A Coat of Many Colours: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Language Uses at Two South African Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Many African higher education entrants have an African language as a first language, whereas English and Afrikaans are default media of instruction in South African higher education institutions (HEIs). This precludes equivalent chances of academic success for students. Linguistic diversity in HEIs might also influence students' experiences in these institutions. This paper explores the perspectives of undergraduate students at a historically Black higher education institution (HBHEI) and a historically White higher education institution (HWHEI), regarding language use at these institutions and their accompanying experiences. We conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with 31 students and analysed the data using thematic analysis. We adopted a critical race theory lens to interpret participants' perspectives. We found enduring marginalisation of African languages, as informed by structural dynamics, and its detrimental effects on students' academic prospects and experiences, contrasting with the enduring privileging of English and Afrikaans in higher education.

Keywords: Critical race theory; higher education; language use; mother-tongue education; race; South Africa

Higher education institutions (HEI) provide ample ground for diversity in their student constituencies, including racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity. Although these contexts can facilitate intercultural exposure and engagement, they are not without disadvantages. Racial prejudice and discrimination have been widely reported in South African HEIs (e.g., Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2008; Suransky & Van der Merwe, 2016). Racism in these institutions is likely compounded by the enduring, distinct racial identities historically accorded to the institutions, such that certain institutions catered for White students only, and others for Black students only (Jansen, 2003). In apartheid-era South Africa, HEIs were further designated as either English- or Afrikaans-medium (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2016), or operated within geographical contexts that influenced their constituents' ethnic make-up. For example, HEIs in apartheid-era Bantustans predominantly catered for students of a particular ethnicity, as per each Bantustan's ethnic designation (Jansen, 2003).

Despite public HEIs being rendered open for all post-1994 in South Africa, their historical identities, particularly as pertaining to race, persist (Jansen, 2003). Historically White, English-medium HEIs primarily retained the English medium, and historically White, Afrikaans-medium HEIs have mainly adopted English and Afrikaans as media of instruction. South African HEIs' exclusive use of English and Afrikaans as media of instruction and retention of apartheid-era racial identities, despite racially and linguistically diverse student constituencies

post-1994 (Habib, 2016), provides ample ground for racial, cultural and linguistic exclusion. This was demonstrated in protests by South African students between 2015 and 2016, against racist institutional cultures in HWHEIs. These included *#Luister, #OpenStellenbosch* and *#AfrikaansMustFall* campaigns, preceded by *#RhodesMustFall* in March 2015 (Contraband Cape Town, 2015; Gwangwa, 2016; Mwaniki et al., 2018). National *#FeesMustFall* protests took place from October 2015, wherein student activists called for fee-free decolonised higher education (Mutekwe, 2017; Mwaniki et al., 2018).

Given the above-mentioned (race and ethnic) group-based institutional identity dynamics, our study explores the multiple layers within which, and multiple ways and contexts in which language is used and experienced by students, based on their group identities in their respective HEI contexts. These experiences are explored broadly and specifically in relation to students' academic success at an HBHEI and an HWHEI. We focus on language because, central to HEIs, is language as a medium of instruction and a means of communication across contexts, which are neither acultural nor raceless.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do students at an HBHEI and an HWHEI experience language use at their institutions?
2. How does race shape language use and students' experiences thereof at an HBHEI and an HWHEI?

Literature review

Language and identity

Beyond its use in academic instruction, language is a marker of identity. Referring specifically to indigenous African languages, Mutasa (2015) posits that inherent in these languages, are their speakers' cultures and value systems. Moreover, language may inform individuals' subjective sense of self (Kiguwa, 2006) and, therefore, how they relate to others and their world. Leibowitz et al. (2005) argue that marginalised groups place significance on their identities, contrasting with the tendency by those in positions of power not to foreground their group identities, assuming these to be normative and universal. These authors further posit that language is considered an important identity marker especially in multicultural contexts wherein a given language-derived identity is perceived to be under threat.

Students may feel alienated from institutions with cultures that are dissonant with their own. Such alienation has been reported for students with a racial identity that differs from that of the institution, particularly in HWHEIs (e.g., Nomdo, 2017). In HBHEIs, alienation also occurs due to ethnic prejudice and xenophobia (DHET, 2016). In Nomdo's (2017) study at the University of Cape Town, an HWHEI, a participant noted that lecturers referred to Xhosa people in a way that invalidated and Othered them. He described the self-alienation that he was required to engage in as a Xhosa person in the academic context as follows: "Even you, when you write you are not expected to come from your home" (p. 203). Such experiences illustrate "double consciousness," referring to Black people's immersion in a world that denies them true self-consciousness, instead necessitating that they constantly perceive themselves through others' eyes (Du Bois, 1903). This requires them to negotiate aspects of their identities to navigate their environments. In Nomdo's (2017) study, double consciousness would refer to

Black students' navigation of two worlds—the HWHEI in jarring contrast to their homes and, essentially, their Blackness or imposed Otherness—to achieve academic excellence.

In Greenfield's (2010) study, Black students at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) reported that lecturers code-switched to Afrikaans in English lectures. This "created a hostile atmosphere that alienated Black students and created a barrier between them and the lecturers" (p. 525). The students considered instruction in Afrikaans equivalent to "the horrors of the past" (p. 525), referring to apartheid South Africa. Use of Afrikaans across South Africa proliferated when the National Party, "which ... became synonymous with Afrikaner nationalism" (Webb & Kriel, 2000, p. 38), gained political power in 1948 and implemented apartheid. Apartheid essentially constituted legislated separation of races and associated forms of statutory control. The nationalist apartheid government attempted to "Afrikanerise South Africa" (Alexander, 2003, p. 13); the language came to symbolise Afrikaner nationalism and, by extension, the apartheid system itself. Most Black people came to loathe and consider Afrikaans "the language of the oppressor" (Alexander, 2003, p. 14). This was especially illustrated in the 1976 Soweto youth's revolt against its use as a medium of instruction.

A illustrated in Greenfield's (2010) study, language can bestow identity on individuals, alienate some and afford a sense of belonging to others, and facilitate default contextualisation of oneself and one's positioning in relation to the broader socio-historical context. This demonstrates that language is not merely a communication or instructional tool in higher education. Rather, it forms an integral part of individuals' ways of relating to the world. It is on this basis that our study explores the multiple ways in which language is used—and in which these various uses are experienced—from students' perspectives, either broadly or in relation to their academic success.

Language in education

Proficiency in the medium of instruction is known to affect students' academic success (Mthimunye & Daniels, 2019; Poyrazli & Isaiah, 2018). In basic education, teachers may facilitate learning through measures such as translating concepts into learners' languages or code-switching, which refers to switching between the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) and learners' first language while teaching (Kennemer & Knaus, 2019). In higher education, students' non-proficiency in the medium of instruction may be foregrounded, in the absence of such support structures. Receiving instruction in a language that one is not proficient in may undermine students' metacognition and, therefore, academic success (Hrbáková et al., 2012). In relation to this, Mkhize (2016) asserts that the exclusion of learners' everyday linguistic practices hampers their epistemic access, which has negative implications for their academic success.

Scholars have long delineated links between the exclusion of African languages in South African HEIs and the latter's standing as products of colonial influence (Nkoane, 2006). Student calls for the decolonisation of higher education and use of African languages intensified during and after *#FeesMustFall* (Mayaba et al., 2018; Mwaniki et al., 2018). Contrasting with calls for mother-tongue education for African students, were equally vehement calls for the scrapping of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction at some Afrikaans-medium HWHEIs through the *#AfrikaansMustFall* movement (Gwangwa, 2016; Mwaniki et al., 2018).

The DHET (2020) recently published a language policy framework for public South African HEIs, aimed at promoting the use of African languages for teaching and learning in higher education, and to facilitate fair access to, and success in higher education for all South Africans. Its predecessor, the 2002 Language Policy for Higher Education, has had little impact in terms of promoting the development and, ultimately, use of African languages for academic instruction in higher education. This is despite the DHET's (2020) acknowledgement that lack of linguistic diversity in academic instruction impedes individuals' Constitutional right to receive education in their official languages(s) of choice.

Theoretical framework: Critical race theory

The current study assumes both overt and underlying racial dynamics in higher education and in relation to the broader social context. This is in consideration of the persisting, racialised nature of South African society, 27 years post-apartheid. Consistent with this observation, critical race theorists posit that race continues to permeate structures in societies in which racial segregation has been abolished for decades (Zamudio et al., 2010). In higher education, this is immediately discernable from South African HEIs' enduring apartheid-era racial identities and the prevalence of racial discrimination in these contexts (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2008; Habib, 2016; Suransky & Van der Merwe, 2016). The continued privileging of English and Afrikaans as media of instruction, coupled with the marginalisation of African languages in basic and higher education, further indicates racialisation of language as a determinant of access to, and success in higher education. These observations necessitate interpretation of findings on higher education and students' experiences of higher education contexts from a critical race theory perspective.

For critical race theorists, race plays an influential role within society and its various structures. Institutional racism within HEIs might stem from institutions' policies, practices and culture—informed by national policies or not—and essentially takes place within and between institutions (Bailey et al., 2017). Structural racism refers to "the totality of ways in which societies foster racial discrimination through mutually reinforcing [inequitable] systems ... that in turn reinforce discriminatory beliefs, values, and distribution of resources" (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 1455). Further, Gillborn (2006) argues that racism be construed not only in relation to its intentions when perpetrated, but also its "effects of disadvantaging one or more ethnic groups" (p. 252). On this basis, our study will elucidate the mechanisms through which institutional and structural racism inform how language is used across higher education contexts, and how students experience such uses, considering their societal positioning as members of racially marginalised or privileged groups in South Africa.

Beyond consideration of institutional or structural bestowal of racial privilege or disadvantage on higher education students through language use, this study further employs the following critical race theory principles for a detailed analysis of how racism shapes participants' linguistic experiences at their HEIs: (a) racism as normal; (b) Whiteness as property; and equal opportunity, meritocracy and race neutrality as components of (c) the critique of liberalism.

Regarding the above, first, critical race theorists consider racism normal and ingrained in the very fabric of society and societal structures, and therefore enduring, not incidental or random (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Rather, "racist hierarchical structures govern all political, economic, and social domains" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27), thereby systematically Othering marginalised people in these contexts.

Second, the view of Whiteness as property stems from its inherent association with privilege, rendering it a valuable asset (Harris, 1993; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). In higher education, Patton et al. (2007) argue that the use of a curriculum drawing from Western epistemologies signifies Whiteness as property. This can logically be extended to the privileging of some languages over others, as illustrated by the use of English and Afrikaans as media of instruction throughout the South African higher education system, to the exclusion of African languages.

Third, regarding the critique of liberalism, critical race theorists (e.g., Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) denounce concepts that are deemed to solely preserve the interests of those in power, such as "equal opportunity," "meritocracy," and "race neutrality." In the university context, meritocracy refers to the notion that academic achievement is merit-based and attainable through individual students' efforts (Park & Liu, 2014). Underlying meritocracy are assumptions that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, and of race neutrality or disregard for race or its implications. Such assumptions ignore structural barriers that prevent marginalised peoples from accessing opportunities (Mitchell, 2013).

Materials and methods

Research site and participants

The study was conducted with 31 undergraduate students at a historically Black and English-medium HEI, and a historically White and Afrikaans-medium HEI in South Africa. At the time of the study, English was the HBHEI's only medium of instruction, while the HWHEI used English and Afrikaans as instruction media. Nineteen of the 31 participants were enrolled at the HBHEI (Black: 14; White: 5), and 12 at the HWHEI (Black: 9; White: 3). Twenty-one participants were female, and 10, male.

Table 1. Focus group composition**.**

	Historically Black HEI			Historically White HEI	
Category	FGD 1	FGD 2	FGD 3	FGD 1	FGD 2
No. of participants	6	5	8	5	7
Race					
Black	6	0	8	5	4
White	0	5	0	0	3
Gender					
Female	3	4	7	4	3
Male	3	1	1	1	4
Study field					
Health Sciences	6	5	8	3	1
Social Sciences	0	0	0	2	2
Natural Sciences	0	0	0	0	2
Economic and Management Sciences	0	0	0	0	2

HEI = higher education institution. FGD = focus group discussion.

Data collection and analysis

Permission to collect the data was obtained from both HEIs. The study protocol was approved by the Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria (Ref no: GW20150823HS).

Five FGDs (three at the HBHEI and two at the HWHEI) were used to collect the data. Two FGDs at the HBHEI comprised Black participants only, and one comprised White participants

only. One FGD at the HWHEI was racially diverse; the other comprised Black participants only. The composition of the FGDs at the two institutions according to participant race, gender and study field, is presented in detail in Table 1.

A focus group guide was used to guide the discussions. This paper focuses on language use at the two HEIs under study; the research forms part of a larger study on factors affecting the academic success and experiences of students at the HEIs. Therefore, participants were asked questions such as: (a) What have your experiences at this institution been since you enrolled? (b) What challenges do students come across in their first couple of years of studying at this institution? and (c) How do you think your institution could enhance students' academic experiences? Before commencing with the discussions, participants were given the option to use a self-assigned pseudonym during the FGDs or one assigned by the first author at analysis, or their actual names at all stages of the research. The discussions were conducted in English in the White-only and racially diverse FGDs. Though the discussions were mainly in English in the Black-only FGDs, participants also took the liberty to speak in their home languages.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, as per Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. After transcribing the data, we assigned initial codes to participants' statements, then identified initial themes by grouping related codes to form individuals themes. Then, we reviewed the themes, ensuring that each statement or group of statements corresponded with a particular code and, in turn, a relevant theme. We could then map participants' experiences regarding language as a medium of instruction and its adjacent uses at their respective institutions. A critical race theory lens was adopted to interpret these participant experiences, in relation to not only the participating HEIs, but also South Africa's broader socio-political and socio-historical contexts.

Results

Disadvantages of not being a first-language speaker of the medium of instruction

Participants who were not first-language speakers of the medium of instruction at the HBHEI and the HWHEI reported being disadvantaged by academic instruction in a language that they were not proficient in—English for Black participants and for White, Afrikaans-speaking participants.

> The language is a problem for me right now, because I study also in Afrikaans. ... But it's difficult, and I can see in my marks as well sometimes, but it's OK. [Esmari, HBHEI, FGD 2]

> But what's also a disadvantage for me personally is that, there is only the option to study in English. There is a lot of people struggling in other languages, like me, in Afrikaans, for instance. [Hesmari, HBHEI, FGD 2]

Black HWHEI participants and both Black and White HBHEI participants reported being inconvenienced by the means that they had to take to understand the English study material. Ilska, a White, Afrikaans student at the HBHEI [FGD 2], described her studying routine as follows:

> When I know I know something really well from school, I try to translate from English to Afrikaans. ... I won't translate like my textbook or make a summary in Afrikaans, but when I study out loud, I will explain it for myself in Afrikaans, if I don't understand.

Thabo, a Black HBHEI [FGD 1] student, took extra English lessons, in addition to the compulsory English module that he was enrolled for.

White participants whose first language is English reported positive experiences regarding the English medium of instruction. Brendan, an HWHEI participant, described studying in his home language, English, as "fine and positive."

The transition from basic to higher education

Participants stated that distinctions or similarities between the LOLT in high school and the medium of instruction in higher education played a role in their academic adjustment.

Some participants particularly struggled to adjust due to strict implementation of the medium of instruction in higher education, contrary to high school, where code-switching was used. Katlego [HBHEI, FGD 1] made the following observation:

> In my first year, aah I struggled a lot because ... they spoon-feed you there at high school. So you just come here as just somebody ... a White person, with white beards there and then he's busy speaking fast and everything.

Thabo [HBHEI, FGD 1] related a similar experience, also contextualising Katlego's account as follows:

> As we know that nobody here, like most of the people, English they did it as their second additional language or ... yah, first additional language, meaning that they are not familiar. You'll find out, in a lecture, that is what I experienced in my first year. I had to be struggling with the ... like the ... those lectures, the Afrikaner lecturers, they speak very fast and their English is just ... it just ... they just get it out.

HBHEI participants who had Afrikaans as a high school LOLT recounted struggles with adjustment at the English-medium institution. For instance, Hesmari [HBHEI, FGD 2] explained how the HBHEI's English-only medium of instruction affected her:

> When you're used to going to school in this language, and suddenly you have to switch so quickly, where I think if you had that perspective of going to Tuks [the University of Pretoria, an English- and Afrikaans-medium HEI at the time of the study] or somewhere, where you have more options, it's a bit of a disadvantage.

These participants' experiences differed from those of Jaco [HBHEI, FGD 2], whose bilingual background eased his transition into higher education:

> I personally went to school ... my home language is Afrikaans, but I spent my entire school career in an English school. So, I'm fully adapted to the English system.

The only White, Afrikaans-speaking participant at the HWHEI, Willem [HWHEI, FGD 2], acknowledged the advantage of a medium of instruction that was congruent with his high school LOLT—Afrikaans. He chose to enrol in only one module (Accounting) in Afrikaans, reasoning as follows:

> It's because I did Accounting at school in Afrikaans, so just that switch would've made it way harder for me.

#AfrikaansMustFall: Afrikaans as a medium of instruction

Beyond personal struggles relating to the medium of instruction and its perceived effects on their academic success, HBHEI participants had not experienced or been involved in protests relating to the medium of instruction. There had recently been an *#AfrikaansMustFall* protest at the HWHEI, with calls made for Afrikaans to be scrapped, and for the institution to adopt one medium of instruction, namely, English.

While some HWHEI participants saw merits in the scrapping of Afrikaans, others were indifferent or neutral; others empathised with Afrikaans students' cause. For instance, Reabetswe [HWHEI, FGD 1] remarked that it was unfair that Afrikaans students were benefitting from mother-tongue education, while "we"—presumably referring to Black students—did not:

> On this one, I have to agree with all those people who were protesting against the whole Afrikaans thing ... it's very much easier when something is being explained in a language that you've grown up with and you understand it better, cause the Afrikaans kids ... they get that, and we don't get that.

Other participants advocated for an English-only medium of instruction at the HWHEI, arguing that it would provide some semblance of equality, since some students could not choose a preferred medium of instruction. Hlohi [HWHEI, FGD 2] presented the following argument:

> Like, let us all study in one language, let us all be equal cause there's like people from other provinces; I'm pretty sure English, they can't really hear it but then they're just there ... they're using it because it's the only thing that they gave them. So, let us all be equal, I get it, like English is not a lot of people's home language. So, it's best if we all actually suffer inconvenience, instead of like, some people get **that**.

Some participants argued against the immediate scrapping of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction at the HWHEI, given its possibly negative implications for Afrikaans-speaking students. They argued that, unlike for Black students, provision had been made for Afrikaans to be used as a LOLT in basic education and a medium of instruction at the HWHEI. Although he shared the sentiment regarding the scrapping of Afrikaans, Willem [FGD 2], an Afrikaans-speaking student at the HWHEI, argued as follows:

> They want Afrikaans to fall immediately; that's impossible to me because you get a third-year student that's been studying in Afrikaans all his life and it's not his fault that he chose to study in Afrikaans, but what happened in history is not his fault. ... If they wanna take Afrikaans, there must be a few years because it just can't happen **now**.

While simultaneously acknowledging that Black students contended with academic instruction in a language that they were not fluent in or did not understand, Makaziwe [HWHEI, FGD 1] explained the unfairness of calls for the scrapping of Afrikaans as follows:

> I think there are basically two sides of this whole language thing. You can be for it or be against it because there are pros and cons on both sides. For instance, let's say the Afrikaans kids ... they grow up probably from kindergarten being taught in Afrikaans, that's all they know. They're not really fluent in English and they come here and they're still being taught in Afrikaans. So, now it's like, this new system that they're telling them, "We're gonna scrap

> Afrikaans completely," then they're going to fail because they don't understand English; they've been taught in Afrikaans all their lives.

Other participants felt neutral about the *#AfrikaansMustFall* protests at the HWHEI, considering that a dual medium did not interfere with the availability of English lectures.

"English is the way to go"—For the most part

Participants presented varying arguments regarding the use of African languages alongside English as a medium of instruction in higher education. They mainly recounted the benefits of English beyond the immediate context, compared to African languages and Afrikaans; remarked on the feasibility and practicality of African languages as media of instruction; and provided recommendations for the latter's incorporation into higher education. Sub-themes in this regard are presented below.

Preference for English as a medium of instruction

Despite their self-admitted challenges with an English medium of instruction, several participants at both HEIs anticipated long-term professional benefits of having had English, instead of either Afrikaans or an African language, as a medium of instruction. Nhlanhla [HWHEI, FGD 1] had the following to say:

> I think English is OK as a medium of instruction cause I can imagine if I went to look for a job in Germany with a Psychology degree taught in Zulu [Participants laugh]. So, I think this language will limit my opportunities. So, the only opportunities will be in KZN [Kwazulu-Natal] or in South Africa.

Presti [HWHEI, FGD 1] expressed a similar sentiment, adding that, with the compulsory use of English as a medium of instruction, Black students are at a relative advantage, compared to Afrikaans students:

> I just think like, Black people are at an advantage. Like, this English thing is, like, we're just being put up there and we don't even realise it. Cause like they said, you go to Germany, the only language you know is Afrikaans, and what if it's like, a company where you're going to speak in English and you can't. And we're at that advantage that you can just get that job wherever you go.

Afrikaans-speaking participants at both HEIs also remarked on advantages to using English as a medium of instruction. Geenan [HWHEI, FGD 2], a Black participant whose home language is Afrikaans, took English as a medium of instruction and believed that this was the correct decision "because the whole world, if you go across the world, then it will be English. Everybody understands English."

Similarly, Ilska [HBHEI, FGD 2], an Afrikaans-speaking participant, acknowledged the benefits of an English medium of instruction, and that she would choose an English medium over Afrikaans:

> Even though at Tuks or Stellenbosch [both historically White and Afrikaans-medium HEIs], you had that option to study in Afrikaans, if I look back now, I wouldn't have taken that opportunity because in the long run, and one day when you are in the professional field, you're going to have to work in English, and communicate in English, and that's why ... and even

> though the textbooks are still in English, so to go to a lecture, to write everything in Afrikaans is still confusing. So, I think we're getting a big advantage in the long run.

The feasibility of African languages' use as media of instruction in higher education

The prevailing sentiment among Black HWHEI participants was that the use of African languages would be chaotic and costly. According to several HWHEI participants, concession for the use of one African language for academic instruction at any given institution would necessitate concession for all other languages, and this would be labour- and resource-intensive. Makaziwe [HWHEI, FGD 1] elucidated some of her concerns as follows:

> If we're gonna have all the languages that we have in South Africa being taught here in varsity, it's gonna be chaotic, honestly speaking, and we're not gonna find as many educated people to actually do the jobs, to teach in all those languages and stuff.

Makaziwe further noted that textbooks would have to be translated, for use by students receiving academic instruction in African languages. Acknowledging the complications of several African languages being added as media of instruction at a given HEI, Tumi [HWHEI, FGD 2] conceded:

> But I think it would be umm ... nice to have maybe **just one** African language for those students that think that they want to be taught in their home language.

Some participants had seemingly resigned themselves to the status quo, and advocated for the maintenance of an English medium of instruction because African students were already familiar with it as a LOLT in basic education. Some further argued that African languages are difficult and that they (African students) would fare worse academically if African languages were to be used for academic instruction.

> I'm sure every single school like, OK, not every single school, but most schools are taught like ... English is the medium of instruction or like it's a universal language. So I mean, personally for me, I don't think I'll understand any scientific work in Zulu. It's like, what is an enzyme in Zulu? So, you're lost and you know you wouldn't understand fully. So, in English ... I think English is the way to go. [Nontsikelelo, HWHEI, FGD 1]

> I'm actually pleased with English cause like, I don't understand my home language like, it's too deep for me. Even writing my home language, it's crazy ... [Hlohi, HWHEI, FGD 2]

Consistent with the above sentiments, Willem, a White, Afrikaans-speaking participant [HWHEI, FGD 2], added that African languages are not equipped for use in academic instruction, due to their reportedly limited vocabulary:

> Like she said, if you wanna bring in all the other languages, it's kind of impossible because I spoke to one of my friends in res ... he said not all the words "are active"; but not all the words are in African languages. The African languages aren't involved enough in those words.

Black HWHEI participants' overall reservations regarding the use of African languages for academic instruction can be summed up in the following argument:

> And some people don't really want their home languages cause our home languages are just insanely difficult, and as for equality, I feel like everybody ... cause some of them ... for some,

> it's gonna be easier if they learn in their own languages, but that's gonna cost money. [Hlohi, HWHEI, FGD 2]

Recommendations for the incorporation of African languages into higher education

With several participants having surmised that the adoption of African languages as media of instruction was not wholly feasible, as shown in the sub-theme above, some made suggestions as to how African languages could be incorporated into higher education.

Reabetswe [HWHEI, FGD 1] offered suggestions on how the HWHEI could accommodate students whose home language was not either one of the mediums of instruction:

> In my opinion, like, not like we have to get the whole material in your home language, but there should be some kind of a supplement to your studies, like maybe tutorials. They can have tutorials, not that they have to translate everything into your mother tongue, but at some point, they have to make it easier for you by trying to use your mother tongue so that things that are difficult for you to understand, they become easy.

Other participants mostly advocated for the translation of key concepts into African languages, to facilitate better understanding of course material for students requiring such an intervention.

Language as a segregational or assimilatory tool

Beyond the use of language in academic instruction, participants reported a general tendency for students to socialise and discriminate against others based on language, which extended to ethnicity or race.

Thabo [HBHEI, FGD 1] described the following scenario involving White classmates in a social setting, with whom he was trying to interact:

> They also changed the language to a point whereby I don't understand anything. So, that was a disadvantage for me. Yah. So, the thing is, most of the time I don't feel free, I don't feel when I'm next to them because I'm not used to speaking to them, that's why I want to speak to them more often.

In response to participants who had remarked that students of different races did not mingle with each other on campus, Sne [HBHEI, FGD 1] argued:

> Even with us; we have tribes, isn't it? Have you noticed that in first year, you go with the Sothos (Other participant: Yah), if you are Venda, it's Vendas. Even with us, we segregate ourselves, based on like, opposites. ... Because if I can ask, how many people have Venda friends here? [Gesturing at other participants, who in turn laugh, shake their heads]. You see such things.

HBHEI participants in both Black-only FGDs (FGDs 1 and 3) reported segregation based on ethnicity and nationality. FGD 3 participants expressed concern that ethnicity-based affiliations were used as a conduit to prevent inter-ethnic resource-sharing among students.

> The Swatis who're in fourth year would pass notes down to the first-year Swatis, and then they would pass notes, and pass this, what what, but only if you're Swati. So, maybe if you ask to have some of that, "I'm sorry, but we can't help," and they will act like they can't; you know that they have stuff. [Tsholo, HBHEI, FGD 3]

These participants lamented that exclusive intra-ethnic interaction at the institution meant that students missed opportunities to learn from each other in a culturally diverse environment. They were concerned that this would disadvantage them in the long run, compromising their adaptability and optimal functioning in the workplace, especially given the benefits of multilingualism for Health Sciences graduates.

> But I have noticed now that we are having ... if I can say, cultural divisions. Yah. Zulu people will stick together. ... I'm not being specific but, for example, a lot of Vendas will probably chill together there. ... But I wanna learn Venda, but some people won't be accommodative for me to learn. Some Tsongas will chill there together. The Pedi people ... let it be. ... And I mean, in varsity; this is where you're exposed to so much, you know. By the end of, I mean by the time you get your degree, at least know you could have at least learnt one language. Kholo [HBHEI, FGD 3]

> You need to [learn different languages]. You need to (Kholo: In the Health Department, yah), especially in what we do; you need to, because you're gonna interact with a lot of patients who will speak to you in Venda. Sonto [HBHEI, FGD 3]

HWHEI participants reported that language was used as a racial microaggression in lectures and social settings. Nontsikelelo [HWHEI, FGD 1] recounted the following experience by an acquaintance:

> There is also those people who're still stuck in times and are quite racist, and a friend of mine spoke to me about the racism encounter that she had with a girl who, like, she would talk to someone in Afrikaans and then when she would ask her to explain in English, she continued speaking in Afrikaans. And that's just downright ....

Presti [FGD 1] highlighted how, in the academic context, language was used in a manner that academically disadvantaged non-Afrikaans students in English lectures at the HWHEI:

> Afrikaans students ... they ask things in Afrikaans, and then the lecturer will explain in Afrikaans, forgetting that some of us don't know Afrikaans. So, we get to lose out on other points. ... And the tutors like, they're best friends with Afrikaans students. And you get there, you don't know if it's a tutor or a friend or what, and the way they explain things, you can see that these people are friends, so they can explain it clearly.

Several participants at both institutions reported instances in which language facilitated cohesion. HBHEI participants noted that, because of its single medium of instruction, there were no protests over language at their institution, unlike at other institutions around the country. At the HWHEI, Nontsikelelo (FGD 1) reported on the following observation, illustrating an attempt by her White peers to be assimilatory:

> I think they always try; there will be those people who always try to accommodate us and be nice to us and, you know, speak English and, yah.

Discussion

Broadly, the study findings demonstrated the notion of language as capital across higher education, to the detriment of non-English speakers and, specifically, Black students—the majority of whom are neither fluent in, nor are first-language speakers of media of instruction across South African HEIs. Unlike their Afrikaans- and English-speaking counterparts, Black students did not have the option of an African medium of instruction or HEIs offering this, and

contended with the academic disadvantage resulting from this. The privileges accorded to English and Afrikaans, coupled with the virtual exclusion of African languages in the South African education system, illustrate commodification of English and Afrikaans, to the detriment of speakers of African languages (Tshotsho, 2013). Similar to previous studies (e.g., Mthimunye & Daniels, 2019; Poyrazli & Isaiah, 2018), participants at both HEIs were aware of the academic disadvantage and inconveniences of not being a first-language speaker of the medium of instruction.

Despite its immediate academic disadvantages to some, Black and White, Afrikaans HBHEI participants preferred an English medium of instruction, in consideration of future work opportunities, especially internationally. This tendency towards what Dor (2004) refers to as "Englishization" (p. 102), is a key feature of globalisation, which entails the promotion of cultural homogenization (Bucher, 2005), while undermining local identities. However, Black participants' preference for English might have further been compounded by the historical, systematic privileging of certain languages over others (Alexander, 2003), such that even in post-apartheid South Africa, English proficiency is associated with upward mobility (Bangeni & Kapp, 2007). Considering that language is an integral aspect of identity (Mutasa, 2015) and Black South Africans' positioning in the broader socio-historical and socio-cultural contexts, Black study participants' favourable attitude towards English could be likened to the self-alienation described in previous South African studies. In these studies, students reported being expected to distance themselves from their Blackness, for ease of assimilation (Barroso, 2015; Nomdo, 2017). This is especially considering that the use of only English and Afrikaans as media of instruction starts as early as basic education, and that this practice has its roots in the apartheid era (Alexander, 2003).

HWHEI participants presented nearly unanimous arguments against the use of African languages as media of instruction, as these languages are not equipped for such. These participants—Black and White—could hardly conceptualise academic instruction in an African language. This demonstrates the systematic incapa of African languages as vehicles of knowledge or knowledge production, at least as perceived by these students. The finding was in line with Black participants' surprisingly marginal recommendations regarding the use of African languages, to support non-speakers of the media of instruction. This possibly illustrates the students' resignation to the Othering of African languages in education (Musitha & Tshibalo, 2016). This stance is incompatible with student movements' advocacy for the use of African languages for instruction in HEIs, consistent with calls for the decolonisation of the institutions (Mayaba et al., 2018; Mwaniki et al., 2018).

An interesting dynamic emerged relating to the proposed scrapping of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction at the HWHEI during *#AfrikaansMustFall* protests that had occurred before the study. Some Black HWHEI participants empathised with the Afrikaans students' cause, considering the potentially negative implications of the scrapping of Afrikaans; others supported the protests. While the scrapping would disadvantage Afrikaans students, it would not necessarily render Black students better off. Moreover, first-language English speakers would continue to benefit from mother-tongue instruction, therefore refuting the assumption of collective "suffering," as suggested by some participants. Perhaps, in realisation of the commodification of English and Afrikaans, students who favoured the scrapping of Afrikaans considered this one less privilege associated with Whiteness. This might also stem from the language's age-old association with Afrikaner nationalism and its notoriety as "the language of the oppressor" (Alexander, 2003, p. 14), and therefore, the perception thereof as symbolically oppressive.

Black HWHEI participants reported on lecturers addressing White, Afrikaans-speaking students in Afrikaans in supposedly English lectures, and more affable treatment of Afrikaans students by tutors. The South African Human Rights' Commission's (n.d.) report on transformation in South African public universities has noted that some HWHEIs use Afrikaans to deliberately exclude non-Afrikaans-speaking students—the majority of whom are Black. Greenfield (2010) has reported similar findings at CPUT. These practices illustrate not only disregard for English-speaking students' engagement with academic material, but also weaponization of the Afrikaans language as an instrument of racial discrimination at historically White and Afrikaans HEIs. This also subscribes to Pérez Huber and Solorzano's (2015) notion of racial microaggressions—which the above-mentioned findings can be classified as—serving "to keep those at the racial margins in their place" (p. 6).

The preceding discussion illustrates, as per tenets of critical race theory, the notion of Whiteness as a commodity or property (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Patton et al., 2007) that can be bartered (Harris, 1993) in exchange for access to various resources and privileges. For White, Afrikaans- and English-speaking study participants, the latter included the option of mother-tongue education. This was due to institutional and structural bestowal of privilege onto the two languages in the South African education system, to the exclusion of African languages that are spoken by the South African Black majority. Moreover, Black HWHEI participants considered Afrikaans to foster positive interactions between Afrikaans students, tutors and lecturers. These lecturers also addressed Afrikaans students in Afrikaans in English lectures, while Afrikaans tutors provided a visibly better tutorial experience to Afrikaans students, from Black students' perspective. Thus, the Afrikaans language granted these students distinct academic advantage and a form of social capital at the institution.

The critical race theory principle of racism as normal (Ladson-Billings, 2013) was also demonstrated by the systemic legitimisation of English and Afrikaans as sole media of instruction in higher and basic education, contrasting with the exclusion of African languages. Further demonstrating the normalcy of racism, this was seemingly co-opted by Black HWHEI participants. Some preferred an English medium of instruction, despite its negative implications on their immediate academic prospects. Others paradoxically argued for at least temporary concession for Afrikaans as a medium of instruction and empathised with Afrikaans students' cause, while not advocating for instruction in African languages to the same degree as Afrikaans or English.

Broadly, in line with critical race theory, variations in the academic experiences of Black and White students in relation to language disproved the notions of equal opportunity, meritocracy and race neutrality. Rather, students' academic and related experiences, based on language, were essentially racialised, with their academic prospects advanced or thwarted accordingly (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Mitchell, 2013).

At an interpersonal level, language was largely used to establish exclusive intra-ethnic and intra-racial relationships, and to perpetuate discrimination on these grounds. To a smaller degree, language was used as an assimilatory tool, illustrated by attempts to foster linguistically inclusive interpersonal environments. Ethnic discrimination particularly among Black participants was exclusive to the HBHEI. This is compatible with reports of the prevalence of ethnic discrimination and xenophobia in HBHEIs (DHET, 2016). This might be due to HBHEIs typically having a predominantly Black student constituency, with race not posing as a significant threat (Leibowitz et al., 2005) at least at an interpersonal level. In the absence of inter-racial contestations in largely racially homogenous contexts, intra-racial, inter-ethnic

contestations may prevail. Some studies have suggested that greater heterogeneity can negatively affect social trust (e.g., Putnam, 2007; Van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). Thus, ethnic heterogeneity, compounded by majority race group status in a largely racially homogenous HBHEI, may open up opportunities for low inter-ethnic social trust and, therefore, inter-ethnic discrimination and a disinclination towards resource sharing.

Conclusion

The study findings demonstrated the myriad of ways in which language is used at two South African HEIs, and students' experiences in relation to these, and that particularly, language and its use are not apolitical or raceless. Rather, structural dynamics relating to different languages and to speakers and non-speakers of these—underpinned by their respective, associated races—are carried over into micro-contexts such as the university context. Herein, these dynamics inform the capitalisation or devaluation of different languages—readily illustrated by which serve as media of instruction—in accordance with the social and cultural capital accorded to them in the broader society. These dynamics also inform the extent of privilege afforded to speakers of these languages, based on the languages' racialised status in the broader context, ultimately shaping the experiences and academic prospects of students in South African HEIs. At an interpersonal level, language was also largely used to perpetuate inter-ethnic and inter-racial discrimination and, to a smaller degree, as an assimilatory tool.

We identified some study limitations. We did not obtain data on participants' proficiency in the medium of instruction or the LOLT used in basic education. Therefore, we could not legitimately draw links between these variables and participants' preferred media of instruction in higher education or views regarding the adoption of African languages as media of instruction, or meaningful incorporation thereof in higher education.

Overall, this study showed persisting linguistic—and by inference, racial—exclusion at the two South African HEIs under study. Structural bestowal of capital onto English and Afrikaans throughout the South African education system, coupled with systematic devaluation of African languages in this context, precludes equal participation and chances of academic success for HEIs' linguistically diverse student constituencies. Moreover, efforts to assimilate in English-medium HEIs by White, Afrikaans-speaking and Black students, in consideration of their ability to compete in the international job market—even if to the detriment of their immediate academic success—suggest implications of the global hegemony of English on Afrikaner and Black subjectivities. Future studies could explore this further, while considering the historical and current status of African languages in education, and the Afrikaans language's loss of political capital and its image in post-apartheid South Africa.

We recommend that South African HEIs heed calls to meaningfully incorporate African languages into their curricula and systems, and effectively channel resources towards their adoption as media of instruction. To demonstrate their commitment to transformation, HEIs have a responsibility to reflect the diversity of their student constituencies and their encompassing national context. Not only is a truly multilingual education system Constitutionally mandated, but it would also legitimise the standing of African languages as vehicles of knowledge. This would enable African students to thrive in higher education contexts, as opposed to constantly negotiating their identities in an effort to assimilate academically and culturally. We also recommend that HBHEIs actively cultivate inter-ethnic cohesion, to counter ethnic prejudice at these institutions.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, T.A.T., upon reasonable request.

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