

The epistemology of (m)other tongue(s): What does this mean for language in education?

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Background: The promotion of 'mother tongue' is at the core of the global education agenda.

Aim: This article explored the problematic nature of the mother tongue concept, and the subsequent effects it has on language use in education.

Method: Although the African continent is referred to wherever necessary to indicate this problem's broadness, South Africa (SA) as one of the most developed African countries was used to contextualise the current study. This article adopted a transdisciplinary approach that intersected the theological and educational disciplines. The biblical text is used as the background for the current research about the concept of mother tongue as viewed within the broader context of language problems in education.

Results: This article has argued that the concept of mother tongue and its use in education serves as one of the root problems underpinning South African education's language challenges. However, this article was not meant to be polemical, but rather, it was intended to stimulate debate on the concept of mother tongue and its use in education.

Conclusion: This article was concluded with advocacy towards the adoption of an alternative term to the concept of mother tongue. The term, dominant language (DL), was proposed which seemed to be clearer and more precise in describing what the concept 'mother tongue' ambiguously tries to express. Recommendations and policy guidelines were also provided should either the proposed term be adopted or a need arise to explore the mother tongue concept's continued use.

Keywords: dominant language; education; language in education; mother tongue; second language.

Introduction

The concept of 'mother tongue' started to receive international attention around 1953 when it was used as a synonym for the concept 'native tongue', and it was described as 'the language which a person acquires in early years and which normally becomes the person's natural instrument of thoughts and communication'.¹ Since the meeting by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the subsequent report of 1958, which advocated for the mother tongue education, the concept 'mother tongue' gained popularity in research on language(s) in education. However, the mother tongue concept has become problematic within the African continent. Various researchers have highlighted how the concept of mother tongue is becoming increasingly ambiguous and therefore problematic to use in education.^{2,3,4} Amongst these problems, according to Banda,⁵ Chimbganda⁶ and Webb,⁷ are a lack of clear definition of the concept, the multilingual nature of African countries and the effects of intermarriages on the home language (as propounded by Nchindila⁸, Chimbganda,⁶ UNESCO¹ and Webb et al.⁹), and the socio-economic status of most Africans that results in most children not being raised by their parents.⁶ These are some of the African population's challenges that present the concept of mother tongue as problematic and adding to the overall language problems.

Focusing on South Africa (SA), for instance, is characterised by diversity as evidenced by its 11 official languages. This diversity is what marks this country as a rainbow nation. The rich socio-cultural diversity that stems from different tribes and their specific languages mirrors this nation's context. However, embedded within this nation and its rich culture is the socio-economic and political challenges due to language disparities. These challenges started around 1971 when the Nationalist Party started to infiltrate the indigenous South African people's education sector. Until around 1971, the indigenous people's education was mainly in the church's hands through the missionaries.¹⁰ When the missionaries settled in the country, they made efforts to promote

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mother tongue education by using a team of mother tongue translators for education. During the colonial period 1652 to 1948, the missionaries helped in the establishment of formal schooling in SA,¹¹ and they were the only role player to bring education to the indigenous South African people.¹² However, since then and with the new democracy, education was removed from the control of the church, development of mother tongue education has been a thing of the past. It is therefore, not a surprise that English is currently the main official language of learning and teaching in most public schools where the indigenous learners are taught. It can be deduced from the South African statistics that about 80% of children learn in a language other than their mother tongue.¹³ This is a matter of concern given the poor literacy performance of South African children in both the national and international benchmark.^{14,15,16,17} The aforementioned longitudinal studies show that language in education has been a concern in the South African education system for years. As such, more time is needed for research and interventions before solutions can be realised. The fact that there has been a pattern of poor achievement for many years is a disturbing factor as SA's future lies in its current learners.

Given all these challenges, speculations have been made about the relevant intervention to remediate the situation. Focus on teacher development,^{18,19} norms standards for infrastructure,²⁰ investment on early childhood education,¹⁹ increasing the Grade 12 pass mark and focus on mother tongue education, are some of the areas speculated to hold promise for improvements in education.^{2,18} However, a review of past literature shows that language is one of the main problems that this country has been struggling with from the dark historical past.^{2,10,11} The language problem in education is exacerbated by the fact that language learning 'underlies all other learning areas since language is the medium through which all teaching, learning and assessment takes place. Thus, without language, no other learning area could exist'.²¹ Perhaps, a time has come for the country to review its language policies and refocus on the promotion of indigenous languages, as was the case in the past through the missionaries. However, this time the solution does not lie with the missionaries; but instead in a collective effort by South Africans. We should start by firstly reviewing literature and policies about the use of concepts that are key to this development, such as that of mother tongue and how such concepts could best be understood within the South African education system and the African continent as a whole. It is important to understand that an alternative concept is necessary, as this article suggests, and that proper steps that include a policy review should be taken towards this objective.

Conceptual framework

In this article, a transdisciplinary approach to the literature review has been adopted. A transdisciplinary approach allows the researcher the freedom to transverse between disciplines.²² The approach provides a theoretical platform for the researcher to use all available resources in various

disciplines to understand a complex phenomenon with the ultimate aim of contributing to knowledge. The concept of mother tongue within the context of languages in education is one such phenomenon with which this article is grappling. In applying the transdisciplinary approach, a biblical text is used to serve as a background to introduce the discourse about the concept of mother tongue. The author concurs with Rackley²³ who has indicated how narratives from the biblical text can be used to assist one to understand complex issues of life. Language development and the use of language in education are complex issues that are at the core of the current discourse. To further engage with the current discourse, the author also relied on literature within the academic disciplines that focuses on language use in education. Literature is drawn from disciplines such as education and humanities to argue that the concept of mother tongue and its use in education serves as one of the root problems underpinning the African continent's language challenges. Guidelines are needed to propose a possible way forward in addressing the challenges.

(M)other tongue(s): What does this mean?

This article has borrowed part of its title from the Day of Pentecost's event as narrated in the biblical text (the book of Acts Chapter 2). According to Pereira,²⁴ biblical texts are used to tell stories about God and the people of God (the church). Therefore, in this article, an event surrounding the Day of the Pentecost is used to tell the story about 'mother tongue'. In this event, the disciples of Jesus were waiting in the upper room for the promised Holy Spirit, whom they were supposed to receive before witnessing in other parts of the world. When the Holy Spirit arrived, in the most remarkable appearance of tongues of fire, the Bible records that all disciples began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. What was remarkable about this event is that the disciples are reported to have spoken to them was a foreign language, in a sense that they lacked understanding of the spoken language. The Bible also records that the Jews around them heard each of the disciples of Jesus in their native language. However, instead of this event eliciting interest from the Jews, they were led to confusion and surprise as they began to ridicule it and ask the question, 'What does this mean?' (Ac 2:12).

This is the same question that this article aimed to address in the issue of mother tongue. This article attempts to answer the question, 'What does (m)other tongue(s) mean in education?' Underlying the above-mentioned event and the question in focus is the literature indicating that the concept of mother tongue has become meaningless given the South African context.^{5,7} Although these two studies localised the problem to only SA, this article argues that this problem goes beyond SA to include Africa as a continent. This is corroborated by other research on language in SA and Africa as a whole.^{6,7,9,25} However, SA as one of the most developed African countries, is used as an example. According to De

Klerk,²⁶ SA is characterised by diversity, with most blacks in urban areas speaking about three languages or more.²⁷ This situation of multilingualism faced by South Africans is because of various factors, including urbanisation and job migration, amongst the main factors. The upsurge of the shared social context promotes this multilingual culture, and as such, it is becoming increasingly meaningless to ask someone the question, 'What is your mother tongue?'.

Given the African context, the previous question is a complex one to ask, if at all relevant. As indicated above, some black South Africans speak about three official languages, and within these languages, one might be or not even be their mother tongue. Hence, other authors have suggested a need for families to decide on family language policy.^{28,29} Based on this policy, the family can decide on the main language to be used in the home by each parent to support the children's language development. In addition, considering that the literature shows that some African countries speak more than 20 languages, with Nigeria leading with about 400 languages,^{1,9} caution is required when concepts such as mother tongue are used (p.313).⁹ Therefore, one needs to figure out whether by the concept of mother tongue, the person is referring to the dominant language (DL) of communication in the home (i.e. the most spoken home language), the language that one feels comfortable with and is often inclined to use when communicating, or the language passed from parents (often by the mother) to the child? All these are some of the valid follow-up questions that can be triggered by using the concept of mother tongue. Of course, accompanying these underlying questions is the issue of measure, that is, determining how much an individual speaks a particular language. This includes understanding how much is enough to qualify a specific language as used more than others. All these are valid questions that beckon reflection by those faced with the mother tongue concept.

Moreover, according to Webb (p. 67)⁷ 'in the more traditional African societies, the first language is the language of the father, and the mother tongue does not seem to be a significant concept'. Thus, although the concept of mother tongue might fit well within the western countries, the situation is not as simple within the African continent. Therefore, when reflecting on the concept of mother tongue within the African continent, one could then ask the same questions as asked by Chimbganda (p. 20)⁶ 'Who is "mother" in language acquisition?'.⁶ Although the attempt that Chimbganda⁶ makes is valid, the mother does not necessarily refer to the biological mother; one also needs to caution why such a misleading concept of mother tongue is used. Given the plethora of language challenges the African continent faces, why give-in to concepts which hold no significant meaning for the continent? There should be an acknowledgement by researchers in the African continent and their respective ministries of education that this question is yet to be fully explored.

The concept of mother tongue poses a language challenge, and its current use perpetuates the language problems

faced by the African continent. In SA, for instance, it is recommended by the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) of 1997 that education in grades one to three should be in the mother tongue of the child.¹ Thus, in recognition of this nation's multilingualism, it is acknowledged that children in their early school years might not be competent to engage effectively in cognitive activities in any language other than their mother tongue. This view is supported by the use of mother tongue in psychological assessments.^{29,30} However, this creates a challenge; because what is presumed to be the mother tongue of most children is usually their second or third language. Therefore, the use of this presumed mother tongue language leads to poor academic achievements and a distorted reflection of their true potential. This misconception could be indicated by learners' poor literacy performance on the Progress International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) even though they were tested in their mother tongue.¹⁷ This failure is the result of instruction in the weaker language, as evidenced by international research on bilingualism.^{31,32}

Although the above combination of problems stems from the good intention of the Department of Basic Education and language advisers with an attempt to help. However, such intentions seem to be based on some flawed premises that assume that a person's mother tongue is always the person's primary language.³³ In this way, it is presumed that because the child has conversational ability in a particular language, that is probably his or her DL and therefore should be used in education. However, this is often not the case.³⁴ It is therefore, based on the aforementioned underlying presumption, that the problem about the usage of the mother tongue concept is reflected in education. In addition, the constant use of the concept mother tongue in relation to the language of learning and teaching is also explored to further understand how this perpetuates the language problem faced by the Education Department.

Language of learning and teaching: Problem in education

The impact of colonialism on the African continent is evidenced by colonial languages (usually, English, Portuguese and French) in education.⁷ However, most African countries have challenged these languages' dominant role, particularly when improving learners' performance is the objective. Botswana, Lesotho, Kenya, Ghana and Malawi, to name a few, are examples of some of the African countries that had to reconsider a colonial language as the language of education in favour of mother tongue education.^{35,36,37} Therefore, these countries had to go through a transition to improve their language use in education, and South African is not an exception.

The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) shows that the language of learning and teaching has been the South African problem dated to the late 18th century.³⁸ Although a literature search on the

language of learning and teaching seems to present SA's dependence on international studies, Heugh³⁸ claims otherwise. According to Heugh,³⁸ works by prominent international scholars such as Cummins³⁴ and Skutnabb-Kanga,³⁹ was preceded by South African research that was carried out in the 1800s, 1930s and 1940s. The implication of this is that local educational research has informed international research, and not the other way around. This long history of research regarding the language of learning and teaching within the South African context suggests a long-standing problem of the language of learning and teaching in SA.

Given the previous history of language within SA, it does not seem too much for one to expect progress concerning language in South African education. Unfortunately, such is not the case. Although there is acknowledgement of the language problem in South Africa, not much effort is made to deal with this challenge. The debate between the PRAESA team and the Department of Basic Education about the issue of lack of books in African languages and lack of finance by the government to produce or source such books seems to be a never-ending one.⁴⁰ The reason of limited finance stated by the government for not reproducing books in African languages is challenged by Mahlalela-Thusi et al.⁴¹ and Heugh⁴² as untrue given the amount of money spent per learner compared to the apartheid era when such books were supplied from a significantly lesser budget for black education.¹⁰ Given the overstated role of developing the primary home language to shortcut the second language development, such prolonged debates should be a concern. Language promotion and development within the education context should be a priority for which the South African government should be willing to make sacrifices. If getting books in the African languages is agreed by all (the government included), to help promote and improve African languages, then all efforts should be made to achieve this goal.

Moreover, there is still a lack of solid basic education policy on language of education besides the LiEP of 1997.¹⁵ Policies in education are full of recommendations that do not necessarily take a stance to provide clear guidelines on what is allowed and not allowed. In the words of Webb⁷:

[T]he actual policy statement on the language of learning and teaching is unexpectedly general and inexplicit. It reads, simply, that 'the language(s) of learning and teaching in public schools must be official language(s)'. This is not sufficiently helpful approach. (p. 180).

This highlights an example of the many grey areas that have posed a challenge in education, particularly with regard to the language of education. The fact that the language choice is still open to negotiations, and issues of practicality show that the Department has not yet figured out what is essential for South African learners concerning language use in education. Therefore, the fact that the South African School Act No 84 of 1996 gives this critical decision of language in education to the School Governing Body (SGB) does not seem to help the situation.⁴³

Although the SGB has been given the responsibility to decide on the language of the school,⁴³ the composition of this body in the public schools comprises black parents who also have their own challenges when it comes to language. The literature shows that the majority of black parents have low education,^{41,44} and negative feelings associated with lack of, or limited, proficiency in children's language of learning and teaching.⁴⁵ These are the parents who serve as committee members of the SGB as teachers, parents of the learners or concerned stakeholders. Therefore, given their background, their role in the SGB is a matter of concern. Their educational background raises the question of competency in deciding about the language of education for the majority of South African learners. That is, whether these parents have answers to questions such as the critical role that language plays in education, the relationship between first language and second language in education, the complexity of language development, the history of language of education in South Africa and its subsequent psycho-social implications. These are crucial questions to which anyone involved in decision-making regarding the language of learning and teaching must be able to provide valid answers. Therefore, it remains unknown whether the parents who represent learners on the SGB could provide valid answers to these questions or not.

The dilemma in education: The language of learning and teaching and mother tongue

The language of learning and teaching in SA has been the Education Department's focus, as indicated above. The use of mother tongue as the language of teaching and learning in formal schooling within SA was started by the missionaries around the 18th century.⁴⁶ It could be presumed that this decision to invest in mother tongue education was motivated by the then international and national research on bilingualism and language in education.^{32,38} Although efforts to teach children in their mother tongue was strategic in the past as most natives were isolated, and English had not gained the hegemonic status it is currently enjoying. Currently, the use of mother tongue, particularly within education, seems to be used inappropriately to the disadvantage of the learners and represents a distorted perception of their potential. For example, in a South African school report, which is used for decisions about educational placements or interventions, children are expected to achieve a higher percentage in the mother tongue subject than any other subject to gain promotion to the next grade.⁴² Such an approach presents the mother tongue subject as one of the gatekeeper subjects, as it is presumed to be the child's strongest language, although that might not necessarily be the case. Therefore, this unfortunate use of mother tongue is proving costly for the learners, thereby hampering their academic achievement and advancement.

However, to state that the problem of the concept of mother tongue is unknown would be untrue. Many studies have been undertaken in the continent, and debates are still in

process regarding the problem of the concept of mother tongue. In SA, for example, during a colloquium on languages held in 2010, a resolution was accepted to develop a common understanding of the definition of mother tongue and home language.⁴² Although the 1958 UNESCO meeting resulted in the formulation of the above definition of mother tongue, such a definition, amongst others, was given with the caution that it might not be universally applicable, and therefore, it was acknowledged that variations could exist in different contexts.¹ It is, however, alarming that since then, it was only in 2010 that SA started to see the need to come up with its own definition. Furthermore, it could be viewed as disturbing that a decade later, such a definition has still not been developed. This could be because of the concern expressed years ago by Alexander (p. 17)⁴⁷ that 'on paper; therefore, the language infrastructure appears to be in place.' However, as indicated by the author, there are many practical problems as well as lack of political will and strategic clarity with respect to evolving language dispensation. Therefore, it can be stated that the problem of mother tongue concept has not been given sufficient attention and urgency by the government agencies who are supposed to be dedicated to language promotion and development, such as the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB), National Language Service (NLS), lexicographic units, and other national language bodies.

Alternative concept to (m)other tongue(s)

It should be noted at this point that concerning the concept of mother tongue, and the language of teaching and learning, the main stakeholders are the learners themselves. Therefore, from the perspective of the learners, it could then be necessary to shift the focus towards an alternative concept to mother tongue. The proposed concept is the 'dominant language' of the learner. The DL could be viewed as the language that is most often used in the social context; it is the language of interaction with peers and those around.^{3,48} Werker et al.⁴⁹ refer to DL as 'the language in which one performs best across a variety of language tasks.' It is the most valued language that one can trade with to save his life.⁵⁰

This concept seems relevant given that different contexts are dominated by specific languages. For example, although it could be attested that English seems to be the DL globally, the situation is not so obvious when speaking about DL spoken by individuals. Taking South Africa for example, although English is the DL used nationally and, in the economy, the distribution of the population by the first language spoken shows a different picture. The picture painted by the 2016 Census is that only 8.3% of South Africans speak English as their first language in their homes, and the first two most spoken languages are the Nguni languages (IsiZulu and isiXhosa).¹³ This suggests that, although English might be dominant in the wider systemic level, such is not the case in an individual system. Therefore, in such a context, it would seem proper to ask about the person's DL within the

context in which language is required, such as, in school. Therefore, to ask learners about their mother tongue might be meaningless compared to asking them about their DL. In this way, a person can clearly state of which language they have a strong command. This is the language that they are often inclined to communicate with or switch to when communicating in a less dominant language (LDL).

Furthermore, the use of the concept DL, with reference to language, relays well the principle of dominance in human development. Child specialists have discovered that children develop dominance of their body parts (e.g. hand dominance) at a relatively early age. One of the critical questions that had to be answered about dominance is the factors that influence it. The researchers, however, corroborate that the environmental components play a more significant role in the development and establishment of dominance than heredity/genetics.^{51,52,53} Accordingly, a similar developmental process can be assumed with regard to DL, suggesting that humans also establish a DL as part of a developmental process rather than inheriting it. This could be supported by the social-linguistic researchers who maintain that learning (language included) occurs within a social context.^{54,55} Within this context, studies on language policy come to the fore.^{26,28} Thus, children growing up where isiXhosa is dominant will grow up speaking isiXhosa, and similarly with the child growing up in environments where English or Igbo are dominant. Therefore, just as a child establishes a dominant hand with exposure to various motor activities, a DL can also be established as a child is exposed to the language and allowed to use it to interact with his environment.

Should it be agreed that a person can have either dominant (strong) or less dominant (weaker) language abilities, then referring to DL could be meaningful and clearer than the concept mother tongue. Given the research by Cutler et al.,⁵³ and Werker et al.⁴⁹ showing that even children who were raised in a bilingual environment have a DL, then acknowledging and understanding about a person's DL should be viewed as crucial in education. In this understanding, even though a person's mother tongue might be known, one would still see the need and make an effort to find out about the person's DL. To put it differently, if the concept of mother tongue is important in education to shortcut second language development, then understanding the limitations of both the concept and its use, are equally important. Therefore, alternative concepts, such as the DL as presented above, should be considered to give better clarity about the concept mother tongue and its use in education. This study argues that this stance could help in understanding that a black child could have English as a DL, and thereby, the language of choice for education from grade R instead of the purported mother tongue, as purported by Webb⁴ and Webb et al.,⁹ about the use of English in the African continent. Even more, this stance could also help in understanding that due to intermarriages and developments taking place in Africa, black 'Africans' can have English as their DL at home and subsequently, as the language of choice for learning and teaching. Hence, it is not a surprise to find learners achieving

a higher pass rate when tested in English than in their presumed mother tongue as was the case in a Zambian study about the benefit of mother-tongue instruction in multilingual African school.⁸ It is therefore, in acknowledgment of these possibilities, that the concept of mother tongue could be assessed and its use in education could be reflected on; so that the realities of the existence of a DL other than the purported mother tongue could be accepted.

Conclusion and recommendations

The above account shows that the concept of mother tongue is problematic, not only in SA but also in Africa. It seems crucial at this stage to ponder how to move forward. The step forward remains a matter of debate as different approaches might need to be taken in dealing with this matter. Firstly, the recommendation that is presented above is that of adopting alternative terms, such as a DL which seems to be clearer and more precise in describing what the concept mother tongue ambiguously tries to express. This approach could serve as a response to the literature as mentioned above that the mother tongue concept is becoming meaningless. Therefore, this approach would be a work in progress towards the establishment of a meaningful alternative concept. Such an approach could start with consultation of key stakeholders at both the national (Government) and the local (schools, communities and organisations) levels, to discuss the relevance and use of this concept. Such consultations should conclude with recommendations and adoption of an alternative concept to use as it was the case with the UNESCO meeting of 1953.¹ It is true that language is connected to the culture and the social context of the people, and any definition that wants to be relevant, must consider this.^{1,56} Therefore, the new description should critically engage with the feminine or maternal nature of this concept to ensure that it is neutral and relevant in the African continent's tradition and socio-cultural nature.

Secondly, it is true that in the African continent, the agglomeration of people from diverse cultures has led to intermarriages which have subsequently resulted in children growing up in homes where the parents speak different languages.^{6,57} Therefore, in cases where parents speak different languages at home, parents should consider deciding on the family language policy to support the child's DL, which they would use consistently in communicating to the child. Deciding on the language policy implies that both parents should decide on the language to be used at home and be consistent with it throughout the child's early stages of language development. This practice could prevent language delays and underdevelopment,^{48,57} thereby assisting the child in establishing a strong DL to be used later as a language of learning and transition to a second language.^{49,57} In this case, the focus is no longer just on the home language, but rather on the dominant home language. The focus here is to acknowledge the multilingual family contexts and what works best for the African continent and its people.⁵⁸

Thirdly, the role that the colonial era and the legacy of apartheid have had on the attitudes of people towards the use of mother tongue language in education cannot be ignored. It

is reported that in SA, mother tongue education was the norm during the missionary period, before apartheid.⁴⁸ However, the problem seems to have started later when the National Party came to power and enforced this mother tongue practice under the notion 'moedertaalonderwys' (mother tongue education). However, this was done with the agenda of segregating black Africans from quality education, and critical subjects such as mathematics and science, which were only offered in English and Afrikaans. This practice resulted in much resentment towards the use of mother tongue in education amongst blacks, and as such, it seems to have propelled them to opt for English against their DL of communication. Therefore, the discourse about using the concept of mother tongue should not be taken in isolation from the broader context of the political history of South Africa, and the approach should be the same for all African countries with a similar background.

Fourthly, the issue of congruency of those in position of power should also be addressed. Those in a position of power say that they support mother tongue education but do not seem to be making efforts to clarify what they mean by the concept. Even more, it might seem hypocritical for education officials to mention that they support the promotion of an African language, while their communications are not even available in any of the African languages they claim to promote. The adopted approach should avoid the unfortunate situation seen in certain education ministries whereby there is a discrepancy between what the education policies are saying about language and what is happening in practice.⁶ More practical effort needs to be made to promote African languages and increased effort must be put into clarifying concepts used, such as mother tongue.

Lastly, it should be noted that knowing the diagnosis does not guarantee that the prescription would also be correct. Although scholars might agree about the problematic nature of the mother tongue concept, intervention approaches to remedy the situation might differ. Therefore, each African country should determine a viable option in dealing with the matter, and most importantly, this article supports that an approach that is relevant to the educational context, and socio-cultural needs of its population, would be most helpful.

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