


Translanguaging as a strategy for essential communication during the Covid-19 pandemic: A discourse analysis of a government official's YouTube posts and the comments they prompted

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Abstract

During the pandemic, governments around the world had to implement innovative measures to ensure that lives were safe. Studies show that social media engagements between the South African government and the public soared during the Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, open-access social media platforms were rife with misinformation that infiltrated people's lives and spread rapidly throughout the nation. It is for that reason that the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Blade Nzimande, had to implement translanguaging as a multilingual strategy to combat the infodemic. This study examines the Minister's translanguaging segments and the responses made by students on YouTube after the Minister used African languages to clarify controversial topics. The researcher used the chat box on YouTube to observe and select translanguaging responses from the audience. This research argues that Minister Nzimande utilized a translanguaging strategy at various points in his briefings to prevent misinformation from spreading. In addition, the findings indicate that positive audience responses increased during the moments when the Minister translanguaged in an Indigenous language.

Keywords: translanguaging, language and identity, language and culture, social justice, social media, Indigenous languages

1. Introduction

The researcher's objective is to examine the usage of translanguaging during Covid-19 in official updates given by Blade Nzimande, South Africa's Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, with corresponding YouTube comments. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a crucial need for effective and efficient government communication. Language was key to ensure broad understanding of the drastic implementation of Coronavirus regulations. The responses of social media users to multilingual information indicated a positive attitude to that implementation.

In a multilingual country like South Africa where most citizens use African languages, the singular use of English to relay important information became a challenging exercise during the pandemic. According to a study conducted by Posel, Hunter and Rudwick (2022), isiZulu is currently the most commonly spoken language outside the home, followed by isiXhosa (30%

and 16%, respectively). As a result, English alone should not be relied upon to inform the public during crucial times of life and death in South Africa.

Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that are known to cause respiratory issues. A new coronavirus was discovered in Wuhan city of China in 2019. The virus was initially referred to as a *novel coronavirus* and then later named Corona Virus Disease-19, or Covid-19. In South Africa and other parts of the world (Sharma 2020), Covid-19 became an immediate joke (Turner, Sijadu & Rudwick 2023), and humour relating to Covid-19 became a trend to numb the harsh prevailing realities. Conspiracy theories and fake news about the spread of the coronavirus circulated rapidly through social media platforms. To limit this misinformation, some South African government officials took a radical stance in communicating crucial information about Covid-19 by implementing multilingual resources such as translanguaging (Turner et al. 2023).

During the apartheid era, language was used as a tool for domination and oppression, which resulted in the Soweto June 16, 1976 uprising by learners who were against the forced use of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in schools. In the post-apartheid era, the current government's language policy endorses 12 official South African languages, with sign language being recently included in 2023. However, the realization and implementation of the policy have been continuously challenged. Not much has changed today as efforts towards realization of the language policy by the national government have been minimal. Instead, English continues to dominate the government's communication such as in parliament debates and national government speeches. Ngcobo (2009) concurs that the lack of Indigenous language usage by government officials when communicating with South Africans, even when it can benefit the people of South Africa, violates the concept of equity enshrined in the South African constitution:

The national government and provincial governments may use any official languages for the purposes of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned; but the national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages.

(Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology 1996)

The researcher manually selected segments of translanguaging from speeches given by Minister Nzimande during the Covid-19 pandemic and presented on YouTube. Speeches were selected based on popular subjects that prompted the most responses from the viewers. According to the investigation, three subjects that captured the attention of YouTube users were (i) returning students to campus, (ii) the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which assists university students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and (iii) vaccinations. The audience responses, which include *likes*, *dislikes*, and constructive engagement, were evaluated based on the following: (i) the subject of the translanguaging segment (i.e., return to campus, financial aid (NSFAS), vaccination), (ii) the frequency of positive and negative responses, and (iii) the frequency of constructive engagement with the topic.

This study advocates for using African languages in national government communication in accordance with national language policy that encourages multilingualism. To achieve this practice, Section 2 provides an overview of African languages in South Africa. Section 3 gives a brief engagement with the theory of translanguaging and its patterns in South Africa. Section

4 discusses prior research on social media use in South Africa. Section 5 deals with research methods and data sources. Section 6 presents the study's statistical findings and is followed by Section 7, which focuses on an examination of the statistical findings. Discussions and findings are presented in Section 8 and concluding remarks in section 9.

2. Linguistic background of African languages in South Africa

History shows that since colonization began in South Africa in the 1600s, Indigenous languages have been subjected to the supremacy of Dutch and English as the languages of power and status in law, politics, and education. English was the first language to be recognized under British rule by Lord Charles Somerset in 1822 (Rudwick 2021: 48) as the official language of South Africa. During that time, the Dutch colonizers who had been in South Africa since 1652 resisted the English imperialism, resulting in the Anglo-Boer War between 1899 and 1902 (Rudwick 2021: 48). In 1910, the Union of South Africa was formed, which brought about the recognition of both English and Dutch as the two official languages (Hofmeyr 2014). However, tensions between the Dutch and English steadily increased, and the Afrikaans language was birthed through Dutch to mobilize and strengthen Afrikaners' (including Coloured people in the Cape Colony) identity against English ethno-nationalism. Socially, culturally, and politically, the Afrikaans language was the identity for Afrikaners (Rudwick 2021), and in 1914, Afrikaans became formally recognized as a language of teaching and learning.

The linguistic diversity of South Africa has vastly transformed in the past 10 years due to urbanization, cross-cultural marriages, and other socioeconomic factors. Multilingual resources such as translanguaging are increasingly being explored by ordinary people, including recently during Covid-19. There are currently 12 official languages; however, English and Afrikaans have better linguistic privileges and statuses than the nine Indigenous languages and South African Sign Language (SASL). This situation is evident in some of the Western Cape High Schools where isiXhosa is not offered as a taught subject (home language) even though the three official languages of the Western Cape are Afrikaans (49.7%), Xhosa (24%), and English (20.3%). This omission deprives learners whose mother tongue is isiXhosa the opportunity to further explore their first language, to expand their knowledge and linguistic repertoire in isiXhosa, and to empower their cultural identity.

As people transition to the cities to seek the proverbial greener pastures, there is also a linguistic transition: the languages of the villages (Indigenous languages) are left behind to English, the language of the city, is adopted. English has become the language people choose to succeed in socioeconomic areas of their lives. However, Alexander (2009: 62) opposes the belief that the use of Indigenous languages cannot also lead to success, by asserting that unless African languages are given market value in the economy of a nation, Indigenous African languages cannot experience the power and status of English and Afrikaans.

Among South Africa's 11 official spoken languages, isiZulu is spoken by almost a quarter (23%) of the population.¹ This is followed by isiXhosa (16%), Afrikaans (13.5%), English (10%), Sesotho sa Leboa (9%), Setswana I and Sesotho (both 8%), Xitsonga (4.5%), siSwati and Tshivenda (both 2.5%), and isiNdebele (2%). It is believed that almost 50% of South Africans can speak isiZulu. Most South Africans speak 2 to 3 languages and practice code-

¹ <https://southafrica-info.com/infographics/languages-black-coloured-indian-white-south-africans-speak/>

switching and translanguaging almost daily. The representation of South African languages in each province is categorized in Table 1 by the South African Gateway website.²

Table 1. Dominant languages across provinces.

PROVINCES	DOMINANT LANGUAGES			
Western Cape	Afrikaans – 49%	isiXhosa – 24.7%	English- 20.3%	
Eastern Cape	isiXhosa – 78.8%	Afrikaans – 10.6%		
Free State	Sesotho – 64.2%	Afrikaans – 12.7%		
KwaZulu-Natal	isiZulu – 77.8%	English – 13.2%		
Mpumalanga	Siswati – 27.7%	isiZulu – 24.1%	Xitsonga – 10.4%	isiNdebele – 10.1%
Gauteng	isiZulu – 19.8%	English – 13.3%	Afrikaans – 12.4%	Sesotho – 11.6%
Limpopo	Sepedi – 52.9%	Xitsonga – 17%	Tshivenda – 16.7%	
North-West	Setswana – 63.4%	Afrikaans – 9%		
Northern Cape	Afrikaans – 53.8%	Setswana – 33.1%		

Maseko and Vale (2016) confirm that for the majority of South Africans, English plays an important perceived role in one's ability to access the job market and maximize one's earnings. An article published in March 2022 by The Witness online news reported that parents removed their children from pilot schools where teaching and learning was done in isiXhosa, an indication that they believe competency in isiXhosa is not necessary for their children's success.³ Data drawn from General Household Surveys in 2017 and 2018 shows that less than 10 percent of Africans reported speaking English as their main language outside the household (Hunter, Price, Murphy, van der Loeff, Baker, Lendrem, Lendrem, Schmid, Pareja-Cebrian, Welch, Payne & Duncan 2020).

Ngcobo (2009: 118) contends that the realization of the *Batho Pele* ("People First") principle by the government can be achieved when important government figures promote Indigenous language use by using them when they communicate directly with the public. When these languages are given equal status and used concurrently and fluidly through a process of translanguaging, they promote the values of social cohesion and social justice that South Africa upholds. Through translanguaging, national governments create opportunities for speakers of non-dominant languages to engage more fully, access information, and expand their linguistic repertoire (Lauwo 2021). Matema and Kariuki (2022) define a socially cohesive society as one that works toward the wellbeing of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization.

² <https://southafrica-info.com/>

³ <https://www.citizen.co.za/witness/news/mixed-opinion-on-push-to-introduce-mother-tongue-instruction-in-schools-20220319/>

3. The theory of translanguaging and its patterns in South Africa

Wei (2018) and Azaz and Abourehab (2021) describe translanguaging as a practical theory of language situated within the field of Applied Linguistics. Wei emphasizes that translanguaging was not originally intended as a theoretical concept but as a descriptive label for a specific language practice. The original observations of translanguaging were done by Williams (1994) in the classroom where language teachers of second language (L2) learners taught in L1 (target language) but allowed learners to engage in their L2 to conceptualize terms and engage fully in problem-solving and knowledge construction (Williams 1994, as cited in Wei 2018: 7). This strategy helped both learners and teachers maximize their linguistic repertoire by freely applying various languages to empower their knowledge.

This paper seeks to take translanguaging out of classroom discourse and into a public discourse by framing translanguaging as a practical theory of language (Wei 2018). Practical theories do not offer predictions or solutions but rather interpretations that can be used to observe, interpret, and understand other phenomena and practices (Wei 2018). By providing frameworks and concepts, practical theories enable individuals to critically analyze and interpret various phenomena and practices. Furthermore, they offer a lens through which to view and understand complex systems, allowing for a deeper examination of underlying dynamics, patterns, and relationships. When applying practical theories, individuals can gain valuable insights and develop a more nuanced understanding of the world around them.

Translanguaging as a practical theory should provide a principled choice among other communicative practices that inform the linguistic discourse (Wei 2018). The term *translanguaging* has been misused and confused with various linguistic terms such as with *code-switching*, *code-mixing*, and *code-meshing*. I seek to avoid that confusion and adopt the term *translanguaging* while providing a theoretical rationalization for taking that stance. Abourehab and Azaz (2023: 400) and Azaz (2021) define translanguaging as “the theory of practice to understand the intricacies of communication in diverse settings” which include political discourse settings. The practicality of translanguaging theory offers new thinking and creative ways of looking at everyday linguistic practices in society (Wei & Garcia 2017; Wei 2018).

This study adopts Marx’s philosophical approach regarding practical theory, as described by Wei (2018), in that Marx’s dialectical materialist view on knowledge acquisition is that knowledge is acquired through practice. Wei (2018) postulates that there is an unceasing dependence between theory and practice as both serve each other. This co-dependency is a cycle of *practice-theory-practice* that informs theorization or knowledge construction of translanguaging. In theorizing or constructing knowledge, the first step is to be able to describe with sufficient precision but not necessarily with accuracy. The description of one event can vary depending on the understanding and observation of the observer or analyst (Wei 2018).

Poza (2017) asserts that translanguaging is an approach centred on the practices of bilinguals and is a normal mode of communication. Furthermore, Ai, Hao and Qiao (2022: 9) observe that participants practicing translanguaging in multilingual business settings demonstrate a high level of fluidity and flexibility. That practice breaks the boundaries of dominant languages by selecting and integrating different linguistic features belonging to different languages available in their communicative environment.

In translanguaging, speakers use their linguistic repertoire without regard to what is commonly known as a language name or label by society and politics. Hence, the translanguaging perspective extends beyond named languages and language varieties, considering geography, social class, age, and gender (Wei 2018). By challenging traditional language boundaries, translanguaging allows individuals to freely use their linguistic repertoire regardless of societal or political labels. This inclusive perspective recognizes that language is not static or confined to specific categories but rather a dynamic tool for communication that transcends traditional language boundaries, thus empowering individuals to express themselves authentically and bridge linguistic divides.

Wei (2018) asserts that multilinguals do not think unilingually within politically named linguistic entities. He further argues that human beings think beyond language, and thinking requires the use of a variety of cognitive, semiotic, and modal resources. His views capture the multilingual language users' fluid and dynamic practices, which translate into how communication is done in multilingual contexts. According to Mbirimi-Hungwe (2023, 2024), translanguaging has been used as a decolonial agent in the Global South. Makalela (2018a) introduces the Ubuntu Translanguaging Pedagogy in which he defines the concept of Ubuntu as an African value system that holds in high esteem the philosophy of interdependences among people. Interdependence among people is reflected in the use of language, as one language is incomplete without complementing support from the other languages in the speaker's repertoire (Mbirimi-Hungwe 2023). In the South African township context, meaning creation is incomplete if it is limited to the use of one language. The norm is that speakers make meaning by using all the languages available in their linguistic repertoire.

4. Social media usage during Covid-19 pandemic

This section addresses the impact of social media on native language users in South Africa. This discussion will bring to light the role of Indigenous languages on social media during official government communication which became more frequent during Covid-19. I will also offer reasons for why I used a manual methodology to select responses from social media, and I will delve into research objectives and data sources from which the study is based.

Existing research on social media usage in South Africa indicates that more than 8.5 million South Africans are internet users (Goldstuck 2012). Ngcobo (2009: 118) affirms that the development of the country's information and communications technology services has progressed both in the private and government sectors. In January 2022, the Data Reportal website⁴ survey recorded that 40 million South Africans are internet users and 28 million are active social media users. It is noteworthy that this number excludes many South Africans, especially in rural areas, who have no access to reliable internet connection. Rural communities of South Africa rely on community radio stations to communicate information in each community's specific African language(s).

A controlled study conducted by Fischer, Van Tonder, Gumede and Lalla-Edward (2021) shows that social media was the main source of Covid-19 information in South Africa. The Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, mentioned in one of his Covid-19 briefings that he had taken the time to read messages he received on Facebook and used the media briefings to address some of the expressed concerns. During instances when translanguaging was used, the viewers' responses on YouTube shed light on how translanguaging bridges

⁴ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-south-africa>

linguistic and cultural diversity, especially when it includes using languages that are marginalized.

According to Clockwork media, YouTube “saw a 24% increase in visits during the lockdown” in 2020. Free data for students contributed to the increase in usage, since students and parents needed updates regarding tuition and the return of students to universities or colleges. The Insider Intelligence reported that “South Africa’s digital video audience first surpassed the live TV audience in 2020”, an indication that YouTube usage rose during the pandemic.

In South Africa, most government press releases are announced in English; this practice has given English a higher status than other official languages. This monoglossic ideology, which upholds English as a language of communication, encountered a major shift during the Covid-19 pandemic (Rudwick, Sijadu & Turner 2021). García and Torres (2009) affirm that in order to meet the demands of multilingual and multimodal communication systems, a shift in government language policies needs to occur that crosses the linguistic boundaries and allows citizens to work across languages with translanguaging. Such a shift would encourage linguistic tolerance, voice, and identity among all people. The monoglossic ideological approach is entrenched in colonialism and violates the nation’s language policy which states that at least two official languages should be used for national government communication. Furthermore, in the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) language policy preamble it is stated that:

South Africa is a multilingual country that through Sections 6, 9, and 30 of the Constitution as well as the use of Official Languages Act, 2012 (Act 12 of 2012, hereafter referred to as the UOLA) legislatively places a high premium on granting equitable space for all official languages.

(Republic of South Africa, 16 August 2024)

In practice, however, this statement by PanSALB is in contradiction to the official English only public communication by the national government officials of the ANC, which is the ruling party in South Africa. Moreover, the government’s monolingual ideology became ineffective during the Covid-19 pandemic as government officials struggled to communicate accurate information. In order to effectively communicate life-saving information, it was a necessity for government officials to communicate in the languages understood by the majority of the South African people, thus reaching a broader population and stressing the importance of following the regulations of Covid-19 as set by the WHO. Despite the principles of PanSALB, which upholds the use of language in a manner that makes the meaning understandable to as many people as possible, the ANC led government has continued to ignore the heterogeneity of the nation by implementing only one language for communication. Instead of viewing languages according to monoglossic ideologies, which separate and isolate languages (Makalela 2018), this paper supports the heteroglossic ideology which advocates for existence of languages in a plurastic and culturalistic context.

Therefore, when a significant shift occurred in the South African government’s use of language in public communications during the Covid-19 pandemic, it resulted in the implementation of PanSALB's mission 6.2, which promotes multilingualism (PanSALB 2024). A study conducted by Krystallidou and Braun (2022) indicates that during the early days of the pandemic, top-down communication (i.e., communication by governments, governmental agencies, and/or health authorities to the public) failed to reach linguistically diverse communities with key health messages. The authors point out that Covid-19 information translations were neither made available nor updated on a timely basis. South Africa was not alone in their negligence

in providing accessible information to all. Chen (2020) notes that at the same time in Taiwan, official press conferences did not provide information in Hakka, a Taiwanese Indigenous language.

5. Research design and methods

During the pandemic in South Africa, Minister Nzimande, along with other essential services ministers, gave direction and readiness for their sectors to move into the announced lockdown level. These instructions and subsequent updates were posted by government officials on YouTube as well as eNCA (eNews Chanel Africa) and SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation). Minister Nzimande significantly employed translanguaging during his announcements by fluidly communicating in isiZulu/isiXhosa along with English, breaking language barriers that existed before. These speeches are freely accessible on the government's website in all official languages, and a selection of these posts was analyzed for this study. The original English speeches found in official government sites contain no translanguaging, which suggests that translanguaging occurred spontaneously when Minister Nzimande felt the need to clarify information or emphasize a specific point. The research design and methods for this study involved the analysis of the following themes:

- a. The translanguaging segments (TS) of the speech
- b. Topics of interest (return to campus (RTC), NSFAS funding, vaccination (Vacc))
- c. The frequency of translanguaging during the pandemic and post pandemic
- d. Public comments on YouTube
- e. Positive and negative comments
- f. Constructive engagements with the content

A purposive sampling method of 20 speeches given by the Minister between 2020 and 2022 was implemented. The purpose of these speeches was to provide information and updates regarding Covid-19. A total of 10 speeches were sampled for a case study, and 71 excerpts were utilized for analyses.

Live chat comments that were made on YouTube during the speeches were copied and pasted manually and then grouped into positive responses (PR), negative responses (NR), constructive engagements (CR), and responses noting the recognition of minority languages (RML). It was necessary to manually select the comments because the data sampling technology for social media responses does not recognize isiXhosa. Each emotional response (i.e., positive and negative) indicates whether translanguaging had a good or bad impact on the language spoken. Emotional responses are often expressed through emoticons such as smiley emojis expressing happiness or crying faces expressing dissatisfaction. Emoticons can be used alone or together with written comments. Constructive responses to the content, whether negative or positive, suggest comprehension of the language used. Constructive engagement by participants in translanguaging is a signifying factor of a positive response.

The comments were selected based on their relevance to translanguaging. The timing of these comments corresponded with the Minister's shifts into isiZulu/isiXhosa. The 2020 live stream was selected from the top two national television stations, SABC and eNCA. Live chats were turned off on some of the YouTube channels, such as during the March 2021 and September 2022 speeches, and there were few available comments during the speeches made in July 2021 and June 2022.

6. Data analysis and discussion

This section examines public responses in social media during the pandemic when engaged with popular speech topics regarding the higher education sector. These speech topics relate to students' concerns (e.g., the return to campus, as many students studying from home were experiencing various socio-economic difficulties). I also shed light on the impact of utilizing multilingualism in these public speeches. The analysis explores the role of using Indigenous languages when engaging with crucial information. The popular speech topics were selected and analyzed by year. This method highlights students' priorities and concerns about their education, which triggered a lot of response during the shift into translanguaging.

6.1 Popular speech topics

The selected speech topics focus on three main areas: (i) the students' return to campus (RTC), (ii) the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which benefits low-income households, and (iii) vaccinations for students and workers (Vacc). The return to campus topic was popular during the height of the pandemic when students were homebound. Issues such as unreliable internet connectivity and the lack of privacy due to limited personal space were mentioned frequently as student concerns. Comments regarding funding from the NSFAS were common throughout the pandemic, and students expressed concerns related to their socioeconomic status in general (e.g., "what about those who don't have funding?", "we are hungry", "money please", "we need an increment on NSFAS for meal allowance"). The topic of vaccinations triggered participants' engagement in the middle of 2021 when lockdown levels were eased, and some negative comments were expressed (e.g., "is he now minister of health?", "vaccines are illuminati", "no vaccination for me", "keep it to yourself please", "we don't care about vaccines", "we don't want to hear about vaccination").

6.2 Analysis of speech topics

During the pandemic lockdown in 2020, the two most commonly posted topics regard the continuation of tuition (i.e., return to campus) and academic funding for low-household-income students (through the NSFAS). In May 2020, Minister Nzimande's speech mainly focused on students returning to campus and tuition funding. As computers are important learning tools for university students for accessing teaching and learning material from their respective institutions, the Minister translanguaged in isiZulu/isiXhosa the government's decision to issue laptops to students funded through the NSFAS to help them continue with tuition at home: *Ngamanye amazwi amalaptop, namakhompyutha sizobanika bonke abafundi njengoko besishilo abaxhaswa sisikhwama sikaNSFAS* ("In other words, we are going to give laptops and computers to all students who are supported by NSFAS"). The phrase *ngamanye amazwi* ("in other words") indicates that the Minister was explaining what he said in the previous English paragraph to ensure understanding among those who have difficulties understanding English. The Minister emphasized this topic by translanguaging because most government funded students and their families are native speakers.

A similar intention by Minister Nzimande occurred in his speech in June of 2020 when he said, *Mhlawumbe sengibuye ngibeke lento nangolwimi lakithi* ("Maybe let me again put this in our language"). The Minister used *our language* to represent most of the isiZulu lingua franca community. IsiZulu is a large linguistic group within the family of Nguni languages that includes isiXhosa, siSwati, and isiNdebele, and these Nguni sub-groups are mutually intelligible. The Minister shifted to isiZulu spontaneously and fluidly to express plainly specific

parts of the speech that related more to the students and parents from disadvantaged communities. The Minister seemed to have a specific audience target during instances when he shifted into isiZulu; this is evident in many parts of his speech such as when he translanguaged into isiZulu/isiXhosa to speak directly to parents to explain about the students' return to campus: *Ngifuna ukuthi nabazali emakhaya bayizwe kahle lento ...* ("I want parents at home to hear this clearly ...").

In another speech, the Minister addressed the topic of student funding (NSFAS) and again referred to parents: *Ibalulekile lento ukuze nabazali bayilalele* ("It is important for parents to listen to this"). Student responses confirm that some parents may not understand the Minister when he speaks in English. Comments such as *musa ukuthetha isiZulu abazali bayezwa* ("don't speak isiZulu parents can hear") confirm that the Minister switches to isiZulu, which benefits the parents. One of the comments confirms that some of his speeches were in isiZulu: "He is speaking isiZulu half of the time".

Table 2. 2020 YouTube public participation statistics.

2020	TS	Topics	PR	NR	CR	RML	Views	Channel
April	3	RTC	9	18	8	2	74,424	SABC
May	12	RTC, NSFAS	10	10	41	-	41,752	SABC
June	6	RTC, NSFAS	10	5	15	-	56,467	ENCA
July	2	RTC,	2	0	12	1	18,243	SABC
Aug	13	RTC, NSFAS	9	3	30	-	48,864	ENCA
Total	36	RTC (6), NSFAS (4)	40	36	160	3	239,750	

The topic of vaccination received little constructive engagement with many antivaccine comments observed; Table 3 shows only eight positive responses out of 6049 views on the 6th July 2021. This low number of positive responses is at least in part due to the students' ability to divert the topic to their own interests (e.g., RTC and NSFAS). As shown in Table 3, such behaviour is observed in comments following the Minister's speech in January 2021, which was entirely focused on vaccines; the high number of constructive responses (CR=40), however, reflects comments on topics different from that of the Minister's. These comments were rather on the return to campus and academic funding, indicating that students were mainly interested in returning to campus.

Table 3. YouTube 2021 public participation statistics.

2021	TS	Topics	PR	NR	CR	RML	Views	Channel
January	7	Vacc	5	9	40	-	28,925	SABC
March	1	NSFAS	-	-	-	-	4185	SABC
June	13	Vacc, RTC,	3	2	-	-	51,611	ENCA
July	6	Vacc, NSFAS	-	-	8	-	6049	SABC
Total	27	NSFAS (2), RTC (1) Vacc (3)	8	11	48		90,770	

6.3 Analysis of audience response

Constructive responses to isiZulu/isiXhosa translanguaging were observed in May 2020 and August 2020 when the students expressed their desire to return to campus. The participants fulfilled expressive communicative needs by engaging constructively in a language they fully understand. These communicative needs included an affirmation of the value, identity, and empowerment of African languages. Some of the students' constructive responses express their reluctance to return to campus (e.g., "reopening of schools is a very bad idea", "we don't want to go back to res", "school can't open while cases are still escalating", "no need to go to school, study where you are with what you have", "lives are at risk here as some of us haven't tested, Lord knows if we are positive or not", "I agree with Blade on the masks businesses for developing entrepreneurship").

The following two comments confirm the socioeconomic challenges faced by many students during the pandemic: "we don't need laptops in poor connectivity" and "online learning only takes the privileged into account". In South Africa many Black people live in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas where internet connection is very poor, and some households cannot afford to buy data when other needs like food take priority. The availability of electricity is also a major hindrance due to loadshedding.

The next comment addresses getting the vaccine, which was unpopular among students: *mina ngizoyisebenzisa le vaccine kaBlade siyabonga* ("I am going to use Blade's vaccine thank you"). This comment written in isiZulu makes a bold declaration for supporting vaccine usage. However, there was a significant divide between those who wanted the vaccine and those who did not. There were several comments that followed when Minister Nzimande explained that vaccines are safe because they were tested on rats to determine their safety for humans: "lol don't kill *amagundane* ("rats")".

When the Minister spoke in isiZulu to warn people against misusing government funds, this comment followed: "yes arrest those who are greedy misusing NSFAS". This is a positive comment that supported the Minister's stand against the misuse of NSFAS. Conversely, negative comments followed the Minister's suggestion that churches may have an explanation about where this virus came from (e.g., *musa ukusukela amasonto* ("don't provoke churches")).

There was a sense of empowerment and identity for some participants who indicated positive emotions towards the use of isiZulu (e.g., "my Zulu man", "I like it when he uses a vernacular", "United Kingdom of the Nguni people", "do not speak English, big up for Blade Nzimande for showing that he is still an African", *Phambili ngesiZulu* ("Forward with isiZulu"), *Blade iqhaweee* ("Blade the hero"), "It's about time indigenous languages are used by our leaders", "this is our nation as black people", *Khuluma isiZulu siyakuzwa* ("speak isiZulu we hear you"), "learn other languages there is nothing special with English"). Accompanying most of these positive responses were positive indicators such as smiling emojis, fists, hearts, and smiles. A huge number of trending comments that could not be captured were #UNIZULU (University of Zululand); such comments were in support of the recognition of isiZulu as a language of learning and teaching at the University of KwaZulu Natal.

There were a few negative responses (NR) that potentially indicated intolerance towards official South African languages other than English (e.g., "English please, what did he say?", "we don't hear you", and "he is speaking Zulu half the time"). Comments such as "our national language is English, he is speaking Chinese or Shangaan", and "Blade Nzimande thinks we are

all Zulus” implies a lack of knowledge of the National Language Policy. Responses to the above comments that point out ignorance, intolerance, and lack of knowledge were also found (e.g., “He was translating something he said in English you are not missing anything”, “isiZulu is an official language most spoken in South Africa you should learn it”, “We are not in England my friend in Spain *bakhuluma i-Spanish* (“they speak Spanish”)”).

Some comments indicate the need for recognition of minor languages (RML) such as Sepedi and Tsonga in government communication. Comments such as “please speak Venda once, Venda is present”, and “Xitsonga please” were few, but they express their plight of being neglected. Most comments were translanguaging in various African languages, especially in isiZulu/isiXhosa. The number of constructive responses (CR) by the participants indicates a positive response to isiZulu/isiXhosa communication. These participants are presumably students and their families directly affected by the topics of funding and the return to campus. The SABC’s YouTube channel that live streamed the Minister’s speech in April 2020 recorded 74,424 views (see Table 2). Other YouTube channels that were live streaming included eNCA, the official Government channel, and News24, as well as other media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Table 4. 2022 YouTube public participation statistics.

2022	TS	Topics	PR	NR	CR	RML	Views	Channel
Feb	3	Vacc, NSFAS	1	2	13	-	7898	Government
June	3	RTC, NSFAS	-	-	4	-	4430	ENCA
Sept	2	NSFAS	-	-	-	-	5262	Government
Total	8	Vacc (1), RTC (1) NSFAS (3)	1	2	17		17590	

7. Descriptive statistics

In 2020, the estimated percentage of translanguaging segments used by Minister Nzimande in his 5 speeches was 51%; this amount decreased to 38% in 2021 and significantly dropped to 11% in 2022 as shown in Figure 1.

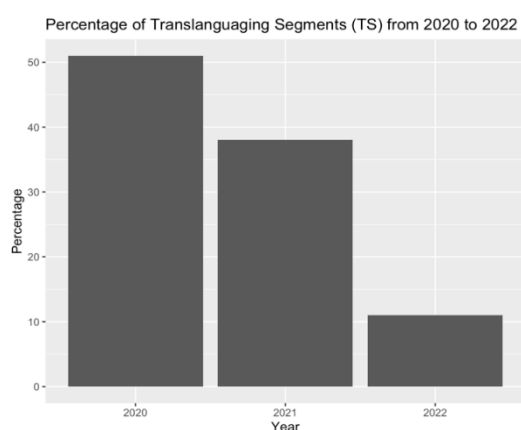


Figure 1. 2020 to 2022.

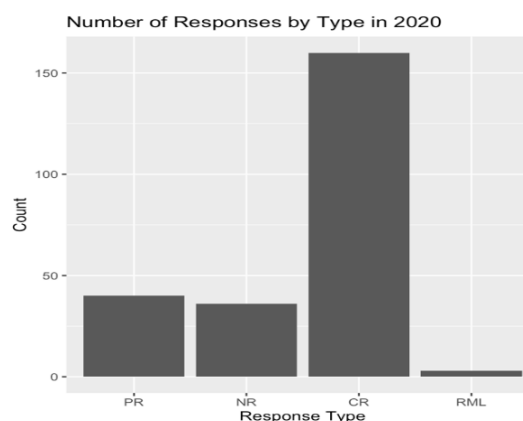


Figure 2. 2020 responses by type.

The changes to the frequency of translanguaging and their various responses can be attributed to a variety of factors. In 2020, when the lockdown began, constructive responses were high due to translanguaged information about two topics that interested the students most: returning to campus (RTC) and funding through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Figure 1 indicates percentages of translanguaging from 2020 to 2022, and the percentages vary each year depending on the seriousness of the discussed topic. In the beginning of the pandemic there was a lot of uncertainty about the academic year. Students, parents, and lecturers needed clarification and direction on how they were to proceed with tuition; hence, the percentage of translanguaging was high in 2020 (see Figure 1) when that academic year, from March to December, was completely online. In 2021 and 2022, the percentage of translanguaging decreased (see Figure 1) as people were becoming acquainted with the new norm and the nation was coming out of the state of emergency. Teaching and learning were hybrid, and students were settling in with the online methods.

As shown in Figure 2, the number of constructive responses (CR) from the audience that engaged with the content of translanguaging was very high in 2020, followed by positive responses (PR) to the use of isiZulu/isiXhosa. There were few negative responses (NR); these expressed unhappiness with the use of isiZulu/isiXhosa (see Figure 2). In June 2021, the NSFAS and vaccination topics provoked most of the constructive responses (CR) to the use of translanguaging, followed by negative responses (NR) and positive responses (PR) (see Figure 3). This could be attributed to the understanding that the viewers were now acquainted with the translanguaging practice by government officials.

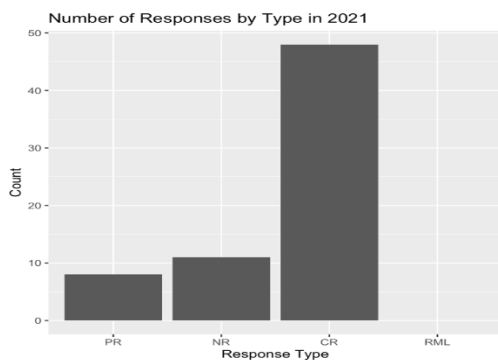


Figure 3. 2021 responses by type.

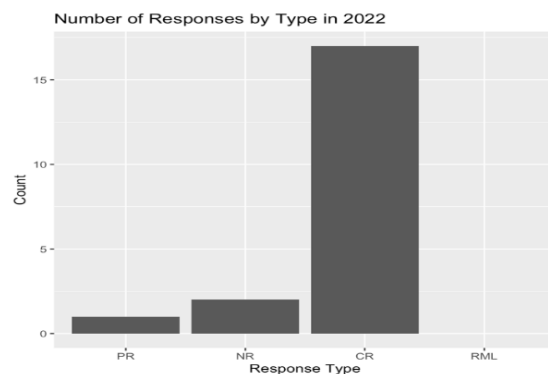


Figure 4. 2022 responses by type.

In 2022, constructive responses (CR) to the translanguaging were still high even though both the number of isiZulu/isiXhosa segments and YouTube viewership had decreased (see Figures 4 and 8). The findings also indicate that participants were eager to express their positive and negative responses in isiZulu/isiXhosa translanguaging in 2020 and 2021, but in 2022 there were very few such responses (see Figures 4, 5, and 6). Responses that express the need for recognition of minor languages were only posted in 2020 when the translanguaging began and faded in 2021 and 2022 (see Figure 7). The decline could also be attributed to the decrease in overall public viewership in 2022 (see Table 4), which was less than 18,000; compare this to the almost 300,000 viewers in 2020 when the pandemic had just started.

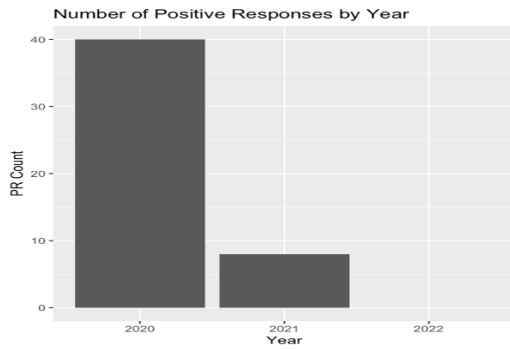


Figure 5. Positive responses by year.

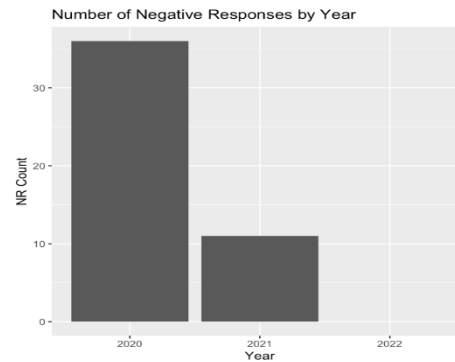


Figure 6. Negative responses by year.

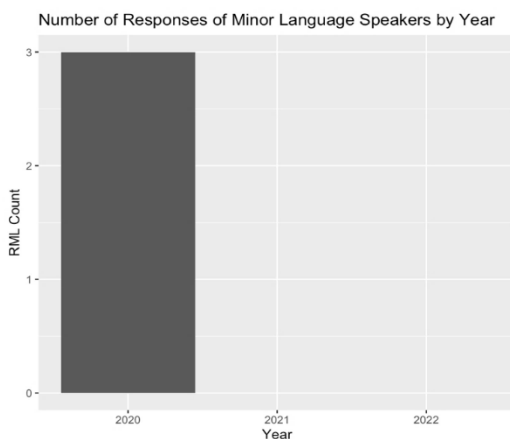


Figure 7. Minor language speakers.

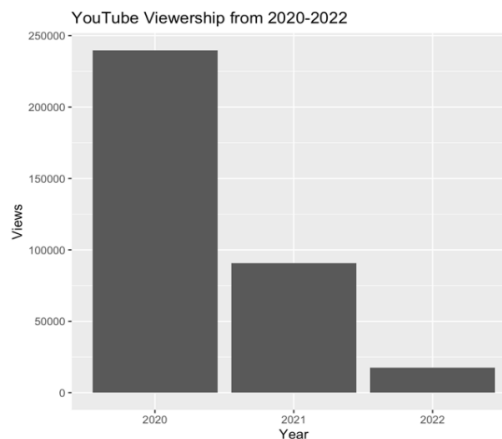


Figure 8. Viewership 2020 to 2022.

8. Discussion of findings

The Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Blade Nzimande, seized the moment when he saw the need to clarify information provided in his speeches by translanguaging with isiZulu/isiXhosa during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. Translanguaging occurred fluidly and spontaneously without any linguistic disruption that could impact the overall purpose of his speech. The decline of social media *likes* and *dislikes* to the translanguaging into isiZulu/isiXhosa as time progressed could indicate either acceptance or surrender to the practice of translanguaging. The Minister demonstrated consideration of the marginalized and non-English speakers who should benefit fully and equally from the information given to the nation. This kind of consideration is an important characteristic of *ubuntu* (“humanity”), which is imbedded in African culture. Through translanguaging, the Minister gave clear guidance to students, parents, and educators who understand Nguni languages (isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiSwati, and isiNdebele). He shifted into isiZulu/isiXhosa to explain important points he had delivered previously in English segments. In his translanguaging, he specifically mentioned the need to address parents in their own language to ensure that they understand the information. The Minister was reaching out to parents and many others who are not proficient in English yet have a significant role in the functionality of the higher education sector.

This concern is observed in the statement *mhlawumbe sengibuye ngiyibeke nangolwimi lakithi* (“Maybe let me say this again in our language”). In African culture, the use of the possessive

pronoun *our* is not necessarily exclusive; in this case, it is an inclusive indication of sincere consideration of those who are not proficient in English. The Global Economy website estimates that in 2021, 32.15% of South Africans live in rural areas where Indigenous languages are used.⁵ The use of language in determining urban versus rural areas of South Africa is more accurate than other factors. Van der Merwer (1996) observes that those living in rural areas are more comfortable communicating in their local African language(s). Studies show that although rural populations are low due to migrations to urban areas for work, a rural connection remains an integral part of many Black South Africans (Van der Merwe).

Furthermore, a significant portion of the adult population living in rural areas are parents of children benefitting from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), and all needed to understand the updates during the pandemic. Various socioeconomic factors played into the need for translanguaging, and the positive responses to Minister Nzimande's speeches that followed on social media indicate that South Africans heard and appreciated the use of their home languages by a government official. For example, following the speeches addressing a return to campus, students responded with comments such as "#res", "can we get back to res", *sidikiwe kuqokelela nohlamba izitya* ("we are tired of house chores and washing dishes"). Many other comments expressed by students focused on the difficulties they experienced studying at home as opposed to on campus; they were distracted, they had less privacy, and they lacked Wi-Fi. By describing their difficulties of being in lockdown, the commentators signified that they understood the content presented in isiZulu/isiXhosa.

As Minister Nzimande addressed the question of fake news regarding vaccines in his speech in February 2022, responses indicate the viewers' disinterest in the subject. Even though there were a few constructive responses (see Table 2), they did not address the topic of vaccination (e.g., "this is not what we came here to hear, please tell us when we are moving to res"). This comment, however, indicates an understanding of the translanguaging and that students were only interested in returning to campus at the start of the academic year. In June and September 2022, the Minister addressed the media on the topic of NSFAS. In the translanguaging segments, he cautioned parents not to illegally benefit from the funding scheme, explaining there is a criterion used for approval. The translanguaging segment in isiZulu illustrates that crucial information should reach those who are benefitting from NSFAS clearly in the language they could understand.

Constructive responses also included explanations in English to other participants who thought they were left out and could not understand what was said: "Can you please speak English? We may miss important information. It will be highly appreciated". This response was followed by the reply from another participant explaining, "He was translating something he had already said in English, you didn't miss anything". The live chat box became a communal space where individuals from different language backgrounds could use *ubuntu* by showing consideration to each other.

9. Conclusions

Multilingual contexts like South Africa may benefit from translanguaging by empowering previously disadvantaged languages and enhancing their linguistic status. Linguistically marginalized South African citizens contribute to the socioeconomic development of the country but are not entitled to the same linguistic privileges as those proficient in English. The

⁵ https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/South-Africa/rural_population_percent/

English language is not an equal opportunity language, and it robs many of the opportunity to receive equal access to information. Thus, translanguaging could address the issue of linguistic diversity and social justice in South Africa.

Data from this study illustrate that English as a lingua franca was disrupted during the pandemic in South Africa, and Minister Nzimande was understood when he communicated to the public in marginalized Indigenous languages through translanguaging. Additionally, the findings indicate that tolerance between the various language users in South Africa is essential to implementing translanguaging successfully. The findings suggest that translanguaging has the potential to bring transformation by recognizing minor languages such as Tshivenda and Xitsonga. The citizens of South Africa need role models from national governments to show them that all 12 official languages have equal status. A translanguaging approach could help bridge linguistic sociocultural gaps, strengthen social cohesion, and eliminate existing linguistic gaps. Additionally, translanguaging strengthens identity by allowing all languages to have access to important information.

Unfortunately, post-pandemic communication has reverted to the monolingual colonial ideology of English as the lingua franca by South Africa's government officials. Although President Ramaphosa addressed the nation only in English during the 2023 State of the Nation Address (SONA) (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2023), interestingly, the opposition parties and some ministers of the ruling party employed a multilingual approach during its debating session. Only when the President of South Africa as the key role player shifts from using a monolingual state language and begins implementing Indigenous languages into his national speeches will the nation begin to see a great revolution of multilingualism.

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Ethical Clearance

This project obtained ethical clearance from Stellenbosch University Faculty of Arts and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (REC): Social, Behavioural and Education Research (SBER), project number 26757.

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