

Language Usage among University Staff Members: Communication, Power, Inclusion and Multilingual Practice in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Language is central to the organisation of work in universities because staff members use it to exchange information, negotiate professional identities, exercise authority, build collegial relationships and participate in institutional decision-making. In multilingual universities, however, language choice may simultaneously enable communication and reproduce exclusion. This conceptual article examines language usage among academic, administrative, professional, and support staff, with particular reference to South African higher education. Drawing on sociolinguistic perspectives, linguistic capital, communities of practice, and translanguaging, the article analyses formal communication, informal interaction, code-switching, digital communication, and the relationship between language and institutional power. It argues that the continued dominance of English offers a shared medium for cross-linguistic communication and international engagement, but may disadvantage staff who possess valuable professional knowledge without equal confidence in dominant academic and bureaucratic registers. Conversely, the unreflective use of a shared local language can exclude colleagues who do not understand it. The article proposes a Context-Responsive Inclusive Staff Communication Framework comprising communicative access, multilingual flexibility, linguistic respect, power awareness, digital clarity and institutional accountability. It concludes that effective university communication requires neither rigid monolingualism nor unrestricted language choice, but an ethically managed multilingual approach that matches language practices to audience, purpose, and context. Universities should therefore translate high-stakes information where necessary, encourage inclusive multilingual interaction, strengthen plain-language communication, support language learning, and evaluate whether their language policies are implemented in everyday staff practices.

Keywords: university staff, workplace communication, multilingualism, language policy, linguistic inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Universities are commonly understood as institutions established to advance teaching, learning, research, innovation, and community engagement. However, they are also complex workplaces comprising employees from different professional, disciplinary, linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Their effective functioning depends on communication among academic staff, administrators, managers, librarians, researchers, technical personnel, and support employees. Communication enables staff members to interpret policies, coordinate academic programmes, conduct meetings, allocate responsibilities, resolve workplace problems and document institutional decisions. It is therefore a central process through which university governance and everyday institutional work are accomplished (Rakgogo, 2024; Mugwaze, 2025).

University staff members communicate through face-to-face meetings, formal reports, memoranda, policy documents, emails, telephone conversations, online meeting platforms, and instant-messaging applications. Information is also exchanged through informal conversations in offices, corridors and social spaces. Each context requires staff members to select an appropriate language, tone, register and level of formality. Formal committees may rely on standardised institutional English, whereas informal departmental conversations may

involve code-switching, translanguaging, or the use of indigenous African languages. These practices demonstrate that workplace communication is dynamic and shaped by the audience, purpose, institutional setting, and relationships among participants (Maseko, 2023; Yafele, 2024).

Language should not be viewed as a neutral instrument that merely transfers information between staff members. It is connected to professional authority, institutional identity, social inclusion, and access to decision-making. The languages used in meetings, reports, and policy deliberations influence whose contributions are recognised, who feels confident enough to speak, and whose interpretations are treated as legitimate. Language practices can consequently reproduce institutional hierarchies when proficiency in dominant academic English is treated as evidence of intelligence, competence, or leadership capacity. Staff members may possess considerable professional knowledge but struggle to communicate it through specialised institutional registers, particularly when English is an additional language (Rakgogo, 2024; Baleni, 2025).

The importance of staff language usage is especially evident in South Africa, where universities operate within a linguistically and culturally diverse society. Staff members may speak Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Setswana, Afrikaans, English and several other languages. This diversity can strengthen institutional knowledge, intercultural understanding, professional collaboration and university engagement with surrounding communities. Nevertheless, it may also generate communication difficulties when universities fail to establish inclusive language practices. Multilingualism should consequently be understood as both an institutional resource and a responsibility that requires deliberate planning, appropriate support and sustained implementation (Rakgogo, 2024; Ngubane, 2025).

English remains the principal language of administration, governance, research, and formal professional communication at most South African universities. Its prominence is partly due to its role as a common language among staff members who do not share a home language. English also connects universities to international research networks, scholarly publishing systems, and professional partnerships. However, the continued privileging of English has contributed to linguistic hierarchies that position indigenous African languages at the margins of university knowledge production and institutional communication. English, therefore, performs a dual function: it facilitates communication and global participation while potentially reproducing linguistic inequality and exclusion (Maseko, 2023; Mugwaze, 2025; Baleni, 2025).

The dominance of English may advantage employees who have received extensive schooling and professional training through English. Such employees may participate more confidently in meetings, write institutional reports more easily, and communicate effectively within bureaucratic and academic registers. In contrast, staff members who use English as an additional language may require more time to formulate their contributions or interpret highly technical documents. Their silence or hesitation may be misinterpreted as inadequate preparation, limited knowledge, or a lack of confidence. Language proficiency may thus operate as a form of institutional power that influences professional visibility, participation, and access to leadership opportunities (Maseko, 2024; Yafele, 2024).

South Africa's multilingual higher-education policies seek to address these inequalities by promoting indigenous African languages as languages of teaching, learning, scholarship, and institutional communication. However, recent evaluations suggest that limited progress has been made in extending these languages into the central academic and administrative functions of universities. Although institutional policies frequently recognise multilingualism, English remains dominant in teaching, research, official documentation, and university governance. This reveals that formal recognition does not automatically produce substantive linguistic transformation (Rakgogo, 2024; Munyaradzi, 2024; Baleni, 2025).

A persistent gap consequently exists between multilingual policy commitments and everyday university practices. Language policies may express commitments to transformation, inclusion, and the intellectualization of African languages, but fail to provide adequate implementation plans, budgets, staff training, or accountability mechanisms. Some universities may translate selected documents or introduce multilingual terminology projects, but these initiatives may remain isolated from mainstream institutional operations. Meaningful implementation requires multilingualism to be integrated into governance, academic development, professional

communication, and staff-support structures rather than treated as a symbolic addition to existing English-dominant systems (Maseko, 2023; Maseko, 2024; Ngubane, 2025).

These policy–practice tensions are visible in meetings, committee discussions, and departmental interactions. English may provide a shared medium for linguistically diverse participants, but specialised terminology, institutional acronyms, and unnecessarily complex expressions may prevent some staff members from understanding the discussion fully. Conversely, when a group switches to a shared indigenous language in the presence of colleagues who do not understand it, the language choice can produce an informal inner group and exclude other participants. The central concern is therefore not simply whether English or an African language is used, but whether the chosen language enables all intended participants to understand, contribute, and respond meaningfully (Maseko, 2024; Yafele, 2024).

Code-switching and translanguaging can nevertheless serve valuable communicative functions among university staff. They allow employees to draw upon their complete linguistic repertoires when explaining specialised concepts, negotiating meaning, expressing culturally specific ideas, and building collegial solidarity. Such practices can also challenge the assumption that professional communication must always be conducted through a single standardised language. However, multilingual flexibility must be accompanied by audience awareness. Staff members should interpret or summarise essential information when a language is not understood by everyone involved in the conversation (Ngubane, 2025; Mugwaze, 2025).

Language practices also contribute to the construction of professional identities and collegial relationships. Staff members use language to demonstrate expertise, establish authority, express respect, manage disagreement, and develop workplace solidarity. Greetings and culturally appropriate forms of address can strengthen interpersonal relationships, whereas ridicule of accents, dismissive corrections, and language-based stereotypes may undermine confidence and a sense of institutional belonging. An inclusive university language culture therefore, depends not only on written policies but also on how staff members recognise and respond to linguistic differences during everyday interactions (Yafele, 2024; Ngubane, 2025).

The increasing use of digital communication has added another dimension to university staff language practices. Emails, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, and related platforms enable rapid communication across departments and campuses, but they can also produce ambiguity, information overload, and misunderstanding. Brief digital messages may be interpreted as disrespectful, while informal expressions may carry different meanings across linguistic and cultural groups. Important institutional instructions can also become lost in fast-moving messaging groups. Universities, therefore, require communication protocols that distinguish official communication, urgent notices, confidential information, and informal coordination (Rakgogo, 2024; Ngubane, 2025).

Although language in South African higher education has received considerable scholarly attention, most studies focus on students, curriculum transformation, and languages of teaching and learning. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to language use among academic, administrative, technical, and support employees. This constitutes an important scholarly gap because staff communication sustains the institutional processes through which teaching, research, governance, and community engagement are organised. Further research is needed to examine how language affects staff participation, workplace relationships, decision-making, professional identity, and institutional transformation (Yafele, 2024; Ngubane, 2025; Mugwaze, 2025).

This conceptual article addresses this gap by examining language usage among university staff across formal, informal, and digital contexts. It considers the relationship between language choice, workplace efficiency, professional identity, inclusion, institutional power, and collegiality. The article is guided by the following questions: How do university staff members use language across formal, informal, and digital communication contexts? In what ways can language choice promote or restrict colleagues' participation? How do institutional power relations determine which languages and forms of knowledge are valued? What practices can universities adopt to promote clear, respectful, and equitable communication? These questions respond to recent calls for multilingualism to be treated as a transformative institutional practice rather than a symbolic policy commitment (Maseko, 2023; Rakgogo, 2024; Ngubane, 2025).

The article argues that effective staff communication requires neither rigid English monolingualism nor unrestricted language choice. Instead, universities require a context-responsive multilingual approach that balances the practical value of a common institutional language with multilingual flexibility, linguistic respect and equitable participation. Such an approach must acknowledge the continued international value of English while creating meaningful institutional functions for indigenous African languages. This balance can strengthen communication while advancing transformation, epistemic justice, and linguistic inclusion within South African higher education (Mugwaze, 2025; Ngubane, 2025; Baleni, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Language as social practice

A social-practice perspective rejects the idea that language is simply a stable code selected from a list. Meaning is produced through interaction, context, professional norms, and relationships. The same staff member may use formal English in a Senate report, an indigenous African language in a collegial conversation, a mixed repertoire in a departmental meeting, and abbreviated English on WhatsApp. These shifts are not necessarily evidence of linguistic deficiency. They are context-sensitive strategies through which speakers accomplish institutional and relational work.

Linguistic capital and institutional power

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital explains why some ways of speaking carry greater institutional value than others. Universities reward mastery of specialised academic English, policy terminology, and bureaucratic writing. Staff members who command these registers may be perceived as more authoritative, even when linguistic confidence does not directly correspond to professional competence. Accent, fluency and vocabulary can consequently influence credibility, promotion opportunities, and participation in meetings. A critical analysis must therefore distinguish legitimate needs for clarity from language norms that operate as hidden measures of intelligence or professionalism.

Communities of practice

The concept of communities of practice helps explain how staff learn the language of departments, committees, and professional roles through participation (Wenger, 1998). New employees encounter acronyms, procedural expressions, discipline-specific vocabulary, and unwritten conversational conventions. Access to this shared repertoire can promote a sense of belonging, whereas unexplained institutional jargon can keep newcomers at the margins. Inclusive induction and mentoring are therefore both linguistic and administrative responsibilities.

Translanguaging and linguistic repertoire

Translanguaging describes the flexible use of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning rather than treating named languages as sealed systems (García & Wei, 2014). In staff interaction, translanguaging may assist explanation, humour, solidarity, and the clarification of difficult concepts. It can also support the intellectualisation of African languages by expanding their use into professional domains. Nevertheless, flexibility becomes exclusionary when participants use a shared language in the presence of colleagues who cannot follow the discussion. Ethical multilingualism, therefore, requires audience awareness.

METHODOLOGY

This conceptual article employed an integrative literature review and a qualitative document analysis approach. The review brought together sociolinguistic theory, workplace communication scholarship, multilingual higher-education research, and policy literature relevant to language use among university employees. Sources were selected purposively for their conceptual relevance to four analytical concerns: language choice across institutional domains, linguistic inclusion and exclusion, the relationship between language and professional power, and the implementation of multilingual policy. Particular attention was given to South African higher-education scholarship and the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions, while

international literature was used to strengthen the conceptual interpretation. The materials were read iteratively and organised through thematic synthesis. Recurring ideas were compared, grouped, and refined into the themes reported below. Because the study used publicly available documents and did not involve human participants, institutional ethical approval and informed consent were not required. The approach is appropriate for theory development, although its conclusions should be tested through empirical research involving diverse categories of university staff.

RESULTS

Formal institutional communication

Formal communication includes policies, minutes, memoranda, committee papers, employment correspondence, reports, and official announcements. A common institutional language can reduce ambiguity and enable records to circulate across linguistic groups. English also connects South African universities to international research and professional networks. However, formal English often becomes dense, legalistic, and inaccessible. The challenge is therefore not only which language is used, but also whether the message is written in plain, precise and audience-appropriate language.

High-stakes communication requires particular care. Conditions of employment, disciplinary procedures, occupational health and safety instructions, transformation policies, and major organisational changes should not depend on employees' ability to interpret specialised language without support. Institutions can provide summaries, glossaries, translated versions, or opportunities for oral clarification. Such measures do not undermine a common working language; they make institutional participation more equitable.

Meetings and decision-making

Meetings reveal the relationship between language and voice. Staff members who are highly knowledgeable may contribute less when discussion proceeds rapidly in an additional language or when interruption and idiomatic speech dominate. Silence should not automatically be interpreted as agreement, lack of preparation or limited competence. Chairpersons can improve linguistic access by circulating papers in advance, explaining specialised terms, inviting contributions without embarrassment, summarising decisions and permitting participants to request clarification.

Code-switching in meetings can clarify an idea or build rapport, especially where most participants share the languages being used. Yet extended use of a language not understood by everyone can create an inner group and position others as outsiders. Participants should therefore return to the agreed common language, briefly interpret key contributions and ensure that all formal decisions are recorded in an accessible form.

Informal interaction and collegial identity

Corridor conversations, greetings, humour and social exchanges are central to collegial relationships. Indigenous languages can express respect, cultural identity and solidarity in ways that formal English may not reproduce. Efforts to prohibit such interaction would be both unrealistic and linguistically unjust. At the same time, repeated language choices can create informal networks through which information and opportunities circulate unevenly. Inclusive collegiality requires staff members to remain attentive to who is present and to shift or interpret when a conversation concerns shared work.

Digital communication

Email, learning management systems, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, and other platforms have intensified the speed and volume of workplace language. Digital messages combine written and conversational features, increasing the risk that brevity may be perceived as disrespectful or that humour may be misunderstood. Unequal access to data, devices, and platform-specific conventions also affects participation. Staff communication protocols should specify which channels are appropriate for urgent notices, official decisions, confidential

matters, and informal coordination. Important instructions should not be distributed only through fast-moving messaging groups.

Benefits of multilingual staff communication

Multilingual practices offer significant institutional benefits. First, they enable conceptual clarification by allowing staff members to connect specialised ideas with familiar linguistic resources. Second, they strengthen relational trust by acknowledging employees' identities through greetings and culturally meaningful expressions. Third, multilingual communication can improve engagement with local communities, schools and public institutions. Fourth, it helps universities develop indigenous languages as professional and intellectual languages rather than limiting them to private domains. UNESCO (2025) similarly presents linguistic diversity as a resource for inclusion, while South Africa's higher-education policy identifies communication as an important domain for language development (DHET, 2020).

The value of multilingualism does not require the rejection of English. English remains useful as a lingua franca among staff who do not share another language and as a medium of global scholarly communication. The more defensible goal is additive multilingualism: retaining access to English while expanding the legitimate functions of African languages. This approach avoids replacing one form of linguistic domination with another.

Challenges and risks

The first challenge is linguistic exclusion. A language chosen for convenience by the majority may prevent minority-language speakers, international staff, or colleagues from participating. The second is linguistic hierarchy, through which accents and registers are mistaken for intelligence, leadership, or competence. The third is ambiguity: informal translation may alter the meaning of policy or employment information. The fourth is tokenism, where policies celebrate multilingualism without allocating budgets, personnel, terminology development or monitoring mechanisms. Cele (2021) argues that weak implementation and limited resourcing have constrained the transformative potential of language policy in South African higher education.

Further challenges include language-based humour, stereotypes, derogatory correction, and the use of unfamiliar language to conceal information or criticise colleagues. Such practices weaken trust and may amount to workplace discrimination. Universities must cultivate an environment in which staff can request clarification without shame and in which correction focuses respectfully on meaning rather than humiliating the speaker.

DISCUSSION

Context-Responsive Inclusive Staff Communication Framework

This article proposes the Context-Responsive Inclusive Staff Communication Framework (CRISCF). The framework treats multilingualism as an institutional resource that must be governed by shared ethical principles. Its six dimensions are interconnected.

Table 1: Context-Responsive Inclusive Staff Communication Framework

Dimension	Core question	Illustrative institutional practice
Communicative access	Can every intended participant understand and act on the message?	Use plain language; translate or explain high-stakes information; provide accessible summaries.
Multilingual flexibility	Can staff draw on their repertoires without excluding others?	Permit code-switching and translanguaging while interpreting key content for the full group.
Linguistic respect	Are accent and language differences treated with dignity?	Prohibit language-based ridicule and correct misunderstandings respectfully.

Power awareness	Whose language is treated as authoritative, and who remains silent?	Use inclusive chairing, advance circulation of papers and deliberate invitations to contribute.
Digital clarity	Is the platform, tone and permanence appropriate to the message?	Separate informal coordination from official records and confirm important decisions formally.
Institutional accountability	Is policy implementation monitored and resourced?	Set indicators, assign responsibility, fund language support and review staff experiences.

Recommendations for universities

1. Review staff communication, not only teaching and learning, when evaluating institutional language policy.
2. Adopt a flexible common-language principle: use a broadly understood language for shared decisions while permitting multilingual explanation and interaction.
3. Provide translations or accessible summaries for high-stakes employment, safety and governance information where need is demonstrated.
4. Train managers and committee chairpersons in inclusive meeting practices, plain language, and respectful management of code-switching.
5. Offer voluntary language-learning opportunities that reflect the linguistic ecology of the university and its surrounding communities.
6. Develop multilingual terminology collaboratively with language specialists, professional departments, and local speakers.
7. Create clear protocols for email, instant messaging, and official digital records.
8. Monitor staff experiences through climate surveys, focus groups, and grievance data, while protecting confidentiality.

Implications for leadership and policy

University leaders influence language culture through everyday conduct. When managers explain decisions clearly, recognise multiple linguistic identities and avoid equating a particular accent with competence, they model linguistic justice. Leadership must also avoid symbolic multilingualism. A policy cannot transform practice without budgets, designated responsibilities, staff development, language services, and measurable outcomes. Policy evaluation should ask not only whether translated documents exist, but also whether staff members understand decisions, can participate in meetings, and feel respected when using an additional language.

At the policy level, universities should recognise different communicative domains. A single rule is unlikely to serve Senate proceedings, departmental discussion, community engagement, emergency notices and informal social interaction equally well. Context-responsive policy identifies the audience, purpose, risk, and record-keeping requirements of each domain. This functional approach aligns institutional coherence with linguistic diversity.

Proposed research agenda

Empirical research is needed to test and refine the proposed framework. Comparative case studies could examine language practices across academic and support departments, historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions, and urban and rural universities. Interviews and observations could explore whether staff experience language choice differently depending on occupational level, age, race, gender, nationality, or first language. Digital ethnography could investigate how email and messaging platforms reshape multilingual interaction. Further studies should also examine whether inclusive language practices improve trust, meeting participation, policy understanding, and institutional effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Language usage among university staff is simultaneously communicative, relational, and political. A shared language can support coordination across a diverse institution, but its dominance may silence knowledge, reproduce hierarchy, and distance staff from institutional processes. Indigenous languages and multilingual repertoires can strengthen identity, trust, and conceptual understanding, yet their use may also exclude colleagues when audience needs are ignored. The central issue is therefore not choosing between English and multilingualism. It is designing communication practices that are clear, inclusive, respectful, and appropriate to the context.

The Context-Responsive Inclusive Staff Communication Framework contributes to higher-education language scholarship by shifting attention from student-facing language policy to the everyday communicative life of university employees. It proposes that communicative access, multilingual flexibility, linguistic respect, power awareness, digital clarity, and institutional accountability should guide both policy and practice. Universities that treat linguistic diversity as a resource—and manage it ethically—are better positioned to build collegial workplaces in which all staff members can understand, contribute, and belong.

Ethical Considerations

This conceptual study relied exclusively on publicly available scholarly and policy documents and did not involve human participants, animals, or identifiable personal data. Ethical approval and informed consent were therefore not applicable.

Data Availability

No new empirical dataset was generated or analysed. All materials considered in the article are publicly available through the publications listed in the reference section.

Conflict Of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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