



LANGUAGE SHIFT AND INDIGENOUS VOCABULARY EROSION AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTH: A CRITICAL REVIEW

Masila Joshua Masipa¹  and Nontokoza Gladys Mdhuli² 

1. African Languages, Siswati Sections and Arts and Social Sciences, University of Venda, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education. Email: masilajoshua.masipa@univen.ac.za.

2. African Languages, Siswati Sections and Arts and Social Sciences, University of Venda, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education. Email: nontokoza.mdhuli@univen.ac.za.

Article Information:

Article Type:
Research Article

Manuscript Received:
10 February 2026

Final Revision Received:
18 May 2026

Published Online:
31 August 2026

Keywords:

Language shift, Indigenous vocabulary erosion, Indigenous languages, South African youth, Linguistic decolonization, Language policy, Multilingualism, Cultural sustainability.

Concerns over the decline of indigenous vocabulary and its consequences for cultural and linguistic sustainability have been raised by the increased language shift among South African youths. The study reviews the literature on language shift and the decline of indigenous vocabulary among young South Africans. The study synthesizes academic literature to investigate the sociolinguistic factors causing language shift, the effects on indigenous vocabulary, and the wider implications for cultural identity and indigenous knowledge systems. It is guided by Fishman's Theory of Language Shift and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonial Theory of Language. A systematic study of the pertinent literature on language policy, multilingualism, language shift, and indigenous language revitalization in South Africa yielded a selection of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy papers, and scholarly reports. Four interconnected themes emerged from a thematic analysis of the literature: the persistence of the gap between multilingual language policy and language practice; the erosion of indigenous vocabulary through decreasing intergenerational language transmission; the dominance of English across social and institutional domains; and the cultural and epistemic ramifications of vocabulary loss. The results show that vocabulary erosion reflects the progressive loss of cultural memory, indigenous knowledge, and linguistic identity in addition to linguistic change. The article concludes that maintaining indigenous vocabulary and advancing linguistic decolonization in South Africa require bolstering the implementation of multilingual policies, increasing the use of indigenous languages in digital and educational contexts, and encouraging intergenerational language transmission.

Cite this article: Masila J. Masipa and Nontokoza G. Mdhuli (2026). Language Shift and Indigenous Vocabulary Erosion among South African Youth: A Critical Review. The Journal of Sustainable Development, Law and Policy. Vol. 18:2. 635-655. DOI: 10.4314/jsdlp.v18i2.24.



© The Author(s)

Publisher: Institute for Oil, Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development (OGEES Institute), Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication, identity formation, cultural continuity, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems all depend on language. Language is more than just a means of communication; it is a community's collective memory, values, beliefs, and worldviews, allowing information to be passed down through the generations. Language is also essential for fostering inclusive national development, cultural diversity, and social cohesion in multilingual communities like South Africa. In order to address historical linguistic disparities and improve the standing of Indigenous African languages that were marginalized during colonialism and apartheid, South Africa has recognized eleven official languages since the country's democratic transition in 1994.¹ English nevertheless rules education, government, business, the media, higher education, and increasingly digital communication despite these progressive constitutional and policy pledges.² As a result, multilingualism is not so much a daily linguistic reality as a constitutional ideal. English has emerged as the language most strongly linked to technological growth, international involvement, socioeconomic mobility, and academic success. Younger South Africans' language habits have been significantly affected by this growing dominance; many of them use their native tongues in more limited contexts while preferring English in professional and casual interactions.³

Concerns about language shift and the long-term survival of South Africa's indigenous languages have grown as English has become more popular. When speakers gradually switch from their mother tongue to a language that is dominant in society, politics, or the economy, this is known as language shift.⁴ The growing use of English by younger

1 C A Webb, 'Thank You for Hearing Me: Listening to Stories of Linguicism' (2025).

2 R Salomone and R C Salomone, *The Rise of English: Global Politics and the Power of Language* (Oxford University Press 2022).
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190625614.001.0001>.

3 S J Shin, *Bilingualism in Schools and Society: Language, Identity, and Policy* (Routledge 2017). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315527197>

4 N M Kamwangamalu, 'English-Medium Instruction and Heritage Language Development in Africa' in *Bloomsbury World Englishes Volume 3: Pedagogies* (Bloomsbury 2021) 275. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350065905.ch-014>.

generations has sparked concerns about the gradual loss of indigenous languages, traditional expressions, and culturally embedded meanings, even as multilingualism remains a defining characteristic of South African society.⁵ Beyond the loss of specific vocabulary words, vocabulary erosion reflects the depletion of the linguistic resources communities use to maintain cultural identity, historical memory, indigenous knowledge, and ecological awareness.⁶ As a result, the loss of indigenous vocabulary has ramifications that extend beyond language use to encompass broader issues of identity preservation, cultural sustainability, and epistemic fairness.

These issues are especially important in light of South Africa's post-apartheid efforts to decolonize and alter its language. The implementation of multilingual language policies has been uneven despite the Constitution's official promotion of linguistic equality, and the socioeconomic prestige of English continues to sustain linguistic hierarchies.⁷ Many students, parents, and teachers believe that being able to communicate in English is crucial for both career and academic success. However, indigenous languages are frequently confined to informal and domestic contexts, limiting opportunities for language maintenance, vocabulary growth, and intergenerational transmission.⁸ Younger speakers are increasingly exposed to English lexical patterns, code-switching techniques, and linguistic choices that may hasten vocabulary erosion as indigenous languages become less prevalent in school, internet communication, and other significant public arenas.

Academics have proposed various theories to explain these trends. While Webb emphasizes the long-lasting impact of historical power relations and colonial language hierarchies, Kamwangamalu links language shift primarily to globalization and the economic value of English. While Cele

5 M R Abtahian and C M Quinn, 'Language Shift and Linguistic Insecurity' (2017).

6 D Crystal, *Language Death* (Cambridge University Press 2002).

7 F Ndhlovu and L Makalela, *Decolonising Multilingualism in Africa: Recentring Silenced Voices from the Global South* (Multilingual Matters 2021).
<https://doi.org/10.21832/NDHLOV7768>

8 T L McCarty, S E Nicholas and G Wigglesworth (eds), *A World of Indigenous Languages: Politics, Pedagogies and Prospects for Language Reclamation* (Multilingual Matters 2019).
<https://doi.org/10.21832/MCCART2310>.

highlights flaws in institutional commitment and policy monitoring, Motaung contends that constitutional recognition alone cannot ensure language maintenance without effective institutional implementation.⁹ Taken as a whole, these viewpoints show that, rather than being solely the product of personal language preferences, language shift among South African youth results from a complex interplay of historical, political, educational, economic, and societal variables. These dynamics have intensified significantly due to the rapid development of digital technologies. Young people are regularly exposed to English vocabulary and linguistic traditions through social media platforms, digital learning settings, and online communication, all of which are mostly English-oriented. Although code-switching is common among multilingual speakers, a persistent dependence on English in digital contexts may eventually limit opportunities to learn, practice, and share indigenous languages. As a result, language degradation increasingly reflects bigger changes in cultural practices, identity formation, and information transmission in addition to shifting communication patterns.¹⁰

While multilingualism, language policy, and language shift in South Africa have all been extensively studied, very little attention has been paid to how language shift specifically contributes to the decline of indigenous vocabulary among young South Africans. Vocabulary erosion as a linguistic and cultural issue has received comparatively little attention in previous research, which has mostly focused on language choice, language rights, or policy implementation. To fill that gap, this article provides a critical literature review that synthesizes prior research to examine how language shift contributes to the decline of indigenous vocabulary and what this means for the relationship among language, identity, indigenous knowledge systems, and linguistic decolonization. To show how sociolinguistic processes and colonial language hierarchies jointly shape vocabulary loss among South African youth, the article critically analyses

9 N Cele, 'Understanding Language Policy as a Tool for Access and Social Inclusion in South African Higher Education: A Critical Policy Analysis Perspective' (2021) 35(6) *South African Journal of Higher Education* 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-6-4495>

10 N Alexander, 'Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education in Africa: A Cultural and Intellectual Imperative' in *Streitfall Zweisprachigkeit – The Bilingualism Controversy* (VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften 2009) 199–214. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-91857-6_12.

existing scholarship through the complementary analytical lenses of Fishman's Theory of Language Shift and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonial Theory of Language, rather than merely summarizing prior research.¹¹

Therefore, by providing an integrated analytical understanding of the degradation of indigenous vocabulary in modern South Africa, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on multilingualism, language policy, linguistic justice, and decolonization. By doing so, it draws attention to the preservation of vocabulary as both a linguistic issue and a requirement for safeguarding cultural history, indigenous knowledge systems, and long-term multilingual development. English still predominates in school, employment, governance, media, and digital communication despite South Africa's constitutional commitment to multilingualism and the advancement of indigenous languages.¹² The Constitution recognizes eleven official languages, and several policy frameworks support linguistic fairness; yet, the application of these frameworks has remained unequal and insufficient to reverse the marginalization of indigenous languages. As a result, many young South Africans now prefer English, frequently at the expense of their native tongues. Concerns about language shift and its effects on the long-term viability of indigenous languages and the preservation of indigenous lexicons have grown as this preference has intensified.

Language policy, multilingualism, language rights, and the sociolinguistic status of African languages in South Africa have all been significantly improved by existing research.¹³ However, examining how language shift directly relates to the decline of indigenous vocabulary among South African youth has received far less attention. The majority of the literature now in print focuses on multilingual practices, policy implementation, or patterns of language use, paying very little attention to the progressive loss of lexical items, idiomatic phrases, culturally embedded notions, and

11 N wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986).

12 S Romaine, 'The Impact of Language Policy on Endangered Languages' in *Democracy and Human Rights in Multicultural Societies* (Routledge 2017) 217–236. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315093821-12>

13 K F Rapule, *Language and Its Role in Epistemic Decolonization* (University of Johannesburg 2024).

indigenous knowledge encoded in language. Because of this, there remains a lack of theoretical integration and synthesis of the relationship between language shift and the erosion of indigenous vocabulary in the South African context.

Because language erosion goes beyond word loss, this gap is important. Cultural memory, social values, historical experiences, environmental knowledge, and community identities that have changed over time are all embodied in indigenous languages.¹⁴ Culturally specific meanings and indigenous knowledge systems are at risk of gradual displacement as younger speakers increasingly substitute English lexical equivalents for indigenous language. Thus, linguistic fairness, cultural continuity, identity development, and the broader endeavour of decolonizing language and knowledge in post-apartheid South Africa are all significant issues arising from the decline of indigenous terminology. By providing a critical literature review of research on language shift and the erosion of indigenous vocabulary among South African youth, this article fills this gap. The article critically synthesizes the literature rather than merely summarizing prior research to investigate the sociolinguistic mechanisms underlying language shift, how indigenous vocabulary is lost, and the consequences of these changes for indigenous knowledge systems and cultural identity. By combining Fishman's Theory of Language Shift and Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonial Theory of Language as complementary analytical frameworks for comprehending both the sociolinguistic processes of language change and the historical power relations that continue to favour English over indigenous languages, the study advances the literature.

The article therefore aims to: examine the sociolinguistic factors contributing to language shift among South African youth; analyse how language shift contributes to the erosion of indigenous vocabulary; critically examine the cultural, linguistic, and epistemic implications of indigenous vocabulary erosion; evaluate how the combined application of

14 D Imbang, O D M Tuegeh, F V Arie, J R Tumiwa and A S Nagy, 'The Interconnection of Language, Tradition, and Identity in Indigenous Communities: A Study on Cultural Continuity and Preservation' (2025).

Fishman's Theory of Language Shift and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonial Theory of Language enhances understanding of vocabulary erosion within the broader context of linguistic decolonisation; and propose evidence-informed strategies for strengthening indigenous language revitalisation and vocabulary preservation within South Africa's multilingual policy framework.

The article advances current research on multilingualism, language policy, indigenous language revitalization, and linguistic decolonization by addressing these goals. More significantly, it provides an integrated analytical viewpoint that illustrates how vocabulary degradation and language shift are related sociolinguistic and epistemic processes influencing the preservation of indigenous languages among young South Africans. The article is divided into six sections, covering the introduction, theoretical framework, and conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fishman's Theory of Language Shift and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonial Theory of Language are two complementary theoretical stances that form the foundation of this article. These frameworks offer a comprehensive analytical perspective for investigating the connection between language shift and the decline of native vocabulary among young South Africans. While Ngũgĩ's decolonial approach sheds light on the historical, cultural, and political causes that continue to marginalize indigenous languages and favour English, Fishman's theory explains the sociolinguistic processes via which language change occurs. When combined, the two theories allow for a thorough understanding of vocabulary erosion as both a linguistic process and an expression of broader conflicts over identity, culture, and the creation of knowledge.¹⁵

2.1 Fishman's Theory of Language Shift

According to Fishman (1991), language shift occurs when speakers gradually switch to a language that provides more social, political,

15 D Imbang, O D M Tuegeh, F V Arie, J R Tumiwa and A S Nagy, 'The Interconnection of Language, Tradition, and Identity in Indigenous Communities: A Study on Cultural Continuity and Preservation' (2025).

educational, or economic benefits. The theory states that prolonged intergenerational transmission and the continuous use of a language in a variety of social contexts, such as the family, public administration, education, religion, and community contact, are necessary for language maintenance. Language vitality declines as a dominant language gradually replaces the mother tongue across domains, leading to language attrition, reduced vocabulary use, and ultimately language loss.

Fishman's paradigm is especially pertinent to the South African situation, where the constitution recognizes eleven official languages, but English has taken on a prominent role in education, employment, government, media, and digital communication.¹⁶ In areas where indigenous languages were formerly spoken, many young South Africans learn English as it becomes increasingly linked to academic success, economic opportunity, and global engagement. This change impairs indigenous vocabulary learning, usage, and preservation while decreasing opportunities for intergenerational language transmission. The main sociolinguistic framework used in this study to explain how shifts in language use lead to vocabulary erosion is Fishman's theory. It makes it easier to investigate how language choice, domain loss, intergenerational language transmission, and the progressive loss of native lexical items in younger generations are related.

2.2 Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonial Theory of Language

Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonial Theory of Language offers a critical perspective on the historical and political contexts that shape contemporary language practices. At the same time, Fishman's theory elucidates the sociolinguistic dynamics of language shift. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o contends in *Decolonising the Mind* that language serves as a carrier of culture, identity, memory, and indigenous knowledge in addition to being a tool for communication. In addition to maintaining political and economic power, colonial dominance was maintained by systematically

16 J A Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (Multilingual Matters 1991).

marginalizing indigenous languages and elevating colonial languages.¹⁷ Ngūgĩ argues that by separating communities from their histories, customs, and indigenous knowledge systems, the persistence of colonial languages leads to cultural alienation. It is not always possible for dominant colonial languages to adequately convey the distinct worldviews, cultural values, and locally produced knowledge that are embodied in indigenous languages. As a result, the loss of indigenous language symbolizes both linguistic change and the slow displacement of indigenous epistemologies and cultural memory.

In post-apartheid South Africa, where constitutional pledges to multilingualism conflict with English's continued dominance in many spheres of society, this viewpoint is especially pertinent. English's privileged status perpetuates historical linguistic inequities that disadvantage indigenous languages structurally, even if it provides access to school, employment, and international participation. Therefore, maintaining indigenous vocabulary is essential to advancing linguistic justice, cultural continuity, and epistemic diversity from a decolonial standpoint.

2.3 Integrating Fishman and Ngūgĩ: An Analytical Framework

Despite coming from different theoretical traditions, Fishman and Ngūgĩ's approaches to language are complementary and reinforce one another. Fishman's theory, which emphasizes changes in language use, intergenerational transmission, and the progressive diminution of indigenous language domains, explains the sociolinguistic mechanisms underlying language shift. By showing how historical power dynamics, colonial legacies, and the unequal status given to various languages within society influence language choices, Ngūgĩ's decolonial approach expands on this analysis.

This study can go beyond characterizing language shift as a neutral sociolinguistic phenomenon by incorporating various frameworks. Rather, it views the decline of indigenous vocabulary as the result of

17 N Mkhize and N Ndimande-Hlongwa, 'African Languages, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and the Transformation of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Higher Education' (2014) 21(2) *Alternation* 10–37

interrelated historical, cultural, political, and sociolinguistic processes. Throughout the literature review and discussion, Ngūgĩ's framework is used to explain how the continued dominance of English reflects broader patterns of linguistic inequality and epistemic marginalization. In contrast, Fishman's theory is used to analyze the mechanisms through which language shift contributes to vocabulary erosion. A more thorough understanding of why indigenous vocabulary continues to decline despite constitutional commitments to multilingualism and language equality can be gained by combining the two theories.

Thus, the analytical basis of this work is the comprehensive application of various theoretical views. By connecting observable patterns of language use with broader issues of cultural identity, indigenous knowledge preservation, linguistic justice, and the ongoing process of decolonizing language practices in South Africa, this approach facilitates a critical reading of the literature.

3. LANGUAGE POLICY AND MULTILINGUALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

With the constitutional recognition of eleven official languages and the encouragement of multilingualism to promote social inclusion, cultural diversity, and national cohesion, South Africa's democratic transition signalled a dramatic shift in language planning and policy. By acknowledging linguistic diversity as a national resource rather than a societal obstacle, this policy approach aimed to address the historical marginalization of Indigenous African languages under colonialism and apartheid. All official languages are positioned as equal participants in public life under the constitutional framework.

The study consistently finds a significant discrepancy between everyday language use and constitutional ambitions, despite these progressive policy pledges. While Webb contends that the implementation of South Africa's multilingual framework is still limited by deeply ingrained linguistic power relations that favour English, Alexander views it as one of the most progressive language policy models in the world. In a similar vein, Connor & Dovers argue that without consistent institutional commitment, funding, and efficient implementation mechanisms,

constitutional recognition alone cannot ensure language development. Cele expands on this point by showing that the implementation of multilingual policies remains hampered by inadequate monitoring and lax institutional accountability.¹⁸

Despite their differing emphases on explanatory factors, these academics reach the same conclusion: despite constitutional pledges to multilingualism, English still dominates important public spheres. According to Fishman's Theory of Language Shift, this institutional dominance weakens intergenerational language transmission by limiting opportunities for indigenous languages to function across multiple societal domains. According to Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonial viewpoint, the persistence of colonial language hierarchies, which continue to influence linguistic practices in democratic South Africa, is evident in the enduring preference for English. The body of research shows that language policy alone cannot guarantee language preservation unless indigenous languages are accorded significant functional importance in public communication, education, governance, and the economy.

3.1 Language Shift among South African Youth

One of the biggest sociolinguistic issues facing multilingual cultures is language change. According to Fishman, language shift occurs when speakers gradually switch to a language that offers more social, educational, political, or economic advantages. Because of its perceived usefulness in school, at work, and in global communication, English has become the preferred language among many young people in South Africa, according to experts. Scholars disagree on how to interpret the consequences of English's expanding influence, despite its widespread acknowledgment. According to Fishman, language attrition and eventual language extinction are preceded by continuous linguistic shift. On the other hand, Makalela contends that multilingual speakers can navigate multiple languages without necessarily abandoning their native tongues, as they often exhibit flexible linguistic repertoires through translanguaging. Masha adds that growing intercultural engagement

18 T L McCarty, 'Revitalising Indigenous Languages in Homogenising Times' (2003) 39(2) *Comparative Education* 147–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050060302556>.

among youth and urbanization are responsible for the rise in English usage.¹⁹

These viewpoints can be seen as complementing rather than opposing. Translingual practices clearly characterize multilingual societies. However, a long-term preference for English in work, school, and digital communication may also limit prospects for vocabulary acquisition in native tongues. Therefore, even in situations where multilingualism is thriving, Fishman's theoretical framework is nevertheless useful for explaining how the progressive narrowing of indigenous language domains contributes to vocabulary depletion.

3.2 Indigenous Vocabulary Erosion and Intergenerational Language Transmission

Because vocabulary embodies cultural knowledge, social ideals, ecological understanding, and historical memory, the literature consistently acknowledges vocabulary as a key indicator of language vitality. According to Crystal, language decline frequently begins with the gradual loss of specialized vocabulary before affecting more general linguistic competence. In a similar vein, Fishman highlights that effective intergenerational language transmission is essential for language maintenance because younger speakers primarily acquire vocabulary through consistent engagement within families and communities. These findings are supported by South African literature, which also emphasizes the impact of shifting social circumstances. Migration, urbanization, English-medium schooling, and shifting family language practices contribute to the decline of indigenous vocabulary among younger generations, according to Mkhize, Ndimande-Hlongwa, and Makalela. Although indigenous languages remain vital in many households, English

19 S Makoni, 'From Misinvention to Disinvention of Language: Multilingualism and the South African Constitution' in *Black Linguistics* (Routledge 2005) 144–164. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203986893>

increasingly dominates domains related to education, science, technology, and contemporary popular culture.²⁰

According to Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonial viewpoint, vocabulary attrition is more than just a matter of language simplicity. According to Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, indigenous vocabulary encodes knowledge systems, cultural practices, environmental awareness, and communal histories that are sometimes difficult to translate into English properly. Thus, the preservation of indigenous epistemologies and cultural memory is likewise under risk due to the progressive loss of indigenous lexical elements. According to the literature, vocabulary degradation should be viewed as a linguistic, cultural, and epistemic process all at once.

3.3 English Dominance, Globalisation and Digital Communication

According to recent research, young people's language practices are increasingly influenced by digital communication. Young people are more exposed to English vocabulary and linguistic traditions because social media platforms, digital learning settings, and online communication are primarily conducted in English. Even if code-switching and translanguaging are common among multilingual users, English still predominates in digital communications. While Makalela acknowledges the potential for indigenous language innovation through multilingual digital activities, Kamwangamalu highlights the global and economic benefits of English. Both academics agree that English now has significant structural advantages in digital environments, despite their differing emphases. As a result, digital communication serves as both a platform for language innovation and a means of displacing native lexical forms with English terminology.

According to Fishman, the growing dominance of English in digital communication is an extension of language shift into new domains of language use. According to Ngūgĩ, the continuation of colonial linguistic inequalities in modern technological environments is evident in the persistent preference for English in digital spaces. Taken as a whole, these

20 D E Mutasa, 'Language Policy Implementation in South African Universities Vis-à-Vis the Perceptions of Speakers of Indigenous African Languages' (2015) 31(1) *Per Linguam* 46–59. <https://doi.org/10.5785/31-1-604>

viewpoints show that digital communication has emerged as a crucial context for both vocabulary loss and language preservation.

3.4 Decolonisation and Indigenous Language Revitalisation

Language revitalization is increasingly situated in the literature alongside broader discussions of knowledge production, cultural justice, and decolonization. According to Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, colonial dominance was maintained by marginalizing indigenous languages and elevating colonial languages as acceptable means of government, education, and knowledge creation. In a similar vein, Tiostanova and Mignolo contend that decolonization necessitates questioning prevailing epistemologies while acknowledging indigenous languages as valid locations for knowledge production.

Both of these academics see indigenous languages as essential to cultural identity and epistemic justice, although taking distinct approaches to decolonization. Makalela promotes a transformative multilingual approach in the South African context that acknowledges indigenous languages as important intellectual resources rather than as subpar substitutes for English. Similarly, Ndimande-Hlongwa and Ndebele contend that, rather than relying solely on symbolic official recognition, genuine language revitalization requires increasing the use of indigenous languages in education, public institutions, and the media.²¹

The body of research shows that increasing the functional domains in which indigenous languages are utilized is essential for successful language revitalization. Therefore, decolonization necessitates both practical interventions that restore indigenous languages to educational, cultural, technological, and intellectual relevance and policy reform. Despite South Africa's constitutional commitment to multilingualism, the literature reviewed shows widespread agreement that English still dominates key educational, institutional, economic, and digital sectors. Academics frequently cite this dominance as a significant factor in the language shift among younger generations. However, the specific relationship between

21 N Ndimande-Hlongwa and H Ndebele, 'Embracing African Languages as Indispensable Resources through the Promotion of Multilingualism' (2017) 33(1) *Per Linguam* 67–82. <https://doi.org/10.5785/33-1-708>

language shift and the erosion of indigenous vocabulary has received very little attention in the literature, which has focused mostly on multilingualism, language policy, language rights, and general language use.

Furthermore, very few research have integrated decolonial and sociolinguistic viewpoints into a unified analytical framework to study vocabulary degradation. Instead of examining how language shift and linguistic decolonization work together to explain the progressive loss of indigenous vocabulary among South African adolescents, existing research has typically treated them as distinct fields of study. This article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of vocabulary erosion as a sociolinguistic process and a manifestation of ongoing linguistic inequality by critically synthesizing these bodies of literature through the complementary perspectives of Fishman's Theory of Language Shift and Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonial Theory of Language.

4. ENGLISH DOMINANCE AS A DRIVER OF LANGUAGE SHIFT: ADDRESSING HISTORICAL LANGUAGE DISPARITIES

The literature reviewed shows that the predominance of English across education, work, governance, media, and digital communication has drastically altered South African youth's language patterns. English is becoming the primary language of social mobility, academic achievement, and international engagement, even though multilingualism remains a constitutional ideal. Therefore, the results imply that language shift among young South Africans is primarily driven by structural factors that consistently favour English proficiency over indigenous language proficiency, rather than by individual linguistic preferences.

Fishman's Theory of Language Shift offers a suitable framework for analysing these changes. Opportunities for regular use of mother tongues decrease as English spreads into areas where native languages once predominated. Sustained intergenerational transmission and ongoing usage in a variety of social contexts are essential for language maintenance. According to research, these circumstances are weakening over time, especially for younger generations who increasingly communicate in

English in workplaces, educational institutions, and online settings.²² Therefore, rather than a dramatic abandonment of indigenous languages, language shift should be regarded as a gradual reorganization of language functions.

From a decolonial standpoint, these patterns also reveal that historical language disparities persist. According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's framework, the persistence of colonial linguistic hierarchies that continue to impact public institutions, educational systems, and knowledge production is reflected in English's persistent dominance. Therefore, the preference for English is both a practical response to socioeconomic opportunities and a continuation of historical processes that assign different values to other languages.

4.1 Language Shift and Indigenous Vocabulary Erosion

One of the main conclusions drawn from this review is that the first and most obvious effect of language change is vocabulary attrition. Opportunities to learn, practice, and share indigenous language become increasingly limited as younger speakers speak English more frequently in a variety of everyday contexts. Therefore, the review shows that vocabulary loss is an observable result of shifting language-use patterns rather than a singular linguistic phenomenon. An essential explanation for this process can be found in Fishman's focus on intergenerational language transmission. Indigenous vocabulary is maintained through frequent use in traditional practices, families, communities, and educational settings. Younger speakers gradually become less familiar with indigenous lexical elements, idiomatic expressions, and culturally distinctive notions as these domains increasingly accept English. Therefore, rather than just replacing one set of terms with another, vocabulary erosion reflects the shrinkage of functional language domains.

According to the reviewed literature, vocabulary loss is most noticeable in fields related to science, technology, higher education, digital communication, and modern popular culture. There are fewer

22 Z Sikandar, 'The Impact of Social Media on English Language Use among Young Adults: Linguistic Transformations, Challenges, and Implications for Formal Writing' (2025) 8(1) *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL* 998–1009

opportunities for vocabulary development and modernization in indigenous languages under these circumstances because English terminology often replaces indigenous lexical forms. Therefore, the results point to a close relationship between vocabulary loss and broader processes of linguistic modernization, in which indigenous languages struggle to retain their functional relevance in rapidly evolving social contexts.²³

4.2 Indigenous Vocabulary Erosion as Cultural and Epistemic Loss

The analysis shows that vocabulary degradation has effects that go well beyond language. Indigenous languages maintain historical experiences, cultural memory, social values, environmental knowledge, and community identities. Thus, their slow loss signifies both linguistic change and the depletion of significant cultural and epistemic resources.

The Decolonial Theory of Language by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o offers a useful interpretative framework for comprehending these wider ramifications. According to this viewpoint, native languages serve as archives of knowledge systems that have evolved over many generations. Younger generations risk losing access to culturally entrenched meanings that are sometimes difficult to translate into English as English lexical forms gradually replace indigenous languages. As a result, vocabulary degradation becomes a sign of epistemic marginalization, whereby indigenous knowledge systems are given less respect in modern society.

Applying Fishman's and Ngũgĩ's ideas together shows that vocabulary degradation is both a decolonial and a sociolinguistic problem. While Ngũgĩ's perspective explains why these trends continue to favour colonial linguistic frameworks, Fishman's theory explains how language shift results in falling vocabulary use. When taken as a whole, the ideas show that attempts to advance linguistic equity, cultural justice, and epistemic

23 M V Tiostanova and W Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (The Ohio State University Press 2012).

diversity are inextricably linked to the preservation of indigenous terminology.

4.3 The Policy–Practice Contradiction

The ongoing discrepancy between South Africa's multilingual language policies and actual language practices is another important conclusion from this analysis. Despite the official recognition of linguistic diversity in constitutional and legislative frameworks, the literature studied repeatedly shows that implementation has remained uneven across public administration, education, higher education, and digital communication. According to the report, there has not been sufficient institutional support to increase the practical use of indigenous languages despite their symbolic recognition. As a result, English still predominates in fields such as teaching and learning, research, government, technology, and professional communication, which are crucial for vocabulary development. The idea that English is the language of opportunity, whereas indigenous languages are still mostly used in informal and domestic contexts, is reinforced by this disparity.

This policy-practice paradox, when viewed through the integrated theoretical framework, helps explain why language shift continues despite progressive constitutional commitments. While Ngūgĩ's framework shows that institutional preference for English reproduces historical linguistic disparities, Fishman's theory predicts that language maintenance becomes more challenging when functional language domains narrow. The ongoing loss of indigenous vocabulary among young South Africans can be explained logically by the combination of these causes.

5. TOWARDS LINGUISTIC DECOLONISATION AND INDIGENOUS VOCABULARY REVITALISATION: RECOMMENDATIONS

The results indicate that efforts outside symbolic language policy are necessary to reverse the degradation of indigenous vocabulary. Increasing chances for indigenous languages to serve as languages of education, research, governance, innovation, media, and digital communication is essential to the success of language revitalization. Only when languages

continue to serve important communicative purposes in a variety of social contexts can vocabulary be preserved.

Additionally, the data shows that multilingualism should not be interpreted as a contest between native languages and English. Rather, the goal should be to promote additive multilingualism, in which indigenous languages remain active vehicles of cultural identity, knowledge production, and communal life. At the same time, English provides access to global opportunities. This strategy aligns with Ngũgĩ's dedication to linguistic decolonization and epistemic fairness as well as Fishman's focus on language maintenance across various domains.

In the end, this article shows that the loss of indigenous vocabulary is neither unavoidable nor irreversible. Coherent language planning, improved policy execution, increased educational opportunities, and ongoing community involvement can all help to address the identifiable historical, institutional, pedagogical, and sociolinguistic processes that shape it. Therefore, maintaining indigenous vocabulary is crucial to preserving South Africa's multilingual legacy, indigenous knowledge systems, and larger linguistic and cultural decolonization initiative.

The following suggestions are put forth as essential steps to preserve South Africa's multilingual legacy:

A. Strengthen the application of multilingual language regulations: To ensure their meaningful use across public institutions, government departments, educational institutions, and public organizations should go beyond symbolic recognition of indigenous languages by creating quantifiable implementation plans, providing sufficient funding, and putting in place monitoring systems. Increase the usage of native tongues in the classroom. In particular, during the foundational years when vocabulary acquisition and language maintenance are crucial, schools and universities should use more indigenous languages for teaching, learning, evaluation, and research.

B. Encourage the use of native languages in online settings: In order to support young people's daily use of indigenous languages, public institutions, technology developers, media organizations, and language

practitioners should work together to create digital dictionaries, terminology databases, educational applications, artificial intelligence language tools, and online learning resources.

C. Encourage the transfer of languages between generations: To improve vocabulary development, cultural identification, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge, families, communities, traditional leaders, and cultural organizations should promote the regular use of indigenous languages in households and community events.

D. Create modern terms in indigenous languages: To ensure that indigenous languages continue to be relevant in contemporary culture, national language organizations, academic institutions, and linguists should work together to increase indigenous vocabularies in quickly developing disciplines including science, technology, medicine, law, engineering, and digital communication.

E. Boost cooperation between communities and legislators: To guarantee that language revitalization programs address local linguistic reality and community needs, effective language planning should involve educators, youth organizations, traditional authorities, community language practitioners, and legislators.

F. Conduct additional empirical research: Future research should use qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods techniques to examine how South African teenagers use language in various provinces, linguistic communities, and educational settings. By producing actual data on vocabulary usage patterns, linguistic attitudes, and intergenerational language transmission, such a study would supplement the conclusions of this critical literature review.

1. Conclusion

Within the broader framework of multilingualism, language policy, and linguistic decolonization, this research critically examined the relationship between language shift and the decline of indigenous vocabulary among young South Africans. The assessment shows that English still predominates in education, employment, governance, media, and digital communication even though South Africa's constitution recognizes eleven

official languages. Due to this domination, young people's language habits have changed, causing indigenous vocabulary to erode and indigenous language domains to contract gradually. The results show that the loss of particular words is not the only aspect of vocabulary degradation. Indigenous languages represent historical events, indigenous knowledge systems, cultural memory, and communal identities that are passed down through the generations. Therefore, their gradual decline poses a threat to cultural sustainability, epistemic variety, and sociolinguistic diversity. The assessment also shows that consistent institutional implementation, which may increase the use of indigenous languages in public administration, education, research, and digital contexts, has not kept pace with constitutional recognition.

A more thorough understanding of these phenomena is possible when Fishman's Theory of Language Shift and Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonial Theory of Language are used together. While Ngūgĩ's decolonial approach shows how historical linguistic disparities continue to favor English and marginalize indigenous languages, Fishman's theory explains the sociolinguistic processes via which language shift contributes to vocabulary degradation. Taken as a whole, these complementary viewpoints demonstrate that language loss results from distinct historical, institutional, pedagogical, and sociocultural processes rather than being an unavoidable by-product of multilingualism. By providing an integrated analysis of the degradation of indigenous vocabulary among South African adolescents, this paper contributes to the literature by moving beyond descriptive studies of multilingualism and language policy. The study increases awareness of the interrelationships among language shift, cultural identity, indigenous knowledge systems, and linguistic justice by synthesizing previous studies through complementary sociolinguistic and decolonial perspectives. It also highlights crucial areas for future empirical studies to investigate young speakers' lived experiences and assess interventions to improve vocabulary preservation and indigenous language maintenance.