From attitudes and practices to policy: Reflections on the results of a large-scale study at the University of the Witwatersrand

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Abstract
The matter of language policy in South African higher education remains contentious. Intense debate followed the promulgation of the Language Policy in Higher Education (LPHE) in 2002 which directed that all higher education institutions (HEIs) needed to develop language policies that presented firm commitments to developing multilingual environments in which African languages are developed as academic or scientific languages. After a period of seeming quiescence, issues around African languages have again surfaced in public debate, primarily as a result of Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande’s call that in future it would be a requirement that every university student in South Africa learns one African language as a condition for graduation. Whether the language policy succeeds or fails is a complex matter, but one of the important factors, we suggest, relates to language attitudes and practices in particular contexts. This article revisits research into language attitudes and practices undertaken at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) with a view to drawing further insights into the matter of language policy in higher education, and in particular, the place of African languages. The results of the study reveal strong support for English as language of learning and teaching (LOLT) as well as continued strong support for Zulu as the ‘preferred’ African language – where an African language is supported. However, the results of the study also suggest that while the ability either to understand or use an African language is considered valuable, the idea that a university should legislate in favour of an African language is not supported.

Keywords: Witwatersrand University, Language Policy, Language Attitudes, Higher Education, African Languages.

INTRODUCTION
One of the many interesting things about the linguistic landscape in post-apartheid
South Africa relates to the way in which the question of the role of African languages in higher education and questions of policy seem to fade and re-appear in the public arena. After a period of seeming quiescence, issues around African languages have again surfaced in public debate. Speaking at the launch of the teacher education and development plan for the next 15 years in April 2011, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, said that it was his vision that in future it would be a requirement that every university student in South Africa learn one African language as a condition for graduation. He announced that an advisory panel had been tasked with looking into the issue.

This article is, therefore, written in the context of what can be described as the re-emergence of the debate regarding African languages in higher education, which has happened primarily as a result of Nzimande’s emphasis on the topic. Recently, in a keynote speech at the Sunday Times Literary Awards, Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2012, 2) echoed Nzimande’s sentiments by arguing that:

The struggle to right the imbalance of power between languages should be national, with belief and passion behind it. The education system should reflect that commitment and I don’t see why a knowledge of one or more African languages should not be a requirement at all levels of graduation from primary to colleges.

By adding his voice on the matter in a manner that is overtly supportive of the minister’s stance, Ngugi draws attention to the salience of the issue not only in South Africa, but also across the continent.

However, the issue of language policy in South African higher education remains contentious and the minister’s intervention in the matter continues to draw a diverse range of responses ranging from applause to outright condemnation. In the Mail & Guardian of 6 May 2011, Nan Yeld from the University of Cape Town’s Centre for Higher Education Development responded to the Minister’s views in a robust manner that encapsulates many of the arguments raised on this subject. Yeld highlights the following factors that make the study of African languages as First Additional Languages unattractive not only to Coloured, Indian and white students, but also to African students: English is a dominant, international language while African languages are not; there are few qualified teachers of African languages; and curricula in South African universities are already crowded. Thus, the practice in most higher education institutions (HEIs) has progressively seen very little being done to promote African languages and to counteract the dominance of English. With the exception of the University of Limpopo, very few universities have systematically promoted an African language for use at tertiary level despite the existence of language policies which commit these institutions to take practical steps to develop African languages and multilingualism in South Africa.

Further, the article is written in the light of the fact that, in the academic arena, there has been a proliferation of research into language policy and practice in South African higher education (e.g. Aziakpono and Bekker 2010; Beukes 2010; Dalvit and De Klerk 2009; Moodley 2010). These and other studies indicate that
there is renewed interest in questions of language policy in South African higher education and suggest that the matter needs revisiting, particularly in the context of Nzimande’s views. Whether the language policy succeeds or fails is a complex matter, but one of the important factors, we suggest, relates to language attitudes and practices in particular contexts. We believe it is important to revisit research into language attitudes and practices undertaken at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) with a view to drawing further insights into the matter of language policy in higher education, and in particular, the place of African languages.

**RESEARCH AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE POLICY: THE CASE OF WITS**

The case of language policy at Wits must be set against the background of the promulgation of the Language Policy in Higher Education (LPHE; MoE 2002) in 2002 which was intended to extend the 1996 constitutional provisions regarding language in the higher education sector.

Paragraph 6 of the LPHE (ibid., 5) sets out the challenge facing the South African higher education sector as that of seeking to ensure the simultaneous development of a multilingual environment in which all languages are developed as academic/scientific languages, while at the same time ensuring that the existing languages of instruction do not serve as a barrier to access and success.

In line with this policy, the Ministry of Education (MoE) directed that all HEIs needed to develop their own language policies and to indicate in their three-year rolling plans the steps they would put in place to align their institutional practices with the policy framework. The MoE set 31 March 2003 as the deadline for all HEIs to submit their policies to the Minister.

The broad objectives of promoting multilingualism and enhancing equity and access were to be achieved through a multi-pronged approach encompassing the following: the development, in the medium to long term, of South African indigenous languages as mediums of instruction in higher education, alongside English and Afrikaans; the development of strategies for promoting student proficiency in designated language(s) of tuition; the retention and strengthening of Afrikaans as a language of scholarship and science; the promotion of the study of South African languages and literature through planning and funding initiatives; the promotion of the study of foreign languages and; the encouragement of multilingualism in institutional policies and practices (MoE 2002, 16).

As part of the process of developing its language policy, Wits commissioned a substantial study of which the aim was to gather a broad range of information related to the language practices, attitudes, repertoires, and competencies of the university community. The results of the study were published in a substantial report provided to a committee of linguists and senior administrators who then received input from
other university experts and stakeholders. The Wits Language Policy was adopted on 14 March 2003.

According to this policy, Wits committed itself to multilingualism and the phased development of Sesotho as a language that could be used as a medium of instruction together with English. Phase 1 of the development of Sesotho, targeted for completion in 2010, was meant to focus on developing the resources and materials needed for the teaching of Sesotho as a subject at all levels of education. Phase 2, set to begin in 2011, was intended to focus on developing the linguistic abilities of staff and students. Phase 3 would be dedicated towards developing Sesotho for use in higher education, while in Phase 4, staff and students would be prepared for the introduction of English and Sesotho bilingual education. Regarding phases 3 and 4, no time frames were set and the university was to consider time frames based on the national language landscape at the time.

What, in our view, is especially interesting about the Wits case relates to the fact that there were two rounds of the research six years apart, in 2001 and then in 2007. The major aim of the second round of the research was to establish whether any changes in language attitudes and practices were discernible in the five years that had elapsed since the first round of the study and the adoption of the Wits Language Policy. In the second round of the study, the same instrument that was used in the first round was administered to a smaller sample of 510 respondents. The major aim of this second round was to find out whether any changes in language attitudes and practices were discernible. It was expected that the changes in the composition of the student body and, to a lesser extent, of the staff, would entail certain changes in language attitudes of the constituents of the university community.

The article explores the results of this second round of the research in the light of those of the study conducted five years earlier. It, therefore, explores both rounds of the research and focuses in particular on the results of those questions which appear to have direct implications for policy. The chosen closed-ended questions are:

- Do you think there should be more than one language of teaching and learning at Wits? If yes, which language(s) should be used?
- Do you think students at Wits should be required to be able to communicate in a South African language other than English by the time they graduate? If yes, which language(s) should be learned?
- Do you think academic staff at Wits should be required to be able to communicate in a South African language other than English? If yes, which language(s) should be learned?

In addition, the article seeks to consider the results of these questions in the light of the responses to the following open-ended questions:

- Do you think Wits is doing enough to support languages other than English?
- Additional comments?
RESEARCH RESULTS

These results were based on selected questions related to the language of learning and teaching mainly, and the questions were renumbered for the article.

Closed question 1(a): Do you think there should be more than one language of teaching and learning at Wits?

The results of this question are expressed as a percentage of all the respondents who answered the question in the two rounds of research. The results showed that there continued to be strong support for the maintenance of one language, English, as the only LOLT at Wits. But there was more support for more than one LOLT in 2007 (34.65%) than there was in 2001 (27.7%).

Table 1: Support for more than one LOLT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td>34.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
<td>65.35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because the question of who was not in favour of maintaining one LOLT was important, it was decided to investigate the demographics of the people who said ‘Yes’ to this question and to compare the trends in the two phases of the research. The demographic variables that were investigated were those of year of study; grade or rank of staff members; and what was described as language profile (see Figure 1).

The results by year of study and grade or rank of staff members did not yield anything consistent or significant. However, it is interesting to note that there was more support amongst undergraduates in the 2007 study compared to the study in 2001. Consistent with the findings of the 2001 study, the 2007 study also showed that there was no clear correlation between skilled and less skilled support staff and their positions on LOLT. While there was some indication of more support for more than one LOLT from less skilled staff (grades 14–17), grades 9–13 displayed lower support than grades 1–8. As noted in the report on the 2001 study, the high level of support in grades 14–17 was expected since many respondents in this category are African-language speakers who are less fluent in English.

While there was no discernible pattern of support for English by year of study, grade of support staff or rank of academic staff, the results read in relation to the reported home or first language of the respondents were more interesting, perhaps predictably so. The question ‘What language(s) would you describe as your home/first language(s)?’ was asked in order to establish the language profiles of the respondents who indicated preference for more than one LOLT at Wits. Figure 1 below indicates the percentages of respondents per category who answered ‘Yes’ to the question. For example, of all the respondents who indicated ‘English only’ as their home language, only 20 per cent (in 2001) and 25 per cent (in 2007) indicated that they supported the position that there should be more than one LOLT at Wits.
Figure 1: Language profile of supporters of more than one LOLT

As the results in Figure 1 show, in 2001 the greatest support for more than one LOLT came from those respondents who indicated that their home language was an African language and English (43%) and an African language only (39%). However in 2007, unlike in 2001, the greatest support for more than one LOLT came, in descending order, from Afrikaans speaking respondents (50%), African only (49%) and English and African (46%). The increasing support for more than one LOLT by ‘Afrikaans only’ speakers is attributable to subsequent developments in the national language landscape as well as the increasingly overt, ‘bottom-up’ language promotion initiatives mainly arising from the growing perception amongst Afrikaans speakers that their language was threatened. For the speakers of Afrikaans, support for more than one LOLT would also mean a rejection of ‘English-only’ and acceptance of Afrikaans (and other languages) as an important LOLT at the university.

Closed question 1(b): If yes, which language should be used?

Question 1(b) asked all those respondents who supported more than one LOLT to choose a language that could be used alongside English. Table 2 shows the results expressed as a percentage of all the respondents who answered the question.
Table 2: Preferred language to be used alongside English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Percentage support</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>isiZulu</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
<td>53.89%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sesotho</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>26.95%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afrikaans</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>28.74%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>19.16%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setswana</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>16.77%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isiXhosa</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>17.96%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sepedi</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>19.76%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isiNdebele</td>
<td>Less than 10%</td>
<td>10.78%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siswati</td>
<td>Less than 10%</td>
<td>10.18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tshivenda</td>
<td>Less than 10%</td>
<td>10.18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xitsonga</td>
<td>Less than 10%</td>
<td>11.98%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the main findings of the 2001 study was that isiZulu enjoyed the most support as the African language that respondents wanted to be used in learning and teaching at Wits. The results of the 2007 research show that the support for isiZulu increased by about 4 per cent. It is also notable that the support for the other African languages has not changed significantly. However, it can be noted that most of the African languages in the 2007 study surpassed the 10 per cent level of support, which was not the case in 2001.

Closed question 2(a): Do you think all students at Wits should be required to be able to communicate in a South African language other than English by the time they graduate?

In the 2001 study, it was noted that there was strong support for students being required to communicate in a South African language other than English by the time they graduated. In the 2001 study, 40.5 per cent answered ‘Yes’ and 59.5 per cent answered ‘No’ to this question. The 2007 study showed that this support increased by about 5 per cent as 45.9 per cent answered ‘Yes’ and 54.1 per cent answered ‘No’.

No pattern is evident in terms of support for the requirement to communicate in one other South African language for academic staff (by rank), for support staff (by grade) or for students (by year of study). However, the support from fifth-year students was striking. One logical explanation for the 100 per cent support from the fifth-years could be that these are mostly medical students whose curriculum requires them to have communicative competence in at least one other South African language by the time they graduate.

The language profile of the supporting group was again the most interesting. Similar to what was observed in the 2001 study, the 2007 study also showed that the support for students to be required to communicate in one other South African
language by the time they graduate came predominantly from the *African only* group and the *English and African* groups. Moderate support came from the *English and foreign* and *foreign only* groups in both the 2001 and the 2007 studies. A surprising finding is the support from the *Afrikaans only* group. It can be speculated, drawing on literature concerned with the increasing advocacy for the Afrikaans language, that the Afrikaans-speaking community has shifted from an attempt to champion the promotion and advancement of their language alone to that of advancing their case in an attempt to promote general multilingualism conceived of as a more productive approach in maintaining the vitality of the Afrikaans language.

**Closed question 2(b): ‘Do you think all students at Wits should be required to be able to communicate in a South African language other than English by the time they graduate? If yes, which language should be learned?’**

Table 3 below shows the level of support for the different languages as indicated by all the respondents who answered the second part of the question. The results are expressed as a percentage of all the respondents who answered the question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Percentage support</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>isiZulu</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
<td>56.76%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sesotho</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>22.97%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setswana</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>13.06%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isiXhosa</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>18.02%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>13.06%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sepedi</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>11.71%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afrikaans</td>
<td>Less than 10%</td>
<td>22.07%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other languages</td>
<td>Less than 10%</td>
<td>Less than 10%</td>
<td>Less than 10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As was noted in the comments on the results of question 1(b), support for isiZulu remained higher than that for the other South African languages. Of all the languages, Afrikaans experienced the biggest increase in support from less than 10 per cent in 2001 to 22.07 per cent in the 2007 study. Having considered the level of support for making communicating in a South African language a requirement for students, Question 3(a) sought to establish the respondents’ views regarding extending that requirement to academic staff.
Closed question 3(a): Do you think academic staff at Wits should be required to be able to communicate in a South African language other than English?

In the 2001 study, 49.2 per cent of the respondents indicated that they felt academic staff should be required to be able to communicate in an African language and 50.8 per cent said ‘No’. However, the support for this proposition declined in 2007 with 46.4 per cent saying ‘Yes’ and 53.6 per cent saying ‘No’. It is significant to note that close to 50 per cent of both the 2001 and the 2007 samples supported the view that all Wits academic staff should be able to communicate in a South African language other than English.

Closed question 3(b): Do you think all academic staff at Wits should be required to be able to communicate in a South African language other than English by the time they graduate? If yes, which language should be learned?

Table 4 below shows the level of support for the different languages as indicated by all the respondents who answered the question. The results are expressed as a percentage of all the respondents who answered the question.

Table 4: Preferred language in which all academic staff should be required to communicate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Percentage support</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>isiZulu</td>
<td>67.4%</td>
<td>66.06%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sesotho</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>23.85%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setswana</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>11.01%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isiXhosa</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sepedi</td>
<td>Less than 10%</td>
<td>12.39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IsiZulu remained the most supported language for the respondents in both the 2001 and the 2007 samples. The amount of support for the other languages did not change significantly, except for isiXhosa whose support increased from 13.3 per cent to 21.1 per cent.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

As has been indicated above, the study also sought to elicit respondents’ attitudes and perspectives regarding the Wits language policy by way of a number of open-ended questions. The rationale for the inclusion of these open-ended questions was that questions of this form would allow respondents to provide more nuanced and elaborated responses regarding the matter of language attitudes and policy at the institution. It was further hoped that since open-ended questions tend to elicit strong
responses, the questions would help access what is often called language ideology. Responses to the following questions were considered for the article:

Do you think Wits is doing enough to support languages other than English?
Additional comments?

Do you think Wits is doing enough to support languages other than English?

The answers of the majority (65%) suggested that the respondents felt that there was enough support for English and that the emphasis on English was appropriate, while the minority (35%) felt other languages needed more support at Wits. The answers are categorised according to degrees and forms of support for English and African languages. Examples of the answers we took to be typical of those falling into each of the identified categories are given below.

Support for English only at Wits
For the respondents who advocated for the exclusive promotion of English at Wits, the overriding consideration was that English had assumed the status of an international language, and that for pragmatic reasons, Wits had to promote the language so that the graduates of the institution would be globally competitive. For that reason, the role of the university was said to be that of conducting learning, teaching and research in English with a focus on discipline based knowledge. Emphasis was placed on the need to provide training that was aligned with the needs of industry. For example, several respondents from the Faculty of Engineering emphasised the fact that in Engineering, English was the universal language such that even those countries like China, India, Russia, France and Germany that could use their own languages in engineering research and industrial functions were slowly gravitating towards the use of English. The argument for the maintenance of English as the only LOLT at Wits is summed up by one respondent in the following terms:

English is a global language. International research papers are in English. When in industry all international relations as well as 99% of local relations will be in English. Therefore to maintain a high standard of education and research, time and resources should not be wasted on different languages. It will require more lecturers, more training for already overworked lecturers, more classes (for different languages) which takes more space and time, as well as notes, tutorials etc. prepared and printed in different languages. The cost and resources of such a task could be put to a better use.

For these respondents, other languages were only necessary in other modes of interaction, and not for academic purposes. A recurring sentiment with regard to the place of languages other than English at Wits was that individuals needed to learn other languages on their own initiative and for their own purposes. Further, the fact that South Africa had 11 designated official languages was ironically cited as one of the reasons why only English needed to be recognised as the language of the
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university. Choosing any one other language would create tensions as speakers of other languages would call for the use of their own languages in one way or the other. In the words of one respondent:

There is not enough time, money, or facilities for all students to be taught in or have notes in different languages. Languages should be taught in primary schools. SA citizens should be able to speak at least 3 languages. This must be done at school not at University.

However, as noted above, 35 per cent of the respondents felt that there was a need to do more to support other languages at the University.

Support for other languages at wits
Among the few respondents who argued for some role for African and other languages at Wits, strong sentiments were expressed against the University’s ‘English-only’ practice. As one respondent observed:

It is good to teach South African languages and to develop them like China, India and countries in the Far East which are using their native languages not only to communicate day to day lives but also they have established their information technology.

Other respondents criticized the status quo which is characterized by the dominance of English at all levels and referred to how the indigenous languages seemed to be undermined at the institution. The lack of importance attached to languages other than English was echoed by other respondents who alluded to the fact that the University sought to project itself as an English first language university. Some staff members cited what they considered to be blatant lack of support for other languages in the sense that any efforts by staff to learn other languages through the Wits Language School were frustrated because, instead of being encouraged to learn other languages via the waiving of tuition fees for staff, they were actually required to pay huge amounts in course fees.

For these respondents, a lot would be gained if the university promoted other languages. Referring to students, some respondents cited advantages such as giving students access to a wealth of cross-cultural publications as well as providing a better understanding of other cultures and languages world-wide.

Additional comments
Under the heading ‘Additional comments’ respondents were given an opportunity to express their views on the question of language use at the university. In the 2001 survey 200 responses under the heading ‘Additional comments’ were recorded and in the 2007 survey, 123 responses were recorded under this heading. Seven categories emerged from the interpretation of the responses.
The amount of support for each category in the 2001 and 2007 surveys is represented in brackets: Straight for English (52% in 2001 and 56% in 2007); Support for English and African languages (15% in 2001 and 25% in 2007); Support for African languages only (14% in 2001 and 4.8% in 2007); Support for foreign languages (2.6% in 2001 and 2.4% in 2007); English language support for African language speakers (2.6% in 2001 and 3% in 2007); Support for multilingualism (11% in 2001 and 12% in 2007); and Support for linguistic tolerance (2% in 2001 and 3% in 2007). It has to be noted that these figures are based on interpretation, and only those examples that appeared to easily fit an identifiable category were classified.

Straight for English

The majority of the respondents expressed the view that Wits University did not need to channel scarce resources towards any multilingual initiatives but rather to focus solely on using English for teaching and learning. This finding is not surprising as it is consistent with the result discussed above with regard to the question: Do you think Wits is doing enough to support languages other than English? As pointed out above, the majority of the respondents indicated that they supported the use of English only for teaching and learning at Wits.

Prominent among the considerations cited by these respondents are the issues around globalisation and the international stature of English as overriding concerns in deciding on the question of the role of the different languages and their place in the university. The following comments capture the sentiments expressed in this regard:

• English is the international language of the world. We cannot spend resources wanting to cater to minorities. There are more important things to spend money on at the university other than language.

• English is the recognised universal language worldwide and therefore all students and staff at Wits should be encouraged to read, write and speak English if they want recognition on a national and international level in the fields of research and business.

• At a University level and in consideration of globalization (for right or wrong) the medium of communication is English. Therefore, if Wits wishes to be part of the global community, fluency and understanding of English should be promoted. Local or mother languages should be cherished and enhanced but not to the detriment of growth – personal or university.

Some respondents pointed out that although English was (only) their additional language, they still felt that there was need to use an internationally accepted language in an academic setting.

For some, the lack of ability in English hampered the academic progress of many black students at Wits. Several other respondents observed that although many of the black students were still able to graduate, they continued to face similar problems in
their careers because they had not developed their English when they were students. For these respondents, it was important to appreciate the role of English as the language of business in South Africa and internationally.

**Support for English and African languages**

This category included responses from respondents who in their comments indicated that they recognised and appreciated the place and role of English as a global language but still suggested that African languages needed to be supported and accommodated in the teaching and learning programmes at Wits. As indicated above, a sizable number of respondents (35%) felt that African languages needed to be accorded some recognition at Wits even when they conceded that English should be the LOLT. For some of these respondents, African languages could be used during such processes as registration and orientation, while lecturers could allow code-switching by students or use code-switching themselves to aid understanding if they could but, as one respondent noted, ‘in order for the University to remain internationally relevant, it should continue to operate in English. This will ensure students are able to access the largest body of academic knowledge’. One professor summarised the balance which is needed by suggesting that the focus should be on encouraging students to be able to take on the challenge of an English tertiary education by the time they reach Wits, but: ‘If there are difficulties they can be supported through home language, but the goal of Wits to achieve international recognition will not be achieved by too diverse a language policy.’

**Support for African languages (only)**

Location in this category does not mean that these respondents explicitly excluded English or other languages but rather that their comments were focused on African languages. Whereas some responses in this category sought to point out the benefits of multilingual practices at Wits, other responses betrayed a lack of patience with the rate at which African languages were being developed or accorded recognition. One medical student cited how his work would be a lot easier if he understood an African language:

> It would be extremely beneficial for a medical student to be taught a language other than English, such as Zulu and Afrikaans. At this moment in time, I find it difficult to communicate with patients in the wards – the majority of the patients are Zulu-speaking. Once these languages are taught I would then not object to a lecturer using these languages during lectures.

Other respondents suggested that African languages would only be developed if institutions like Wits insisted on using them for some of the purposes.
Support for foreign languages

Responses in this category showed some support for foreign languages, such as French, German, Italian, Spanish and others. Some of the advantages which were cited include the enhancement of the capacity to embrace other languages as well as other cultures. One of the recurring reasons which was cited was the enhancement of a person’s competitive advantage on the international job market. For example, one engineering student pointed out that he would rather learn German than an African language: ‘Engineers must be taught German so we can work for BMW one day.’

English language support for African language speaking learners

Respondents in this category acknowledged the position of English as a global language and their responses focused on the need to provide additional support so as to improve the English language competences of the speakers of African languages. One respondent, a student in the Health Sciences Faculty, suggested rather forcefully that:

All first year students should write a compulsory English exam (as with the computer literacy programme) to assess level of proficiency. Based on this, supplementary classes should be provided.

Support for multilingualism

Some respondents expressed general sentiments regarding the need to promote and encourage multilingualism in South Africa. Responses in this category emphasised the merits of multilingualism, such as the promotion of cross-cultural communication and understanding. One Science student captured the essence of this reasoning in the following terms:

People should be encouraged to learn other South African languages at university as it is important for creating cultural understanding in the country. This is why the world over, people at tertiary institutions learn international languages. In South America, people learn Spanish or Portuguese even if it is not their home language. In European countries such as Sweden and Holland people use one of the international languages such as English, French or Spanish even if it is not the native language of their country and most educated people in China and Japan now learn English.

One interesting response raised a suggestion similar to the Nhlapo/Alexander proposals regarding language standardisation. For this particular Social Sciences student:

Wits needs to use one of the Nguni languages – isiZulu, SiSwati, isiNdebele, isiXhosa – and one of the Sotho languages – Sesotho, Sepedi, Setswana and Tshivenda and Xitsonga as official means of communication to all students in addition to English. One Nguni and one Sotho language can be used together with Tshivenda and Xitsonga.
Support for linguistic tolerance

Some responses under ‘additional comments’ were deemed to suggest a desire for the cultivation and maintenance of the culture of tolerance of linguistic difference. A lecturer’s comment, which apparently referred to the Soweto Uprising of 1976 when school children rioted in opposition to being forced to learn through the medium of Afrikaans, captured the essence of the desirability of linguistic tolerance not only in the university but also in the country, generally: ‘We should learn from the past and not force other languages onto people who do not wish to learn them.’ In a similar vein, a Commerce student stated: ‘The questions should be more about choice and encouragement of use of other languages not a requirement. If people have a preference for certain languages there should be that option available.’

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study demonstrate the salience of language attitudes as a factor which has far-reaching implications for the successful implementation of the LPHE. These findings show that there are three significant categories of attitude towards language which have implications for language policy at Wits, namely: attitudes towards English; attitudes towards African languages; and attitudes towards multilingualism generally.

Attitudes towards English

The support for English as a medium of instruction, particularly during lectures, is expressed without ambiguity. These findings are consistent with those of other related studies as well as arguments advanced in the literature (e.g. Aziakpono and Bekker 2010; Dalvit and De Klerk 2005; Foley 2004; Madiba 2004; Ndiamnde 2004). Foley (2004) specifically identifies language attitudes as one factor that militates against a multilingual policy in the South African higher education sector. In a study focusing on the attitudes of isiXhosa-speaking students toward the language of learning and teaching at Rhodes University, Aziakpono and Bekker (2010) found that the majority of the students supported monolingual English-medium instruction in the university. This was in spite of the acknowledgement that ‘the sole use of English as LOLT at Rhodes University is disadvantageous and challenging to isiXhosa-speaking students’ (ibid., 46). Like their Wits counterparts, the Rhodes students cited the instrumental factor as an important consideration in their preference of LOLT. Similarly, Dalvit and De Klerk (2005) found that University of Fort Hare students constantly referred to English as the language of the real world, the language of the workplace. English was not only a universal and an international language required for wider communication in a global village, but also the language required in order to communicate effectively, get good jobs and study further abroad (Aziakpono and Bekker 2010, 47). Similarly, Beukes (2010) noted the ever increasing support for English amongst the student body of the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and the almost identical grounds for supporting English as the LOLT. What is particularly
striking is that UJ is an institution whose history is associated with Afrikaans, a language that has the apparent advantage of having already been developed as an academic language (ibid., 199). The emphasis regarding the global competitiveness cited by Wits respondents is echoed at UJ where a staff member justifies the gravitation towards English because it is ‘the global language’ and that ‘using any other language limits the potential for us being globally competitive’ (ibid., 208).

Reference to English as a ‘neutral’ and unifying language in a linguistically diverse country like South Africa features in both the Wits and Rhodes students’ opinions regarding the desirability of maintaining the ‘English only’ status quo. For example, some respondents at Wits argued for the maintenance of English only as the LOLT because choosing any one other language would create tensions as speakers of other languages would clamour for the use of their own languages in one way or the other. These views are echoed in Aziakpono and Bekker’s (2010, 47) study in which they observe that ‘some of the interviewed students believed that English is a national language that unites people, generally and at the university, despite the diversity of Rhodes University’s population’. Further, Rhodes University students felt that ‘English is the only LOLT that will accommodate all students in Rhodes University’s multilingual environment’ (ibid., 47).

Dalvit and De Klerk (2005) made similar observations in their study of the language attitudes of University of Fort Hare students. In their study, the students supported the use of English at the university because they considered the language to be ‘non-culturally loaded’ and neutral because it was not associated with any particular culture, unlike isiXhosa. Several Wits students alluded to the neutrality and unifying role of the English language, a view shared by their counterparts at the University of Fort Hare and at Rhodes University, suggesting that this may be a widely held view at university campuses in South Africa.

The fact that the majority of the respondents supported the ‘straight for English’ approach at Wits is not surprising in the light of several research findings which suggest that this is the desired approach even in primary and secondary schools in South Africa. This is aptly captured in a study by Mbatha and Plüddemann (2004) which showed that in Cape Town, there was a decline in the number of secondary school learners wishing to study isiXhosa as an additional language. These learners did not see the value of isiXhosa and preferred a ‘straight for English’ approach. The preference for a ‘straight for English’ approach even at secondary school level was also evident in a study by Kanjira (2008), which focused on motivation and attitudes towards English among learners in rural KwaZulu-Natal. When asked whether English should be given more time than isiZulu and other subjects in school, 210 out of a total of 269 (i.e. 78.09%) of the respondents answered ‘Yes’. The majority of the learners in Kanjira’s study also indicated that they would prefer English-medium instruction. What was also interesting from Kanjira’s study was the language preference of the teachers: 91.45 per cent preferred English-medium instruction; 1.7 per cent isiZulu medium instruction; and 2.56 per cent English and isiZulu instruction. Equally instructive were the parents’ language attitudes and
preferences. When asked, ‘Through which language would you wish your child to be educated?’ all 27 respondents answered ‘English’. Particularly striking was the parents’ response to the question, ‘Would you send your child to a high school, college or university, which uses isiZulu only?’ All 27 parents (100%) answered ‘No’. Kanjira’s findings are particularly significant considering that the respondents in the study all lived in KwaZulu-Natal, where the levels of English language proficiency are low. It is therefore not surprising that the ‘straight for English’ approach would be overwhelmingly preferred at universities like Rhodes and Wits where the respondents’ competence in English is comparatively advanced. The study by Aziakpono and Bekker (2010, 49), like the other studies noted here, suggests that generally negative attitudes towards African languages and generally positive attitudes towards English dominate the education sector from secondary through to tertiary levels.

It is also noteworthy that studies from contexts other than Africa also point to the strong influence of the instrumental factor in the overwhelming support that English receives, particularly at HEIs. For example, in a study of the attitudes towards English among Malaysian undergraduates, Rahman (2008) found that the majority of the students cited the importance of knowing English, particularly in the era of globalisation, as contributing to the huge amount of support that English receives. In Rahman’s study, 84 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed and 13.4 per cent agreed with the statement that knowledge of English provides individuals with a competitive advantage on the job market. The majority of the Malaysian students supported a ‘straight for English’ approach not only at university but also at primary school level. As Rahman (2008, 12) noted:

[The] majority of the respondents realized the necessity of learning English in this era of globalization and they reported their strong positive attitude towards English. They were of the opinion that those who speak English create [a] good impression and get advantages in seeking good jobs. They felt that all children should learn English right from primary one. They also felt that English should be the medium of instruction at undergraduate and postgraduate studies. As a whole, they wanted an increase[d] use of English in education. The students showed a very positive outlook towards the use of English in office and media.

Bradford (2007) makes similar observations regarding university students in Indonesia. Bradford’s study reflected strong instrumental motivations as the respondents pointed to the importance of learning English for job-related purposes and for them to be able to communicate with native speakers in work situations. Bradford (ibid., 312) cites other studies from Thailand, Malaysia, Japan and Singapore and concludes that these findings are not only applicable to Indonesian students but that ‘EFL students in Asia generally recognize the value of English for competing in the internationalized society’. It is therefore evident from a review of the relevant literature that the findings regarding the preference for English as LOLT
at Wits are consistent with some of the findings from other university contexts, not only in Africa, but also in other continents.

**Attitudes towards African languages**

As noted above, those respondents who expressed sentiments which were considered to be in support of African languages did not explicitly state that they would want an African language to be the LOLT at Wits. The data suggests that for the Wits community, the only role for African languages in the academic activities at the university would be in tutorials, group discussions and practicals in laboratories. Interestingly, this appears to be the desired approach in other contexts. For example, Aziakpono and Bekker (2010, 47) observe that some of the Rhodes University respondents felt a role could be found for isiXhosa whereby the language could be used ‘alongside English in tutorials to help isiXhosa-speaking students from bilingual English/isiXhosa, ex-DET backgrounds to actively participate in learning and to better understand the course material’. As noted above, one of the interesting observations is that some Wits students expressed some positive sentiments regarding the use of African languages in disciplines such as Medicine and Social Work. For the medical student, knowledge of an African language would help in his/her practice of medicine in South Africa. Aziakpono and Bekker (2010) make similar observations where Law and Journalism students at Rhodes acknowledge that knowledge of isiXhosa would be helpful in the practice of their profession. However, one of the main observations in the Rhodes University and the Wits University studies is that support for multilingual practices is minimal and the attitude towards African languages in higher education is generally negative.

Ndimande (2004, 67) notes this generally negative attitude towards the African languages in higher education and concludes that the languages are stigmatised and undervalued:

> The concern of graduating students at tertiary level, in particular African language-speaking students, is access to the work arena and the need to be financially independent. For those that study with African languages as media of instruction, the questions that arise are: will these students be employable upon completion of their studies, what jobs will they be able to access, will these positions enable them to become financially secure, etc.?

Ndimande (2004) further notes that negative attitudes towards African languages in South African HEIs are exacerbated through the dynamics of student interactions on campus where students who attended multiracial schools and are fluent in English despise those who attended government schools. Those who go on to study African languages are considered inferior and are discriminated against:

> Nowadays, students discriminate against one another on the basis of varying degrees of English proficiency, with those having higher levels of proficiency not wanting to accommodate others who have lower levels of proficiency. Students from government schools feel inferior about their identity as African people (ibid., 68).
Thus, for the speakers of African languages, an acceptable policy is one which promotes English, mostly because it is the language associated with social mobility and opportunity in a globalising world. African languages are relegated to the status of languages for in-group and intergroup communication while Afrikaans is either rejected (as the language associated with apartheid) or simply tolerated.

As noted above with respect to the Rhodes University students’ attitudes towards African languages, these negative perceptions are cultivated in primary school and are deeply entrenched by the time the students enter high school. The negative sentiments expressed by high school students suggest that if they had the option, very few learners would study an African language. A study by Barkhuizen (2002), involving 2,825 high school learners from the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape illustrates the lack of popularity of African languages in the school curriculum. Learners were asked to compare isiXhosa and English in terms of three variables: the language they found easier as a subject; the more enjoyable language to learn; and the language they considered more useful in future. English was rated higher in all three variables. This raises a fundamental question: If these students demonstrated such negative attitudes towards African languages in high school where policy compels the students to study an African language, what were the chances that their attitudes would be different in university where, for the majority of the students, African languages are not a requirement in order to complete their degrees?

Given the prevalence of the negative views associated with African languages across several domains, it is understandable why for the respondents at Wits, African languages were only supported as long as they were used as a means of helping struggling students in tutorials and practicals and not in serious academic activities such as lectures.

**Attitudes towards multilingualism, foreign languages and linguistic differences**

One of the interesting observations from the study of language attitudes at Wits is the general support for multilingualism by both staff and students. The data show that there is general appreciation that multilingualism is a resource. Knowledge of languages other than one’s first language was shown to be valued highly by most respondents who considered multilingualism to be useful for purposes of enhancing cross-cultural communication and understanding. An appreciation of multilingualism was considered to be important as it contributed to linguistic tolerance. Respondents referred to the Soweto uprising as an illustration of the consequences of lack of linguistic tolerance. The data further show that the Wits community appreciates the benefits of multilingualism and linguistic tolerance evidenced by the high amount of support for the use of languages other than English in general interpersonal communication on campus, tutorials and during laboratory sessions. This is consistent with observations made at other universities. Dalvit and De Klerk (2005), for example, observe that isiXhosa-speaking students at the University of Fort Hare used their language a lot amongst themselves. Similarly, Dyers (1998) also observed
that isiXhosa-speaking students at the University of the Western Cape used their language in most informal situations. These practices show that multilingualism is a reality on university campuses in South Africa. In all these settings, these practices did not, however, extend to positive attitudes to the use of isiXhosa in formal academic settings where English was the preferred LOLT and knowledge of English was actually considered to be an important addition to students’ general linguistic repertoire because then they would be able to communicate with other people who did not speak their home languages. Multilingualism was considered to be an asset because the multilingual Xhosa-speaker would communicate in the home language with those who could, and revert to English ‘in communicating with non-Xhosa speakers at all levels: on campus, nationwide and internationally’ (Dalvit and De Klerk 2005, 5). This practice could serve as an illustration of linguistic tolerance.

**CONCLUSION**

One of the most striking features of the research into language attitudes and practices at Wits relates to the broad similarity between the results of 2001 and 2007 rounds of research despite the six years that had elapsed between them. Both studies reveal very little support for more than one LOLT at Wits although there is a slight increase (7%) in 2007 which appears to be coming from undergraduates and Afrikaans-speaking respondents. Also evident in this study is the continued strong support for English as the LOLT as well as continued strong support for Zulu as the ‘preferred’ African language – where an African language is supported. However, the results of the study also suggest that while the ability to understand or use an African language is considered valuable, the idea that a university should legislate in favour of an African language is not supported. Both rounds of the research reveal strong support for English on the grounds that it is, for example, a recognised universal language worldwide; the appropriate language of higher education; the language of science and technology; and the language for global competitiveness. This view seems to lead to divided views around the nature and extent of support the university should be required to give to students whose home/first language is not English.

The important question raised by this research and the fact that attitudes and practices remained almost the same after six years raises an important general question concerning the relationship between research and policy making. If those who developed the language policy at Wits in 2002 had used the results of the first round of the research as the basis and reference in the process of designing the Wits policy, it would in the eyes of linguists, probably be considered conservative. It would have reinforced the power of English and to the extent that it supported an African language at all, it would have advocated the development of Zulu, the hegemonic African language. The policy would, for example, continue to operate in terms of English as the LOLT. In addition, the university would not hold itself accountable for the development of the English language competence of the student body perhaps on the grounds that it would be the responsibility of schools. The policy would support what is perceived as the most powerful African language in South Africa, despite the
fact that Wits is not located in a predominantly Zulu speaking area. Further, the policy would affirm that it is in the best interest of students’ careers for them to be taught in English. There is even some suggestion that foreign languages, such as French or German, would be more useful than an (or any) African language. It is interesting to note that even the university community’s attitudes seem very similar to those of the parents of school children who opt for a ‘straight for English’ approach against the counsel of linguists regarding the merits of early mother-tongue education. There is apparently a sense in which it might be considered part of HEI’s responsibility to develop an African language’s capacity to function as a LOLT by, for example, producing education materials in that language. This is yet another indicator that the results of research into language attitudes and practices cannot be the sole basis for policy formulation unless policy makers are happy to accept the likelihood that the policies of this kind would essentially be pragmatic and conservative. A similarly concerning implication of this research relates to the fact that were policy makers to go ahead and implement more progressive policies, at Wits at least, the chances are that the policy would meet with considerable resistance from a large section of the university community.

NOTES
1. The Registrar of the University of the Witwatersrand constituted a small committee of linguists and senior administrators who in turn commissioned Susan van Zyl and Pinky Makoe, then of the Department of Applied English Studies, to supervise a large-scale study concerning language attitudes and practices on the campus.
2. In 2007, Susan van Zyl of what was then the Graduate School for Humanities and Social Sciences, applied for additional funding from the Registrar of the University to replicate the 2001 study using the same instrument and principles but involving a smaller sample. Nicholas Nyika, a post-doctoral fellow in the Graduate School for Humanities and Social Sciences, supervised the research in the 2007 study.
3. The first round of the research was conducted using a questionnaire consisting of 29 closed and four open-ended questions administered to a stratified sample of 820, which comprised undergraduate and postgraduate students from all faculties in the university, as well as academic and administrative staff.
4. In each case the respondents were asked to indicate their choice of a language or languages on a list which included all 11 official languages and a block marked Other (specify).

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