

**Report on the Fourth Seminar on Decoloniality in the CHEC Universities**  
**DECOLONISING HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE QUESTION OF LANGUAGE**

**Funded by the Andrew F Mellon Foundation and hosted by Stellenbosch University**

**Africa Centre for HIV/Aids Management**

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**Executive summary**

This seminar, the fourth and final one in the CHEC universities' seminar series on decoloniality, highlighted the important role that a decolonial language policy or framework might play in higher education. Not only would this challenge the notion of "bounded languages", the use of multilingualism and translanguaging would assist in dismantling colonial legacies and language hierarchies. In addition, translanguaging would allow students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires and reduce inequalities established through the dominance of English and Afrikaans. The concept of "linguistic justice" was introduced along with the importance of "democratising" language.

It was argued that if our universities want to promote relational communication that respects inclusivity, equality and agency, we need to both reconsider our language policies and frameworks and also create opportunities for non-standard languages to be used in teaching and learning spaces. Systematic reflexive critical practice that encourages students to access disciplinary knowledge using multiple languages and multiple modes is required. The presentations at the seminar provided insights as to how this might be achieved through examples drawn from both research and practice.

**Welcome and introduction to the seminar series: Professor Nico Koopman**



***Professor Nico Koopman***

Professor Nico Koopman, DVC: Social Impact, Transformation and Personnel at the University of Stellenbosch (SU), welcomed the delegates from all four CHEC universities – the University of Cape Town (UCT), the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and SU. He highlighted the importance of this seminar by referring to the legacy of colonialism and how notions of superiority and inferiority have impacted people’s identity, value and worth. The impact of these colonial beliefs continues to be felt today.

The power of language to shape reality and our experience of the world requires that we engage in dialogue and critical analysis in the decolonial project – and to challenge existing power structures and relations so as to develop of new perspectives for a decolonised future. Prof Koopman closed by saying that this work requires imagination, collaboration and commitment – and wished the delegates well for the seminar.



***Dr Sharman Wickham***

Dr Sharman Wickham, coordinator of the CHEC seminar series, summarised the previous three seminars in the series. The first, held at CPUT, drew on the research conducted by members of the Advisory Committee for the project to identify approaches to and “map” initiatives related to decoloniality in each of the four universities. The findings indicated that universities differed in line with their individual histories: at least one university employed a more top-down centralised approach while others a more individualised approach with projects driven by champions at various points in the university.

A key point raised in the discussions at the first seminar was the need to include practical examples alongside the more theoretical principles that have informed decoloniality. Delegates stressed that they wanted to learn how to “do” decoloniality.

The second seminar drew on this suggestion to include presentations on both theory and classroom practice. The third seminar narrowed the focus to speak to the coloniality of gender, again introducing examples of how classroom practice had been shifted to create new understandings and perspectives.

The link between language and decoloniality had also been raised in the first seminar – and this was now the explicit focus of this final seminar. In addition to the themes identified by Prof Koopman, Dr Wickham suggested that delegates identify additional

themes in the presentations amongst which would be the advantages of multilingualism, the relationship between language and learning, and the inextricable link between language and belonging.

**Keynote address by Professor Mbulungeni Madiba**

***Decolonising the curriculum through indigenous African languages***







***Professor Mbulungeni Madiba***

The keynote address was given by Professor Mbulungeni Madiba, Dean of Education at SU whose wide experience in language research and policy development for universities in South Africa and abroad has provided him with expertise in leadership and management.

In opening this address, Professor Madiba referred to the initial optimism felt in the 1980's about promoting African languages in education. Unfortunately, progress in this – particularly in the higher education sector - in the last 30 years has been limited as existing frameworks have failed to deliver meaningful change. It is now imperative that we accelerate the process by seeking alternative frameworks.

Professor Madiba explained that language had been a key means of spiritual subjugation used by missionaries and other colonial powers in shaping perceptions and creating artificial linguistic boundaries – “bounded languages”. The legacy of this continues in South Africa today.

The notion of bounded languages and the creation of distinct “nations” based on language need to be challenged in an educational revolution that embraces the understanding that African languages exist on a fluid continuum, defying categorisation.

Professor Madiba suggested that “translanguaging” be considered for a decolonial framework – one that will shift the focus from language as a system to language as a

dynamic social practice to emphasise the fluidity and flexibility of language. He drew on the case study undertaken at the University of Cape Town during his tenure there to illustrate how translanguaging allowed students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires.

A decolonial language policy not only challenges the language hierarchies in our current system but also promotes linguistic diversity, creates a more inclusive and equitable learning environment and facilitates a deeper understanding of knowledge production.

In practice, students would be able to discuss concepts in both English and their home languages. This, in turn, would give rise to a natural code-mixing and emergence of a hybrid discourse. Ultimately, translanguaging is a powerful tool for dismantling colonial language legacies and creating a future where Africa languages are valued and utilised to their full potential.

**Professor Quentin Williams, Director for the Centre of Multilingualism and Diversities Research, University of the Western Cape**

***The intellectualization of Kaaps (Afrikaans) through decolonial communication resources at the University of the Western Cape***







***Professor Quentin Williams***

Following Professor Madiba's argument, Professor Williams highlighted the importance of challenging language ideologies and hierarchies. He explained that while Kaaps is not an official language in South Africa, the majority of students at UWC come from Kaaps-speaking backgrounds and so face challenges and inequalities when confronted with the dominance of English and Afrikaans at the university. Vernacular languages, like Kaaps, are perceived as inferior and "simple" as a result of colonialism's impact on colonised people.

It is important that the complexity and validity of marginalised languages is recognised and that colonial discourses are "unlearned" in order to promote relational communication that respects inclusivity, equality and agency. In this way, multilingualism and translanguaging should be recognised as key principles for decolonial communication. This will require that we recognise and value the diversity of languages and repertoires, and create the spaces for dialogue and understanding.

In terms of the practical steps required for implementing Kaaps and effecting curriculum transformation, UWC is developing teaching and learning materials in Kaaps, introducing Kaaps language courses and modules and integrating Kaaps into existing courses across disciplines. Lecturers are using multilingual PowerPoint presentations and glossaries, developing terminology lists and building a Kaaps word bank and tracking its usage. In addition, the university is providing training and

workshops for lecturers and staff on Kaaps language and pedagogy – all the while addressing potential resistance and navigating language ideologies. These are all important contributions to empowering students from historically marginalised linguistic backgrounds and contributing to the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa.

In concluding this presentation, Professor Williams highlighted the crucial role played by those working to intellectualise Kaaps and dismantle colonial legacies so as to build a more just and representative academic community.

## **DR EARL BASSON**

### ***Classroom spaces and linguistic democratisation: the case of Afrikaans***



## ***Dr Earl Basson***

In his presentation, Dr Earl Basson, a lecturer and researcher in the Cape Peninsula University of Technology’s Faculty of Education, highlighted the issue of “linguistic justice” and how he introduces this concept to his students who are studying to qualify as educators in primary and secondary schools. Through the use of debates on scenarios and practical examples, his students are challenged to explain what is “pure” or “proper” Afrikaans and how to understand that language might be “weaponised” and stigmatised in educational contexts. In this way, his students are also introduced to the



notion of hierarchical power structures and the importance of democratising language in and through classroom practices.

Using texts in Kaaps, Dr Basson encourages his students to consider questions such as who “standardises”, “formalises” and “legitimises” language and the consequences of this. He stressed that such questions should not be limited to the region around Cape Town and the use of Kaaps, but should be part of a national issue and approach to understanding language. Using Odendaal’s re-standardisation framework, Dr Basson argued for legitimisation of Cape Afrikaans in authoritative spaces in the education system. Here, the use of non-standard language forms and translanguaging in the delivery of the curriculum, including in the textbooks and prescribed reading materials used, serve to advance the democratisation of Afrikaans.

### **A/PROF KATE LE ROUX**

#### ***Languages and literacies in and for (de)colonisation in STEM: Conceptual tools for collaborative, reflexive curriculum development towards (re)design***



### ***A/Prof Kate le Roux***

A/Professor le Roux began her presentation by sharing some inputs from students at the University of Cape Town about their experiences of transitioning from environments where they are accustomed to using language flexibly and informally to the academy where the more formal discourses are valued for accessing learning, communicating

and building knowledge. The quotes from students illustrate, in Nixon's terms, the "slow violence" of exclusion through linguistic, ontological, epistemic and social injustices. Through language, students continue to "breathe" coloniality and experience attritional and exponential harms.

A/Professor le Roux's work with lecturers in the STEM subjects foregrounds questions about different knowledges, the students who learn and use these and how these knowledges are taught – through which languages and literacies. Drawing on Professor Carolyn McKinney's work on language ideologies that underpin our thinking about languages and literacies, A/Professor le Roux pointed to "valued" and "marginalised" languages and literacies. Students who engage with the latter, are often characterised in terms of the "deficit model". Furthermore, notions such as translanguaging, intended for equity purposes, may actually become subsumed in the currently dominant hierarchical, bounded thinking about what counts as language and literacy in the academy. .

Through her work with lecturers in the STEM subjects, Professor le Roux has developed conceptual tools to enable the lecturers to systematically reflect on what languages and literacies, viewed broadly, they use in course design and pedagogy, and for what purposes. The notion of "moments of fracture", following Christie, allows lecturers to identify moments where they might promote access to relative knowledge in the academic canon, but crucially to pursue opportunities for the critical decolonial work of transforming knowledge. These tools have been used in the teaching of the teaching of "technical" concepts such as the notions of stress and strain in engineering studies, and mathematical proofs, as well as in knowledge areas such as ethics and sustainability in engineering..

Professor le Roux closed her presentation by suggesting that further work needs to be done on the conceptualisations of languages and literacies as well as their use in decolonisation.

## MR THEMBINKOSI MTONJENI

### *Enacting progressive ideologies to achieve epistemic justice: reclaiming the student voice*



### ***Mr thembinkosi Mtonjeni***

Mr Mtonjeni, an academic literacy lecturer at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, shared developments at this university in its move towards transformation and translanguaging. In doing so, he also drew on his experience in the Writing Centre and in assisting students to become self-directed learners.

Mr Mtonjeni pointed out that the current student body at CPUT is 73% African with more than 50% female – a very different profile from the early traditional European universities established for male students. He also questioned whether this university – along with others in this country and beyond – is “ready” for this new student body. Given the percentage of “drop-outs”, this might not be the case! As suggested by previous presenters, Mr Mtonjeni argued that issues related to social justice in the established language hierarchies need to be reviewed – not only in relation to students’ learning the subject content but also in relation to their sense of “wholeness” and belonging in the university. This is aligned with the Dimension of Oneness in the *CPUT Vision 2030* which serves as a driving force toward putting the African philosophy of Ubuntu at the centre of the pedagogical processes.



CPUT is working to ensure safe learning spaces by giving careful attention to issues related to staff recruitment and training, engaging in ongoing debates on different learning and teaching models for multilingualism and translanguaging – that ultimately lead to “transknowledging” – a richer development of knowledge generation.

**MS ANGELA GOVENDER**

***Embracing a multilingual mindset in teaching and learning***



***Dr Precious Simba (left) and Angela Govender***

The final presentation of the seminar invited delegates to take on the role of learners in understanding subject content in a second (or third) language, firstly without any scaffolding or assistance and then with assistance. This experience encouraged delegates to experience first-hand the challenges and successes multilingual learners encounter in classrooms in order to gather insights on best teaching practices.

The experience also allowed delegates to explore how language diversity can be harnessed to enhance learning outcomes while promoting inclusivity, deepening comprehension and encouraging critical thinking. In summary, this experiential session illustrated the transformative power of a multilingualism and practical strategies for creating inclusive environments that align with the broader goals of decoloniality.

## Conclusion



### *Dr Precious Simba*

Delegates' questions and comments throughout the seminar proceedings indicated a high level of interest in the policy frameworks required to provide greater opportunities for decoloniality – particularly those related to language. The importance of challenging colonial discourses of power and optimising students' linguistic repertoires in order to enhance both their learning and sense of agency will continue to be taken forward in each of the four universities.

As can be seen in the photos below, the occasion provided a time of reunion, renewal and regeneration through the sharing of ideas.



# Gallery









