond South Africa. In Canada

and Australia, for example, Indigenous-language inclusion initiatives in higher education have been shown to enhance symbolic recognition and cultural visibility while leaving English largely unchallenged as the dominant language of research, assessment and academic prestige (Lo Bianco 2010; McCarty et al. 2025). Similarly, research from East African universities demonstrates that multilingual reforms frequently generate additional expectations for staff and students, such as code-switching, translation and language mediation, without disrupting the entrenched role of English as the primary medium of scholarly authority (Brock-Utne 2017). Across these contexts, the lived effects of multilingual policy reforms reveal a recurring pattern: language initiatives introduce new forms of labour and responsibility while leaving underlying epistemic hierarchies intact.

Taken together, these lived effects underscore how multilingual policies that do not explicitly confront English dominance risk reproducing symbolic multilingualism rather than enabling substantive epistemic transformation. From a WPR perspective, such outcomes illustrate how problem representations that frame multilingualism as a developmental or compliance issue produce everyday consequences that limit the transformative potential of language policy in higher education.

6 APPLYING THE SIX WPR QUESTIONS TO THE UKZN POLICY

Applying Bacchi's six WPR questions to the UKZN Language Policy reveals the layers of meaning, silence and institutional logic embedded in the document and provides a systematic lens for understanding how the policy constructs multilingualism.

Question 1: What is the problem represented to be?

The UKZN Language Policy represents the core problem as the underdevelopment of isiZulu, the entrenched dominance of English and insufficient institutional capacity to support bilingualism. The problem is framed as a developmental challenge that can be overcome through structured interventions such as terminology development, corpus creation, staff training, curriculum adjustments and coordinated institutional processes. English dominance is acknowledged but not framed as a systemic or epistemic problem. Instead, the policy treats linguistic inequality as an institutional-technical gap requiring planned remediation.

Question 2: What assumptions underpin this representation?

Several deep-seated assumptions underpin this framing, produced and sustained through the discourses of national policy makers, higher-education regulators and institutional governance structures operating within a globally English-dominant academic order. English is implicitly treated as academically indispensable and globally legitimate by national departments responsible for higher education policy, by universities as they align themselves with international benchmarking, ranking and research evaluation regimes, and by institutional leaders who prioritise global competitiveness and visibility. Through these policy and governance discourses, English becomes the unmarked and taken-for-granted language of scholarly communication, requiring no justification or development to function as a medium of academic knowledge.

Conversely, African languages are assumed to lack academic adequacy by policy designers and institutional planners who frame them as resources 'in development' rather than as

already legitimate epistemic media. This assumption is reproduced in national policy texts that emphasise terminology development, corpus building and staff training as prerequisites for academic use, and in institutional implementation strategies that locate African languages within language centres, support units or compulsory service modules rather than within core disciplinary teaching, research and postgraduate supervision. Together, these actors and practices construct African languages as objects of institutional engineering, positioning them as supplementary to, rather than co-equal with, English in the production and circulation of academic knowledge.

Question 3: How did this representation emerge?

The representation emerges from several intersecting historical and policy trajectories. Post-apartheid constitutional commitments to linguistic equality and the LPHE (2002) mandate universities to promote African languages in academia. These commitments unfold within a higher-education system whose linguistic hierarchies were shaped by colonial and apartheid legacies that entrenched English as the language of scholarship, administration and upward mobility. UKZN's demographic context, in which a majority of students are isiZulu-speaking, further informs its institutional emphasis on isiZulu. However, the representation is shaped by internationalising pressures, global academic publishing norms and the institutional imperative to maintain competitiveness in an English-dominant global academy. UKZN's historical and demographic positioning aligns with national expectations for African-language development, but these developments occur within a broader academic economy still dominated by English.

Question 4: What is left unproblematised?

The analysis exposes several silences. The structural dominance of English is naturalised rather than problematised; English appears as a neutral background rather than as a product of colonial and global power relations (Kamwangamalu 2001; Heugh 2009; Phillipson 2017). Translanguaging practices, already widely used by students and staff, are not recognised as potentially legitimate academic resources, reflecting persistent monolingual assumptions embedded in formal policy frameworks (Makoni and Pennycook 2006; García and Wei 2014). The workload implications for staff expected to implement multilingual initiatives receive limited attention, as do resource disparities across faculties, resulting in uneven labour distribution and implementation capacity (Hultgren and Thøgersen 2014; Airey et al. 2017; Naidoo, Gokool, and Ndebele 2018). Broader epistemic hierarchies, which position English as the authoritative language of science, publication and postgraduate supervision, are similarly left unexamined, despite extensive critiques linking language dominance to global knowledge inequalities (de Sousa Santos 2015; Piller 2016). These silences ultimately limit the scope of multilingual transformation by constraining the kinds of interventions the policy imagines as possible.

Question 5: What effects does this representation produce?

Discursively, the policy reproduces the idea of African languages as emerging or 'developing' resources, requiring technical enhancement to meet academic standards. This contributes to a hierarchy of languages in which English appears inherently adequate, while indigenous languages are constructed as perpetually incomplete (Kamwangamalu 2001; Heugh 2009; Phillipson 2017). In terms of subjectification, students and staff are constituted as responsible agents of multilingualism: students are expected to acquire isiZulu to access

the curriculum, and staff are required to adapt their pedagogical and research practices. These expectations generate ambivalence and resistance, shaped by disciplinary location, linguistic background and professional context (Naidoo, Gokool, and Ndebele 2018; Ndebele and Zulu 2017; Airey et al. 2017). Lived effects include uneven implementation across faculties, increased workloads for language practitioners and staff involved in terminology development, variable student engagement with compulsory language modules and persistent inequities in access to multilingual teaching and learning resources (Hultgren and Thøgersen 2014; Naidoo, Gokool, and Ndebele 2018; Brock-Utne 2017). As a result, the institutional multilingual project is widely described as ambitious yet unevenly experienced across colleges and disciplines.

Question 6: How is this representation defended, and how might it be disrupted?

The current representation is legitimised through appeals to transformation rhetoric, national policy compliance and constitutional imperatives (Kamwangamalu 2001; Heugh 2009; DoE 2002; DHET 2020). The developmental framing of isiZulu is defended as a necessary pathway to parity of esteem and as a response to the linguistic needs of the surrounding community, particularly within historically marginalised contexts (Ndimande-Hlongwa et al. 2010; Ndebele and Zulu 2017; USAf 2022).

Yet this representation can be disrupted. Reframing African languages as epistemic resources rather than as objects of technical development would foreground their role in knowledge production and challenge deficit assumptions embedded in policy discourse (Makoni and Pennycook 2006; de Sousa Santos 2015; Nkosi 2017). Treating English dominance explicitly as a structural problem, rather than as an unquestioned norm, would open space for more radical interventions, including bilingual or multilingual postgraduate supervision, local-language publication incentives and translanguaging pedagogies (Phillipson 2017; García and Wei 2014; Hultgren 2019). Acknowledging workload inequalities and addressing them structurally would further expand institutional capacity for multilingualism by redistributing linguistic labour and recognising it within academic reward systems (Naidoo, Gokool, and Ndebele 2018; Airey et al. 2017). Such disruptions would reorient policy away from narrow developmentalism toward a more transformative vision of multilingualism in higher education.

7. DISCUSSION: SOUTH AFRICA AS A WINDOW INTO GLOBAL MULTILINGUALISM

The South African case, illuminated through the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) example, offers broader insights into the global politics of multilingual higher education. The WPR analysis reveals four key dynamics that resonate internationally. The first concerns the dominance of technicist reforms. At national level, South Africa's Language Policy for Higher Education (LPHE) (Department of Education 2002) and the Revised Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training 2020) frame multilingual transformation primarily in terms of technical and developmental interventions, including terminology development, corpus construction, staff capacity-building and institutional language planning. At institutional level, UKZN's Language Policy and Language Plan (2014) similarly emphasise the development of isiZulu through corpus projects, terminology standardisation, compulsory language modules and staff

training initiatives. While these policies articulate strong commitments to multilingualism and parity of esteem, their focus remains largely on technical implementation rather than on epistemic reform that would challenge the status of English as the default language of academic knowledge production. This technicist orientation mirrors developments elsewhere. In Europe, parallel-language policies adopted in countries such as Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands promote the co-existence of national languages alongside English, yet in practice reinforce English dominance in research publication and postgraduate education (Hultgren and Thøgersen 2014; Airey et al. 2017; Hultgren 2019). Similarly, indigenous-language-in-education policies in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, Bolivia and Peru, foreground language development, standardisation and teacher training while leaving global hierarchies of English and Spanish largely intact (Hornberger 2000; de Sousa Santos 2015; McCarty et al. 2025). Across these contexts, technical language measures coexist with entrenched epistemic hierarchies that continue to privilege English as the primary language of academic authority.

The second dynamic relates to symbolic versus substantive multilingualism. Although African languages hold strong rhetorical value in South African policy, substantive multilingualism, where African languages function in research, supervision, publishing and high-stakes assessment, remains limited. UKZN's compulsory isiZulu modules and extensive corpus-development projects, while progressive, coexist with ongoing English dominance in academic publishing, postgraduate education and research evaluation. Global parallels abound: Scandinavia's promotion of national languages exists alongside the 'publish in English or perish' imperative, and indigenous universities in the Americas struggle to elevate local languages beyond symbolic functions (Hultgren & Thøgersen 2014; Airey et al. 2017).
Third, responsibility for multilingualism is often individualised rather than structural. Students and staff are charged with adapting to multilingual demands without corresponding systemic reforms to workload distribution, incentives or academic evaluation systems. This pattern is visible in multilingual institutions across Asia, Australia, East Africa and Europe, where individual compliance stands in for structural transformation (e.g. Piller 2016; Airey et al. 2017).

Finally, the limits of policy optimism become evident. Scholars have long noted that South African language policy rests on an assumption that transformation will inevitably follow from policy adoption, even as the epistemic and political-economic structures that reproduce linguistic inequality remain largely intact (Heugh 2009; Kamwangamalu 2001). Comparable optimism is visible in multilingual reforms globally, where ambitious strategies promise rapid change but rarely challenge the entrenched hierarchies of global academic knowledge production (Hultgren & Thøgersen 2014; Spolsky 2009; Shohamy 2006).

8. CONCLUSION

Using Bacchi's WPR framework, this article has analysed how multilingualism is represented in South Africa's national and institutional language policies, focusing in particular on the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The analysis reveals that policies construct African languages as developing resources, institutions as under-implementing agents and multilingualism as a technical challenge. These representations obscure the structural dominance of English, leave translanguaging and existing multilingual practices unrecognised and place disproportionate responsibility on students and staff. By integrating the six WPR questions, the article

demonstrates that multilingual policy challenges in South Africa reflect wider global trends in which Indigenous and minoritised languages are symbolically valued but structurally marginalised. The South African case thus offers a lens through which to understand the epistemic, political and institutional barriers that constrain multilingual transformation globally.

Transformative multilingualism requires reimagining African and Indigenous languages as epistemic resources, challenging the naturalisation of English dominance and designing institutional cultures that redistribute labour, recognition and resources. This shift demands sustained investment, policy coherence and epistemic openness. Only by moving beyond technicist solutions to embrace a decolonial vision of linguistic and epistemic justice can higher-education systems contribute meaningfully to the global project of transforming knowledge production.

DECLARATION REGARDING USE OF GENERATIVE AI TO PREPARE THIS MANUSCRIPT

In preparing this manuscript, generative AI was used to conduct a search for relevant international literature, to check for alignment of intext references and the reference list as well as for basic checks of grammar, spelling and punctuation.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study. Policy documents cited in the article are publicly available.

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