

# Language Policies and Decolonization

## The Case of #AfrikaansMustFall

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### INTRODUCTION

Decolonization is a process that has been approached from many disciplines. Language policy and planning (LPP hereafter) is central when it comes to thinking of decolonization. In the case of South Africa, language has always played a central role in power struggles. The main dispute is between English and Afrikaans, the colonial languages, while Indigenous languages are systematically marginalized. That marginalization is reflected in the languages of instruction chosen by universities. Although Indigenous languages were officially recognised after the end of apartheid, some universities failed to adjust their language policies and practices in a significant way. In 2015 and 2016, within the context of protests for decolonizing universities, such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, a linguistic protest arose: #AfrikaansMustFall. Its goal was to end the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in universities since it acted as a barrier for non-Afrikaans speakers.

Drawing from the field of language policy, following Tollefson's (2015) approach of historical structural analysis and Woolard and Schieffelin's (1994) concept of language ideology, the purpose of this article is to discuss why protests like #AfrikaansMustFall are central to decolonizing processes. Exploring both sides of the protest will demonstrate how questioning and working on language policies can contribute to decolonizing universities.

### THE TWO SIDES OF #AFRIKAANSMUSTFALL

Authors such as Savo Heleta and Sally Matthews have discussed Africanization or the idea of an African Renaissance in higher education as a possible solution to ending colonialism in institutions. Heleta (2006) mentions the epistemic violence that has been present in such institutions since apartheid and how that violence colonized Black people's minds in such a way they believed they were 'inferior', as Fanon also argued in his book *Black skin, white masks* (1952). However, regarding the idea of an African Renaissance, Matthews (2018) points out that using this concept is still adopting a European point of reference. The author proposes

challenging Eurocentric epistemology and in particular paying attention to pedagogy. I argue that the choice of language used as a medium of instruction is another way in which epistemic violence operates, hence why some university students from Afrikaans medium universities protested against the language policies which were not modified accordingly after apartheid finished.

It is important to take into consideration that language policies in education help preserve or modify systems of inequality (Cooper 1989). Hence why, in the #AfrikaansMustFall protest that took place in 2015 and 2016, the discussion around languages of instruction in certain South African universities involved many other aspects, such as hegemony, privileges and colonial heritage. There were two sides to this protest. One side did not consider that changing the language of instruction was beneficial for the universities or their students. The other side believed the language of teaching and learning in some universities acted as a barrier and, therefore, promoted the change of language policies. These stances show what has been termed linguistic ideologies, a concept that has been studied by Woolard and Schieffelin (1994), among others. The authors claim language ideology ‘makes its own contributions as an interpretative filter in the relationship of language and society’ (62), reflected here in the arguments used by each side of the protest.

### **Afrikaans Must Fall**

The student opposition to the language policies in former Afrikaner universities was based on the claim that Afrikaans is the language of oppression. That belief is rooted in apartheid era ideology and the policies that made Afrikaans compulsory in education. In addition, students believed Afrikaans acted as an academic and social barrier for those who could not master the language.

The role of LPP in relation to decolonizing higher education has been extensively debated. Decades ago, Thiong’o (1986) wrote about the colonial alienation and the crisis of identity that neo-colonial language policies can cause in students. Kwesi Kwaa Prah (2018) states that colonial languages in education serve the purpose of producing and reproducing neo colonial culture in Africa.

In the #AfrikaansMustFall campaign, the solution proposed for the language of instruction debate was to replace Afrikaans with English. Yet, once again, the result would be that Indigenous languages would remain in the margins. Prah (2018) raises the question: ‘Why are African students bent on changing one master for the other?’ (57), he links this to the idea of commodification of education in English and the ‘anglobalization’ (58) of education. In order to decolonize the university, we need to carefully analyze the systematic functioning of the

university. Questioning a language policy is central, but questioning language policy to foster a type of multilingualism in which Indigenous languages are included is equally as important.

### **Afrikaans Sal Bly**

A group of students did not agree with the demand for a change in the language of instruction in some traditional Afrikaans-instruction universities. Despite the fact that most of them were able to speak English, they were still against the proposed reform of language policies. In order to understand this position, it is important to look back to why it has been held. Webb, Laffon and Pare (2010) hold that many white Afrikaans speaking people believe that if their language loses power, their community will also be disempowered. Kriel (2006) states that Afrikaners think that their culture depends on the survival of their language and that ‘language should act as the substitute for the lost, never-to-be-found again state’ (56). The connection between power and languages is explicit. After the end of apartheid, Afrikaners lost some of their power but their language remained as functional as English in almost every domain of life. The defense of that is key to retain power and, therefore, privilege of access and success in certain universities.

On the other hand, Nash (2000) says that Afrikaners, by defending Afrikaans against English as the medium of instruction in universities, are also defending the majority of South Africans who cannot speak English. However, this approach to the issue encounters a problem, as voiced by the same author, in that: ‘there is no conceivable reason why that majority would opt to support a language which favors their former apartheid masters’ (360). It is understandable that Afrikaners might want to defend their language and thus be against changing language policies. However, it is equally important to then question the relation between the language they defend and its intimate connection with apartheid ideology and policies.

### **CONCLUSION**

Language planning and policy (LPP) impacts much more than just language. The discussion of decolonizing universities reveals power relations, structural inequalities and ideologies. The call to question language policies and revise them accordingly may contribute to promoting access to higher education and to fostering diversity and plurality in institutions. However, for this to occur, a critical interrogation is necessary: questioning should be oriented towards amplifying historically silenced voices and to stopping the institutional/systematic undervaluing of Indigenous languages and knowledge.

If the current prioritization of colonial languages is interrupted at universities, these institutions would become more diverse and inclusive places since different worldviews and ways of knowledge production attached to each language could coexist and complement each other. As well as this, Indigenous language speakers could feel empowered that they can actively participate in one more social domain. This would be a first step towards university decolonization and multilingualism.

As shown in this article, on both sides, the language debate is complex and involves several social and historical aspects. Thus, the discussion of institutional LPP is integral to the process of decolonization.

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