



# Decolonising and transforming curricula for teaching linguistics and language in South Africa: Taking stock and charting the way forward



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The #RhodesMustFall (RMF) protests at South African universities (2015–2018) were the publicly visible manifestation of deep epistemic problems in the higher education (HE) sector, particularly around questions of whose knowledges are validated and whether these are reflective of students' lived realities. This exploratory research attempted a snapshot of the state of curriculum transformation of the linguistic language disciplines in South Africa and to identify areas that require more attention. The authors focus on curriculum underpinning the teaching of linguistics and language-related disciplines. The study takes place at HE institutions in South Africa against the backdrop of substantial academic and public engagement around epistemic access in the HE sector. The authors used an anonymous questionnaire distributed among a purposive sample of 32 HE academics within the linguistics and language studies disciplines to elicit views around university curriculum transformation and decolonisation with particular focus on linguistic language disciplines curricula. Generally, practitioners indicate that there have been substantial changes in the disciplines over the past 10 years. There have also been notable achievements with respect to building broad curricula that are responsive to student needs and which balance the need to equip students to engage in global conversations while also being embedded in the contextual realities of South Africa, the African continent and students' lived experiences.

**Contribution:** The authors conclude that although transformation has progressed considerably in key areas, the representativity of languages and theoretical approaches remain areas for development. The authors also highlight how disciplinary curricular choices are value-driven and that contestations around which values are to be validated may inhibit curricular transformation. In these contexts, individual agency around curricular choices is important.

**Keywords:** transformation; higher education; linguistics; curriculum; instructor perceptions; curriculum transformation; agency; decolonisation.

## Introduction

Transformation and decolonisation of university curricula have become an integral part of epistemic access and social justice internationally. While this is an international trend, the stakes in South Africa are particularly high given the urgent need for historical redress, gross levels of inequality, as well as the importance of developing a critically informed and educated citizenry with a decent quality of life. The study of language (through linguistics, applied linguistics, language teaching and language practice studies) is potentially an important area of contestation within this broader movement: language is an important life resource and importantly, is an integral part of daily activities, life, culture and identity. Thus, the teaching of linguistic and language disciplines has the potential both for empowering people with tools to understand their linguistic worlds and their place in it or – if we get it wrong – for alienating people from these and entrenching the colonial notion that their languages, linguistic identities and experiences are not worthy of academic inquiry.

In this study, the authors attempt to provide an overview of strategies of curriculum transformation in linguistics, applied linguistics and language departments across South Africa.<sup>1</sup> The article analyses how curricular variables – such as empowering students, reflections on change, the degree to which transformation is perceived as having been achieved, level of representation of local and diverse epistemologies and visibility of languages in the curriculum – are positioned in curricula for the teaching linguistics, applied linguistics and language and, among other things,

1. We acknowledge the differences between the terms 'transformation' and 'decolonisation'. We choose to use the term 'transformation' to reflect a more general set of changes and 'decolonisation' for the more specific project.

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show that transformation is not necessarily a unitary concept but that is highly contested and is approached in different ways according to the contexts that departments and academics find themselves in. In particular, there are competing discourses around transformation with respect to language and a responsibility to a global community of researchers that many academics find difficult to navigate. Consequently, we are still only beginning to grapple with what transformation and decolonisation may mean for our curricula and there is a need for ongoing reflection and discussion around these issues. Many of these issues are not unique to South Africa and thus may be generalizable beyond South Africa to both former colonies as well as to formerly colonizing countries. The empirical nature and focus on linguistic curricula in South Africa make this study the first on this important aspect of the literature on transformation in higher education (HE) and the authors hope it this study may initiate a wider debate.

## Literature review

At the outset, it is essential to acknowledge that the South African decolonisation conversation resonates with long-standing discussions and struggles around language and education throughout the (de)colonial world (see e.g. Chen 2010; Fitznor 2018; Hornberger & Limerick 2018; Kanywany 1989; Mamdani 2019; Mazrui 2005; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986; Parker 2019; Sullivan, Langum & Cocq 2018).

It is also important to note that although the #Rhodesmustfall (RMF) protests at formerly white, prestigious universities captured the popular imagination, and perhaps more significantly, the attention of the media, the protests themselves are probably best seen in terms of continuity of a long tradition of protest. Student protests have been common at Historically Black Institutions (HBIs) since the '90s, themselves an extension of the long tradition of anti-apartheid protests in education (Cele & Koen 2003). It is therefore important not to adopt an ahistorical or exceptionalist perspective of the 2015 protests merely because the protests infringed on the formerly white spaces of prestigious, historically advantaged universities.

These protests were the publicly visible manifestation of deep problems in the HE sector, which persist even as demographics have become more reflective of South African society. For example, the number of participants in HE increased from 480 000 in 1995 to 980 000 in 2014 (Universities South Africa 2015). By 2012, the student population had become much more representative, consisting of 80% black and 18% white students (Universities South Africa 2015). Although participation rates rose to 19% overall by 2012, participation rates among white people (55%) and Indian (47%) students were comparatively higher than for African (16%) and Coloured<sup>2</sup> (14%) students (Universities South Africa 2015) showing the persistence of structural inequalities involving access to HE.

<sup>2</sup>The terms Indian, African and Coloured refers to categories used in the report, as per the South African Employment Equity Act, 1998 (chapter 1[55]), when referring to race.

It is widely acknowledged that despite progress in removing structural barriers to participation, the epistemic experience offered by HEI institutions was steeped in 'recalcitrant colonial-apartheid values and whiteness culture (euro centrism) [*and that*] every study or report undertaken so far, has described the culture as — alienating, disempowering with pervasive racism' (Ministerial Oversight Committee 2015:3). It is the epistemic orientations towards 'Eurocentric, racist, and sexist knowledge at untransformed institutions... [*that*] is at the heart of the experience of alienation at the university' (Fataar 2018:vi).

## A national response to curriculum transformation in linguistics: The Linguistics Society of Southern Africa and Southern African Applied Linguistics Association transformation workshops and their context

The need to reflexively reconsider linguistics and language curricula was recognized formally by the Linguistics Society of Southern Africa (LSSA) and Southern African Applied Linguistics Association (SAALA) who jointly hosted a curriculum workshop at Rhodes University from 20 to 22 January 2016 and again from 18 to 19 January 2018 at the University of the Free State, as well as a panel discussion at the Joint Annual Conference (2016).

The workshops explored issues of transformation, specifically grappling with what constitutes a transformed linguistics or language curriculum and how transformation can be implemented in discipline-specific ways. The workshops resulted in a set of draft resolutions<sup>3</sup> covering issues such as characteristics of transformation, transformation in curriculum, research and knowledge production, etc. While the document can be critiqued on its own terms for what it includes and excludes, it is significant in that it was one of the few national responses by an academic discipline (or a set of related disciplines) at that time. It is also significant that it presented a consensus view from within the discipline(s) but nevertheless makes room for other interpretations of the decolonisation project. Although a full analysis of this important document is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth pointing out a number of important themes that run through it.

### People focussed agency

Every department should be welcoming and inclusive spaces for all staff, especially those from previously disadvantaged groups, to achieve their full potential. Placing people at the centre of the transformation project necessarily requires that they be active agents in the process of implementing transformative curriculum change in a reflexive manner and that students become active agents in the creation of knowledge (Le Grange 2014; Mahabeer 2018; Naudé 2019).

### The importance of diversity

People live in a diverse and intersectional world at societal, linguistic and disciplinary levels. Language curricula should

<sup>3</sup>The resolutions are available at: <https://salas.org.za/2019/03/25/resolutions-of-the-first-transformation-in-linguistics-summit-2016/> [accessed 11 March 2022].

therefore be tailored to ensure that students are empowered to explore their linguistic world and to equip them 'with the tools to understand the languages they speak and the linguistic contexts they navigate every day' (Mesthrie et al. 2018:291).

### Knowledge production

The theoretical emphasis in writing and selection of research for use in teaching and supervision often serves to privilege the Global North, in particular the international Anglophone research community. Consequently, it is relevant to ask 'to what extent are our curricula uniquely African and to what extent do they reflect African realities?' (Mesthrie et al. 2018:291) without constant recourse to the Global North.

### A broad view of curriculum

Curriculum goes beyond mere syllabus content to encompass the totality of structured learning experiences, which is necessarily replete with socio-scientific and political choices about what to include and exclude, assessment, power relations between student and lecturer and expectations of each, etc. Syllabus content is thus only one dimension of a much larger curricular landscape.

### Transformation as a continually ongoing process of balancing of multiple voices

There exist competing demands at disciplinary, institutional and departmental levels, for example, historical redress, student numbers, staffing, space, finances, objects of study, alignment of curricula across multiple campuses, etc. These are often driven by different agendas, values and/or value-driven positionings: for example localization versus internationalization; transformation versus decolonisation; promoting indigenous languages versus English for the workplace; South-Africa-centrism versus Pan-Africanism; citing local research versus citing the global disciplinary discourse; privileging disciplinary voices versus transdisciplinary voices, etc. Departments, depending on their contexts and driving concerns and while acknowledging their positioning in Africa, may choose different ways of navigating these complex and intersecting voices to develop transformational responses.

### Decolonisation and curricular choices

In South Africa and abroad, there is a lively academic debate around the role of language and linguistic issues in decolonisation, with more recent and forthcoming work examining a broader range of linguistic subfields (Agyekum 2018; eds. Bock & Stroud 2021; eds. Charity Hudley, Mallinson & Bucholtz in press; eds. Deumert, Storch & Shepherd 2020; eds. Kaschula & Wolff 2020; Leonard 2018; Rudwick & Makoni 2021; among others). Importantly, Dyers and Antia (2019) discuss their attempts to implement transformation of one linguistics module at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) by changing which language(s) it is offered in. However, to the best of the authors' knowledge there has been no other work that examines

the transformation of linguistics and language curricula as a whole either in Southern Africa or elsewhere prior to the study reported on here.

Curriculum is replete with value-laden choices – what to include, what to exclude, how to contextualize issues, what is valued and what is less valued, etc. (cf. Bernstein 1975; Fraser, Loubser & Van Rooy 1993; Shay et al. 2016 inter alia). These choices are indexed by broad sets of value-driven and philosophical underpinnings. As universities are intellectually complex spaces, developed over long periods of time, they represent accretions 'Knowledge Regimes' of differing motives and value-driven positionings (Jansen 2019).

One way of thinking about these groupings of ideas draws on the analytical device of constellations (Maton 2014). Constellations refer to the dynamic relationships and associations between mutually reinforcing values and knowledges, principles and worldviews that may be coherent or at odds with one another and which, in the case of decolonisation and transformation, motivate views of education, 'The University', and what ends these serve. Depending on what constellations are at play, different choices will be made around objects of study, subjects of study and narrow syllabus content, subjectivities of study, situatedness of study and pedagogies of study.

For example, there is a powerful constellation underpinning HE internationally including classical humanism, scientism and empiricism. Closely allied to the European enlightenment project, it constructs universities as spaces for rational debate and discovering the 'truth' for its own sake or for maximizing human potential. More recently, neoliberal and managerial perspectives have become very prevalent in HE. These constellations seek to construct universities knowledge production engines that both prepare workers for the workplace and use public funding to produce both public and private knowledges to be applied for private gain; all the while increasing fees and declining subsidies to universities and controlling staff and students through managerial processes and the 'technology of performativity' (Le Grange 2019:30) such as audits, reports, quality assurance frameworks, performance and risk management systems.

Additionally, within the South African context, from 1994 to the present, narratives around transformation in the formal economy and HE have largely been government-driven and informed by values of the developmental state, democratic pluralism, multiculturalism and nationalism. This approach dictated a focus on demographics of staff and students, equity in contracts and conditions of service etc. – what is called 'First Level Indigenization' by Hoppers (2009) in Soudien (2019). These value-driven choices also dictate that curricula are constructed as important sites of creation of national identity and developing critically engaged citizens capable of engaging productively in a new, post-apartheid democracy (Paphitis & Kelland 2016). Choices reflecting this approach affect pedagogy (particularly emphasis in humanities on critical thinking, essay writing, and to some

extent multilingualism and translanguaging in education, etc.), and situatedness of study in formal, state-sponsored university classrooms favouring hierarchical power relations.

It was as a critique of these constellations and their failure to drive deeper epistemic shifts that the RMF movement used the term decolonisation. However, as the nature of decolonisation itself has emerged as a site of struggle and negotiation it becomes useful as an 'floating signifier' where one can read a number of attributes into it thus 'allow[ing] symbolic thought to operate despite the contradiction inherent in it' (Levi-Strauss in Mehlman 1972:23) thus situating it as a site of productive, dialectic struggle. For example, the 'UCT Science' video (Henderson 2016) briefly explored the idea of epistemologies of spiritual belief in relation to *Umhlab'uyalingana* 'traditional magic'. Other approaches include ethnic nationalism, radical state nationalism, socialism (Mamdani 2019), Pan-Africanism (Auerbach 2019), Afrocentrism (Sesanti 2018) and Ubuntu(-currere) (Le Grange 2014), intersectionality (Rhodes Must Fall 2015), critical universalism (Fataar 2018; Nyamnjoh 2016), to name a few. This is not an exhaustive list and the authors do not take any particular position on any of these, nor on whether they are mutually compatible or not, nor on which constitute the 'correct', current or received interpretations of decolonisation – the authors merely point out descriptively that these have been read onto the floating signifier of decolonisation at various points.

Drawing on the two analytical devices of floating signifiers and constellations the authors can recognize decolonisation as a healthy site of semiotic struggle characterized by dynamically shifting sets of assumptions, values, etc. It is the positionings offered by these that affects the choices made about decolonisation in the broader curriculum.

### Some considerations and limitations

There are some shortcomings in this research that the authors will point out. The aim of this research is to obtain an overview of curricular transformation as perceived by academics rather than to provide a comprehensive picture of every department. While the input is obtained from many institutions, and despite the fact that the questionnaire was distributed as widely as possible, there is significantly less input from staff at HBIs (only two HBIs are explicitly identified in the responses) than especially staff at formerly white universities (seven such institutions are explicitly identified) as such this work has a blind spot to the experiences of academics in HBIs (see also Jansen 2019:60). The authors also want to point out that the research was not oriented towards the student experience. Nor does it cover broad issues of teaching (e.g. styles, methods, classroom management, etc.). Such an expanded scope would have been beyond the resources available for this research and would also have presented a fundamentally different set of research questions (but see Gibson et al. 2021, which examines student experiences of African languages and decolonising the curriculum).

Linguistics and applied linguistics are complex of subdisciplines which are constantly being renegotiated. As such, it is necessary to point out that the work in this article limits itself to disciplinary language curricula (e.g. applied linguistics, language teaching, language practice and general linguistics): it does not cover literature curricula, nor does it cover general issues of language within HE in general, for example, language of teaching and learning, language policies, language use in society, etc. The focus in this article by the authors is entirely on choices around disciplinary linguistics and language curricula in South African HE institutions. Lastly, while the authors we aimed the survey questions to broadly cover the field, they recognize that they were influenced by their own subdisciplines and teaching in general and formal linguistics and some participants did not find all of them relevant to their own contexts.

## Research methods and design

The authors sought to answer two main research questions:

- What is the state of curricular transformation in the linguistics and language disciplines.
- In what terms do subject specialists articulate transformational desiderata?

In order to obtain an overview of linguistics and language curriculum transformation, the authors followed a mixed methods, quantitative and qualitative design, specifically a triangulating one-phase concurrent validating quantitative design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007). A triangulating mixed methods design aims to use different data types to explore multiple aspects of the phenomenon under study. The data were collected concurrently within a single elicitation session. In this study, the primary data is quantitative in nature and the authors use qualitative data to 'validate and expand on' (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007:65) the quantitative data.

The primary data collection tool was an anonymous, online questionnaire drawing on areas broadly from the LSSA and the SAALA 'Resolutions of the First Transformation in Linguistics Summit 2016' document (LSSA & SAALA 2016). The questionnaire included both fixed response (e.g. Likert-type scales, checkboxes) as well as open-ended textual responses. The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms and was anonymous. The authors developed two sets of questions: one aimed at individuals and one aimed at heads of department. Participants could also complete both if they wished to.

### Study population and sampling strategy

Participants<sup>4</sup> were required to be affiliated, employed (fulltime, part-time or contract) academic staff in any HE institution in Southern Africa or be present or former students of such institutions. Participants also needed to be identify

<sup>4</sup>To protect the anonymity of participants limited participant identifiers have been provided.



with a linguistics or language-related discipline (including linguistics, applied linguistics, language practice and language teaching – but excluding literary studies). Participants were recruited as a purposive sample (e.g. all original participants in the 2016 and 2018 workshops; all members of SAALA and LSSA; and as many heads of departments of departments of linguistics and/or language studies as possible); participation was also invited via social media channels such as the Facebook pages of SAALA and LSSA. Participants were also encouraged to invite their networks. Two participants were excluded from the data set because they selected the option ‘I do not want to participate’. In total, the authors received 32 completed questionnaires including six completed on behalf of a department, school or organization and 26 from individuals.

The participants included six postgraduate students (19%), seven lecturers (22%), five senior lecturers (16%), five professors (16%) and two heads of department (6%). Sixty-nine per cent indicated their highest qualification to be a Ph.D. Twenty-three per cent held a master’s degree and 8% an Honours degree. Fifty-eight per cent had spent 10 years or more as an ‘active Language academic’. The smallest amount of time reported as spent in the field was 4 years (11%) with the remaining participants being evenly spread out between 4 and 10 years. Together the survey respondents represented nine HE institutions (RU, UWC, UP, Stellenbosch, University of Botswana, NWU, UFS, UNISA, UniVen) and department types (e.g. Linguistics, English, Afrikaans & Dutch, Academic Communication, Translation Studies, Modern Languages, Literature, African Languages and Culture). Half of the respondents indicated that they taught language-specific courses and half taught general courses that are not linked to any specific language. The respondents were thus highly qualified, experienced academics representative of a wide range of language disciplines in traditional universities across South Africa.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by both Rhodes University (RUESC 91691) and the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2018/1120). Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

## Findings

Participants responded on Likert-type scales to stimuli in the following clusters: whether their curricula were empowering (Table 1), curriculum change over the past decade (Table 2), areas of curriculum transformation (Table 3), the epistemologies privileged by curricula (Table 4) and language in the curriculum (Table 5). Fifty-

**TABLE 1:** Perceptions on empowering students.

Question	A lot	Not much
How effective is the framework at equipping students to become effective knowledge producers?	72	4
How effective is the framework in equipping students with transferable skills (e.g. skills used in the workplace and/or skills used in research in general)?	64	12
To what extent is there evidence that your curriculum empowers students to ultimately produce research and knowledge?	44	8
To what extent is there evidence that your curriculum empowers students to be active agents in their own learning?	40	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>7%</b>

**TABLE 2:** Reflections on curricular change summarized and represented as percentages of responses.

Over the past 10 years, to what extent	Significant changes	No significant changes
Have you changed the types of sources you draw on to reflect a more African focus in your teaching?	44	28
Have you changed the main theoretical frameworks you draw on?	48	28
Have African languages become increasingly more visible in the curriculum for the courses you teach?	44	44
Has your classroom practice become more responsive to student needs?	52	24
Has your assessment practice changed to promote formative assessment?	56	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>48.8%</b>	<b>28.8%</b>

**TABLE 3:** Degree to which transformation is perceived as having been achieved.

Area of transformation	More transformed	Working on it	Less transformed
Degree of formative assessment	25	67	8
Relevance of curriculum to a global community of academics (e.g. linguists, applied linguists, language teachers, etc.)	24	72	4
Relevance of curriculum to students’ daily lived experiences	16	72	12
Student-centred curriculum	8	80	12
Visibility of African languages	16	60	24
Visibility of theory produced by Africans	0	68	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>16.7%</b>	<b>67.2%</b>	<b>16%</b>

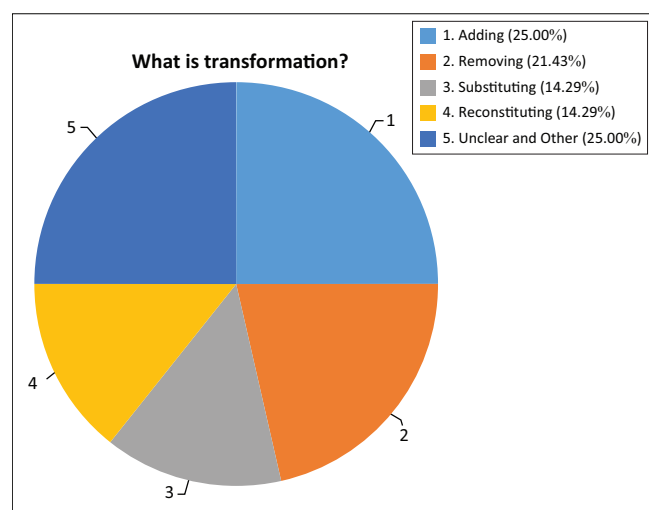
**TABLE 4:** Level of representation of local and diverse epistemologies in the curriculum in percent of responses.

Reflections on visibility and frameworks	A lot	Very little
To what extent does your main theoretical framework relate to a global community of scholars?	84	0
How prevalent are African scholars in the main frameworks you teach?	28	28
How influential have African scholars been in your chosen framework or in particular significant areas of the framework?	28	28
To what extent are students exposed to scholarship that validates ideas and identities without constant recourse to the Global North?	52	24

five per cent indicated that curricula were empowering to students. Sixty-seven per cent responded that implementation of curricula transformation is an ongoing process. Fifty-two per cent responded that diversity of epistemological representation was greater. With respect to

**TABLE 5:** Visibility of languages in the curriculum.

Estimate the visibility of languages from the following groups in the courses you teach	To a greater extent	To a lesser extent
English and Afrikaans	88	8
Other South African official languages	28	36
Foreign languages	16	64
Other African languages	12	76
Constitutional minority languages	8	80
Khoisan languages	8	72

**FIGURE 1:** Stances on curriculum transformation.

language in the curriculum, 88% indicated that English and Afrikaans were highly visible in curricular choices while only 24% expressed that other South African languages were highly visible.

## Discussion

Quantitative findings corresponding to research question: (1) are discussed in section 'Discussion of quantitative data: An overview of the state of transformation in the language disciplines'. This study's qualitative findings and discussion corresponding to research question (2) are presented in an integrated form in section 'Qualitative findings and discussion – Perspectives on curriculum transformation'.

### Discussion of quantitative data: An overview of the state of transformation in the language disciplines

Decolonisation entails breaking cycles of epistemic dependency that position the Global North and 'the teacher' as creators and curators of knowledge while Southern students are positioned as nothing more than consumers or 'learners'. Heleta (2016) describes the status quo in South Africa HE as follows:

Most universities still follow the hegemonic 'Eurocentric epistemic canon' that 'attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production' (Mbembe 2016:32). Such a curriculum does not develop students' critical and analytical skills to understand and move the African continent forward. Gqola (2008:222) asserts that since 1994, South African universities have

not done nearly enough to open their students' horizons about Africa. (p. 4)

These types of issues are reflected in this study's results. While certainly some steps have been taken, the discussion in this section shows that too little deeper change has occurred to date and provides multiple examples of the tensions surrounding curriculum change and resistance to decolonisation by some academics in the language disciplines.

Participants in this study responded about the degree to which their epistemic frameworks, and more broadly, their curricula were empowering (Table 1). Most (55%) indicated that their curricular frameworks empowered students to become active agents (Le Grange 2014; Mahabeer 2018; Naudé 2019) in their learning and production of knowledge and equipped them with skills that could be used in other knowledge domains.

Responding to eurocentrism, racism and whiteness culture embedded in curricula (Fataar 2018), there is a perception that curricula have changed over the past decade with respect to a variety of issues affecting the transformation project such as a more contextualized, African focus, theoretical underpinnings and becoming responsive to a greater diversity of voices (Table 2). In most areas, a sizeable number indicated that they had witnessed significant change in these areas. Forty-eight per cent reported that there had been significant (positive) changes and 28% had not. One exception to the trend is that while 44% indicated the improved visibility of African languages in the curriculum, 44% indicated that this had not changed. The authors will return to this issue shortly.

The respondents in this study were also asked directly about areas of curriculum transformation (Table 3). Unsurprisingly, most (67%) indicated that the transformation of their courses was an ongoing process. Areas where significant progress has been made are the degree of formative assessment and internationalization – these are also areas promoted by the mainstream constellations discussed in section 'Some considerations and limitations' above. Less progress has been made in areas of making the curriculum relevant to students' daily lived experience, including the fact that they live in a multilingual linguistic world characterized by African languages among others (Mesthrie et al. 2018) – this is consistent with data in Table 1. Finally, least progress has been made in drawing on Southern, particularly African theoretical voices. It is these areas which are the focus of the decolonisation constellation which includes voices around Africanization and re-centring around indigenous experiences (Auerbach 2019; Fitznor 2018; Sesanti 2018, among others):

The recentred curriculum, which is African, is both an expression of political struggle for agency as well as an assertion and validation of African identity. It is a curriculum that 'critically

centres Africa and the subaltern... treating African discourses as the point of departure.' (Mungwini 2016:525 in Sayed & Motala 2019:162)

An integral part of the transformation project is to problematize the very nature of knowledge and its production (Cloete & Maasen 2015). Accordingly, the authors asked the respondents about the theoretical frameworks they privileged in curricula (Table 4). It is immediately apparent that most (84%) of theoretical frameworks were international in nature with moderate to low input from African scholars (28%). About half (52%) agreed that students were exposed to African scholarship without constant recourse to the Global North – importantly, about half (48%) did not. This suggests that curriculum is driven by neoliberal values associated with internationalization. It is clear that much work remains to be done in this area.

An integral part of curricular transformation in language studies relates to language (and language phenomena) as objects of study in their own right (e.g. through exemplification, case studies, etc.) (Table 5). The previous data have already indicated that visibility of African languages in the curriculum may be an area for improvement. Importantly, disciplinary boundaries play a significant role here: in general linguistics there is considerable room for reference to multiple languages since these are the disciplinary objects of study. In contrast, in language teaching (e.g. English, French) there is much less flexibility with respect to including additional languages – although one could still include African varieties of these languages (see discussion of Afrikaans below).

The respondents indicated that English and Afrikaans remain by far the most visible languages in curricula (88%) followed by other official languages of the Republic (28%). Notably, other African languages, including Khoisan languages and minority languages, are underrepresented. From this, the authors might infer that there is a moderate attempt to be more inclusive of official South African languages. The disproportionate focus on South African official languages may indicate that transformation seems to be driven by the political agendas of the nation state as opposed to the need to give a voice to the disenfranchised, minority and subaltern groups – or broader voices of the Global South. This analysis is supported by the fact that quantitative data in this study shows that transformation is most progressed in areas that are consistent with the value constellations or knowledge regimes (Jansen 2019; Maton 2014) identified in section 'Some considerations and limitations', associated with neoliberal and nation-state imperatives. In contrast, transformation appears to lag in areas associated with localization, Africanization, African voices and perspectives suggesting that there is contestation around the values underpinning differing conceptions of curricular transformation.

The fact that these curricular choices are ultimately value-driven was recognized by several respondents – although

not all agreed on which set of values ought to be prioritized. Also consistent with the notion of decolonisation as a floating signifier is the way the following respondent was able to read into it the assumptions necessary for their particular straw man argument, which can then be characterized as '*ridiculous*':

'I think the idea that Courses necessarily have to focus on African languages simply shows some bad assumptions being made about the courses. What is the point of giving Zulu examples in a case study of isolating languages? What point is there in bringing up African languages when teaching beginner's German? given the above points, a person teaching a course in Old English literature would have to conclude that their course was bad and should be done away with on the basis that it was not African enough. That is ridiculous. Courses are there to teach people about a particular subject area, not pander to certain people's value-driven outlooks.' [Respondent]

Similarly, some respondents raised the issue of the status of Afrikaans as part of the transformation project with respect to the question: 'To what extent does the curriculum for the courses you teach mainly refer to a hegemonic language (e.g. Standard English or Standard Afrikaans)?' As one respondent wrote 'I have a massive issue with your referring to Afrikaans as a "hegemonic" language. You really should know better or, at the very least, be more nuanced'. Another participant expressed similar thoughts:

'How can Afrikaans be seen as a hegemonic language if the majority of its speakers are NOT white? Do brown and black mother-tongue speakers of Afrikaans not find it insulting when their home language is referred to as hegemonic? It means they have been overlooked as a demographic.' [Respondent]

This is an interesting result given the historical and cultural prominence that (Eastern) Standard Afrikaans has enjoyed certainly since 1925 and particularly after 1948 and the role of the apartheid state in promoting and racializing its use, etc.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is worth noting that the variety of Afrikaans used and validated in HE contexts remains almost uniformly the standard variety, which is also not necessarily the same variety spoken by the majority 'brown and black mother tongue speakers of Afrikaans' [Respondent]. Once again it is evident that decolonisation acts as a floating signifier onto which respondents can then read their own values and subjectivities.

This issue is picked up by another respondent who noted:

'My courses are in and about Afrikaans linguistics, but I aim to include diverse perspectives on language, and very deliberately include material and examples on and from different varieties of Afrikaans, not just the standard; occasionally there are opportunities to include reference to and examples from African languages.' [Respondent]

The authors' view is that *any* curricular choices about linguistic objects of study and the associated choices about how to elucidate those are inherently value-driven and informed by tacit disciplinary assumptions about what are

5. We do not intend to engage on the issue of its hegemonic status here, merely noting that there remains considerable sensitivity around Afrikaans and its continued contested relation to the decolonisation project.

valid objects of study and which are not. It is this point which is foregrounded in epistemic orientations towards transformation. The above quote shows that lecturers retain agency in making important, value-driven choices about how they engage with the languages that they study: it is perfectly feasible to construct a decolonised curriculum around languages with contested histories and semiotics – perhaps it is all the more important to do so. However, in doing so, one might run up against some disciplinary values about what knowledges are validated and what are not. The authors suggest that bringing these constellations to light is an important goal of the decolonisation project and that it is important that lecturers and departments be able to identify and articulate the constellations that underpin their particular approaches to curricular change.

### Qualitative findings and discussion – Perspectives on curriculum transformation

The following section presents the combined qualitative findings and discussion around how the respondents chose to articulate their understanding of transformation.

Before transformation can proceed it requires self-reflection:

Decolonising the curriculum is, first of all, the acceptance that education, literary or otherwise, needs to enable self-understanding. This is particularly important to people not used to seeing themselves reflected in the mirror of conventional learning – whether women, gay people, disabled people, the working classes or ethnic minorities. (Gopal 2017)

To this end, the authors asked respondents to characterize their view of curriculum transformation: 'What is your personal view about what transformation is?' Responses were coded according to whether the approaches were additive (25%), subtractive (22%), substituting (14%) and reconstituting (14%). Each successive phase requires a deeper engagement with curriculum and can be mixed in various ways to constitute a set of transformative curricular choices.

Adding to a curriculum entails expanding curriculum content to include areas that were previously de-emphasized or not covered at all (*supplement, including, incorporating, greater focus*). Additions tended to focus on an additive approach to pedagogy and languages of teaching and learning; expanding focus on formal studies of indigenous languages as well as including more material from the Global South. Examples from responses are quoted below:

- 'the use of languages other than English to *supplement* the normal English lectures and a drive to *incorporate* scholarship from the Linguistic "South."'
- '... *including* languages previously not used as pedagogical resources. For example in SA, the issue revolves highly around *including* the other 10 official languages and learning material.'
- '... *incorporating* contributions from the Global south into research, and teaching and learning...'

- 'greater focus on structures (phonetics and/or morphology and/or syntax) and comparative aspects of southern African languages.'

Again, these responses largely imply an incomplete understanding of transforming the curriculum, which is limited to South Africa's official languages, rather than a more complete understanding of the linguistic ecology of South Africa within the broader regional and global context. Moreover, in these responses the authors see the broader limitations of the 'addition approach' which has been noted as supporting the maintenance of the status quo where 'Eurocentric worldviews are still dominant in the university curriculum, but an "African" voice is inserted to claim that transformation is taking place' (Zembylas 2018:4).

Removing (*removing, moving away, less, throw off*) entails making curricular choices to remove certain subject matter, particularly when it is seen as being rooted in a colonial-historical or whiteness context.

- '... make learning more accessible, promoting epistemic access, *removing barriers* (e.g. institutional racism) that could prevent success. In other words, it attempts to *make* the university a genuinely free space where everybody can thrive.'
- '*Moving away* from Eurocentric views, theories and methodologies ...'
- '... a drive to *make Things less White* ...'
- '... *throw off the yoke* of British Imperialism and its aftermath ...'

Curriculum can also be transformed through substitution of one set of curriculum choices with another (*moving away, transforming, undo, working towards, replacing, changing*):

- '*Moving away* from colonized language teaching and *transforming* to contemporary and new unfolding language teaching trends.'
- '... try to relate HE to Africa as its context (in space and time) and that try to *undo* the structural injustice of the past by *working towards* social justice.'
- '... *removing or toning down* "Northern Theory," and *replacing* it with "Southern Theory" and *changing* the focus away from English to South African languages, or within English, the focus to South African varieties of English.'

Reconstituting is arguably the most difficult and deepest approach to curriculum transformation of the ones the authors have considered. On the one hand, it involves considered questioning of existing knowledges (*evaluate, rethinking, troubling and destabilizing*) while also creating something new (*develop, reimagining, merge*):

- '*carefully evaluate* which concepts are useful, so as to *make meaningful use* of relevant and appropriate previous (not reinvent the wheel where a workable model already exists), and *develop* new constructs for matters that are not adequately accounted for by existing work'.



- 'merging what we already know with African theories and practices.'
- '... develop truly alternative modes of thinking and engagement with the world, ways that do not validate Western, Northern, Eurocentric ways of thinking about things ... promote indigenous knowledges and indigenous ways of being.'
- 'Fundamentally rethinking, re-imagining, and changing epistemology, theory, curricula, and pedagogy to align these with who our students are (ontology), and what the current social and political context demands ...'
- '... troubling and destabilizing Eurocentrism and its impact in maintaining intersectional injustices across institutions of higher learning.'

Concerningly, 41% were unable to articulate any response, for example, 'I am not clear at all on what is meant by decolonisation' or 'I don't have much experience on this.' Another 41% indicated only a single strategy. This indicates that 82% of respondents either have no articulated stance on transformation or have a unidimensional stance on it. This underscores the importance of the authors' argument in this article that being able to articulate the constellations that underpin the curriculum project is an important step.

The efforts of the LSSA and SAALA to develop a set of disciplinary understandings about the nature of transformation in the context of the South African language disciplines notwithstanding, the concepts of transformation and decolonisation are highly contested; there are many competing ideas about what it is and how best to implement it ('there seems to be little understanding of what transformation actually means'; 'I observe that it means many different things to many people'). As one participant put it:

'Discussions I have attended are confusing and contradictory. At this stage, I get the feeling that cosmetic curricular changes are being implemented under the umbrella term of transformation and decolonisation. And committees for these seem to function without a clear agenda. Committees for the sake of committees because we don't know what else to do and we have to be seen to be doing something.'

Nevertheless, a number of responses indicated a deeper set of aims for the process of transformation. A number of responses articulated that it included changing the representation of South African academia in terms of equity, that is, employment of representative staff and removal of barriers to employment ('it denotes changes in staff and student demography'; 'staff and student demographics, is a university wide undertaking') as well as removal of institutional-cultural barriers to becoming part of the community of scholars ('specific barriers and clubs that may limit participation or the sense of belonging should be interrogated and removed') without feeling a sense of alienation of having to adjust to institutional norms of whiteness and/or institutional norms of the academy ('... where they are not expected to shape themselves in a particular way to be 'like current people' and thereby

turn their back on insights they have, or even worse, and their own sense of self').

Other constellations of ideas evident in this study's data are include Africanization ('*Africanization of the curriculum*'; '*make provision for the African perspective*'), indigenization (*develop truly alternative modes of thinking and engagement with the world, ways that do not validate Western, Northern, eurocentric ways of thinking about things ... promote indigenous knowledges and indigenous ways of being*) while others are intra-disciplinary contestations ('*promoting translanguaging*'; '*promoting a sociolinguistic approach of language within society*'; '*problematizing formal vs functional perspectives i.e. 'any kind of reified, fixed theoretical construct that removes language from use and users'*').

Many respondents tended to articulate epistemology and the knowledge project in general and somewhat essentialist terms, speaking of 'African theories and practices', 'Northern Theory', etc. It is not immediately clear that all (Linguistic, Applied Linguistic and Language) theory is necessarily easily categorized with these particular labels – at least not without the risk of adopting a reductionist or ahistorical caricature of the histories of the language disciplines.<sup>6</sup> A more productive approach may be to reinterrogate established theory in the light of African realities as indicated by the following extract:

'I believe various theoretical constructs were designed in contexts where the data informing the theorising are so different from the data here that it does not do justice to understanding language data, developments, etc. This requires that we carefully evaluate which concepts are useful, so as to make meaningful use of relevant and appropriate previous (not reinvent the wheel where a workable model already exists), and develop new constructs for matters that are not adequately accounted for by existing work.' [Respondent]

To conclude the discussion of these results the authors return to the conceptualization of 'additive' vs. deeper transformation as expressed by Heleta (2016):

'When we talk about and engage in reconceptualisation and decolonisation of the curriculum in South Africa, we need to consider the two approaches discussed by Garuba. The first approach is to 'add new items to an existing curriculum'. The second approach is to 'rethink how the object of study itself is constituted' and then reconstruct it and bring about fundamental change (Garuba 2015). Garuba (2015) asks 'Do we simply add new items to an existing curriculum – rather like adding raffia chairs to the master's living room? Or do we adopt the reverse approach in which we rethink how the object of study itself is constituted?' (p. 5)

Many of the answers discussed here show that conceptualizations and/or current implementations of transformation often remain limited to the 'additive'. In the authors' opinion, a meaningfully transformed languages

6. For example, to caricature modern Phonology as an exclusively 'Northern' or 'Western' enterprise obscures the contributions of: (1) hundreds of languages from around the world (2) of minority scholars in the North, (3) Southern scholars working both in the North and the South as well as (4) scholars from traditions that are not easily characterizable in the North-South/East-West binaries.

curriculum in linguistics means that the content is centred around a representative linguistic dataset that goes beyond official, majority and standardized languages and is grounded in a conceptually transformed approach to teaching and learning. In the next section, the authors offer some recommendations for this.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings discussed in this article, the authors' personal experiences and reflections, and other scholars' work (e.g. Gibson et al. in press; Namboodiripad 2020), the authors recommend the following steps to their colleagues in the language disciplines in South(ern) Africa who are seeking ways to decolonise and transform their curricula:

- Be able to explicitly articulate a conception of transformation and/or decolonisation for your module or course and the value-driven assumptions that underpin it.
- Ensure that work authored by a diverse set of scholars in terms of gender, race, regional and institutional affiliation, etc. is included throughout modules and given appropriate weight and time for your particular context (see Namboodiripad 2020 for discussion of this).
- Ensure that the module equips students to understand, analyse and engage with the linguistic environment of South Africa, including its particular forms of multilingualism, South Africa's Apartheid past and colonial experiences and their linguistic repercussions – including on the linguistic landscape and the perception of the different types of national languages.
- In any language classes, educators should problematize concepts such as 'standard' or 'pure' varieties and equip students with tools to integrate these conceptually with other tools of linguistic analysis.
- As far as possible general linguistics modules should include work on students' own languages, lects and registers and in Southern Africa also Khoisan languages, non-South African African languages and other languages of the Global South. Datasets should include signed languages and non-standard varieties in examples and homework assignments.

These recommendations are particularly focussed on formal and general linguistics, which are the authors' own fields of scholarly expertise and teaching experience. The authors also refer readers to recommendations for syntacticians and general linguists for decolonising, inclusivity and racial justice in the classroom put forward in Namboodiripad (2020), Sanders (2020), Gibson et al. (in press) on syntax, and Nevins (in press) on how linguistic theory has been shaped by minoritized languages. The authors encourage language scholars in other sub-disciplines to build on these for their own modules.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to the field in terms of being empirically based, its focus on curriculum transformation,

and in exploring this in an academic subdiscipline where decolonisation has not been a central point of debate.

The quantitative data in this study reveals uneven application of transformational ideals and that transformation has proceeded most where the values informing transformation coincide with those underpinning HE more generally, aided by the semiotic flexibility of the floating signifier. This finding is supported by the qualitative analysis which highlights both the value-driven nature of and contestation around differing views of what curricular transformation ought to be. The position of language and languages as objects of study within the curriculum needs to be problematized and engaged with based on a nuanced understanding of transformation and decolonisation in the South African context. Because transformation and decolonisation represent floating signifiers and are driven by dynamically shifting and negotiated constellations of ideas, the authors acknowledge that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to curricular change and that how fundamental principles play out in particular contexts is very much an ongoing process of negotiation. However, this does not absolve us from taking action to make curricular choices, especially if we see curriculum as being more than syllabus content. Crucially for linguistics, applied linguistics and language studies, these choices include which languages and language contexts are presented, explored and validated as legitimate objects of intellectual inquiry. These choices take on different significance in different micro-contexts. For example, in one context, a course about Old English, Afrikaans, Swahili, or any other language or variety for that matter, may thoroughly entrench a colonial, untransformed status quo, whereas in another context and/or it may constitute an empowering, revolutionary act. To be able to perceive the difference, the we, as language specialists, need to be able to articulate to themselves and others the constellations of ideas that inform our approaches to transformation and decolonisation.

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