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Communication challenges faced by customers who are less proficient in English and Afrikaans at two South African state-owned enterprises

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The *Use of Official Languages Act* (No. 12 of 2012) applies to all national departments and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in South Africa and stipulates that they should promote multilingualism when interacting with members of the public and/or customers. The main aim of this study was to investigate how two SOEs, that is, the South African Post Office (SAPO) and Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA), manage communication with their customers, particularly those who cannot communicate in English and Afrikaans. Data for this study were gathered through a mixed method approach. Quantitative data (i.e., a Likert-type scale) were gathered from 120 participants who were customers of the two SOEs, and qualitative data (i.e., face-to-face interviews) were gathered from 20 interviewees who were drawn from the 120 participants. The researcher was based in Gauteng, and conducted the study in that province because it was convenient and practical. The data were gathered in Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, Johannesburg, and the West Rand. The study found that customers believed that those who could not communicate in English and Afrikaans did not receive adequate information from the SOEs because of this shortcoming. The study also revealed that the marginalisation of Black South African Languages (BSALs) by SOEs was regarded as justified by some respondents because these SOEs provided services to customers who speak different languages. The study also found that other participants felt that it was necessary for SOEs to continue to use English as the main language of communication with customers because it is an international language, which also promotes unity among the people of South Africa, including customers of SOEs.

Contribution: The major contribution of this article to scientific knowledge is that it dwells deeper into how customers of the two SOEs who are less proficient in English and Afrikaans felt excluded in communication with all customers, and this is the first article to do so. Through this article, there is potential that the SOEs will appreciate that customers who are less proficient in English and Afrikaans want major adjustments to be made so they too can feel a sense of belonging and also fully appreciate what is being communicated to all customers, regardless to their proficiency in the two languages.

Keywords: language proficiency; language policy and planning; multilingualism; language attitudes; state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

Introduction

Business and media have been reporting about poor communication in industries and government entities. Customers complain about inadequate explanations, and a lack of clear focus of business communication caused by the multiplicity of languages in Gauteng. To assist such customers, the Parliament of South Africa passed the *Use of Official Languages Act* (No. 12 of 2012), which is aimed at promoting multilingualism at the levels of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and national government. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a slow pace to implement this Act, that is, customers who are less proficient in English and Afrikaans continue to be marginalised and excluded from receiving information in languages they are proficient in.

There are several studies that interrogate the implementation and the practice of multilingualism in South Africa and internationally. Pan (2009) conducted a study on the impact of customer satisfaction of profitability on SOEs in China, and revealed that there is a positive correlation between SOEs and customers. On the African continent, Mbako (2017) conducted a study on the drivers of organisational performance of SOEs in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). His findings revealed that SOEs in SSA fall short of fulfilling their mandate. In South Africa, Mbele (2016) conducted a study on corporate governance

in SOEs, and found that English dominates other official languages when it comes to official communication. His study also revealed that there is still a lot to be done in terms of language planning and implementation in South Africa. By contrast, in Asian countries, such as China, language policy has been implemented effectively.

The implication of Mdeble's (2016) study is that there is currently no study that has been conducted in South Africa to explore the challenges faced by SOEs' customers who are less proficient in English and Afrikaans. Therefore, there is a need for a study that establishes the frustrations experienced by such customers. The researchers chose to conduct this research among customers of the South African Post Office (SAPO) and Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) because the two SOEs not only provide direct services to members of the public, but they also service significant numbers of customers who may be less proficient in English and Afrikaans.

Research problem

It is important that SOEs which directly provide services to members of the public, interact with the customers from all linguistic communities in languages that they understand best. Before South Africa became a democratic country in 1994, services (e.g., from government and SOEs) were mainly availed to citizens in English and/or Afrikaans as these were the only two languages with official status. In a democratic South Africa, 11 languages have been given official status, and Section 6 of the Constitution of South Africa (*Act 108 of 1996*) notes that effective communication can be achieved through the usage of home languages. As mentioned earlier, there is no study which helps to assist SOEs with guidelines for language policy implementation for communication in business. This study sought to understand multilingualism in business communication in SOEs (PRASA & SAPO).

Study's hypotheses

Four hypotheses were formulated, and the study sought to prove or disprove the following:

- Customers receive inadequate information because they do not fully understand what SOEs explain to them mainly in English and Afrikaans.
- The marginalisation of Black South African Languages (BSALs) by SOEs is justified because they provide services to customers who speak different languages.
- It is necessary for SOEs to continue to use English as the main language for communication with customers because it is an international language, which also promotes unity among customers who speak different languages.
- Being assisted mainly in English at SOEs helps customers develop their communication skills in the language.

Conceptual framework to the study

This section provides a broad conceptual framework for this study. In this study, we consider existing scholarship that contain information on how language is used in SOEs that service customers who are less proficient when it comes to English and Afrikaans. This study is grounded on 'language in society'. It also reviews other language aspects and related phenomena.

Language rights and dominance

'Dominant language' was introduced by Phillipson (1992), who points out that it means linguistic imperialism. A 'dominant language' can be an official language or a national language, which is in the constitution, thus can be used in public domains and for the economy. It is regarded as more important, prestigious, influences economic factors, has control over minority languages or has a lot of influence over something or somebody (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2003).

With regard to language rights, Mabela (2015:28) states that it is unfortunate that the word 'rights' is perceived to have a somewhat political connotation. Therefore, language 'right' is a political decision and a deliberate attempt to change and influence or affect the various aspects of language practices which are not adhered to; also, it is to protect and promote the status of one or more languages in a given society. This is influenced by law, politics and society who experiences such dilemma. However, Ricento (2005:349) notes that the word 'rights' has been perceived negatively, because it is believed to be associated with redressing past linguistic wrongs that various countries have suffered under colonial systems.

'Linguistic human rights are a set of ideas and principles that are ascribed universal validity, and interlinked with democracy, freedom, and popular representation in the political process' (Phillipson 1998:102). Skutnabb-Kangas (2001:203) notes that 'linguistic human rights might be one way of promoting conflict prevention and self-determination, preventing linguistic genocide, and maintaining linguistic diversity and biodiversity'.

Patten and Kymlicka (2003:3) are of the view that one way of viewing 'language rights' concerns personality versus territoriality rights regimes. They state that the latter promotes individuals' language rights regardless of the speakers' location, whereas the personality rights favour a regional and more homogenous policy based on where numbers are situated.

Language and power

Before we discuss *language* and *power* as a unit, we will make a distinction between the two of them. Alexander (2002) notes that 'power' is the ability of individuals or groups to realise their intentions [will] by means of language [empowerment] or, conversely, the ability of individuals or groups to impose their agendas on others [disempowerment of the latter]. 'Power' is an element that gives an individual reign over something or someone. Pearsall and Kavanagh (2002:916) describe 'power' as 'a

right or authority given or delegated to a person or body, the capacity to influence the behaviour, the emotions of others or the course of events'.

In the case of South Africa, Alexander (1989:57) argues that English is the language of power and is, without question, the lingua franca of the middle class in South Africa, but not of the entire population. Ditsele (2014:106) argues that a good place to start in a democratic South Africa is to acknowledge that English unified people of different races, who were involved in the liberation struggle, against apartheid. As Alexander (1989:63) puts it: 'Almost all of us accept, for example, that English should be promoted as a language that connects people in the short term and more and more people are beginning to understand the urgency of learning the other languages spoken in South Africa'.

Alexander (1989) adds that English should, then, be an official language nationally, and all other languages should have official status on a regional basis, such as Southern Sotho, Afrikaans, and English, in the Free State province.

Ditsele (2014:107) paraphrases Alexander (1989:63–65) who suggests that the four Nguni and three Sotho-Tswana languages be standardised, and used in formal situations, including the crucial area of education. Over time, it is expected that the spoken standard – used relatively in formal situations – will begin to approximate to the written standard, even though individuals will inevitably betray their regional or social origins via their accent and intonation, as they do in all similar situations elsewhere in the world.

Furthermore, Alexander notes that this happened in German (in Europe), and Shona (in Zimbabwe) – each has a standard variety, and various regional dialects. He admits that this standardisation idea has been ridiculed by people, since it was first put on the table by Nhlapo in the mid-1940s, but he stresses that it is no more than a suggestion, and requires much research and debate, particularly by speakers of Nguni and Sotho-Tswana languages. Since Nhlapo's time, studies (e.g., Heugh 2016; Msimanga 1994) have been conducted on harmonisation and standardisation of Nguni and Sotho-Tswana languages.

Alexander (2002:2) states that language is the main instrument of communication at the disposal of human beings; consequently, the specific language(s) in which production processes take place become(s) the language(s) of power. Alexander puts it differently – that if one lacks proficiency in the language(s) of production, one is automatically excluded and disempowered. Furthermore, Alexander added that due to the colonial history of southern Africa, the language of power in post-apartheid South Africa is undoubtedly English, despite the Constitution of South Africa stating that all languages should have equal status.

Alexandre (1972:86) argues that for postcolonial Africa, proficiency in the language of the former colonial power (e.g., English, French, or Portuguese) constituted 'cultural capital' and was an index to the class location of the individual, since this ability almost automatically elevated the speaker into the ruling elite. Powerful people often use language as an instrument to suppress others. Power is essentially manipulative and oppressive. For this reason, those in power are always on guard to consolidate and maintain their status through language usage. Fairclough (1989) submits that one of the best ways to maintain power is using language, as power needs language to conduct and verbalise itself. Without language, power often becomes meaningless.

Language attitude

'Attitude' is a complex term to define. According to Garrett (2010:19), over the years many definitions of it have surfaced. Baker (1992:10) submits that 'attitudes' are often used to measure the status, value, and importance a certain language holds, either at an individual or group level. Garrett (2010:19–20) defines 'attitude' as a 'disposition to react favourably or unfavourably to a class of objects', which highlights the fact that 'attitudes' include positive and negative emotional responses towards something.

Garrett (2010) further states that 'attitudes', however, are also concerned with thought and behaviour, not only affect, as attitudes are 'learned dispositions to think, feel, and behave toward a person or object in a particular way'. In this view, attitudes are seen as self-descriptions and perceptions, as notes Baker (1992:11).

However, 'attitudes' are evaluative orientations to social objects, such as, for example, languages (Garrett, 2010:20). Furthermore, an 'attitude' cannot be observed directly and, therefore, needs to be inferred from emotional reactions and statements. Attitudes are often discussed and explained in terms of three components, namely, cognition, affect, and behaviour (Baker 1992:12). Garrett (2010:629) argues that some 'language attitudes' are formed at a very early age, and that these attitudes are unlikely to be changed. Furthermore, it has been found that superiority, social attractiveness, and dynamism influence the attitudes individuals form about languages.

Multilingualism

Multilingualism has been shown to mean more than just the lemmas 'more than two languages'. In fact, many scholars have tried to seek an accurate description or definition of 'multilingualism'. It is a common phenomenon, which is found in most parts of the world including South Africa.

Corson (1990) defines 'multilingualism' as the 'recognition and the use of more than two languages in every sector of the community'. Skutnabb-Kangas (1995:221) defines 'multilingualism' as the mastery of more than one language. Heugh (1993:112) also agrees that being multilingual means being able to communicate in at least two languages.

Makoni and Pennycook (2007:54) refer to the notion of multilingualism, understood as the knowledge of separate languages, as a 'pluralisation of mono-lingualism'. However, Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) asserts that the qualitative definition has to do with identification where one identifies himself or herself or where a community is identified with more than one language.

Research methodology

According to Leedy (1997:155), there are two types of methodologies, that is, qualitative and quantitative. According to Fink (1998:10), quantitative methods rely on mathematical and statistical models. Most evaluative research relies on quantitative methods to answer research questions and test hypothesis. Scholars generally accept that quantitative and qualitative aspects of scientific investigation are complementary. A combined quantitative and qualitative approach enables a researcher to create a defined corpus and allows for observations about language use and practices in the public space. It is in this regard that this study, conducted on language policy at entities servicing the public in South Africa, used both a quantitative and qualitative approach, also known as the mixed-method approach.

The first author randomly approached customers of SAPO (outside post offices) and PRASA (near train stations), explained to them the purpose of the study, and then sought the consent of those who were willing to participate in the study. The researcher resided in Gauteng; therefore, it was convenient to gather data in the province. Data were gathered from 120 participants (i.e., 60 from each SOE) in the municipalities of Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, Johannesburg, and West Rand.

Research instruments

Data were gathered through a questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire comprised a Likert-type scale (close-ended); it was answered by all 120 participants (see Annexure A). This Likert-type scale comprised 12 belief statements (see Annexure B) with the following five options: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, and strongly disagree. Belief statements were analysed using the *mean* and the *chi-square test* as a whole and separate, according to the eight variables, namely:

- sex,
- age group,
- level of education,
- language group,
- English proficiency,
- Afrikaans proficiency,
- years as a customer, and
- residence.

The relevance of the *chi-square test* (generated through Statistical Package for Social Sciences [SPSS] software Version 27) was to establish whether (or not) any of these eight variables were statistically significant in influencing participants' attitudes and views regarding communication challenges faced by customers who were less proficient in English and Afrikaans at SOEs. This p value ($p \leq 0.05$) was used in determining such statistical significance.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 20 participants who were randomly selected from the 120 participants. As such, the Likert-type scale provided the study with quantitative data, while face-to-face interviews with qualitative data.

Data analysis

To be systematic in analysing the data with a view to prove or disprove the study's hypotheses, the following four themes were developed, namely:

1. Theme 1 (Dissemination of information).
2. Theme 2 (Use of BSALs).
3. Theme 3 (Using English mainly).
4. Theme 4 (Developing communication skills).

These themes were developed after the data were gathered. Data related to each theme will be discussed, beginning with quantitative data (i.e., belief statements), followed by qualitative data (face-to-face interviews).

Theme 1: Dissemination of information

Belief statements[1] 1 and 8, as well as Question 1 (interviews) were used to obtain the data for this theme.

Quantitative data for Theme 1

Belief Statement 1: *This company should not assume that its customers understand English and Afrikaans; it should ask them if they understand these languages.*

The mean for all participants was **4.42**, and it showed an attitudinal positional tendency of ***agreeing,*** regarding the belief statement. This indicated that SOEs should not assume that its customers understand English and Afrikaans; it should ask them if they do. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Belief Statement 8: *It is difficult for me to understand this company's messages when they are given mainly in English and Afrikaans.*

A mean score of **4.42** illustrated an attitudinal positional tendency of ***agreeing*** with the belief statement. This suggested that customers agreed that it was difficult for customers to understand messages when they were mainly in English and Afrikaans. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Qualitative data for Theme 1

Question 1: *If your home language is not English or Afrikaans, have you ever asked this company to assist you in your home*

1. All 12 Belief statements appear in Annexure B.

language? If YES, how was the experience? If NO, why have you not asked to be assisted in your home language?

Customers expressed their concerns based on their experience to be not assisted in their home languages. Some said YES and others NO, based on their experience and explained more. Here are some of the reasons given by customers who answered YES:

> 'Yes, the experience was okay because the staff did not have a bad attitude towards me. When I asked to be assisted in my home language, indeed, they assisted me. I would say to be assisted in your home language is one of the things that strengthens trust we have with the company. Being assisted in my own language is courtesy of good customer care and also good reputation to the company. It also strengthens trust and prioritises good business relationship with customers.' (Participant, female, Tshwane, language Sotho-Tswana)

> 'Yes, it was a great experience because after I asked why I was not assisted in my own home language. Then, a staff member switched to my home language and things became much simpler and easier in my own language.' (Participant, male, Tshwane, language group Tsonga or Venda)

Here are some of the reasons given by customers who answered NO:

> 'No, because English is used as a medium of communication in South Africa; it is an official language that is used in public domains. So, for me, I had never asked why the company does not use my home language. I also understand English and Afrikaans.' (Participant, male, West Rand, language group Sotho Tswana)

> 'I cannot communicate in English and Afrikaans. So, if a White person is ready to assist customers, I wait and wait in the queue until a Black person is available to assist me. I prefer to be assisted by Black people so I could explain myself well.' (Participant, female, Johannesburg, language group Nguni)

The above responses indicated that some participants accepted that their home languages were not used and did not ask why that was the case, while others found out why their home languages were not used.

Theme 2: Use of Black South African Languages

For this theme, data were gathered through belief statements 2, 5, 6 and 12, as well as Question 4 (interviews).

Quantitative data for Theme 2

Belief Statement 2: *Should this company communicate with customers in African languages dominant in particular areas, that will be unfair to those who do not understand those languages.*

The mean for all the participants was **3.52.** This showed an attitudinal positional tendency of *agreeing* with the belief statement. The participants agreed that it would be unfair to use languages that were dominant to specific areas as that would exclude customers who did not understand such languages. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Belief Statement 5: *This company should invest money in promoting the use of all official languages of South Africa.*

Participants scored a mean of **4.21** in this belief statement, which meant that they *agreed* with it. This suggests that customers wanted SOEs to invest resources into developing BSALs. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Belief Statement 6: *The use of African languages promotes tribalism and disunity when used at companies such as this one (i.e., SAPO or PRASA).*

Participants recorded a mean of **3.30** in this belief statement, and that suggested that they were ***not sure*** if the use of BSALs promoted tribalism and disunity. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Belief Statement 12: *By communicating mainly in English and Afrikaans, this company denies many customers their right to be addressed in African languages.*

The mean for all participants was **4.72**, and it showed an attitudinal positional tendency of *strongly agree,* regarding the belief statement. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Qualitative data for Theme 2

Question 4: *South Africa's Constitution promotes the use of different languages in the country. This use means that a lot of money should be spent on developing nine (9) African languages, which were previously marginalised. With so many demands for money (e.g., housing, roads, schools, clinics, etc.), should the government include 'language development' as one of its priorities OR should it rather focus on the mentioned social demands instead of the development of African languages?*

The question was aimed at establishing how important the development of BSALs was relative to other priorities which compete for government's resources. These are the views of participants who believed that the development of BSALs should enjoy priority over the other priorities:

> 'Government should include African languages as one of the priorities because it important that people be addressed with language that they understand better. They will respond better and make informed decisions.' (Participant, male, West Rand, language group Sotho Tswana)

> 'Government should include African languages as one of the priority areas because they are also equally important. Language is used to conduct business, so government would have done an excellent job by including African languages as part of social development.' (Participant, female, Johannesburg, language group was Tsonga or Venda)

These are the views of participants who believed that government should prioritise needs such as the building of housing, schools, clinics, among others, ahead of the development of BSALs:

'Government should focus on social demands because they are the most important compared to spending money on the development of African languages. There are people who do not have a place to stay, and some stay in informal settlements where a family of more than seven people must share one room. Government should not focus on language development as one of its priorities because we are still behind with priorities such as housing.' (Participant, female, Tshwane, language group, Sotho Tswana)

'Government should focus more on social needs such as housing and medical facilities because they are still not sufficient; there are people who are homeless, and some people have to travel long distances to access medical care. So, money should not be wasted on the development of African languages; that can be done later after social needs had been addressed.' (Participant, male, West Rand, language group Nguni)

The responses above show that participants held different opinions regarding the development of BSALs as a priority area in South Africa. On the one hand, some felt that communication in languages which people understood better was important and should also enjoy priority by government, while on the other hand, others felt that social needs such as housing for the poor was far more important than the development of BSALs, and thus should receive priority.

Theme 3: Using English mainly

Belief statements 3, 9 and 10, as well as Question 3 (interviews) were used to obtain the data for this theme.

Quantitative data for Theme 3

Belief Statement 3: *This company should drop Afrikaans and communicate with customers in English only because it is an international language.*

The mean score of **4.37** was recorded, which means that participants *agreed* with the statement that the company should drop Afrikaans and communicate with customers in English only because it is an international language. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Belief Statement 9: *South Africa should have chosen English as the only official language after 1994 to promote unity among the people who speak different languages.*

A mean score of **3.67** was recorded which indicates that participants *agreed* that South Africa should have chosen English as the only official language after 1994 to promote unity among the people who speak different languages. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Belief Statement 10: *Customers should accept that in South Africa, English is the most important language to be proficient in; thus this company should communicate with them in it.*

The mean of **4.37** was recorded for this statement, which illustrated that participants *agreed* that customers should

accept that in South Africa, English is the most important language to be proficient in; thus this company should communicate with customers in this language. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Qualitative data for Theme 3

Question 3: *Do you think that the government should (1) spend more money on English to ensure that those who do not speak it have access to it, and those who do not speak it well improve their skills in this language OR (2) spend more money on developing African languages to be at the same level as English and Afrikaans?*

The main aim of this question was to establish whether participants supported the dominance of English in South Africa's linguistic landscape or whether they supported the development of BSALs to be at par with English and Afrikaans. These are the opinions of those who supported the dominance of English:

'Developing people's communication skills in English should not be seen as oppressing African languages, but to help people so they are able to communicate with others from around the world. The ability to communicate effectively in English gives people greater opportunities for living and working overseas, so those who are less proficient in English would not be marketable overseas.' (Participant, male, Johannesburg, language group Nguni)

'Government should spend more money on English to help people who do not speak it well to improve their communication skills in it because English is used as a medium of instruction across South Africa in the public and private sectors.' (Participant, female, Ekurhuleni, language group Sotho-Tswana)

Some of the participants supported the development of BSALs to be at par with English and Afrikaans, and below are their opinions:

'Imagine if everything is explained to you in your home language? When you sign documents, you will know what you are agreeing to. I once signed a document that I did not completely understand its contents, and I ended up paying more for the account at a retail shop. Had everything been explained to me in my home language, I would not have paid more.' (Participant, male, Ekurhuleni, language group Sotho-Tswana)

'Government should spend more money in developing African languages to be the same level as English and hold the same status. This because in South Africa, African languages are spoken by most people compared to English. It also does not make any sense that home language speakers of English are very few in South Africa, but this language was given official status.' (Participant, female, Ekurhuleni, language group Nguni)

From the above responses, it is illustrated that participants held different opinions regarding support for continuing the dominance of English in South Africa versus the development of BSALs to be at par with English and Afrikaans.

Theme 4: Developing communication skills

For this theme, data were gathered through belief statements 4, 7 and 11, as well as Question 2 (interviews).

Quantitative data for Theme 4

Belief Statement 4: *By communicating with customers mainly in English and Afrikaans, this company helps its customers develop skills in these languages, which helps them communicate better at work.*

A mean score of **3.53** was recorded, which means that participants *agreed* that English and Afrikaans could help them improve communication skills in the work environment. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Belief Statement 7: *I am happy that this company communicates with its customers mainly in English and Afrikaans because this improves my skills in these languages.*

A mean of **2.32** was recorded. This means that participants disagreed with this belief statement; they were dissatisfied with the practice of offering a service mainly in English or Afrikaans, designed to improve their communication skills in these languages. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Belief Statement 11: *To approach staff at this company after a message had been given in English or Afrikaans is an embarrassing admission that one does not understand these languages.*

The mean score of **4.55** illustrated that participants *strongly agreed* with the statement; they were overwhelmingly embarrassed to approach staff at companies which offered them a service and admit that they did not understand messages given to them in English or Afrikaans. None of the variables had a statistically significant relationship with this belief statement.

Qualitative data for Theme 4

Question 2: *Education in South Africa is still received in English (mainly) and Afrikaans (to a lesser extent), which means that people who went to school may have communication skills in the two languages. Should companies (such as this one) provide information and/or service only in those two languages?*

The focus of the question was to source participants' opinions regarding the continuation of disseminating information and/or rendering services through English in the main and Afrikaans to a lesser extent in the context of these two languages being the languages through which education is accessed in South Africa. The following opinions were given by participants who were opposed to the idea of giving information only in English and Afrikaans:

'Not all customers are comfortable to communicate in English and Afrikaans; they prefer using their home language including myself and my family members because we usually have conversations in our home language. If this company forcefully used English and Afrikaans, that would mean denying us our language rights. We as customers, so we have a right to receive services in our home languages.' (Participant, male, Tshwane, language group Sotho Tswana)

'I totally disagree. It would be unfair because not all customers have good command of English and Afrikaans. First of all, being educated does not mean that people are proficient in English or Afrikaans. I have a Bachelor's degree, but I need things to be explained to me in my home language.' (Participant, female, West Rand, language group Nguni)

Some participants supported the idea of giving information only in English and Afrikaans. Here are their opinions:

'I prefer that this company should provide information mainly in English not Afrikaans because Afrikaans it is not an international language. English will help customers to develop their communication skills in English.' (Participant, female, West Rand, language group, Nguni)

'This company should strictly provide information in English. Afrikaans should also be added despite what happened during the apartheid era; it is a home language of some people in South Africa.' (Participant, female, Ekurhuleni, language group Tsonga or Venda)

Language rights (secondary matter)

Whereas this study did not directly focus on 'language rights', there was a need to canvass this among participants. To that effect, only qualitative data were gathered in a form of three open-ended questions, that is, Questions 5, 6 and 7. For coherence in data presentation, Question 6 and 5 were presented in reverse order.

Question 6: *What is your understanding of linguistic rights?*

This question was intended to establish what participants understood 'language rights' to be. Nearly all the participants gave long-winded answers which suggested that either they did not fully understand what was being asked of them or they did not know or understand what 'linguistic rights' are. However, their subsequent answers to Questions 5 and 7 showed that they understand what these rights are; thus, their uncertainty to Question 6 might lie in being unfamiliar with the term 'linguistic' as opposed to 'language'. The researchers did not anticipate the misunderstanding in semantics.

Question 5: *Do you think that unity among people of different language backgrounds in South Africa can be achieved through (1) each language group taking pride in speaking its language OR (2) one language being chosen as the sole or main language spoken by all South Africans?*

This question was aimed at exploring the phenomenon of 'unity' from the perspective of maintaining the status quo of keeping and using South Africa's official languages or reducing them. Some participants preferred that the country should continue its path of keeping and using all its official

languages in the current form, and here is the opinion of one such respondent:

> 'Not all customers are comfortable to communicate in English and Afrikaans; they prefer using their home language including myself and my family members because we usually have conversations in our home language. If this company forcefully used English and Afrikaans, that would mean denying us our language rights. We are customers, so we have a right to receive services in our home languages.' (Participant, female, West Rand, language group Nguni)

Other participants preferred that South Africa should seek a new path of how it uses its official languages, that is, they should be narrowed or reduced, and here is a representative opinion:

> 'This company should provide services in one language, that is, English because it is an international language which is used across the world. The information provided will assist in acquiring better knowledge and understand of English. Afrikaans should not be used in this company because the world is moving to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, so if this company used English only, it would equip people to have better skills to adapt easily because technology requires people to understand English. Translating material into our home languages will take years to complete and add to our dictionaries. For instance, if you have cell phone app, you need English commands to use that app. The app that we have in our cell phone are in English and not in our home languages.' (Participant, male, Tshwane, language group Sotho Tswana)

An overwhelming majority of participants believed that it was a bad idea to use English and Afrikaans only in disseminating information and/or rendering services. They felt that this would unfairly discriminate against customers who cannot communicate in English and/or Afrikaans that is, those who received limited or no education because in South Africa, English [in the main] and Afrikaans [to a lesser extent] are languages used for education; therefore, those who received limited or no education tend to struggle in these languages, particularly those who do not speak them as home languages. A few participants supported the use of English because of its status as an international language.

Question 7: *If this company refused to communicate with you (or assist you) in your home language on the basis that it does not have enough money to cover your home language OR that your language is spoken by very few people, would you accept the reasons as reasonable?*

This question sought to investigate participants' awareness of their language rights, in other words, how open they were to resources or the lack thereof and the population size of those who speak official languages being given as a reason for denying people their language rights. Some participants were not open to resources and population size being advanced as reasons for denying language rights, and this is what they said:

> 'I would not accept their reason because this company is owned by the public so I would expect it to assist me in a language that I prefer, which is my home language and one of South Africa's

official languages.' (Particpant, male, Tshwane, Tsonga or Venda)

> 'No, I would not accept the reason that I cannot be assisted in my home language based on less money because that would mean that the company does not take me seriously and does not appreciate my money. I would feel offended by under-estimating my home language, and that would constitute unfair discrimination. I would consider taking this matter further by reporting the violation to the company's head office or even the Human Rights Commission to restore my language rights.' (Participant, female, West Rand, language group Sotho Tswana)

Other participants did not have issues with resources and population size being advanced as reasons for denying language rights, and this is what they said:

> 'Yes, I would accept the reason because there would be nothing that I could do. But I would try to learn other languages because that would be a chance for me to be multilingual.' (Participant, male, Tshwane, language group Tsonga or Venda)

> 'Yes, I would accept it if they said that they do not have money to cater for my home language. However, it would be unfair since we have a right to be assisted in the language that we want.' (Participant, female, Tshwane, language group, Tsonga or Venda)

Regardless of their opinions, participants demonstrated that they were aware of what constitutes one's language rights.

Conclusion
Theme 1: Dissemination of information

The data indicated that participants were not sure as to whether [or not] customers who could read or write English should be communicated to in their preferred languages. Regarding sex, female participants generally indicated that SOEs should communicate with their customers in languages preferred by customers, while male participants generally indicated that they were not sure as to whether [or not] SOEs should continue to communicate with customers in English and Afrikaans only. The data also showed that participants acknowledged that SOEs did not use BSALs adequately or to their satisfaction as customers.

Theme 2: Use of Black South African languages

The data revealed that participants wanted government to develop BSALs further or to a level where they could be used a lot more at SOEs. However, participants were not sure as to whether [or not] the use of BSALs at SOEs would promote tribalism and disunity among customers. On the one hand, some felt that communication in BSALs was important and should also be one of government's priority areas, while on the other hand, others felt that providing resources to address social needs, such as housing for the poor, was far more important and should enjoy government's attention rather than developing BSALs.

Theme 3: Using English mainly

The data showed that some participants held favourable attitudes towards English in that they agreed that, in South

Africa, it is the most important language to be proficient in, and that it should have been chosen as the only official language after 1994 to promote unity among the people who speak different languages. Participants also favoured the use of English over that of Afrikaans at SOEs because the latter is not an international language while the former is. While they generally held favourable attitudes toward English, some of them emphasised the importance of the further development of BSALs for use in SOEs, arguing that there are benefits to disseminating information in languages which customers understand better.

Theme 4: Developing communication skills

This theme intended to reconcile the other three themes, namely, dissemination of information (Theme 1), use of BSALs (Theme 2), and using English mainly (Theme 3). In other words, it sought to establish whether (or not) the choice of language made by SOEs mattered in disseminating information. As discussed in Theme 1 to Theme 3, participants acknowledged the importance of being able to communicate in English in the main, and Afrikaans to a lesser extent, and that such importance should not be at the expense of the development and use of BSALs.

The data from this theme corroborated that of the other three themes in that participants believed that communication with customers in English and Afrikaans improved their communication skills in these languages, but they were unhappy if such communication happened at the expense of the development and use of BSALs. They were adamant that there was nothing wrong with customers approaching staff members at SOEs and admitting that they did not understand English and Afrikaans. Interestingly, participants associated the ability to communicate in English and Afrikaans with education, and by extension, knowledge. They believed that people who could communicate in English and Afrikaans were literate and educated while those who could not communicate in the two languages were illiterate and uneducated. There is context to this perception in that education in South Africa (at least as of 2020 when the data were gathered) was still received mainly in English and Afrikaans to a lesser extent: as such, limited or no communication skills in the two languages meant that a person received little or no formal education.

While participants supported the development of communication skills in English and Afrikaans, they emphasised the importance of protecting the rights of customers who could not communicate in English and Afrikaans by making sure that BSALs are developed and used at SOEs to ensure that such customers are not left behind in accessing the disseminated information.

Proving or disproving the study's hypotheses

With regard to the first hypothesis, participants stated that they did not fully understand what SOEs communicated to

them in English and Afrikaans, and that therefore they received inadequate information. This means that this hypothesis has been proven or accepted.

Looking at the second hypothesis, participants were of the view that SOEs had a duty to disseminate information in BSALs in addition to English and Afrikaans. However, in multilingual settings where it was costly or impractical to do so in all these languages, SOEs would be justified to reduce the number of languages in favour of English in particular. This means that this hypothesis has been proven or accepted.

Considering the third hypothesis, participants supported the use of English at SOEs and the dropping of Afrikaans because the former is an international language while the latter is not. They also stated that English promoted unity among people of different linguistic backgrounds. That said, this hypothesis has been proven or accepted.

With regard to the fourth hypothesis, participants believed that on the one hand, only participants who were literate and understood English benefitted from being communicated to in the language because that had the potential to improve their communication skills in the language. On the other hand, those who were illiterate and did not understand English did not benefit from being communicated to in the language and thus could not develop communication skills in the language. Participants held strong views regarding the latter, thus this hypothesis has been disproved or rejected.

Data availability

The data were self-generated, thus owned by the authors.

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Annexure A:

TABLE 1-A1: Profile of participants.

Social variables	Number	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Female	70	58
Male	50	42
Total	**120**	**100**
English proficiency		
Poor	38	16
Good	69	75
Excellent	13	09
Total	**120**	**100**
Years as a customer		
5 years or less	57	48
6–10 years	33	27
11 years and above	30	25
Total	**120**	**100**
Residence		
Tshwane	30	25
Johannesburg	30	25
Ekurhuleni	30	25
West Rand	30	25
Total	**120**	**100**
Language group		
Nguni	46	38
Sotho-Tswana	39	33
Tsonga or Venda	35	29
Total	**120**	**100**
Afrikaans proficiency		
Poor	74	62
Good	36	30
Excellent	10	08
Total	**120**	**100**
Level of education		
Grades 1–4	41	34
Grades 5–8	50	42
Grades 9–12	29	24
Above Grade 12	00	00
Total	**120**	**100**
Age group		
18–19 years	11	09
20–29 years	30	25
30–39 years	20	17
40–49 years	18	15
50–59 years	16	13
60 years and above	25	21
Total	**120**	**100**

Annexure B

TABLE 1-B1: Belief statements.

No.	Belief Statements	Means	Attitudinal positions	Statistically significant variables
1	This company should not assume that its customers understand English and Afrikaans; it should ask them if they understand these languages.	4.42	Agree	-
2	Should this company communicate with customers in African languages dominant in particular areas, that will be unfair to those who do not understand those languages.	3.52	Agree	-
3	This company should drop Afrikaans and communicate with customers in English only because it is an international language.	4.37	Agree	-
4	By communicating with customers mainly in English and Afrikaans, this company helps its customers develop skills in these languages, which helps them communicate better at work.	3.53	Agree	-
5	This company should invest money in promoting the use of all official languages of South Africa.	4.21	Agree	-
6	The use of African languages promotes tribalism and disunity when used at companies such as this one.	3.30	Not sure	-
7	I am happy that this company communicates with its customers mainly in English and Afrikaans because this improves my skills in these languages.	2.32	Disagree	-
8	It is difficult for me to understand this company's messages when they are given mainly in English and Afrikaans.	4.42	Agree	-
9	South Africa should have chosen English as the only official language after 1994 to promote unity among the people who speak different languages.	3.67	Agree	-
10	Customers should accept that in South Africa, English is the most important language to be proficient in, thus this company should communicate with them in it.	4.37	Agree	-
11	To approach staff at this company after a message had been given in English or Afrikaans is an embarrassing admission that one does not understand these languages.	4.55	Strongly agree	-
12	By communicating mainly in English and Afrikaans, this company denies many customers their right to be addressed in African languages.	4.72	Strongly agree	-