The retention of South African indigenous languages: a systemic literature review

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 11 march 2023
Received in rev. form 12 June 2023
Accepted 15 July 2023

Keywords:
Challenges, indigenous languages, post-colonialism, retainment, South Africa

JEL Classification:
Z13

ABSTRACT

Intricacies concerning indigenous languages in the South African milieu demonstrate intransigence that necessitates a scholarly contestation. This is in addition to the paradox that have been made by the post-colonial government and language experts to ennoble the stature of these indigenous languages. With that context, this article underscores the historical component of indigenous languages and retainment strides - including challenges - that have been underlined in respect of South African indigenous language matters. The objective, among others, is to underscore those challenges concerning indigenous African languages, and in particular, South African indigenous languages exhibit tenacity. To ratify the claims of the article, a systemic literature review is appreciated as a fragmentary qualitative research methodology while conceptualization of language matters in South Africa coaches the theoretical underpinnings. The principal discussion is that challenges that prevail within the phenomenon of language in the South African context must be acknowledged in a bid to solicit reasonable solutions to the problematized phenomenon. For future scholarly implications, it is debated that indigenous language matters must be contested.

Introduction

This systemic scholarly discourse pivots to underscore how South African indigenous languages are maintained or retained in the 21st century and beyond. This is against the ambiance that South African indigenous languages have been victims - directly and indirectly - of colonialism and apartheid policies that sought to vitiﬁy their habitual operations that were already in place (Manyike & Shava 2018; Diko 2022a). Colonialism refers to the policy or habitue of acquiring comprehensive or fragmentary political hegemony over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically while apartheid in the South African milieu refers to a former policy of segregation and political, social, and economic discrimination against the non-White majority (Thakholi & Koot 2023). The two terms will be predominantly utilized in this article hence the necessity to deﬁne them. One of the conspicuous legacies of apartheid is the ofﬁcialization of the English and Afrikaans languages only. During apartheid, South Africa had two ofﬁcial languages, English and Afrikaans (Dlangamandla & Chaka 2022). Indigenous languages, like the people who spoke them, were considered subservient. When apartheid formally ended in 1994, the White and Afrikaner minority that had ruled South Africa (Diko 2020) was willing to give up some of its power - but not its language.

The ostracism of South African indigenous languages is a multifarious issue that has fathomless historical roots. During the colonial era, European and Western powers promulgated their languages on local populations and earnestly subjugated South African indigenous languages, which were seen as inferior and a hindrance to assimilation (Finlayson & Madiba 2002). South African indigenous languages (in no particular order) are isiXhosa, isiZulu, isiNdebele, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho and Siswati, and several dialects (Diko 2022a). The legacy of apartheid has continued in the post-apartheid era, where English and Afrikaans remain languages of administration even in the legal and forensic fraternity in South Africa (Ariani et al. 2014; Perkins 2021). This then denotes the continued ostracisation of South African indigenous...
languages. This ostracisation of South African indigenous languages has had significant negative consequences for South African society, including the dispossession of linguistic diversity, the depolitization of cultural traditions, and the perpetuation of inequality (Diko 2023a). Many indigenous languages are endangered or vulnerable, with younger generations often not learning them as they are not seen as economically or socially valuable (Bell 2013; Hammine 2021; Gomashie 2022). Efforts have been made to en throne the use and maintenance of indigenous languages in South Africa, including the adoption of the eleven official languages in the country’s constitution, the establishment of language policies in education and government, and the enhancement of language revitalization programs. Nevertheless, progress has been dilatory and uneven (Biswas et al. 2022), and much more needs to be done to address the covert causes of language marginalization and promote linguistic diversity and cultural pluralism.

For the brief reason above, this article problematizes and contests the phenomenon concerning South African indigenous languages; and how existing literature has made commentary and parades vis-à-vis the retainment of South African indigenous languages. To advance this scholarly discourse, a literature review will be used as a research methodology while South African language matters will be appreciated as a conceptual framework that will couch the holistic debates herein – the article does not follow a definite theory or theoretical framework. The role and choice to appoint the two research avenues will be detailed in this article. The rationale to initiate this scholarly discourse is that discussing indigenous languages is exigent for cultural preservation, linguistic diversity, social justice, education, and environmental knowledge, among many prescripts. It is essential that people recognize and embrace the value of these languages and work towards their protection, preservation, and promotion. For instance, indigenous languages are a requisite fragment of the cultural heritage of a community or a nation. Indigenous languages in South Africa represent the prototypical identities, histories, and traditions of the people who speak them. By discussing and promoting these languages, people can help preserve cultural diversity and prevent the loss of valuable knowledge and traditions which are inherent in native languages. Henceforth, this article interrogates the following research questions:

i. What are the cogent challenges that have been ascertained by different scholars in the South African milieu in respect of indigenous languages?

ii. How have the South African government and other social divisions made strides to en vigorize the stature of South African indigenous languages?

iii. Do the current maintenance attempts prove or certify a cogent notion that these languages will completely realize decolonization today and in the future?

With these research questions in mind, the principal objective of this article is to form a configuration that seeks to demonstrate that though there are historical and current scholarly discourses, matters concerning South African indigenous languages persevere. For instance, the verisimilitude that debates regarding these languages recurrently emerges is enough to underscore that there are challenges. The next section will now concentrate on the research methodology and conceptual component that will support the debates of this article.

Research & Methodology

Research methodology and conceptual framework

This particular section is dualistic. This suggests that a literature review as a qualitative research methodology will first be given meticulous attention, followed by the conceptual framework. Language experts and other experts within the field of human and social sciences encourage this dualistic technique in the study of language matters in that it forms triangulation and juxtaposition, thereby soliciting much more versed insights into the phenomenon of interest (Synder 2019; Peters et al. 2020; Belur et al. 2021; Antons et al. 2023).

Building research on and ascribing it to existing knowledge is the building block of all academic research activities, regardless of discipline. Therefore, to do so accurately and creditably should be a primacy for all academics or researchers including those in the discipline of South African indigenous languages. To this, Antos et al. (2023) proclaim that literature review as a research methodology is more relevant than ever. This is because a literature review can conventionally be described as a more or less systemic way of collecting and conjugating previous research concerning a phenomenon of interest (Cho 2022). An effectual and well-conducted literature review as a research methodology elicits a solid foundation for advancing knowledge and facilitating theoretical development (Pereira et al. 2023).

This evinces that by integrating findings and perspectives from many, but relevant empirical findings, a literature review can address research questions with an aptitude that no single study has. It can also help to provide an encapsulation of areas in which the research is disparate and interdisciplinary (Cho 2022). Additionally, a literature review is a preeminent way of super-synthesizing research findings to exhibit evidence on a meta-level and to ruminate areas in which more research is integral, which is a critical component of catalyzing theoretical frameworks and building conceptual models. However, Wirtz et al. (2023) assert that traditional ways of...
describing and portraying the literature often lack heedfulness and are not undertaken systemically. This results in a lack of knowledge of what the collection of studies is essentially denoting or to what it is pointing at. As a result, there is a considerable probability that authors of language research forge their research on flawed or defective determinants (Lipscombe et al. 2023). When researchers of language or linguistics are scrupulous of the evidence on which to build their research, ignoring research that points the other way, serious problems can be faced (Antos et al. 2023). For example, problems such as empirically recycling the same ideas using new data may emanate. In addition, even when the methodology of the reviews is valid, there are often issues with what constitutes a good contribution – *originality and novelty* in the paradigm of language. A systemic literature review is related to the semi-structured review approach⁵ (Hill et al. 2021) given that it is an integrative or critical review. In comparison to the semi-structured review, an integrative review, as an affiliated component to the review of literature, habitually has a different purpose, with the aim to assess, critique, and synthesize the literature on a research topic in a way that enables new theoretical frameworks and perspectives to emerge.

Predominantly, an integrative literature review in the intellectual discourses of a language phenomenon is intended to address mature topics or new, emerging topics (Cronin & George 2023). In the case of mature topics such as language intellectualization for developing and underdeveloped states, the impetus of using an integrative literature review methodology is to overview the knowledge base, to critically review and *hypothetically re-conceptualize and re-contextualize*, and to magnify the theoretical foundation of the specific topic as it develops. For newly emerging topics, the purpose is rather to create initial or preliminary conceptualizations and theoretical models, rather than review old models (López-Deflory 2023). This type of review recurrently requires a more creative collection of data, as the purpose is usually not to cover all articles ever published on the topic but rather to homogenize perspectives and insights from different fields or research traditions (Cronin & George 2023).

In a nutshell and considering the aims and objectives of this particular scholarly discourse, a literature review as a research methodology will be employed to review, synthesize, and analyze the existing published literature on South African indigenous languages and their maintenance in a post-colonial era. The aim here is a critical examination of the available literature and scholarly research related to the topic of interest, intending to locate gaps, dichotomies, and areas for further contextualization. The literature review in this article is conducted to burgeon a discursive understanding of a research topic or question, to identify theoretical frameworks, and to assess the existing knowledge base. Several steps or phases are considered hereunder. These constitute identifying the research question or topic, searching for and selecting relevant literature, reading and evaluating the literature, synthesizing and examining the findings, and writing the review itself.

While the literature review as a research methodology remains crucial, this article does not follow a specific or confined conceptual framework; instead, it is couched on South African language matters with particular reference to indigenous languages. Though that is the case, two conceptual matters must be pointed out. First, is the officialization of the English and Afrikaans languages. During the colonial period, English and Afrikaans languages were the dominant languages of administration, education, and commerce (Diko 2022a). It must also be noticed that the Afrikaans language emerged as a distinct language from Dutch and became abundantly spoken among the Boer population (Rooy & Peters 2021). These languages (English and Afrikaans) were then imposed and applied to the indigenous populations, who had their own languages and cultural traditions. In the early years of apartheid, the government promoted the Afrikaans language as the language of instruction in schools, which led to protests and the Soweto Uprising in 1976 (Remmington 2022). The government eventually relinquished this policy and fostered a multilingual approach to education. After the end of apartheid, the constitution of South Africa, through its legal policies or regulations venerated eleven official spoken languages,³ including the indigenous languages that were historically trivialized (Maseko 2021). To this end, the South African government has taken ventures to promote the use of indigenous languages in education, media, and government (Diko 2022b), but there is still a long way to go to fully recognize and support these languages. In essence, the officialization of colonial languages in South Africa during colonialism reflects the country’s unfathomable history, but the government has taken steps to recognize and promote indigenous languages in recent years.

The second periphery to bear in mind is the constituent in the National Language Policy Framework (NLPF) which states that approximately twenty-five different languages are spoken in South Africa,⁴ of which eleven have been granted official stature in terms of Section 6 of the Constitution (Act No. 108 of 1996) (Scholtz 2004), on the grounds that, their usage includes about 98% of the total population in the country. The eleven official languages are isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu and Siswati (referred to as the Nguni language group); Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho and Setswana (referred to as the Sotho language group); Tshivenda, Xitsonga, English and Afrikaans, as said during the genesis of this article. South Africa is therefore a multilingual and multicultural country because of these multiplicities. A striking characteristic of multilingualism in South Africa is the palpability that several

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⁵ This scholar is not explicit as to which traditional ways reference is being made to. However, what can be speculated for now is that problems regarding the review of literature can emanate from the researcher’s side in failing to identify relevant and extensive scholarship.

⁶ Semi-structured literature review will not be given attention hereunder since it is not the point of interest for now.

³ Please note that the South African Sign Language (SASL) has recently been officialized as the eleventh official language. However, the attention herein is on spoken indigenous languages.

⁴ Many of these languages are unknown due to no research or historical records underscoring their existence. That is why it is often stressed that there many indigenous languages in South Africa that remain uncovered.
indigenous languages are spoken across provincial borders; shared by speech communities from different provinces. There is currently a strong awareness of the need to intensify efforts to develop the previously marginalized indigenous languages and to promote multilingualism if South Africans are to be liberated from undue reliance on the use of non-indigenous languages as the dominant official languages of the state (Kretzer & Kaschula 2020; Diko 2023a). Management of linguistic diversity in post-apartheid South Africa has been made problematic by the dearth of an irrefutably definite language policy, leading to the use of English and Afrikaans as the most authoritative languages in the socio-economic and political territories of its society. The policy framework not only initiates an unwithered approach to multilingualism in South Africa, but strongly encourages the use of indigenous languages as official languages in order to foster and promote national unity (Thuketana & Makgabo 2022). The policy framework takes into account the broad acceptance of linguistic diversity, social justice, the principle of equal access to public services and programs, and respect for language rights (Makoni et al. 2023). The South African constitution of 1996, officially appreciates all languages in the country, while also recognizing the historically diminished use and prominence of the indigenous languages of the people, and that the state must take pragmatic and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages (Diko 2022a). However, the two official languages of South Africa remain English and Afrikaans because of their close ties to political and socio-economic activities. The call to promulgate a variety of languages in government manners is both lofty and admirable; however, some progress is being made (Bekker 2022). For instance, the South African government actualized a consortium to work analogously with the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC) and the important division called the Pan South African Language Board, or the PanSALB. The PanSALB aims to promote multilingualism and see to the development and use not only of the official languages, but also of the Khoi, Nama and San languages, as well as SASLs. PanSALB is also to cultivate respect for the heritage languages spoken by some sections of our community and for those languages that are used for religious purposes (Nyika 2009).

The objectives of promoting multilingualism are achieved through a strategic plan in which attention and programs are instituted by PanSALB, with emphasis on status language planning; language in education; translation and interpreting; lexicography, terminology and place names; development of literature and previously marginalized languages; language rights and mediation; and research (Diko 2022a; Makoni et al. 203). Some of PanSALB’s specific ventures include a campaign to raise public awareness about the right of people to be served in their own language at government institutions, as well as education and instruction occurring in many indigenous languages (Nyika 2009). As of 2008, the PanSALB has pivoted to further its reach by creating Provincial Language Committees (PLCs) to micromanage and oversee much of the work done at a provincial level (Mojela 2013). Per its 2008/2009 annual report, the PanSALB is in the continuous training processes of these committees to emulate much of the work in individual provinces that the PanSALB does at a national level. Although the PanSALB does see its role in promoting languages as crucial to the culture and knowledge transfer of South Africa, it stays grounded and acknowledges the hurdles it must overcome within South Africa. For instance and currently, in the South African legal code, there is no legislation mandating that the activities and goals of the PanSALB must be adhered to by the regional and national governments (Alberts 2022; Gouws 2022). The NLFP is merely that it is a framework. The PanSALB arduously advocates for what it calls a Languages Act (Alberts 2022), which would provide more administrative oversight on the part of the PanSALB to guarantee that language discrimination does not occur within the realms of government and education (Posehl et al. 2022). But the corporeality of the South African constitution, 1996, makes great strides in the recognition of indigenous languages. Prior to the 1996 constitution, the 1983 constitution only mandated that laws be drafted and interpreted in either Afrikaans or English, discrediting many South African residents underserved and disenfranchised (Diko 2022a). Let us now discuss and contextualize the phenomenon chosen herein.

Discussion and Findings

Predominant Ways in Which South African Indigenous Languages Have Been Maintained Pre and Post-Colonial Era

South Africa has a rich multiplicity of indigenous languages and cultures, and all these fundamental components are official and recognized in the country’s constitution. The country’s indigenous languages have been maintained through various means. For instance, oral tradition. Many of the indigenous languages in South Africa were traditionally passed down orally from generation to generation. Senior elders or old people in communities would pass on the language through storytelling, songs, and other forms of cultural expression (Mesthrie 2021). Folktales, for instance, were utilized not solitarily to present merriment but to regularise narratology through indigenous tools such as language, imitation of animals within the folktale, change of tone and all other elements that are ingrained in folktales. Formal education is another constituent that has been used to maintain South African local languages. South Africa’s constitution recognizes the significance of indigenous languages and requires that they be promoted and developed through teaching and learning (Ohara & Machida 2023). As a result, several schools now offer classes in indigenous languages, and some universities offer courses and qualifications in these languages (McCarty 2003; Lingam 2022; Chew & Tennell 2023). For example, Nelson Mandela University’s (NMU) isiXhosa sub-section allows Masters and Doctoral candidates to construct and produce their research proposals, dissertations and theses in the isiXhosa language (Mayaba 2018). This is also evident at the

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3 This is one of the South African languages whose existence continues to gain scholarly attention due to the necessity to advance its stature.
University of Fort Hare (UFH). Similarly, the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) makes it permissible for Masters and Doctoral candidates to produce their dissertations and theses in the isiZulu language (Ndinamile-Hlongwa 2010; Rudwick & Parmegiani 2013; Mthombeni & Ogumubi 2021; Diko 2022a). On the other hand, there are convincing debates that even South African schools use bilingualism and multilingualism as a teaching and learning strategy wherein teachers use different indigenous languages in a bid to support and advance knowledge creation (Xu & Shan 2021; Patterson & Gardyne 2022; McLachlan & Essien 2022).

Through observable literature, it is also patent that the government is required to lead and accelerate the maintenance of indigenous languages. In respect of government support, the South African government has taken applicatory ventures to buttress the preservation and development of indigenous languages. For example, the PanSALB was established in 1995 (Malema et al. 2020; Du Plessis 2022) to canonize and develop the country’s official languages. For example, when and where a certain institution or organization rationalizes developing a terminology list for whatever reasons, it is required that such terminology be approved by the PanSALB for the purposes of accuracy, reliability and consistency. Also, it is required that such terminology be scrutinized within the confines and jurisdictions of the language policies of the country for the very reason that seeks to safeguard indigenous languages against those who continue to make mockery and humiliation of local languages – those who are not experts in these languages (Diko 2023a).

Cultural institutions are also legitimized to partake in a role in the maintenance of South African indigenous languages (Jordan & Sterling 2019; Smith & Li 2022). An example of such a cultural institution includes Amazwi Museum in Makhanda which pivots on their wild and community events that celebrate the language and culture. Also, where a certain institution or organization notices that there will be a special channel that will broadcast in indigenous languages only. The SABC also has several radio stations which are all vaunted and protected by the constitution of South Africa (Kamper et al. 2014; Dube 2020). Second, language policies. The South African government has made a decree and an obligatory regimen to ennoble the teaching of indigenous languages in schools (Makanya & Zibane 2020). For example, learners are taught in their mother tongue. These language policies are customized based on each sector’s needs. For example, the University of South Africa’s (UNISA) language policy accepts all South African indigenous languages given that the university caters and has students all over the nation and globally (Mutasa 2015). Third, education. The South African government has made a decree and an obligatory regimen to ennoble the teaching of indigenous languages in schools (Makanya & Zibane 2020). For example, learners are taught in their mother tongue during the foundation phase (Grades 1 to 3) of their schooling (Phaka et al. 2023). Comparatively, in a process of transfiguration, several universities and colleges in South Africa offer courses in indigenous languages and literature (Steyn & Gunter 2023). Forth, is media. For example, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has made an asseveration to broadcast in all official languages, including indigenous languages (Aiseng 2022). Recently, this broadcasting institution has made a promissory note that there will be a special channel that will broadcast in indigenous languages only. The SABC also has several radio stations that radiocast exclusively in indigenous languages. Fifth, cultural festivals. The government supports various cultural festivals that promote the use of indigenous languages. These festivals provide a platform for people to showcase or exhibit their cultural heritage and language (Diko 2023a). For example, during the State of the Nation Address (SONA), different indigenous people in South Africa are invited annually by the state or parliament to recite a poem in their indigenous language. Sixth and last, language revival projects. There are various language revival projects taking place in South Africa, where communities are working to defibrillate and promote their indigenous languages. These projects habitually involve the recording and archiving of indigenous languages, as well

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6 Please observe the university’s online library. It is incontrovertible that certain post-graduate candidates in the discipline of African languages designate to write in the isiXhosa language.

7 These subsume Lesedi FM, Ukhozi FM, Munghana Lonene FM, Vuma FM and many others. Some are nationally recognised, while others are recognised only at community levels.

8 To prove the validity of this claim, may you please consider watching annual SONAs.
as the development of language learning resources (Ohara & Machida 2023). In essence, while there is still much work to be done, the South African government has made significant efforts to promote and retain indigenous languages in the country.

**Interludes in the Retainment and Development of South African Indigenous Languages**

While there are parades that are embarked upon to maintain South African indigenous languages, there are several challenges that point to delays in the promotion and elevation of these languages. This is against the veracity that South Africa has been “enjoying” constitutional democracy for the past twenty-eight years; and therefore, issues concerning indigenous languages should not be as problematic as they are today (please refer to the genesis of this article as a reminder to the problematized phenomenon). There are several determinants that contribute to the interludes in the maintenance of indigenous languages in South Africa. Some of the most significant factors include historical marginalization and/or subjugation (Ndimande 2012). This legacy of marginalization has contributed to a lack of resources and consideration given to these languages in the post-apartheid era. Additionally, colonial languages demonstrate aversion and continue to certify vestigial elements of apartheid in South Africa. Another delaying component is inadequate education. Several indigenous languages—including dialects—are not taught as official subjects in schools, and when they are, the quality of education is often inadequate owing to the reality that the South African education system itself has its own challenges and problems (Khalifa et al. 2019). This (inadequate education) can make it difficult for young people and children to develop aptitude in their ancestral languages. Urbanization is another crucial component to observe in the delay of successful decolonization; and the maintenance of traditional languages (Ndimande 2012). As more people migrate from rural to urban areas in South Africa, there is a greater tendency for them to adopt the dominant languages of those areas. This can lead to a decline in the use of indigenous languages, particularly among younger generations.

Globalization also remains another challenge. The expansion of global culture and media has had an impact on the use of indigenous languages in South Africa. As the English language becomes more universally spoken and used, particularly in business and media ambiances, there is less of a need for people to use indigenous languages in those settings (Roche 2022). Diko (2022a) argues that limited resources must be considered in the delay of maintaining indigenous languages too. For instance, there is a lack of resources, including funding and trained personnel, dedicated to the maintenance and promotion of indigenous languages in South Africa (Ohara & Machida 2023). This can make it grueling to develop and implement determinative language maintenance programs. In a nutshell, the causes of delays in the maintenance of indigenous languages in South Africa are complex and multifaceted, reflecting the broader social, economic, and political challenges facing the country.

**Conclusions**

This scholarly discourse insists that though several parades have been made to promote the prestige of South African indigenous languages, these strides remain vanquished by numerous forces as a result of vestigial elements of apartheid. It is worthy, thereof, that scholarly debates are continued in an attempt to locate reasonable solutions to the conundrum. It must also be agreed and appreciated that South Africa is one of the countries with the most constitutional laws and policies that seek to induce the development of these languages, however, the fact that there are still observable challenges is enough to underline that more discourses must be carried out to challenge or contest the major problem. For future scholarly implications, it would be perceptive to continue the discourse in an effort to sensitize all affected stakeholders in order to come to the fore and find solutions to language matters. This is what this article calls for at the current moment. Also, to notice, this scholarly discourse alone cannot answer or address all language problems, hence the need for a multi-collaborative effort.

**Acknowledgement**

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing—Original Draft Preparation, Writing—Review And Editing by author. Author has read and agreed to the published the final version of the manuscript.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, due to that the research does not deal with vulnerable groups or sensitive issues.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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