

## **UNVEILING MULTICULTURAL AND MULTILINGUAL POSITIONING THEORY AS NORMATIVE IDEAL IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS: THE CASE OF SOUTH AFRICA<sup>1</sup>**

**GILBERT MOTSAATHEBE**

*ILMA, North-West University, South Africa*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Rapid and commendable change has taken place in many post-colonial societies. The past few years have been epochal in transforming traumatised and fragmented societies into more stable and democratic ones. This was achieved through various means of political accommodation, including recognising the multiple cultures of those polities. Yet, despite the fanfare about multiculturalism accommodation, linguistic diversity and the quality of its actual practice remain parlous. Realising this problem, a new Multicultural and Multilingual Positioning Theory is proposed and developed to foster integration, focusing on the recognition of indigenous languages and their usage in various public platforms. This article highlights pertinent issues inherent in multilingual contexts using South Africa as an example. Insights from Multiculturalism Accommodation are used as a starting point to argue that the perilous situation in South Africa not only limits indigenous language communities' effective participation in the national life but also constrains citizens' constitutional rights. The article argues that although the country recognised nine African languages to the status of official languages, the actual usage of such languages in official discourse remains very erratic and effete. Ultimately it proposes a novel theory, the Multicultural and Multilingual Positioning theory, as an alternative approach to ensure that multiple languages and cultures function effectively in multicultural and multilingual contexts. This theory contributes to new epistemic horizons and provides a framework for practical implementation.*

**Keywords:** *Multicultural and Multilingual Positioning theory, multicultural accommodation theory, media diversity, Indigenous languages, rainbowism*

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## INTRODUCTION

After 1994, South Africa made a remarkable attempt at inclusivity and some of the feats achieved include the recognition of eleven official languages. There were also other positive developments such as the adoption of a Khoisan language expression as the national motto, “!ke e: /xarra //ke,” which simply means “diverse people unite” or “united in our diversity.” These were important and culturally nuanced steps in the right direction. Despite these developments and the fanfare around them, the real multicultural character of the country is still in peril. During his tenure as the first president of a united and democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela set the tone for what Desmond Tutu called ‘the rainbow nation’ as a normative ideal. This included reaching out to Afrikaners by visiting Orania, an Afrikaner separatist town that agitates for self-determination sequestered from South Africa. Mandela’s lifelong dream was a South Africa where all people, black and white, would live together in harmony as equals. The metaphor of a rainbow nation stood for the nation-building project. It embodied the idea of unity across the colour spectrum, including the multiple languages and cultures of South Africa.

This metaphor generated a lot of fanfare and euphoria as part of the nation-building project, which South Africa yearned for and espoused. As a metaphor, the rainbow also signaled unity of purpose for the country’s diverse cultures and ethnicities. This rainbow constituted unity and inclusivity, given South Africa’s checkered history of inequalities and injustices. As Shole (2021: 68) points out, “the concept “Rainbowism” derives from the term “The Rainbow Nation, which was coined and popularised by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1994 when he referred to the liberated South Africans as rainbow people of God”. The critical point, however, is whether that fanfare yielded tangible results in terms of transforming the once-divided South African society into a unitary construct espousing multiculturalism and multilingualism.

What is clear is that, from the onset, Mandela and his ruling party did not consider cultural diversity carefully. They were, instead, too concerned about political and racial inclusion under the Rainbow Nation and therefore did not address the fundamental question of diversity and the actualisation of multiple cultures and languages that had been marginalised by the onslaught of colonialism. This article argues that although much awareness regarding the rainbow nation as a unifying call for South Africans of different races has been spawned, the knowledge and tools available are not adequate to understand the complexity and dynamics of multiculturalism and multilingualism. This is not to discredit the work that has been done by language and cultural activists, academics and organisations working to promote all South African languages but rather to draw attention to the fissures and the work that must be done if the country hopes to see meaningful change concerning the recognition, promotion, preservation and official usage of its indigenous languages.

As such, there is an urgent need to generate new knowledge, especially at the level of theoretical abstraction, to understand and ultimately improve the ways in which multiple languages could function effectively in a multicultural and multilingual context without the denigration of other languages in South Africa. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to propose one such theoretical framework. It embarks on the process of finding a way to ensure effective utilisation of indigenous languages in official discourse and other public platforms without playing second fiddle to the dominant colonial languages. This is achieved by examining of the antecedent

literature, empirical data and problematisation of language diversity which is at the core of conversations regarding cultural recognition.

## THE CURRENCY OF THE PROBLEM

What has become clear after 1994 is that accommodation has become a subtext for assimilation and that multiculturalism and multilingualism cannot be discussed separately: the two are symbiotic. From this vantage point, the article puts forward the idea of “positioning” rather than “accommodation” which, in retrospect, leads to assimilation. In that sense, positioning as a construct is proposed as an alternative that constellates on the deployment of the languages in question in an ideal position that enables them to be used more effectively. In this context, the languages that have been relegated as non-dominant claim their rightful place alongside the more dominant languages that have usurped first place at the expense of the indigenous languages.

This article posits that the answer to this phenomenon lies in a novel theory of Multiculturalism and Multilingualism Positioning (MMP). The strength of this theory lies in the fact that it clarifies why indigenous languages are not prospering as official languages and further provides practical steps to help change that situation. Thus, it is praxis oriented. As Higgins (2024) explains, “a good theory should be testable, coherent, economical, generalizable, and explain known findings.” The proposed theory is testable because it is based on observations from an experiential perspective. It is coherent and economical because its conceptual assumptions are concise, distinct and logically stated.

In demonstrating the coherence and realistic perspective of the MMP, it is necessary to foreground its key propositions from the onset. Its core tenets posit that legal provisions to promote indigenous languages must be enacted and vigorously enforced to enable these languages to thrive; using a language regularly confers status to that language and a sense of identity to that group and positions that language to evolve and thrive; lack of language positioning leads to language shifts, resulting in language apathy and acculturation; language positioning is progressive and empowering because it gives other languages the same status as dominant languages from a practical perspective, enabling those languages to flourish outside the confines of the dominant languages that have continued to be reproduced through usage in public discourse and public platforms; language and culture cannot be separated because language is an embodiment of culture and enforces cultural identity, thus to preserve culture, the community must effectively use their languages in public discourse and that media mediation plays a key role in popularising the language and cultures thus helping them thrive. These propositions are discussed in detail in the subsequent section with examples of how the theory could be operationalised in real-world contexts.

Furthermore, MMP theory is both predictive and divergent or disruptive. It is predictive because it explains what happens when language is ‘positioned’ in the ways explained by the basic propositions of this theory. It is divergent because it does not only extend knowledge on language theories concerned with declining language use but actually diverges from theories such as multiculturalism accommodation theory and language revitalisation theory. According to Comajoan-Colomé & Coronel-Molina (2021, 897) language revitalisation “involves the restoration or strengthening of a particular language in regions where it prevailed before being displaced by other, more powerful or prestigious languages.” Thus, it involves efforts aimed at capacitating languages that are

endangered. However, what is clear is that these theories and the application of their central tenets did not work as Wiltshire, Bird, and Hardwick, (2024) observed, “revitalisation programmes may not be achieving desired outcomes.” One of the main problems with these approaches is that the methods used are more contingent and ad hoc, and this includes “community language classes, language camps, language nests, language use in formal and informal education, master-apprentice programmes (Lewis and Simons 2016). Hence, Wiltshire et al, (2024: 3947) observed that “this plethora of options results from there being no clear optimal strategy, from limited understanding of how language revitalisation works, and a lack of consensus on how to evaluate programmes.” The MMP addresses these concerns because it is clear about how the ‘positioning’ should be undertaken. It provides practical steps for its practicalisation.

Thus, MMP’s main tenets oscillate around the recognition that language and culture are intertwined and therefore cannot be treated separately as they operate simultaneously; and that in a multicultural and multilingual context the two need to be anchored through meaningful application rather than being accommodated within the dominant cultures and their languages. The focal point of this theory is that languages in multilingual contexts must be accorded more space at every opportunity and that there must be deliberate and radical attempts to use these languages, otherwise, the language/s of the dominant culture will forever remain a *sine qua non*.

## THE CASE STUDY

Countries such as South Africa present a unique situation because, unlike other countries where the language and cultural norms of the majority populations are dominant, the language and culture that dominate the SA landscape are those of the minority (English & Afrikaans). The dominant languages and cultures are of those of the colonial imperialists, who have effectively endangered the local languages and cultures. Because language identity is at risk, cultural identity is also at risk in South Africa. There are indeed multiple cultures in South Africa. However, the dominant culture that South Africans conform to in the public sphere is the colonial one. After 1994, the government adopted language policies, but nothing came out of those policies because they lacked ‘positioning’. For example, South Africa’s language policy, enshrined in the Constitution, recognises 11 official languages: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu.

The existing policy pronouncements are ambiguous about what ought to happen to truly embed and ultimately intellectualise indigenous languages. Even the Higher Education Policy Framework (2020) starts very well by recognising the dilemma of indigenous African languages in its preamble, but falls short on providing explicit guidelines:

Language continues to be a barrier to access and success for many students at South African higher education institutions. Despite their status as official languages, indigenous languages have in the past and at present, structurally not been afforded the official space to function as academic and scientific languages. South African higher education institutions are therefore confronted with the challenge of

ensuring the development of a multilingual environment in which all official South African languages, particularly those which have been historically marginalised, are afforded space to develop as languages of scholarship, research as well as teaching and learning.

However, all this lacks meaningful direction and falls short of providing clear guidelines and principles that should be followed to use and promote indigenous languages. Thus, the existing policies articulate a picture that remains unattainable if deliberate and radical actions are not taken. For example, the Government Communication and Information Systems (GCIS) Language Policy (2016) is based on the following principles as outlined under section 3 of the policy:

*3.1.1. Recognition of the linguistic and cultural diversity within the GCIS, and the multilingual nature of the people of South Africa.*

*3.1.2. Development and promotion of all official languages in the spirit of Batho Pele.*

*3.1.3. The public's right to use the language of their choice in their interaction and communication with the GCIS.*

*3.1.4. The public's right to access and/or receive government services and information in the language of their choice, where it is reasonably practicable.*

*3.1.5. The important role language plays in facilitating communication between government and the people.*

*3.1.6. The need to provide for the communication needs of people with language barriers, such as the visually and/or hearing impaired.*

*3.1.7. The legislative and constitutional mandate to promote multilingualism to ensure effective and efficient communication between government and the public.*

It is clear from some of the clauses in the above-cited section that the policy is not intentional in its provisions. For example, phrases such as people receiving services “in the language of their choice where it is reasonably practicable” (see clause 3.1.4) are problematic as they essentially allow the disproportionate use of English/Afrikaans. Furthermore, despite the pronouncements in the preceding, the GCIS policy still continues to use and even prioritise English as a language of discourse. The table below illustrates this point.

**Table 1: Type of communication and language use according to GCIS language policy**

Type of communication	Language
Forms	<b>Will be made available in English.</b>
Signage and Branding	All GCIS internal and external signage and branding <b>shall be in English.</b>
GCIS annual reports and other strategic documents.	<b>Will be published in English.</b>
All internal official oral, written and electronic communication (memoranda, leaflets, brochures, banners,	<b>Shall be conducted in English</b>

official announcements, documents, newsletters, posters, notices, and official addresses, meetings).	
All official oral, written and electronic communication where third parties may be involved including meetings, group discussions, presentations, job interviews, training sessions, and disciplinary hearings.	<b>Shall be conducted in English</b>
Oral communication, including official proceedings, announcements, public speeches, and conferences.	<b>The GCIS will use English interchangeably with any of the official languages, depending on the purpose or the platform.</b>
Official written communication, including electronic communication, all correspondence, press statements, memoranda, invitations, circulars, publications, leaflets and brochures.	<b>The documents will primarily be published in English.</b> All written communication material shall also be translated into the most prevailing language(s) spoken in a particular province. The GCIS Language Unit shall facilitate requests for such translations.

**Source:** Adopted from GCIS language policy (2016)

The table above demonstrates exactly what this article argues: that although there are policies, they are not resolute in using indigenous languages in official platforms. The government messages are essentially in English, meaning English remains the language of access. This is just one example of the lack of ‘positioning’ which is required for using indigenous languages meaningfully and allowing them to thrive in public discourse. This is because English remains the dominant culture, and as a result, everything oscillates around English. This situation compromises the language rights of indigenous language speakers and the principle of equal access to public services and information, since the language of access remains English. It also has implications for social justice as it exacerbates inequalities, considering that other language speakers’ rights to access and opportunities are delegitimised.

Furthermore, this compromised situation illustrates that the current attempts do not work in embedding the use of indigenous languages and that such languages just remain official languages on paper, not in practice. This is so severe, so much so that assimilation into the English culture has affected even the home front and the private space of every South African. For instance, although many Indigenous South Africans practice their own traditional cultures in their private space, they are still inextricably embedded in the dominant culture and are often shy about practicing their own traditional cultures publicly. Hence many of them prefer Western cultures to their own, which they too, just like the Westerners in whose culture they have been assimilated, consider backward. For example, many black South Africans would not admit openly that they consult traditional healers. They are more likely to seek Western medical care when they are unwell than to opt for traditional health care. Thus, their cultural identity is seriously compromised. Indigenous cultures have been consumed by the dominant culture (read Western culture). The private space is also increasingly dominated by the hegemonic culture due to the level of usage.

An example of the lack of a clear strategy which MMP advocates could be seen in the !Xun and Khwe communities whose language is in danger. Empirically, (interviews with the author) these communities and languages, and therefore their cultures too, are marginalised to the periphery. Positioning could make it possible for such languages to be taught at school, make them available for experts to be trained in that language and use the languages in public fora applicable to these communities.

This marginality demonstrates the embeddedness of colonial languages in post-colonial contexts and how colonial languages continue to create a problem for indigenous languages. It also demonstrates how the modern state continues to thwart efforts at the revitalisation of indigenous languages and their cultural practices. I foreground this discussion through a diachronic context in the next section and further engage with the multicultural accommodation theory, showing how it has not been adequate in addressing the problem.

### ***The embeddedness of language, cultural practice and hegemony***

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that in multicultural and multilingual contexts where languages were imposed for years, language shift and acculturation take place simultaneously. This is often unavoidable considering that the dominant languages have become the centre point because of their cultivation over many years. For example, in the case of South Africa, English was introduced in the 1700s through a process of Anglicisation. As Aiseng (2024, 2) puts it, “Anglicisation refers to the process of becoming more influenced by English culture, language, and customs.” During British colonial rule, the British actively promoted English and relegated all languages available in the country at the time. Kamwangamalu (2020, 1) argues “Anglicisation required knowledge of English to access whatever resources were available in the colony.” The requirement of English as a language of access is still very much embedded in all public structures in South Africa. It has also become a language of prestige. Those unable to speak it remain on the margins and do not have the same level of access to resources as the elite who speak it. This has created problems for indigenous and minoritised South African languages, which should be “positioned” as effective means of communication in public fora.

Because of the embeddedness of English, there is a problem in many fora where speakers from the same language community would rather discuss the issues affecting the same community in English instead of their own languages which they all understand (see Motsaathebe, 2010). This extends to all major public platforms where the main language of discourse becomes English. In these forums, when interpretation services are used, it is usually interpretation from English to an indigenous language instead of the other way around. This affirms the assertion that the language of the minority and their culture become a centre of gravity. Due to this same problem, even the interpreting services become complicit in the marginalisation of indigenous languages because the context of interpretation is not African but English.

In a session at a recent conference, delegates expressed exasperation that even in courts when the magistrate, the lawyer and the accused are Batswana (Setswana speakers), the case is conducted in English. This realisation was triggered by Leburu and Poe’s (2023) paper titled “The state and quality of court interpreting at the Mmabatho Magistrate Court of North-West Province, South Africa.” In this instance, it is clear that the Setswana language

is accommodated within the English language, which is the dominant language. This second-rate positioning of Setswana is what the current article bemoans. It insists that such accommodation creates more problems for indigenous languages and cultures. The speakers of indigenous languages fail to preserve their languages and cultures more meaningfully, leading some to argue that those languages are not fully developed for use in formal discourse, an idea that I have consistently dismissed as utterly false.

Further afield, studies show that the modern state is often eager to incorporate marginalised language communities into the mainstream under the guise of inclusion and accommodation. For example, in a study focusing on the cultural and lingual identity of Basarwa in Botswana (see Motsaathebe 2023), I concluded that in spite of their strong determination to preserve their roots, the state was intent on incorporating Basarwa into the mainstream Tswana community in the name of development. This obliterates the cultural identity of the accommodated groups. Without cultural identity, such communities become ambivalent members of society due to traditions that are imposed on them. This situation has been referred to as cultural identity salience (see Liu, Volcic and Gallois, 2019).

Without cultural identity, one becomes a quartered member who is at the mercy of others within society, which is bound to oppress them. Liu, Volcic and Gillios (2019: 138) refer to this situation as cultural identity salience. Cultural identity salience “refers to the strength of identification with a cultural group. A strong sense of affiliation indicates high cultural identity salience, whereas a weak sense of affiliation reflects low cultural identity salience” (Liu, Volcic and Gallois, 2019: 138). Cultural identity is perhaps the key affirmation of one’s culture and tradition as well as the cultural group in which one is affiliated. According to Liu, Volcic and Gallois (2019: 137), cultural identity refers to those social identities that are based on membership in a cultural group.

Ultimately, the accommodated communities end up preferring the culture of the dominant compared to their own cultures because of privileges and opportunities available to those who conform to the values, worldview and cultural mores of the dominant group. Thus, their cultural identity together with their languages is seriously compromised as they become inserted into the dominant culture (read Western culture). The private/home space is also increasingly eclipsed by the predominant culture due to the level of usage. Language shift and acculturation take place simultaneously at the expense of less dominant languages that are marginalised. Song (2024: 29) is right in indicating that,

Modern states are organised around the language and culture of the dominant groups that have historically constituted them. As a result, members of minority cultural groups face barriers in pursuing their social practices in ways that members of dominant groups do not.

Social practices include rituals, cultural practices and etiquette peculiar to a particular context, cultural or language group. Because of the domination of their languages, the marginalised language groups are unable to develop the social practices applicable to their culture, ways of knowing and ways of doing things. Such a situation underscores the assertion that language is an embodiment of culture (see Motsaathebe 2010) and that the two are intertwined. It is in this regard that this article argues for a more pointed theory such as the Multicultural and Multilingual Positioning Theory (MMP) to account for language use and cultural maintenance and production in

plural societies such as South Africa which is more complicated compared to monocultural societies such as Japan, the United Arab Emirates and Russia, for example.

As Song (2010: 7) says, “in culturally diverse societies, we can easily find patterns of state support for some cultural groups over others.” Although one cannot say this with certainty in the context of South Africa, it is clear that the support of some cultural groups is embedded in certain public institutions. For instance, despite efforts at parity of languages, one of the broadcasters in South Africa, Newzroom Africa, recently decided to introduce Nguni language news broadcasts in IsiXhosa and IsiZulu (see Komisa 2023, Mbhele 2023). Sociolinguist Thabo Ditsele criticised this move, saying that it was discriminatory for such a broadcaster to prioritise the two languages at the expense of other indigenous South African languages. He labeled this move as “a posture of majoritarianism in African languages” adding that “it is against the spirit of the Constitution and defeats social cohesion and the nation-building project.” (Ditsele, 2022).

Institutions such as the media are very important platforms as they confer status. There have been many studies focusing on media and the use of indigenous languages (Motsaathebe 2018; Shole 2022; Salawu, Shabangu and Mpofo, 2022) and they all paint the same picture. Thus, the media is central because it is the fourth estate. That is why the government pays attention to the media because it can make or break any priority agenda. Using indigenous languages in the media confers status to the communities of those languages (Motsaathebe 2018). They contribute to identity, although they may also contribute to stereotypes, assimilation and even acculturation.

### ***Culture and language as a single unit***

As indicated, the article uses insights from Multiculturalism Accommodation as a starting point to argue that the perilous situation in South Africa and similar contexts not only limits indigenous language communities’ effective participation in the country’s national life but also impedes their constitutional rights, pushing them beyond the margins of citizenship. Multiculturalism Accommodation has emerged as the most privileged theory on issues of multiculturalism. According to Shachar and Holmes (2001), multicultural accommodation aspires to give minority groups the choice of maintaining “their unique cultural and legal understanding of the world, or their *nomos*.” This source defines accommodation as:

A wide range of state measures designed to facilitate identity groups’ practices and norms. For example, group members might be exempted from specific laws, or the group’s leader might be awarded some degree of autonomous jurisdiction over the group’s members. (Shachar and Holmes 2001)

Although accommodation usually has good intentions, it also poses problems. For instance, multiculturalism becomes a problem whenever state accommodation policies intended to mitigate the differences between groups end up reinforcing power hierarchies. This phenomenon creates the paradox of multicultural and multilingual vulnerability. Canadian Philosopher Will Kymlicka (1997) distinguishes two kinds of multicultural accommodation, namely the external protections which promote justice between groups, and the internal

restrictions which restrict individuals' ability to abandon certain cultural practices. However, Kymlicka's distinction between the external and internal aspects of accommodation has been dismissed as a distinction that fails to provide a practical solution for real-life situations involving accommodated groups. In fact, it exacerbates the differences between the ingroups on one hand and the outgroups on the other. Hence, I argue that the multicultural accommodation theory fails to provide practical solutions and concur with those that argue it may do more damage.

Next, I delve into the proposed Multilingual Positioning Theory, highlighting its major propositions. I then demonstrate how such theory is not only praxis-oriented, but that it is also more conceptually distinct and clear about its propositions.

## **THE CASE FOR THE MULTICULTURAL AND MULTILINGUAL POSITIONING THEORY (MMP)**

I demonstrated above that multicultural accommodation and various language revitalisation frameworks do not work when dealing with language usage. Hence the proposition for the new theory. Generally, Multiculturalism theorists maintain that democracies must embrace multiple cultures that make up these polities (see Taylor 1994; Kymlicka 1997, Motsaathebe 2022). According to Baumann (1999), the elites often impose their own vision of multiculturalism and culture. The present article argues that culture and language operate simultaneously and must be treated as one entity. The article is also opposed to the idea of accommodation which compels the accommodated cultures to operate within the confines of the dominant cultures. It joins conversations by scholars such as Songs (2024: 27) who says, "toleration requires indifference, not accommodation." It is clear that multiculturalism does not necessarily promote justice and fairness. This suggests that multiculturalism accommodation is not potent enough to help cultural and language communities assert themselves without the threat of assimilation. Multicultural and multilingual contexts demand a more potent praxis-oriented framework capable of enabling language and cultural communities to assert themselves. In the case of South Africa, it is clear that the question of structural injustice was ignored in pronouncements of multiculturalism post-1994 and structural injustice was reinforced. It is clear that only ornamental as opposed to genuine efforts were made after 1994.

Consequently, the thrust of the argument in this article is that multicultural and multilingual contexts need a more meaningful praxis-oriented framework capable of enabling language and cultural communities to assert themselves. Therefore, if we accept that different cultures must function as one, *how may this work without potential assimilation?* The answer lies in "positioning" which is elaborated in the next section.

In light of these concerns, multilingual scholars need to continue to make the case for less dominant languages to be accorded with more space to ensure that they do not become the stepchild of more dominant languages which unfortunately continue to reproduce themselves and their cultures. This could go a long way in addressing the existing inequalities, particularly in multilingual contexts where multiple marginalized groups coexist.

## The constituents of mmp

A good theory is based on clear propositions. As Dankasa (2015, 67) states, “it is very essential that an author should explain these propositions so that any theory developed can be understood based on the clear statements of its propositions.” Linked to this assertion, the proposed theory is undergirded by the following main propositions.

- *Legal provisions to promote indigenous languages must be enacted and vigorously enforced to enable these languages to thrive.* It requires that the state crafts a mechanism and legal instruments that allows for cultural particularities in which the language is embedded. Examples: government policy and legislation should make provisions requiring schools to teach the languages, make it mandatory for people in context where language is in majority to use that language of discourse. Schools must be directed to teach these courses to PhD level, from primary school. Another example of this would be to make it mandatory for courts in areas where a particular language is predominant to speak that language, except under unique circumstances.
- *Using a language regularly confers status to that language and a sense of identity to that group and positions that language to evolve and thrive; lack of language positioning leads to language shifts, resulting in language apathy and acculturation.*
- *Language positioning is progressive and empowering because it gives other languages the same status as dominant languages from a practical perspective and enables those languages to flourish outside the confines of the dominant languages that have continued to be reproduced through preponderous usage in public discourse and public platforms.*
- *Language and culture cannot be separated because language embodies culture and enforces cultural identity.* Former South African president Thabo Mbeki (2005) noted that more and more South African children are socialised in the English culture and adopting the English language at the expense of the indigenous South African languages. This is evidence of multicultural accommodation in peril. This requires a sharp language and cultural positioning framework based on problematisation in the foregoing.
- *MMP maintains that to preserve culture, the cultural community must effectively use their languages in public discourse and media mediation plays a key role in popularising the language and cultures and helping them germinate, remain operational and thrive.* We have seen how attempts at multiculturalism accommodation led to integration and assimilation resulting in language shift and acculturation of those accommodated in the dominant language and culture. Based on the disastrous implication of the theory for the normative framework in multilingual contexts, the theory proposed in this article asserts that language and culture operate simultaneously and should not be considered separately.
- *Media mediation plays a key role in popularising the language and cultures and helping them germinate, remain operational and thrive.*

A major proposition of this theory is that language positioning is crucial for the usage, maintenance, vitality and continued success of indigenous languages in postcolonial hegemonic contexts. MMP holds that denigrated

cultures and languages cannot thrive without 'positioning'. Positioning refers to the processes through which language and cultural communities are intentionally given sufficient space to practice their cultures and languages exclusively in public discourse. The concept of positioning itself emanates from the realisation that language and culture operate simultaneously and that the two must be allowed space to be practised. Language must be used and taught, otherwise, it becomes endangered. Members of that language are axiomatically relegated to lower social categories. Thus, language is not only a major cultural heritage, but it is also a marker of social class. That is why many parents often encourage their children to use the language used more often in society in order to distance themselves from the perceived lower class.

Unfortunately, people within one or two generations of this occurrence could easily lose the language. Indeed, Mbeki (2005) was at pains to explain this when he said many children are learning other languages and neglecting their mother tongues, a move which is problematic because they become socialised in other languages at the expense of their own mother tongue languages. Habte and Wagaw (2003) are of the view that such people end up shunning their own languages and cultures. There is, therefore, a need for deliberate action in a pragmatic context and the proposed theory provides a tacit road map on how the obfuscation of certain languages could be remedied. Its propositions are clear about the causal relationships between factors that constitute language positioning as a construct around which propositions of the new theory vacillate.

### **What is significant about mmp?**

Whereas the applicable theories have called for accommodation, the multicultural and multilingual positioning theory calls for positioning. As such, the theory is praxis-oriented. There is a need for a significant shift in the way these aspects are handled. Accommodation and assimilation are the key determinants of the current conjecture. This study, therefore, has practical implications and could help minoritised languages embed themselves and reclaim their own rhythm that has been debilitated by dominant languages.

In the current conjecture, people gravitate towards the dominant culture in which conformity is rewarded. For instance, if one can speak certain dominant languages, then one gets more opportunities and if one can speak to them in the accent of the dominant cultural group, the opportunities and prestige increase.

The class status is also accrued by those who conform. Thus, conformity presents opportunities such as better jobs and contingent acceptance in the class of the dominant language group. I argue that this situation is tantamount to assimilation and acculturation. Excessive exposure to the culture and language of the dominant cultural group has a corresponding effect, and it results in excessive interference from that culture when you try to speak your language and when you attempt to practice your own native culture. The proposed new theory intervenes by reordering the prioritisation of the less dominant languages. Hence, MMP is deemed as divergent as it challenges the status quo.

It is an integration/incorporation of the dominant cultural group/society. Challenges when integrating into another culture include finding a way to negotiate between the values and traditions at home and those outside of the home. Cultural accommodation is a balancing act. People who move to a place where the dominant culture is

different must adapt, to a certain extent, to that culture's rules and customs, while at the same time retaining their own identity, or risk losing the traditions and beliefs that make them distinct and make them who they are.

### **Multicultural and Multilingual Positioning theory as a viable framework**

The issue of local language use in official discourse should be pursued more vigorously. The confident pronouncements concerning their recognition as official languages should translate into reality. The Multicultural and Multilingual Positioning theory offers a viable framework in which this could be realised. Whereas the applicable theories have called for accommodation, the Multicultural and Multilingual Positioning theory endeavours for the true reclamation of the status of these languages and their functionality in various contexts including public platforms and discourses outside the confines of the dominant colonial languages such as English in the context of countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Nigeria, Kenya and others, or French in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Benin) and Niger or Portuguese in countries such as Mozambique, Guinea, Cape Verde and Sao Tome and Principe.

Although South Africa has seen a rapid push for culture and language accommodation in the past three decades, these have not succeeded in asserting the language and cultural specificities of local communities of indigenous language speakers, the current arrangement continues to reinforce the mainstream dominant cultures and their languages. Thus, this article maintains that, in spite of such a push for diversity and the fanfare around it, the real multicultural and multilingual character of the country is still in peril. It exemplifies that the cherished multiculturalism accommodation has become a subtext for assimilation and that multiculturalism and multilingualism cannot be discussed separately as they operate simultaneously. This issue and the lack of depth in discussions around language diversity, equity, and inclusion have been especially disconcerting.

The article maintains that although much knowledge and awareness have been spawned, the knowledge and tools available are not adequate to fully understand the dynamics of multiculturalism and multilingualism, which operate simultaneously. This calls for a significant shift to change the situation. The idea of positioning encapsulated in the proposed theory attempts to level the playing field without antagonising the other. The proposition in this article, therefore, has a practical implication. It puts forward the idea of "positioning" rather than accommodation as elucidated in the proposed theory of Multiculturalism and Multilingualism Positioning. Its tacit framework should lead to more usage and appreciation of African languages. Such usages could re-cultivate these languages and instil a sense of pride and agency in the art of the speakers of these languages to privilege them as much as possible.

Significantly, by focusing on South Africa as a case study, the study resonates with Song's (2004) call to study the development of multiculturalism beyond the West. The dynamics of South Africa as a multilingual, multiracial and multicultural society offer an opportunity to introduce a more nuanced and encompassing theoretical interpolation from a more realistic perspective.

### **Potential obstacles to implementing positioning**

The hegemony of the dominant culture is one of the major obstacles towards positioning. According to Motsaathebe (2010), hegemony is self-perpetuating. The proposed framework levels the playing field because it fights for each language to be afforded more space for it to be utilised effectively and thrive. Using the language effectively means that the language must not only be used in informal contexts, including the home and community settings but must be used for educational purposes and engaging with difficult and complex contexts. In this way, marginalised languages could equally begin to thrive in multilingual contexts as opposed to the current conjecture where they are minoritised and relegated to the periphery. Such languages could equally become the language of opportunities as they would be on equal footing with other languages in all respects.

Positioning could encounter problems of poor uptake or resistance from the language speakers themselves. The language speakers who have been socialising in mainstream dominant languages may be opposed to positioning as they enjoy the prestige of being the colonial elite. They are the same people who look down on their own languages and cultures due to their embeddedness in the colonial culture, which has displaced their own cultures and languages.

That is why, as the author suggests, positioning should be mandatory and relentlessly enforced as it would change the current situation. It could go a long way in reinforcing language usage, unlike the current scenario where language revitalisation mechanisms are used tenuously and on an ad hoc basis. Thus, it should be mandatory for these languages to be used at levels, rather than remaining a subject of scholarship. This definitely addresses structural inequalities in multilingual societies.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This article explored the potential and actual contribution of theories of non-domination as a normative ideal of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Multiculturalism Accommodation theory has been particularly privileged. The article argued that it has become clear that accommodation has become a subtext for assimilation and that multiculturalism and multilingualism cannot be discussed separately as they operate simultaneously. From this vantage point, the article put forward “positioning” rather than “accommodation” and proposed a novel theory, the Multiculturalism and Multilingualism Positioning theory whose main tenets are the recognition that language and culture are intertwined. The theory also posits that in a multicultural and multilingual context, both culture and language need to be anchored through meaningful application rather than being accommodated within the dominant culture and their languages.

The long-term benefits of positioning as underscored in the MMP theory are clear. Firstly, it enforces the idea of equality because the languages would now compete on equal footing, not as subtexts of dominant languages. Secondly, it frees these languages from embedded domination. In that sense, this theory is also about social justice. Thirdly, it is praxis-oriented because it is geared for practical use and practical steps that must be enforced through the legislative framework. Fourthly, it is divergent from previous revitalisation frameworks that have not proved useful as the situation has largely remained unchanged where they have been applied. Fifthly, it is radical in its preposition, maintaining that situations that have existed for centuries require more radical action for changes to

take hold. MMPL theory's prepositions are predictive because it is clear what happens when language is positioned in the ways explicated by the basic assumptions of this theory, and it is divergent because it not only extends knowledge on related theories such as multiculturalism, accommodation and language revitalisation theory but also diverts from situations that are not helpful. Lastly, it contributes to liberating scholarship on multiculturalism and brings to the fore challenges of multicultural accommodation theory from the vantage point of non-dominant languages. The following recommendations are offered for multilingual contexts as part of language positioning:

### **Actionable recommendations**

As part of 'positioning' to ensure minority language use in public, this article proposes 1) a meaningful legal framework and policies, 2) effective language bodies for planning and mainstreaming purposes, 3) Training and intellectualisation of marginalised languages, 4) the preponderance of public services and information in indigenous languages, 5) mediatisation, meaningful involvement of indigenous language communities representatives and 6) funding and resource provision for positioning initiatives.

#### **1) Legal Framework:**

Government must put in place legal provisions that promote indigenous languages. The government has done well to give some of the languages official status, but it must go further to champion a legal enforcement that will enable these languages to thrive. For instance, it should make it compulsory in certain contexts for indigenous languages to be used. For instance, putting provisions that make the use of isiZulu mandatory as a court language in certain parts of KwaZulu Natal, Sepedi and Shangaan in Limpopo, Setswana in certain parts of North-West, Sesotho in the Free State and Afrikaans and Setswana in parts of the Northern Cape. The same applies to schools in certain areas. Until then, these languages will not enjoy a true official language status. Thus, a mere recognition of language rights, as it is currently the case, is not enough, but an enforcement of mechanisms to have those languages used and thrive.

#### **2) Indigenous Language Planning and Mainstreaming**

Establish and capacitate language planning bodies or committees to develop and implement language policies. In the case of South Africa bodies such as Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) and the South African Language Practitioners' Council (SALPC) must be capacitated and given more support and cope to promote and protect the language practice in the Republic more meaningfully.

#### **3) Training and Educational Institutions**

Encourage more students to take courses in indigenous languages. These languages must be taught from primary school to PhD level. Research and publications must be done in these languages. This will ensure access to education and knowledge in minority languages, starting right from primary through secondary, and higher education. This should lead to the intellectualisation of marginalised languages. Starting at primary schools is ideal as it leads to a more organic way of positioning, thus it is important to start from below at school levels to

grow the usage organically in order to reclaim African languages, heritage and rhythms. Sufficient funding for language education in indigenous and minoritised languages must be allocated. It will also be crucial to provide training for government officials and public service employees in minority languages to facilitate communication and service delivery. For example, the !Xun and Khwe languages are not taught at any of the schools in South Africa as they need teachers. It is therefore necessary to invest in the training and education of specialists in these languages. Lessons could be derived from countries such as Japan and China, for example. These are the few countries that have successfully promoted and positioned their languages to achieve greatness. It is critical to learn from other countries that have successful experiences in promoting and protecting minority languages.

#### **4) Availability of public information in indigenous languages/ Language Access:**

Ensure that public services and information are available in minority languages, particularly in areas where minority language speakers are concentrated. According to Fenuku (2024), indigenous languages could play a critical role in stakeholder communication by fostering inclusivity, enhancing cultural identity, and ensuring effective engagement in multilingual societies. Such communication could result in higher levels of comprehension and participation and enhance language access, public participation/deliberation and service delivery.

#### **5) Media mediatisation**

Ensure the effective utilisation of such languages in media platforms. This could foster a better public sphere in marginalised languages.

#### **6) Constant monitoring and Evaluation**

Monitoring and evaluation are necessary for any project if one wants to ensure its success, without which nothing meaningful happens. Therefore, regularly monitoring and evaluating the implementation of language policies is required.

#### **7) Involve indigenous language representatives**

The reason why certain projects are often not sustainable is that they are imposed on communities. Targeted language communities and their representatives must be consulted not only when developing policies but also when implementing them to ensure that they become the change agents within their communities.

### **FUTURE STUDIES**

Future studies could look at this concept in the context of higher education, where dominant colonial languages are prioritised at the expense of local languages, so much so that very few local languages are used at advanced levels such as when writing Master's and doctoral theses, or when writing journal articles such as this one.

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