

“We are also Africans”:

**Exploring the experiences of monolingual English-speaking black African youth
interacting in black African Communities in South Africa**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social
Science (Cwk/Thesis) in Sociology

Date of Submission: January 2025

Abstract

English monolingualism among black African youth is a growing phenomenon in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly among those raised in urban areas. This trend carries significant implications, as these individuals must navigate their identities as black Africans within a context where language is deeply intertwined with ethnic identity. This dissertation explores the development of English monolingualism among black African youth, focusing on how their environments and social contexts have shaped the predominance of English. It further examines the implications of this monolingualism for individuals from cultures and ethnic groups with distinct linguistic traditions. Additionally, the study investigates the social construction of 'blackness', focusing on how it is defined, understood, reproduced, and reinforced within society. This study examines the interplay between language, identity, and social interaction among monolingual English-speaking black African youth (aged 20 to 30) raised in urban areas in South Africa interacting within African social environments in South Africa. Addressing a gap in existing literature, it centres on individuals who reside in their native environments but lack proficiency in their ancestral language. Using symbolic interactionist and social constructionist theoretical frameworks, this qualitative study highlights how these youth navigate social interactions and identity formation, emphasising the role of language in shaping their experiences. Through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, seven in-depth interviews were conducted to capture the nuanced experiences of participants. Findings provide insights into how these youth perceive and define "blackness," their personal identities, and the circumstances shaping their experiences. Additionally, the study highlights the complexities of language use in social interactions and cultural connectedness, revealing the tension between personal identities and societal expectations. This study thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of language in shaping identity and social interaction, offering insights into the lived experiences of black African young adults in South Africa. By amplifying their voices, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the lived realities of monolingual English-speaking black African individuals living in South Africa.

Keywords: Language, youth, black, identity, social interaction, belonging

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to God for His unwavering provision of strength, perseverance, and inspiration throughout this journey. From the initial spark of the topic to the final conclusion, I attribute every step of this process to His guidance.

To my mother, Yolisa Ntshona, I owe endless thanks for her constant encouragement, support, and invaluable assistance throughout my journey. Her unwavering belief in me and her instrumental role in my life have been a cornerstone of my success. To my partner, Cody Chinsamy, I am deeply grateful for your constant reassurance, encouragement, and steadfast support during this journey. Thank you for prioritising my well-being and handling other responsibilities, allowing me to fully concentrate on my writing. To my dear cousin, Andisile Ntshona, your reminders of my goals and genuine interest in my progress was encouraging and a constant source of motivation. To my friends—a remarkable group of women—thank you for uplifting me during times when motivation was scarce and for offering a comforting space to recharge when I needed it most.

I am deeply grateful to the Mellon Foundation "Turning the Tide" Masters Scholarship for making it possible for me to pursue my academic dream. I extend my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Thoko Sipungu, whose guidance, perspectives, and support were pivotal in shaping *We Are Also Africans*. His thoughtful feedback helped streamline my ideas, while his mentorship added a polished touch to this work.

Special thanks go to the lecturers at the Rhodes University Sociology Department, who offered their expertise, helped refine my ideas, and guided me through various chapters of my dissertation.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the participants involved in this study. I will forever be thankful for their willingness to share their experiences and perspectives. Thank you for trusting me to represent your stories and experiences with integrity and care.

This work stands as a testament to the collective efforts of all who have walked this journey with me. I am profoundly grateful to each of you.

Lastly, to those who have questioned my Africanness or invalidated my identity because I primarily speak English: I bear no grudges. I thank you, for you have unknowingly provided me with inspiration for this dissertation.

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Glossary of Key Terms

Black/African

In this study, the terms “Black African” and “African” will be used interchangeably. They both refer to individuals with established African black ancestry (Davis, 1991: 5). Essentially, these terms denote people whose roots can be traced back to Africa and who identify themselves as part of the Black racial or ethnic group (Letshufi, 2016: 12; Mattes, 2004: 2). The concept of “native” denotes individuals recognised or accepted as members of any ethnic group indigenous to Africa (Posel, 2001: 56). In South Africa, there are four racial classifications namely Black, Coloured, White, and Asian (Brown, 2000: 198). Specifically within the scope of this research, “African” refers to individuals historically classified as “Bantu”, “Native”, or “Black” under the apartheid-era classifications (Seekings & Nattrass, 2008: ix). These individuals are unequivocally indigenous South Africans with varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Goduka, 1998: 35).

Furthermore, “African” extends to Black natives from other African countries on the continent, who have immigrated to South Africa, with second-generation immigrants obtaining citizenship. These individuals are also considered to be persons of Black African lineage (Onukogu, 2022: 158).

Cultural Connections (Connectedness)

Cultural connections are complex processes involving identity and culture (Krakouer, 2023: 831), particularly significant for indigenous children and young people who have the right to foster and maintain connections to their native families, communities, countries, and cultural heritage (Krakouer, 2023: 822). Narratives and stories play a crucial role in deepening one’s connection to their culture, offering personal significance as well as enriching the broader cultural heritage (Goduka, 1998: 36). The cultivation of culture necessitates continuous learning, practice, and lived experiences over time (Krakouer, 2023: 829). Ultimately, cultural connections serve as vital bridges, enabling individuals to forge deeper connections and navigate interpersonal relationships more effectively, enhancing both self-esteem and communal cohesion.

First Language Attrition

First Language Attrition, also known as ‘language loss’, is the process of decreasing proficiency in, or forgetting a first or heritage language. It is the disintegration of the structure of the first

language, due to continuous immersion in a second language (Seliger & Vago, 1991; Schmid & Köpke, 2013).

Heritage/Ancestral language

Heritage, or ancestral language, is “the native or historical language spoken by one's forebears, ancestors, [or parents]” (Rudnieva, 2023: 189).

Youth

The term “youth” refers to a demographic group characterised by their transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. Typically, youth are understood to encompass the younger segment of the population. According to the United Nations General Assembly (2005:23) (cited in Van Der Byl, 2004: 3), youth are individuals aged between 15 and 24 years. However, in the context of South Africa, youth are defined as individuals aged between 15 and 35 years (Van Der Byl, 2004: 3). This distinction is crucial for understanding the scope of this study, which specifically focuses on individuals aged 20 to 35 years.

These terms will be frequently utilised throughout this study. Thus, it is necessary to define them clearly. These terms represent the fundamental attributes of the present study, encapsulating the various elements and dynamics central to the themes under investigation.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

1.1. Context

The concept of a mother tongue is powerful, as language is often absorbed from one's family, the first social group a person interacts with. Even as individuals grow and join new groups, adopting their behaviours and language, the influence of family remains strong. Language, however, is just one aspect of identity, as many other elements real or imagined, can serve to connect individuals to a group. Identity is a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by social interactions, unique encounters, and various social contexts. Language plays a significant role in linking personal identity – how individuals perceive themselves – to social identity, or how they are perceived within their communities. Our sense of self is continuously shaped by our past experiences and current circumstances, guiding our actions in the present.

Identity is contextually specific, constantly in process, and continuously influenced by social relationships from early childhood onward. Through our identity, we understand our connection to the world and our relationships with others. Language, as a product of the society and time in which people live, serves as a means of defining individuals in relation to others. Every word we use reflects the influence of our social context and how we think others perceive us, shaping our communication in a way that connects us to our community. Language thus becomes a bridge between individuals, where one side represents what is said and the other how it is understood. Created within a particular historical and social context, language is tangible and socially oriented, giving meaning to our interactions and identities. Through language, people construct and negotiate their individual and collective identities, reinforcing the understanding that identity is shaped in a social context and is always open to change.

The concept of blackness, as a visible and socially prominent identity marker, is reinforced in social interactions. Characteristics like physical appearance and inherited traits, as well as social markers such as accent and dress, are used to classify individuals. This study examines how monolingual English-speaking black African individuals in South Africa construct their black identities, exploring their experiences, challenges, and the ways they form identity through language and social interactions.

Historically, black African identity has been shaped by societal expectations regarding behaviour, appearance, and language. African individuals inherit cultural symbols such as ancestry, ethnicity, and native languages that profoundly impact identity formation. Language is crucial for self-expression and for fostering a sense of belonging. In South Africa, black

African individuals are often expected to speak an African language due to their indigenous roots. However, colonialism and apartheid promoted English as a dominant language, impacting identity formation, especially among children raised in English-speaking environments in urban areas. Many black African youth grow up monolingual in English, often without choosing this linguistic environment, as it is often shaped by parental decisions (among other factors) rather than personal choice. These circumstances, including language attrition where proficiency in an ancestral language declines, influence their sense of self and social integration.

While the phenomenon of black African individuals speaking only English has been well-documented among immigrants, there is a notable gap in research concerning those who experience this in their native context. Specifically, there is limited literature addressing black Africans born and raised in their countries of origin who do not speak their ancestral languages. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the experiences of black African South Africans who, despite being raised in a culturally rich and historically complex nation, do not speak their ancestral languages.

This research integrates the Sociology of Identity and Belonging with the Sociology of Language, employing symbolic interactionism and social constructionism as its theoretical frameworks. From a social constructionist perspective, black African identities are socially, culturally, and historically constructed, shaped by discourse and cultural narratives. This perspective underpins the research's argument that blackness is not fixed or defined by a singular factor, such as language, but rather emerges from a dynamic interplay of social, historical, and cultural influences. Symbolic interactionism complements this by illuminating how individuals attach specific meanings to symbols during interactions and how these symbols influence behaviours and shape perceptions within social contexts.

Monolingual English-speaking black African youth in South Africa are often misunderstood and labelled negatively, which diminishes their unique experiences. This study seeks to dispel these misconceptions, offering deeper insight into the social dynamics and challenges faced by monolingual English-speaking black Africans, while fostering an inclusive and accurate understanding of black African identity in South Africa. By exploring how language shapes identity and cultural connection, this study amplifies the voices of individuals who are frequently marginalised, revealing the multifaceted nature of blackness and demonstrating that identity encompasses diverse forms of black African identity beyond language alone.

1.2. Goals of the Research

The primary objective of this research is to examine how social interactions and language use shape perceptions of “blackness” within black African social contexts, focusing specifically on black African youth who communicate exclusively in English and do not speak their ancestral language. The secondary objectives aim to support the primary objective by examining the circumstances that lead to monolingualism and its effects on these individuals.

This will be achieved by:

- Examining the factors and contexts that have led to the predominance of English over ancestral languages among some black African youth.
- Investigating the unique experiences and challenges these youth face in terms of social interactions, identity formation, and cultural connectedness.
- Exploring how these youth navigate attitudes and perceptions about their lack of proficiency in their ancestral language within African social spaces.
- Analysing how black African youth perceive their own monolingualism.

1.3. Research Design

1.3.1. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in interpretivist philosophy to gain an in-depth understanding of the unique experiences and lived realities of monolingual English-speaking black African individuals. This approach is well-suited for engaging directly with social phenomena, allowing the researcher to understand individuals’ perspectives and thought processes (Corbetta, 2003: 42). By immersing in participants’ viewpoints, the methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of their attitudes and behaviours (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270; Bryman, 2012: 399; Corbetta, 2003: 236; Kalof, Dan, & Dietz, 2008: 80). The study is exploratory in nature.

1.3.2. Reflection on Researcher’s Positionality

This section aims to clarify how the researcher’s background connects to both the study’s topic and the identities of the participants.

The researcher was born and raised in Johannesburg to Xhosa parents, with isiXhosa as her first language. Growing up, she initially spoke only isiXhosa, but as she was socialised in spaces with diverse cultures and languages, English became the common language. Her

primary environments – neighbourhoods, schools, and even her parents’ workplaces – were predominantly English-speaking, which influenced her language use. To belong and be understood, she gradually adopted English as her primary language, resulting in a loss of fluency in isiXhosa. By the time she and her parents realised the impact of this language shift, it had already deeply affected her sense of identity.

This personal experience inspired the researcher to examine the lives of black Africans who speak only English and lack proficiency in their ancestral languages. Sharing common ground with the participants, particularly in being primarily exposed to English-speaking environments, the researcher uses this study as a means to explore questions about her own monolingualism and identity. In this way, this study highlights how the topics we choose to study are often connected to our personal lives. Furthermore, this study seeks to foreground the researcher’s perspective, intentionally distancing itself from the traditionally detached approach in social sciences, where the researcher’s identity and experiences are excluded from the research narrative.

1.3.3 Research Methods

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants’ perceptions of their lives and access their experiences and views of reality (Boyce & Neale, 2006: 3; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002: 727). A total of seven one-on-one interviews were held, with one conducted in a conference room at Rhodes University and the remaining interviews were held through Zoom or WhatsApp calls to accommodate participants who were not physically present. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and securely stored, with signed informed consent obtained beforehand.

The data was analysed using thematic and discourse analysis. Thematic analysis, following an inductive approach, allowed dominant themes to emerge naturally during the data analysis process (Merriam, 2002: 5; Thomas, 2006: 238). This method identified patterns and themes within the data, providing a nuanced understanding of the participants’ subjective experiences (Dawadi, 2020: 62). Discourse analysis focused on how language use shaped and reflected social contexts, interpersonal relationships, power dynamics, and identity formation. This dual approach offered a nuanced understanding of the role of language in constructing meaning and influencing social realities (Ho & Limpaecher, 2023; Sutherland, 2016).

1.3.4. Sampling

This study utilised non-probability sampling methods, specifically purposive and snowball sampling, to access participants. Purposive sampling focused on selecting young black African individuals, aged 20 to 35, raised in metropolitan urban areas and primarily speak English. Snowball sampling, a common technique in qualitative research, relies on networking and referrals (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaei, 2017: 2; Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019: 3). This method allowed the researcher to expand the participant pool by asking initial participants to refer others who met the study's criteria. The initial participants were individuals with whom the researcher already had established rapport, facilitating trust and openness during the research process. Together, these sampling techniques ensured the recruitment of participants whose experiences provided valuable insights aligned with the study's objectives.

1.3.5. Unit of Analysis

The participants, who constitute the unit of analysis in this study, are young black African South Africans aged 20 to 28, primarily from Johannesburg, Cape Town, and East London. This age group was selected because they witnessed significant transformations in the country during the 1990s, with some transitioning across different regions and others growing up directly in metropolitan environments following the end of apartheid, a contrast to the experiences of older generations. This unique position within this period made them more exposed to the sociolinguistic and socioeconomic shifts shaping modern South Africa (Rudwick, 2008: 109).

The primary research site was Johannesburg - a culturally diverse metropolitan area (Mongwe, 2006: 177) - as most participants are from there, and it provided a rich backdrop for the study. While Johannesburg served as the main focus, the research also included other urban areas to capture a broader perspective. Cities encompass many areas where individuals are bi- or multilingual, particularly among youth from townships. Language proficiency in urban areas is influenced by various factors, including the schools attended, neighbourhoods resided in, and social interactions. By studying black African individuals from specific suburbs in South Africa, the research aimed to uncover the shared experiences and cultural dynamics that characterise life in these communities. This approach provided insights into common patterns in their upbringing and identities.

Table 1.1: Profile of Participants

Participant No.	Age (years)	Gender	Occupation	How they identify/ethnic group	Place of residence
1	28	Male	Customer Service Representative	Black African (Xhosa)	San Francisco, California
2	20	Male	Student	Black African (Xhosa)	Gauteng, Pretoria
3	22	Female	Student; Model	Black African (Xhosa)	Western Cape, Cape Town
4	22	Female	Learnership in retail	Black African (Sesotho)	Cape Town, Brackenfell
5	22	Female	Entrepreneur; Event Specialist	Black African (Xhosa)	Eastern Cape. East London
6	28	Female	Research Assistant; Ad-hoc Sociology Lecturer; PhD candidate	Black African (siSwati)	Eastern Cape, Grahamstown
7	25	Female	Product Coordinator	Black African (Xhosa)	Western Cape, Cape Town

1.3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in this study focused on ensuring the research was conducted responsibly and respectfully. Approval was obtained from Rhodes University's Higher Degrees Committee and Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethical Clearance Number: 2024-7991-

8929) before recruitment began. Voluntary participation was emphasised, with participants providing signed consent after being fully informed about the study's purpose, data usage, requirements, time commitments, and their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. They were also assured of their safety and provided with the researcher's contact details to access the final study draft.

Confidentiality was strictly maintained by excluding personal identifiers, such as real names, schools, residences, and workplaces, from reports and presentations, instead using pseudonyms. Recorded interviews were securely handled, accessible only to the research team, and deleted after transcription to ensure anonymity.

These measures upheld participants' rights, privacy, and dignity throughout the research process.

1.3.7. Limitations and Issues of Reliability and Validity

No study is without limitations, and this research is no exception.

This research conducted within the constraints of a one-year Master's programme, faced limitations due to time and scope. Fieldwork was restricted to one month, resulting in a smaller sample size of seven participants instead of the intended ten. Despite efforts to recruit more participants through referrals and broadcasting, time constraints hindered additional recruitment. However, as noted by Bekele and Ago (2022: 44), "no universal rule dictates the maximum or minimum number of interviews for qualitative research." Qualitative research prioritises in-depth understanding and meaning over generalisation (Dworkin, 2012: 1319), and studies suggest six to eight interviews are sufficient for homogenous samples (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006, cited in Bekele & Ago, 2022: 48), making the data collected from seven participants valuable for addressing the research questions (Dworkin, 2021: 1320).

The use of Zoom for some interviews presented challenges, such as limited observation of non-verbal cues, and technical issues occasionally affecting audio quality. Nonetheless, Zoom provided flexibility in scheduling, allowing participants to engage from comfortable environments, which fostered candid responses (Irani, 2019: 4; Gray, Wong-Wylie, Rempel, & Cook 2020: 6).

Validity concerns the extent to which the data accurately reflects the truth, in this case, the participants' own views and experiences (Babbie, 2010: 153). The use of interviews is

beneficial for maintaining validity, as the direct contact allows for real-time verification of data accuracy and relevance (Denscombe, 2003: 189).

Researcher subjectivity was acknowledged as a potential limitation, with a reflexive approach adopted to minimise bias. Regularly rechecking interpretations and critically reflecting on potential interviewer bias and preconceived perceptions helped ensure the reliability of findings (Babbie, 2010: 151).

While the study faced limitations, related to sample size, virtual interviews, and researcher subjectivity, measures were implemented to mitigate these issues, preserving the reliability and validity of the research.

1.4. Structure of the Thesis

Chapter One introduced the dissertation, providing a brief contextualisation of the study. It outlined the primary research question and the objectives of the study. Additionally, it provided an overview of the research design, including the methods and methodologies used for data collection and analysis. Chapter Two features a comprehensive literature review, examining existing studies and literature relevant to the research topic to establish a strong foundation for the study. Chapter Three delves into the theoretical frameworks that underpin this research, providing an in-depth analysis of the two frameworks that guide the study. Chapter Four presents the data analysis, detailing the findings, identifying the themes that emerged during the research, and providing interpretations of these themes. Finally, Chapter Five serves as the conclusion, summarising the key discussions and outcomes of the dissertation. It highlights the study's contributions and insights, summarises the findings related to each subsidiary objective, and offers recommendations and conclusions based on the findings. Furthermore, it reflects on the broader implications and limitations of the research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The main objective of this study is to examine how social interactions and language use shape perceptions of “blackness” within black African social contexts, focusing specifically on black African youth who communicate exclusively in English and do not speak their heritage language. It is essential to analyse existing literature that explores the interesting interplay of language, identity, and belonging among monolingual English-speaking black African individuals. As these individuals navigate through their ethnic communities, they confront the complexities of language use and its impact on their self-perception, social interactions, and cultural affiliation. This chapter critically reviews the existing literature that sheds light on the nuanced experiences of these voices often unheard. Its purpose is to highlight the significant role of language in shaping identities, facilitating interactions, and fostering a sense of belonging within black African social environments in South Africa. Both this chapter and the broader study aim to investigate how language reflects and shapes identities and cultural connections within diverse black African communities.

This literature review chapter is organised into distinct sections and sub-sections. The first section delves into the significance of language in everyday life, discussing its various functions. Additionally, this section covers the importance of language within the South African context, with a focus on the country’s twelve official languages. Within this discussion, there is a sub-section dedicated to exploring how regions influence language use and contribute to the formation of identity. Specifically, it examines the role of language in urban environments, highlighting its impact on identity in diverse city settings. The subsequent section will examine how language shapes personal and cultural identity, considering how language intersects with physical traits and perceptions of ethnic identity. Drawing on existing scholarship, this section investigates the influence of language on notions of ethnic authenticity and a sense of belonging.

The chapter concludes with a section that explores the experiences of monolingual English-speaking black African individuals and their identity negotiations. By delving into personal stories, this section examines their language development and their interactions while using English in black African social settings. Through analysing language behaviours, it reveals how language reflects and reinforces ethnic identities within specific social settings. Furthermore, it will shed light on how language can transform ethnic identities, challenging

conventional notions of ethnic classification and highlighting the dynamic process of identity construction.

This chapter provides a thorough analysis of the relationship between language, identity, and belonging. By synthesising findings from academic research and empirical studies, it aims to demonstrate how language influences the construction, negotiation, and transformation of ethnic identities within contemporary societies. This review will inform and guide the current study by illuminating the gap in existing literature, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in this field. Moreover, it will prompt key questions and introduce fundamental concepts that will be explored throughout the study.

2.2. The Significance of Language

Language is a tool that is used every day (Shashkevich, 2019). It serves as a medium through which the experiences of individuals and communities are expressed (Rovira, 2008: 64). Meaning is inherently attached to language (De Angulo, 2021: 17; Everaert, Huybregts, Berwick, Chomsky, Tattersall, Moro, & Bolhuis., 2017: 569; Foucault, 1972: 118; Goduka, 1998: 36). Within language, the transmission of meaning occurs, allowing symbolic messages to be conveyed. This indicates that language not only carries meaning but also facilitates the communication process by transmitting this meaning (Chomsky, 2013: 654).

Language is more than a tool for communication; it also serves as a vehicle for expressing one's innermost self (Chomsky, 2013: 648; Rovira, 2008: 66; Thesen, 1997: 494). It allows individuals to articulate their lived experiences and fosters mutual understanding among people (Rovira, 2008: 66). It is inherently creative and has unlimited potential for innovation, creating new expressions, words, or linguistic forms. It has the ability to generate new ideas and concepts (Chomsky, 2013: 649). In a more profound and spiritual or religious manner, according to Rovira (2008: 64), language "serves as a vessel for expressing ... spiritual truths or divine messages." This emphasises the significant role of language in both mundane and profound aspects of human existence. Additionally, language plays a crucial role in shaping personal, ethnic, cultural, and national identity (Leibowitz, Adendorff, Daniels, Loots, Nakasa, Ngxabazi, Van der Merwe, & Van Deventer, 2005: 25).

Language includes the concept of the 'mother tongue', a metaphor highlighting the mother's role in cultural transmission. As highlighted by one participant in Mills's study (cited in Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 174), it represents the language that "your family has been speaking for many, many years". Furthermore, it serves as a tangible expression of culture,

ethnicity, or nationality (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 166), embodying a cluster of attributes that interconnect language, self-awareness, domestic context, belonging, and nurturing. This linguistic connection is twofold: language belongs to individuals shaping their identity, while simultaneously aligning them with a specific community as their sense of self evolves (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 174). Indeed, an individual's relationship with their mother tongue is integral to defining their identity (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 166).

Scholarship demonstrates that language significantly shapes identity. It serves as a tool through which individuals affiliate with others within their ethnic group, engage in social interactions, and establish a sense of belonging within their community (Castells, 1997; Goduka, 1998; Leibowitz *et al.* 2005; Mckenna, 2005; Rovira, 2008; Thesen, 1997). 'Discourse' emerges from language and encompasses both mother tongue and proficiency in additional languages. It comprises a set of linguistic features that shape the way individuals perceive society and culture (Fairclough, 1992: 64; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25). Through language, individuals can share personal narratives that reflect their identities, experiences, and cultural heritage (Goduka, 1998: 36; Rovira, 2008: 66), thereby underscoring its intrinsic connection to cultural expression (Rovira, 2008: 66). Language, therefore, serves as a fundamental aspect of cultural identity (Rovira, 2008: 66). Moreover, it establishes the circumstances under which individuals are either included or excluded and feel a sense of belonging or alienation (Rovira, 2008: 68).

Ethnicity plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of black African South Africans, particularly due to the historical context of apartheid, which forcibly segregated black African South Africans into ethnically defined "independent homelands", primarily based on language (Rudwick, 2008: 4; Thesen, 1997: 500; Thomas & Wagner, 2013: 1041). This systemic separation entrenched linguistic and cultural divisions, reinforcing ethnic identities tied to specific languages and territories. The apartheid regime's policy ensured that language became a marker of ethnic and cultural differentiation thereby influencing the socio-political landscape and individual identities. Historically, European languages dominated official sectors such as government, business, media, and education, marginalising indigenous African languages (Rehema, 2023). This dominance of European languages contributed to the erosion of indigenous languages and cultural practices. Consequently, the post-apartheid era has seen efforts to reclaim and revitalise African languages as a means of restoring cultural unity.

Acknowledging the historically diminished use and status of indigenous languages, the state was mandated to take practical and positive measures to elevate their status and promote their use (Currie, 2005: 1). With the adoption of the new constitution in 1996, aimed at giving

African languages more prominence, nine indigenous African languages were accorded official status (Rehema, 2023). This policy shift sought to rectify the linguistic injustices of apartheid, which recognised only English and Afrikaans as official languages (Currie, 2005: 2; Rudwick, 2008: 5). The current linguistic landscape reflects diverse usage across the country's twelve official languages (du Plessis & Naudé, 2017: 159; Rudwick, 2008: 2). The term "official language" refers to the right of individuals to speak the language of their choice and the rights of linguistic communities to use their language in private communication and public forums, including media, schools, public meetings, and organisations (Currie, 2005: 5; Rudwick, 2008: 2). South Africa recognises twelve official languages, which include isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, English, Sepedi, Setswana, Sesotho, Xitsonga, siSwati, Tshivenda, , and South African Sign Language (Dauncey, 2024; Newzroom Afrika, 2023). Thus, South Africa stands out globally as a culturally rich and multilingual country, with various languages spoken across nine provinces.

In South Africa, speaking one's heritage mother tongue holds symbolic and cultural significance (Goduka, 1998; Rudwick, 2008). Languages in the country embody deep meaning, symbolising customs, values, and historical and cultural heritage (Rovira, 2008: 66). This intertwining of language and ethnicity is evident in the societal expectation that individuals with certain physical characteristics or names should speak a specific language (Rovira, 2008: 65). Consequently, tensions arise towards those who do not speak their mother tongue in various contexts (Fought, 2006: 19; Rovira, 2008: 67; Thesen, 2007: 501). Depending on the context and language spoken, individuals may either fit into their cultural group or face ostracisation. In some instances, individuals place great importance on their heritage language as a means of asserting their cultural heritage and resisting assimilation into dominant linguistic norms (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 26). However, the extent of individual control over language choice and the myriad factors shaping one's reality remains complex and warrants further research and exploration.

There are various factors that contribute to individuals becoming monolingual, specifically proficient only in English within the scope of this research. According to Rovira (2008: 66), some individuals feel compelled to abandon or suppress their heritage language to assimilate into a new environment. They may prioritise the language of the new environment over their heritage language in order to fit in or be accepted. Children of immigrants settling in a foreign country where a different language is spoken, as well as children who are not immigrants but speak a different first language and socialise in an environment where another language is

predominant, face significant challenges (Montrul, 2013; Rovira, 2008; Seliger & Vago, 1991). These children must navigate not only the language barrier but also the complexities of forming their personal and cultural identities in a new context. Some individuals have never been taught their ancestral language, which significantly impacts them. The lack of transmission of familial history, culture, and heritage contributes to their sense of being different or separate from their cultural group, while acknowledging a shared sense of difference from others outside their cultural group (Rovira, 2008: 67). Therefore, first language attrition, or language death¹, and monolingualism result from a combination of factors and actions.

Language significantly influences how people relate to one another and perceive each other based on perceived language affiliations (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 26). This suggests that language has a profound impact on social interactions and relationships, shaping perceptions and interactions based on language connections or differences. Consequently, power dynamics are embedded in language and communication.

These power dynamics affect social interactions and relationships, as highlighted by Foucault (Thesen, 1997: 505), who emphasised that language operates as systems of knowledge and practices that shape individuals and societies through mechanisms of power (Fairclough, 1992: 51; Foucault, 1972: 120). Language serves as a mechanism through which social norms, ideologies, and hierarchies are constructed and maintained (Coplan, 1986; Rea, 2006). Individuals are deeply embedded in these power struggles within discourses, impacting their interactions with others (Castells, 1997: 7; Fairclough, 1992: 63; Foucault, 1972: 220; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 1), and the construction of their identities (Fairclough, 1992: 64; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 20).

2.2.1. Regional Factors in Language Development

Urban environments, unlike homogeneous cities or provinces, are characterised by a diverse array of cultures and languages coexisting within the same space (Bornman, Álvarez-Mosquera, & Seti, 2018: 28; Rudwick, 2008: 1). This diversity stems from urban movements², as suggested by Castells (1997: 64), which are essential in urban contexts. Urban movements serve to identify and safeguard common interests, share life experiences, and generate new

¹ Language death is a gradual process of an individual transitioning to another language, wherein a speaker ceases to use their native language, as a means of survival (Wolfram, 2004: 765).

² Urban movements are characterised by the sustained mobilisation of people with common social or political goals. Cities play a crucial role in fostering these movements because their unique characteristics—such as dense populations, diverse communities, and access to various resources—create an environment where people can connect, organise, and mobilise effectively around their common objectives (Van Haperen, 2022).

meanings (Castells, 1997: 64). These social movements typically focus on three main objectives: enhancing living conditions and collective consumption, affirming local cultural identity, and advocating for local political autonomy and citizen participation (Castells, 1997: 64). Although the outcomes of these movements may vary, their mere existence often contributes significantly to the production of meaning, both for participants and the broader community (Castells, 1997: 64).

This process of meaning production is foundational to cities throughout history, as the significance of the social environment emerges from conflicts and negotiations among different social groups with divergent interests and values (Castells, 1997: 64; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 1). The meaning attributed to urban spaces is shaped by the interactions and conflicts between various stakeholders, including residents, policymakers, and developers. As these groups vie for influence and control over urban spaces, the design and utilisation of these spaces reflects the power struggles and encapsulates the predominant social and political dynamics of the city (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 1; Wiechers, 2010: 3). Understanding this knowledge is vital, as my study focuses on urban environments characterised by these complex dynamics.

The metropolitan layout of cities significantly impacts the languages spoken across various settings such as schools, workplaces, homes, and different social spaces. For instance, in schools in the United States, language policies tend to favour a homogeneous monolingual society, prioritising English as the dominant language of instruction (Rovira, 2008: 69). Similarly, South African schools adhere to similar language policies. According to Thesen (1997: 489), the language policy on education in South Africa is highly politicised, leading to the predominance of English as the language of instruction in classrooms. This can pose challenges for children with limited English proficiency, as the environment may not foster bilingualism (Rovira, 2008: 71). Since schools serve as pivotal settings for socialisation among children (Rovira, 2008: 71), language acquisition disruptions can occur (Rovira, 2008: 75). When learners are forced to shift to a different language, their heritage language may fade into obscurity. In regions where English holds dominance, as noted by Rovira (2008: 71) “English quickly displaces and replaces the primary language.”

Educational systems perpetuate disparities in power dynamics among linguistic minorities (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 2; Rovira, 2008: 72). When speakers of the dominant language disregard the importance of other languages, it creates unequal relations toward linguistic minorities (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 2; Rovira, 2008: 72). Therefore, “English is learned

at the cost of the mother tongue, rather than in addition to the mother tongue” (Rovira, 2008: 73). This linguistic shift places individuals in a challenging position as they try to reconcile their heritage and cultural background with the assimilation process of acquiring the new language (Rovira, 2008: 63; Castells, 1997: 6). When children begin to lose proficiency in their heritage language, they may feel disconnected and, at times, distant from their family (Goduka, 1998: 36; Rovira, 2008: 76). This feeling of detachment can also be experienced by individuals who have only been able to speak English (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Moreover, they may encounter criticism, scepticism, ridicule, or humiliation (Rovira, 2008: 79), which affects their sense of belonging and integration within their cultural community.

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals’ integration into communities and societies, as well as how they relate to others. This includes forming connections through shared language proficiency, assimilating into a dominant language to fit in, or facing communication challenges due to language barriers. This premise underpins my argument and the focus of my study, which aims to explore, analyse, and articulate the complexities of these experiences, particularly among monolingual English-speaking black African youth navigating multiple cultural and linguistic influences simultaneously. It encompasses not only the process of linguistic shift, where individuals may lose their primary language while acquiring another, but also instances where individuals may not even learn their heritage language due to various circumstances. Such experiences may evoke feelings of loss, disconnection, and identity conflict as individuals grapple with the tension between preserving their cultural and linguistic heritage and assimilating into their surroundings (Rovira, 2008: 66). The following section will delve into how language influences identity formation and cultural identity construction.

2.3. Language, Identity, and Culture

“Where Are You Really From?”

When encountering a person for the first time, the first question that is almost always asked is: “What is your name?” to which I respond, “Onele.” My name is my first identity marker. Depending on the context, the subsequent question might be, “Where are you from?” or “Where do you live?” If I am outside Gauteng, particularly in the Eastern Cape where isiXhosa is the predominant spoken language, the focus tends to be on my place of origin. When I am in Gauteng, the focus shifts to my place of residence, reflecting an interest in my upbringing and social surroundings. The first question (*Where are you from?*) seems to be aimed at categorising me based on my appearance, name, and speech, attempting to place me within an ethnic group.

In response, I typically respond “Johannesburg”, while for the second question (*Where do you live?*), I specify the suburb, stating that “I am from the East Rand, specifically Bedfordview/Edenvale.” I am aware that what the person might truly want to ask is “Where are you really from?” which pertains more to my parents’ background and origin. My second identifier - “I am Xhosa” – reveals more about who I really am than knowing my name and where I live. Rovira (2008: 65) echoes this sentiment, noting how physical traits and names often prompt inquiries into one’s “true identity”.

Research literature has shown that the topics researchers pursue intersect with their personal interests and experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Flick, 2009). Therefore, it is evident from the above account that this study stands to fulfil both personal and scholastic curiosities. This section will unpack the intricate connections between language and identity, as well as language and culture, exploring their complexities.

2.3.1. Language and Identity

Identity is conceptualised within the context of social actors, involving a process of the construction and creation of meaning (Castells, 1997: 6). This implies that identity is not fixed but rather constructed and given meaning through social interactions and experiences. Self-identity is the way individuals understand themselves based on their personal experiences and life stories (Castells, 1997: 10; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25). Language serves as a tool for individuals to narrate their stories and articulate who they are (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25; Rovira, 2008: 64). This way of using words expresses our perceptions and how we view the world (Fairclough, 1992: 64; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25; Shashkevich, 2019). This process is reflected in discourse, which links language use to the values and norms of a specific culture. Discourses include the systems of communication, language, and social practices that shape discussions around identity categories (Fairclough, 1992: 64; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25; Mckenna, 2005: 269; Thesen, 1997: 488).

Identities often originate from dominant institutions and societal structures, yet they only truly become genuine identities when individuals internalise and imbue them with personal meaning (Castells, 1997: 7; Du Plessis & Naudé, 2017: 159). This process highlights how influential institutions and structures shape self-perception and the perception of others, as individuals integrate these identities into their sense of self. Identities serve as symbolic markers of an individual’s beliefs and values, organising the meaning behind their actions (Castells, 1997: 7). In contexts where traditional social structures and norms are less influential, individuals

actively engage in reflecting on and constructing their own identities, rather than simply inheriting them from tradition or predefined roles (Castells, 1997: 10).

Chomsky (2013: 649) supports this notion by stating that both external factors (such as situational contexts or social conditions) and internal factors (our own thoughts, feelings, beliefs) influence how we speak or the language we use. However, this influence does not dictate our speech; Instead, “it merely inclines or motivates us towards certain speech patterns or expressions” (Chomsky, 2013: 649). We still maintain a level of autonomy and agency in how we choose to express ourselves.

This passage suggests that people have the agency to define who they are. However, the concept of agency raises questions. For instance, do individuals have a choice in language acquisition when raised in a particular linguistic environment? At what point can individuals consciously choose to adopt or retain a language, considering the influences of their upbringing? These questions challenge the assertions made by Castells (1997) and Chomsky (2013) and raises questions about self-awareness: When and how do individuals decide to use their heritage language in settings where a different dominant language is spoken? Exploring the development of self-awareness regarding language choice, particularly regarding the age at which it emerges, is an area of interest.

Self-awareness, according to Castells (1997: 6), is shaped by external factors and societal expectations. This indicates that an individual’s understanding of themselves and their place in the world is not solely based on their internal thoughts and feelings but also on external influences such as societal norms, cultural expectations, and the perceptions of others. This interaction between self-perception and external perceptions shapes individuals’ self-awareness. It is also important to note that the environments individuals inhabit shape both self-perception and how they are perceived and categorised by others. Therefore, exploring the social contexts where individuals feel a heightened self-esteem or encounter identity conflicts and disconnection is crucial in my research, especially as I concentrate on African social environments.

“Traditionally, identity is associated with a speaker’s home language³” (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25). This first language serves as both a marker of identity and a source of affiliation to a culture or community (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 4). Identity markers and labels provide individuals with a framework for defining themselves in relation to the

³ A ‘home language’ is the first language we come into contact with, typically spoken at home (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25) by primary caregivers and others present during infancy.

world (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25; Shashkevich, 2019). Language, as a source of affiliation, enables people to connect with various groups and communities. Mckenna (2005: 270) asserts that adopting a particular discourse involves more than simply using certain words or phrases; it entails embodying the roles and behaviours associated with that discourse. This idea is exemplified by a participant in Mills's study (cited in Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 179), who highlighted the importance of her children maintaining their heritage language to foster religious connections and develop moral behaviour through adherence to their mother tongue. This shows that "identity is intricately intertwined with language and discourse" (Mckenna, 2005: 270). Other scholars, including Chomsky (2013: 648), Fairclough (1992: 64), and Shashkevich (2019), share this perspective on discourse and its implications.

In many cases, the language spoken at home tends to be a person's heritage mother tongue (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 174). This heritage language carries significant familial history, cultural heritage, and the stories, traditions, and values transmitted across generations (Batibo, 2005: 32; Goduka, 1998: 36; Rovira, 2008: 67; Tchindjang, Bopda, & Ngamgne, 2008: 38). This language is intertwined with an individual's cultural identity, which will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent sub-section. This intimacy with the home language fosters positive behaviours and practices that reinforce one's sense of self (Rovira, 2008: 66). Moreover, it enables close bonds and intimacy within the family and cultural community. However, there are instances where the mother tongue is not spoken at home due to various reasons.

There are several factors that contribute to situations where the mother tongue is not spoken at home, including parental traumas associated with the language. Parents may choose not to pass on their heritage language to their children to shield them from experiencing similar difficulties. This is illustrated in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (2023) discussion, where a speaker shares how his parents refrained from teaching their ancestral language due to past experiences of punishment for speaking it in school. Similarly, Xhakaza (2020: para. 3) describes how some parents, harbouring internalised traumas from their language experiences, refrain from teaching their children their native languages. Another reason could be a perceived lack of necessity, where parents do not see the need to speak their heritage language, as seen in Spectra (2013: para. 4), where immigrant parents in the United States prioritise English to aid their children's integration into dominant culture. Xhakaza (2020: para. 1) also notes parents aspiring for their children to only speak English, or prioritising English over their African languages. Additionally, mixed-language households, where each parent speaks a

different language, may result in children learning English as their primary language instead of their heritage language. These circumstances have a bearing on how an individual shapes their identity.

One of the crucial stages in a child's life involves socialisation, typically occurring within schools and neighbourhoods. Depending on the context, efforts may be made to preserve the first language, or strongly emphasise acquiring a new language leading to the risk of the first language being forgotten, a phenomenon known as linguistic genocide (Rovira, 2008: 72). This process often occurs in schools, where children are forcibly assimilated into the dominant group through linguistic and cultural pressures (Rovira, 2008: 72), reflecting power struggles within language and discourse. These power dynamics significantly shape identity construction and understanding, influencing whose experiences and perspectives are valued and whose are marginalised (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 1; Rovira, 2008: 72).

For instance, Mills's study (cited in Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 185) notes a participant who taught her children English to help them adapt to the school environment. This expectation is mirrored in South African urban areas, where children are often compelled to adopt English in order to integrate and be accepted into educational institutions (Thesen, 1997). Despite English being the native language of a minority of South Africans, it holds a dominant position in education, even for students from non-English language backgrounds (Du Plessis, 2006: 28). This process of assimilating a new language presents challenges, as children must balance learning the new language while maintaining proficiency in their first language, often leading to situations where individuals engage in code-switching.

Code-switching, also known as language mixing, is the practice of transitioning between languages based on the context. It is a common phenomenon that involves individuals switching from one language to another in response to changes in the speech situation (McSwan & Faltis, 2020: 6). This phenomenon, as noted by Gardner-Chloros and Weston (2015: 182), reflects the ability of individuals to adapt their language use to different social settings. Even children's tendency to respond to one language using another is recognised as a form of code-switching (Ribot and Hoff, 2014: 2). Understanding why English-speaking black African individuals engage in code-switching is vital, as it profoundly influences their identity, despite their cultural background and physical appearance associating them with a particular ethnic group.

In the scenarios mentioned above, I personally relate to the experience of responding to one language with another. During my formative years, I exclusively spoke my first language, isiXhosa. It was not until I attended nursery school that I encountered another language. At this young and impressionable age, I had little control over the circumstances, and as I learned this new language (English), my proficiency in speaking my first language began to wane unknowingly. Unfortunately, there were no strategies in place at school to support the retention of my first language. Furthermore, at home, my parents would speak to me in isiXhosa while I responded in English, leading to a decline in my proficiency in speaking my first language.

Individuals from diverse backgrounds share similar experiences of not speaking their ancestral language. For instance, Benjamin Baez, a Spanish author, assimilated into a new environment, losing his “original language” (Baez, 2009: 123), and Georges Perec, a Polish Jew novelist and filmmaker, does not speak his parents’ language, leading him to feel alienated from his cultural heritage (discussed in Rovira’s (2008: 66) study); Rovira herself, a Cuban woman, experienced a decline in proficiency in her first language (Rovira, 2008: 67). These examples demonstrate how one’s environment shapes language development, thereby influencing their sense of identity.

Identities are often shaped by external factors in diverse environments (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 32). In places with a mix of different cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives, individuals’ identities are frequently influenced by factors outside of themselves. For example, ethnic identities might be assigned to individuals based on their physical appearance, while reactions may vary when considering language use. Attitudes towards particular languages and their speakers are influenced by the perceived status and power associated with those languages (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 1; Seliger & Vago, 1991: 4; Shashkevich, 2019). The way people view a language and its speakers is influenced by their beliefs about the prestige, importance, and dominance of that language in society (Seliger & Vago, 1991: 4). This indicates that people may hold preconceived notions and stereotypes, “often inaccurate ones” (Rovira, 2008: 65), which influence whether individuals are “embraced or ignored, accepted or rejected” (Rovira, 2008: 65).

When monolingual English-speaking black African individuals interact in African social environments⁴, they may experience a sense of disconnection and alienation from aspects of

⁴ 'Social environments' refer to the settings and conditions in which people live and interact with others. These environments shape how individuals behave, what they believe, and the experiences they have within their community. They include things like social norms (the rules or expectations for behaviour), institutions (like

their cultural background and struggle to fit into these spaces (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 177). This sense of disconnection and alienation can pose challenges in integrating into their cultural communities and social circles. Investigating the challenges faced by monolingual English-speaking black African individuals in navigating their cultural identities and social spaces is a key focus of this research.

People often seek out community organisations that foster a sense of belonging and cultural identity (Castells, 1997: 64). These organisations serve as spaces where individuals with similar characteristics or shared interests gather, fostering a sense of community and connection. Within the context of black African social spaces, these organisations play a vital role in providing support and solidarity within the African community. However, when there exists a language barrier between English-speaking black African individuals and these communities, how are they received and integrated into these spaces? This question will be explored in depth in my research. The subsequent sub-section will delve into the intricate relationship between language and culture, elucidating how it impacts acceptance or rejection within cultural communities and ethnic social spaces.

2.3.2. Language and Culture

Language serves as a vital medium for the expression and preservation of culture (Goduka, 1998: 36; Rovira, 2008: 66; Rubongoya, 1975: 15; Rudwick, 2008: 6; Shashkevich, 2019). In the study of culture, language encompasses all symbolic behaviour (Rudwick, 2008: 6), with each language symbolising the culture with which it is most intimately associated (Rudwick, 2008: 8). Language not only reflects prevailing social and cultural norms but also contributes to their maintenance and transmission (Goduka, 1998: 37; Rudwick, 2008: 66), highlighting the strong connection between language and culture (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25). Culture embodies the accumulated ways of life passed down through generations (Idang, 2015: 99; Rovira, 2008: 66). It includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a community (Eliot, 1949: 31) and encompasses both tangible elements, like physical objects, and intangible aspects, such as beliefs and traditions (Wiechers, 2010: 2). It represents the patterned way of life shared by a particular group of people who claim a common origin or descent, encompassing material achievements, feelings, manners, and morals (Aziza, 2001: 31; Idang, 2015: 98; Mlonyeni & Naudé, 2004: 248), thus shaping the identity of a group (Idang, 2015: 108; Krakouer, 2023: 823). Eliot (1949: 23) contends that true cultural cohesion arises from

schools or workplaces), relationships with others, and the physical spaces people encounter in their daily lives (Barnett & Casper, 2001: 465).

shared interests, participation, and mutual appreciation among individuals. The shared values, customs, and histories inherent in a culture profoundly influence an individual's behaviour, thoughts, and worldview (Mlonyeni & Naudé, 2004: 248; Rovira, 2008: 66; Shashkevich, 2019; Thesen, 1997: 487).

The acquisition of culture occurs through the process of socialisation, as individuals internalise the values and behaviours of their community. It is essential for individuals to feel connected not just to their country but also to specific areas within it, building strong ties to their local communities (Eliot, 1949: 52). Therefore, culture and society are deeply intertwined; culture cannot exist without a community (Idang, 2015: 99).

The vitality and richness of a culture stem from the varied cultural contributions of its regions, each with its own unique cultural characteristics (Eliot, 1949: 66). The culture of a community sets it apart from other societies, encompassing a variety of unique traits (Idang, 2015: 97). These distinct attributes include language, clothing, music, occupations, arts, religion, and dance (Eliot, 1949; Idang, 2015). Language plays a crucial role in shaping our perception of society and culture, influencing how we understand and interpret them. Through words, phrases, expressions, and language conventions, our understanding of various societal and cultural aspects, such as behaviour, interactions, and beliefs is shaped (Rovira, 2008: 6).

In the realm of culture, distinctions can be made between traditional cultural practices and those influenced by modernity or globalisation (Wiechers, 2010: 2). In primitive communities, which are less developed compared to modern societies, different aspects of culture are closely connected, illustrating how cultural practices within these communities are interrelated and dependent on each other for coherence and functionality (Eliot, 1949: 23). Fafunwa (1974: 48) argues that in traditional societies, children naturally absorb their cultural heritage by observing and mimicking the actions of their elders and peers. They witness and participate in various cultural rituals and ceremonies, inevitably becoming immersed in their cultural and physical surroundings. "This shows that every human being who grows up in a particular society is likely to become infused with the culture of that society, knowingly or unknowingly during the process of social interaction" (Idang, 2015: 99).

Emotions and attitudes significantly influence how people engage with their surroundings and make decisions. Interactions can be influenced by factors such as personal experiences, societal expectations, and cultural norms. Individuals may have their own understanding of who they are and how they identify culturally, but this can be reflected differently in how they present

themselves to others or engage with their cultural community. Language serves as a means to articulate these internal processes, highlighting its importance in both social interaction and decision-making (Goduka, 1998; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005; Shashkevich, 2019). Therefore, language, through its structure and meaning, not only shapes human experiences but also holds a crucial position in defining one's cultural identity (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986: 13; Rovira, 2008: 66).

Africa is home to numerous diverse ethnic groups, each shaped by various cultures inhabiting the continent, characterised by distinct languages, values, and traditions (Idang, 2015: 100). (Explore the significance of language in Africa through the works of Afangbedji, 2023; Batibo, 2005; Mukuthuria, 2009; New African, 2022; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Rettová, 2002; Rubongoya, 1975; and Tchindjang *et al.*, 2008). With much of Africa's history being orally transmitted, cultural wisdom finds its richest expression in proverbs, passed down through generations (Rudwick, 2008: 10). This, again, highlights the significance of language in culture. Rooted in strong moral principles, African culture encompasses a vast array of beliefs and customs upheld by individuals (Idang, 2015: 103). Integral to African societies are social values that dictate accepted behaviours and practices, guiding the conduct of community members in various contexts (Idang, 2015: 103). These cultural norms serve as benchmarks for acceptable behaviour within society and contribute significantly to shaping the collective identity of the group.

Black African individuals often encounter predefined roles and cultural expectations based solely on ethnicity. For instance, within the African community, there is a strong cultural emphasis on language as a marker of respect. Many African parents and elders consider it highly disrespectful for children to communicate with them in English, viewing the language as inadequate for showing proper respect (Rudwick, 2008: 9). Consequently, young people often avoid switching to English when interacting with older or rural relatives. There is a perceived mismatch between the values embedded in the African culture and the expressive power of the English language (Rudwick, 2008: 9). Older members of the African community lament the declining importance of *ukuhlonipha* [respect] in the face of increased English language usage, highlighting tensions between cultural traditions and linguistic practices (Rudwick, 2008: 9).

In addition to *ukuhlonipha*, other cultural practices help reinforce approved codes of conduct and maintain social order within African society. These practices play a vital role in promoting adherence to established behavioural norms and serve as mechanisms of social control within

the community (Rudwick, 2008: 10). Deeply rooted in African culture, these elements are conveyed and expressed through language, highlighting the essential role of language in cultural contexts.

2.3.2.1. Language and Culture in South Africa

Understanding the significance of language is key to appreciating its role in South African cultures. Language is deeply intertwined with culture, serving as a fundamental element of the nation's identity (Nuttall & Michael, 1998: 58). It also holds significant value as a basic human right, as emphasised by The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and Woolman (2007). Language and culture profoundly shape individual identity and values, influencing how people perceive themselves and their surroundings (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 162). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 - Chapter 2: Bill of Rights Section 30, highlights the necessity of protecting and promoting linguistic and cultural diversity to ensure their preservation and growth (Currie, 2005: 3). Moreover, The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on language, granting individuals the freedom to use their language of choice (Currie, 2005: 3).

Individuals are both users and bearers of culture, reinforcing their cultural identity (Wiechers, 2010: 3). Protecting language and cultural rights is crucial for people's dignity (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981: 57) cited in Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004: 163) because those aspects are integral to their identity and well-being. Protecting language and cultural rights ensures that ethnic groups can maintain their unique identities, preserve their heritage, and participate fully in society without facing discrimination or marginalisation. This helps foster inclusion, diversity, and respect for the rights and dignity of all individuals within a society. While some traditions may be fading among younger generation, they still hold symbolic significance and are revered as essential elements of culture (Coplan, 1986; Rudwick, 2008).

English-speaking black African individuals may encounter a unique challenge in navigating their cultural identity due to language differences (Goduka, 1998: 36). This linguistic divide may evoke a sense of alienation within their own cultural community, while simultaneously highlighting their distinctiveness from other cultures. This aspect makes the study of their experiences particularly intriguing. By exploring the experiences of these individuals and delving into the intricacies of their identity formation, this study seeks to uncover the realities they face and affirm their rightful position in society.

The experiences of monolingual English-speaking black African youth are often misunderstood or misinterpreted, leading to their frequent subjection to derogatory labels that undermine and minimise their unique experiences. Existing research has primarily focused on language attrition, lack of proficiency in speaking one's ancestral language, and identity among immigrants (See for example: Fishman, 1999; Montrul, 2013; Onukogu, 2022; Rovira, 2008; Seliger & Vago, 1991; and Smith, 2020). However, there remains a notable gap in literature regarding these individuals within their native environments. While Letshufi (2016) examined the self-identification of English-speaking black African individuals in South Africa, this study pursues nuanced objectives to analyse how language dynamics and social interactions influence and shape perceptions of black African identity within the country's complex social, economic, and political landscape.

This study aims to illuminate the realities and lived experiences of monolingual English-speaking black African youth, providing a deeper understanding of their social dynamics and challenges. Motivated by a desire to clarify the misconceptions and limited views of what it means to be black African in South Africa, this research intends to contribute to the ongoing conversation by bringing to light diverse and authentic definitions of black African identity. By focusing on these individuals in their native environments, this study seeks to enrich existing literature with new insights that may emerge.

Highlighting the significance of language in shaping identity and cultural connectedness, this study aligns with Xoliswa Mtose's (2008) work on black African identity in South Africa, which underscores the impact of political and social changes on identity formation. This study argues that while language influences social interactions and identity, it is not the sole determinant of Africanness. By analysing how language dynamics shape perceptions of black African identity within South Africa's complex social, economic, and political landscape, this research aims to offer a nuanced perspective on the fluidity and social construction of black African identity within evolving cultural contexts.

2.4. Negotiation of Identities

This section explores how individuals negotiate their identities when they do not speak their heritage language or cannot relate to their ethnic and cultural communities. It aims to highlight how the experiences of these subjects differ from those of black African individuals who are proficient in their ancestral language. The lack of proficiency in speaking their ancestral

language significantly impacts their ability to connect with their cultural and ethnic communities, resulting in distinct identity challenges.

The enduring effects of apartheid continue to influence the identities of the “born-free” generation, with external factors often imposing identities on individuals despite their perceived freedom. Although the “born-free” generation theoretically enjoys freedom from apartheid’s legal constraints, the historical and social impacts of apartheid still profoundly influence their self-perception and societal perception. External societal factors, such as historical, social, and economic contexts, continue to impose identities on these individuals, limiting their true freedom to self-identify. Proficiency in English is associated with social status and economic opportunities. It is not merely a skill but a marker of higher social status and better economic opportunities. This association with English affects how different societal groups view and value the language. It is crucial to understand that these attitudes are not uniform but are deeply shaped by specific contextual factors. Consequently, different groups may have varying perspectives on the importance and value of English based on their unique social, economic, and historical contexts (Rudwick, 2006: 71). By recognising the role of these contextual influences, we can better understand the complex dynamics of language attitudes in post-apartheid South Africa.

Negotiated identities refer to identity options that are contested and resisted by particular individuals. These negotiations are typically related to language and ethnicity (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 20). Race, ethnicity, and tradition significantly influence social interactions and discourse within South African society (Adams, Van de Vijver, & De Bruin, 2012: 386). The cultural landscape of South Africa is deeply intertwined with ethnic identity, which encompasses an individual’s sense of belonging to a specific ethnic group defined by shared language, history, and culture (Thomas & Wagner, 2013: 1038).

Language serves as the medium through which identity is expressed, negotiated, and understood within social contexts. There is ongoing construction and performance of identities in multilingual contexts (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 20). Struggles arise when certain identity options are imposed or devalued, and others remain inaccessible or misunderstood (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 20). Individuals find themselves in perpetual tension between self-chosen identities and others attempts to position them differently (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 20). For instance, there are instances of negotiated identities, such as experiences of “mother tongue shaming”. An example is recounted by Githae (2022), who faced criticism for not speaking her native language at a social gathering, leading to feelings of shame and a

temporary avoidance of her native name. Chigumadzi (2015: para. 3) shares a similar experience, highlighting struggles with cultural identity as individuals manoeuvre through spaces that may not fully accommodate their identity. Another example involves a Nigerian individual being judged based on their language proficiency, illustrating misconceptions that language fluency determines authenticity and belonging (Spectra, 2013: para. 15). Additionally, individuals may downplay aspects of their identity to avoid being labelled with negative stereotypes (February, 2018), reflecting the ongoing negotiation of identity within social spaces.

The language one knows best or uses mostly may not be the one cited as the heritage language (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 162). Second language learning is an area in which new identities can be sought out and constructed (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 23). One's first language may be the mother's tongue, and this can have effects on which languages children acquire, especially in contexts where bilingualism may be associated with inequality or social disadvantage. Thus, in the Breton example (cited in Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 165), mothers chose not to pass the language on to their children.

Linguistic means of negotiation of identities include code-switching and language choice (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 22). Code-switching, can have profound effects on individuals, as illustrated by the experiences of Nkonde (cited in Mohdin, 2017) and Li (2020). Nkonde (cited in Mohdin, 2017: para. 1), who moved from Zambia to the United Kingdom at the age of six, experienced a transition from her native language to English, resulting in the attrition of her first language. Similarly, Li (2020) once took pride in her multilingual abilities but now feels ashamed, reflecting the internal conflict caused by language shifts.

Individuals who experience first language attrition or do not even speak their ancestral language may face exclusion and alienation from groups with which they wish to affiliate (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 177). Duba (2022: para. 2) highlights how ethnicity often precedes individuals, influencing preconceived notions, shaping expectations regarding "the way they speak" and what they should aspire to, based on the colour of their skin. Failure to conform to these expectations can result in being labelled as an outsider (Duba, 2022: Para. 2).

One of the more severe damaging experiences is receiving demeaning, inaccurate labels of ethnicity and linguistic proficiency leading to people being called 'coconut'. The term coconut is used to describe a person who is "black on the outside and white on the inside" (February, 2018; Chigumadzi, 2015; McLeod, 2022). This means that this person is "perceived to embody

and embrace white culture” (Duba, 2022: para. 1). The term gained popularity in South Africa during the final days of apartheid as “black children entered formerly white schools” (Chigumadzi, 2015: para. 5). It is a pejorative label primarily aimed at black African individuals used by others within their racial group (February, 2018; Letshufi, 2016; Rudwick, 2008: 11; Xaso, 2019: para. 1). The term is weaponised as a form of exclusion and division within the black African community (February, 2018; Letshufi), based on assumptions and stereotypes about language preference and cultural alignment (Kinzler *et al.*, 2012: 215). These assumptions and stereotypes stem from the belief that individuals choose to speak English because they favour it over their ancestral language (Letshufi, 2016: 28). It is also assumed that having access to privileges such as education and higher learning experiences leads individuals to perceive themselves as superior on the societal scale and look down upon their own culture (February, 2018; Letshufi, 2016)

Those labelled as “coconuts” are often perceived as deviating from standard cultural norms (McLeod, 2022; Xaso, 2019: para. 1). People who make these kinds of statements often treat individuals as a collective whole representing an entire race (February, 2018). This label suggests that individuals must change to fit into a narrow concept of blackness for the comfort of others, thereby questioning their blackness and imposing a restrictive definition of identity (2019: para. 3). The notion that blackness is confined to a singular identity box ignores the vast diversity of experiences and intersections within the black African community (McLeod, 2022). Language is often used as a litmus test for claiming a connection to home countries, leading to exclusion and labelling as sell-outs for those who do not conform to perceived linguistic norms (Spectra, 2013: para. 15; Xaso, 2019: para. 4). While the term “coconut” extends beyond language, its implications highlight the complexity of identity within ethnic communities. The primary focus of this study is on language-related aspects, and therefore, this research will not delve into the concept of “coconut”, as it encompasses a broader range of factors beyond language. Letshufi (2016) examines various aspects of the concept.

According to Montrul (2013: 91) a considerable amount of scholarly work has explored the role of language in shaping identity, particularly concerning immigrants settling in foreign countries, which often involves language attrition and shifts in culture. However, there exists a notable gap in literature concerning individuals who are born and raised in their native country but do not speak their ancestral language (Sebina, 2014: 53). This gap is especially relevant in the South African context, given the country’s diverse linguistic and cultural landscape. The close connection between language and cultural identity makes language loss

or lack of proficiency a critical factor in understanding identity, highlighting the need for further exploration. This study seeks to contribute towards filling this gap by examining the experiences of black African youth in South Africa who are disconnected from their heritage language. It aims to understand how these individuals navigate their identities and interactions in social and cultural settings.

Seliger and Vago (1991: 3) emphasise that the attrition phenomena can occur in multilingual societies, within indigenous countries. In such contexts, individuals often face the challenge of resisting, negotiating, and sometimes even transforming themselves to assimilate. This study aims to contribute to the existing body of literature on identity negotiation by examining how individuals in multilingual areas in South Africa construct their identities. Specifically, it will focus on how their experiences contribute to their monolingualism, and how this monolingual reality shapes their negotiation of identity within black African social spaces.

2.5. Conclusion

Language serves as a reflection of one's upbringing and surroundings, influencing language development and self-perception. Ethnicity plays a significant role, as societal assumptions are often based on physical appearance leading to expectations that tend to overlook individual circumstances and life experiences. This chapter delved into the intricate interplay between language, ethnicity, and social environment, shedding light on how these factors shape one's identity and social interactions.

This chapter has elucidated the interconnectedness of key concepts and their impact on individuals' livelihoods. It has revealed the significance of language in shaping self-perception and serving as a marker of cultural identity. The significance of language has been explored in relation to both identity and culture, emphasising its fundamental role in shaping one's sense of self and facilitating social interactions and cultural affiliation. The chapter demonstrated the importance of language and cultural expectations within the South African context. Furthermore, the chapter highlighted the complexities of language use, social interactions, and cultural affiliation among monolingual English-speaking African individuals. It illuminated their unique experiences, diverging from what could be perceived as the norm for black African individuals, while also stressing the impact of multilingual urban environments on language acquisition and development. Additionally, the chapter has drawn attention to the research gap it seeks to address by highlighting an area ripe for further exploration: the experiences of

monolingual English-speaking black African youth born and raised in South Africa, who grapple with identity conflicts.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A Symbolic Interactionist and Social Constructionist Approach

3.1. Introduction

Human actions are strongly influenced by personal life experiences, backgrounds, and the larger systems that shape people's lives. These systems can include cultural norms, social structures, and particularly language, which plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals understand themselves (their identity) and how they relate to others (Mills, 1959). To understand human behaviour, it is essential to explore the definitions, meanings, and processes that individuals form as they navigate their social contexts (Aksan, Kısac, Aydın, & Demirbiken, 2009: 904). The primary objective is to explore how people born and raised in metropolitan cities and suburban areas construct their identities, especially within South Africa's rich diversity of languages and cultures.

To analyse these experiences, symbolic interactionism serves as a key theoretical framework, providing a lens to explore how individuals interact with their environment, particularly through the connections between language and behaviour (Husin, Rahman, & Mukhtar, 2021: 116). This framework offers valuable insights into how individuals construct their identities within their social and environmental contexts. Complementing this approach, social constructionism is also employed to examine the broader factors shaping the identity formation and social interactions of monolingual individuals. By integrating these two frameworks, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of identity construction for those disconnected from their ancestral language.

This chapter provides a detailed exploration of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, highlighting their main concepts and relevance for understanding human behaviour and social phenomena. It starts by defining language, then moves on to discuss various aspects of identity, including racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, with a focus on South Africa. Next, it examines symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework, followed by social constructionism. The chapter concludes by connecting these theories to the argument that identity is not determined solely by language. This perspective is central to the dissertation, which emphasises that identity is continually negotiated.

3.2. Language

Edward Sapir (1921: 7) (cited in Edwards, 2009: 53) described language as "a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols". Building on this, Morris (1946) (cited in Edwards, 2009: 53) explained that language consists of arbitrary symbols that gain meaning within a community. These symbols can be understood and used outside of specific situations, and they are organised through rules and structures. This idea of language highlights three important aspects. First, language operates as a system, following regular patterns and rules. Second, its elements are arbitrary, meaning they only gain meaning through shared agreement within a community, not because of any inherent value. Third, language serves a purpose in communication, relying on a community's collective understanding of its symbols. In essence, language can be seen as a system of symbols whose meanings are agreed upon by users, structured by a set of rules. These rules, or grammar, are crucial for understanding and also allow for creativity in how we use language (Edwards, 2009: 53).

The linguistic relativity hypothesis, also called the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, further explores how language shapes our perception of the world. Edward Sapir argued that the language we use influences our worldview, meaning that speakers of different languages may interpret reality differently. Sapir argued that the language we use shapes our worldview, meaning that people who speak different languages may see and interpret reality differently (Hussein, 2012: 642). Benjamin Whorf expanded on this idea, suggesting that language not only shapes perception but can also limit communication and interaction between different language groups (Hussein, 2012: 643; Rozanov, 2016: 2). This reinforces the idea that language plays a powerful role in shaping collective identities and worldviews, linking linguistic identity to broader issues of personal and cultural identity (Rozanov, 2016: 4).

There is a dual role of language in both expressing and concealing ideas. Popper (cited in Edwards, 2009: 54) emphasises power of storytelling in language, allowing people to share complex stories and ideas. In contrast, thinkers like Wittgenstein, Talleyrand, and Kierkegaard (cited in Edwards, 2009: 54) argue that language can also disguise or obscure true thoughts, making it a tool for concealment. While language is typically used for communication within a group, it can also be a way to keep certain ideas or perspectives hidden from outsiders. This shows that language also plays a role in protecting and maintaining a group's identity (Edwards, 2009: 54). However, the idea that only insiders can truly understand a language is not entirely accurate, as outsiders can learn the language and understand the group's worldview (Edwards, 2009: 54).

The difference between the communicative and symbolic functions of language is key to understanding how language serves as both an instrumental tool and a symbol of group identity. Language plays a dual role: it helps people communicate (communicative function) while also representing their cultural and group identity (symbolic function) (Edwards, 2009: 55). In some communities, the language people use daily is also their ancestral language, making it both a practical means of communication and a carrier of historical and cultural meaning. When this happens, the symbolic and practical aspects of language become intertwined. Language carries memories and cultural meanings that influence every conversation (Edwards, 2009: 55). This creates a strong bond of shared identity and understanding among members of the group, making language not just a tool, but also a marker of identity.

Language plays a vital role in shaping cultural identity as it reflects a society's social and cultural realities, historical traditions, and shared values. It helps foster unity within communities, preserves cultural heritage, and supports the development of a community's socio-cultural systems (Parajuli, 2021: 113). According to Kennedy (2019), language strengthens community ties, helping individuals build and navigate their cultural identity. Moreover, speaking a language requires understanding and integrating into the culture that comes with it. Passing language down through generations is essential for cultural transmission, allowing values and traditions embedded in a mother tongue to shape future identities (Parajuli, 2021: 113-114). As Kinzler, Corriveau, and Harris (2011) (cited in Parajuli, 2021: 114) highlight, the mother tongue is a key marker of social and cultural identity.

Challenges arise when language transmission is disrupted, such as when individuals migrate to a different linguistic or cultural environment or lack the opportunity to develop their native language (Edwards, 2009: 57). Bhugra (2004) argues that in these situations, individuals may experience cultural discrimination and feelings of alienation, making it difficult to establish a clear sense of cultural identity. According to Bhugra (2004), when people cannot pass on their native language, or when they are immersed in a dominant language environment, they face difficulties in preserving their cultural roots. This can lead to struggles in forming a strong and distinct cultural identity.

For black African youth in South Africa who communicate only in English, the lack of proficiency in their ancestral language can affect their sense of self and how they fit into their communities. Disconnection from their heritage language may influence how they shape their identity, especially in social and cultural environments where language plays a key role in

group belonging. Belonging refers to emotional attachment to certain groups and how we identify with them (Yuval-Davis, 2011). It is about gaining access to or becoming a part of a group, and is often mediated by language (Croucher, 2004: 41; Sung-Yul Park, 2012: 1080). Paxton (2022), however, argues that language alone is not a defining factor of one's identity. She asserts that cultural identity is shaped by a combination of personal experiences, such as enjoying traditional foods, participating in community events, and engaging with cultural practices. According to Paxton (2022), "language is not a defining factor in one's identity. Our own unique and beautiful selves define who we are as well as our own cultures. Though language is necessary for communication, it should never be used to divide communities and exclude individuals. There are no barriers to participating in culture. Being a part of its vibrancy helps [us] move forward with pride in our ethnic identities."

This study explores how the absence of ancestral language proficiency impacts the identity formation of monolingual black African youth and their interactions within their black African communities. For these individuals, not speaking their ancestral language may yield diverse outcomes. This research looks at how these youth manage the tension between using language for communication and using it to either conceal or reveal aspects of their identity.

3.3. Identity

Hall (1996) explains that identity is not straightforward or simple to understand. In the Enlightenment period, identity was viewed as something stable and unchanging—a person was seen as a rational, unified individual with a fixed sense of self (Hall, 1996; Mama, 1995; Weedon, 2004). This idea reflects a common way of thinking about identity in everyday language (Weedon, 2004). However, this traditional view of identity has been heavily criticised and is no longer considered a valid way to understand it (Hall, 1996: 1).

In the postmodern era, identity has been deconstructed and reconstructed, and is now seen as something fluid and constantly changing (Andrei, 2017: 4). Althusser (1971) described identity formation as a process called "hailing", where individuals are shaped by language and the ideas (ideologies) that exist in society. He suggests that when individuals recognise they are being addressed or called upon in certain ways, they start seeing themselves as part of the existing belief systems or ideologies around them. Over time, they come to identify with these systems, which shapes how they view themselves and their place in society (Fraser, 2016: 71).

Identity is closely tied to time, involving both our past experiences and current situations (Kehily, 2009: 2). When people ask "Who am I?", they rely on identity markers from their

history and present context (Kehily, 2009: 2). Social interactions and societal structures, with language at the core, play a major role in shaping our sense of self (Kehily, 2009: 3). Joseph (2004: 13) argues that language and identity are "ultimately inseparable," as language is central to being human and is one of the main ways we distinguish ourselves. Therefore, any study of identity must include language (Edwards, 2009: 20).

Identity can be seen as an individual's sense of self, the personal traits that matter to them and others, and the markers that indicate group membership (Edwards, 2009: 16). It involves the interaction between personal, social, and situational factors that together form a person's identity (Adams, Van de Vijver, & De Bruin, 2011: 378). This research takes a layered approach to understanding identity, drawing from both personal and social identity theories.

Personal identity theory focuses on how individuals define themselves based on their unique traits and how these traits interact with the surrounding environment. It emphasises the influence of context on a person's behaviour. On the other hand, social identity theory looks at how people relate to groups (Tajfel, 2010). It highlights the beliefs, feelings, and behaviours shared by a group and considered acceptable within that group (Adams *et al.*, 2011: 378).

Linguistic ethnography suggests that language and society influence each other. By closely examining how language is used in everyday situations, we can better understand how social and cultural norms are created and maintained (Edwards, 2009: 17). While personal identity comes from social structures, it does not always perfectly align with them. Each individual develops a unique personal style, shaped by their experiences, psychological development, and life history (Edwards, 2009: 17; Vandeyar, 2019: 460).

At the group level, language acts as a marker of identity, evident through accents, dialects, and language variations. These differences reveal a speaker's membership in specific communities, social classes, and ethnic or national groups (Edwards, 2009: 21). Brubaker and Cooper (2000) explain that identity can be seen along a spectrum, ranging from something fixed to something more fluid and changeable. Instead of viewing identity as a static entity, it can be understood as a dynamic process that evolves as individuals take on different social roles and affiliations over time.

In this research, both personal and social identity are key to understanding the connection between language and blackness in South Africa. Personal identity refers to an individual's unique traits and characteristics (Edwards, 2009: 19), which are shaped by the social groups one belongs to. The social context plays a crucial role in shaping these personal traits, meaning

individual identities are often reflections of broader social or cultural identities (Edwards, 2009: 20).

3.3.1. Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Identity

Racial identity refers to how individuals see themselves in relation to their racial group (Belgrave, Brome, & Hampton, 2000). Assimilation into a racial identity involves two key components: identifying with the racial group and being aware of that group's shared experiences. This concept is complex, as it includes how strongly a person feels connected to their racial group, how attached they feel to other members, and how they evaluate their membership in that group—whether they feel pride or discomfort in being part of it (Allen, Dawson, & Brown, 1989; Broman, 2015). Additionally, racial identity may include group-relevant attitudes and behaviours.

Early studies on racial group consciousness suggested that this awareness not only fosters a sense of belonging but also encourages action and political beliefs tied to the group (Broman, 2015: 833). Scholars have used different terms to describe racial identity, such as self-consciousness, racial group identification, and acculturation (Broman, 2015: 833). A common thread is the deep psychological and emotional connection individuals feel to their racial group. For many, this strong connection defines racial identity, and those who lack it may be seen as not fully identifying with their racial or ethnic group (Broman, 2015: 833).

Ethnic identity is closely linked to racial identity but is more flexible and changes over time. Adam (1995: 463) notes that sociology can only outline broad collective practices and historical circumstances that make some groups more receptive to ethnocentrism, while others may adopt a more individualistic worldview. Ethnic identity shifts depending on the needs and goals of group members, as well as the identities imposed on them by others (Adam, 1995: 463). For monolingual black African individuals, their relationship with English may influence how they see themselves, but their ethnic identity is shaped by a combination of cultural practices and personal experiences.

Ethnic identity is not necessarily determined by the language we speak. As Paxton (2022) states, “my ethnic identity is defined solely by me and not by the language I speak.” This suggests that while language influences identity, it does not fully define how individuals connect with their ethnic or cultural roots. Even if someone does not speak their ancestral language, cultural activities and family traditions remain important ways to express and maintain their ethnic identity (Paxton, 2022).

Ethnicity is fluid and ever-changing, shaped by constantly changing social conditions, and cannot be fully understood through essentialist theories (Adam, 1995: 464; Wilmsen, Dubow, & Sharp, 1994: 349). It serves both instrumental and symbolic purposes, helping people assert their rights and resources, while also expressing their identity and sense of belonging (Adam, 1995: 464). Ethnicity is seen as ‘a bearer of culture,’ reflecting a group’s shared cultural heritage and memories, which shape how they see the world (Adam, 1995: 464; Wilmsen *et al.*, 1994: 349). The idea of “ethnic authenticity,” or what it means to be a “true” member of an ethnic group, is not fixed. Instead, it depends on the specific context of time, place, and audience. While ethnicity can, in theory, create broader, more inclusive identities that bring people together, in practice, it often leads to division and exclusion when groups define themselves too narrowly or rigidly (Wilmsen *et al.*, 1994: 350). This tension highlights how complex and context-dependent ethnic identity is.

Cultural identity, meanwhile, is the sense of belonging to a group defined by shared cultural traits such as nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion (Chen, 2014). It is shaped by collective knowledge, including traditions, language, and customs (Chen, 2014). Since individuals often identify with multiple cultural groups, cultural identity is complex and multifaceted. While earlier scholars viewed cultural identity as stable, it is now understood as fluid and influenced by changing contexts. In today’s globalised world with increasing intercultural interactions, cultural identity is continually negotiated and reshaped through communication (Chen, 2014).

3.3.2. Identity in South Africa

Ethnicity, a term referring to a specific group’s cultural characteristics, encompasses norms, values, attitudes, and typical behaviours (Adams *et al.*, 2011: 378). In the context of South Africa, the concept of ethnic identity is deeply intertwined with the nation’s historical backdrop. Prior to 1994, South Africa was governed by apartheid, a political system rooted in the sociopolitical oppression of all ‘non-white’ ethnic groups. Ethnic identity in South Africa is therefore closely related to how individuals and groups have navigated and overcome the degradation of their ethnicity during this period (Ford, Harris, & Scheuriger, 1993).

South Africa’s diverse ethnic landscape is the result of unique historical and developmental experiences (Adams *et al.*, 2011: 378). The population is broadly divided into four main ethnic groups, with the African group representing the “Bantu-speaking people” (Adams *et al.*, 2011: 378). The differences in identity among these groups have deep roots, existing even before

apartheid, and are based on variations in cultural development and social organisation (Adams *et al.*, 2011: 379). However, apartheid policies like the Group Areas Act and Native Resettlement Act further entrenched these differences by physically separating ethnic groups (Athiemoolam, 2003, cited in Adams *et al.*, 2011: 379). This forced segregation strengthened ethnic identity and group cohesion, leading to the deep societal divisions that still influence South Africa today, particularly in terms of cultural values like individualism and collectivism (Adams *et al.*, 2011: 379; Mattes, 2004).

Within the African group, there are nine distinct traditional cultural groups, primarily distinguished by language (Adams *et al.*, 2011: 378). These groups tend to have a collectivistic orientation, with individuals placing great importance on their social environments and rely on their community for guidance on acceptable behaviour. The family, both immediate and extended, along with the wider community, are key to shaping their identity, with a strong focus on traditional values (Adams *et al.*, 2011: 379). In collectivistic cultures, the context in which people find themselves is important, as behaviour is guided by cultural norms, expectations of the situation, and specific roles. In these environments, social relationships and situational factors carry significant weight in shaping how people act (Adams *et al.*, 2011: 380).

Ethnicity takes on different forms in various settings and holds a unique historical role in each context. Scholars have often approached the topic of ethnicity based on the political concerns of their time. In liberal English-speaking South Africa, there has been a noticeable lack of discussion on ethnicity, which is surprising given the country's diverse cultural landscape. Adam (1995: 462) argues that the lingering effects of apartheid have contributed to the marginalisation of ethnicity in South African academic discussions. To fully understand ethnic identity in South Africa, it is crucial to examine the historical, political, and social factors that have shaped its development.

This lack of focus on ethnic identity in South Africa, particularly regarding monolingual English-speaking black African individuals, leaves a significant gap in understanding their experiences. While ethnicity in South Africa is shaped by a range of influences, the experiences of black African youth who primarily speak English have been largely overlooked. This gap underscores the need for more research into how ethnicity and language intersect for individuals who navigate a cultural landscape shaped by both English and broader ethnic influences. This study aims to address this underexplored area, specifically focusing on how

monolingual English-speaking black African youth construct their ethnic identities within their native environments.

3.4. Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, as a theoretical framework, focuses on how people create meaning through their social interactions and how symbols shape their understanding of the social world. It draws on the works of scholars like George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, and Herbert Blumer (Aksan *et al.*, 2009: 903; Main, 2023), who emphasised that meaning is developed through interactions, which in turn shapes how individuals view themselves and their identities (Main, 2023). Objects, gestures, and symbols all carry specific meanings that influence how people behave and perceive their social environment (Aksan *et al.*, 2009: 903). Mead, in particular, introduced the idea of the “significant symbol”—a gesture or expression that elicits the same response in both the person communicating and the person receiving the message (Harkins-Mehsling, 2023: 29). Language is a prime example of this, as it allows people to construct and share meaning during social interactions (Aksan *et al.*, 2009: 902; Harkins-Mehsling, 2023: 29). Thus, symbolic interactionism highlights the importance of language and symbols in shaping individual identity and behaviour (Main, 2023).

Symbolic interactionism emphasises the importance of personal perspectives, values, and cultural inputs in shaping meanings (Husin *et al.*, 2021: 114). It is characterised by three key premises: individuals act based on the meanings they attribute to objects and situations; these meanings are derived from interactions with others; and individuals interpret and adjust these meanings over time (Blumer, 1969: 2). These ideas suggest that human society is a dynamic space where individuals engage in actions that collectively shape social structures and cultural meanings (Blumer, 1969: 6). Meaning-making through social interaction is therefore a central part of human behaviour (Blumer, 1969: 7). Objects, whether physical or abstract, derive their meaning from social interactions around them, and these meanings can vary depending on personal experiences and perspectives (Blumer, 1969: 10). This perspective highlights the importance of meaning in human behaviour and how it is constructed through individual experience.

Key concepts in symbolic interactionism include symbolism and social constructs. Symbolism, which refers to the subjective meanings individuals assign to objects, events, and behaviours, shapes social interactions based on personal interpretations (Main, 2023). These interpretations are influenced by individuals' beliefs and experiences, leading to diverse and

evolving understandings of symbols. Social interactions involve continuous negotiation of these symbols, where communication—both verbal and non-verbal—plays a crucial role in expressing thoughts, feelings, and intentions (Main, 2023). Furthermore, individuals bring their biases and expectations into these interactions, affecting their interpretations of symbols and social situations (Main, 2023).

Social constructs, which are formed through symbols and language in everyday interactions, shape the shared meanings and perceptions that define society (Main, 2023). These constructs affect how people see themselves, how they behave in social settings, and how their identities develop (Main, 2023). According to Turner (2013: 331), in social settings, individuals' actions are driven by their sense of self as they seek validation of their identities through interaction with others. These interactions lead individuals to reevaluate their identities, shaping their emotions and identity systems over time (Turner, 2013: 332).

From a young age, individuals begin to develop their sense of identity by observing and internalising the gestures and interactions of those around them. This process plays a crucial role in how they understand themselves, as their thoughts and cognitive processes are shaped by their social experiences (Mead, 1934: 173). The development of the self is deeply connected to social dynamics within groups and communities. As individuals participate in shared activities within these social settings, the self gradually takes shape, becoming an integral part of the larger social structures (Mead, 1934: 164). This reflects the idea that identity is socially constructed through ongoing interactions with others.

While symbolic interactionism offers valuable insights into how individuals construct meaning and identity through social interaction, it has also faced several critiques—particularly regarding its limited engagement with broader social structures and power dynamics. Critics argue that the theory often neglects the influence of macro-level forces such as institutions, race, class, and systemic inequalities, which are central to understanding behaviour in complex, modern societies (Aksan *et al.*, 2009: 903–904; Reynolds, 1993: 136). Symbolic interactionism tends to focus on micro-level, face-to-face interactions, sometimes assuming that meaning naturally emerges through these interactions without adequately addressing the structural conditions that shape and constrain them (Aksan *et al.*, 2009: 904). This has led to concerns that the theory lacks a comprehensive vision of society and overlooks how power differentials affect identity formation and social behaviour.

In response to these critiques, this study places particular emphasis on the social realities of the interlocutors—recognising that meaning-making does not occur in a vacuum but is deeply embedded within broader social, historical, and cultural contexts. Understanding how individuals negotiate identity requires attention to both their immediate interactions and the larger structural forces that influence those interactions. Therefore, symbolic interactionism is not used in isolation in this research; rather, it is employed alongside social constructionism. This combined framework allows for a more holistic exploration of how language, identity, and power intersect, especially within the complex social landscapes that monolingual English-speaking black African youth in South Africa must navigate.

In the context of this dissertation, which examines the identity of monolingual English-speaking black African youth in South Africa, symbolic interactionism provides a lens to understand how these individuals navigate their social environments. Through their use of language and engagement with cultural symbols, they construct their own sense of “blackness” that is shaped by their social interactions and the meanings they attach to the world around them. This theory ties into the broader discussion of how language, culture, and identity are interconnected, reinforcing the idea that identity is not fixed but continuously shaped by social and cultural exchanges. For these youth who primarily speak English, their identity is shaped by the social environments they are part of. Their identity is influenced by social experiences, cultural norms, and interactions with their communities. This perspective highlights how the social construction of identity plays a crucial role in understanding one's sense of belonging and self-understanding within specific cultural and social contexts.

3.5. Social Constructionism

The social constructionist view of culture and identity posits that our sense of self is shaped through interactions with others, influenced by social, cultural, and political contexts. This perspective highlights that identities are not fixed or predetermined; rather, they are dynamic, multifaceted, context-dependent, and socially constructed through ongoing processes of interaction, interpretation, and negotiation (Edwards, 2024; Hall, 1992; Rudwick, 2008: 108). Shotter (1993) asserts that identity is formed through dialogue, with language playing a critical role in shaping both social relationships and personal identity. In this way, our sense of self is continuously redefined as we engage with others in various social settings.

At its core, social constructionism challenges the notion that identities are natural or essential. Instead, it argues that identities are socially constructed through a complex interplay of social,

cultural, historical, and political factors, which shape how we see ourselves and others (Edwards, 2024). This approach views identity as something fluid and evolving, not something static or unchanging. Identities are expressed and performed through language, gestures, and other symbolic practices (Edwards, 2024). This concept is central to the study, which aims to understand how monolingual English-speaking black African youth express their identities through language, showing that these identities are shaped by the context they find themselves in.

Social constructionists also emphasise the role of power and social institutions in shaping identities. Power dynamics within institutions such as family, education, media, and government contribute to creating and maintaining certain identities while marginalising others. These power relations lead to social inequalities, shaping dominant and subordinate identities (Edwards, 2024). In South Africa, for example, English plays a dominant role in education and the workplace, often marginalising indigenous languages and the cultural identities tied to them. This creates a system where certain identities, like those tied to English proficiency, hold more power, while others are sidelined. Additionally, identities are formed and negotiated within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. The meaning and significance of racial or ethnic identity can change across societies and time periods, reflecting how identities are constantly evolving. These insights are key to the dissertation's focus on how language, power, and social institutions shape the identity of monolingual English-speaking black African youth, illustrating the complex interplay of identity formation in South Africa.

While social constructionism offers valuable insights into how identity is shaped through social and cultural processes, it has not been without criticism. One major critique is that it can portray individuals as passive products of their environments, placing too little emphasis on personal agency and the capacity people have to actively shape their own lives (Andrews, 2012). This dissertation engages directly with this tension by exploring the self-awareness of individuals and the extent to which they perceive their social environment as influencing their identity. This is further investigated through participants' reflections during interviews, which help clarify the degree to which external factors shape their realities versus how much they assert their own interpretations and choices. This study acknowledges both the power of social forces and the agency of individuals, offering a more nuanced view of identity formation among monolingual English-speaking black African youth in South Africa. This dual focus enables a richer analysis of how language, identity, and power intersect in everyday life.

From this view, identity is not something individuals are born with; rather, it is a social process that is constantly negotiated and performed through interactions. Society, culture, language, and power all play a role in influencing how we understand and define ourselves. By understanding identity as socially constructed, we see how these factors work together to shape who we are.

3.6. The Dynamic Nature of Black African Identity

This section delves into how social constructionism and symbolic interactionism serve as key theoretical frameworks for analysing the core aspects of this study, namely the social construction of identity and the role of symbols, like language, in shaping our understanding of ourselves and others. Social constructionism helps us understand how identity is formed through social processes and interactions, while symbolic interactionism focuses on how symbols and language influence our perceptions and social relationships. By examining these theories, we can see how the meanings we attach to symbols, the nature of social interactions, and the context in which they occur all contribute to our sense of identity. This discussion also identifies a gap in existing research, particularly in understanding how the social construction of identity applies to monolingual English-speaking black African youth. The study will address this gap by examining how these youths navigate their identity in contexts where they are confronted by those who speak ancestral languages.

In Western societies, African identity often shifts based on changing social conditions and influences, highlighting that there is no fixed African identity. Instead, African identities are continuously evolving and socially constructed, with language being just one of many strands constituting one's identity (Mtose, 2008: 66). From a social constructionist perspective, black African identities are understood as socially, culturally, and historically constructed, shaped by discourses that influence cultural narratives (Burr, 1995; Mtose, 2008: 65). This aligns with Mtose's (2008: 66) view that black African identities, like all racial or ethnic identities, are products of historical, political, economic, and social factors. This reinforces the central argument of this research: blackness is not tied to any one factor, such as language, but is fluid and shaped by a variety of experiences and characteristics.

Language plays a key role in identity formation, but is not the sole defining factor (Paxton, 2022). As discussed earlier, language serves multiple purposes and carries symbolic meanings that reflect personal, social, and group identities. While it is a crucial element in identity formation, it interacts with other factors, such as social experiences and personal

values, to shape who we are. South African Author, Ndumiso Ngcobo (cited in Rudwick, 2010: 55), highlights a key issue with assigning rigid cultural or racial meanings to language. He argues that judging people solely based on their accent oversimplifies their identity, which can lead to misunderstandings and discrimination (Rudwick, 2010: 56). In a diverse and multilingual world, linguistic identities are far from simple and cannot serve as a definitive marker of ethnic or cultural identity. This assertion supports the idea that language should not be used as a definitive marker of identity, as doing so can lead to unfair and harmful stereotypes.

Ngcobo challenges the notion of fixed “African” or “white” values, highlighting that these concepts are subjective and differ both within and across societies. What it means to be “black” or “white” varies greatly in South Africa and around the world, shaped by individual perspectives and social contexts (Rudwick, 2010: 56), ultimately reflecting personal understandings of reality. This perspective aligns with the idea that identities are constantly being formed and re-formed through social interactions.

The study builds on this theory by arguing that identity cannot be narrowly defined or reduced to language alone. It challenges the traditional association of cultural, ethnic, and racial identities tied to language, and instead suggests that personal and social identities are complex, dynamic, and shaped by more than just language.

The research examines how power dynamics influence the development and predominance of a language that is not their ancestral language due to the environments they occupy. It argues that ethnic identity is ultimately self-defined and not determined by the language one speaks (Paxton, 2022). While language plays a role in shaping identity, it does not fully determine how individuals connect to their ethnic or cultural roots. Cultural activities, family traditions, and shared values continue to serve as meaningful expressions of ethnic identity, even in the absence of ancestral language proficiency.

This study also seeks to challenge conventional views of ethnic identity, echoing assertions like those made by Ngcobo (Rudwick, 2010), that identity cannot be confined to language alone. It illustrates the social construction of black African identity, emphasising that these identities are shaped by individual perspectives, personal histories, unique social contexts, and lived experiences. This approach underscores the fluidity and multifaceted nature of identity formation.

3.7. Conclusion

This chapter unpacked how language plays a crucial role in expressing and shaping identity, but it is not the sole determinant of one's blackness. Instead, language is used for personal expression and is influenced by the surroundings in which individuals find themselves. This chapter outlined the significance of language, the concept of identity, and various social identities within the South African context. It then introduced the theoretical frameworks that explain how these concepts are developed and how they apply to the black African identity.

This chapter explored the dynamic interplay between symbolic interactionism and social constructionism to provide a comprehensive understanding of the construction of black African identity. Both theoretical frameworks emphasise the fluid and evolving nature of identity, shaped by ongoing social interactions, cultural narratives, and power relations. Symbolic interactionism highlights how identities are continuously constructed and negotiated through social interactions and the meanings attached to symbols like language. Social constructionism further underscores that identities, including blackness, are context-dependent and subject to change based on personal experiences and societal influences.

By integrating the insights from both symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, this chapter supports the argument that black African identities are not fixed but are shaped by a range of factors including language, cultural practices, and social environments. This perspective is central to my dissertation, which asserts that the black African identity, especially for monolingual English-speaking individuals, cannot be reduced to language alone. Rather, their ethnic, racial, and cultural identities are multifaceted. Through this lens, we gain a deeper understanding of how identity is continuously negotiated and expressed, reflecting the rich and varied experiences of black African youth in South Africa.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter explores how monolingual English-speaking black African individuals navigate their identity within black African social and cultural environments. In some parts and spaces of South Africa, English has become a significant aspect of cultural expression, evolving into a “localised and indigenised form”. The argument in this chapter, a finding from the data, is that while these individuals primarily speak English, this does not mean they have lost their cultural or ethnic identity. Cultural identity, rooted in values, traditions, and beliefs, continues to be preserved and expressed, even through the use of a different language. This chapter examines how these individuals balance their language use in black African social and cultural spaces, exploring the role of language in expressing identity and fostering a sense of belonging within a multicultural South African society.

The chapter begins by discussing concepts of blackness, ethnicity, and the relationship between language proficiency (or lack thereof) and culture. It then examines the factors and contexts that have contributed to the predominance of English over ancestral languages. The next section delves into the unique experiences and challenges these youth face in terms of social interactions, identity formation, and cultural connectedness. Following this, the chapter explores how they navigate attitudes and perceptions about their lack of proficiency in their ancestral languages within black social spaces. The analysis continues with a discussion on how black African youth perceive their monolingualism in English. The chapter concludes by analysing the power of language in shaping identity and social dynamics.

4.2. Exploring the Data: Collection and Analysis

Data was collected from young black African individuals who stated that their primary spoken language is English. Among the participants, five speak only English, while two have a marginal understanding of their ancestral languages but still rely on English as their main mode of communication. Though these individuals currently reside in different locations, they were all raised in metropolitan suburbs, shaping their linguistic experiences. To protect participant’s identities, they were not assigned pseudonyms but labelled sequentially as “Participant One”, “Participant Two”, and so forth, based on the order in which their interviews occurred. The researcher selected this labelling method to maintain clarity and consistency while safeguarding participants' anonymity.

Information for this chapter was gathered through participant in-depth interviews, with direct quotes used to reinforce the study's central thesis. Key findings centred on participants' deep awareness of their black African identity, the role of language in shaping their identity, the impact of language in social interactions, and the power of language in various social contexts. During data analysis, common ideas expressed by participants were coded and categorised into themes, which directly corresponded with the study's objectives. Each theme addressed specific subsidiary goals, ultimately contributing to the primary goal of the research.

Interviews were transcribed and carefully analysed, with responses colour-coded according to the different categories aligned with specific research objectives. Similar responses across interviews were grouped into cohesive themes. In interpreting the data, the researcher refrained from inferring beyond what participants directly expressed, instead focusing on how participants' words related to the questions asked and linking them to broader themes. Additionally, examining the language used by participants – what was said and how it was expressed – revealed underlying power dynamics. This analysis demonstrated that language is more than a mere vehicle for communication; it carries social influence within various contexts. This nuanced exploration of language's role will be further discussed in the chapter.

Overall, data analysis followed a systematic and rigorous process to extract insights directly relevant to the topic, synthesised and supported by existing literature.

4.3. Speaking English, Living African: Exploring Identity through Language

This section explores how these monolingual youths see and define their own sense of blackness, ethnic identity, and cultural connection, despite their inability to speak their ancestral language.

4.3.1. 'I am a black African'

What does it mean to be black African, and who or what defines someone's blackness? Blackness is neither fixed nor universal—it is a concept shaped by the unique experiences, context, and personal realities of each individual. A key finding from this research, emerging from participant interviews, underscores that these individuals, despite language limitations, identify as African. According to participants, their sense of blackness remains authentic and unwavering, regardless of their ability to speak an African language.

This rootedness in African identity emerged strongly during the study interviews, with most participants clearly explaining their understanding of their identity and why they see

themselves as black Africans. When asked about their African identity in light of their inability to speak an African language, the participants premised their self-definitions on both blackness and Africanness.

Participant One stated that he considers himself to be: *Black African* (Zoom Call, 14 August 2024).

Similarly, Participant Three described herself using the same terms, explaining her beliefs about her identity and the reasons behind them: *...Black African. I've never ever thought why not because it's just like it's a part of my identity that's almost fact. It's my genetics. It's my background. It's my lineage, my ancestry. I've never really thought to deny that* (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).

Participant Four stated: *I identify as an African black woman ... for the mere fact that I was born African, and I have brown skin, and I am a woman* (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

Participant Five shared: *I fully identify with my black South African ... group... There is more to being a black South African than speaking vernac...* (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

Participant Six stated: *...Black... because in South African law I am black. I have brown skin. I know that my parents are black... to the outside world I look black. I experience the world as a black woman... I experience the social world as a black person* (Makhanda, 22 August 2024).

And Participant Seven shared: *I am a black Xhosa girl! I identify as black because when I look at myself in the mirror I see myself as a black lady... My skin tone is of the 'blacker group'. Based off my surroundings and the people around me, I know myself to be a black lady* (Zoom Call, 28 August 2024).

All these participants emphasised an element of their Africanness in their self-definitions. While some identified primarily with their Africanness, others centred their definitions on blackness, and others highlighted their ethnicity. Despite these variations, their self-definitions were all firmly rooted in an aspect of being African.

These responses reveal that they are fully aware of their identity as black African individuals, and language is not a factor in how they see themselves. Their family background, life experiences, and physical appearance already make up what it means to be African for them.

For a long time in South Africa, notions of blackness, ethnicity, and heritage were closely tied to language (de Beer, 1998). Being able to speak an African language was often seen as a

marker of true belonging and a connection to one's roots. National identity was also linked to this ability as language became a way to determine who truly belongs. However, the responses from participants challenge this traditional view, pushing us to rethink how central language is in shaping ideas of belonging, heritage, blackness, and Africanness today.

Understanding how participants self-define was an essential starting point. However, from a sociological perspective, it was equally important to explore how participants believe they are perceived by others within the environments they occupy. Cooley's theory of the *looking-glass self* (see Cooley, 1902: 151) suggests that our self-image and self-evaluations "are affected by the evaluations which others have of us, and more importantly, by how we perceive those evaluations" (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983: 77). Building on this idea, the researcher sought to establish whether this dynamic also plays a role in the formation of identity.

While the participants themselves have no doubts about their heritage, cultural identity, sense of blackness and Africanness, their experiences reveal that the world around them often does not share the same view. Society still tends to associate blackness with an ability to speak an African language. In interviews, participants shared that people often assume they can speak an African language simply based on their appearance. For instance, Participant Three noted, *There's just the assumption I would speak vernac... I think the assumption is quite fair because we live in a [majority] black society* (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).

Similarly, Participant One highlighted this assumption and went further to discuss how their African name contributes to these perceptions, an observation also noted by Rovira (2008: 65): *...that does happen quite often, I would say. Especially if you do live in South Africa... ...if you are black, I believe that you are expected to speak some sort of African language... they will just say something to you in their language, assuming you would know how to speak it... that's quite often given the fact that I also have an African name* (Zoom Call, 14 August 2024).

Participant Six shared her experience and talked about the expectations that come with having an African name: *I was in Edgars⁵ and a security guard... spoke to me in an African language and I said I don't understand and she looked at me and she's like "what's your name?" and I told her my name, and she's just like "and you don't speak an African language?"... She was*

⁵ Edgars is a department store chain in Southern Africa that sells clothing, footwear, accessories, cosmetics, and homeware.

just very aggressive. She was like “how dare you not speak an African language!” (Makhanda, 22 August 2024).

These experiences reveal the interplay between how individuals perceive themselves and how they believe others perceive them. This dynamic aligns with the principles of symbolic interactionism, which emphasise the mutual influence of human interaction and the environment. According to symbolic interactionism, individuals’ self-perceptions are shaped by their interactions and assumptions about others’ perceptions (Aksan *et al.*, 2009; Turner, 2013). However, while theorists like Cooley argue that surroundings heavily influence self-image and perceptions, this study found a different outcome. The participants consistently identified as African, regardless of the negative reactions they sometimes face from other African people due to their inability to speak an African language. This suggests that, for these individuals, identity is grounded more in their own sense of Africanness than in external validation.

The findings also demonstrate deeply embedded assumptions, particularly regarding physical appearance. For instance, a visible black African identity carries certain expectations from others, who may assume language ability based on appearance alone. According to Main (2023), symbolic interactionism suggests that individuals bring their biases and expectations into interactions, influencing their interpretations of symbols like language and shaping social situations accordingly. Rovira (2008: 65) also addresses this link between language and ethnicity, observing that societal expectations often align specific physical traits or names with language proficiency. Similarly, Rudwick, (2008: 9) notes that black African individuals frequently face predefined roles and cultural expectations tied to ethnicity, particularly in communities where language is a strong cultural marker.

These perspectives highlight the complexity and multifaceted nature of black African identity, showing that language is only one of many factors that shape a person’s blackness. As Ndumiso Ngcobo argues, language alone should not serve as a definitive marker of identity (Rudwick, 2010: 55), a view echoed by Paxton (2022), who asserts that language is not the sole defining factor of identity.

Under this theme, the researcher began by examining how participants described themselves as opposed to how they imagined others perceived and defined them. The findings revealed that participants primarily self-identified as Africans. However, those they interacted with daily often questioned the authenticity of their Africanness due to their inability to speak an

African language. Building on this, the next section delves into the theme of ethnic identity, focusing on how monolingual youth perceive and define themselves within this context.

4.3.2. Ethnic Identity

This section is important because ethnic identity has played a significant role in shaping the experiences of black African South Africans, particularly given the country's colonial and apartheid history. During apartheid, black African individuals were systematically categorised into ethnic groups, primarily defined by language, which created profound divisions within black African communities (Kamwangamalu, 2001: 75). Ethnic identity thus became a central element of both individual and collective identity (Rudwick, 2008: 4; Thesen, 1997: 500; Thomas & Wagner, 2013: 1041). Apartheid policies further entrenched linguistic and cultural distinctions, positioning language as a key marker of ethnic and cultural differentiation. This not only influenced socio-political structures but also shaped individual identities. As discussed in the theory chapter, these divisions were reinforced by laws mandating physical segregation based on ethnicity (Athiemoolam, 2003, cited in Adams *et al.*, 2011). As a result, ethnic identity and group cohesion were deeply strengthened, leaving enduring societal divisions that continue to impact South Africa today (Mattes, 2004).

The study's participants echoed these historical patterns in their responses, identifying strongly with their respective ethnic groups, often linked directly to language. This alignment highlights the importance of distinguishing African identity from ethnic identity within the South African context. Black South Africans often exist simultaneously as African and as members of specific ethnic groups, with language playing a central role in shaping their ethnic identity.

What is particularly striking about the participants in this study is that, despite their language barrier or lack of fluency in their ancestral language, they still identify with their ethnic groups. For example, Participant Two said: *[I consider myself] Xhosa because I went through my whole ritual in becoming a Xhosa man* (Zoom Call, 16 August 2024).

Participant Five shared:

I'm fully in touch with my Xhosa heritage. Outside of the language barrier, that is fully a side that I am in touch with (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

And Participant Four stated:

I identify with both isiXhosa and Sesotho but traditionally, because my mother and father weren't married, I am deemed as Sesotho (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

As can be seen from the above accounts, in addition to seeing themselves fully as Africans, the participants also showed an awareness that they exist as ethnicised people. Participant Four, for example, shows her deep understanding of *Isintu*, which refers to “the ways, languages, and customs of African people” (Puterman, 2020).

It is interesting to note that while ethnic identity is often associated with language, these monolingual youths still regard their ethnic identity as a core part of who they are. They have shaped their identities through their social experiences, highlighting that identity is something you define for yourself based on your personal history. This aligns with Paxton's (2022) perspective, which asserts that ethnic identity is determined by the individual and not by the language they speak.

This finding suggests that although language plays a role in shaping identity, it does not fully define how individuals connect with their ethnic or cultural roots. Even without speaking their ancestral language, cultural activities and family customs remain vital in expressing and maintaining their ethnic identity.

Moreover, this challenges traditional notions of ethnic identity, which often tied it closely to language, and supports Ngcobo's assertion (Rudwick, 2010) that identity cannot be reduced to language alone. It prompts a broader consideration of the factors that contribute to the formation of ethnic identity and offers insight into why these youths feel a strong connection to their specific ethnic and cultural backgrounds - a theme explored further in the next subsection.

4.3.3. Navigating Culture Without Native Language Fluency

Several studies have shown that language is an important carrier of culture (Batibo, 2005; Goduka, 1998; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Rovira, 2008; Tchindjang, Bopda & Ngamgne, 2008). Since the participants in this study recognised both their Africanness and their ethnic identities, I sought to explore how they then navigate their sense of belonging in cultural spaces that are defined by the use of an ancestral language. Most participants acknowledged their ancestral heritage, which is closely tied to their language group. For instance, participants mentioned visiting their ancestral homes, often with their parents, for traditional ceremonies or holidays. This raised questions about how they navigate these culturally rich environments

especially when they lack fluency in their ancestral language. Through analysing their responses, it became clear that many participants discussed language in relation to culture. However, their views varied on how essential their ancestral language is to their cultural identity. Some felt strongly that the language was integral, while others believe their connection to their culture went beyond language alone.

Participants shared their views on the connection between language and culture. Some participants emphasised the significance of the ancestral language in relation to culture. For example, Participant One mentioned that knowing how to speak your ancestral language brings you closer to your roots. He states: *I believe that it shows that you have the privilege of having to be exposed more to your roots and your origins, your ethnic origins* (Zoom Call, 14 August 2024).

Participant Two added: *To become a Xhosa man you have to spend a few weeks in the mountains just doing their rituals... I did that three years ago... I know for my sister, since my mom is Zulu, she has to go through her Umemulo⁶, which is kind of also like a rite of passage but in the Zulu culture... My parents both keep intact with all their cultural festivities, or whatever it is they need to do. And I think they just try [to] empower us and impart everything for us to learn about “this is what this means, and this is what that means, etc... culturally” it is more of them trying to make us understand what the significance is* (Zoom Call, 16 August 2024). He also noted, *Remember, language also goes with your culture. So, I think once you learn the language you start to know the culture a little bit more. Or once you know the culture you start to know the language a bit more.*

Both participants highlighted that understanding and speaking one’s ancestral language is crucial for fully grasping one’s culture. Thus, while some participants expressed a connectedness to their culture and heritage, these accounts also revealed an awareness of the limitations this connection faces due to their lack of fluency in the language. However, some participants emphasised that actively engaging in learning about their culture, even without fluency in their ancestral language, strengthens their sense of the cultural connectedness. As a result, some participants reported feeling deeply connected to their cultural community despite language barriers. For instance, Participant Five shared:

⁶ Umemulo is a traditional Zulu coming-of-age ceremony for women. The ceremony can be held at any stage of a woman's life but is most commonly conducted when she reaches 21 years of age (Walubengo & Wangare, 2022).

On holidays,[I] go to the rural areas and we celebrate [imigidi⁷] and [imicimbi⁸] and other Xhosa traditions that we do have ... Within the Xhosa community, not that there's only those two... my family has their Christian background... so [there] are only two within our religion that we participate in. So, if there's a male in the family who is coming of age, who's been to the bush, we celebrate them. Other traditional events I fully participate in (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

Participant Three added: *Language is great, and it's extremely significant to how we relate to people and where we fit socially, but I also think culture is probably more important. As much as they are inextricably linked, culture I would say is more important than just saying that you should learn the language. I would say that wanting to learn your culture would be more important than wanting to know your language (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).*

While traditional ritual ceremonies are largely conducted in African languages, these accounts highlight that one can engage with their culture and participate in cultural events without speaking their ancestral language.

Participant Four shared: *I do go [to the Eastern Cape] twice a year, in June and December. So... in December when the boys come back from the mountains, or the "men" come back from the mountains, we will have this sort of celebration where they are gifted new clothes and their beds and their new shoes, and all of us as a community, not just their immediate family but just people from the neighbourhood ... will come and celebrate with them and give them money and just help the other women as well, cook the food, and dish out the alcohol and stuff like that (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).*

Participant Seven added: *All of the male cousins or the boys in our family, went to the mountain, and we had those events at home... I was present for all of them except for one, mainly because one of them happened when I was working part-time in varsity, so I just could never really be there (Zoom Call, 28 August 2024).*

These responses reveal that, despite their lack of proficiency in their ancestral language, these participants actively participate in cultural traditions and customs. Their experiences demonstrate that engagement in cultural practices is possible even without speaking the

⁷ Umgidi is a traditional Xhosa cultural celebration that marks a boy's return from the ulwaluko, or initiation, ceremony. It's a joyous family event that celebrates the boy's transition from boyhood to manhood (Nance, 2014).

⁸ Umcimbi is a Xhosa/Zulu word that refers to a traditional ceremony, celebration, or social gathering (Alternative Black Continues, 2023; Melusi's everyday Zulu, 2019).

ancestral language. This finding challenges Goduka's (1998: 36) assertion that monolingual English-speaking black African youth face unique difficulties in navigating their cultural identity due to language differences. It underscores the notion that cultural identity can be maintained and expressed through participation in rituals and celebrations, highlighting that language, while significant, is only one facet of cultural identity.

Some participants highlighted the significance of symbolic acts and gestures in African culture, even if they primarily speak a different language. Certain symbols and meanings in language are unique to specific groups and are understood best by members within those groups. For example, plural markers in greetings can express respect, especially towards elders (Avramenko, 2020: 342).

One participant demonstrated her understanding of this respect for elders by saying: *I will hold you [in] great regard and respect [because] you're my elder. So, I'll address you as sis 'Posh or malume mang mang because that is how I was raised.*

Another participant mentioned:

I try to remember how to express my manners and politeness in vernacular languages.

Although she is not fluent in her ancestral languages, she makes an effort to show respect, which is crucial in interactions within African cultures. There are specific behaviours and attitudes that reflect this etiquette, and there is a general understanding among African people about how to interact respectfully. The way one addresses older individuals is especially important and varies according to age (Evason, 2019). This shows that even monolingual English-speaking black African youth are aware of these cultural codes and symbols in their interactions.

This theme highlights how ethnic groups maintain their traditions, rituals, and customs. Being part of a language group is one of the aspects of a person's ethnic identity. However, language does not limit someone's ability to engage in cultural activities. Monolingual individuals can still fully participate in these events. At the same time, some participants noted that language plays an important role in passing down culture. This observation supports findings from various studies that emphasise the connection between language and cultural transmission.

4.4. Why English? Understanding Factors Shaping Language Dominance

Factors and contexts refer to the circumstances, events, situations, and experiences that have shaped people's lives. Various factors and contexts have contributed to the rise of English as the primary spoken language among these black African youth, often leading them to speak little or none of their ancestral languages. Chomsky (2013: 649) explains that both external factors, such as the surrounding environment, and internal factors, like personal thoughts and beliefs, impact language use. Rovira (2008) adds that some people may lose their first language while acquiring another or may not learn their heritage language at all. These factors are essential to understanding why monolingualism in English has become prevalent in this group and how they, in turn, construct their identities.

The environments in which these youths grew up, including their homes, schools, and neighbourhoods, significantly shaped their language use. Edwards (2009) asserts that daily language use influences the dominant language spoken in one's life, while Bhugra (2004) emphasises the significance of one's environment in shaping language choices. All of the participants in this study grew up in urban, English-dominant settings, often attending English-medium schools, which naturally influenced their primary language choice. Each participant shared unique reasons for primarily using English instead of their ancestral languages. It is essential to consider these diverse circumstances to understand the variety of experiences and factors that contribute to their language use.

Participant One, for example, explained that English predominated both his home environment and social surroundings, including family, friends, and school. Xhakaza (2020) notes, when the home language is not the mother tongue, individuals may not develop ancestral language skills. Participant One shared:

Mainly because of my household and environment I grew up in predominantly spoke English, this includes close family, friends, and schooling... If you grew up predominantly in an area that's mainly English-speaking then it's not easy at all to really pick up any African language... For the most part I understand that my background is quite diverse and so the people that I come into contact with will be a diverse group of people. I've just naturally accepted as part of who I am, just someone who doesn't know how to speak the language, but I'm around very culturally diverse people themselves (Zoom Call, 14 August 2024).

Similarly, Participant Two reflected on how his school environment and involvement in sports, specifically a sport with a largely English-speaking community, influenced his language use:

I would say that it's mostly because I have gone to schools that are predominantly English-speaking white schools. Also playing sport such as cricket which is a mainly white person playing sport (Zoom Call, 16 August 2024).

Thesen (1997: 489) discusses the impact of South Africa's education language policies, where English is the primary medium, affecting young individuals' language choices.

Participant Three described growing up in a multicultural family where English served as the common language. This aligns with the notion of mixed-language households, where diverse backgrounds may result in children learning English over their heritage language. Participant Three states:

I just didn't grow up with Xhosa. English is my home language because it was the common language in the household as I grew up in a multi-cultural household. And so naturally not much of an effort was made to teach me Xhosa (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).

Participant Four recalled the peer and school pressures to use English. Rovira (2008: 66) discusses how individuals may assimilate into the dominant language to feel included. This is known as code-switching, a phenomenon discussed by McSwan and Faltis (2020), where individuals practice transition between languages based on the context. It is a common phenomenon that involves individuals switching from one language to another in response to changes in the speech situation (McSwan & Faltis, 2020: 6). Participant Four shared:

I was in second grade... and then these random Afrikaans kids just came up to [my friends and I] and ... told us "you can't speak [African languages] here", and obviously as an impressionable child I took that to the heart... Especially with the teachers telling us as well that "this is an English and Afrikaans school, you guys cannot speak that language here." So, we just didn't, and I got better at English and then I started speaking English only... I speak English predominantly because it's the easiest... in terms of relating to people globally... In terms of being in South Africa, speaking English makes it easier to thrive at work and in academics, in my opinion. And African people I meet are not always Xhosa or Sotho, they might be Shona or Venda, etc. [so] English is that middle ground that we can all reach (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

Participant Seven added that teachers discouraged the use of ancestral languages, and explicitly encouraged English. Thesen (1997) observes this expectation in urban South African schools, where children are often compelled to adopt English. Code-switching is also practiced in this

scenario. She stated: *[the teachers] wanted us to predominantly communicate in English. So, me trying to paraphrase certain terms in Xhosa was frowned upon* (Zoom Call, 28 August 2024).

The interviews revealed that both the home and the school, as primary and secondary agents of socialisation, play a pivotal role in shaping which language becomes an individual's primary language.

Participant Five described a unique family situation in which English became the household language to support a family member's speech development. She explained:

I had a family member who struggled with speech in their early years, and because they'd struggled with speech, the speech therapist had suggested, for them to develop speech they should stick to one language just at home so that when they go to school they wouldn't have complications. Because of that situation, we grew up around this family member too, and we just all started speaking English in the household as a primary language so they could develop their speech. And then, it became the language of the household just so that when I grew and my siblings grew up, because we all grew up in the household, it wouldn't happen to us either. So, this is all because of the speech therapist, because of a speech issue. Lots of people make assumptions because we want to be white, or we [want to] prove that we went to good schools. It's never ever that case. It's genuinely because of an occurrence that happened in my family (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

Participant Six described the impact of apartheid on her family's language choices, Xhakaza (2020) highlights how older generations might prioritise English for perceived social benefits. Participant Six shared:

My mom was going to teach us Siswati, but my sister was born, and my grandmother, my dad's mom, was very strict on her not teaching us Siswati ... it's an interesting reaction from apartheid., She was an English teacher, and she realised, like I suppose many black people did realise that the better your English the better you were treated under apartheid as a black person. And so, I think even after, my sister was born in '91; the elections were only in '94, I think even though Mandela had been freed, and there was a sense of freedom and integration coming, I think maybe my grandmother was still reacting to that privilege that one has with speaking English. And I'm guessing she didn't think about the long-term effects that would have. She only knew her experience, and she was essentially like "these children are going to

speak English and nothing else.” And so that’s like kind of what happened. No one ever really broke that cycle (Makhanda, 22 August 2024).

Lastly, Participant Seven reflected on her experience of moving to Johannesburg and the social dynamics that influenced her language choice, further emphasising the desire to fit in and be understood. She stated:

I only speak English because I left home quite early on. In as much as in the Eastern Cape I was around my aunt and my cousins, and the rest of the neighbourhood was speaking in Xhosa, when I moved to Joburg I was usually the only Xhosa girl around the friend group that I was making. There was no one around me that could actually speak Xhosa with me. My mom was barely at home, working two shifts at the Johannesburg General hospital, so I needed to be able to communicate and the one language that everyone [was] communicating in is English. So that is the language that I found myself speaking. It’s been that. I never thought there was any problem with it (Zoom Call, 28 August 2024).

These diverse experiences highlight the complex factors—home, school, socialisation, family dynamics, and historical influences—that have shaped the participants' use of English over their ancestral languages. These examples illustrate that each participant's language use was shaped by specific, often complex factors. Each participant's circumstances were unique, showing that they were not in environments that supported the development of their ancestral African languages. These narratives underscore the importance of understanding individual contexts in examining language use and identity formation. It is clear that they did not have the same opportunities as their peers who spoke African languages, as they lacked access to neighbourhoods, schools, or family members who emphasised the importance of speaking their ancestral language. As a result of these unique situations, they face distinct experiences and challenges. These issues will be further explored in the next section.

4.5. Youth Experiences in a Social World

Everyone's experiences are unique, even among people who share similar backgrounds. This is especially true for monolingual individuals, whose challenges can vary widely. This study examined how monolingual individuals relate to their cultural identity, shape their personal and social identities, and engage in social interactions. It aimed to understand the social contexts they encounter and how they navigate these environments. Additionally, the study explored how their personal experiences throughout life influence their social identity.

The participants had different perspectives on their experiences and challenges. To analyse their responses effectively, this section will be divided into sub-sections that will examine social interactions, identity formation, and cultural connectedness.

4.5.1. Social Interactions

Social interactions in the context of this research are defined as exchanges where people communicate and interpret symbols (Bardis, 1979: 148). Communication is essential for social interactions (Bardis, 1979: 148). In this context, it refers to the experiences of monolingual black Africans when they interact with individuals who speak African languages. For example, Participant One mentioned that most people react with understanding, saying, *for the most part they are more like “Oh, he doesn’t know how to speak the language”... but it’s not like they’re going to alienate me or isolate me. It’s not like I’ve been isolated in such a harsh way for not knowing how to speak a certain language* (Zoom Call, 14 August 2024).

Participant Two shared a similar experience, stating, *I can understand Xhosa and Zulu, so if I’m in [a social] setting, I [can] still listen, laugh, maybe say a comment or two, but I don’t really feel uncomfortable... In the Eastern Cape, I think some people would be like “hey!” and have a little bit of a shock to them, not to the point where they would want to stop speaking to you but just the point where it’s a bit of a shock to them. But in Pretoria I haven’t gotten any reactions* (Zoom Call, 16 August 2024).

Participant Four added:

People don’t really insult me for it... I haven’t really had a really negative comment from a person who was like “Oh, why can’t you speak Xhosa?” (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

Participant Five noted that while some people are accepting when they hear her speak English, others may not appreciate it, depending on the setting.

Participant Six shared: *Some people just switch to English during conversations. However, she also felt there were moments when some individuals acted as gatekeepers of black womanhood* (Makhanda, 22 August 2024), suggesting that if she did not speak an African language, she was not considered truly black African.

Some participants have simply not been exposed to the social spaces where African languages are spoken. For example, Participant Seven said, *I won’t lie to you, I don’t think I’ve actually been in many [social settings] like that... I don’t get out enough, in terms of friends having events or going to certain events where it’s predominantly vernac. It’s majority English* (Zoom

Call, 28 August 2024). These responses reveal that social interactions vary depending on context and the individuals involved. Some people are more accommodating toward those who do not speak an African language, continuing to communicate in English and ensuring the individual does not feel ostracised. In another instance, one participant noted that she primarily occupies spaces where African languages are not dominant, resulting in seamless social interactions. However, in other contexts, reactions differ—some express surprise without hostility, while others respond more negatively to the participant's language use.

Some individuals face challenges because of the language barrier. Participant Three explained, when she encounters these situations *...it becomes very limited. There's a level of interaction that you can't reach, that a lot of people who do speak vernac can reach*. According to her, there's a significant relationship between *language, race, [and] class... and how you relate to people of a different class, or a different social standing, or status, becomes very difficult* (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).

Participant Four shared that in these situations she tends to be more reserved, saying, *when I am in those situations... I'll find that I'm more quiet, and I'll only speak when I'm spoken to* (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

Participant Five described how some people react to her in a distant way, reflecting a sentiment highlighted by Rovira (2008: 68), who notes that language use can create conditions where individuals may feel excluded or alienated. Participant Five explained: *Some people kind of react to me in a way more distant way. So, a lot of the time, if I do want to socialise with somebody and they are speaking isiXhosa to me, and I reply in English... it does draw them away from me... I was at the hospital here in the Eastern Cape, they see a black girl and they're like "she should be speaking Xhosa" and then they started asking me stuff in Xhosa... If I go to Home Affairs, they are mean to me. They are horrible. The people there they just hear English and they just instantly make an assumption. Then they just not having it... At the traffic department ... they only wanted to test me in Xhosa, they didn't even give me [an] option...* (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

These experiences illustrate the varying levels of comfort and difficulty participants face when navigating social situations influenced by language. Language serves as a tool for establishing connections within ethnic group, engaging in social exchanges, and fostering a sense of belonging within a community (Castells, 1997; Goduka, 1998; Leibowitz *et al.* 2005; Mckenna,

2005; Rovira, 2008; Thesen, 1997). Depending on the language used, individuals may either feel and find belonging, or experience exclusion and alienation (Rovira, 2008: 68).

Social interaction often involves symbolic communication, where people exchange and interpret symbols to understand one another and work together (Bardis, 1979; Rudwick, 2008). This process is essential for coordinated actions (Idang, 2015). However, individuals have different experiences when interacting in black African social spaces where African languages are spoken. These experiences depend on the specific individuals they encounter. For example, how a black African person who only speaks English is received can vary greatly. The responses they receive are influenced by the expectations and assumptions of the people they interact with (Rovira, 2008: 65). As a result, their treatment often reflects how others perceive and respond to their monolingualism.

4.5.2. Identity Formation

Identity formation, also known as identity development or construction, is the process through which individuals develop a clear and unique understanding of themselves. This includes asking questions like "Who am I?" (Olson, 2019). Personal identity is shaped by various factors, such as a sense of continuity, uniqueness from others, and affiliation with different groups like family, ethnicity, and occupation. These group identities reflect the human need to define oneself in relation to others.

Some individuals, like Participant One, find that their language skills do not negatively impact their identity. He stated, *...because I don't know how to speak the language... it's not necessarily something that has burdened me. I'm not really burdened by it. It hasn't really affected me to a great deal. Like I don't lose self-esteem because I don't know how to speak the language, to be very honest with you* (Zoom Call, 14 August 2024).

In contrast, other participants face challenges regarding their identity. Participant Three expresses: *Challenges in terms of understanding your own identity or feeling comfortable in your identity, in the sense that you know that it is constantly challenged or questioned... that still has a huge impact on other parts of my identity that might have to do with like personal, just in terms of how one goes about, or how you carry yourself in a different space, or how much you understand about yourself; your cultural identity being compromised or your understanding of your cultural identity being compromised; might be a compromise on your ... language, language proficiency, or might compromise your social identity, like you become more acquainted with spaces that speak English because you don't understand vernac.*

So, I think it's quite intertwined and I don't think you can box it as strictly. I would say, it has to do mostly with cultural identity, but it touches on a lot of other things (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).

Similarly, Participant Four shares: *I sometimes do feel a little bit insecure about my standing ... not be able to fully speak vernacular languages* (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024). This highlights how language can influence feelings of insecurity regarding one's identity.

Identities are shaped by a combination of social, cultural, historical, and political factors. These influences help us understand who we are and how we see and categorise others. Identity construction is a personal process, and how one person forms their sense of self will differ from another. People draw from their surroundings and experiences to build their identity.

The above accounts reveal that some individuals may experience feelings of insecurity about their cultural identity due to their inability to speak their ancestral language. Participants noted that, while this occasionally impacts their sense of identity- such as when they are questioned about who they are or become acutely aware of their lack of language proficiency- it is often situational. These moments arise in contexts where language or cultural identity is emphasised, causing them to feel as though they fade into the background due to their limitations. However, these instances do not diminish their overall sense of self or personal identity. On the other hand, some participants expressed that language proficiency is not a factor that affects their identity and therefore does not influence how they perceive themselves or the emotions they experience in various spaces.

4.5.3. Cultural Connectedness

In this research, *cultural connectedness* refers to the sense of connection to one's culture, including an understanding of and engagement with its various aspects (Gray & Cote, 2019). It also encompasses an individual's relationship with members of their cultural group. This concept forms the focus of this section, which examines participants' experiences regarding their connection with members of their cultural group.

This focus is significant because the participants in this study identify with cultural groups through their ethnicity, which is often linked to language groups. Given that the participants are monolingual English speakers, the research explored their experiences and connections with members of their cultural groups in various cultural settings, events, or spaces. Many participants shared their perspectives on how they engage and interact with members of their

cultural communities. Some individuals did not face difficulties with cultural connectedness. For example, Participant Two expressed: *I've actually always had this thought where at cultural events, I think there's a time and place where you speak English* (Zoom Call, 16 August 2024), and he went on to explain that at cultural events, he believes it's easier to respond in the native language rather than English. Despite not being fluent in African languages, during his initiation, he made an effort to speak isiXhosa to blend in better.

Some participants, however, shared less positive experiences, describing a sense of disconnection and alienation that align with Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004: 177) findings. Participant Five, for example, recounted feeling like an outsider at cultural events, drawing a parallel to her experience at a predominantly white school where she felt like *the black one among all white people*. At family gatherings, being called a "coconut" made her feel like *the white one among ... black people... I do feel like a black sheep* (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024), reinforcing her sense of not fully belonging.

This experience reflects a broader phenomenon in South Africa, where the term "coconut" is used as a derogatory label to accuse someone of being brown or black on the outside but white on the inside. Typically directed at black individuals by members within their own racial group (February, 2018; Rudwick 2008), the term serves as a tool of exclusion with black African communities. It is rooted in stereotypes and assumptions about language use and cultural alignment (February, 2018; Kinzler, Shutts & Spelke, 2012: 215; Letshufi, 2016). These assumptions, as Letshufi (2016: 28) explains, stem from the belief that individuals who primarily speak English do so by choice, favouring it over their ancestral language (Letshufi, 2016: 28). Furthermore, as Rovira (2008: 67) notes, such experiences contribute to a sense of being different or separate from one's cultural group.

Similarly, Participant Seven mentioned that initially, people made fun of her attempts to speak isiXhosa, labelling her as sounding *white* or "*like a snob*." Over time, she accepted that this is who she is, stating that *this is me, this is who I am, if you can't accept it, that is a you problem, it's not a me problem* (Zoom Call, 28 August 2024). She emphasised that, in the end, effective communication was what mattered most to her.

These accounts reveal that while participants primarily navigate urban metropolitan spaces where English dominate, they often find themselves engaging with other environments where African languages are more prevalent. This dynamic is deeply rooted in South Africa's history of colonialism and segregation, which has shaped the nation's linguistic and social landscape.

Many black African individuals living in urban areas maintain strong ties to townships or rural areas far from the cities, where African languages are more prevalent.

One participant shared how he attempted to speak his ancestral language in a cultural space as a way to assimilate and gain acceptance. In contrast, participants who only speak English reflected on how they are perceived by others in similar settings. This sub-section highlights the participants' experiences and feelings in relation to members of their cultural groups, emphasising how these interactions are influenced by the participants' self-perception and their awareness of how others perceive them.

The degree to which participants connect with their cultural groups and navigate spaces often depends on their individual autonomy. How they choose to engage in these settings reflects their awareness of others' perceptions, and the decisions they make to navigate these interactions.

Participants also noted that language barriers can create challenges in cultural group settings, though not everyone shares the same experience. In spaces such as events, gatherings, or cultural festivities, African languages are typically spoken. When a participant communicates in English, it stands out, which can shape how they are perceived by others. These perceptions influence how monolingual black African youth feel in these spaces. The way others treat or respond to them can have a significant emotional impact, leaving it up to the individual to decide how to navigate and respond to such behaviour.

4.5.4. Challenges Faced by Monolingual English-Speaking Black African Youth

As participants shared their experiences, a common theme emerged about the challenges they face as monolingual English-speaking black African individuals. These experiences are significant because many participants encounter these issues regularly, setting them apart from black Africans who speak African languages.

Participants had varying views on these challenges. Participant One did not feel that language posed any significant issues in social interactions, stating that he does *not really [face] that many challenges... To be very honest with you, most people who have spoken or engaged with me in Xhosa or Zulu or whatever language, or even other languages, they speak English anyway so it's not like there's a big barrier that makes you unable to talk to someone. So, it hasn't affected me that much* (Zoom Call, 14 August 2024).

In contrast, many other participants described different types of difficulties. Participant Two mentioned how speaking a native language with an English accent can lead to being undermined: *...sometimes when I do speak in any of the native languages it's like people undermine what I'm trying to say. It's like I don't say it the best way or I don't say it the way that everyone else says whatever it is I said. I think it's just the way it rolls off the tongue and the accent. Because you could speak Xhosa but you could speak it in an English accent. It's like you're struggling with your words, and you're not annunciating everything* (Zoom Call, 16 August 2024).

Participant Three explained that social connections are where the challenges arise:

I would say challenges come more socially than anything. How much you feel a closeness to someone or how much you relate to them (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).

Participant Five pointed out the issue of subtle discrimination, stating:

...challenges... just little discrimination in a sense... people not wanting to help you; people walking away from you (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

This reflects a broader phenomenon known as language discrimination, where individuals are treated differently based on their language skills. In such instances, black individuals who do not conform to the expected norms may lead others to perceive them as outsiders in those spaces (Katsere, 2019; Rudwick, 2008). Such perceptions of not belonging can intensify feelings of exclusion and alienation.

Participant Six raised the issue of having her black identity questioned: *I find that people invalidate my blackness. There's this sort of phenomenon of gatekeeping blackness... when it comes to black people there's always someone who's going to try gatekeep or become the judge of how valid you are as a black person* (Makhanda, 22 August 2024).

Participant Seven reflected on being made fun of and bullied:

... people are gonna make fun of you, or maybe not want to converse with you. Those are certain challenges. Being bullied, I was bullied quite [a lot] when I was younger. And bullied in the essence of people laughing behind my back and not wanting to speak to me (Zoom Call, 28 August 2024).

These accounts illustrate that while some monolingual English-speaking black Africans do not face significant issues, many others experience social difficulties, discrimination, and feelings

of exclusion due to language barriers. The reactions they receive from others impact their social interactions.

The responses reveal that the challenges faced by these youth stem largely from how others perceive and categorise them, often influenced by assumptions and stereotypes about language (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2005: 25; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 1; Rovira, 2008: 65; Seliger & Vago, 1991: 4 Shashkevich, 2019;). For instance, when a black African person speaks only English and cannot speak an African language, they may be judged or stereotyped before others have a chance to understand them as individuals. As Leibowitz *et al.* (2005: 26) point out, language plays a key role in how people relate to one another, often shaping perceptions based on assumed language affiliations. This does not always happen in every situation. Sometimes, people are accommodating and will speak English in return. However, when that is not the case, these individuals might experience discrimination, teasing, exclusion, being ignored, or having their identity questioned simply because they do not fit the expected norms of a black African individual (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 177). These challenges come in different forms, but as participants shared, it highlights a lack of compassion, understanding, or *ubuntu*⁹ from others within their own racial group, solely based on language differences.

While there has been a plethora of sociological research on racial discrimination in the South African context, there is a need for more research on discrimination based on language. This study tentatively reveals that English monolingualism often leads to stereotyping, bullying, and other forms of discrimination, particularly within black African communities.

4.6. Language Barriers and Social Perceptions

Monolingual English-speaking black African youth face unique experiences, often encountering different reactions in their daily interactions. Many people are surprised when they learn that these individuals, despite being black African, cannot speak their ancestral language or any African language. This surprise is common among participants, but it appears that younger people are generally more accepting of this than the older generation.

This theme is important to explore because it highlights how these youth navigate these situations. How do they respond when people react strongly to their inability to speak an African language? In South Africa, it is common for others to approach them speaking an

⁹ Ubuntu is an ancient African word meaning 'humanity to others'. It is often described as reminding us that 'I am what I am because of who we all are'. It refers to behaving well towards others or acting in ways that benefit the community (Thompson, 2019).

African language, and they respond in English. Since this happens regularly, the researcher wanted to understand how they handle the reactions they receive. Two responses, among others, show that the younger generation is generally less concerned with language differences than the older generation.

Participant Six explained that while some young people may be bothered by their lack of African language skills, it is mostly the older generation that has a strong reaction. She said, *...with people in our age group, doesn't really seem to affect [interactions], unless that person is... politically inclined.* She further described how she navigates these situations: *I've kind of learned this thing, I actually learned it from my brother, where you sort of guess what someone is saying, and then you kind of just laugh, and you smile. So, I find that it's just easier and then you escape the conversation as quickly as possible* (Makhanda, 22 August 2024). She avoids building relationships with people who criticise or judge her based on her language skills.

Similarly, Participant Seven shared that younger people don't mind her speaking English, but older people may find it difficult due to language barriers: *I think with the younger generation I find [speaking English] really good, like people don't really care as much. I think with older people it's definitely difficult because not everyone knows English. So, there is a bit of a block, or like a hurdle in the communication, but it becomes okay. It bothered me at first,* she said, *because we should all be able to speak English in general. Now I laugh at it, and I don't care* (Zoom Call, 28 August 2024). In her response, she emphasised the importance of being confident in herself and keeping interactions brief when people react negatively to her language ability.

Both participants show how they keep their conversations short and move on when faced with criticism or judgment about their language skills. They are not interested in engaging further with people who do not understand their situation. However, some participants noted that others are more curious and engage in conversations to understand their background. For example, Participant Three recalled a positive encounter where someone asked about her upbringing and why she could not speak an African language: *... I straight up did tell them that I don't really understand fully what you're saying and they got to know why exactly... It was quite a comforting approach that he took* (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024). Similarly, Participant Five mentioned that in social settings: *sometimes they just ask and we just chat about it and we have a conversation. It really is a conversation starter* (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

These participants show that reactions to their language ability vary, but they have learned to navigate these situations by either moving on or engaging in meaningful conversations, depending on the context.

How a person responds to others' perceptions and attitudes depends on how they interpret the situation and how they feel about it. If someone chooses to disengage, it likely means they no longer want to continue the conversation. On the other hand, if they decide to keep talking, it may show they are open to explaining their experience and helping the other person understand their reality. Ultimately, it depends on the individual—how they view the interaction, how they want to be seen, and what they feel capable of handling at that moment.

4.7. Through Their Eyes: Monolingual Black African Youth Reflect on Their Reality

Black African youth in South Africa who are monolingual English speakers are not uncommon (Kamwangamalu, 2002: 3), and similar cases have been documented in other African countries, such as in Botswana (Sebina, 2014). Despite this, the experiences of monolingual youth are rarely discussed openly. Often, these individuals find themselves having to defend their reality to others who view their situation as unusual. Instead of focusing on others' perceptions, this research seeks to amplify the voices of these youth, exploring their experiences, and understanding how they feel about themselves and their connection to the world.

The fact is, these young people primarily or exclusively speak English. In a society with a rich cultural history, they must reflect on their experiences as black African individuals in this context. Since speaking English is their norm in most spaces, this research explores how they perceive their monolingualism. Many participants expressed that they have accepted their reality and move forward confidently, embracing who they are.

Participant One shared:

The environment I am exposed to is very diverse, so ... I've just naturally accepted as part of who I am... I have learned to accept that you're not [going to] relate to everyone even if it's based off the language you speak. So that's kind of how I've dealt with it, and it really hasn't affected me to a traumatic extent. It's not really something that has affected me throughout my life (Zoom Call, 14 August 2024).

Participant One highlights the significant influence of his surrounding environment on the language he speaks. He acknowledges that he will not relate to everyone and chooses to focus on building connections with those who are receptive to him. Additionally, he notes that his

exposure to diverse environments has shaped his perspective, stating that his inability to speak an African language has not significantly affected his way of life.

Participant Three said:

I would say that it's extremely important [to know your ancestral language], but I also know that I've been okay with not knowing vernac (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).

Participant Three emphasises the importance of knowing one's ancestral language for cultural reasons. However, she acknowledges that not speaking the language does not hinder her life. She has lived her life well without knowing an African language, and it has not significantly impacted her daily activities.

Participant Four added:

I'm not completely bummed out about it. It doesn't make me sad (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

Participant Four is revealing that she does not experience negative emotions due to her inability to speak an African language.

Participant Five reflected:

I am kind of a little more true to myself and I know my reasons and I know my background. I'm not too ashamed of it, just because my reasoning for it isn't to belittle anybody or my reasoning for it isn't really anybody's business. (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

Participant Five expresses confidence in her identity, stating that she is not ashamed of not speaking an African language, as she understands that the circumstances were beyond her control. She does not conform to any stereotypes associated with English-speaking black Africans and is secure in her identity, regardless of her language proficiency.

Participant Six mentioned:

I guess maybe sometimes it limits the nature of conversation that I'm able to have with people. But I wouldn't say it limits my quality of life because I live in metropolitan areas, [and] because my whole life has always been very cosmopolitan (Makhanda, 22 August 2024).

Participant Six reaffirms that not speaking an African language does not diminish one's quality of life. While she acknowledges that it may affect conversations with certain individuals, her life has largely been metropolitan and cosmopolitan, where the lack of an African language is

not a major issue. In these spaces, English is the most common language, and multiple languages are spoken, making the inability to speak an African language less significant.

Participant Seven stated:

I don't feel anything. I'm just like we're communicating regardless, so that's important to me (Zoom Call, 28 August 2024).

Participant Seven emphasises the importance of communication and getting the message across. For her, the specific language spoken is secondary. She highlights that, regardless of the languages used, what truly matters is effective communication. As long as two interlocutors can understand each other, communication is successfully achieved.

Despite their different experiences, these individuals still feel the need to validate and accept themselves. They understand who they are, the circumstances that shaped them, and that their reality was not a choice. Participant Six highlighted this, saying: *I think it's this whole thing of them believing that I am trying to assimilate into whiteness or I'm trying to escape blackness, which isn't the case... it's not a conscious effort. It's how I was brought up. I was raised in white spaces. So, it's not a conscious effort to get away from blackness* (Makhanda, 22 August 2024). This statement highlights the stereotypes often directed at English-speaking black African individuals, while also rejecting those assumptions and emphasising her reality. Participant Six, along with the others, stresses that her monolingualism is a product of her upbringing and the spaces she was exposed to, rather than the intentions others may assume. The participants have learned to make the best of their circumstances.

This research focuses on language and its power in certain spaces, and the next section will explore the impact of language in different contexts.

4.8. The Power of Language

Language holds immense power, influencing how we communicate, perceive the world, and interact with others. The words and phrases we choose often shape our behaviour and worldview, even unconsciously (Altun, 2023: 365). Language is not just a tool for communication but also a cultural, social, and psychological phenomenon. By studying how languages differ and why, we gain insight into the diversity of the human experience (Shashkevich, 2019).

Language barriers can hinder effective communication and engagement between people from different linguistic backgrounds, further entrenching social hierarchies (Altun, 2023: 365). For instance, in-group language, such as slang or jargon, can reinforce social bonds and create a sense of belonging. Shared language signals group membership and identity (Altun, 2023: 365), while differences in language proficiency can highlight social divides. Historically, language has been a means of control and domination. During colonisation, colonisers often imposed their language on the people they conquered, prohibiting native languages (Shakib, 2011: 117). In South Africa, English was introduced through British occupation in 1795 as part of Britain's effort to control the Cape sea-route (Kamwangamalu, 2002: 1). Before the British, the Dutch had colonised the Cape from 1652-1795. The British policy of Anglicisation aimed to replace Dutch with English in all aspects of public life, requiring English for access to resources and official positions (Kamwangamalu, 2002: 1). By 1814, English had become the official language of the colony, and a proclamation in 1822 enforced its use in official documents and legal proceedings (Kamwangamalu, 2002: 2). English was also made the medium of instruction in schools, further entrenching its dominance.

However, in 1948, when the Afrikaners came into power, English was replaced by Afrikaans in state affairs under the policy of Afrikanerisation. The apartheid government's 1958 Bantu Education Act sought to impose Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in Black schools, reducing the role of English. This policy sparked resistance, culminating in the Soweto uprisings of June 16, 1976. In the aftermath, Afrikaans became seen as the language of oppression, while English emerged as the language of liberation (Kamwangamalu, 2002: 2). From that point until the democratic transition in 1994, English grew increasingly hegemonic, maintaining its dominance even in post-apartheid South Africa, where it coexists with other official languages but remains the most powerful (Kamwangamalu, 2002: 3).

In post-apartheid South Africa, English has gained prestige as the primary language of education, media, technology, and government. It is seen as the language of power, status, and upward social mobility, making it a valuable tool for social and economic success (Kamwangamalu, 2002: 3). English also holds a unique status, functioning as both a native and non-native language across different communities. According to the 1996 census, 113 132 black South Africans spoke English as a home language, with numbers growing by 2010, especially in urban and metropolitan areas (Kamwangamalu, 2002: 3).

Social constructionists highlight how power dynamics within institutions such as family, education, media, and government, shape identities. These dynamics often elevate certain identities while marginalising others, creating social inequalities that establish dominant and subordinate identities (Edwards, 2024). In South Africa, English dominance in education and the workplace can overshadow indigenous languages and the cultural identities associated with them, reinforcing a system where English proficiency aligns with social power, while identities tied to indigenous languages are often sidelined (Altun, 2023: 365). Similarly, in certain social spaces and provinces, African languages hold authority, sidelining those who do not speak them or lack proficiency in an African language.

Language can influence interpersonal interactions, shaping how we perceive ourselves and others (Haun, 2017; Shashkevich, 2019). The way we speak – our tone, register, and nonverbal cues – affects how people respond to us and how communication unfolds (Altun, 2023: 363). Language plays a crucial role in social inclusion and integration, often acting as a bridge or a barrier between people. People who do not share the same language may face challenges in accessing services, participating fully in social interactions, or expressing their needs and opinions (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). For instance, Participant Three shared how she felt excluded in everyday interactions, stating: *I feel quite excluded when it's kind of like [a] small conversation. For example, the person that I live with is Xhosa, and ... in spending time with her and going places with her, whether it's the mall or whether it's grocery shopping, wherever it may be really, whether we go to a restaurant, there's a different level of relating to someone that can be done when you understand their language, and I feel like ... for me, that's the exclusion that I don't think I'm used to or that I'm comfortable in yet* (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).

Another participant described an experience at a shoe store, where a Xhosa-speaking staff member was insistent on using Xhosa even though the participant could not describe what she was looking for in that language: *I couldn't describe it in Xhosa, so I told him in English but there was a sort of adamancy to speak Xhosa instead. So, I did feel a little bit of pressure ... even though I didn't know how to describe what I was looking for in Xhosa.* This situation reflects how language dynamics can affect social interactions and lead to feelings of inadequacy.

Similarly, a third participant, Participant Six, recalled an experience with a waiter who became unfriendly upon realising she only spoke English: *I once got a waiter who was very displeased*

at the fact that I only spoke English and he turned from being quite friendly, quite nice, to just being very salty whenever he came by my table (Makhanda, 22 August 2024), further illustrating how language proficiency can influence social interactions.

Language proficiency also contributes to social inequality, reinforcing existing power structures (Altun, 2023: 365). Participant Three observed that someone who understands only African languages would likely encounter significant difficulties, particularly in workplaces and schools where English dominates. This highlights the disparity in how language affects access to knowledge and resources. She states: *I don't really feel too many challenges in a different sense outside of the social setting, and I think that would be quite different for someone who understands vernac but doesn't understand English. I think that, obviously English being the predominantly spoken language in workplace, for school, doesn't affect me, but someone who doesn't really understand English would be affected by that. So, I guess that also speaks to the power that also comes with language... African languages, are not used as influentially in work or in school. And those are the places where... that's where knowledge is created* (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).

Participant Four noted that her proficiency in English has benefited her: *...I'd rather appreciate that I can speak English at the proficiency that I can. Mostly because I feel like I can excel better in the corporate world because of it* (WhatsApp Call, 19 August 2024).

The advantages of speaking English are evident among the participants. Participant Six acknowledged the privilege that comes with fluency, recognising the societal power dynamics at play. She expressed: *I see the benefits of being fluent in English. When I first came to university, I saw it very quickly. I was doing a lot better in schoolwork, in essays, than my peers who struggled in English, or English was only their third or Fourth language. I'm also aware of the fact that it has benefitted me in great ways and I know that with my "accent", and with the fact that I do speak English, it has allowed me however unconsciously, I don't think I've ever done it consciously, again I was raised in spaces of whiteness, it has allowed me proximity to whiteness and the unfortunate truth of our society, at least right now, is that whiteness holds a great deal of power. Holds a great deal of economic power, it holds a great deal of cultural power, and so I know that speaking English and how I speak English allows me access to a kind of privilege that other black people who ... don't speak English as fluently, don't have* (Makhanda, 22 August 2024). English serves as a key that unlocks economic and cultural

opportunities. As a global language, it provides significant advantages in various spheres of life (Haun, 2017).

Participants in the study did not choose their reality of speaking only English; rather, they have come to embrace it. They recognise the privileges associated with their language skills. However, as Kamwangamalu (2002: 3) notes, while English opens doors to education and job opportunities, it simultaneously excludes those who do not speak it well. One participant reflected on this barrier, acknowledging that their English proficiency grants them access to opportunities that others may not have. This situation underscores the power of the English language, shaping both personal experiences and broader societal dynamics.

Language plays a vital role in expressing and forming both personal and social identities. It enables individuals to communicate their thoughts and emotions, build confidence, and foster a collective identity that reflects their cultural, ethnic, and social ties. African languages, often referred to as “vernac”, hold particular significance in defining individual and collective identities. They enable people to articulate and define who they are culturally, racially, and socially.

When individuals communicate in African languages, they engage in symbolic interaction, where shared language and meanings promote understanding and connection (Main, 2023). Symbolism - the subjective meanings people assign to objects, events, and behaviours – plays a key role in social interactions (Aksan *et al.*, 2009: 903). Through gestures and symbols, individuals convey meanings that influence behaviour and perceptions of their social environment. (Altun, 2023: 364).

Additionally, language choices, including accents, often signal a sense of belonging and cultural heritage (Altun, 2024: 364). Speaking a common African language not only reflects shared cultural identity but also serves as a form of resistance against language-based discrimination. This fosters a sense of community and connection.

Different African languages dominate various regions of South Africa, reflecting the country’s rich linguistic diversity. For example, isiZulu is primarily spoken in KwaZulu-Natal, the home province of the Zulu people, while isiXhosa is mainly spoken in the Eastern Cape, where it is taught in schools., Xhosa speakers can also be found in significant numbers in Cape Town and Gauteng. Setswana is mostly spoken in the Northern Cape and North-West (Laas, 2024).

In these regions, speaking the local language enhances communication, making interactions with residents smoother and more meaningful. Participant Two observed that using the native language in such contexts simplifies communication and can also shield individuals from negative comments by signaling a shared understanding: *I think responding in that native language just helps a lot more, and just would be easier for you. Now you don't have to take any comments from anyone because now you're speaking the same thing, it's just a normal day now.* He added that it helps in everyday situations: *I think it helps you in social settings. Think about how many times you go to a mall, you meet a parking guard or a security guard or whatever, they're not really proficient in English at all. I think it just makes life a bit easier* (Zoom Call, 16 August 2024). This highlights how power dynamics embedded in language and communication shape social interactions, as noted by Foucault (Thesen, 1997: 505).

Participant Three shared: *... coming from a place of privilege, my relation with other people in terms of the public space, people who are like blue-collar workers for example, it's difficult to bridge the gap between those two social statuses... language is something that kind of brings you back to home, that brings you home, that says, we are one, we are one of the same, but without that its extremely difficult to even start anywhere. You don't see each other the same. There's nothing to relate upon* (Zoom Call, 18 August 2024).

Participant One observed: *I've noticed a lot of people relate to each other just based off the fact that they can speak the same language* (Zoom Call, 14 August 2024).

Participant Two noted: *...think about it, you going to a place where they only speak their native languages and now you're coming here with English... if you're going towards your cultural background, you're there and you speak English only it'll be a lot harder for you to get anything done there whatsoever* (Zoom Call, 16 August 2024).

While African languages are commonly spoken in various situations across South Africa, they dominate in everyday informal interactions, according to Avramenko (2020: 341). They thrive in culturally homogenous areas and at cultural events. Today, indigenous languages are increasingly visible in media (Avramenko, 2020: 341).

This section examines the influence of language within different contexts, highlighting the power dynamics that emerge when one language dominates others. These dynamics are socially constructed through influential institutions and structures that promote certain languages in particular spaces. In environments where English holds sway, it often displaces other primary languages, as Rovira (2008: 71) notes, “English quickly displaces and replaces the primary

language.” English, for instance, holds power in specific settings, while African languages are more influential in others. When speakers of the dominant language dismiss the importance of other languages, it creates inequalities that affect linguistic minorities (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 2; Rovira, 2008: 72).

In spaces where English is predominant, using it can be beneficial for achieving certain objectives, while speaking African languages in culturally significant or local settings where they are widely spoken can enhance communication, navigation, and social interactions. Language is thus a powerful tool—a means to an end. However, when people do not share a common language, communication can become difficult, leading to feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction, or disconnection.

The prestige assigned to certain languages by social institutions affects which language dominates in a region, potentially shaping individuals’ identities based on their exposure. However, in the context of this research, language is not viewed as the sole determinant of identity. Although language contributes to ethnic identity and can reflect collective affiliations, it does not singularly define an individual’s cultural or personal identity. Language holds power in fulfilling social purposes, yet it does not solely dictate a person’s sense of self.

4.9. Conclusion

The analysis has shown that despite predominantly speaking English, these youth remain deeply aware of their ethnic and cultural heritage. For the most part, they identify as black African youth and feel a strong connection to their ethnic communities. Their use of English does not diminish their sense of belonging; they still see themselves as part of their cultural groups, which are integral to their identity. Their experiences with social interactions, identity formation, and cultural connectedness, however, are varied. Some feel a disconnection from their cultural identity due to language barriers, while others do not. Some are able to engage in meaningful conversations with other black African individuals who speak African languages, whereas others face challenges. Similarly, some can maintain a strong bond with their cultural community, while others struggle with this connection.

One key takeaway from this study is the diversity in how these individuals came to speak English, highlighting that they cannot be generalised or "painted with the same brush." The challenges they face as monolinguals vary, impacting them in different ways. How they navigate attitudes and perceptions about their inability to speak a native language depends on personal choices—whether to engage or disengage with those who react to their language

proficiency. Their perceptions of their monolingualism are largely shaped by their confidence in themselves. Many have learned to accept and embrace who they are, viewing their fluency in English as a strength.

Ultimately, language holds power in every sphere of life, and its influence depends on the context and the people involved. However, this analysis has demonstrated that language does not solely define a person's identity. While it plays a role in social identity, an individual's sense of self is determined by many factors beyond language. In particular, a person's "blackness" or Africanity is not dependent on speaking an African language—other cultural, social, and personal factors also contribute to their identity.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1. Introduction

This chapter concludes the study by summarising the key research findings in relation to the research aims and questions, discussing the study's contributions, addressing its limitations, and proposing directions for future research. The findings in this study reveal that, although these young people predominantly speak English, they maintain a deep awareness of their ethnic and cultural heritage. They identify as black African and feel a strong connection to their ethnic communities. Their use of English does not lessen this connection; they still view themselves as part of their cultural groups, which remain integral to their identity.

The primary aim of this study was to explore, document, and analyse how social interactions and language use shape perceptions of “blackness” within black African social contexts. The focus was specifically on black African youth who communicate exclusively in English and do not speak their ancestral languages. Utilising symbolic interactionist and social constructionist theoretical frameworks, the research examined how these individuals navigate their identities within the social and cultural environments of South Africa. The central argument aligns with the perspectives of Ndumiso Ngcobo (cited in Rudwick, 2010: 55), and Skylar Paxton (2022), asserting that language cannot be the definitive marker of identity. Identity is shaped by a multitude of factors that collectively contribute to one's sense of self.

This research employed a qualitative approach, relying on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with seven monolingual English-speaking black African youth between the ages of 20 and 35. English monolingualism among black Africans – a phenomenon where individuals exclusively use English in social and professional interactions – has been widely studied in the context of immigrants but remains under-researched among those born and raised in their native environments. This study's exploration of this subject is particularly significant against the historical backdrop of South Africa, and the country's rich cultural heritage.

The imposition of the English language on South Africa's indigenous populations dates back to the colonial era, resulting in the marginalisation of native languages. For African people, speaking English became associated with access to resource and upward mobility, driving the adoption and acculturation of the language. Urbanisation has further entrenched English as the dominant medium of communication in cities, with many youth raised in predominantly English-speaking environments.

The rise of English-monolingualism reflects a cultural shift and the enduring imposition of colonial structures that disrupted the indigenous languages and ways of life. Urban migration has played a pivotal role in influencing language use, particularly among youth raised in metropolitan environments. These diverse settings, characterised by a blend of ethnicities, cultures, and languages, necessitate a common language, often English, to facilitate communication in shared spaces such as schools, workplaces, and social settings.

5.2. Critical Reflections on the Research Objectives

Findings from this study reveal that all participants were raised in English-speaking environments. These youth are surrounded by English in their neighbourhoods, social spaces, schools, and even through their parents' workplaces. To socialise, integrate, or feel included, they adopt the language commonly spoken by their peers. Over time, consistent exposure to and use of English entrenches as their primary language, shaping their linguistic identity.

The participants in this study described unique circumstances that led to their use of English as their primary language - circumstances often beyond their control. This language use developed during their formative years, significantly influencing their linguistic practices. The research explored how racially black African individuals who speak only English, and their ancestral languages, perceive their identities. These participants frequently find themselves attending cultural and social events where they interact with black Africans proficient in African languages. Due to their appearance, they are often approached in these spaces by individuals speaking African languages. However, when they respond in English, they elicit varied reactions – a dynamic this study aimed to investigate.

The findings of this study indicate that, despite not speaking their ancestral languages, participants firmly identify as black Africans well-rooted within their ethnic communities. While some acknowledged that their lack of ancestral language proficiency influences social interactions and identity to a degree, they unanimously agreed that it neither diminishes their quality of life nor serves their connection to their cultural roots. While language provides tools for communication, self-expression, and respect, it is not the sole determinant of African identity. Identity encompasses a multitude of factors, and “blackness” cannot be reduced to linguistic proficiency.

Participants cited several factors and contexts contributing to their use of English over ancestral languages. These include environmental factors- predominantly English-speaking households, schools, neighbourhoods, and social circles. Multicultural dynamics- growing up

in diverse families or environments where English served as the common language. Educational influence- teachers explicitly promoting English while discouraging the use of African languages. Family circumstances- unique family needs, such as supporting a member's speech development, led to English becoming the household language, and social pressures- the desire to fit in, peer expectations, and the need to be understood in diverse social contexts.

Participants reported varied reactions to their monolingualism in social settings. Some individuals were accepting and accommodating, continuing conversations in English to ensure inclusivity. Others expressed surprise or curiosity without hostility, while a few reacted negatively. These interactions depended on the context and the individuals involved. The inability to speak an ancestral language occasionally triggered feelings of insecurity or self-doubt, particularly in situations emphasising cultural identity or language. These moments, however, were situational and did not undermine participants' broader sense of self. Some participants viewed language proficiency as irrelevant to their identity, affirming that it neither shaped their self-perception nor influenced their emotional experiences in social spaces. Participants recognised that language barriers could create challenges in cultural group settings such as gatherings or festivals, where African languages are predominantly spoken. Communicating in English often made them stand out, shaping how others perceived them and, in turn, how they felt in those spaces. While such interactions could be emotionally impactful, participants navigated these dynamics based on their own interpretations and comfort levels, deciding whether to disengage or engage in dialogue to explain their experiences.

The final objective focused on how black African youth perceive their monolingualism. Participants demonstrated a strong sense of self-awareness and acceptance, understanding that their linguistic reality resulted from their upbringing and environmental influences rather than personal choice. They rejected external assumptions and interpretations, affirming that their identity is shaped by their lived experiences and social interactions, not solely by language.

This research contributes to the discourse on individuals raised in their native environments who do not speak their native language - a topic that is under-researched, particularly in South Africa. Building on Ndumiso Ngcobo's argument, this study highlights the limitations of attributing rigid cultural or racial significance to language. Ngcobo contends that evaluating individuals solely based on language oversimplifies their identity, often leading to misunderstandings, stereotypes, and discrimination. His perspective reinforces the idea that

language should not serve as a definitive marker of identity, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of identity formation. While language plays a significant role in social interactions and cultural settings, it is not the sole determinant of identity. These youth navigate societal attitudes and perceptions about their linguistic realities by relying on their self-awareness, resilience, and a commitment to defining their identities in their own terms, despite external expectations.

5.3. Limitations and Recommendations

One notable limitation of this study is the time constraint associated with a one-year Master's programme, which restricted the scope of participant selection and data collection. With additional time, a larger sample size and more diverse perspectives could be incorporated. Future research could expand on this work by including participants from various regions across South Africa. Furthermore, subsequent studies could explore the cultural knowledge of monolingual English-speaking black African individuals, investigating their familiarity with their ethnic and cultural traditions, such as clan names, attire for specific occasions, and other cultural customs. This could help determine whether proficiency in a native language directly influences exposure to cultural practices or if monolingual English speakers possess significant cultural knowledge despite their linguistic background.

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APPENDIX 1

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION

(signed by research participant/s)

Project Title: 'We are also Africans': Exploring the experiences of monolingual English-speaking Black African youth interacting in Black African Communities in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Onele Ntshona from the Department of Sociology, Rhodes University has requested my permission to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

The nature and the purpose of the research project and of this informed consent declaration have been explained to me in a language that I understand.

I am aware that:

1. The purpose of the research project is to participate in examining how social interactions and language use shape perceptions of "Blackness" within Black African social contexts. The study focuses specifically on Black African youth who communicate exclusively in English and do not speak their ancestral language.
2. Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project **(2024-7991-8929)** and I have seen/may request to see the clearance certificate by contacting the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za)
3. By participating in this research project I will be contributing towards advancing understanding of the experiences of monolingual English-speaking Black African individuals, specifically the role of language in shaping identity and influencing cultural connectedness within the Black African community.
4. I will participate in the project by responding to a semi-structured interview consisting of predetermined questions. The interview will be conducted in a setting and approach that ensures my comfort and ease of participation.
5. My participation is entirely voluntary and should I at any stage wish to withdraw from participating further, I may do so without any negative consequences.
6. I understand that I have the right to refuse to respond to any question that I would prefer not to answer.
7. I will not be compensated for participating in the research as the study is an academic project.



8. The following risks are associated with my participation: The potential risks that may arise are minimal. These may include discomfort in discussing childhood experiences related to the topic and other interactions within Black African social contexts.
9. The Researcher intends to publish the research results in the form of a dissertation for assessment for her Master's degree. However, confidentiality and anonymity of records will be maintained, and my name and identity will not be revealed to anyone who has not been involved in the conducting of the research, unless I indicate to the contrary/recognise that as a public figure, my identity will inevitably become known, and I agree to accept the loss of anonymity.
10. In terms of the Protection of Personal Information Act (No. 4 of 2013) it remains my right to request the Researcher to provide me with a detailed explanation of exactly how confidentiality and anonymity of the data I provide will be achieved. I may also request to know exactly how my personal information will be stored securely, for how long it will be stored.
11. I consent to data collected from me for this research project being used by the Researcher in a follow up study. If any data collected from me for this research project is to be used by the Researcher for any further study, I am to be informed in writing and my written consent requested again. I need not give consent for the new research if it is incompatible with the initial purpose of the present study (POPIA, s15(3)). Equally, I can simply reject the request. In such cases, a formal request needs to be made to me by the researcher via the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za).
12. In terms of the POPI Act, I possess the right to receive feedback about this research. This will take the form of communication via telephone or email, unless **I elect not to receive this feedback.**
13. Any further questions that I might have regarding the nature of the research and/or my participation in it will be answered by Onele Ntshona (g23N1866@campus.ru.ac.za).
14. By signing this informed consent declaration, I am not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies. A copy of this informed consent declaration will be given to me, and the original will be kept on record by the Researcher.
15. I **agree** to the Researcher's use of voice recording of my comments and opinions during interviews, the purpose of which is to ensure the accurate recording of my views/responses. Furthermore, I have the right to request a copy of the interview transcriptions to confirm that my opinions are accurately recorded

I,, have read the above information / confirm that the above information has been explained to me in a language that I understand, and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all questions that I



wished to ask, and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research.

I have not been pressurised in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned project.

.....
Participants signature

.....
Witness

.....
Date

APPENDIX 2

Interview Schedule

Title: ‘We are also Africans’: Exploring the experiences of monolingual English-speaking black African youth interacting in black African Communities: A case study of youth residing in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Researcher: Onele Ntshona

Student Number: 23N1866

Supervisor: Dr. Thoko Sipungu

Name of Interviewee:

Date:

Place:

Occupation:

Questions are organised based on the research objectives. The specific questions are outlined below:

1. Biographical Questions

- What is your primary spoken language?
- What is the primary spoken language of your parents?
- Which ethnic group do you identify with or belong to?
- Do you identify as a black African? Why?
- Can you describe your proficiency in any African languages? If fluent, please specify which ones.
- What is your age?

2. Examining the factors and contexts that have led to the predominance of English over ancestral languages among black African youth.

- What are the native language(s) of your parents?
- How do your family members communicate with you? Do they use any ancestral language(s)?
- [*probing question*] How well do you understand your ancestral language(s)?
- Which language is most commonly used in your family household?

- Where in Johannesburg did you grow up? Please describe the locality.
- What do you know about your parents' birthplaces and upbringing? Where were they raised?
- [*probing question*] Have your parents always lived in an urban environment, or did they move from a different setting? Can you elaborate on this?
- Which primary and secondary schools did you attend?
 - What was the primary language of instruction at these schools?
- During your formative years, what language did you and your peers predominately use?

3. Investigating the unique experiences and challenges faced by these youth in terms of cultural connectedness, identity formation, and social interactions.

- Can you describe any notable cultural events, rites of passage, customs, or heritage rituals that are significant within your ethnic group?
- How does your family observe these cultural traditions?
- How do you engage with cultural events and social gatherings within your community?
- Can you share any experiences where fellow black Africans assumed you spoke a vernacular language based on your appearance?
- [*follow up question*] How do you typically respond in such situations?
- What are your experiences in black African social settings where African languages are predominantly spoken?
 - Have you ever felt excluded in these settings? How did that impact you?

4. Exploring how these youth navigate attitudes and perceptions about their lack of proficiency in their ancestral language within black social spaces.

- How do you feel about your proficiency level in your ancestral language?
- In what ways does your lack of proficiency in your ancestral language affect your social interactions with other black African individuals who speak an African language?
- Please can you describe your experiences when you respond in English to someone speaking to you in a vernacular language.
- How do you perceive others' reactions to your inability to respond in a vernacular language?

- Have you ever faced criticism for not speaking an African language? If so, can you describe these experiences?
- What are your thoughts on the necessity for a black African individual to speak an African language?

5. Analysing the perceptions of black African youth regarding their monolingualism.

- How do you feel about speaking only English in black African social settings or cultural events?
- What challenges have you encountered, if any, associated with being monolingual?
- Have you made any attempts to learn an African language? Can you describe your experiences or motivations?
- [*follow up question*] What are your thoughts on whether it is necessary for a monolingual English-speaking black African individual to learn an African language?
- How effective do you find speaking only English when interacting with black African individuals who speak vernacular languages?
- What is one question you would have added to this interview schedule?