

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES FOR AFRICAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION THROUGH POLICY INITIATIVES

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Abstract

Recent debates indicate that, although African Indigenous Languages (AILs) are significant in fostering cultural identity, and contributing to the transmission of unique knowledge, worldviews and traditions, the critical role of these languages is endangered. Significantly though, the United Nations (UN) affirmed 2022-2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL), drawing consideration to the revitalization and protection of indigenous languages across the globe. This paper aimed to cast a microscopic eye on transformative leadership (TL) practices for AIL revitalization through policy initiatives. Through the lens of Ubuntu-inspired Linguistic Justice Philosophy (ULJP), texts in the *Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) Language Policy* and the *Report of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC)* on indigenous languages were dissected, having applied a human rights-based conceptual analysis. The conceptual insights derived from the analysis showed that educational leaders should dismantle language standardization and foster hybrid language practices toward shaping the visibility and use of marginalised languages. To provide clarity regarding these findings, this paper proposes a Transformative Leadership Language Revitalization Framework (TLFRF), showcasing how indigenous language revitalization can be considered as dignity-affirming and relational. The paper recommends that the revitalization of AILs should be considered as motivating African people to honour their history, embrace the present and silhouette a future founded on cultural pride, justice and dignity.

Keywords: *African indigenous languages, policy initiatives, revitalization, transformative leadership.*

1. Introduction

For many decades, languages that were not initially part of the African continent were institutionalised in fundamental societal pillars such as government, education, media and government. Ariyo (2026) reports that the institutionalization of Western languages contributed to the banning of indigenous languages, especially in the school context, where learners were often humiliated, demoted or beaten for communicating in their native tongues. This led to the marginalization of African languages, whilst colonial tongues were used as weapons of amongst others, economic stability, power and literacy. Sadly, when colonies were finally renounced in the 20th century, an inevitable scar was left on its survivors: “a deeply entrenched linguistic influence that showed the world just how successful colonial domination had been” (Ariyo, 2026, n.p.). Significantly, the linguistic influence on African people continued to constitute an inhibition to development, democracy and the exercise of human rights (Diallo, 2024). To set Africa free from European linguistic enslavement, African philosophers and influential political figures challenged the dominance of European language systems on this continent. Notably, the revitalization of AILs can be traced to Azikiwe’s (1937) publication, *Renascent Africa*, Diop’s (1996) works on *African Renaissance* and the influence of former South African president, Thabo Mbeki in his 1998, “*I am an African*” speech. The mentioned works align with a seminal view of Evaldsson and Wessels (2004) who once proclaimed that Africans must “*Africans themselves must do something about the matter*” (p. 84), implying that they (Africans) must actively work in revitalizing their indigenous languages. In more recent times, the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR, 2024) calls for the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages for the protection of cultural diversity. Based on the history of indigenous languages and considering the ACHPR’s (2024) call, this paper asks the following question: *What transformative leadership policy practices can be proposed to contribute to the revitalization of African indigenous languages?*

2. The significance of African indigenous language revitalization

According to the ACHPR (2024), AILs incorporate the wealth of established knowledge and cultural legacy, contributing to sustainable growth and the advancement of African identities. Significantly, indigenous languages can play a fundamental role in advancing inclusivity and equity, whilst combatting racial prejudice, unfair exclusion and continuation of superiority (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2020). Considering these views, I henceforth focus on the significance of AIL revitalization for teaching, learning and leadership enactment. Firstly, employing indigenous languages to teach African learners can enable them to grasp concepts within their own cultural context and language (Ntuli & Mudau, 2024). Secondly, an application of AILs can contribute relevance to learning in terms of learners' cultures and experiences (Munyaradzi & Manyike, 2025). Thirdly, an understanding and use of AILs can assist leaders to be more responsive to societal matters (Itedjere, 2025). I believe that, while AILs support life-long development and strengthen African identities, the use thereof in educational context is significant for teaching, learning and leadership enactment. Not only do AILs assist in promoting inclusivity and equity, but it can be empowering to leaders in terms of their responsiveness to diversity.

3. Colonial legacy vs the African language discourse

Africa is substantially ideologized in terms of two incompatible outlooks. While one is called the '19th century European nation state-ideology', the other is labelled as the '20th/21st century African Renaissance-ideology' (Wolff, 2017). These two ideologies contribute to huge disputes among language planners and decision-makers in Africa. Wolff (2017) explains that Europeans judge their continent to be precious in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity and plurality. Interestingly, the focus on linguistic and cultural plurality explains the appearance of a Eurocentric attitude according to which any situation that would quantitatively exceed the European one must be regarded as unmanageable and chaotic, such as would appear to be the case in Africa. In Africa, powerful and major dominant languages are exoglossic by derivation (not necessarily native to society), specifically Afrikaans, Malagasy and Arabic, and previous expatriate languages such as Italian, Dutch, English, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese (Wolff, 2017). Another contributing factor is the waves of immigrants across African borders, bringing along additional languages, adding to the language variety on the continent. Notwithstanding the influence of European models and waves of immigration, the idea would be to maintain and preserve AILs in ways that counter the marginalization of languages, while accommodating other languages in an additive framework. Notably, a possible way of influencing AIL preservation and revitalization can be through an understanding and implementation of policies (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023).

4. The role of policy in language revitalization

A seminal, yet powerful statement by Hartshorne (1999) indicates that a policy should be regarded as *"a course of action...with a general assumption that it should be beneficial to the country"* (p. 5). Considering this statement, policies should thus be used to develop tools, approaches and methods to preserve indigenous languages (Kuzmin, 2022). This is further emphasized by Msomi (2025) who purports that policies are vital for the intellectualization of AILs. In this paper, selected texts in PanSALB (RSA, 2024) and SAHRC (2016) were extracted and analyzed to showcase the significance of these policies in revitalizing AILs. While PanSALB advise that is necessary *"to take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of indigenous languages"* (RSA, 2024, Preamble), the SAHRC's (2016) report has a strong focus on *"the preservation and promotion of multilingualism in restoring dignity and a recognition of equality and identity"* (p. 9). The role of these policies in revitalizing AILs can be found in PanSALB's intention to elevate the use of indigenous languages as significant for redress and justice. Additionally, selected texts from SAHRC shifts the discourse about indigenous language revitalization from passive acknowledgement to involved interventions.

5. Ubuntu-inspired Linguistic Justice Philosophy (ULJP)

Oviawe (2016) suggests that Ubuntu philosophy provides a grouping of useful elements of wisdom that can be applied to create ideas to foster emancipatory and transformative experiences in school contexts. For example, Ubuntu encourage a decolonized (transformative) mindset through language, whilst advancing linguistic justice through the enactment of translanguaging. Significantly, clothe with a transformative Ubuntu attire, leaders in schools can create spaces for multilingual language users, *"bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience, and environment, their attitudes, beliefs,*

and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into one coordinated and meaningful performance and transforming it into a lived experience” (Mtanha-Matariro & Makalela, 2025, p. 54). Thus, when individuals are open to transforming conditions that can advance the application of AILs, they cultivate habits to optimally advance their own and other’s linguistic repertoires, thereby promoting a sense of interconnectedness and shared understanding (Mtanha-Matariro & Makalela, 2025). An application of ULJP was useful because it guided my thinking in terms of cultivating habits linguistic repertoires and creating spaces for multilingual use in educational spaces.

6. Research design and methodology

Koskela-Huotari (2020) explains that conceptual research draws on the integration of prevailing information, whilst bridging formerly isolated theories, and unveiling innovative ideas that broaden the scope of meaning and thinking. To contribute to the debate regarding the revitalization of AILs, I consulted the works of Isaac, Koch and Neftd (2022) to conduct a human rights-based conceptual analysis of selected texts in PanSALB (2024) and SAHRC (2016). Drawing from Isaac et al. (2022), I first selected texts that closely relate to the revitalization of AILs. The texts were analysed to explore the emergence of innovative meanings that can be associated with the revitalization of AILs. I then proposed A TLFRF with transformative leadership praxes, showcasing what leaders can do in revitalizing AILs in educational spaces.

7. Selected policy texts toward revitalizing African indigenous languages

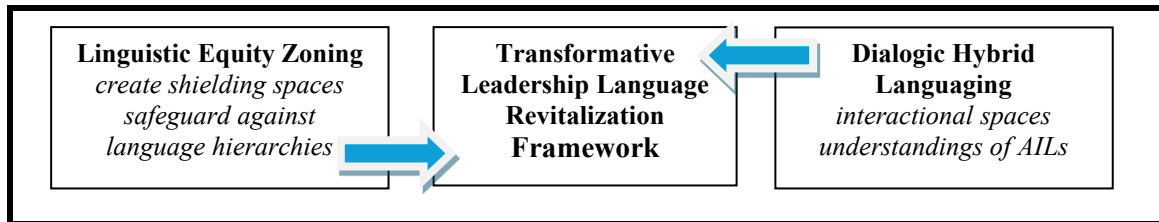
In the South African context, PanSALB is responsible for supervising the implementation and development of language policies which is geared toward safeguarding alignment with the languages talked by the majority of South Africans (Mabela & Ditsele, 2024). Also, in their report on transformation at public universities in South Africa, the SAHRC (2016) applaud one educational institution for using language to promote indigenous languages in this country. According to the policies, it is paramount that *“all official languages enjoy parity of esteem and be treated equitably”* (RSA, 2024, Section 1.2) and that leaders must actively work *“to promote multilingualism and tackle the stigma associated with minority language groups”* (SAHRC, 2016, Section 7.2.8). These texts advocate for the deliberate dismantling of language hierarchies because many AILs face the threat of extinction because of policies of dispossession and assimilation (*vide*: The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2019). In this regard, educational leaders should advocate for recognition and creating spaces for AILs to be remembered, re-enacted and restored, thus the unmasking linguicides toward revitalizing the dignity of languages (Sibanda, 2021). The idea would not be to merely equalize languages in a static way, but to frequently advance indigenous languages through linguistic equity zoning (LEZ) as a TL praxis. The policies further encourage that leaders must *“foster respect and protect language rights”* (RSA, 2024, Section 6.2), whilst encouraging *“the use of language in a manner that makes the meaning understandable to as many people as possible”* (RSA, 2024, Section 6.5). These texts hint on the application of hybrid language, implying that language usage is more than just learning from one another, but a way of becoming inter-culturally proficient competent through mixed languaging (Chaparro, 2024). Notably, language hybridization emphasises individuals’ interaction with others, not merely a way of preserving one language, but acknowledging and practising the multiplicity of ways in which individuals use language to make and negotiate meaning and understanding (Chaparro, 2024). Derived from this analysis of policy texts, I suggest dialogic hybrid languaging (DHL) as a TL praxis.

I henceforth explicate LEZ and DHL as TL praxes toward advancing the revitalization of AILs in educational contexts.

8. Transformative Leadership Language Revitalization Framework (TLFRF)

According to the United Nation’s UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), *“indigenous people have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit their languages”* (Article 13(1)) and *“this right must be protected”* (Article 13(2)). Shields (2026) purports that TL is more than assisting organizations operate professionally; it requires disturbing existing policies, beliefs and practices to change conditions of inequity toward affecting deep-seated changes for sustainable development, *“as when a chrysalis changes to a butterfly”* (3). Drawing from Shields (2026), this paper proposes LEZ and DHL as TL praxis to change conditions relating to the application of AILs in educational spaces. Considering this declaration, this paper next discusses LEZ and DHL as novel TL praxes toward advancing AILs in educational contexts.

Figure 1. (Transformative Leadership Language Revitalization Framework (TLFRF)).



8.1. Linguistic equity zoning (LEZ) as a transformative leadership praxis

This paper articulates LEZ as a replacement for language standardization, arguing that linguistic multiplicity should be regarded as the infrastructure for diverse knowledge construction rather than an act of language exclusion. This articulation aligns with the notion of language multiplicity can positively boost cultural variety, social unity, inclusiveness and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2025). Significantly, I propose that transformative leaders can apply LEZ through the creation of shielding spaces where language pyramids are blocked, ensuring that no AIL is treated as more superior than another, thus safeguarding against the re-emergence of language hierarchies.

8.2. Dialogic hybrid languaging (DHL) as a transformative leadership praxis

DHL can be understood as the fluid blending of multiple dialects toward co-constructing meaning. This articulation aligns with the seminal views of Wei (2011), explaining that dialogic hybridity allows for the co-existence, collision and interaction of various languages, and the expansion of individuals' communication skills and language repertoires (*vide*: Suarez, 2020). Considering these explanations, I propose that transformative leaders design interactional spaces and experiences that will shape multilingual individuals' language practices, whilst developing new understandings of AILs.

9. Conclusion

This paper asked the question: *what transformative leadership policy praxes can be proposed to contribute to the revitalization of African indigenous languages?* In search for answers to this question, I first explored academic literature and derived three valuable insights. Firstly, AILs can assist school leaders to be more approachable to societal matters, positioning them to address diversity challenges, whilst fostering a sense of belonging. Secondly, there should be ongoing attempts to preserve and maintain AILs to dismantle the marginalization of languages. Thirdly, policies play a significant role in guiding transformative leaders to elevate the use of AILs, thus defending the significance of language diversity. After an analysis of selected texts, policies such as RSA (2024) and SAHRC (2016) advise that school leader should work actively to dismantle language standardization and foster hybrid language practices toward shaping the visibility and use of marginalised languages. In line with these conceptual policy insights, this paper propose that transformative leaders can apply LEZ to protect and defend the existence and equal use of all AILs. Also, transformative leaders must intentionally design opportunities for language hybridization, cultivating expansive understandings of AILs. This paper did not include the voices of school leaders regarding their experiences with AILs in schools. An interesting avenue for future research might be the application of a longitudinal timeline methodology, exploring how educational leaders implement AILs over a period.

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