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Language-in-Higher-Education Policy and the Intellectual Marginalisation of Setswana in South African Universities

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ABSTRACT

South Africa's higher education language policy framework formally recognises indigenous African languages, including Setswana, and mandates their development as languages of teaching, research, and institutional governance. Despite these commitments, Setswana remains marginal in high-status academic domains, with English continuing to dominate disciplinary instruction, postgraduate scholarship, research publication, and institutional administration. This article examines the structural, ideological, and institutional factors constraining the intellectualisation of Setswana within South African universities. Drawing on Critical Language Policy theory and intellectualisation scholarship, the study adopts a qualitative document analysis approach to interrogate national policy frameworks, institutional practices, and existing literature on African language development in higher education. The analysis reveals a persistent policy–practice gap shaped by English-dominant promotion systems, global publication pressures, limited integration of Setswana into disciplinary curricula, and entrenched institutional language ideologies. The article argues that Setswana's limited intellectual expansion is not a consequence of linguistic inadequacy but of structural design within higher education systems. It concludes by proposing a systemic model of Setswana intellectualisation that integrates policy alignment, disciplinary expansion, postgraduate capacity building, research incentives, and ideological transformation. Meaningful intellectualisation requires coordinated institutional reform that positions Setswana as a legitimate language of advanced

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scholarship and epistemic authority.

Keywords: Setswana; Higher Education; Intellectualisation; Language Policy; Critical Language Policy; African Languages; Epistemic Justice

1. Introduction

In South Africa, the post-apartheid constitutional order recognises eleven official languages, and national higher education frameworks formally commit institutions to promoting multilingualism and developing African languages for academic use. The *Language Policy for Higher Education*^[1] and the *National Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions*^[2] explicitly call for the intellectualisation and functional expansion of indigenous languages, including Setswana. Scholars have argued that the success of these policies depends on their implementation within institutional cultures and academic practices rather than on policy formulation alone^[3,4].

Despite these progressive commitments, English continues to dominate as the primary language of teaching, research, administration, and scholarly publication in South African universities^[5–7]. Setswana, although widely spoken and constitutionally recognised, remains marginal in higher education beyond its status as a subject of study within language departments. This reflects broader patterns in which African languages are recognised symbolically but remain excluded from key knowledge-production spaces^[4,8].

The concept of intellectualisation is central to understanding this tension. Intellectualisation refers to the development of a language's capacity to function in high-status domains such as science, technology, governance, and academic discourse^[8]. Recent studies on African language development in higher education emphasise that intellectualisation requires the creation of specialised terminology, academic literacy resources, and sustained institutional support^[9–11].

One contributing factor is institutional language ideology. English is widely associated with internationalisation, global competitiveness, and academic mobility^[12,13]. Universities seeking global ranking recognition often prioritise English-medium instruction and publication to attract international students and enhance citation metrics. Similar findings have been reported in South African universities, where institutional language practices frequently privilege

English despite formal commitments to multilingualism^[4,14].

Curriculum structures further shape language development trajectories. Even in universities that offer Setswana language programmes, its role is often limited to linguistic and literary study rather than disciplinary knowledge production. This restriction limits opportunities for African languages to participate in knowledge creation and dissemination processes^[11,15].

Research production patterns also contribute to limited language development. Academic promotion and funding systems frequently prioritise publication in international, English-medium journals. Consequently, scholarly terminology, methodological discourse, and theoretical debates continue to develop predominantly in English^[6,16]. Studies focusing on indigenous language development have highlighted the need for deliberate scholarly publication strategies to support language intellectualisation and corpus development^[11].

Furthermore, institutional resource allocation plays a critical role. The development of terminology banks, academic glossaries, and discipline-specific corpora requires sustained funding and strategic planning. Research on African language development in higher education demonstrates that resource constraints remain a significant barrier to implementation despite policy support^[4,17].

The persistence of English dominance in higher education also has epistemic implications. Decolonial scholars argue that language is inseparable from knowledge systems^[18,19]. The marginalisation of African languages in higher education may therefore perpetuate colonial epistemic hierarchies and limit the participation of indigenous knowledge systems in academic discourse^[4,6].

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Critical Language Policy (CLP)

This study is grounded in Critical Language Policy (CLP) theory, which interrogates how language policies are

shaped by power relations and how they reproduce or challenge social inequalities^[13,20]. Unlike traditional language planning approaches that focus on policy formulation, CLP emphasises policy enactment, institutional mediation, and ideological structures. It recognises that language policies operate within broader socio-political and economic contexts and that formal recognition does not automatically translate into equitable practice.

In the South African higher education context, national frameworks such as the *Language Policy for Higher Education*^[1] and the *National Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions*^[2] explicitly mandate the development of African languages for academic use. However, CLP enables a critical interrogation of how these commitments are implemented or neutralised within institutional structures.

Tollefson^[13] argues that language policies often reproduce existing hierarchies when embedded within unequal social systems. In South African universities, English retains structural dominance due to its association with global scholarship, academic publishing, and economic mobility. From a CLP perspective, the limited development of Setswana in higher education reflects not linguistic deficiency but institutional and ideological constraints that privilege English as the legitimate language of knowledge production.

Shohamy^[20] further argues that language policies frequently operate symbolically, while de facto language regulation occurs through everyday practices, institutional norms, and assessment systems. In higher education, promotion criteria, publication requirements, and international ranking pressures often function as implicit language policies favouring English. Thus, CLP provides a lens for examining how policy recognition of Setswana coexists with structural mechanisms that constrain its intellectual expansion.

2.2. Intellectualisation Theory

Complementing CLP is the concept of intellectualisation, central to African language development scholarship. Intellectualisation refers to the process by which a language expands its functional domains to include higher-order academic, scientific, technological, and administrative discourse^[8]. It involves terminology development, corpus planning, scholarly publication, and institutional legitimisation.

Alexander^[8] argued that African languages must move beyond symbolic cultural status to become languages of science, governance, and advanced scholarship. Intellectualisation is therefore not only linguistic but institutional and political. It requires systemic support within universities, including curriculum reform, research funding, and publication platforms.

Heugh^[5] emphasises that language development depends on sustained use in high-status domains. If a language is confined to informal or introductory-level contexts, its academic register cannot mature. In the case of Setswana, while it is offered as a subject of study, its limited use in content disciplines such as law, economics, engineering, and medicine restricts its epistemic growth.

Intellectualisation theory also intersects with decolonial scholarship. Mignolo^[18] argues that colonial languages dominate global knowledge systems, marginalising indigenous epistemologies. In South African higher education, the limited institutional presence of Setswana in postgraduate research, academic publishing, and disciplinary discourse reflects ongoing epistemic hierarchy.

Together, CLP and Intellectualisation Theory provide a dual analytical lens: CLP interrogates power and policy implementation, while intellectualisation theory focuses on functional language development in high-status domains.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Setswana and Higher Education in South Africa

3.1.1. Policy Commitments to African Languages in Higher Education

South Africa's post-apartheid higher education policy landscape reflects strong rhetorical commitments to multilingualism. The *Language Policy for Higher Education* (2002) positioned African language development as central to transformation. The 2020 National Language Policy Framework reinforced this commitment, requiring universities to develop implementation plans for African languages.

However, empirical studies demonstrate that implementation varies significantly across institutions^[2,5]. While some universities have introduced multilingual glossaries, language centres, and terminology development initiatives,

English remains the dominant language of instruction and research dissemination.

In provinces where Setswana is widely spoken particularly the North West universities have adopted institutional language policies recognising Setswana. Yet recognition often translates into limited functional use beyond ceremonial contexts or language departments.

3.1.2. Setswana as a Subject versus Setswana as a Medium

One recurring theme in the literature is the distinction between African languages as academic subjects and as media of instruction. Makalela^[6] notes that African languages are frequently studied academically but rarely used as vehicles for disciplinary knowledge.

For example, at universities located in predominantly Setswana-speaking regions, Setswana is offered as a degree subject within humanities faculties. However, core courses in social sciences, natural sciences, law, and business are overwhelmingly English-medium. This structural separation confines Setswana to linguistic and literary study rather than epistemic production.

Alexander^[8] warned that without expansion into content disciplines, African languages risk remaining peripheral within higher education. The limited use of Setswana in postgraduate supervision and thesis writing further illustrates this marginality. Students are often encouraged to write dissertations in English to increase publication prospects.

3.1.3. Research Production and Publication Pressures

Research production practices significantly shape language development. Academic promotion systems in South Africa reward publication in accredited journals, most of which operate in English. As Phillipson^[12] and Tollefson^[13] note, English dominates global academic publishing, reinforcing its symbolic capital.

This dynamic constrains Setswana's intellectual expansion. While occasional academic articles are published in Setswana, mainstream research dissemination remains English-medium. The absence of high-impact Setswana-medium journals limits opportunities for scholarly register development.

Furthermore, postgraduate students often perceive English as necessary for career mobility. This perception re-

flects Bourdieu's^[21] concept of linguistic capital: English proficiency is associated with professional advancement, whereas African languages are seen as locally bounded.

3.1.4. Terminology Development and Corpus Planning

Intellectualisation requires systematic terminology development. Some South African universities have established language units to develop glossaries in African languages, including Setswana. However, these initiatives are often fragmented and under-resourced.

Heugh^[5] argues that sustained corpus planning must be integrated into disciplinary teaching. If newly developed terminology is not actively used in lectures, textbooks, and research publications, it cannot gain institutional legitimacy.

For example, scientific terminology in Setswana may exist within glossary documents but remains absent from mainstream engineering or medical instruction. Without consistent academic usage, terminology development alone cannot achieve intellectualisation.

3.1.5. Institutional Language Ideologies

Language ideology remains a powerful barrier to African language development. Research indicates that many academics associate English with global scholarship and academic credibility^[6,22]. Even where policy supports multilingualism, institutional culture may prioritise English for pragmatic reasons.

This ideological positioning influences curriculum design, research expectations, and postgraduate supervision practices. Setswana may be valued culturally but viewed as unsuitable for advanced scientific discourse. Such perceptions reflect historical hierarchies rather than linguistic limitations.

3.1.6. Decolonisation and African Language Development

The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements foregrounded language as central to decolonisation. African languages were positioned as vehicles for epistemic justice and institutional transformation.

However, while universities adopted decolonial rhetoric, structural reliance on English remained largely unchanged. Mignolo^[18] argues that epistemic transformation requires disrupting linguistic hierarchies within knowledge production systems. In the case of Setswana, this would

involve expanding its presence in postgraduate research, interdisciplinary scholarship, and institutional governance.

3.1.7. Structural Barriers and Future Prospects

The literature suggests that the limited development of Setswana in higher education is not due to linguistic inadequacy but to structural constraint. These include:

- English-dominant publication systems.
- Promotion criteria tied to international indexing.
- Limited funding for African language corpus development.
- Institutional ideologies privileging English.

Meaningful intellectualisation requires coordinated policy, funding, curriculum reform, and ideological change.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design, combining critical document analysis with conceptual synthesis informed by Critical Language Policy (CLP) theory and intellectualisation scholarship. The research does not rely on primary empirical data collection but instead undertakes a systematic analysis of policy documents, institutional frameworks, and scholarly literature related to the development of African languages specifically Setswana in South African higher education.

This design is appropriate given that the study seeks to interrogate structural and ideological factors shaping language development at institutional and national levels. Rather than examining individual attitudes or classroom practices, the focus is on the relationship between formal policy commitments and systemic higher education structures that influence the intellectual expansion of Setswana.

4.2. Data Sources

The primary data sources for this study consist of:

1. **National policy documents**, including:
 - *Language Policy for Higher Education*^[1].
 - *National Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions*^[2].
2. **Selected institutional language policies** from

South African universities located in predominantly Setswana-speaking regions.

3. Scholarly literature on:

- Critical Language Policy^[13,20].
- Intellectualisation and African language development^[5,8].
- Linguistic capital and language ideology^[21].
- Decolonial theory and epistemic justice^[18].

4. Academic research on Setswana in higher education, including studies on curriculum design, terminology development, research production, and language use in tertiary institutions.

All policy documents analysed are publicly accessible. Scholarly sources were selected based on relevance to higher education language policy, African language development, and epistemic transformation.

4.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by two complementary theoretical lenses:

4.3.1. Critical Language Policy (CLP)

CLP provides a framework for examining how formal policy commitments are mediated by institutional power structures and ideological formations. Following Tollefson^[13] and Shohamy^[20], policy is understood not only as official documentation but as enacted practice shaped by institutional norms, assessment systems, and research incentives.

In this study, CLP is used to interrogate:

- The extent to which higher education policy commitments translate into functional language development.
- How institutional structures reproduce English dominance.
- The relationship between policy rhetoric and institutional implementation.

4.3.2. Intellectualisation Theory

Intellectualisation theory^[8] frames language development as functional expansion into high-status domains, including scientific discourse, postgraduate research, and disciplinary knowledge production. This framework enables analysis of whether Setswana is being structurally positioned to develop academic registers necessary for sustained schol-

arly use.

Together, these frameworks allow for multi-layered analysis linking policy texts, institutional structures, and epistemic outcomes.

4.4. Data Analysis Procedures

A qualitative thematic document analysis approach was employed. Policy texts and scholarly literature were systematically examined to identify recurring themes related to:

- Medium of instruction in higher education.
- Terminology development and corpus planning.
- Research publication norms.
- Promotion and funding criteria.
- Institutional language ideologies.
- Structural barriers to African language intellectualisation.

The analysis involved:

1. Close reading of policy documents to identify explicit commitments to African language development.
2. Comparative examination of these commitments against documented institutional practices described in the literature.
3. Thematic coding of recurring patterns of constraint, including English dominance, publication pressures, and limited disciplinary integration.
4. Interpretation of findings through CLP and intellectualisation theory.

Rather than treating documents as neutral artefacts, the analysis considers them as products of socio-political contexts that both reflect and shape institutional power relations.

4.5. Trustworthiness and Rigour

Although this study does not involve empirical fieldwork, analytical rigour was maintained through:

- Use of established theoretical frameworks.
- Engagement with peer-reviewed scholarship.
- Cross-referencing national policy commitments with institutional practice patterns.
- Transparent articulation of analytical categories.

By triangulating policy texts with academic literature and theoretical models, the study strengthens interpretive validity.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

The study relies exclusively on publicly available policy documents and published academic literature. No human participants were recruited, and no confidential institutional data were accessed. As such, formal ethical clearance was not required.

However, care was taken to avoid naming specific institutions in ways that could imply institutional deficiency. The analysis focuses on systemic patterns within South African higher education rather than evaluating individual universities.

4.7. Methodological Limitations

As a desktop study, this research does not include primary data from lecturers, students, or policymakers. Future empirical studies incorporating interviews, surveys, or institutional case studies could provide deeper insight into lived experiences of Setswana language development in higher education contexts. Nevertheless, the conceptual and policy-oriented focus of this study is appropriate for examining structural constraints on language intellectualisation at a systemic level.

5. Discussion

5.1. Setswana, Institutional Power, and the Limits of Policy Recognition

The findings of this study demonstrate that the limited development of Setswana in South African higher education cannot be attributed to linguistic inadequacy but must be understood because of structural and ideological constraints embedded within university systems. Although national frameworks such as the *Language Policy for Higher Education*^[1] and the *National Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions*^[2] explicitly promote the development of African languages for academic use, Setswana remains marginal in high-status institutional domains. This reflects what Critical Language Policy (CLP) scholars identify as the disjuncture between policy text and policy enactment^[13,20].

In institutions located in predominantly Setswana-speaking regions, formal language policies often recognise

Setswana as an institutional language. However, recognition frequently manifests in symbolic domains ceremonial addresses, signage, or language courses rather than in sustained disciplinary instruction or research production. Alexander^[8] cautioned that symbolic recognition without structural integration risks preserving linguistic hierarchy under the guise of inclusivity. The limited presence of Setswana in postgraduate supervision, disciplinary lectures, and institutional governance illustrates this pattern.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, English continues to function as the dominant form of linguistic capital within the higher education field^[21]. Academic promotion systems reward publication in internationally indexed journals, almost all of which operate in English. Consequently, scholars who might wish to publish research in Setswana face institutional disincentives. Phillipson^[12] argues that such systemic privileging of English is not neutral but embedded in global academic structures that reproduce linguistic inequality. In South Africa, this dynamic reinforces English as the legitimate language of knowledge production while constraining the intellectual expansion of Setswana.

5.2. Setswana as a Discipline versus Setswana as a Language of Knowledge

A critical distinction emerging from the literature is between Setswana as an object of study and Setswana as a medium of knowledge production. Setswana departments in universities offer degrees focusing on linguistics, literature, and cultural studies. However, core disciplinary instruction in fields such as economics, political science, engineering, medicine, and law remains English-medium. Makalela^[6] argues that African languages are frequently confined to heritage domains, rather than developed as vehicles of scientific reasoning or disciplinary discourse.

This structural arrangement restricts intellectualisation. Intellectualisation requires sustained engagement with specialised terminology, conceptual frameworks, and research methodology discourse^[8]. If Setswana is not used to teach sociology, for example, its sociological vocabulary remains underdeveloped. If it is not used in law, its legal register cannot mature. Heugh^[5] emphasises that functional expansion into high-status domains is essential for language development. Without such expansion, language remains peripheral to epistemic authority.

For instance, while terminology development initiatives may produce Setswana glossaries in science or law, these resources often remain unused in mainstream instruction. Without consistent application in lectures, assignments, and assessments, terminology cannot gain institutional legitimacy. Intellectualisation is therefore not achieved through documentation alone but through habitual academic usage.

5.3. Research Production and Postgraduate Practices

The domain of research production further illustrates structural constraints. South African universities incentivise publication in internationally recognised journals indexed in global databases. Because these journals are predominantly English-medium, postgraduate students are often required or strongly encouraged to write theses and dissertations in English. Even where institutional policy permits submission in African languages, supervisory capacity and examination systems may be limited.

This dynamic reflects what Tollefson^[13] describes as *de facto* language policy. Although formal policy recognises multilingual scholarship, institutional practices shape outcomes differently. The requirement that doctoral candidates publish in English-medium journals to advance academic careers limits the development of advanced academic registers in Setswana.

Moreover, funding bodies often prioritise research with international visibility, further entrenching English dominance. Bourdieu's^[21] theory of symbolic capital helps explain why English-medium publication is associated with prestige and professional mobility. Setswana, positioned as locally bounded, lacks equivalent symbolic capital in global academia.

5.4. Institutional Language Ideologies and Academic Legitimacy

Language ideology plays a significant role in shaping the intellectual trajectory of Setswana. McKinney^[22] notes that colonial language hierarchies persist in post-apartheid education systems, often invisibly. English is frequently framed as the language of modernity, scientific precision, and global engagement, while African languages are associated with cultural identity or informal communication. Recent reflec-

tions on the South African higher education sector indicate that, despite three decades of democracy and progressive language policies, English continues to dominate academic spaces, limiting the meaningful development and utilisation of indigenous African languages in teaching, learning, and research^[23].

In higher education settings, this ideological framing influences curriculum decisions, lecture practices, and research norms. Even academics who support multilingualism may perceive English as necessary for academic rigour. Makalela^[6] argues that translanguaging offers possibilities for epistemic expansion, yet institutional structures often restrict such pedagogical innovation. Rakgogo^[23] similarly contends that the limited implementation of multilingual language policies in universities reflects enduring linguistic inequalities and institutional preferences for English as the language of academic prestige and mobility.

The decolonial turn in South African higher education, particularly following the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMust-Fall movements, foregrounded language as central to epistemic justice. Mignolo^[18] argues that colonial languages dominate knowledge systems, shaping what counts as legitimate scholarship. In this context, the marginal presence of Setswana in higher education is not merely a pedagogical issue but an epistemic one. When advanced scholarship occurs exclusively in English, African languages are positioned outside the domain of legitimate knowledge production. This situation mirrors broader historical processes through which language status and legitimacy are shaped by political, economic, and cultural power rather than purely linguistic considerations. As Rakgogo and Zungu^[24] demonstrate in their analysis of the elevation of Sepedi from a dialect to an official standard language, language development and recognition are often closely linked to power relations, institutional authority, and political influence. Similar dynamics continue to affect the intellectualisation of Setswana within higher education, where questions of language status remain intertwined with broader struggles over knowledge, identity, and access.

5.5. Curriculum Design and Disciplinary Expansion

Curriculum design significantly influences language development trajectories. Even where universities commit to multilingualism, the absence of bilingual or multi-

lingual disciplinary modules restricts functional expansion. For example, offering introductory sociology lectures in Setswana, accompanied by academic readings and assessment in Setswana, could stimulate terminology development and intellectual register expansion. However, such initiatives remain rare.

The reluctance to introduce African languages into high-status disciplines often reflects concerns about resource availability and academic competitiveness. Yet Heugh^[5] argues that sustained multilingual models enhance cognitive development and disciplinary understanding. In higher education, such models could involve parallel-medium modules or bilingual seminars. Without curriculum reform, Setswana's role remains largely confined to humanities faculties. Intellectualisation requires integration across disciplines rather than isolation within language departments.

6. Conclusions

This article has examined the persistent gap between formal language policy commitments and the limited intellectual development of Setswana within South African higher education. While national frameworks articulate strong commitments to multilingualism and the advancement of African languages, the institutional realities of universities continue to privilege English as the dominant language of instruction, research production, governance, and academic mobility. The analysis demonstrates that the marginalisation of Setswana is not a consequence of linguistic insufficiency, but rather the result of structural arrangements, institutional ideologies, and global academic pressures that reproduce linguistic hierarchies.

Through the lens of Critical Language Policy, the study has shown that policy recognition alone does not guarantee functional implementation. Although Setswana is constitutionally recognised and institutionally acknowledged, it remains largely confined to symbolic domains or to its role as an academic subject within language departments. Institutional incentive structures such as promotion criteria tied to English-medium publication, postgraduate supervision norms, and international ranking systems operate as de facto language policies that reinforce English dominance. These structural mechanisms limit the expansion of Setswana into high-status disciplinary fields necessary for sustained intel-

lectualisation.

The findings resonate with studies demonstrating the educational value of indigenous languages in facilitating learning and knowledge construction. Research by Makgabo and Modise^[25] found that Setswana-speaking learners experienced significant linguistic challenges when required to learn and be assessed through English, often affecting their academic performance and comprehension of disciplinary content. Similarly, Mbatha et al.^[26] demonstrated that the use of isiZulu as a language of learning and teaching enhanced conceptual understanding and numerical literacy, highlighting the critical role of indigenous languages in supporting cognitive development and meaningful participation in education. These findings suggest that the underutilisation of Setswana in higher education represents not only a language policy challenge but also a missed opportunity for improving access to knowledge and academic success.

Furthermore, the study highlights that language intellectualisation cannot be achieved through terminology development and policy formulation alone. It requires the systematic integration of Setswana into teaching, learning, assessment, research dissemination, postgraduate supervision, and institutional communication. Universities must move beyond symbolic multilingualism towards transformative language practices that position African languages as legitimate vehicles for knowledge production. This includes investing in discipline-specific terminology development, multilingual pedagogies, academic literacy resources, translation initiatives, and scholarly publishing platforms in African languages.

Ultimately, the intellectual development of Setswana is inseparable from broader struggles for epistemic justice and decolonisation within higher education. If universities are committed to transforming knowledge systems and widening participation, they must create conditions under which Setswana and other African languages can function fully within academic spaces. Without such structural and institutional reforms, multilingualism will remain an aspirational policy ideal rather than a lived reality. The future of Setswana in higher education therefore depends not on its linguistic capacity, but on the willingness of institutions to redistribute linguistic power and recognise African languages as legitimate languages of scholarship, innovation, and academic authority.

Intellectualisation theory further clarifies that language development requires systematic integration into domains of advanced knowledge production. Without sustained use in postgraduate research, scientific discourse, disciplinary instruction, and institutional governance, Setswana's academic register cannot mature. Terminology development initiatives, while important, are insufficient in the absence of consistent application within teaching and research. Intellectualisation is therefore an institutional process rather than merely a linguistic one.

From a decolonial perspective, the continued privileging of English in higher education raises profound epistemic questions. If African languages remain peripheral to advanced scholarship, then epistemic transformation remains incomplete. Decolonisation demands more than symbolic inclusion; it requires structural reconfiguration of the linguistic hierarchies embedded within universities. Expanding the presence of Setswana in research, postgraduate study, and interdisciplinary teaching is therefore central to broader goals of epistemic justice.

Ultimately, the limited development of Setswana in South African higher education reflects a tension between progressive policy rhetoric and entrenched institutional practice. Addressing this tension requires coordinated reform across curriculum design, research production systems, funding structures, and language ideologies. Universities must align policy commitments with institutional incentives that actively support African language intellectualisation.

The future of Setswana in higher education will depend not on its symbolic recognition, but on whether institutions are willing to reposition it as a legitimate language of advanced scholarship, governance, and disciplinary knowledge. Without such deliberate transformation, Setswana risks remaining acknowledged in policy yet marginal in practice. With structural commitment and sustained implementation, however, it has the potential to emerge fully as a language of academic authority and intellectual empowerment within South African higher education.

6.1. Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that meaningful intellectualisation of Setswana in South African higher education requires systemic, coordinated policy intervention rather than symbolic recognition. To reposition Setswana as a legitimate

language of advanced scholarship and institutional authority, the following policy-oriented strategies are recommended.

6.1.1. Embed Setswana Intellectualisation in Institutional Strategic Plans

Higher education institutions should explicitly integrate Setswana intellectualisation into their strategic transformation frameworks. Language policy must move beyond general multilingual commitments and specify measurable targets for the development of Setswana as a language of disciplinary instruction, research production, and postgraduate supervision. Institutional language implementation plans required by the Department of Higher Education and Training^[2] should include:

- Clear timelines for the introduction of Setswana-medium or bilingual modules in selected disciplines.
- Annual reporting on Setswana academic usage in teaching and research.
- Dedicated budget allocations for language development initiatives.

Without strategic integration, language development efforts remain peripheral and fragmented.

6.1.2. Reform Promotion and Research Incentive Systems

One of the most significant structural barriers to Setswana intellectualisation is the dominance of English in academic promotion and publication systems. Universities, in collaboration with national research bodies, should:

- Recognise and reward peer-reviewed academic publications in Setswana.
- Support the development of accredited Setswana-medium academic journals.
- Incentivise bilingual publication models.
- Recognise doctoral theses written in Setswana as equally prestigious to English-medium submissions.

Reforming incentive systems is essential to recalibrating linguistic capital within the academic field^[21]. If research in Setswana carries institutional value, scholars will be more likely to invest in its development.

6.1.3. Expand Setswana into High-Status Disciplinary Domains

Intellectualisation requires functional expansion into science, law, economics, technology, and other high-status

domains^[8]. Universities located in predominantly Setswana-speaking regions should pilot:

- Bilingual or parallel-medium modules in selected disciplines.
- Discipline-specific terminology development integrated directly into teaching.
- Setswana academic writing modules for postgraduate students.
- Research seminars conducted partially in Setswana to stimulate disciplinary vocabulary growth.

Terminology development should be embedded within disciplinary practice rather than isolated in language units. Without consistent academic use, corpus planning initiatives remain symbolic.

6.1.4. Strengthen Postgraduate Capacity in Setswana

Postgraduate education is central to intellectualisation. Universities should:

- Train supervisors capable of overseeing theses in Setswana.
- Develop institutional guidelines for examination of Setswana-medium dissertations.
- Fund postgraduate research projects that prioritise Setswana scholarly output.
- Encourage interdisciplinary research projects conducted in Setswana.

By embedding Setswana within postgraduate scholarship, universities create a pipeline for sustained academic register development.

6.1.5. Establish National Terminology and Corpus Development Collaborations

Intellectualisation requires a coordinated national effort. DHET, universities, language bodies, and research councils should establish collaborative platforms to:

- Develop discipline-specific Setswana terminology banks.
- Produce peer-reviewed textbooks in Setswana for selected fields.
- Create digital corpora to support academic writing and translation.
- Develop machine translation and digital tools to enhance accessibility.

Technological integration is particularly important in ensuring the long-term sustainability of language development.

6.1.6. Align Decolonisation Agendas with Language Intellectualisation

Institutional decolonisation strategies must explicitly address language hierarchies. Setswana intellectualisation should be framed not only as linguistic development but as epistemic transformation. Universities should:

- Integrate African language scholarship into mainstream disciplinary curricula.
- Promote academic conferences and seminars conducted in Setswana.
- Support interdisciplinary research exploring Setswana epistemologies and knowledge systems.

Decolonisation without linguistic restructuring risks remaining rhetorical.

6.1.7. Address Institutional Language Ideologies

Finally, policy reform must engage institutional language ideologies that position English as inherently superior or academically necessary. Universities should:

- Facilitate institutional dialogues on language, power, and epistemic justice.
- Provide academic development workshops on multilingual pedagogy.
- Encourage visible leadership modelling of multilingual scholarship.

Structural reform must be accompanied by ideological engagement to disrupt the reproduction of English dominance^[13,20].

6.2. Concluding Policy Statement

The intellectualisation of Setswana in South African higher education is not a linguistic challenge but a policy and institutional design challenge. Meaningful transformation requires alignment between national policy frameworks, institutional incentive systems, curriculum structures, postgraduate practices, and academic culture. Research on the teaching and learning of Setswana has demonstrated that challenges facing the language are often rooted in systemic and structural factors rather than deficiencies in the language

itself^[27]. Similarly, studies examining the sociolinguistic status of indigenous languages in South African institutions reveal that language marginalisation persists despite constitutional recognition and policy support, largely because of limited implementation and the continued dominance of English in formal domains^[28].

Without deliberate structural intervention, Setswana will remain symbolically recognised yet structurally marginal. The continued underrepresentation of indigenous languages in key institutional spaces, including education, governance, and legal systems, illustrates the gap between policy aspirations and practical implementation^[28]. However, with coordinated policy implementation, funding commitment, and ideological recalibration, Setswana can emerge as a fully functional language of knowledge production, governance, and academic authority within South African universities. Such transformation would contribute not only to linguistic equity but also to broader goals of epistemic justice, social inclusion, and the decolonisation of higher education^[27].

6.3. Decolonisation and the Future of Setswana in Higher Education

The decolonisation movement challenged universities to reimagine epistemic authority. Language was central to this challenge. Calls for African language intellectualisation emphasised that transformation requires not only demographic change but epistemic restructuring.

However, while universities adopted decolonial rhetoric, structural reliance on English remains largely intact. The persistence of English as the dominant language of governance, research, and disciplinary instruction suggests that policy recognition alone cannot shift entrenched hierarchies. From a CLP perspective, meaningful transformation requires alignment between policy commitment and institutional incentive structures. Intellectualisation requires funding, curriculum redesign, postgraduate supervision capacity, and publication platforms in Setswana. Without systemic support, Setswana's development remains constrained.

6.4. Synthesis

The limited development of Setswana in higher education reflects interconnected structural and ideological

constraints:

- English-dominant publication systems.
- Promotion criteria tied to international indexing.
- Curriculum structures excluding African languages from high-status disciplines.
- Institutional language ideologies privileging English.
- Limited sustained integration of terminology development.

The issue is therefore not one of linguistic capacity but of institutional will, structural alignment, and ideological transformation.

If Setswana is to emerge as a fully intellectualised language within higher education, universities must move beyond symbolic policy recognition and integrate African languages into research production, postgraduate education, and disciplinary instruction. Intellectualisation is not automatic; it is the product of deliberate institutional design.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, formal analysis, data curation, and writing—original draft preparation, K.B.; investigation, writing—review and editing, I.S. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript to be published and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable. The study relies exclusively on publicly available policy documents and published academic literature. No human participants were recruited, and no confidential institutional data were accessed.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

AI Use Statement

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with language editing, grammar refinement, and manuscript structuring. All intellectual content, data analysis, interpretations, and conclusions presented in the manuscript remain the sole responsibility of the authors. The authors reviewed and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure their accuracy, relevance, and alignment with scholarly standards.

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