

Editorial:

The Role of Language in Human Existence, Education, Innovation and Research, and the Intellectualisation of African Languages

Langa Khumalo

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2694-9105>

Sam Mchombo

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8431-8950>

The Role of Language in Human Existence

In attempting to define language, we refrain from using a litany of definitions found in the literature on Language and Linguistics that is drawn from Eurocentric theories. In appreciating what mother tongue means, we defer to the explication of mother tongue in isiZulu¹, as simply *ulimi lwebele* (literally, *the language that one sucks from their mother's breast*). Mother tongue in this sense means one's first language. In isiNdebele, when a child utters the first word, the elders exclaim: *Sekungumuntu!* (Meaning: *It is now a human being*), (Khumalo 2020). We argue therefore that language is that which makes us HUMAN. Language is at the heart of our human existence. The mother tongue is inextricably linked to our cultural self-identity. It formulates and records our personal and social experiences. It has been persuasively argued in the literature that the use of the mother tongue in education stimulates and enables

¹ IsiZulu and isiNdebele are languages of the Nguni group that are recognised by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) as part of the 11 officially recognised languages to be used, promoted and developed for scholarly engagement knowledge generation.

the child's literacy skills, enables the child's cognitive development, stimulates the child's critical thinking, and stimulates the child's imagination and innovation.

The Role of Language in Education

The organization of knowledge and its transmission is facilitated through language. Education as part of citizenship training and intellectual development is conducted through language using various discourses (Mchombo 2017). It is argued in this special issue that access to epistemologies in South Africa must be done, at both Basic and Higher Education levels, through a language that the vast majority of learners speak and understand; that is, their first language. Tragically, according to studies by numerous scholars, the main reason why many children in Africa drop out of school and why there is such a high attrition rate of African learners is because Africa is uniquely one of the only continents where children receive knowledge in foreign languages (cf. Finlayson & Madiba 2002), like English and French.

Quoting the South African Human Rights Commission Report on Transformation at Public Universities in South Africa (2016:12):

... In recognition of the reality that language continues to be a barrier to access and success in higher education (both in the sense that African and other languages have not been developed as academic/scientific languages and the majority of students entering higher education are not proficient in English and Afrikaans) the Language Policy for Higher Education emphasized that language and access to language skills is critical to ensure the right of individuals to realize their full potential to participate in and contribute to the social, cultural, intellectual, economic and political life of South African society

The Role of Language in Innovation and Research

The role of language in teaching, learning, research and innovation is vitally important. We argue that African governments must invest in African languages and their active and enabling role in these key areas, in order for Africans to begin to contribute meaningfully to the global knowledge economy. Spivak (2016) argues about the notion of epistemic violence, which has left most

(Africans) cognitively damaged. The notion of epistemic violence expresses the Eurocentric and Western domination and the subjugation of former colonial (African) subjects through knowledge systems. The curricula, packaged in European languages and expressing Eurocentric worldviews, were designed to degrade, exploit and subjugate the African people. The learning (in the case of most African learners) is therefore reduced to rote memorization devoid of critical thinking and cognitive development, which has resulted in what Spivak calls cognitive damage (Samuel *et al.* 2016). The tragedy is that these Eurocentric worldviews still persist in the South African Higher Education system today (Prah 2017). It is in this sense that in order to improve access to education, critical and innovating thinking, sound and real contribution to the global knowledge economy, the exigency exists to cultivate all the 11 official languages so that they can be used in teaching and learning, research and innovation. It is difficult, nay near impossible, to innovate in a foreign language.

We argue that the investment in all the 11 official languages is not just a constitutional imperative, but it is a transformative imperative that can change the African society from passive knowledge consumers to innovative knowledge producers, whose contribution to the global knowledge economy has a real impact in the societies in which all these 11 official languages are spoken. The collection of articles in this special issue argues that the exigency exists to develop and promote African languages so that they become capable of expressing all forms of knowledge, and drive their use and function in research and development, education, social transformation, trade, economic and scientific development.

The Intellectualisation of African Languages

The United Nations declared 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages (IY2019). One of the cited reasons for this was to foster a link between language, development, peace and reconciliation. The absence of African languages as languages of teaching and learning in the academy has been cited as one of the reasons why there is a high attrition rate in Africa's education systems (cf. Finlayson & Madiba 2002). Similarly, discourse in African languages in the areas of trade, commerce, science, technology and innovation is predictably sparse. The use of African languages and African knowledge models has hitherto been discredited across the continent and the default has been to retain the official use of the erstwhile colonial languages

and Western epistemologies at the expense of the development, documentation and *intellectualization* of African languages. Their use is despised, discouraged and even feared, because they are viewed wrongly as shallow, inadequate and even divisive (cf. Shizha 2012). One of the frequently cited reasons why African languages cannot be used in education, science, trade and innovation is that they lack the requisite scientific terminology. It is in the context of IY2019 that the exigency exists for the *intellectualization* of African languages through terminology development.

By *intellectualization* we mean a process of (functionally) cultivating, developing, elaborating and modernizing a language so that the terminology of that particular language can carry the full weight of scientific rigor and precision, and that its sentences can express logical judgements accurately, resulting in a language that has the capacity to function in all domains. As the direct consequence of intellectualization, the speakers of the language derive the pride, self-assurance and resourcefulness in the (new) ability to discuss the most complex of issues, ranging from the mundane to the academic and beyond (cf. Khumalo 2017).

Intellectualization has famously been associated with the development of Tagalog in the Philippines. The cultivation process involved Tagalog's lexical enrichment through terminology to enable its use in academia. The contributions in this volume variously demonstrate how the effort to intellectualize African languages is possible and currently under way. The examples to demonstrate this are drawn from an array of African languages in the Nguni and Sesotho-Tswana group of languages.



Dion Nkomo, in, '**The Language Question and the Role of the University in South Africa Revisited**', argues that the role of a university in language intellectualization is critical. He traces the evolution of the language question from the arrival of European settlers up to the present, showing how the language issue has become a complex one over the last three hundred years. Nkomo underscores the enormous importance of the intellectualization of African languages, calling for a critical approach to the relevant tasks, bearing in mind their demanding nature. Similarly, a call is made for circumspection regarding the recently emerged concept of translanguaging in relation to African languages, given the African context that is different from Western contexts that

started experimenting and theorizing on the concept. Overall, the paper calls for South African language activists, practitioners and scholars to view their work as a long-term selfless struggle that should liberate future generations.

In his, **‘Laying the Foundations for a New Approach to Music Theory at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: Creating isiZulu Terms to Foster Deep Learning and Challenging the Western Gravity of Staff Notation’**, **Andrew-John Bethke** examines the role of language in the pedagogy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). He reflects on the Introduction to Music Fundamentals modules at UKZN and why the pedagogical aims of these modules are not met. He argues for corrective measures, to align the modules more closely with the general aims of the university – that is, primarily accessibility to knowledge through mother tongue teaching or tutoring, and creating a learning environment that is receptive to and reflective of multiculturalism. A new pedagogy should drive the use of both English and isiZulu in the teaching and learning of these modules. It will encourage deep learning at the foundational level of university education, improve knowledge retention and the ability to transfer or adapt knowledge. This, he argues, will strengthen the students’ chances of academic success.

Evangeline Bonisiwe Zungu examines the contemporary innovations in Indigenous Knowledge Systems that are triggered by globalization, in her, **‘Reconceptualising the Teaching of Zulu Orature: Modernisation of *izilandelo* through Children’s Game Songs and *izaga* through Memetic Aphorisms as a Possible Field of Research’**. She argues that these innovations reflect streams of dynamism in African languages and demonstrate how African languages have adapted to new realities in media spaces. Through neologism in *Gqom* music and memetic aphorisms, Indigenous Knowledge Systems have been re-introduced in teaching the youth the nearly forgotten Zulu orature of children’s and memetic aphorisms. In South Africa where multilingualism is the norm, the linguistic exchanges are evident in the forms of orature. These linguistic interactions reflect translanguaging and socio-cultural dynamics that leave linguistic imprints in these African genres. This demonstrates the versatility of African languages and proves that portraying them as archaic and monolithic is unfounded and is therefore refuted. Zungu’s analysis succeeds in showing that these genres are the oral art form to be viewed as a unique cultural heritage – which has to be reconceptualised for better reception and continued preservation in order to enrich African languages and their Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

In her, ‘**Translating and Adapting an Academic Textbook from English to isiZulu: A Case of the Intellectualisation of a Target Language**’ **Zanele Gladness Buthelezi** looks at translation as an intellectualization activity through a novel term creation process. The article derives from lived personal and professional experiences of a group of author-translators who wrote, translated and adapted an academic textbook into an African language, isiZulu. The book, *Izisekelo Zokulungisa Okubhaliwe: Izinsizakuhlaziya Nokwenziwayo*, is the isiZulu edition of *Text Editing: A Handbook for Students and Practitioners*, written in English by Kris van de Poel, W.A.M. Carstens and John Linnegar (2012) and the Sesotho translation *Metheo ya ditokiso tsa sengolwa* by Nyefolo Maleti (2016). Both titles were used to guide the author-translators in determining the form and the content of the isiZulu edition. While most of the source texts could be translated into the target language, aspects that were specific to the target language had to be created. Furthermore, the author-translators had to develop terminology equivalent to that used in the source texts where it did not exist in the TL (e.g. terms specific to the realms of book publishing and text editing). Using Afrocentrism and Steiner’s hermeneutic motion, Buthelezi adopted for her study a qualitative research approach from an interpretive perspective. Data derived from semi-structured interviews and praxis essays were analysed through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The production of the isiZulu book highlights the emergence of a new process of the extraction of material from an academic subject area, digesting and bringing it home to suit the target language while ensuring that meaning, culture, effect, academic style and register are maintained. Buthelezi’s research extends Steiner’s work by acknowledging the existence of Source Text Exegesis (initial browsing and critical analysis) before hermeneutic motion starts through ‘trust’. The author’s lived experience reveals that it is possible to write, translate and adapt academic books from English into isiZulu. This is one example of how an African language can be intellectualized. Although the available indigenous equivalents for terms in *Text Editing* were generally limited, by using strategies such as semotaxis, neologism and transliteration, the author-translators produced a book that has contributed enormously to the development of new isiZulu terms in this field. Buthelezi argues in this article that African intellectuals are able to use translation in order to contribute to decolonization of the epistemologies and the intellectualization of African languages.

In ‘**Intellectualization of IsiZulu at the University of KwaZulu-**

Natal through the Development of IsiZulu Terminology and the Implementation of the Doctoral Rule’, Tholakele Glenrose Zungu examines how terminology development for an African language can contribute towards its intellectualization. She demonstrates how standardized isiZulu terminology has played a significant role in the implementation of the Doctoral Rule, also known as the DR9, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). She argues that terminology development is at the service of science, technology and communication; hence its critical role when developing a language. She observes that through the standardized isiZulu terminology in specialized fields such as Anatomy, Architecture, Law, Information Technology, Mathematics, Research, Physics, Psychology, etc., UKZN was able to translate doctoral abstracts for the graduating streams of 2018 and 2019. This has contributed to the intellectualization of isiZulu at UKZN. Zungu, does note however, that technical challenges were encountered due to the technical nature of some of the abstracts and the lack of terminology in certain fields such as Agriculture, Engineering and Science.

Langa Khumalo and Rooweither Mabuya argue in their article, ‘**A Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender Sensitivity in isiZulu: Towards an isiZulu Gender Dictionary**’ argue for a gender dictionary in isiZulu. They provide evidence that there is paucity of such specialized dictionaries in African languages. Through a corpus study, it is evinced from this study that isiZulu is a gendered language that demonstrates skewed power relations towards the dominant male gender. The authors are able to conclude that negative attributes such as weakness are associated with the female gender or pejoratively connected to maleness. The only positive association of the female gender is observed in the kitchen, an unfortunate location or reference, which perpetuates the stereotype that the role of women in the Zulu society is confined to the home. There is corpus evidence that an isiZulu gender dictionary is motivated, and it is envisaged that it will preserve the Zulu cultural knowledge for posterity, and provide an invaluable reference to studies in IKS.

References

Buthlezi, Z. S.D. Mbokazi, W.N. Mthembu-Ngema & M.Z. Thembu (trans. & eds.). 2019. *Izisekelo Zokulungisa Okubhaliwe: Izinsizakuhlaziya*

- Nokwenziwayo*. Milnerton: McGillivray Linnegar Associates.
- Finlayson, R. & M. Madiba 2002. The Intellectualisation of the Indigenous Languages of South Africa: Challenges and Prospects. *Current Issues in Language Planning* 3,1: 40 – 61. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14664200208668036>
- Khumalo, L. 2017. Intellectualization through Terminology Development. *Lexikos* 27: 252- 264. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.5788/27-1-1402>
- Khumalo, L. 2020. African Languages and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Keynote Address. *First Annual African Languages and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Seminar*. Pretoria: University of South Africa. 27 October 2020.
- Maletse, N. 2016. *Metheo ya ditokiso tsa sengolwa: boitsebelo le tshebediso*. Milnerton, South Africa: MLA Publications.
- Mchombo, S. 2017. Politics of Language Choice in African Education: The Case of Kenya and Malawi. *International Relations and Diplomacy Journal* 5,4: 181 – 204. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2134/2017.04.001>
- Prah, K. 2017. The Intellectualisation of African Languages for Higher Education. *Alternation Journal* 24,2: 215 – 2 5. Available at:
<http://alternation.ukzn.ac.za/Files/articles/volume-24/issue-2/11-Prah-F.pdf>; also
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2017/v24n2a11>
- Samuel, M.A., R. Dhunpath & N. Amin (eds.). 2016. *Disrupting Higher Education Curriculum: Undoing Cognitive Damage*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, Sense. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-896-9>
- Shizha, E. 2012. Reclaiming and Re-visioning Indigenous Voices: The Case of the Language of Instruction in Science Education in Zimbabwean Primary Schools. Infonomics Society – *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal (LICEJ), Special Issue* 1,1: 785 - 793. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.20533/licej.2040.2589.2012.0116>
- Spivak, G.C. 2016. Histories, Democracy and the Politics of Knowledge in Higher Education. In Samuel, M.A., R. Dhunpath & N. Amin (eds.): *Disrupting Higher Education Curriculum: Undoing Cognitive Damage*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) 2016. *Transformation at Public Universities in South Africa*. Pretoria: South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC).

Van de Poel, K., W.A.M. Carstens & J. Linnegar 2012. *Text Editing: A Handbook for Students and Practitioners*. Antwerp: Antwerp University Press.

Professor and Executive Director

Professor Langa Khumalo

Issue Editor: *Alternation*

South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR)

North West University

Potchefstroom

langa.khumalo@nwu.ac.za

Professor Sam Mchombo

Issue Co-Editor: *Alternation*

Centre for African Studies

University of California

Berkeley University

San Francisco

United State of America

mchombo@berkeley.edu