


A linguistic evaluation of the South African higher education sector: A reflection on 30 years of democracy (1994–2024)

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The core objective of this article is to evaluate the progress made in linguistic development over the past three decades, with a specific focus on the role of language and its philosophical underpinnings in reshaping and decolonising South African higher education landscape. Linguistic imperialism as a conceptual framework alongside the Framework for Policy Analysis were employed to inform, guide and support the author's contention that linguistic hegemony is still dominating the discourse within the higher education sector. The research adopts a qualitative approach, utilising content analysis for data analysis purposes. The findings of the article reveal that despite 30 years of democracy, the influence of colonial-era language philosophy and western epistemologies persists. It is suggested that comprehensive implementation of language policies could effectively address the transformation and decolonisation agenda. It further advocates for alignment between policy and practice through pragmatic, intentional and transformative initiatives aimed at identifying, interrogating and disrupting the coloniality of power and its western epistemologies, as far as language policy and practice are concerned. In conclusion, the article emphasises the urgent need to counteract existing linguistic imperialism and hegemony embedded within colonial knowledge systems by enacting transformative policies that will prioritise student access, success, linguistic diversity, linguistic justice, epistemic justice and social cohesion within the framework of higher education.

Contribution: The aim is to provide guidance to language policy implementers in South African universities by offering an overview of the linguistic advancements achieved between 1994 to 2024.

Keywords: coloniality of power and knowledge; English hegemony; epistemic justice; language policy; linguistic democracy; linguistic imperialism, linguistic human right(s); transformation agenda.

Introduction and background

Over three decades, various interventions such as acts, national legislations, policies, public frameworks and ministerial task teams have been prominent in discussions within the linguistic community, particularly regarding language policy imperatives, language planning strategies and the utilisation of South African indigenous languages in higher education. Kangira (2016) suggests that the issues surrounding language policy and its implementation are not exclusive to Southern Africa but extend across the entire continent. He further notes that upon gaining independence, many African governments adopted the foreign languages of their colonisers as official languages for use in various sectors including business, judiciary, education, local government and parliament. Common examples of these foreign languages prevailing over local languages in African nations include English, French and Portuguese.

The relevance of this article lies in the fact that English is still dominating the South African Higher Education space as the primary language of instruction, communication, teaching and learning as well as the language of research. As part of assessing 30 years of democracy emanating from a linguistic point of view, the researcher argues that the idea of power in a society is considered a key component of linguistic imperialism. According to Rakgogo (2019), sociolinguists have extensively explored the interplay between language and power dynamics. Thus, this article acknowledges that any discussions concerning the status-type of language planning inevitably intertwine with political power, influence and control.

Furthermore, it is imperative to highlight that this article holds significant importance, as it will be extensively reviewed by all stakeholders within the higher education sphere. Equally important, it

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may also be of interest to language regulators and other stakeholders supporting the advancement of African languages within the education space. This submission is prompted by its status as a prevailing topic dominating discussions within the South African linguistic community. Additionally, the aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of the present state of language policy implementation across all universities in South Africa.

In the South African context, Foley (2004:57) argues that English, and to a lesser extent Afrikaans, are the only languages capable of serving effectively as mediums of instruction within higher education institutions (HEIs). However, a significant number of potential higher education students lack sufficient fluency in English and/or Afrikaans to effectively engage with their studies through these languages. A report from the Department of Higher Education and Training (2002:4–5) highlights that language remains a significant barrier to access and success within the higher education landscape. This is evident in the underdevelopment of African and other languages as academic and/or scientific mediums, as well as the fact that the majority of students entering higher education lack full proficiency in both English and Afrikaans languages.

It is for above-mentioned submissions when Cele (2021) postulates that there is a need to understand language policy as a tool for access and social inclusion within South African Higher Education landscape. He further argues that the development of language policy for transformation and social inclusion has significantly failed to achieve the ideal order of things given lack of robust monitoring and systematic implementation.

Touching on the issue of linguistic hegemony, scholars such as Darquennes, Du Plessis and Soler (2020) argue that the reinforcement of the supremacy of English as opposed to enhancing the development of African languages is also noticeable. They further underscore that linguistic diversity and its management have become increasingly significant for HEIs around the world.

According to Language Policy for Higher Education (2002: 2), it is articulated that:

South Africa is a country of many languages and tongues. However, our languages have not always been 'working together'. In the past, the richness of our linguistic diversity was used as an instrument of control, oppression and exploitation. The existence of different languages was recognised and perversely celebrated to legitimise the policy of 'separate development' that formed the cornerstone of apartheid. However, in practice, all our languages were not accorded equal status. The policy of 'separate development' resulted in the privileging of English and Afrikaans as the official languages of the apartheid state and the marginalisation and under-development of African and other languages.

Aliakbari (2003) maintains that English was originally imposed on several countries on the periphery and has successfully displaced or replaced some of the indigenous languages of these countries through deliberate contrivance. From this position, the author submits that there is also a need for the education system of South Africa to employ some strategic and intentional mechanisms that will strengthen the inclusion of previously marginalised languages as languages of teaching and learning.

Dockrat and Kaschula (2020) examine and contextualise the predominantly monolingual language policies of South African universities within the context of transformation, emphasising their transformative potential. They further analyse the language issue within HEIs in South Africa by considering constitutional and legislative frameworks. In their study, they argue that there is a need to transform the linguistic landscape, since the Constitution recognises 11 of the official languages.

The report on the use of African languages as the medium of instruction in higher education (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015a:3) points out that 21 years after the advent of the democratic dispensation, South Africa's higher education system continues to be characterised by the pervasive marginalisation of indigenous African languages. It is further argued that the democratic dispensation has not made much progress in exploring and exploiting the full potential of African indigenous languages in facilitating access and success in higher education. As a result, the yoke of inequality remains a heavy burden carried by many historically disadvantaged and unfairly treated students as demonstrated by the high dropout rate, particularly among students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Mkhize (2020) submits that while there have been English and Afrikaans speaking universities in South Africa, there has never been a university that uses indigenous African language as a language of teaching and learning even in universities that were previously designed for only black Africans. Considering the preceding submission, it is evident that there is still much to accomplish regarding the development and use of African indigenous languages within the realm of higher education. This submission holds significant critical importance as it also addresses the advancements made in the past three decades of democracy.

Section 27(2) of the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997 (Department of Higher Education and Training 1997) was promulgated by the Minister of Education to determine the language policy for higher education in South Africa. It further provides that, subject to the development of policy by the Minister, the councils of public HEIs, with the concurrence of their senates, must determine the language policy of their HEI and must publish and make such a policy available on request. Such a policy must be aligned with the key national principles of unity in diversity and social transformation. In according to the *Higher Education Act of 1997* (Department of

Higher Education and Training 1997), it can be understood that the language policy is regarded as one of the few policies that have to be approved by the council in consultation with the senate.

In addition, the National Language Policy Framework (Department of Higher Education and Training 2002:3) provides that a person's language is a 'second skin', in many ways: a natural possession of every normal human being, with which we express our hopes and ideals, articulate our thoughts and values, explore our experiences and customs, and construct our society and the laws that govern it. Through language, we function as human beings in an ever-changing world. The right to use the official languages of our choice has, therefore, been recognised in our Bill of Rights (RSA 1996), and our Constitution acknowledges that the languages of our people are a resource that should be harnessed.

In Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996 (RSA 1996), Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu are declared the official languages of the Republic of South Africa (RSA). In addition to the above-mentioned languages, South African Sign Language was recently recognised and adopted as the 12th official language.

The above-quoted clause is complemented by Section 29(1) of the Constitution that pronounces that:

Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of this right, the state must consider all the reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account – equity; practicability; and the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices.

Taking cognisance of the above-mentioned citation, the researcher contends that the clause 'Section 29(1)' is problematic because it gives a measure of autonomy to educational institutions when it comes to the application of the language policy. The researcher's argument is that linguistic imperialism cannot be addressed by using words, such as practicability, feasibility and practicable, when conditions allow, among others, and that they are not helpful when it comes to the implementation of the language policy. The researcher contends that while acknowledging the necessity of addressing redress, the inclusion of escape clauses in policy implementation may pose potential challenges.

Section 6(5) of the Constitution of South Africa further complements the above-quoted excerpt where it stipulates that the Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must:

(a) Promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of – (i) all official languages; (ii) the Khoi, Nama and San

languages; and (iii) sign language; and (b) promote and ensure respect for – (i) all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu; and (ii) Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa.

What further captures the attention of the researcher is Section 6(2) of the South African Constitution where it articulates that in:

[R]ecognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.

The author contends that the linguistic stagnation within the South African higher education sector lacks constitutional justification.

Furthermore, it could be contended that despite the passage of 28 years since the enactment of the Constitution of South Africa, minimal progress has been made in the promotion of African indigenous languages mentioned in Section 6(1), beyond their elevation to official language status. In terms of language policy, English continues to serve as the medium of instruction across all South African universities, notwithstanding the Constitution's emphasis on the necessity of practical and affirmative actions.

From the above excerpts from the legislation, it is clear that the South African Constitution advocates developing and promoting indigenous languages that have been given an official status in Section 6(1). From a constitutional implementation point of view, it may be interpreted that it is not only motivated by the transformation and decolonisation agenda, but is also motivated by the struggle for cognitive social justice as a core imperative of decoloniality within the linguistic fraternity.

One of the objectives is to identify the qualitative variables associated with the lack of language policy implementation in the South African universities. The major challenges highlighted include the qualitative variables, which perpetuate the supremacy of the language(s) of colonisers at the expense of South African indigenous African languages; the linguistic imperialism and neo-colonial elites who promote languages like English and Afrikaans; the absence of coordinated and strict monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of language policies guided by the national legislation and frameworks; and the intersection between student language proficiency, academic access and success.

The central theme is to provide a linguistic evaluation of the South African higher education sector, by reflecting on 30 years of democracy (1994–2024). The major underlying difference between the current article and the previous studies on language policy implementation is that the

previous articles focussed on policy-related challenges while the current article focusses on the progress that may have been made in the past 30 years. The researcher's contention is based on the observation that the country will be celebrating 30 years of democracy in 2024 without any significant progress in the South African higher education sector.

In this article, the researcher maintains that 28 years after the promulgation of the *Constitution of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996* (RSA 1996), the status of South African indigenous languages within the higher education landscape is still a matter of concern. The researcher concurs with scholars such as Madiba (2013), Alexander (2003) and Maseko (2014) whose general observation is that South Africa is experiencing regression rather than progress. Similarly, Docrat and Kaschula (2020), Darguennes, Du Plessis and Soler (2020), and Cele (2021) add that there is a need for universities to understand language policy as a tool for access, success and social inclusivity. Instead of multilingualism, monolingualism, which favours English, is becoming the norm, while indigenous African languages are being marginalised. Against this backdrop, the current article assesses the linguistic progress made in higher education in the past 30 years.

According to Maseko (2014), central to the provisions of the Constitution is the issue of access and success. The Constitution states that language, race and other markers that have been used in the past to discriminate against certain groups of people should not hamper their access and success in education (Maseko 2014). She further articulates that the policy pertaining to language in higher education advances the sentiments of the Constitution. Drawing from Maseko's research, it becomes apparent that the promotion of indigenous languages within the realm of higher education stands as a constitutional imperative. Nevertheless, the hurdle lies in universities effectively translating this constitutional mandate into actionable practice.

Section 27(2) of the *Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997* (Department of Higher Education and Training 1997) and the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training 2020), which is considered a review of the 2002 *Language Policy for Higher Education*, support this view. These acts seek to address the challenge of the underdevelopment and underutilisation of official African languages at HEIs while simultaneously sustaining the standard and utilisation of languages that are already developed.

In addition to the *Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997*, the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (2020) articulates the following:

Drawing from the principles and values of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), as well as the relationship between language and cognition in the learning process, the revised *Language Policy Framework for Higher Education* seeks to promote multilingualism as a strategy to facilitate meaningful

access and participation by university communities (students and staff) in various university activities, including cognitive and intellectual development. The policy framework aims to promote and strengthen the use of all official languages across all functional domains of public higher education, including scholarship; teaching and learning; as well as wider communication in line with Section 29(2) of the South African Constitution.

Following the promulgation of the *Language Policy for Higher Education*, several initiatives were introduced by the Ministry of Education (later, Higher Education and Training) to assess the status of indigenous languages at public HEIs and map out the interventions required to strengthen the development and use of these languages. According to the researcher, the practical implementation of the policy to practice is still considered one of the contentious issues that need to be taken into consideration. This submission is based on the observation that several pieces of legislation have been formulated and gazetted; but it is still impractical for the universities to put these pieces of legislation into practice.

Problem statement

This research was motivated by the pronouncement of the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions, 2020 (Department of Higher Education and Training 2020), which is understood as a revision of the Language Policy for Higher Education published in 2002 (Department of Higher Education and Training 2002).

The issue is exacerbated by the persistent non-compliance with language policies, as the dominance and supremacy of English and Afrikaans remain prominent within the higher education landscape, even three decades into democracy. The researcher's contention is that this is happening at the expense of South African indigenous languages that have been accorded official status in terms of Section 6(1) of the *Constitution of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996* (RSA 1996). The researcher's observation is that linguistic imperialisms and its western epistemologies still dominate higher education even when the Constitution advocates the equitable use of all official languages.

This problem statement is further supported by the Language Policy for Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training 2002:5) which states that the South African indigenous languages that have been accorded official status within *Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa* (RSA 1996), should be developed for use as academic and scientific languages, while at the same time, ensuring that the existing languages of instruction do not serve as a barrier to access and success. It further articulates that the majority of students entering higher education are not fully proficient in English and Afrikaans. Against this background, the article concerns itself with a linguistic evaluation of the South African higher education sector by reflecting on 30 years of democracy (1994–2024).

Aims and objectives

Emanating from the above-stated non-compliance of the language policy realised in the South African higher education sector, the aims and objectives are to:

- assess the linguistic landscape of the South African higher education sector over the past 30 years of democracy (1994–2024);
- analyse the significance of three decades of democracy concerning linguistic evaluation of South African higher education;
- explore the interplay between the colonial legacy in knowledge production and language policy dynamics within South African universities; and
- identify the qualitative variables associated with the lack of language policy implementation in the South African universities.

These aims and objectives will help the researcher to draw a comprehensive narrative on the current state of affairs, as far as the linguistic progress within the higher education space is concerned.

Linguistic imperialism as a theoretical framework

The linguistic imperialism as a theory has been adopted to guide, build, buttress and fortify the researcher's contention. In addition, the framework for policy analysis to reflect on the status and development of language policy in South African universities in line with the national legislation was also used. According to Pervaiz, Khan, and Perveen (2019), linguistic imperialism, like many other similar sociopolitical phenomena, is a direct result of the spread of English during British colonisation, which took place in the global multilingual setting in the second half of the 20th century. Linguistic imperialism takes shape when one language acquires a powerful position in a multilingual setting, is accorded a higher status, and is given preference over other languages for various functions in society. In such a situation, the most powerful language dominates and marginalises the less important languages.

The correlation between the aforementioned point and the current article's scope revolves around the continued dominance of English and Afrikaans in educational discourse, particularly in terms of their use as mediums of instruction. The researcher contends that this dominance persists to some degree, even three decades into democracy, and it occurs at the expense of other officially recognised African indigenous languages.

The researcher defines linguistic imperialism as the imposition of a dominant language on other languages and people who were previously disadvantaged because of administrative authority and control. It further touches on the international exercise of power and has geopolitical ramifications. This idea aims to explain the philosophy of language, the hierarchy of languages, and further attempts to

address why some languages are more dominant than others. It also aims to identify which structures and ideologies facilitate this process and determine the roles of language professionals. It further articulates that various qualitative variables, such as immigration, invasion, trade, colonisation, cultural superiority, and political superiority, can lead to linguistic imperialism.

Language Policy for Higher Education (2002: 2-3) mentions that the use of language policy as an instrument of control, oppression and exploitation was one of the factors that triggered the two great political struggles that defined South Africa in the twentieth century – the struggle of the Afrikaners against British imperialism and the struggle of the black community against white rule. Indeed, it was the attempt by the apartheid state to impose Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools that gave rise to the mass struggles of the late 1970s and 1980s (Department of Education, 2002).

Pervaiz, Khan and Perveen (2019) state that the introduction of European languages to America, Africa and Asia is seen as a legacy of the European colonial and imperial expansion from the 15th century. They further articulate that the languages of the early modern period colonisers are, therefore, still the dominant languages of their past colonies. English, Spanish and Portuguese are spoken as the dominant languages of the Americas. Similarly, the languages of their colonisers are the principal languages and have symbolic pride in many African and Asian countries. In this sense, linguistic imperialism is understood as the study of the relationship between political and linguistic independence and the role of language along with the postcolonial approaches to the linguistic liberation of the third-world countries.

It can further be noted that linguistic imperialism, as a theory, is relevant since there is a noticeable underutilisation of all South African indigenous languages within the higher education space. A nation's sociocultural environment and political ideology are taken into consideration when deciding which language is to be made an official or national language. An ideology is built on longstanding social conventions, values and presumptions of a community or a group.

Intersection between linguistic imperialism and violation of linguistic human rights

It has been underscored that English and Afrikaans dominance is still noticeable within the South African higher education sector. This is not only limited to policy considerations but also in terms of teaching and learning. Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2017) hold the view that there is an intersection between linguistic imperialism and linguistic human rights. Their contention is that linguistic human rights relate to the mother tongue(s) as consisting of the right to identify with it/them, and to education and public services through the medium of it/them. They further articulate that mother tongue is therefore defined as 'the language(s) one has learned first and identifies with' (p. 1-2).

It is interesting to note that the above-mentioned view postulated by Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2017:2) resonates well with Section 6(1) and Section 29(1) of the Constitution of South Africa since the one clause deals with the status of official languages while the other clause deals with the equitable use of official languages within the education sector. It can therefore be interpreted that failure to not provide education in any of the South African indigenous languages may constitute a violation of linguistic human rights.

Mkhize and Balfour (2017) add another crucial argument to this debate when articulating the following:

Despite the fact that the majority of people in South Africa speak languages other than English and Afrikaans, these languages – English, in particular, and Afrikaans, to a lesser extent – continue to dominate official public domains. The continued hegemony of these languages undermines the language rights of other citizens as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and other legislative frameworks.

Within the parameters of this study, it is understood that cultural, religious and linguistic rights are also considered human rights. It is against this background that the preservation of human rights is outlined in Chapter 1 of the South African Constitution and Bill of Rights. In the Constitution, the defence mechanisms are also referred to as 'state institutions supporting constitutional democracy'. Seven institutions were established under Chapter 9 of the Constitution to safeguard citizens' rights and ensure that the government functions correctly. One of the seven organisations tasked with defending human rights is the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission in short).

The goal of the CRL Rights Commission is to advance and defend the rights of various linguistic, religious and cultural groups. On the basis of equality, non-discrimination, and the right to free association, it must encourage and foster a sense of national unity, tolerance and harmony among various communities. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (the Constitution) deals expressly and quite prominently with the recognition of languages and the protection of the choice and use of language. As a chapter 9 institution, mandated to protect constitutional democracy, the author puts forward that the CRL Rights Commission has a role to play in the 30 years of democracy concerning linguistic assessments.

Literature review

The article engages in a comprehensive systematic literature review. The main objective is to provide a linguistic evaluation of the South African higher education sector by reflecting on 30 years of democracy (1994–2024). *The relevance of a systematic review* is that it will allow the researcher to follow a structured and rigorous methodology to identify, select, and critically appraise relevant literature on the linguistic progress that has been made in the past three decades.

The significance of this approach is that it ensures that the review is transparent, reproducible and minimises bias. Given the extensive scope of assessing linguistic progress over three decades, it needs to be articulated that a systematic review will allow the researcher to systematically search and analyse a wide range of studies, including empirical research, constitutional documentation, national legislations, Higher Education Acts, language policies ministerial task teams, theoretical frameworks and methodological advancements. This will help to provide a robust synthesis of the evidence regarding linguistic developments, trends and achievements over the past 30 years.

In the introduction and background section, it was established beyond that South African indigenous languages that have been accorded official status in Section 6(1) of the South African Constitution (RSA 1996) have been neglected and undermined by the colonial government. What initiated this research is the observation that 30 years after democracy, there seems to be linguistic regression instead of linguistic progress, as postulated by scholars, such as Madiba (2013), Alexander (2003), and Maseko (2014). The researcher's position is that multilingualism, in general, should be acknowledged and promoted as a vital component of South Africa's material reality, and that all languages spoken in the country should be respected and valued by being used as languages of teaching and learning, scholarship, and communication.

According to the Language Policy for Public Higher Education Institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training 2020), all public higher educational institutions are required to develop their own language policy subject to the above policy framework (Department of Higher Education and Training 2020), which had to be submitted to the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology for noting and record-keeping purposes. It is important to note that this represents a forward-thinking initiative aimed at ensuring adherence and compliance to language policy.

According to this framework, the date of implementation of the policy framework is 01 January 2022. It is also articulated in the framework that the Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology will develop and implement a monitoring instrument, with indicators that will form part of the monitoring process. Where appropriate, institutional visits will also form part of the regular monitoring exercise to address the challenges hampering the implementation of short- and long-term language development programmes.

In addition, it is reported that institutions are required to report annually to the Department of Higher Education on the progress made in implementing their language policies and language development plans. The resources and capacity to implement these policies and plans must be made available and must also be supported. These include the information technology infrastructure relating to language development and preservation. Universities should also provide the means to promote access to the resources and ensure the success of

students by providing quality supporting language services, such as translation and interpreting services.

Language and its role in transforming the higher education sector

From a specifically linguistic point of view, the author's contention is that there is a noticeable relationship between language and the transformation of the higher education sector, and the preservation of the indigenous knowledge systems. This view is validated by the *Report on the use of African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education* (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015a:13) referring at that time to the fact that 20 years after democracy, it is necessary to reflect on the efficacy of the legislative policies that were formulated to facilitate social transformation. The language-in-education policies, and particularly those applicable to higher education, recognise the potential and critical role of HEIs in the transformation of South African society.

Similarly, Cele (2015) argues that there is a need for policy developers and implementers to understand and view the language policy as a tool for access and social inclusion in the South African higher education landscape. It is further reasoned that language policy development for transformation, decolonisation and social inclusion has failed significantly to achieve the ideal order of matters, given the lack of robust monitoring and systematic implementation. This view is in alignment with one of the aims and objectives of the current study, which is to explore the contributing factors to the lack of language policy implementation by South African universities.

The Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training 2020:4) acknowledges that since the promulgation of the *Language Policy for Higher Education*, there have been various initiatives on the part of the Department of Higher Education and Training to monitor progress and assess the extent to which institutional practices are in line with the national policy. The most recent initiative is the Ministerial Advisory Panel on the Development of African Languages in Higher Education (MAPALHE) established in 2012, whose work resulted in the *Report on the use of African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education* (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015a). From this report, it is apparent that little progress has been made in exploring and exploiting the potential of African languages in facilitating access and success in HEIs.

It is argued that the language policy implementation, as prescribed by legislation such as the *Higher Education Act of 1997* (Department of Higher Education and Training 1997), the National Language Policy Framework (Department of Higher Education and Training 2002), the Language Policy for Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training 2002), the *Report on the use of African languages as mediums of instruction in higher Education* (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015a), and the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (Department of Higher

Education and Training 2020) is still a problematic issue. For this reason, Foley (2004:57) articulates that there is a need to identify and discuss some of the possibly unforeseen or unacknowledged complexities involved in the practical implementation of the language policy.

From a theoretical point of view, Cele (2015) shares a similar view that a robust debate about the importance of African languages in teaching and learning, research, community engagement and organisational administration needs to become an integral part of the conversation on student-centredness, improving the graduation throughput, developing indigenous knowledge systems, improving research productivity, transformation and social inclusion, and social and cultural diversity at universities.

Mkhize (2020) adds that the use of African indigenous languages cited in the Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa in higher domains becomes critically important. In his foreword to S.E.K. Mqhayi's *Iziquaneke Zesiwe*, Professor Barney Pityana explains how, as an African student, he viewed African languages during apartheid, when teaching operated through English. He further articulates that:

The truth of the matter is that we were thoroughly colonised to see the value in that which was both foreign but also acclaimed to a symbol of value and learning and erudition: that which became from colonial ties. Secondly, through our urge to oppose Apartheid in all its forms blinded many of us to know what is good for us independently of the designs of the oppressive system. In a nutshell, that explains why it is that after so many years, African languages are still not accessible and utilised as languages of science. (Mqhayi 2017:xi)

Based on the above-quoted foreword, it is for this reason that Mkhize (2020) adds that our academic model is still largely based on a Eurocentric epistemic canon and treats that is from Africa as a remote appendix. It is argued that the work of Mqhayi (2017) and Mkhize (2020) align well with the main objective, which is to provide a linguistic evaluation of the South African higher education sector reflecting on 30 years of democracy (1994–2024).

In alignment with the views of Foley (2004), Cele (2015:29), Mqhayi (2017) and Mkhize (2020), the author argues that the language policy was created as a reaction to the apartheid system of social exclusion, which relegated African languages to unofficial communication methods. He further puts forward that the Declaration of the 2010 Higher Education Summit was an important forum where language was seen to be a weapon for changing institutional culture and bringing about social inclusion and diversity after wrestling with transformation problems in the higher education sector.

Research methods and design

The descriptive research design has been selected involving a qualitative approach where content analysis was considered

for data analysis purposes. According to the author, the research design and approach helped to achieve the main aims and objectives of this study. The relevance and significance of descriptive research design is that it focusses on describing and analysing the characteristics of a phenomenon without manipulating variables. It also aims to provide an accurate portrayal of the situation.

Data collection methods

A historiographic analysis on the practical implementation of language-related policies concerning the use of South African indigenous languages as languages of teaching and learning, communication and scholarship as prescribed by the aforementioned legislation was provided. The article is discursive in nature, and a content analysis focussing on constitutional documentation and other relevant legislative frameworks such as the *Higher Education Act of 1997* (Department of Higher Education and Training 1997), National Language Policy Framework (Department of Higher Education and Training 2002), Language Policy for Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training 2002), the *Report on the use of African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education* (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015a), and the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions promulgated in 2020 (Department of Higher Education and Training 2020) were mainly considered for data collection and analysis purposes. In addition, the available language policies of the selected South African universities were also consulted to supplement the above-mentioned legislation. A thorough analysis of language policy implementation university-by-university was carried out.

Methods of data analysis

The qualitative nature involved employing thematic analysis for data analysis purposes. This approach facilitated the identification of 13 qualitative themes that dominate the discourse within the article. It is noteworthy that thematic analysis aided the researcher in comprehending the reviewed literature and enhancing the rigour of the analysis of a substantial amount of content from both primary and secondary qualitative sources. Additionally, the concept of 'linguistic imperialism' was utilised as a framework to analyse the linguistic situation, providing evidence of imperialism and linguicism within the South African linguistic context. In this study, linguistic imperialism is not merely considered a theory focussing on the dominance of powerful languages like English over less utilised ones; rather, it serves as a framework to assess and examine the linguistic advancements made over the past 30 years.

The concept of validity and reliability

To ensure the accuracy, credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings, the author employed content validity which ensured that the research instruments (such as

TABLE 1: The *status quo* of African language departments and language units.

University name	African languages department	Language unit
1. University of Cape Town	Yes	Yes
2. University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg	Yes	No
3. University of Pretoria	Yes	Yes
4. Stellenbosch University	Yes	Yes
5. University of KwaZulu-Natal	Yes	Yes
6. North-West University	Yes	Yes
7. University of Johannesburg	Yes	No
8. Rhodes University	Yes	No
9. University of the Western Cape	Yes	No
10. University of the Free State	Yes	Yes
11. Cape Peninsula University of Technology	Yes	Yes
12. Nelson Mandela University	Yes	No
13. Durban University of Technology	Yes	No
14. Tshwane University of Technology	Yes	No
15. University of Fort Hare	Yes	Yes
16. Central University of Technology	Yes	No
17. University of Zululand	Yes	No
18. University of Limpopo	Yes	No
19. Walter Sisulu University	Yes	Yes
20. Vaal University of Technology	No	Yes
21. University of Venda	Yes	No
22. Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University	No	No
23. Mangosuthu University of Technology	Yes	No
24. Sol Plaatje University	Yes	No
25. University of Mpumalanga	Yes	No
26. University of South Africa	Yes	Yes

surveys, interview questions or document analyses) adequately cover all relevant aspects of language policies in higher education. In addition, construct validity was also employed by using theoretical frameworks and concepts relevant to language policy research to inform and guide the development of research instruments and data analysis. When it comes to the concept of reliability, the author depended on document reliability which ensured that documents or texts analysed as part of the study are reliably coded or categorised by using clear and consistent criteria.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand, Human Research Ethics Committee (No. H17/06/46) and the Tshwane University of Technology, Research Ethics Committee (No. REC/2015/03/007).

Discussion of findings

The aim was to evaluate the linguistic advancements observed in higher education over the past three decades (1994–2024), in light of the forthcoming 30th anniversary and commemoration of democracy in 2024. Consequently, the data presented primarily examine the correlation between policy directives and the practical implementations within South African universities regarding language policies. Table 1 summarises the status of African Languages Departments and Language Units across 26 South African universities.

Table 1 illustrates the presence of African language programmes in South African universities, while also indicating the availability of language units or centres to support the implementation of language policies outlined in national legislation. Notably, Table 1 indicates that 24 South African universities, comprising 92%, have dedicated African language departments. It is noteworthy that a substantial majority of South African universities possess African language departments, which play a pivotal role in promoting and developing indigenous languages within the higher education sector.

One of the aims was to identify the qualitative variables linked to the failure of language policy implementation in South African universities. Table 1 reveals that 15 of these universities, constituting 58%, lack dedicated language units to aid in language policy implementation. This article argues that this absence is a contributing factor to the compliance issues regarding language policy. The prevailing assumption is that without a language unit or centre, the implementation of language policy will be sluggish, as the planning and execution must be carried out by such dedicated entities.

Another significant observation is that only 11 universities, constituting 42% of South African universities, possess both an African Languages Department and a dedicated Language Unit or Centre. In accordance with the Language Policy for Public Higher Education Institutions published in 2020 (Department of Higher Education and Training 2020), as well as other national legislations advocating for the development of indigenous languages, it is argued that these universities are better equipped to make substantial linguistic advancements compared to those universities that have either an African Languages Department or a Language Unit or Centre.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that only one university, constituting 3.8%, lacks both an African language department and a dedicated language unit or centre. This observation underscores the rarity of such a situation within the South African Higher Education landscape. Such a circumstance can significantly impact language transformation efforts, as it indicates a complete absence of institutional support for the development and promotion of indigenous languages. Without these essential resources, the university may struggle to meet the linguistic needs of its diverse student body and hinder progress towards linguistic inclusivity and transformation in higher education.

The primary aim is to evaluate the linguistic landscape of the South African higher education sector during the 30 years of democracy (1994–2024). Based on the findings presented in Table 1, it is evident that progress has been achieved regarding the establishment of African Languages Departments. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that certain universities have also succeeded in establishing language units or centres. This dual advancement underscores positive developments in promoting linguistic diversity and indigenous language support within the higher education sector.

Presentation of qualitative themes

Drawing upon the literature reviewed and the analysis of Table 1, the following 15 qualitative themes have emerged. These themes encapsulate key insights gleaned from both the academic discourse and empirical data. It is also important to mention that these themes not only provide a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic landscape in South African higher education sector but also underscore the importance of addressing language-related challenges and opportunities for fostering inclusivity, equity, and academic success among diverse student populations.

Theme One: Implementation of African languages for conversational purposes

The article recognises the advancements made within education, humanities and social science faculties, where the incorporation of one or two African language(s) into the curricula reflects progress in language policy implementation. This development is notable as it enables students from diverse linguistic backgrounds to acquire proficiency in a new language alongside their academic pursuits. The University of Zululand, University of KwaZulu-Natal, and University of the Witwatersrand are some of the universities that serve as commendable examples of institutions embracing this transformative approach.

Theme Two: Conducting and writing research report in African languages

In some of the South African universities, postgraduate students are afforded the opportunity to write their dissertations and theses in their preferred African language. This policy reflects progressive thinking and aligns effectively with the commemoration of 30 years of democracy. Such initiatives underscore the commitment to linguistic diversity and inclusivity within academic settings, promoting a more equitable and representative educational experience for all students.

Theme Three: Abstract translation into one of the African languages

In certain South African universities, postgraduate students are required to translate their abstracts into one of the official South African languages, particularly when the research report is originally written in English. This practice serves as another imperative for transformation, aligning effectively with the ethos of 30 years of democracy. It also highlights a commitment to linguistic inclusivity and acknowledges the importance of ensuring accessibility to research outputs across diverse language communities within the country.

Theme Four: Progress on terminology development

Numerous universities and other critical stakeholders are undertaking terminological development projects as a means of generating and sharing knowledge in African languages. This initiative reflects a significant stride forward in the past

three decades. It underscores the commitment to linguistic diversity and the promotion of indigenous languages as vehicles for academic discourse and knowledge dissemination. The Department of Sport, Arts, and Culture through its National Language Service, consistently works on creating terminologies across various specialisations, significantly supporting the advancement of African languages within the education space. PanSALB, through its National Language Bodies, play a crucial role in verifying and authenticating these terms, enabling their integration into standard languages.

Theme Five: Progress on digital humanities

With support from the Department of Science and Innovation, the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR) has made significant strides in providing language resources aimed at facilitating the teaching of African languages within the higher education sector. Numerous workshops and training sessions have been conducted to bolster this initiative, demonstrating a concerted effort to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of language instruction in academic settings.

Furthermore, notable strides have been achieved by the Department of Sport, Arts, and Culture through National Language Service in advancing Human Language Technology projects, which serves as a pivotal tool in the instruction and scholarly development of African languages. In addition, a few universities, including North-West University and Walter Sisulu University, have successfully implemented Computational Linguistics as part of their curriculum. This represents a positive step toward linguistic transformation.

Theme Six: English hegemony, supremacy and dominance

Based on the literature reviewed, it has been observed that English hegemony, supremacy, dominance and some of the western epistemologies continue to exert influence within the South African higher education landscape. Despite the recognition of South African indigenous languages that have been given the official under Section 6(1) of the Constitution, practical measures for their implementation in language policies as languages of teaching and learning are lacking. Furthermore, the dominance of English and Afrikaans persists, sidelining indigenous languages as outlined in the Constitution (1996).

In addition, linguistic imperialism as a theoretical framework employed in this research underscores the continued dominance of English in South African higher education landscape. This is viewed as part and parcel of the legacy of colonialism. The literature further suggests that western epistemologies remain prevalent in teaching, learning and research practices, with limited efforts to incorporate elements that promote the status and development of indigenous languages in South Africa.

Theme Seven: Intersection between coloniality of power and coloniality of knowledge

It is argued that there exists an intersection between contemporary language practices and the enduring legacy of colonial power dynamics and knowledge systems. The author asserts that remnants of colonialism persist within educational frameworks, particularly evident in grammar instruction. The curriculum continues to reflect colonial vestiges, yet it lacks mechanisms for critical examination and disruption of the status quo. Regarding this theme, Mkhize (2020) expressed that our academic framework predominantly adheres to a Eurocentric knowledge base and often marginalises African perspectives as distant and insignificant appendages.

Theme Eight: Misconception of English as an international language

The understanding that English is an international language of business is often confused with the concept of 'language of teaching and learning'. This means that those universities that still allow English to dominate as the medium of instruction do not necessarily differentiate between English as a language of communication and English as a language of teaching and learning. The misconception of English as an international language is one of the qualitative variables that has been identified.

The researcher proposes that English should be taught for communication purposes, and it should also be used as a medium of instruction. Similarly, African indigenous languages that have been accorded official status should also be taught as conversational modules and, at the same time, be used as a medium of instruction. As articulated in the Language Policy for Public Higher Education Institutions of 2020 (Department of Higher Education and Training 2020), each university should choose at least two of the indigenous languages that should be developed, promoted and intellectualised so that they become languages of teaching and learning, scholarship and research.

A significant correlation between the misconception of English as the primary international language of communication and its widespread usage as the language of instruction across South African universities is highlighted in this research. The researcher suggests that many language policies prioritising English as the main medium of teaching and learning may have inadvertently influenced language policy formulations within these institutions. Consequently, remnants and ideologies of colonialism persist even after 30 years of democracy. This situation has led to linguistic stagnation concerning the development, promotion and utilisation of South African indigenous languages, as English continues to be perceived as the global lingua franca.

Theme Nine: Intersection between language, student access, and success

Language, student access and success are some of the qualitative variables identified. The consulted literature

established that there is a relationship between the language of instruction and students' academic achievement. The intersection between the aforementioned is realised in the *Report on the use of African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education* (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015a) where it is stipulated that English, as the only medium of instruction, is one of the contributing factors to the failure rate in South African universities. It is further revealed that the inclusion of South African indigenous languages that are cited in Section 6(1) of the South African Constitution (RSA 1996) as languages of teaching and learning will ensure that these languages are developed to their fullest potential, so that they can be at the same level as English and Afrikaans. Thus, these languages may contribute profoundly to improving the following: pass rate, success rate, and learners' and students' learning outcomes.

Theme Ten: Celebrating what should have been celebrated long time ago

It is argued that some of the good stories and achievements recorded in the past six years should have been celebrated long time ago. The author's contention is that the celebration of certain achievements few years before the 30 years of democracy is considered one of the clear indications of a linguistic stagnation within the South African Higher Education landscape. The following are some of the good stories that dominated the media space in the past six years: (1) In 2019, Dr Justice Kobue Legodi became the first Unisa student to obtain a PhD in Setswana. (2) In 2018, Dr Nompumelelo Kapa became the first person in the University of Fort Hare's 102-year history to have written and published a PhD thesis in isiXhosa. Dr Kapa received her PhD in Literature and Philosophy for her thesis in isiXhosa, one of South Africa's official languages. In 2019, the North-West University's (NWU's) campus in Mahikeng conferred the first ever Setswana PhD in the history of the Department of Setswana, since its establishment about 39 years ago. Furthermore, a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Languages and Literature in Setswana was conferred on Eileen Elizabeth Poole, an educator, lecturer and Head of the Department of Setswana during the Spring Graduation ceremony on 17 October 2019. (4) In 2021, Dr Dumisani Khumalo became the first person to write a PhD in isiZulu at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The author contends that the sparsity of these kinds of achievements proves the existence and noticeable linguistic stagnation within the higher education landscape, largely on the basis that these achievements were only celebrated of late, while democracy was achieved in 1994. Furthermore, it needs to be mentioned that there are other universities that are yet to achieve what has been achieved by North-West University, University of Fort Hare, University of South Africa and University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Theme Eleven: Resources and prioritisation

One of the contentious issues surrounding the lack of compliance with the language policy is the lack of resources

and in some cases a lack of prioritisation. The implementation of the language policy should be accompanied by the allocation of resources. It is against this backdrop that Fishman (1987) in Rakgogo (2016, 2019) defines language planning as:

[T]he authoritative allocation of resources to the attainment of language status and corpus goals, whether in connection with new functions that are aspired to or in connection with old functions that need to be discharged more adequately. (p. 143)

Similarly, the Ministry of Education (Department of Higher Education and Training 2002:10) adds that the language policy for higher education speaks of the need for 'the level of resourcing [to] be comparable to the investments that were made, in the past, to develop Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in higher education'. In addition, Foley (2004:61) supports the view that apart from any other considerations, the project has some obvious economic implications. If nothing else, the sheer financial cost of the undertaking is prohibitive.

It is further argued that one of the critical issues that affect language policy implementation is the lack of prioritisation. This can happen at government level and also at university level. This implies that there should be some sort of integration and collaboration between the government and the universities regarding the advancement of language policy considerations. From Table 1, it can be seen that in some cases, the lack of language policy implementation has nothing to do with government intervention on resources, but how the universities themselves prioritise the policy under attention.

Another critical observation that comes to the fore is the fact that there are still universities such as Vaal University of Technology and Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University without an African Languages Department. Similarly, the following universities: University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, University of Pretoria, University of Johannesburg, University of the Western Cape, University of the Free State, Tshwane University of Technology, Central University of Technology, University of Zululand, University of Limpopo, Walter Sisulu University, University of Venda, Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, Mangosuthu University of Technology, Sol Plaatje University, and University of Mpumalanga are yet to establish a dedicated Language Unit or Centre to assist with the implementation plan.

Theme Twelve: Poor monitoring and evaluation

The findings reveal that the major qualitative variable regarding the lack of compliance with the language policy within the higher education space is perpetuated by the lack of proper monitoring and evaluation at government level. According to Rakgogo and Zungu (2022), Chapter 3 of the *Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997* (Department of Higher

Education and Training 1997) touches on the Governance of Public Higher Education Institutions. Its Section 27(2) stipulates that:

Subject to the policy determined by the Minister, the council, with the concurrence of the senate, must determine the language policy of a public higher education institution and must publish and make it available on request.

Based on the above-excerpted piece of legislation, it may be implied that it is the responsibility of the Department of Education, Science and Technology to establish a Committee on Monitoring and Evaluation that will help to enforce compliance within the universities. It is also understood that the council in consultation with the senate, should establish a language committee, whether at council level or senate level, that will assist with compliance and oversight at university level. It is argued that the Language Unit or Centre responsible for language policy implementation should be accountable to the sub-committee on monitoring and evaluation at the level of the council or senate. At a national level, this committee should be accountable to the monitoring and evaluation committee that should be established at a government level.

Theme Thirteen: CRL Rights Commission and its silence on violation of linguistic rights

It is noted that one of the qualitative variables associated with lack of language policy implementation in South African universities is the silence of the CRL Rights Commission as a relevant chapter 9 institution that should advocate for marginalised languages within the higher education space. The literature consulted argues that there is an intersection between linguistic imperialism and the violation of linguistic rights. It was also postulated that a reluctance to use other officially recognised South African languages as languages of teaching and learning is a violation of human rights since the Constitution expresses that everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. Docrat and Kaschula (2015) argue that while phrases such as 'practical' and 'reasonably practical' allow institutions to tailor language policies to their needs, these phrases open the possibility of the continuation of old practices. From a constitutional implementation point of view, the aforementioned phrases should also be challenged as they bring in some possibilities of retaining the colonial vestiges within the education system, especially when it comes to language of instruction.

Theme Fourteen: English and Afrikaans universities vis-à-vis Black African universities

In relation to this topic, the literature reviewed contends that English and Afrikaans have been predominant in the discourse within universities previously affiliated with these languages. Nevertheless, English, and to some extent Afrikaans, continue to dominate the discourse in former Black African universities. This raises concerns about the status of African indigenous languages in higher education.

As per the perspective presented, it is argued that insufficient progress has been made regarding the development and utilisation of African languages for teaching, learning and research purposes.

The languages designated in Section 6(1) of the South African Constitution are the same ones recognised during colonialism and apartheid. Despite 30 years of democracy, South African universities have made little progress in promoting and advocating for some of these languages, which were unfairly categorised under colonial administration. This situation persists even as other ethnic groups push for their varieties to be recognised as distinct languages rather than mere dialects. Universities should play a crucial role in examining whether colonial classifications of certain African languages were based on linguistic principles or political motives.

Theme Fifteen: Political decolonisation but colonised administrative system

The examination of the South African higher education sector through a critical linguistic lens, reflecting on the three decades since democracy (1994–2024), suggests that while the country has undergone political decolonisation, its administrative system, particularly regarding language policy and implementation, remains entrenched in colonial structures and lacks transformation. There is a need for a paradigm shift and the deconstruction of linguistic colonial legacy that aimed to stigmatise African languages over European languages.

Application of the theory on findings

The main objective was to provide a linguistic evaluation of the South African higher education sector by reflecting on 30 years of democracy (1994–2024). This topic was motivated by the fact that the year 2024 will mark 30 years of democracy in South Africa. The literature that was consulted stressed that little progress has been made within this period since most South African indigenous languages that have been accorded official status are yet to be used for teaching and learning. Based on the literature that has been consulted, it was established that linguistic imperialism as a theoretical framework that was used established that English supremacy and dominance together with the Afrikaans language succeeded because it had institutional and administrative support from the previous regime.

A critical argument that comes to the fore is the political will of the current regime regarding the development, promotion, and use of South African indigenous languages within the higher education space. In a more practical sense, it is argued that there is no political will that aims to strengthen and intensify the development, promotion, and use of South African indigenous languages within the higher education space. The reason for this submission is that there is no university that is held accountable from a policy implementation point of view, if the administrative system is silent on the use of indigenous languages as languages of teaching and learning.

Language policies and other relevant legislations have been disregarded since the promulgation of the Language Policy for Higher Education published in 2002, but there is no consequence management to those institutions that disregarded this policy. Thirty years after democracy, English is still considered as the primary language for teaching and learning, communication and research activities. There is a little that has been done to advance the development and promotion of South African indigenous languages.

In addition to the above-mentioned, it is equally important to mention that linguistic imperialism and Western epistemologies that were imposed on South African education system as a concomitant part of colonialism are still dominating the higher education system even after 30 years of democracy. It is further contended that this does not only derail transformation agenda but disregards other important imperatives such as social justice, student access and student successes. Thus, it is argued that anything that violates linguistic rights, violates human rights. In a more practical sense, linguistic rights are also considered human rights.

Conclusion

The central theme was to provide a linguistic evaluation of the South African higher education sector by reflecting on 30 years of democracy (1994–2024). This research was motivated by the realisation that 2024 will mark 30 years of democracy, which necessitated the author to examine the linguistic progress made by focussing on the role of language and its philosophy in transforming and decolonising the South African higher education sector as well as the linguistic fraternity. The findings revealed that the linguistic imperialism that was imposed by the colonial government and its administrative system still dominates the practice within the higher education sector. It was further established that the philosophy of language and Western epistemologies practised during the colonial era are still evident after 30 years of democracy. It was further postulated that a thorough implementation of the language policy in South African universities can serve as a pragmatic response to the transformation and decolonisation agenda.

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Author's contribution

T.J.R., is the sole author of this article.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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