

Language and Students' Access to Psychological Support at a South African University: An Exploratory Case Study

by

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Declaration

I, Gwen Sinamava Payi (17p4225) declare that this thesis is my original work and has not been submitted in its entirety or part for examination for a degree to any other university or education institution. Any information that has been obtained from other scholars has been acknowledged by citation and included in the references list.

Signature:  Date: 03/06/2025

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Abstract

It is no new knowledge that in South Africa, language has historically functioned both as a tool of oppression during apartheid and as a resource for transformation in the post-apartheid higher education (HE) landscape. In multilingual and culturally diverse contexts such as South African universities, language plays a critical role in shaping students' access to and experiences of university life—not only in the transformation of teaching and learning but also in essential student services, particularly psychological support, which is central to students' holistic well-being and academic success. This thesis explores the intersection of language, psychological support, and institutional language policy at Rhodes University, with a specific focus on how students who speak African languages as Mother Tongue experience and access mental health services in an institution that proclaims a commitment to multilingualism, as well as the experiences and perspectives of psychologists who provide those services. Anchored in the field of Language Planning and Policy (LPP), this study critically examines how language practices within the university's Student Counselling Centre (SCC) align—or do not align—with the linguistic needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse student body. Using a qualitative case study approach, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and psychologists to explore their lived language related experience in psychological counselling, institutional language policy framework, and the implication of professional psychology training and curriculum. Findings reveal that while students possess functional proficiency in English, they encounter emotional strain, linguistic anxiety, and cognitive challenges when counselling takes place in a language other than their Mother Tongue—challenges that are intensified by institutional power dynamics privileging English and, to a lesser extent, isiXhosa. These dynamics, coupled with the absence of formal language negotiation practices and a perceived linguistic hierarchy, contribute to emotional withdrawal, reduced trust in the counselling process, and in some cases, discontinuation of counselling services. This study contributes towards the ongoing discourse on the transformation of HE and psychological practice in South Africa by making a strong case for more linguistically inclusive and culturally grounded approaches in student support services. It calls for a reimagining of multilingualism not only as a pedagogical imperative but as a practical necessity for equitable access to mental health care and other essential services in universities.

Key Words: Language Planning and Policy, African languages, Multilingualism, Counselling Psychology, African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Higher Education

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List of Acronyms

- **AIKS** – African Indigenous Knowledge Systems
- **DHET** – Department of Higher Education and Training
- **HEI** – Higher Education Institution
- **HI** – Higher Institution
- **HPCSA** – Health Professions Council of South Africa
- **HWI** – Historically White Institution
- **IKS** – Indigenous Knowledge Systems
- **IPA** – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
- **LPHE** – Language Policy for Higher Education
- **LPP** – Language Planning and Policy
- **PsySSA** – Psychological Society of South Africa
- **SCC** – Student Counselling Centre
- **SSS** – Student Support Services Framework
- **TVET** – Technical and Vocational Education
- **UCT** – University of Cape Town
- **UKZN** – University of KwaZulu-Natal
- **UWC** – University of Western Cape

Contextual Notes

For the purpose of this thesis, Home Language (with capital letters H and L) is used to refer to the language that participants studied as a subject at school, as designated by the Department of Basic Education in its curriculum policy documents. Mother Tongue (with capital letters M and T) refers to the actual language spoken by participants in their homes or communities, which may or may not align with the language formally studied as the Home Language at school. Lastly, home language (in lowercase h and l) is used to represent the language participants personally identify as the one spoken at home. This term reflects the wording used by participants themselves in their reflections, particularly when they do not use the term Mother Tongue. The term “counselling” will be used to refer specifically to the psychological support service under research. Other psychological support services will be referred to exactly as they appear in the reviewed literature to maintain consistency. Based on my understanding of individual differences and lived experiences, I acknowledge that these terms—Home Language, Mother Tongue, and home language—may be interpreted differently by different individuals. Therefore, I remain open to the possibility that these terms may carry distinct meanings for different people.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

This study explores how language impacts students' access to psychological support services in a multilingual higher education environment. It focuses on the extent to which language functions either as a bridge or a barrier in mental health care, particularly for students whose first language is not English.

In linguistically and culturally diverse contexts such as South African universities, language plays a critical role not only in academic instruction but also in shaping students' broader experiences within the institution, including their access to support services. The connection between language and students' academic performance is well documented (Heugh, 2009; Brock-Utne, 2007; Alexander, 2005). Language influences cognitive development, comprehension, and participation, which in turn affects student success and retention. This recognition has led to growing attention to language issues in the national higher education transformation agenda. Legislation such as the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997) requires all public universities in South Africa to develop and publish institutional language policies (Section 27(2)). In alignment with this, the Department of Education promulgated the *Language Policy for Higher Education* (LPHE) in 2002. The LPHE acknowledges the intrinsic link between language and cognition and advocates for the use of all official languages in higher education to promote equity and redress historical language-based exclusions. It also highlights the importance of diversifying language use in teaching, learning, research, and administration to accommodate speakers of historically marginalised African languages. In 2020, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) gazetted the *Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions*, which came into effect in 2022. The framework pursues the same endeavors as the LPHE, but sought to strengthen the accountability mechanisms on the part of universities and DHET in order to address implementation challenges for two decades since the adoption of the LPHE.

While considerable attention has been paid to language in teaching and learning, less recognition has been given to the role of language in institutional culture matters such as the psychological support services for students. Psychological support services are a vital component of the student experience, as they contribute to the holistic well-being of students and play a crucial role in enabling academic success. Research suggests that mental health support enhances students' emotional resilience and psychological readiness to meet the challenges of university life (Nkwanyana, 2013). Similarly, Soricone and Kachgal (2014) argue that comprehensive student support systems in higher education should include both academic and non-academic services—such as mental health and counselling—since these are integral to student retention and performance. The *National Education Policy Act* (1996) echoes this sentiment, stating that education must contribute to the full personal development of each student and support their moral, social, cultural, and economic growth. Yet, there remains a significant gap in how language is addressed within the delivery of psychological services at university counselling centres. Given that language is the primary medium through which psychological services are provided—through talk therapy, assessments, and consultations—the linguistic mismatch between students and service providers can create barriers to trust, comprehension, and effective care (Bhana & Pillay, 2012; Swartz, 2002).

In the light of the above, this study sought to address the highlighted gap by investigating how language affects students' access to psychological counselling at a South African university—specifically Rhodes University, using an exploratory qualitative case study approach. Drawing on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research captures the lived experiences of students who speak African languages as their Mother Tongue, as well as the perspectives and experiences of psychologists who provide support to those students.

This introductory chapter provides context for the study by outlining the global, national, and institutional backgrounds for the research. It introduces the broader issue of language use in psychological service provision, highlighting how language acts not simply as a tool for communication, but as a fundamental factor in shaping access, understanding, and inclusion in mental health care. The chapter then narrows its focus to the South African higher education context, where issues of linguistic diversity, transformation, and equitable access remain critical in shaping student experiences. Thereafter, it presents the statement of the problem, research

questions, research objectives and the rationale of the study. This is followed by a brief outline of the subsequent chapters and their foci.

1.2 Contextual background

The transformation of language practices in higher education institutions (HEIs) is intertwined with the transformation of institutional culture and curricula. As Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) argues, language is not a neutral tool but is inextricably linked to culture, identity, and worldviews. For African languages to be effectively integrated into the curriculum, educators must also engage with the cultural contexts of the students who speak these languages. This requires mindfulness, cultural competence, and inclusive pedagogies, ensuring that the curriculum is not merely translated into African languages but is reimagined to reflect African epistemologies. Moreover, as Makalela (2018) highlights, culture is dynamic and constantly evolving through the lived experiences of people. In the context of South African HEIs—particularly Historically White Institutions (HWIs)—this implies that as student demographics shift in terms of race, language, and culture, institutional practices and cultures must adapt accordingly.

A powerful example of a cultural and epistemological shift in South African higher education is the Rhodes Must Fall movement and its symbolic removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town (UCT). This historic event reflected a broader call for decolonisation, not only of physical symbols but also of the curriculum and institutional ethos that impact access, participation, performance and success in HE. Within the ambit of the #RhodesMustFall struggle, Rhodes University came under the spotlight regarding its name which immortalizes the chief-architect of British colonialism in Southern Africa.

When it comes to curricula, academic disciplines such as Psychology, long grounded in Eurocentric and colonial paradigms, have been challenged to redefine their disciplinary foundations to reflect more inclusive and contextually relevant knowledge systems. The language question also got renewed interest (Magadla, Dana & Nkomo 2024). In the context of psychological support services, Van Dyk and Naidoo (2014) observe that language mismatches between clients and mental health professionals can lead to miscommunication, cultural misunderstandings, and reduced therapeutic efficacy. Chitindingu and Mkhize (2016), Laher and

Kramer (2017), Nsamenang (2007), Segalo and Cakata (2017) further note that most psychology curricula in South African universities remain anchored in Western paradigms, with limited attention to the linguistic and cultural needs of African language-speaking clients. These blind spots not only hinder effective therapy but also reinforce the marginalisation of African epistemologies within the university system. As such, addressing the language question is not only a pedagogical imperative but also a matter of social justice. It calls for the transformation of both academic and support systems to accommodate multilingualism and to affirm students' linguistic identities as integral to their well-being and academic success. Language is not just a technical issue; it plays a key role in shaping how students feel included, supported, and able to succeed at university.

As Ashwin and Case (2018) point out, understanding how HE can truly transform lives must be based on the real experiences of students themselves. For this reason, the current study aims to explore the lived experiences of students who speak African languages as their Mother Tongues in psychological counselling, as well as the experiences and perspectives of professional psychologists who provide support to these students. Universities need to provide psychological support that is accessible, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the diverse needs of their student populations (World Health Organization, 2021). As can be seen in Chapter 2, local scholarship has started to explore the language question within psychology in a way that illuminates this study as it will be demonstrated in more detail in the next chapter. For instance, a study conducted at UCT investigating undergraduate psychology students' perceptions within the broader "relevance debate" found that students regarded psychology as largely inaccessible to the broader South African population. Among the key barriers identified was language, with students arguing that the dominance of English and a lack of culturally and linguistically responsive practices marginalised non-English speakers (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004). Pillay and Petersen (1996) highlighted a significant gap in the training of psychology students, noting that while many express a desire to learn an African language, few clinical and counselling psychologists graduate with the necessary proficiency to use the language effectively in consultations. This deficiency is particularly concerning given the linguistic diversity in South African universities, where many students speak African languages as their Mother Tongue but may struggle to fully engage with mental health services provided in English or other dominant languages. Mkhize (2016) further

raises concerns about psychologists' ability to apply key psychological concepts in languages that resonate with their patients, particularly when considering the psychological, cultural, and linguistic needs of the patients. This highlights a critical issue in psychological service provision—while there may be a growing awareness of the importance of cultural and linguistic sensitivity, psychologists often lack the training or confidence to offer services in a manner that fully addresses these needs. This issue forms a key focus of the current study, which seeks to explore how language influences students' experiences with psychological counselling and to investigate the preparedness of psychologists to offer linguistically and culturally responsive support.

The present study recognises that three key factors are critical for ensuring adequate linguistic and cultural sensitivity in psychological support within a linguistically and culturally diverse environment such as Rhodes University. First, the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of South African students who speak African languages as their Mother Tongue significantly shape their counselling experiences and needs. Second, the preparedness and competencies of psychologists employed by the South African HEIs — particularly their ability to provide linguistically and culturally responsive services — play a central role in how accessible and effective their services become. Finally, broader institutional structures, cultures, and language practices influence both the delivery and reception of psychological services. These institutional dimensions include the dominance of English in administrative and support services, the extent to which multilingualism is encouraged or accommodated, and how inclusive the institutional culture is towards diverse linguistic and cultural identities (Lorenzo, van Niekerk, & Prins, 2019; DHET, 2020). Understanding the interplay between these three factors is crucial for identifying barriers to access and developing strategies that promote equity and inclusivity in mental health support for all students.

In terms of disciplinary location, this study is anchored on language planning and policy studies. As a discipline, language planning and policy studies emerged from sociolinguistics in the early 1960s to investigate the socio-economic, political and cultural implications of certain human interventions on language use and practices (Haugen, 1966; Fishman, 1974). However, the study has an interdisciplinary vocation, extending its forays into psychology as a discipline and professional practice, as well as higher education studies in as much as it explores curriculum issues with respect to the training of professional psychologists. It is thus, to an extent, an

interdisciplinary study that is rooted in language planning and policy studies. As highlighted below, the global and national historical developments of the relevant disciplines inform the present study in significant ways.

A major focus of language planning and policy studies pertains to socio-economic, political and even cultural implications of language practices emanating from the language arrangements that emerge from human interventions (Cooper, 1989; Bourdieu, 1991), which led pioneering scholars to ponder whether language planning was a necessary human enterprise (Tollefson, 1987). Ruiz's (1984) tripartite orientations to language planning, namely language as a problem, language as a right and language as a resource, offer an understanding of the dispositions that have motivated language planning in different contexts. The unpleasant and sometimes unintended consequences of language planning are captured in James Tollefson's book entitled *Language Planning, Planning Inequality* (Tollefson, 1987), in which the author demonstrates how socio-economic inequalities emerge from the linguistic hierarchies associated with the unequal statuses assigned to different languages, uneven access to the different languages and the marginalisation of certain languages from certain domains of use, which disadvantages their speakers (Bourdieu, 1991).

In the light of the above, the social injustices associated with language planning have been viewed from the perspective of 'linguistic imperialism', a concept that was introduced by Ghanaian linguist Gilbert Ansre in 1979 to account for the imposition and spread of certain few languages at the expense of numerous others that get abandoned by their speakers in line with socio-economic and even political incentives associated with the imperialist languages (Ansre, 1979). The concept was later popularised in Phillipson (1992) to specifically account for the spread of English as a global language, dominating politics, economics, education, media and other so-called controlling domains (Sibayan, 1999). South Africa, like the rest of the continent, is a historical victim of linguistic imperialism, with English dominance associated with British colonisation and Afrikaans hegemony instituted by the apartheid policies. The impacts of linguistic imperialism have been sharply felt in education and in the provision of various socio-economic services. Having been used as a tool of exclusion of the majority of South Africans from accessing critical services and opportunities during colonial and apartheid times, language remains an access barrier even thirty after the demise of apartheid. It is on this account that language planning remains a priority transformation that seeks to bring redress of the social injustices for which linguistic imperialism

has been partly responsible. The aspiration is to dismantle a monolingual culture and cultivate multilingualism as a South Africa reality whose appreciation would ensure that the country's linguistic heritage is utilised as a resource to bring about the needed socio-economic and political transformation.

1.3 Problem statement

As noted earlier, since the end of apartheid in 1994, South African HEIs have embarked on comprehensive transformation agendas aimed at redressing historical inequalities and fostering inclusivity for previously marginalised student populations. A central focus of these reforms has been improving access and success for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Among the many dimensions of transformation, language has been identified as a critical component in creating equitable and responsive academic environments (Council on Higher Education, 1997; Heugh, 2015). Within historically white institutions (HWIs) such as Rhodes University, the changing demographics of students—particularly in terms of race, language, and cultural background—demand a corresponding transformation in how institutions respond to student needs. This includes not only academic practices but also student support services such as psychological counselling. At Rhodes University, and indeed within the higher education sector as a whole, little is known about how language factors into students' access to psychological support. Despite broader transformation agendas, the integration of linguistic diversity into student wellness services remains underexplored. This gap is particularly concerning given that language is fundamental to the counselling process, which is often described as a form of “talk therapy” (Van Dyk & Naidoo, 2014; Freud & Breuer, 1895). Effective counselling relies heavily on verbal communication, mutual understanding, and cultural attunement, making linguistic competence in the client's preferred language an essential component of therapeutic efficacy. Given the centrality of language in both academic and support services in the contexts of psychological provision for students, it is important to extend language transformation beyond lecture halls and into the realm of student wellness.

1.4 Research questions

Against the background outlined 1.2 and the statement of the problem presented in the previous section, this study attempts to address the following three research questions:

1. How do students describe their language-related experiences and perceptions of accessing psychological counselling within the current institutional structures, cultures, and language practices?
2. How does the Rhodes University Language Policy influence the implementation of multilingual support in student psychological services?
3. How is the psychology curriculum and training perceived to prepare professional psychologists for practice in a multilingual and culturally diverse society?

1.5 Research objectives

In response to the research questions presented in the previous section, the study seeks to achieve the following research objectives:

1. Explore students' language preferences in the context of psychological support services in a multilingual university context, thereby partly addressing Research Question 1.
2. Explore the linguistic challenges faced by students who speak African languages as their Mother Tongues during counselling sessions in a historically white English university, as well as the experiences of psychologists providing support to these students and how psychologists address these challenges. This objective partly addresses Research Questions 1 and 2.
3. Explore how the Rhodes University language policy affects the implementation of multilingual support in student psychological services, which addresses Research Question 2.
4. Examine the implications of the Psychology curriculum and training in South Africa on equipping psychologists to effectively work with linguistically diverse clients, thereby addressing Research Question 3.

1.6 Rationale of the study

Language barriers are documented as significant impediments to accessing and benefiting from psychological services. Current studies within the South African context address language-related barriers in public healthcare and psychiatric settings, with insufficient focus on how language affects access to psychological counselling within universities. There is also inadequate research exploring how institutional language policies, everyday language practices, and the preparedness of university psychologists intersect to shape the counselling experiences of Black African students at HWIs. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of language in shaping students' access to and experiences of psychological counselling services at Rhodes University. It focuses on the perspectives of students who speak African languages as their Mother Tongue and the counsellors who provide psychological support. Hence, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how linguistic diversity, cultural expectations, and institutional structures impact the accessibility and quality of psychological support in South Africa's linguistically complex higher education landscape.

Despite efforts to transform HEIs in South Africa following the end of apartheid, many HWIs still reflect linguistic and cultural practices that privilege English and Western norms. While the student population at Rhodes University — a HWI — has become increasingly diverse, with many students speaking African languages as their Mother Tongue, support services such as psychological counselling have not sufficiently adapted to meet this linguistic and cultural diversity. Research shows that language barriers can significantly impact the accessibility and effectiveness of psychological services (Pillay & Petersen, 1996; Mkhize, 2016; Lorenzo, van Niekerk, & Prins, 2019; Griner & Smith, 2006; Kim et al., 2011). Students who are not proficient in English may struggle to express their psychological distress fully or to engage meaningfully in counselling sessions, while psychologists may lack the necessary linguistic and cultural competence to offer responsive care. Although national policy frameworks, such as those cited in 1.2 above, call for greater multilingualism and inclusivity, the focus is mostly on language transformation in teaching and learning, transformation initiatives and implementation within student support services remains limited. Most existing empirical research on language use in psychological services within the South African context focuses on language barriers in clinical or public psychiatric settings, with little attention paid to how language affects access to

psychological support within universities, particularly for Black African students at HWIs. There is also limited exploration of how institutional structures, language practices, and psychologists' preparedness interact to shape students' experiences of psychological support.

Thus, there is a critical need to explore the role of language in students' access to psychological counselling at institutions such as Rhodes University. In seeking to shed some light on how language, culture, and institutional practices influence the accessibility and quality of psychological support in a linguistically complex higher education landscape, the study contributes towards scholarly and policy conversations on higher education transformation in South Africa. On the one hand, it extends the conversation on the linguistic transformation beyond the academic project into matters of the university institutional cultures which remain foreign to the majority of students and South Africans who constitute transformed university communities. On the other hand, the study provides an illustration of how language is an important aspect of transforming and decolonising curriculum to make it socially and culturally relevant.

1.7 Overview of chapters

This thesis is structured into seven chapters, including this introductory chapter. Below is a brief description of the seven chapters.

- **Chapter 1** introduces the study by presenting its background, rationale, research problem, objectives, and research questions. It sets the stage for understanding the complex interplay between language, policy, and psychological support in a HEI.
- **Chapter 2** provides a critical review of the existing literature at the intersection of language, psychological counselling, and IKS, framed within the discipline of LPP. This chapter contextualises the study within broader debates on linguistic equity and transformation in South African higher education.
- **Chapter 3** outlines the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning the study. Central to the analysis is Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which is used to account for the communicative strategies employed in multilingual counselling encounters and to explain the dynamics of language negotiation between students and psychologists.

- **Chapter 4** details the research methodology, including the research design, sampling procedures, data collection and analysis methods, and ethical considerations. This chapter establishes the qualitative approach used to explore the lived experiences of participants.
- **Chapter 5** presents the first phase of data presentation and analysis, focusing on students' perspectives and language preferences in psychological counselling. It addresses Objective 3 of the study and offers insights into how language impacts students' emotional expression and engagement with mental health services.
- **Chapter 6** continues the data analysis by addressing Objectives 1 and 2. It explores the linguistic challenges faced by African language-speaking students in counselling, the communicative responses of psychologists, and the influence of Rhodes University's Language Policy on multilingual practices in student support services.
- **Chapter 7** summarises the key findings, offers recommendations for practice and policy, outlines limitations of the study, and provides concluding reflections.

1.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has laid the foundational groundwork for this study. The chapter highlighted the persistent challenges of linguistic exclusion and the need for transformation in institutions like Rhodes University, where linguistic diversity intersects with broader goals of equity and inclusion. Through a clearly articulated research problem, set of objectives, and guiding questions, the chapter has established the study's overarching aim: to examine how language policies and practices in higher education, and the psychology curriculum and training impact students' access to psychological support, especially for those whose Mother Tongues are African languages. The rationale offered further justification for the study's relevance in the context of ongoing efforts to decolonise and transform higher education. Lastly, the chapter provided an overview of the structure of the thesis, offering a roadmap for the chapters that follow. The next chapter deals with the review of the relevant literature.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Language plays a fundamental role in psychological support provision, serving as the primary medium through which counselling is conducted (Santiago-Rivera et al. 2009). Counselling is a psychological service that involves engaging in conversations with a mental health professional to explore thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, with the goal of gaining self-understanding and fostering mental well-being (American Psychological Association, 2008). Sigmund Freud, often regarded as the father of psychotherapy, emphasized the significance of verbal communication in therapy. He introduced the concept of "talk therapy" asserting that psychological issues could be addressed through open dialogue, thereby recognizing language as a core element of the therapeutic process (Van Dyk & Naidoo, 2014; Freud & Breuer, 1895; Freud, 1915). Freud's psychoanalytic approach offers a comprehensive theory of human psychology and behavior, highlighting the role of the unconscious mind, early childhood experiences, and internal conflicts in shaping individual development and actions (Tarzian et al., 2023). In contrast, Carl Rogers developed person-centered therapy, a humanistic approach often viewed as an optimistic evolution of Freud's "talk therapy." This approach emphasizes client autonomy, enabling individuals to explore their thoughts and emotions, gain self-understanding, and improve their self-concepts, with the therapist serving as a supportive facilitator (Rogers, 1961). Although these two approaches differ in their foundational principles, they share a reliance on "talk therapy"—the belief that verbal expression of mental health concerns can aid in problem-solving, with language playing a central role (Verschueren, 2001). Talk therapy is also the primary mode of psychological support offered through the Rhodes University's Student Counselling Centre (SCC) where data was collected for this study. In this context, counselling refers to a form of psychological support where individuals engage with a mental health professional to explore thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, working collaboratively to enhance mental wellbeing (American Psychological Association, 2008).

Using the foregoing as a point of departure, this chapter conducts a critical review of literature relevant to the intersections of language, psychological support, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) within the context of higher education in South Africa. Anchored in the disciplinary field of Language Planning and Policy (LPP), the chapter begins by situating the study within broader debates on language policy in South African higher education. This framing is essential for understanding the complex role language plays in shaping access to knowledge, services, and identity in multilingual academic institutions. The chapter then turns to the disciplinary history of psychology in South Africa, tracing its colonial foundations and exploring how these legacies continue to influence psychological support services. Subsequent sections explore how psychological support services in higher education have been conceptualised, particularly in terms of language accessibility, cultural relevance, and inclusivity.

2.2 Language policy and planning in higher education

To fully understand language policies in higher education, it is important to first understand the field of LPP. This is a specialised area of study that explores how languages are managed, promoted, or restricted in societies. Different scholars have defined language planning in various ways over time.

One of the earliest and most influential thinkers in this field was Einar Haugen, who first used the term "language planning" in the 1950s and 1960s. Haugen introduced a four-part model of language planning, which included steps like developing spelling rules (orthography), grammar, and dictionaries. He described language planning as the process of creating standard language tools to help guide speakers and writers, especially in communities where multiple languages or dialects are spoken (Ngcobo, 2007). Blommaert (1996) offered a broader view. He saw language planning as any attempt by authorities—such as governments or institutions—to shape how language is used in society. This includes everything from promoting a national language to encouraging the use of certain languages in schools or workplaces. Cooper (1989) proposed a more comprehensive definition. According to him, “language planning is the deliberate effort to influence how people use language—how they learn it, how it's structured, and what roles different languages play in society” (Cooper 1989: 45). He also pointed out that the effects of language planning can be both positive and negative, depending on the intention and outcome. More recently, Kaschula and

Nkomo (2018) described language planning as a structured and intentional process used to address language-related problems. This could include challenges like language inequality, underdevelopment of African languages in academic spaces, or the dominance of English in higher education. Their view emphasises that planning leads to the creation of language policies, which are formal rules or guidelines about language use in specific settings. What is significant, building on ideas such as those of Bloomaert (1996) and Cooper (1989), is that any form of human intervention on language structure and use will have socio-cultural, political and even economic implications for the speakers and users of languages. Thus, even if the notion of ‘language problems’ recurs in most definitions as captured in Cooper, language planning essentially attempts to address issues of inequalities associated with language allegiances, competences and use, although Tolfson warns that language planning may translate into planning inequality (1991).

Language planning is a complex exercise that involves various agents or stakeholders, including language academies, governments, individual scholars or activists, and entire communities or societies (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). These agents play a crucial role in influencing how languages are treated in society—whether they are developed, maintained, marginalised, or revitalised. According to Fairclough (1989), the beliefs and ideologies that language planning agents hold about particular languages play a crucial role in shaping language policy decisions. Fairclough (1989) as cited in Ricento (2006:43; 47) describes ideology “unconscious beliefs and assumptions that are ‘naturalized’ and thus contribute to hegemony”. Accordingly, Tollefson (2006) argues that language planning is not a neutral process; rather, it is deeply tied to power dynamics. He explains that policy-making institutions—such as governments and universities—use language policies as tools to influence and regulate how people use language. In this way, language becomes central to systems of social control (Tollefson, 2002). By controlling which languages are given prestige and which are excluded, dominant groups are able to limit access to opportunities, often reserving them for those who speak the privileged language. The connection between language and power was clearly evident in South African Higher Education during the apartheid era. During this time, language policies in universities reflected the broader racial and linguistic ideologies of the apartheid state, which was designed to uphold white minority dominance (Alexander 2013; Heugh 2002). English and Afrikaans were established as the official languages of teaching, learning, and administration in most universities, while African languages were deliberately marginalised. As a

result, Black students who were not fluent in these dominant languages faced significant barriers to academic access, success and participation in institutional life. In this context, language functioned as more than just a medium of communication—it became a tool of exclusion and control, used to reproduce inequality and limit access to knowledge, power, and social mobility.

The language policies implemented in South African higher education under apartheid were not isolated institutional choices; rather, they mirrored and reinforced the broader national language policy of the apartheid state. These policies served to maintain racial segregation and white minority dominance, privileging English and Afrikaans as the languages of power while systematically excluding African languages from academic and administrative domains. As Grin (2010, p. 4) observes, “the linguistic practices of universities reflect broader sociolinguistic conditions; through their linguistic practices, universities contribute to the shaping of these broader conditions.” This means that the language choices made within higher education institutions both reflect and reinforce broader social power structures and ideologies.

Although South Africa has since moved into a democratic era, the role of language as a tool for social control and transformation remains significant. In the post-apartheid context, language policy in higher education has shifted from being a mechanism of exclusion to one aimed at redress and transformation (Nkomo, 2021). However, language is still strategically used—this time, as a way to dismantle the linguistic legacies of apartheid and to promote equity through multilingualism. In response to this need, the *Language Policy Framework in Higher Education (LPHE)* was introduced in 2002. Its primary goal was to encourage public universities to promote multilingualism, both in policy and practice. This policy aimed to elevate the status and use of African languages within academia, ensuring that they are recognised as legitimate languages of teaching, learning, research, and administration (LPHE, 2001). In 2020, the government gazetted the *Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions* to assess the extent to which institutions had aligned themselves with national language goals and to accelerate the development and intellectualisation of African languages in higher education. The framework also reaffirmed the government's commitment to linguistic justice, social inclusion, and the transformation of universities into spaces where linguistic diversity is respected and cultivated. In accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and guided by the LPHE of 2002 and its revised version of 2020, all public higher education institutions were mandated to

develop their own institutional language policies. These policies were expected to reflect each institution's commitment to promoting multilingualism, and more specifically, to outline strategies for the development and use of African languages in teaching, learning, research, and administration (Council on Higher Education, 2001; Webb, 2004; Madiba, 2010; LPHE, 2020). As part of their institutional planning processes, universities were required to identify both the challenges and practical steps they would take to address issues related to language equity and access.

However, several scholars Madonsela & Moeketsi (2021), Cele (2021), Kaschula (2013) who critically engaged with these language policies critiqued HEIs for a lack of implementation, and monitoring of their language policies. Bamgbose (1991) critically highlights a common pattern across African countries where language policies advocating for the use of African languages in higher domains often remain symbolic, describing this trend as “declaration without implementation.” In other words, while policies are formally adopted, they rarely translate into concrete action or meaningful change in practice. Similarly, Cele (2021) argues that in the South African higher education context, African languages are often used as political instruments within policy documents, serving more to demonstrate symbolic commitment than to effect real transformation. According to Cele, these languages are frequently referenced in policy blueprints but are seldom integrated into institutional practices in a substantive way. This lack of implementation is partly enabled by the ambiguous and non-committal language found in foundational documents such as the 1996 Constitution, which serves as a reference point for many higher education language policies. Phrases such as “where possible,” “where practicable,” and “may” provide institutions with loopholes to avoid firm commitments, allowing for flexibility that often leads to inaction (Kaschula, 2013).

In the light of the above, African languages remain marginalised in the higher education sector, despite their formal recognition in national and institutional policies. Kaschula (2013), drawing on insights from Rhodes University's 2005 language policy, states that the university had taken the time to reflect on and analyse its past language practices and the role of language in its institutional history. Despite this critical evaluation and the creation of a formal Language Policy in 2005, what was happening in practice did not align with the policy. There was a disconnection between the official commitments outlined in the policy and the actual implementation. The LPHE of 2002

requires that all public higher education institutions must submit a report every five years to the Ministry of Education. These reports should explain how far the institutions have gone in putting their language policies into action. This requirement is meant to help the government monitor the progress and implementation of language transformation in universities.

Although most South African universities have language policies available to the public, very few actually send these progress reports to the Ministry, as required (Rhodes University Research Summit Report, 2018). This shows that there is not only a problem with implementation, but also a serious lack of internal monitoring and accountability. Without proper follow-up and reporting, it becomes difficult to measure whether any real changes are being made. As several scholars have argued, it is not enough for universities to simply develop language policies—they also need to actively implement and regularly monitor them (Bamgbose, 1991; Kaschula, 2013; Cele, 2021). Without this, language policies risk becoming symbolic documents with little real impact on promoting multilingualism or improving access for speakers of African languages. Monitoring a language policy is not just about checking whether it is being put into action—it also involves evaluating whether the policy is effective and responsive to the real linguistic needs of students. As Van der Merwe (2016, p. 14) points out, “the success of a policy does not necessarily depend on the implementation thereof, but rather on the soundness of a policy.” In other words, a policy might be carried out, but if it is not well-designed or practical, it may still fail to make a meaningful difference. Sometimes, a language policy looks good on paper, but it lacks clear strategies, tools, and mechanisms for monitoring whether institutions are truly following through. Without these, it becomes easy for universities to continue operating in ways that exclude African languages and voices, just as they did in the past. This failure to ensure accountability allows the status quo of linguistic inequality to persist, even after the adoption of new policies meant to promote transformation.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that some HEIs have demonstrated that, when both implementation and monitoring of language policy are taken seriously, the use of African languages in teaching and learning can be both practical and effective. A notable example is the University of the Western Cape (UWC), where Antia and Dyers (2016) investigated how student engagement and comprehension were affected by lecture content delivered in various languages and modalities. They discovered that in addition to traditional written texts, offering resources in

students' Mother Tongues—including colloquial or non-standard forms—facilitated a deeper comprehension and connection to the material. This method questioned English's predominance in academic settings while also acknowledging the linguistic diversity of the student body. Similarly, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) has taken important steps towards promoting bilingualism in isiZulu and English. According to Ndimande-Hlongwa et al. (2010), all undergraduate students at UKZN—unless formally exempted—are required to complete a credit-bearing isiZulu module as part of their degree requirements. Moreover, isiZulu is used as a medium of instruction in several disciplines, including Nursing and Psychology, demonstrating its growing role in academic contexts. In addition, Neethling (2010) highlights the potential for African languages, particularly isiXhosa, to be used for high-level academic functions, such as teaching and learning, at universities like the UCT, UWC, and Stellenbosch University. The UCT medical students are not allowed to graduate unless they can communicate with patients in one of the region's main languages—isiXhosa, English, or Afrikaans. This policy reflects the university's recognition of the importance of linguistic competence in local languages for professional practice.

At Rhodes University, students in specific faculties such as Journalism and Education are required to pass a designated isiXhosa language course before they can graduate (Rhodes University Research Summit Report, 2018). This institutional requirement serves as an example of how African languages can be successfully integrated into academic programmes in meaningful ways. Another notable multilingual initiative can be found at Rhodes University within the Department of Political and International Studies, where multiple languages are both taught and utilized for instruction and assessment purposes. Launched modestly in 2017, the project has gradually expanded the academic space to accommodate isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho, and Afrikaans alongside English, each to varying extents (Magadla et al., 2024). This initiative has demonstrated that African languages can be effectively employed across various academic domains—not just in oral communication or through code-switching with English in written work. Significantly, students have successfully submitted assessments entirely in isiZulu and isiXhosa without mixing languages, challenging dominant assumptions about the limitations of African languages in formal academic contexts (Magadla et al., 2024).

Such initiatives demonstrate that the implementation of language policies that promote the use of African languages is not only feasible but also effective when properly supported. These cases

challenge the common narrative that African languages are not suitable for higher education and instead show that, with political will, curriculum design, and monitoring, multilingualism can be achieved in practice. From the literature reviewed, it is evident that much of the scholarship and institutional initiatives regarding transformation, language policy, and the intellectualisation of African languages in HE have predominantly concentrated on the domains of teaching and learning (Heugh, 2015; Madiba, 2013; Webb, 2004). While these interventions are undeniably important for curriculum inclusivity and pedagogical relevance, they have not been matched by commensurate efforts to transform other equally crucial aspects of university life, such as student support services, particularly, psychological services, which are integral to student well-being and academic success. This narrow focus on academic language use neglects the broader institutional ecosystem in which students are embedded.

Language in psychological support services is not just a matter of communication—it is a reflection of institutional values and cultural legitimacy. It reveals whose ways of speaking, knowing, and healing are recognised and validated. If counselling services continue to operate predominantly or exclusively in English, they implicitly convey that only certain linguistic identities and culturally embedded expressions of distress are acceptable. This not only limits the therapeutic potential for students from linguistically diverse backgrounds, but also perpetuates the marginalisation of African epistemologies and healing practices, even as multilingualism is being celebrated in teaching and research spaces (Mkhize, 2004; Ratele, 2017; Swartz, 2006). Furthermore, psychological support services that fail to engage with African languages and worldviews risk reproducing the very exclusions that multilingualism policies aim to dismantle. As Kessi and Booyesen (2021) argue, institutional culture is often sustained through subtle practices that privilege Western norms, including monolingualism in high-stakes environments like mental health services. Thus, the symbolic and practical exclusion of African languages in psychological counselling undermines the transformative goals of higher education and points to a critical disjuncture between policy and practice.

By drawing attention to this gap, the current study underscores the need to expand the discourse on multilingualism and transformation beyond classrooms and lecture halls. It calls for a more holistic approach that includes language use in student support systems, particularly in mental

health services, where language choice can profoundly shape students' access to care, sense of belonging, and overall well-being.

2.3 The colonial roots of psychology as a discipline in South Africa

Psychology education in South Africa is widely regarded as being of a “high standard,” producing professionals who are internationally recognised and frequently recruited by developed nations for employment opportunities (Pillay et al., 2012; Pillay & Kramers, 2003). The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA), the national professional body representing psychologists, underscores this global standing in its vision statement, which aspires “to advance South African Psychology as a globally respected science and profession and to promote psychological practice that is relevant, proactive, and responsive to societal needs and well-being” (PsySSA, 2011, p. 5). The international demand has contributed to the migration of many South African-trained psychologists to Western countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and the United States. These countries are seen as offering more robust professional opportunities and better infrastructure for psychological practice (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012; Kagee, 2006). However, while international recognition is one marker of quality, other indicators—such as contextual relevance, cultural responsiveness, accessibility, and alignment with local mental health needs—are equally important in assessing the true value of psychology training in South Africa (Seedat et al., 2004; Duncan et al., 2007). It could be the case that South African-trained psychologists find other countries more appealing for their professional careers and that the local context does not seem to appreciate psychological services because of misalignment between professional training and psychological service needs of the local South African community. This could be traced down to the roots of psychology as both an academic discipline and professional practice in South Africa and globally.

Psychology was introduced as an academic discipline in South Africa in the early 20th century, with a focus on psychometrics and mental testing—fields that aligned with the racial segregation policies of the apartheid government (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012). It was used as one of the strategies to solve the “poor white problem” which was a threat to the social and economic power and racial pride of white people in South Africa. The “poor white problem” was a term used to describe poverty in white people (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012; Mahomed, 2022). It was deemed as

a “problem” because it contradicted scientific notions of racial superiority, poverty, and economic depression that seemed to strike people regardless of race and hence it became the focus of "scientific" study. Psychology was then used to prove the “scientific fact” of white intelligence and how whites are more deserving of high social and economic status (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012; Mahomed, 2022). In the light of the above, psychology as a profession in South Africa initially focused on serving the interests of the white minority, with little to no attention paid to the mental health needs of black South Africans. The protest years before the end of apartheid in the late 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s led to increasing concerns about the relevance of psychology in South Africa leading to the rise of critical psychology (Cooper, 2014; Foster, 2008; Long, 2016). This discourse which challenges mainstream psychology and emphasises the need for psychology to be politically conscious of its role and power, has become a common feature in post-apartheid South Africa as part of the democratic ideals perpetuated by the new state power (Yen, 2016).

Although psychology's primary goal in South Africa was originally to serve the interests of white people, the country faced the challenge of reforming its educational system—including psychology curricula—to reflect the values of the country's new democratic society after apartheid was overthrown in 1994. The goal of the post-apartheid curriculum was to align with the values of equality, social justice, and human rights while eschewing Eurocentric and racially biased content. Understanding the origins and development of psychology in South Africa helps contextualize this study by highlighting the country's progress in integrating psychology into its academic institutions. It also shows how mental health support has become an essential component of student support systems in South African universities. Additionally, this study situates itself within the broader discourse on mental health support in South Africa’s higher education sector.

2.4 Student psychological support in South African higher education

Psychological services at universities aim to enhance and promote students' psychological well-being and to reduce psychological distress in students' lives so that students have the mental and emotional stability to face their daily challenges (Mkhwanyana, 2013). Soricone and Lisa (2014) emphasize the importance of a holistic student support system in higher education institutions—one that integrates both academic and non-academic advising, along with access to social services and counselling. Mc-Donnel et al. (2014) further explain that social services and counselling

involves managing personal lives, provision of referrals, mental health counselling, life skills training, identifying students' social needs and addressing them. The provision of psychological services which are under Student Support Services are deeply embedded in various policies governing education in South Africa. The National Education Policy Act Section 4(b) (1996) expresses that the starting point of defining Student Support Services is that the education system should be “able to contribute to the full personal development of each student and to the moral, social, cultural, economic, and political development at large including the advancement of democracy, human rights, and the peaceful resolution of disputes”.

A framework known as the Student Support Services Framework was introduced by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for Technical and Vocational Education (TVET) colleges. Its goal is to support the provision of academic support to students at three different levels: pre-entry (selection and placement into appropriate programmes, contracting and code of conduct, induction and orientation), on-course level (academic support: tutorial systems, learning centres, libraries, performance monitoring and feedback, job readiness programmes, links with industry, etc. Personal Support (referrals): Life skills, psychological services/counselling, health and wellness), and exit level (entrepreneurship, job placement, and articulation into HEIs (DHET, 2017). The on-course level is divided into two parts, academic support and personal support. This study focused on personal support and emphasis on psychological services (DHET, 2017). As societal comfort with discussing mental health continues to grow, and efforts to dismantle the stigma associated with seeking psychological assistance gain momentum, researchers are increasingly focusing on the subject of mental health and the provision of psychological services. The literature on psychological services in higher education institutions has focused interestingly on the attitudes that students have towards getting professional psychological help, the efficacy of those services, the rate at which students use those services, the reasons why they use them or not, and the therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the client (Czech & Biber, 2021; Lawrence, 2009; Young, 2009, Dlamini, 2019). In a study conducted by Czech and Biber (2021) on attitudes towards seeking professional help of college students from a rural setting, the findings lend support to the notion that the more severe the mental illness, the less likely students seek treatment. This notion is supported by Lawrence's (2009) study at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology to explore students' attitudes towards utilizing student

counselling services (through focus group discussions with twenty-nine students). The results revealed that students feel shame and guilt when they are struggling psychologically, and as a result avoid seeking psychological intervention due to the fear of being negatively stigmatized.

In a similar way, according to Young's (2009) findings, black students, who tend to report higher levels of mental distress and self-harm, exhibit reluctance to seek psychological assistance and delay doing so until their distress reaches a higher threshold. A study by Dlamini (2019) which explored the usage rate of psychological services and reasons why students may opt not to utilize psychological services at The UKZN, and Muchineripi's study (2017) on the effectiveness of psychological support to students in a TVET college (Muchineripi, 2017) ascertains the idea that it is black students that utilized psychological services the most on campus. The CORE-OM intake standards of the student counselling service at Rhodes University in 2009 were compared with the United Kingdom's counselling service data published by Connell et al in 2007. Although the findings indicated that South African and United Kingdom's students shared comparable norms, there were notable distinctions between the black and white clientele in the South African sample, with the former reporting higher levels of distress and self-harm than the latter (Young, 2009).

The enduring impacts of apartheid continue to shape the lived experiences of Black students in South African higher education, particularly those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. These students encounter a complex set of challenges that go beyond the general adjustment difficulties faced by all first-year university students. One of the primary challenges is of a sociolinguistic nature. English, which dominates the language of instruction in higher education, is often not the first language of many Black students. This linguistic barrier affects their academic performance and social support (Alexander, 2005; Tshotsho, 2013; Heugh, 2009, Young, 2009). Young (2009, p. 480) further asserts that “[t]he chance to study at tertiary is viewed as a lifetime opportunity to improve one’s economic status and in the wake of all this many black students experience intense pressure as they try to fulfil their academic goals”. This “burden of success” can create psychological distress, increasing anxiety, and mental health challenges, as students must balance academic performance with socio-economic expectations (Young, 2009). It could be argued that, Black students make the most use of psychological services at institutions such as Majuba TVET College, CPU, and the UKZN simply because these are Historically Black

Institutions (HBIs), meaning that they have a higher proportion of Black students than White students.

However, recent research challenges this assumption. Bantjes et al. (2023), in a national survey on student mental health, found that Black students attending HWIs in South Africa were at greater risk of experiencing mental disorders compared to their White counterparts. This elevated vulnerability among Black students in HWIs cannot be solely attributed to population demographics. Rather, the findings point to deeper systemic issues. Although the study does not explore the specific causes of this disparity, it strongly suggests that the increased risk is linked to feelings of marginalisation, discrimination, and alienation—conditions often perpetuated by institutional cultures that remain untransformed post-apartheid (Bantjes et al. 2023). These mental health disparities highlight the urgent need for inclusive, eco-systemic interventions and a transformative agenda in higher education that centres the psychological wellbeing of historically disadvantaged groups. The findings from the studies reviewed in this section provide important insights into student attitudes, psychological outcomes, and systemic inequalities, but with limited attention to the structures and contexts within which counselling services are delivered. The prevailing emphasis is on using student counselling centres as research settings for data collection rather than assessing them as sites of institutional practice shaped by sociocultural and linguistic dynamics.

Furthermore, language use in the provision of psychological services remains a significant yet underexplored issue. In multilingual contexts such as South Africa, where many students speak English as an additional language, the linguistic medium of counselling can profoundly influence therapeutic outcomes. Despite this, existing studies have rarely interrogated how language barriers, code-switching, or a lack of culturally and linguistically responsive counselling approaches affect student engagement and the efficacy of psychological interventions. This study explores how language use influences students' access to and experience of psychological services, the linguistic strategies counselors use, and how language acts as a barrier or facilitator in therapeutic settings. This research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of mental health service provision by foregrounding the linguistic dimension of psychological support.

2.5 Psychology and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS)

The incorporation of AIKS into psychology—often referred to as the Africanization of psychology—has emerged as a key strategy for decolonising and transforming the discipline to better reflect African realities. Scholars such as Mkhize (2004), Nwoye (2015), and Nobles (2006) argue that the Africanization process involves the use of Afrocentric paradigms that seek to centre African worldviews, values, and epistemologies, which have long been marginalized in mainstream psychology. Central to this shift is the understanding that AIKS is inseparable from African languages, since language is the primary medium through which cultural values, philosophies, and knowledge systems are expressed and transmitted (Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2014). Flavier et al., (1995) as cited in Mkhize et al., (2016) maintain that while Indigenous Knowledge Systems are difficult to define in universal terms, they are broadly understood as dynamic, locally rooted knowledge frameworks developed through both internal innovation and interaction with external influences. These systems guide decision-making in diverse spheres such as education, health, agriculture, and social life. Several scholars (Baloyi, 2020; Mkhize, 2013; Nobles, 2006; Nobles & Mkhize, 2020; Nwoye, 2015, 2017; Ratele, 2019) have played an important role in bringing AIKS into the field of psychology. They have laid the groundwork for thinking about psychology in a way that reflects African worldviews. Baloyi (2020), for example, questions how the term “African Psychology” is often used without much thought by universities trying to change their psychology programs. He argues that using the word “psychology” without challenging its Western roots can lead to a misrepresentation of African ways of being and knowing. It can also suggest that African languages lack the right words to express African experiences, which shows how colonial thinking still shapes our understanding of psychology.

Scholars working to reshape psychology so that it better fits African realities and truly represents African people often challenge the Western idea of individualism that dominates mainstream psychological thinking (Ratele, 2017; Hook & Eagle, 2002; Nsamenang, 2007; Segalo & Cakata, 2017). In Western thought, individualism sees people as separate from others and from their environment. It puts the individual at the centre and treats personal goals, choices, and values as more important than those of the community. This way of thinking has strongly influenced how psychological theories are developed and how assessments are done. In contrast, scholars like

Mkhize et al. (2016) argue for a different foundation—one based on AIKS. They promote the philosophy of Ubuntu (in Nguni languages) or Botho (in Sotho), often expressed by a popular African idiom that encapsulates its ethos and practical expression— *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* or *Motho ke motho ka batho*, which means “a person is a person through other people.” Scholars such as Ramose (2002) and Letseka (2012) describe Ubuntu as a moral philosophy and African worldview grounded in communalism, relationality, and interdependence. Ubuntu offers a collective way of understanding human life, where people are deeply connected to each other and responsible for one another. Rather than focusing on the individual alone, this philosophy sees each person as part of a larger community, and values cooperation, care, and interdependence. In African ways of life, the philosophy of Ubuntu goes beyond just human relationships—it also applies to how knowledge is understood (Ratele, 2017). According to this view, different knowledge systems are not in competition but are meant to work together. No one system has all the answers, and each becomes more complete when it includes the insights and lived experiences of others. Accordingly, AIKS in general and Ubuntu philosophy in particular occupy the core of debates around curriculum transformation and educational transformation broadly in Africa. In the context of this study, the philosophy of Ubuntu is manifested in the ontologies of student participants, whose lived realities and understandings of psychological support are informed by Ubuntu-oriented values of collective well-being, mutual care, and interconnectedness. This manifestation is further explored and evidenced in Chapters 3 and 6.

To describe this idea of connection and mutual support between systems, Mkhize et al. (2016) use the Nguni term *Ububini* or *Ububili*, which means “twin-ness.” This concept reflects a core belief in AIKS: that nothing exists fully on its own. This means that incorporating AIKS and African languages into the psychology curriculum does not require abandoning English or Western paradigms altogether. Instead, it involves recognising that these dominant frameworks do not exist in isolation and are not universally applicable. South Africa’s population is linguistically and culturally diverse, and as such, psychologists must be equipped to work within and across multiple knowledge systems. A truly inclusive and contextually relevant psychology curriculum should therefore embrace both African and Western paradigms, ensuring that practitioners are responsive to the diverse worldviews, experiences, and languages of the communities they serve. This is where the language question becomes especially pertinent. While AIKS and Afrocentric

paradigms offer a rich foundation for transforming psychology in Africa, the implementation of these ideas without language transformation risks undermining their goals.

2.6 Psychology training and the language question

The professional journey to becoming a registered counselling psychologist in South Africa unfolds through a structured five-phase process, reflecting the high academic and practical demands of the discipline. According to the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) (2019), the first step involves completing a Bachelor's degree with Psychology as a major. This is followed by an Honours degree in Psychology or a B-Psych (Bachelor of Psychology) degree from an accredited institution. The third phase is entry into a competitive Master's programme in Counselling Psychology, during which students are required to register with the HPCSA within four months of commencement. The Master's training spans a minimum of two years. The first year focuses on intensive academic coursework and clinical training, including the completion of a research dissertation. The second year is devoted to an internship in a recognised mental health institution, under supervision. According to the Government Gazette (2011, p. 7), the role of counselling psychologists is to assess, diagnose, and intervene in psychological issues related to life challenges and developmental concerns. They also conduct assessments of cognitive, emotional, personality, and neuropsychological functioning. The HPCSA (2019, p. 2) affirms that the overarching goal of psychology training is to “provide psychological services that will enhance and promote the psychological well-being of the South African population.”

Mahomed (2022), in a contextual analysis of the curriculum in the Department of Psychology at the UCT, argues that the structuring of psychology curricula in South Africa has historically been guided by the notion of relevance to the prevailing sociopolitical context. In the field of psychology and other disciplines concerned with transformation and social justice, relevance is tied to how knowledge addresses the real-life concerns of the people it intends to serve (Kagee, 2014; Long, 2016a). In this sense, *relevance* reflects the evolving relationship between psychological knowledge production and the broader societal needs of a given period. During apartheid, these "societal needs" were defined by the interests of the white minority, and psychology as a discipline was largely mobilised to serve and reinforce the dominant ideology. As such, while psychology may have been considered "relevant" during this time, that relevance was

fundamentally unjust, as it was aligned with systems of oppression and exclusion. This is particularly evident in the prominence of neuropsychology within the psychology curriculum during apartheid. The discipline was often used to pathologise Black people and to support pseudo-scientific narratives of racial inferiority (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012). In doing so, psychology became complicit in legitimising racial hierarchies and sustaining systemic inequality (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012) (see Section 2.3 for a broader discussion on colonial roots of psychology as a discipline in South Africa). This dynamic is what Dlamini (2006) refers to as “just injustice”—a term used to describe policies that are legal and appear orderly on the surface but are inherently unjust because they serve the interests of a privileged minority while systematically oppressing the majority. The concept of *relevance* in the structuring of psychology curricula remained significant in the transition to democracy in 1994, though its meaning began to shift (Mahomed, 2022). As Kagee (2014) as cited in Mahomed (2022) notes, there was a growing emphasis on aligning psychological knowledge and training with the local social and cultural realities of the majority of South Africans. This shift marked a move toward a discipline that was more responsive to the lived experiences, histories, and challenges of the broader population. This was particularly evident in the emergence and growth of areas such as social psychology, critical psychology, community psychology, political psychology, and the psychology of gender (Mahomed, 2022). The content of these courses has increasingly reflected the social, political, and economic conditions shaping South Africa in the post-apartheid era (Mahomed, 2022). These developments illustrate how the discipline has responded to calls for transformation by embedding historically marginalised voices and issues into its core teaching and research agenda.

The psychology curriculum and training in South Africa have been critically examined, particularly in relation to issues of culture and language. Mahomed (2022) points out in her analysis of the psychology curriculum at the UCT, even the recent decolonial turn—while commendable for incorporating elements of social relevance—still falls short of a fully cultural framework. That is, while the curriculum may address certain cultural issues, it does not yet integrate Afrocentric epistemologies or indigenous African languages into teaching and practice.

In line with the above, Long (2016a) further notes that the absence of African languages in the psychology curriculum reinforces a disconnect between the language of instruction and the cultural contexts of the students and communities being served. Due attention has been given to the

important role of African languages in medical healthcare (Mpasha & Lebesse, 2017; Van de Berg, 2016; Hussey, 2012; Madzimbamuto, 2012). Mpasha and Lebesse (2017) argue that the lack of language concordance between healthcare providers and patients often leads to miscommunication, which in turn contributes to poor health outcomes and reduced patient satisfaction. Van de Berg (2016) highlights how patients may withhold critical information or misinterpret medical instructions when consultations are not conducted in their home language. Similarly, Hussey (2012) points out that using a dominant language (such as English) in healthcare settings tends to marginalise African language speakers, particularly in rural areas where limited proficiency in English can lead to medical misunderstandings. Madzimbamuto (2012) adds that the exclusion of African languages from medical education and training also undermines culturally competent care and continues the colonial legacy of privileging Western norms over local realities. These scholars collectively call for the integration of African languages into both healthcare delivery and professional training to ensure equitable and effective care. However, an equally important discipline of mental healthcare continues to endure a literature deficit in this regard. The bias towards medical healthcare is evident not only in the amount of research on language barriers in medical healthcare, but also in the initiatives intended to facilitate ameliorate the language barriers. Examples include the Covid-19 communication initiatives which comprised the Government's Communication Strategy, the translation of basic Covid-19 information into African languages in various communication platforms, and the development of a Covid-19 multilingual medical terminology in all South African official languages (Government Communications and Information System, 2020).

While the initiatives reported above are commendable for facilitating effective and inclusive medical communication, it is important that they are considered across all areas of healthcare. Segalo and Cakata (2017) argue that the literature deficit on the use of African languages in Psychology is rooted in its distinctly Western origins which have contributed to the systematic erasure of IKS from the onset of colonialism (Nwoye, 2015). African knowledges, which previously sustained societies for centuries, were disrupted by the imposition of colonial epistemologies. Mignolo (2011) argues that this process was accompanied by marginalising indigenous languages in the professionalised world. Indeed, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019, p. 229) regards the “Mother Tongue of African people that were replaced with colonial languages” as the

first major casualty of colonialism in the field of knowledge production. Baloyi calls for a more meaningful inclusion of African ideas and terms in the curriculum. Instead of simply translating Western concepts, he believes African languages should be used to introduce their own ideas—such as *Swa Moya*—which reflect the spiritual, moral, and lived realities of indigenous Africans. This view is supported by other scholars (Nwoye, 2015; Ramose, 2020; Ramose & Baloyi, 2020; Thésée & Carr, 2012), who agree that African languages and concepts must be central to psychology education.

The lack of focus on what an “indigenous” psychology really means led Bandawe (2005) to conclude that African philosophy is still missing in professional training. For Nsamenang (2007), Psychology generally continues to be taught in most university departments on the African continent as an extension of Western curricula, with English remaining the hallmark of such Western-centred curricula. Pioneering AIKS scholars (Grills, 2002, 2004; Holdstock, 2000; Mkhize, 2004, 2018; Nobles, 2006; Nobles & Mkhize, 2020; Nwoye, 2015, 2017; Ratele, 2016; Van Sertima, 1994) call for an Afrocentric paradigm centering African languages in professional psychology training and practice. The inclusion of African languages in professional psychology training is gradually being adopted by some South African universities. For instance, at UKZN, Ndimande-Hlongwa et al. (2010) highlight the creation of discipline-specific isiZulu curricula for Psychology and Nursing students. This initiative is significant because it challenges the lingering effects of apartheid-era practices, where students were often trained to serve only within their own linguistic or racial communities (Ndimande-Hlongwa et al. 2010). By integrating isiZulu into professional training, UKZN promotes cross-cultural competence and equity in service delivery.

Campbell and Young (2016) conducted a study focused on translating the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation – Outcome Measure (CORE-OM) into isiXhosa for use in South African university student counselling centres. Campbell & Young (2016) emphasize that the development of psychological resource materials and the translation of well-established psychometric tools into African languages can significantly enhance accessibility to mental health services (Health Professions Council of South Africa, 2006) as cited in Campbell & Young (2016). This initiative is both commendable and essential in advancing linguistic inclusivity and fostering a more mindful approach to psychological support. Kathuria and Serpell (1999) demonstrated the value and effectiveness of incorporating AIKS by adapting psychological assessment models to align with

the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of those receiving services. They developed the Panga Munthu Test (PMT) in Zambia, meaning "Make a Person," as a culturally sensitive intelligence assessment specifically designed for children in non-Western contexts. This approach enabled a more accurate and culturally relevant evaluation of cognitive abilities, highlighting the importance of customizing psychological tools to reflect the experiences and environments of diverse populations. These studies significantly highlight the historical and ongoing marginalization of African languages in psychological practice and education within South Africa. The insights are crucial in establishing that neglecting African languages is a linguistic issue and a deeper epistemological and structural problem within psychology. However, while the scholars strongly critique the Western epistemological dominance in psychology and acknowledge the linguistic and cultural marginalization of African knowledge systems, most of these existing studies remain broad in scope. They focus on policy issues and training curricula, and not the specific institutional experiences of students navigating psychological services in real-world contexts, particularly at HWIs in South Africa. Moreover, there is a limited empirical examination of how African language-speaking clients experience language barriers in university counselling centres. This study goes beyond conceptual critiques by exploring how linguistic and cultural mismatches affect help-seeking behavior, and the perceived efficacy of psychological services in higher education institutions.

2.7 Language and psychological provision in multilingual contexts

International studies on language use in psychological care have predominantly focused on therapy involving displaced individuals, such as refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, who are often required to engage in therapy using the host country's language (Dewaele, 2013; Ervin-Tripp, 1964; Cook & Dewaele, 2022). In multilingual psychological counselling, Dewaele (2013) recognizes that frequent language shifting occurs, influenced by various factors such as emotional expression, identity, and trauma processing.

One of the earliest studies on language switching in multilingual contexts was conducted by Ervin-Tripp (1964), who explored this phenomenon within sociolinguistics. Her research focused on Japanese immigrant women in the United States and found that language shifting is not solely dependent on proficiency but is closely linked to the topic of discussion. Specifically, participants

who were required to speak English to another Japanese speaker struggled when discussing Japanese cultural topics, suggesting that certain subjects are deeply tied to specific languages. Cook and Dewaele (2022) examined multilingualism in therapy and found that when trauma-related or emotionally distressing topics, clients often shifted to a language that felt emotionally distant, thus reducing emotional intensity and re-traumatization. Their study on multilingual refugees living in the United Kingdom—who underwent therapy in English, their second language—revealed that speaking in a non-native language allowed them to express suppressed aspects of their identity that were difficult to articulate in their Mother Tongue due to the trauma and persecution they had experienced in their home countries. Several scholars (Dewaele, 2013; Grosjean, 1982, 2010; Espin, 2015) have observed that expressing emotions in a second language can sometimes be less emotionally overwhelming for multilingual individuals. One reason for this is that certain memories and emotions may be so deeply tied to the first language that revisiting them in that language feels too intense or distressing. Additionally, speaking in a second language can create a sense of emotional detachment, making it easier for individuals to discuss sensitive, socially restricted, or taboo topics. Espin (2015), for example, found that bilingual individuals often find it easier to express culturally forbidden or socially stigmatized topics—such as sexuality or trauma—when speaking in a language that feels less emotionally charged. Similarly, Dewaele (2013) highlighted how the emotional weight of words differs across languages, influencing how individuals process and express deeply personal experiences in therapy.

However, Aragno and Schlachet (1996), as well as Panicacci and Dewaele (2017), argue that the Mother Tongue carries greater emotional intensity compared to a language learned later in life. They suggest that because the first language is deeply embedded in an individual's early emotional and cognitive development, it is more effective for expressing feelings and experiences in therapy. According to their perspective, therapy conducted in a Mother Tongue allows for deeper emotional access, fostering a stronger connection between the client and their emotions, which can enhance the therapeutic process. In contrast, additional languages are typically acquired later in life, often through formal education with limited emotional or embodied engagement. As a result, words in these languages may feel emotionally distant or disconnected from personal experiences (Dewaele, 2010).

Kennedy (2013) conducted a study on the role of the Mother Tongue in counselling Welsh-speaking clients and its impact on the therapeutic relationship. The study, which involved bilingual participants who identified Welsh as their Mother Tongue, found that the language used in counselling plays a key role in shaping how easily individuals can express emotions, discuss personal issues, and share experiences. Additionally, another qualitative study explored the experiences of bilingual immigrant therapists from six different countries working in the UK. These therapists provided counselling in both English (their second language) and their Mother Tongue. The findings revealed that they felt more comfortable working with clients who shared the same linguistic background, particularly those who also spoke English as a second language and share the same Mother Tongue as them. In contrast, when working with native English speakers, they reported experiencing strong emotions such as anxiousness and nervousness. These emotions were linked to feeling linguistically incompetent when communicating with native English clients. Such incompetence may exacerbate the emotional strain that necessitates the need for psychological consultation in the first, starting with linguistic anxiety (Kennedy, 2013). In their 2021 systematic review, Ling et al. examined the effects of language barriers on counseling for refugees, finding that both counselors and refugee clients often felt unprepared for the counseling process due to insufficient training, language and cultural differences, and mismatched life perspectives. These challenges make it difficult to establish rapport and trust—key components of effective psychological counseling—when there is a language gap (Ling et al., 2012). Without trust, clients may be reluctant to open up, and counselors may struggle to perform their roles effectively, often feeling inadequate as a result (Ling et al., 2012).

While there are varying opinions on the role of interpreters in counseling, using interpreters has been identified as a possible way to address language barriers, alongside providing specialized workshops and training. These measures could better equip counselors to navigate cross-cultural settings, and raising awareness among refugees about interpreter-assisted services may enhance their access to support. While interpreters can bridge the language gap, they also introduce complexities in maintaining confidentiality, ensuring accurate communication, and fostering a direct counselor-client relationship. Arshadi's (2018) study on immigrant therapists practicing in their second language explored the challenges these professionals face, particularly in therapy contexts with non-native languages. Findings indicated that therapists often experienced anxiety

and frustration due to language-related challenges, paralleling results reported by Ling et al. (2021). This emotional strain frequently stemmed from linguistic insecurities, as reflected in one of Georgiadou's (2014) study participants who described feeling engulfed by anxiety whenever she made language errors. Such anxiety negatively impacted therapists' sense of professional competence and hindered their effectiveness. One therapist remarked on the cognitive load involved, noting, “[y]ou are listening 20 minutes of this patient and you really struggle to focus on the content because so much of your mental availability capacity are involved in speaking English” (Arshadi, 2018, p. 134). This suggests that linguistic alignment between the therapist and client can significantly reduce stress and improve therapeutic engagement (Arshadi, 2018).

Within the South African context, considerable attention has been paid to language practices in public psychiatric healthcare settings, revealing a critical mismatch between patients’ linguistic backgrounds and the linguistic capabilities of mental health professionals. Research indicates that, with the notable exception of psychiatric nurses, the majority of mental health practitioners remain predominantly white and often lack proficiency in the indigenous languages spoken by most Black South African patients, particularly isiXhosa (Drennan, 1996; Swartz, 2002; Swartz, 1989). This linguistic disconnect contributes to substantial communication barriers and undermines the therapeutic process. Drennan’s (1996) study underscores the extent of this challenge, noting that clinicians who could not speak isiXhosa were heavily reliant on isiXhosa-speaking nurses to act as informal interpreters. These nurses were expected to fulfill dual roles—both providing clinical care and mediating linguistic understanding—despite having no formal training in interpretation. Alarming, in some cases, fellow patients or other hospital staff such as cleaners or security guards have been called upon to facilitate communication, reflecting the ad hoc and inconsistent nature of language support in these settings (Drennan, 1996). Studies have documented how this lack of structured language provision compromises the quality of care, confidentiality, and the dignity of patients (Kilian et al., 2015; Kilian, 2013). For example, Kilian (2013) found that when clinicians engaged with patients who had limited English proficiency in the absence of interpreters, communication was superficial, clinical understanding was compromised, and crucial diagnostic or therapeutic opportunities were lost. These challenges point to a systemic neglect of language as a critical component of equitable mental healthcare. A study conducted at UCT investigating undergraduate psychology students’ perceptions within the broader "relevance debate" found that

students regarded psychology as largely inaccessible to the broader South African population. Among the key barriers identified was language, with students arguing that the dominance of English and a lack of culturally and linguistically responsive practices marginalised non-English speakers (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004). Pillay and Petersen (1996) highlighted a significant gap in the training of psychology students, noting that while many express a desire to learn an African language, few clinical and counselling psychologists graduate with the necessary proficiency to use the language effectively in consultations. This deficiency is particularly concerning given the linguistic diversity in South African universities, where many students speak African languages as their Mother Tongue but may struggle to fully engage with mental health services provided in English or other dominant languages. Mkhize (2016) further raises concerns about psychologists' ability to apply key psychological concepts in languages that resonate with their patients, particularly when considering the psychological, cultural, and linguistic needs of the patients. This highlights a critical issue in psychological service provision—while there may be a growing awareness of the importance of cultural and linguistic sensitivity, psychologists often lack the training or confidence to offer services in a manner that fully addresses these needs. This issue forms a key focus of the current study.

While the South African context is unique, the issue of linguistic marginalisation in mental health services echoes findings in global research, where language mismatches have consistently been shown to hinder access, trust, and treatment efficacy. As Drennan (1996) and Swartz (1989) poignantly observe, African language speakers in psychiatric institutions are often treated as linguistic outsiders, likened to immigrants in their own country—positioned in a state of “otherness” that further alienates them from meaningful care. The South African context is multilingual; clients and psychologists may share multiple languages but default to English in counselling sessions. However, the literature remains silent on how this structural multilingualism is negotiated within institutional counseling settings. The psychological implication of conducting psychological counselling in a second language for clients and psychologists remain under-explored in South African higher education institutions context, despite the evidence that language can influence emotional accessibility, identity expression and therapeutic alliance (Grosjean, 1982, 2010; Aragno & Schlachet, 1996; Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017).

While research from countries such as Wales and the UK (Arshadi, 2018; Georgiadou, 2014, Kennedy, 2013) provides valuable insights into how bilingual or multilingual therapists navigate linguistic and emotional dynamics, few studies in South Africa explore how local psychologists and students manage these complexities. This study, therefore, examines how language use influences access, emotional expression, and counseling outcomes in psychological services at a South African University. The study contributes to a contextually grounded understanding of mental health support in South Africa's higher education landscape, and it challenges the residual effect of monolingual ideologies within psychological practice.

2.8 Chapter summary

Drawing from existing relevant literature, this chapter has examined the intersection of language, psychology, and AIKS to highlight the complexities involved in providing culturally and linguistically appropriate psychological support in South African higher education. Beginning with an overview of LPP in South African universities, the review traced how institutional language frameworks continue to reflect colonial legacies that marginalise African languages and ways of knowing. This is especially relevant within the field of psychology, where the dominance of Euro-American theories and English as the language of instruction and practice often excludes African worldviews, African languages, and the lived realities of the majority of the South African population. By highlighting these theoretical and practical tensions, this literature review establishes a clear rationale for the present study. It underscores the urgent need to investigate how language shapes students' access to psychological support in multilingual higher education settings. In doing so, the study contributes to the broader project of decolonising psychological care in South Africa by centring language as a critical site of transformation. The next chapter frames the study both theoretically and conceptually.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This chapter delineates the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning this study, offering a structured lens through which the research problem is examined. Central to the theoretical framing is Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which is employed to account for the communicative events that characterise student counselling sessions in a multilingual university context. As the chapter will show, CAT offers a useful framework for analysing how speakers adjust—or fail to adjust—their communicative behaviour in response to perceived social, cultural, and linguistic differences. Complementing this, the conceptual framework integrates key concepts pertinent to the study within CAT, illustrating the interconnections between these concepts and their alignment with the main theory. In constructing this framework, the study acknowledges the dual ontologies present in the counselling context: the professional ontology of psychologists, shaped by formal training and clinical practices, and the personal ontology of both students and psychologists as well as the epistemological premise, rooted in cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and the institution’s language practices. CAT provides a lens to understand how these ontologies influence communication strategies. The chapter is organised into five key sections. It begins with a detailed exposition of CAT, outlining its origins, central premises, and relevance to multilingual and multicultural counselling interactions. Following this, the chapter unpacks the three core strategies within CAT—Convergence, Divergence, and Maintenance—each examined in terms of how they manifest in student-psychologist interactions and the implications they hold for linguistic and cultural inclusion in the counselling environment. This chapter concludes by extending the concept of Communication Strategies into potential outcomes of interaction. This structure ensures a comprehensive understanding of how CAT illuminates the communicative dimensions of psychological support in a multilingual higher education context.

3.2 Communication accommodation theory

Just as human beings grow and evolve over time—gaining wisdom through life experiences—Ogay & Giles (2007) suggests that theories, too, are dynamic and subject to change. He insightfully notes that “theories are not only about life; they also have their own lives” (p. 4). This perspective is particularly relevant when considering the development of CAT, which originally began as Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT). SAT was originally created to explore how social and psychological factors influence the way people change the way they speak during conversations (Ogay & Giles, 2007). It focused on understanding the reasons behind why speakers modify their language—whether to gain approval, reduce social distance, or express group identity. However, as research around the theory expanded, it began to encompass much more than speech adjustments. Scholars started exploring broader dimensions of social interaction, including non-verbal communication, identity negotiation, and intergroup dynamics. This broadening of focus led to a shift in the theory's name from “Speech” to “Communication” Accommodation Theory, reflecting its wider applicability. As Giles et al. (1987, p. 34) explain, CAT presents “broad and robust basis from which to examine mutual influences in communication, taking account of social and cognitive factors, and having the scope to cover the social consequences of speech shifts as well as their determinants and the motivations underlying them. Furthermore, it is applicable to a broad range of speech behaviors, and nonverbal analyses potentially, with the flexibility of relevance at both interpersonal and intergroup levels”. For a more in-depth discussion on the evolution and theoretical foundations of SAT and its transition to CAT, Gallois et al., (2005). This chapter will focus on the current principles of CAT as they relate to the present study.

CAT aims to uncover the underlying motivations behind how and why individuals adjust their communication when interacting with others. This entails recognising and acknowledging the interpersonal and intergroup dynamics that shape communication, considering how individuals accommodate communication to others in both one-on-one (interpersonal) interactions and group-based (intergroup) settings, where social identities and group affiliations come into play. It is on the basis of these tenets that CAT is utilized in this study, as explained in 3.5 below, and in the light of complex identity dynamics that characterise South African higher education institutions, their academic projects and institutional cultures (refer to Chapter 1).

While both CAT and IPA are employed in the study, they serve distinct but complementary purposes rather than being conceptually integrated. CAT, as a sociolinguistic theory, was used to interpret the nature of the counselling interactions—particularly how language accommodation occurred between students and psychologists. Importantly, these interactions were not observed directly but analysed based on participants’ reported experiences. IPA, on the other hand, guided the analysis of how participants (both students and psychologists) made sense of those counselling experiences from their perspectives. As such, CAT informs the interpretation of communicative dynamics, while IPA enables a deeper exploration of subjective meaning-making. Although not conceptually merged, the two frameworks work in parallel to offer a fuller understanding of multilingual counselling in this context.

According to Giles et al., (1987), communication adjustments can be broadly categorised into three key strategies: convergence, divergence, and maintenance, which are discussed in subsections 3.2.1 – 3.2.3 below. Individuals adjust their communication styles to either converge (accommodate), diverge (non-accommodate), or maintain their communicative behavior, depending on various factors, including social identities and perceived relational dynamics, which may include linguistic competences, attitudes and ideologies. The strategies determine the success of communicative events, sometimes with far reaching implications for the interlocutors. Therefore, CAT not only sheds light on when and how people adjust their communication, but also prompts critical reflection on the appropriateness, impact, and underlying assumptions of those adjustments—especially in sensitive contexts like healthcare. In the context of patient–provider interactions within a geriatric care facility, such over-accommodative behaviours have been documented (Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988; Farzadnia & Giles, 2015; Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995). It explores both accommodation [when individuals modify their speech or behavior to become more similar to their conversation partners] and non-accommodation [when individuals deliberately maintain or emphasize differences in communication]. The theory examines what drives these choices, such as the desire for social approval, the need to maintain group identity, or the presence of power dynamics. Moreover, CAT considers the effects of these adjustments—how the receiver interprets and responds to them, and what social or relational outcomes result from either accommodating or not accommodating. Accordingly, the (non-)accommodative strategies of convergence, maintenance and divergence are discussed in the subsections that follow below.

3.2.1 Convergence strategy

According to CAT, convergence occurs when an individual adjusts their communication style to accommodate and align more closely with that of the receiver. This adaptation can involve linguistic, paralinguistic, and nonverbal modifications, such as speaking in a preferred language, adopting a similar speech accent, word substitution, using culturally familiar expressions, or mirroring body language (Giles & Ogay, 2007). The motivation behind convergence is often to reduce social distance, enhance mutual understanding, and foster rapport. In a study conducted by Pretorius (2018), which analysed nurse–patient interactions through the lens of CAT, it was observed that the nurse shifted from using technical medical jargon to more accessible, everyday language once she realised the patient did not understand the clinical terms. This act of convergence—adjusting language to align more closely with the listener’s level of understanding—illustrates how accommodation can foster better communication and enhance patient comfort in healthcare settings. Similarly, in a study examining receivers’ perceptions and self-reported behaviours during actual “speaking-up” interactions in a healthcare context, convergence was also found to be prominent among senior healthcare professionals (Barlow et al. 2023). When junior staff members “spoke up” voicing concerns, the seniors who are the receivers in this context often described the communication interaction as accommodating (Barlow et al. 2023). Despite their authoritative roles, these senior professionals were able to adjust their tone, language, and approach in a way that created a more open and respectful communicative space. This accommodative behaviour helped reduce hierarchical tension, encouraged dialogue, and signalled a willingness to listen—key elements in fostering a supportive and collaborative healthcare environment.

While accommodation is generally regarded as a positive communication strategy, it can become problematic when it turns into over-accommodation. This occurs when the speaker makes excessive or exaggerated adjustments that may come across as patronising or disrespectful, even if the intention is to be kind or polite. This communicative style, often referred to as elderspeak, is intended to show warmth and care. However, it often results in linguistic depersonalisation, making older patients feel infantilised or less competent. Rather than promoting mutual respect, such speech patterns may unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes about ageing and reduce

the sense of autonomy and dignity in older adults (Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988; Farzadnia & Giles, 2015; Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995).

As it will be shown later on in this study, acts of convergence are seen when psychologists revealed that they used greetings to make the clients (students) in their Mother Tongue to build a welcoming environment. Indeed, student participants confirmed that some psychologists would try to talk to them in their Mother Tongue even if they were not proficient in those languages to build rapport. Such convergence strategies helped overcome various language barriers such as the inability to understand certain English words, imposition of Mother Tongue on clients that emerged during the counselling sessions. By using these convergence strategies, the psychologists and the students were able to achieve a convergent outcome, where the objectives of the counselling session were met adequately.

3.2.2 Divergence strategy

Divergence is the opposite of convergence. It happens when an individual intentionally emphasizes linguistic or cultural differences. This strategy is often used to assert power, highlight social or linguistic boundaries, or resist assimilation into a dominant language or culture (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). While accommodation, particularly in the form of convergence, is generally viewed as a positive communicative strategy, non-accommodation—such as divergence—is not inherently negative. In fact, divergence can, in some contexts, serve an accommodative function. For instance, in Barlow's (2013) study on speaking-up interactions in healthcare settings, one nurse/midwife described a situation where they intentionally diverged from the speaker's communicative style. Instead of matching the speaker's elevated speech rate and volume—behaviours perceived as aggressive—they slowed down their speech and lowered their volume. Although this response was technically divergent, it was used strategically to de-escalate the situation and facilitate a more constructive interaction. Thus, while their behaviour diverged from that of the speaker, it was motivated by a desire to accommodate the emotional tone of the interaction and promote understanding. This example illustrates that divergence can, paradoxically, be a form of adaptive accommodation, particularly when it aims to regulate tension, manage conflict, or support a more effective communicative exchange.

Unpleasant experiences such as linguistic anxiety, cognitive strain and cultural clash as explained by the students participants in the interviews reveal a divergent strategy of communication from the psychologists during the counseling session. These unpleasant experiences resulted in various divergent outcomes such as changing a psychologist or complete discontinuation of counselling.

3.2.3 Maintenance strategy

Maintenance refers to a neutral approach, where a speaker neither converges nor diverges but rather maintains their original communication style regardless of the receiver's language or social identity (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 199). This strategy may manifest through the continued use of a dominant language, formal tone, or technical jargon, even when interacting with individuals who may not share the same linguistic or cultural background. While this may reflect an effort to uphold clinical standards or ensure clarity from a practitioner's perspective, it can also inadvertently contribute to epistemic exclusion and reduced patient engagement (Watts, 2015; Roberts, 2010). Roberts (2010) found that general practitioners in multilingual settings often maintained the use of medical jargon in English, even when patients demonstrated limited proficiency, leading to misunderstandings and a sense of disempowerment. Similarly, Levin (2006) highlights how the maintenance of English as the primary medium in healthcare consultations can marginalise patients who are more comfortable expressing symptoms and emotions in African languages. These studies underscore how maintenance, when not critically examined, may serve to reinforce power imbalances, hinder effective care, and limit the recognition of alternative knowledge systems in health communication.

3.3 Outcomes of communication strategies

While Giles (1987) originally introduced convergence, divergence, and maintenance as key communication strategies within the framework of CAT, this study extends the conceptualisation of these elements by also positioning them as potential outcomes of interaction. In other words, rather than viewing convergence and divergence solely as strategic choices made by interlocutors during communication, this study proposes that they can also represent the results of communicative exchanges—particularly in emotionally sensitive and support-driven contexts such as student counselling. Specifically, when accommodation occurs in the form of convergence—

where communicators adjust their language, tone, or communicative behaviours to foster mutual understanding—it often leads to successful communication. In the context of this study, such success typically facilitates effective emotional, psychological, and social support for students, thus qualifying as a *convergent outcome*. On the other hand, when divergence and maintenance occur—where speakers emphasise difference rather than similarity—communication may become ineffective or strained, resulting in a *divergent outcome*. Convergent and divergent outcomes of counseling as speech act forms are illustrated in the following figure which shows that communication is anchored on ontological and epistemological premises.

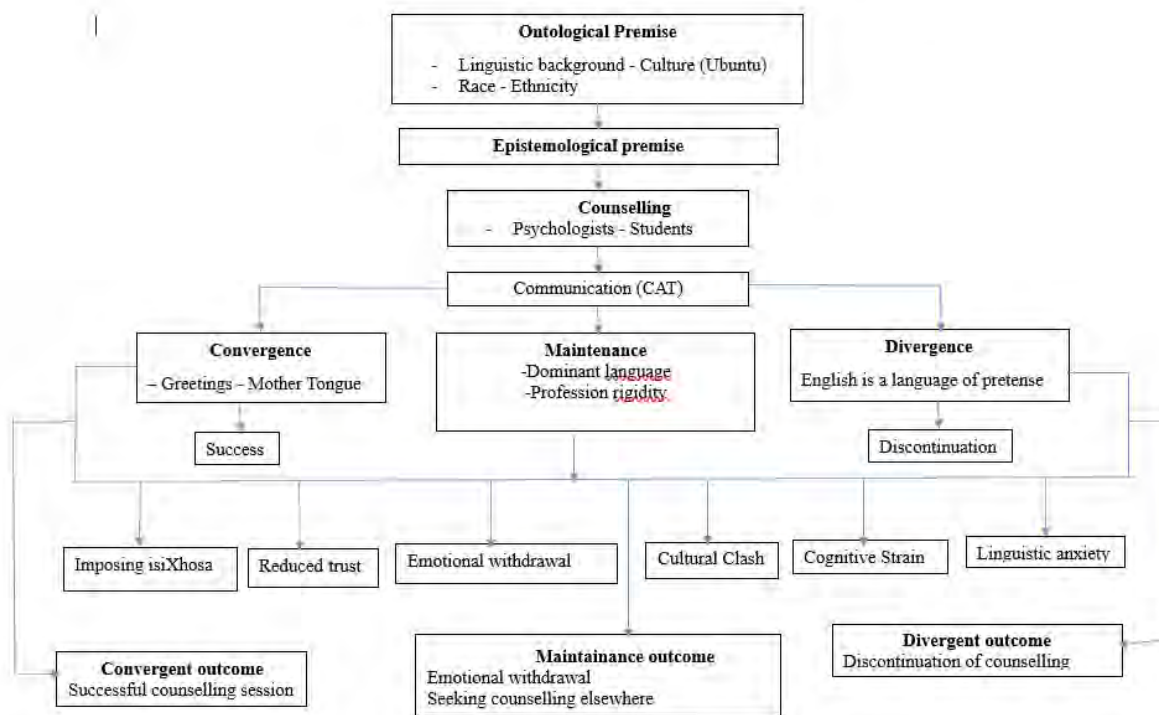


Figure 3.1 Conceptual Framework

Ontology, as articulated by Crotty (2003), is a philosophical field concerned with being and the nature of reality. It examines what exists, how it exists, and the ways we can comprehend and describe that existence. In the context of social sciences, different perspectives on ontology exist, particularly with regard to how reality is understood and constructed. These differing perspectives give rise to several ontological viewpoints, the three primary of which, according to Gould & Onuf (2009) are:

- Realism – This perspective asserts that there is a single, objective reality or truth that exists independent of human perception or belief. Realists maintain that the world operates in a consistent, objective manner, irrespective of individual perspectives.
- Constructivism – In contrast, constructivism posits that reality is not singular but rather multiple, with various truths constructed by individuals based on their subjective experiences and interactions. This perspective highlights the role of human perception and cognition, and experiences in shaping the way reality is understood.
- Pragmatism – Pragmatism offers a more nuanced position, suggesting that both a singular and multiple realities exist. This perspective recognizes that objective truths may exist in certain contexts but acknowledges that human experiences and perceptions can also generate diverse understandings of reality.

Ontology becomes a foundational premise for navigating the potentially conflicting views of reality that may arise from participants' different lived experiences before and after enrolling in the institution, including those who are agents of the institutional culture as workers in the institution's different entities, including the institution's counselling centre. As a foundational premise, it interrelates with the epistemological premise which pertains to knowledge, its justification and its sources (Moser, 2009), as well as how these influence interactions within institutional spaces such as Rhodes University's Counselling Centre. While the ontological premise concerns what exists, the epistemological premise addresses how we come to know what exists. Epistemology involves examining the sources and justification of knowledge, which include — but are not limited to — perception, memory, reason, and experience (Sol & Heng, 2022). These sources provide the basis through which individuals make sense of their realities. This study acknowledges participants as knowers in their own right, whose knowledge is legitimately constructed and justified through their lived experiences, perceptions, and interactions within the university context.

Ontology and epistemology do not only manifest themselves in the research participants but they also form the philosophical underpinnings that guide research. In this study, the researcher adopted a constructivist perspective, which aligns with the views of Honebein (1996), as cited in Adom et al. (2016), who describes constructivism as a paradigm that emphasizes how individuals construct their understanding and knowledge through subjective experience and reflection. According to

constructivists, reality is not passively received but actively constructed through individuals' engagement with the world. People's unique experiences and interactions shape their understanding of reality, leading to the conclusion that there are multiple realities, each one subjective and dependent on personal context. This then means that constructive ontology can be understood as that ontology, or the nature of reality, that can be deliberately shaped or constructed by individuals or societies. Reality is not necessarily objective or fixed but can be shaped by human beliefs, social interactions, cultural norms, and institutional structures.

The student participants in the present study are Black Africans who bring with them ontologies deeply rooted in their linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds. Their linguistic backgrounds and the language practices of Rhodes University that they interact with significantly influence their communication within counselling settings. Central to their worldview is the African philosophy of Ubuntu, as explained in the previous chapter (see also Mkhize et al., 2016). This philosophy emphasizes interconnectedness, interdependence, and mutual responsibility among individuals and the broader community. Unlike Western epistemologies that often prioritize individualism, Ubuntu fosters collectivism, collaboration, inclusivity, and shared knowledge as foundational aspects of human existence. This worldview influences how students navigate familial relationships, community interactions, and, importantly, their expectations and experiences within psychological counselling. Language is at the heart of the Ubuntu philosophy whose weight may be too heavy for languages with different philosophical premises.

Unlike the students at Rhodes University, counselling psychologists operate within dual ontological frameworks. Professionally, their ontology is shaped by formal training, the language of the curriculum and training, psychological theories, and clinical practices that are predominantly grounded in Western epistemological traditions. Their professional identities emphasize evidence-based approaches, individual-focused interventions, and standardized therapeutic modalities. Furthermore, psychologists also carry personal ontologies that exist beyond their professional roles — shaped by their linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds. These personal worldviews may influence how they relate to clients, interpret emotional experiences, and conceptualise healing. The coexistence — and at times, tension — between institutional and personal ontologies can significantly shape how psychological support is understood, delivered, and received, particularly within multilingual and culturally diverse contexts.

Accordingly, CAT offers a valuable framework for understanding how psychologists' ontologies and epistemologies influence their communicative behaviors with students during counselling sessions. In the context of this study, psychologists who engage in convergence demonstrate flexibility by adapting their communication to align more closely with the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their student clients. This flexibility is evident in strategies such as greeting students in their Mother Tongue, incorporating substitute words from the student's native language, and employing code-mixing techniques, as it will be reported in Chapters 5. These accommodative behaviors exhibit linguistic and cultural mindfulness which serve to bridge language barriers, foster rapport, and enhance cultural sensitivity, ultimately contributing to more successful counselling outcomes. Such psychologists effectively balance their professional ontology, rooted in formal psychological training and Western epistemologies, with their personal ontology, informed by their own cultural and linguistic experiences. This will be demonstrated in Chapter 5. Conversely, psychologists who exhibit divergence or maintain their standard communicative approaches without accommodation may be perceived as rigid. Their adherence to a singular professional ontology, without integrating personal cultural insights, can lead to communication challenges. This rigidity may result in linguistic barriers manifesting as student anxiety (including linguistic anxiety), cognitive strain, cultural misunderstandings, and, in some cases, emotional withdrawal or discontinuation of counselling sessions. The lack of accommodation can hinder the development of a strong counselling alliance, which is crucial for effective counselling. It is important to note that convergence does not eliminate all language barriers; however, it facilitates negotiation and management of language use within the counselling context.

3.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I presented and discussed the theoretical framework that underpins this study. The chapter began with an exploration of CAT, which serves as the overarching theory for understanding the dynamics of language and communication in the provision of psychological support to students. I outlined the core concepts of CAT—convergence, divergence, and maintenance—and highlighted their relevance not only as communicative strategies but also as potential outcomes of interaction, particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts such as Rhodes University. Furthermore, I discussed the ontological and epistemological assumptions that

align with CAT and support the study's interpretivist approach to understanding lived experiences and meaning-making in communication encounters. These conceptual premises reinforce the study's focus on the nuanced, relational, and context-specific nature of language use in student support services. To visually consolidate the theoretical orientation of the study, a theoretical framework diagram was included to illustrate the interconnectedness between CAT, the study's research objectives, and its broader interpretive paradigm.

While CAT offers valuable insights into how individuals adjust their communication styles to manage social distance, it was primarily formulated to account for communicative acts in Western contexts. To fully capture the nuanced dynamics of multilingual counselling in a South African university context, CAT was supplemented with additional conceptual frameworks—such as idiom, ontological and epistemological perspectives—which foreground relationality, communal values, and the lived experiences of students in postcolonial, multilingual spaces (Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991; Heugh, 2009; Chick, 2002; Dyers, 2008; Mesthrie, 2002). As a theory, CAT has faced criticism for its broad applicability, with some scholars arguing that its flexibility allows it to fit almost any communication-related study, potentially diluting its specificity and predictive power (Elhami, 2020; Zhang & Giles, 2018). Critics suggest that the theory's core concepts—convergence and divergence—may oversimplify the complexities of real-world interactions, where individuals often employ multiple strategies simultaneously or shift their communication styles dynamically within a single encounter (Elhami, 2020). However, this perceived complexity and adaptability can be advantageous, particularly in studies examining nuanced intergroup interactions, such as those between counselling psychologists and students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In such contexts, the multifaceted nature of CAT allows for a comprehensive analysis of how professionals navigate their dual ontologies when engaging with clients who may hold different worldviews. Therefore, rather than viewing CAT's broad applicability as a limitation, this study embraces it as a strength, utilizing the theory's comprehensive scope to delve into the intricate dynamics of cross-cultural and multilingual communication in psychological counselling settings. Its positive returns are apparent in the data presentation and analysis chapters, before which the methodology of the study is outlined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this study. It begins with a description of the research design, detailing how this qualitative study employs the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to explore students' counselling experiences in a higher education institution. This is followed by a discussion of the target population, highlighting the characteristics of the study participants. The chapter then explains the sampling methods and procedures used to recruit participants. Next, the data collection tools and techniques are described, followed by a detailed explanation of the data analysis process, illustrating how the analytical framework was applied to interpret students' linguistic experiences during counselling. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations observed throughout the study, including those related to participant recruitment, informed consent, and the handling of data collected from participants.

4.2 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. According to Cleland (2017), as cited in Oranga & Matere (2023, p. 2), qualitative research focuses on understanding people's experiences in a simple, analytical, and systematic manner, using a clearly defined set of procedures to explore research questions. This approach enables a deep exploration of how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived realities, particularly within their specific cultural and institutional contexts. In support of this, Lim (2025) emphasises that the depth of understanding gained through qualitative inquiry is essential for theory development, policy formulation, and the creation of interventions that are both socially relevant and culturally sensitive. Lim's (2025) perspective is particularly relevant to the present study, which aims to explore and bring awareness to the language-related challenges experienced by both students and psychologists at Rhodes University in the context of mental health care provision. These challenges may be shaped by multiple factors, including the language of psychology training, institutional language policies, and broader

systemic dynamics. By uncovering these experiences, this study hopes to contribute to ongoing efforts toward language transformation within student mental health services at the university, ultimately advocating for more inclusive and accessible psychological counselling. Furthermore, Lim (2025) also notes that in qualitative research, it is crucial to clearly state the research questions and objectives, which guide the inquiry into the "how" and "why" of the phenomenon under investigation.

Given the exploratory and experience-based nature of this study, the study adopted the IPA approach. IPA is a qualitative phenomenological research approach that seeks to explore how individuals make sense of their social and personal life experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA is rooted in fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography which all emphasize the importance of participants' subjective meaning making (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Phenomenology aims to distinguish the traits of a phenomenon or experience that makes them different or exceptional from others and this is done through the use of the eidetic method. It allows the phenomena which are studied to speak for themselves, rather than having already predetermined conceptions of the experience. The foundational principles of phenomenology, as introduced by Husserl (1913) include intentionality, and inter-subjectivity. Heidegger (1962) built on Husserl's foundational principles of phenomenology by expanding them into hermeneutics. Originally used to interpret Biblical texts, the hermeneutic approach recognizes that understanding human experiences is an ongoing interpretative process, shaped by both the participant's and the researcher's perspectives. In IPA, this means that after the participant makes sense of their own experience, the researcher then interprets the participant's understanding of that experience. This process is known as the double hermeneutic, where the researcher is essentially interpreting the participant's interpretation of their lived reality (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The third key principle of IPA is its idiographic focus, which prioritizes an in-depth examination of individual cases Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012). Rather than seeking to make broad generalizations, IPA aims to provide rich, detailed insights into how a specific person, in a specific context, makes sense of a specific experience. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of personal meaning-making before identifying patterns across cases. In a nutshell, IPA can be understood as viewing the participant's experiences of a context through their lenses.

Since IPA focuses on how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences, it is an ideal approach for examining the subjective meaning-making processes of both students and psychologists as this study explores students' linguistic experiences in accessing psychological services and psychologists' experiences in facilitating counselling. Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012) highlight that while IPA offers structured guidelines, it also prioritizes flexibility, allowing researchers to adapt the methodology to suit their study's needs. These guidelines are not rigid rules but rather a framework that provides direction while still enabling customization and creativity in the research process. This flexibility makes IPA particularly well-suited for the present study, as it allows the researcher to tailor the approach to explore the linguistic experiences of students and psychologists in a meaningful way. Additionally, since IPA does not require large samples or generalizable findings, it is especially useful for exploratory studies like this one, where limited prior research exists. This ensures that the study can capture rich, detailed narratives while remaining open to new and unexpected insights.

However, like any research methodology, IPA comes with both advantages and challenges. One of the most significant challenges in this study was the time-consuming nature of the approach, along with the potential for personal biases to influence the findings. IPA requires a detailed, case-by-case analysis, which demands multiple rounds of listening to interview recordings and reviewing transcripts to ensure a deep and accurate interpretation of participants' experiences. This intensive process makes IPA particularly time-consuming, especially when working with rich, nuanced data. Additionally, while IPA acknowledges the researcher's role in interpretation, there is always a risk that personal biases may shape the findings. To address this, researchers must engage in bracketing and reflexivity, which involves critically examining their own beliefs, experiences, and assumptions before and during the analysis. However, this process itself is also time-intensive, as it requires the researcher to carefully reflect on how their perspectives might influence the study and find ways to minimize bias while maintaining a focus on participants' lived experiences. This will be described and illustrated in Section 4.6.

4.3 Sampling and sampling procedure

The research site for this study was selected based on four key factors: the research objectives, accessibility, available resources, and overall feasibility. Rhodes University was purposively selected. The university provides a unique context in which the research objectives can be meaningfully explored, owing to its diverse student population, multilingual environment, and the presence of established mental health support services. These characteristics make it a particularly suitable site for investigating the intersections between language and students' access to psychological support. The site also offers accessibility to the target population. As a student of the university, the researcher is familiar with its institutional structures, policies, and procedures. This familiarity enabled the efficient acquisition of necessary permissions and facilitated rapport-building with participants, thereby enhancing the data collection process. The decision to conduct the study at the researcher's university was also informed by practical constraints, particularly financial limitations. Conducting the research at an institution that the researcher is already affiliated with ensured that the project remained within the available financial and logistical resources. Moreover, the choice of the institution also aligns with the exploratory nature of the study, which aims to generate in-depth, contextually grounded insights. As a case study, this site allows for a focused examination of institutional policies, language practices, and lived experiences within a clearly bounded context. While the findings may not be generalisable to all universities, they can offer transferable insights that may inform similar institutions and contexts.

In alignment with a phenomenological research design, purposive sampling was employed to recruit "those with experiences relating to the phenomenon being researched" (Kruger, 1988, p. 28). Specifically, purposive sampling was used to select students who speak any of the official South African languages and who had accessed psychological support services at the university's counselling centre. The recruitment process for student participants involved sending an invitation email through the university's student mailing list. The email included a description of the study and invited interested and eligible students to participate (see Appendix 1A). The response from students was enthusiastic, and many expressed eagerness to contribute to the research. However, the recruitment process for psychologists proved to be more challenging. The researcher initially sent a request email to the counselling centre manager (see Appendix 1B), who then forwarded it to the counselling centre staff mailing list. The researcher was also prepared to go to the centre in

person, if necessary, as part of the recruitment strategy. Despite these efforts, only one psychologist responded and agreed to participate. This necessitated flexibility in the sampling process in line with Creswell's (2014) argument that researchers must be able to make informed decisions during the research process in order to best serve the aims of the study. When the original purposive sampling strategy proved insufficient for reaching all categories of participants, the researcher had to adopt an alternative approach—snowball sampling—to ensure the study remained methodologically sound and rich in data. Snowball sampling is the selection of participants through referrals by previously selected participants or persons who have access to more potential participants. Following the interview with this psychologist, the researcher requested their assistance in identifying other potential participants. This marked the use of the snowball sampling method. The initial participant was willing to assist and successfully invited two additional psychologists to take part in the study. The combination of purposive and snowball sampling ensured that participants with relevant, first-hand experience of the phenomenon under investigation were included, thereby enriching the quality and depth of the data collected.

In phenomenological research, purposive sampling is used to select participants who have direct experience with the topic being studied. This means that researchers intentionally choose people who can provide relevant and meaningful insights about the phenomenon (Kruger, 1988).

As previously mentioned, the participants in this study were divided into two categories:

- Rhodes University students who speak any of the official South African languages as their Mother Tongue and English as a second language.
- Psychologists working at Rhodes University's Student Counselling Centre.

Since Rhodes University only employs intern psychologists at the Student Counselling Centre, the sample of psychologists in this study consisted solely of intern psychologists. However, for the sake of clarity, they will be referred to simply as psychologists throughout the study. Although one might view the inclusion of intern psychologists as a limitation due to their limited professional experience (1–2 years, as indicated in the questionnaire), this aspect actually aligned well with the study's third objective, i.e. to examine the implications of the Psychology curriculum and training in South Africa in equipping psychologists to effectively work with linguistically diverse clients. Having recent graduates as participants was beneficial because they could provide fresh insights

into the relevance of their academic training in real-world practice. Since they had recently completed their studies, they were in a strong position to critically reflect on their curriculum's strengths and gaps, particularly in relation to working with linguistically diverse clients.

Several scholars suggest different sample sizes for IPA studies. Creswell (1998) recommends a sample of 5 to 25 participants, while Morse (1994) suggests a minimum of 6 participants. In the context of clinical psychology doctoral programmes in Britain, Turpin et al. (1997) propose that 6 to 8 participants are appropriate for IPA research. Despite these variations, all recommendations emphasize small sample sizes, typically not exceeding 25 participants. This is because IPA prioritizes an in-depth exploration of each participant's experience, requiring detailed, case-by-case analysis. A smaller sample allows the researcher to fully immerse themselves in each participant's narrative while keeping the data manageable (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Following these recommendations:

- The current study included 15 participants.
- 12 students and 3 psychologists.
- Of the 12 student participants, 10 agreed to be interviewed, while 2 opted only to complete a questionnaire.
- All psychologists participated in both the questionnaire and interviews.
- Apart from the two students who only answered the questionnaire, the rest of the participants took part in both interviews and the questionnaire.

The quality of the data gathered ensured that the study had enough depth to explore the linguistic experiences of students accessing psychological services and the perspectives and experiences of psychologists facilitating counselling.

4.4 Data collection

The data collection process for this study involved two methods: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. McDonald (2024) advocates for combining both methods in qualitative research to strengthen the depth and accuracy of findings. Using both questionnaires and interviews not only provided rich, detailed data but also enhanced the study's validity and

reliability, as it allowed for cross-checking of responses. The following subsections describe each of the two data collection methods.

4.4.1 Questionnaires

Questionnaires, a data collection tool made up of a set of questions intended to obtain information from participants in a consistent and organised way (Kuphanga, 2024) served as a point of departure for the interviews. It offers a structured approach for systematically collecting and analysing data to generate meaningful insights (Kuphanga, 2024). The questionnaires were used to collect language-related demographic information about participants, as well as responses to general or straightforward questions that might have felt too abstract or simplistic within an interview context—such as yes/no questions or other closed-ended items (refer to Appendix 2A and 2B). The questionnaire included a range of targeted questions designed to gather foundational information relevant to the study. These included items on participants' language proficiencies, an indication of the language most commonly used at the counselling centre, as well as the time frame during which participants had accessed the counselling centre (for students) or duration of practice at the centre (for psychologists). Participants were also asked to indicate whether they had experienced any language-related barriers in the context of accessing or providing psychological support. These questions helped the researcher to identify relevant experiences while also informing the direction of the subsequent interviews. The researcher used Google Forms to create the questionnaire, and a link was sent to all participants via email after they had completed the consent forms. This allowed for easy access and efficient data collection. However, due to technical issues, one participant filled out the questionnaire manually instead of using the online form. While questionnaires are not commonly used in IPA, the researcher took advantage of IPA's flexibility (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012) to customize the study based on its specific needs. Indeed, questionnaire data enabled the researcher's preparation for the interviews.

4.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used alongside the questionnaires to enrich the data collection process (refer to appendix 3A and 3B). In qualitative research, interviews are essential for gaining a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences and viewpoints. The use of semi-

structured interviews in this study allowed the researcher to maintain a consistent line of inquiry while also remaining open to exploring issues raised by participants in more detail (Oranga & Matere, 2023). According to Burck (2005), questions in qualitative research should be open-ended and exploratory to help gain a deeper understanding rather than to test a hypothesis (as cited in Arshadi, 2018). After completing the questionnaire, participants were contacted via email to schedule an interview. As noted above, of the 12 students who filled out the questionnaire, 10 agreed to participate in a one-on-one interview. All three psychologists were also available for interviews; however, they preferred to have their interviews conducted virtually via Zoom. This ensured flexibility and accommodated their schedules while still allowing for in-depth discussions. Interviews provided an opportunity to explore participants' experiences in-depth, allowing them to expand on any responses from the questionnaire, and verify questionnaire answers. For example, some participants initially stated in the questionnaire that they had not experienced language barriers in psychological counselling but later contradicted this in the interview by sharing detailed experiences of language challenges. That way, the interviews compensated for the common challenge of questionnaire surveys whereby respondents sometimes respond to questions without giving them much thought, especially under time constraints.

The interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants, which was obtained both in writing—through signed consent forms (see Appendix 4)—and verbally prior to each interview. Ethical considerations, including the process of obtaining consent, are discussed in detail in Section 4.6 Interview questions for psychologists and students were different, yet thematically related. Both sets of questions focused on language-related experiences within the psychological counselling environment. However, the questions were tailored to each group's role in the context: students were approached as clients and recipients of psychological support, while psychologists were engaged as service providers. Given the multilingual nature of the study setting and the linguistic diversity of the participants, the researcher began each interview by disclosing their own linguistic background and repertoire. This was a strategic step aimed at building rapport, encouraging trust, and creating a safe space where participants felt comfortable expressing themselves in their preferred languages or switching fluidly between them. The interviews were designed to last approximately 30 to 40 minutes. However, the actual duration varied depending on several factors: the participant's willingness to share, their schedule, and the researcher's ability

to prompt further elaboration. According to Seidman (2006), the length of an interview does not necessarily determine the richness or depth of the data collected. In this study, although the longest interview lasted 32 minutes and 8 seconds, all interviews provided rich, meaningful insights that were sufficient to meet the objectives of the research. The interview recordings were stored and encrypted in the researcher's Google Drive, which was secured through two-factor authentication and accessible only to the researcher. All recordings were later transcribed for analysis. In cases where interviews were conducted in isiXhosa, the researcher translated them into English. Given that the researcher is a first-language isiXhosa speaker with formal training in translation studies, the translation process was carried out with care and accuracy, ensuring that meaning and context were preserved throughout.

4.5 Data analysis

Since IPA requires an in-depth analysis, the researcher listened to the recordings and read the transcripts multiple times, focusing on each participant's experience individually. Each review provided new insights, making it an iterative process, this is the IPA principle of hermeneutics discussed above. Once transcription was complete, the researcher moved on to writing exploratory comments, a key step in IPA analysis. This involved interpreting each participant's moments were also helpful when writing the analysis chapters. By carefully engaging with the data in this way, the researcher ensured that each participant's perspective was thoroughly understood and interpreted within the context of their experience. Below (Table 4.1) is an example of how exploratory comments were done. The main interview questions (excluding probing and follow-up questions) were grouped into clusters based on their primary focus. After writing exploratory comments and notes for each transcript, the researcher identified and formulated themes for each cluster when relevant. Once all transcripts had exploratory notes and themes, the researcher then selected the most relevant themes that best captured participants' experiences. Renamed some themes to align them more closely with the study's objectives. At this stage, the goal was to transform the notes into emerging themes. The researcher was now working primarily with the notes, rather than the transcripts, to refine and structure the findings. The development of themes in the analysis is guided by the core concepts of CAT. Specifically, the themes are structured around CAT's key constructs—such as convergence, divergence, and maintenance—to examine

how language accommodation (or lack thereof) manifests in students' and psychologists' accounts of counselling interactions. This approach ensures that the thematic analysis remains grounded in the theoretical framework of the study.

It is important to note that the excerpts from interview transcripts used in the analysis are presented verbatim, meaning they are inserted exactly as spoken by the participants, without correcting grammar or sentence structure. This approach, known as verbatim transcription, is commonly used in qualitative research to preserve the authenticity, tone, and natural flow of participants' speech, which may carry significant meaning in itself (Poland, 1995).

Below is an example of how the process of writing exploratory comments and themes was done, taken from Student Participant 1.

Table 4.1 Exploratory Comments

Original Transcript	Exploratory Comments	Emerging Themes
<p>Cluster 1: Language Related Schooling Experience</p> <p>Interviewer: Ooh..Interesting.. So, can you please just take me through your language practices at school? The language that was used for teaching and learning and the language that you use at home when you communicate with your family, with your</p>		

<p>friends, and the language that you actually chose as a home language or mother tongue at school. If you could just take us through that.</p> <p>Participant: Okay, I come from parts of Gauteng where, I don't want to say rural, but almost rural because it's remote or township-like. So, the options that we did have was not as much in terms of schools that you can access. And, like, entering the next town is, like, quite a distance. So, it's not even an option to consider the next town. So, the schools that we had options for were about four in our provision, and one was an Afrikaans school, two were English medium schools, and one was a, yeah, another one was an Afrikaans, so it's two Afrikaans and English medium school. So, I</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights the limited access to schools offering diverse linguistic options. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited options for language use in formal education
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<p>basically was in an English medium school as my home language.</p> <p>Interviewer: Oh, okay. So, both from primary until secondary?</p> <p>Participant: From grade one to grade 12, same school.</p> <p>Interviewer: Oh, wow. So, English was the home language.</p> <p>Participant: The home language.</p> <p>Interviewer: Did you have any additional languages that you took?</p> <p>Participant: Afrikaans was the additional language. So, there were none of my home</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English as the medium of instruction despite their personal or familial linguistic practices. • English Home-Language at school & Afrikaans as an additional language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences in Mother Tongue and school Home-language
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<p>languages. They were all new languages that I had to learn and adapt from grade-one.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The participant had no formal learning of African languages. 	
<p>Cluster 2: Family Linguistic Dynamics</p> <p>Interviewer: Oh, so which language do you then use at home to communicate?</p> <p>Participant: We communicate, okay, that's also the tricky part. I feel like because we are such a diverse nation, and, like, really being into our languages is not as easy, especially in urban areas, because we are so mixed. So, I come from a home where my dad is Pedi, and my mom is Zulu. But the language we use at home is Zulu. My dad is Pedi, but he just accommodates all of us, so it's basically a norm now. But I can speak both.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Living in a diverse linguistic environment influences one's linguistic repertoire Family language planning/dynamics: The participant describes a linguistically mixed home, where Zulu is predominantly used despite their father's Sepedi background. This dynamic reveals an adaptive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “By the order of things”: Prioritization of traditional linguistic hierarchies vs Communication.

Interviewer: Would you say that you are proficient in both writing and speaking?

Participant: Yes, I'm proficient in both writing, speaking, and articulating.

Interviewer: Not that you have to choose but which one do you personally consider as your mother tongue?

Participant: By the order of things, it's supposed to be Sepedi.

Interviewer: You mean "by the order of things" because your dad is Pedi?

Participant: But the language we speak at home is not that

and accommodating family structure that prioritizes communication over strict adherence to traditional linguistic hierarchies.

The phrase "by the order of things" underscores a perceived traditional or societal expectation that the father's language should dictate the mother tongue. This suggests a cultural or patriarchal norm influencing

	<p>the participant's perception of linguistic identity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Her acknowledgment that "it's supposed to be Sepedi" but that Zulu dominates in daily life reveals a negotiation between inherited cultural identity and practical, lived language use. 	
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Since this was the researcher’s first time using IPA as a methodology, they chose to analyze the data manually instead of using research analysis software. This decision was made to:

- Gain hands-on experience with IPA.
- Fully immerse in the research process.
- Engage deeply with the data without relying on automated tools.

By manually analyzing the data, the researcher was able to closely interact with each transcript, explore patterns thoroughly, and develop a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Rhodes University. The study was reviewed and approved in accordance with institutional ethical standards. (Refer to Appendix 5 for the Ethics Approval Certificate). For this study, ethical considerations were upheld throughout the entire research process—not only through the formal application for ethical clearance, but also in the researcher’s continuous commitment to protecting participant well-being and confidentiality. Given the nature of the study, which involved individuals who were possibly in or had previously been in a vulnerable state due to mental health concerns, it was crucial for the researcher to act ethically at all stages. Although this research does not focus on the clinical content of what patients share with psychologists, it fully adheres to the

ethical principles governing psychological practice and research. These include the HPCSA Ethics Guidelines, the National Health Act No. 61 of 2003, and the Rhodes University Research Ethics Policy: Involving Human Participants. The National Health Act affirms that all patients have the right to confidentiality, aligning with the constitutional right to privacy as stated in the South African Constitution (Act No. 108 of 1996). In accordance with the HPCSA Ethics Guidelines, when researchers or healthcare professionals are required to share or analyse patient-related data, such data must be anonymised when de-identified information sufficiently meets the purpose of the study. As such, all participants were clearly informed that the research focused exclusively on language-related aspects of their experiences, rather than the therapeutic content of their sessions. However, in one exceptional case, a participant voluntarily shared detailed and sensitive information related to their session and reasons for seeking counselling—some of which was not directly relevant to the focus of the study.

To uphold ethical integrity and protect the identity of the participant, the researcher excluded this information from the transcript and subsequent analysis. This decision ensured that the participant could not be easily identified and that their right to confidentiality and psychological safety was preserved. To protect participants' identities and foster an environment of trust and psychological safety, anonymity was maintained throughout the study. Participants were assigned codes, such as Student Participant 1 or Psychologist Participant 1, to ensure their identities remained confidential in both transcripts and the final reporting of findings.

Consent was obtained in two folds. The first involved consent to participate in the study, and the second involved consent to be audio-recorded during the interviews. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, information and consent letters were sent to all participants. These documents clearly outlined the purpose of the study, what participation would involve, potential risks and benefits, and participants' rights—including the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions for clarity before providing informed, voluntary consent for both participation and recording. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2017), ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research is closely tied to the ethical conduct of the study.

One key ethical and methodological practice in IPA is bracketing—a process through which the researcher actively identifies, reflects on, and sets aside their own assumptions, beliefs, and prior

experiences that might influence the interpretation of participants' narratives. This is what other scholars, such as Bourke (2014) and Berger (2015), refer to as positionality—the idea that a researcher's identity, background, and social location inevitably shape the research process. Recognising one's positionality involves being reflexive about how factors such as race, language, gender, class, or institutional affiliation may influence interactions with participants, data interpretation, and overall knowledge production. In this study, acknowledging positionality was essential, particularly given the researcher's familiarity with the institutional context and shared linguistic background with some participants.

While bracketing is an important part of IPA, scholars such as Moustakas (1994) and Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012) acknowledge that it is nearly impossible for researchers to completely set aside their own beliefs and biases. However, they emphasise that bracketing requires deliberate effort, self-awareness, and continuous reflection to minimise the influence of preconceived ideas (Moustakas, 1994). As Moustakas (1994, p. 90) states, this process demands "energy and attention, reflection and self-dialogue, to reduce the influence of preconceived thoughts, judgments, and biases." As a researcher, to help maintain objectivity and ensure that I viewed the participants' experiences from their perspective rather than my own, I first identified and listed my own assumptions and preconceptions about this topic. This reflective process allowed me to remain aware of potential biases throughout the research and focus on understanding the participants' lived experiences as authentically as possible.

One of my key presuppositions was that I considered myself an insider in this study. I, too, am a student at Rhodes University. I speak one of South Africa's official African languages (isiXhosa) as my Mother Tongue, and English is my second language. I have also personally accessed the university's counselling services, which made me feel that I might relate to some of the participants' experiences. I initially saw this as a strength, but I soon realised that it could also bias my interpretation if I was not careful. To manage this, I had to adopt a mindset of *tabula rasa*—an open approach—as I moved into the role of a researcher, rather than a participant. I use *tabula rasa* mindset as a metaphor for epistemic humility—a conscious effort to listen attentively and let participants' voices guide the direction of the inquiry. This approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm that underpins the study, which values subjectivity, reflexivity, and the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the researched.

Before beginning each interview, I chose to disclose my linguistic background and identity to participants. This was done to help build rapport, to allow them to feel comfortable enough to share their own linguistic experiences without fear of judgement, and to show that code-mixing was welcomed in the interview space. Additionally, given my academic background in Language Policy and Planning, I held certain beliefs about the dominance of English in higher education institutions and the impact of language policy on access to services such as psychological counselling. I was already aware of the structural challenges posed by English-dominant policies in multilingual university contexts. However, I recognised that this prior knowledge could lead me to expect certain responses from participants or over-emphasise language barriers in the data. To minimise this, I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process. I used this journal to document my reactions to interviews, my thoughts during analysis, and any shifts in perspective that emerged. This practice helped me remain in constant dialogue with my presuppositions, and allowed me to consciously set them aside where necessary, so I could prioritise the lived experiences of participants.

4.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented a comprehensive overview of the research methodology employed in this study. By adopting a qualitative design rooted in IPA, the study has sought to capture the depth and complexity of students' lived experiences in counselling sessions within a multilingual higher education context. The chapter has outlined the rationale for participant selection and the data collection and analysis processes, demonstrating how students' narratives were interpreted through a structured analytical lens to uncover the nuanced ways in which language mediates their counselling experiences. Finally, the chapter has emphasised the ethical protocols adhered to throughout the research process, ensuring the integrity of the study and the protection of participants. Together, these methodological choices provide a robust framework for exploring the intersection of language, identity, and psychological support in South African higher education. The data that was obtained within the methodological framework outlined in this chapter is presented in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER FIVE

COMPLEX LINGUISTIC DYNAMICS AND INFLUENCES IN STUDENT COUNSELLING

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of the two data analysis and presentation chapters, the other being Chapter 6. This chapter presents and analyses the qualitative data generated from student interviews, focusing on objective 1 of the study: to explore students' language preferences in the context of psychological support services in a multilingual university context. It also seeks to address the first research question: How do students describe their language-related experiences and perceptions of accessing psychological counselling within the current institutional structures, cultures, and language practices? While this chapter provides initial insights, the research question will be substantially addressed in Chapter 6. As established in the literature review, language is not merely a vehicle for communication but also a powerful medium through which identity, cultural worldviews, and emotional expression are shaped and conveyed (Swartz, 2006; Kessi & Booyen, 2021). In the South African higher education context—particularly at historically white institutions—linguistic inequalities continue to shape student experiences despite the country's progressive language policies (Heugh, 2009; Madiba, 2010). Foregrounding students' linguistic backgrounds and preferences, this chapter aims to uncover how language functions as both a bridge and a barrier in their experiences of psychological support. The chapter begins by examining the participants' diverse and complex linguistic repertoires, shaped by home environments, schooling, and broader socialisation processes. It then explores how these repertoires inform their language preferences when seeking psychological counselling. This analysis is critical to understanding whether current institutional practices affirm or marginalise students' linguistic identities, and how this, in turn, influences their willingness to engage with support services. In doing so, the chapter contributes to the broader aims of this study: to interrogate the role of language in student well-being, and to inform more inclusive and culturally responsive psychological support in multilingual university contexts.

As noted in Section 4.5, the main interview questions (excluding probing and follow-up questions) were organised into clusters according to their central focus. The structure of the analysis is organised around clusters derived from the main interview questions, each corresponding to a specific area of focus in the study. For clarity and coherence, each cluster is presented under a dedicated section heading, followed by subsections that explore the key themes that emerged within that cluster.

5.2 Complex Linguistic Dynamics

Although the participants come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, they share a common characteristic: their Mother Tongue is one of South Africa's official African languages. This commonality provides a valuable lens through which to examine their linguistic experiences and the factors influencing their language choices in counselling settings. The recurring themes from this cluster varied based on the official LoLT in schools attended, whether the institution was public or private, and the linguistic dynamics within their home environments. While all participants were enrolled in schools where English was the prescribed LoLT in official policy documentation, there were notable differences in its practical implementation. Participants from private schools were immersed in English as the primary medium of instruction across all subjects, with the exception of additional language subjects. In contrast, those who attended public schools experienced a different approach. English was primarily reserved for assessments and English language classes, whereas an African language—typically their Mother Tongue—was the dominant medium for teaching, learning, and classroom interactions for all other subjects.

5.2.1 Differences between the School Home Language and the Mother Tongue

There is a discernible trend of differences between language use at home and at school among the five participants who attended private schools where English was the primary language of instruction. While the participants' Mother Tongue, an African language, is utilised as their primary language of communication with their families at home and, in rare cases, as an extra language at school, English is taught as Home Language subject and used as the LoLT across the other subjects apart from Additional Language subjects, which include African languages.

Student Participant 1, a multilingual individual who identifies isiZulu as her Mother Tongue, comes from a linguistically mixed household where isiZulu is predominantly spoken, despite her father's Sepedi background. She reflects on this linguistic dynamic, stating:

So, I come from a home where my dad is Pedi, and my mom is Zulu. But the language we use at home is Zulu. My dad is Pedi, but he just accommodates all of us, so it's basically a norm now. But I can speak both.

Student Participant 1's multilingual family language dynamics reflect the linguistic practices common in many South African households, particularly in economically vibrant provinces such as Gauteng and the Western Cape. These provinces, which are major destinations for both internal and international migrants, are microcosms of the country's broader linguistic diversity. According to Statistics South Africa (2022), a census on cultural dynamics examined the main language spoken by individuals within households comprising two or more people. When different languages are spoken by household members, such a household is classified as multilingual. Gauteng and the Western Cape recorded the highest proportions of multilingual households compared to other provinces, further underscoring their status as linguistically diverse regions.

At the beginning of the interview, when asked which language she identifies as her Mother Tongue, she responds, "[b]y the order of things, it's supposed to be Sepedi." However, as the interview progresses, she reflects on her everyday language use and eventually concludes, "I should actually name that (isiZulu) as a home language because I prefer talking in that language." This linguistic shift highlights a fluid and evolving understanding of Mother Tongue, shaped not only by heritage but by lived experience and practical language use. It also points to an adaptive and accommodating family structure that prioritizes communication over rigid linguistic expectations. Importantly, her reflection reveals that isiZulu is, in fact, the language of her mother and the one most used in her home environment—thus aligning with what may be considered her 'real' Mother Tongue. This insight challenges patriarchal norms of language inheritance and underscores an adaptive and inclusive family structure that prioritizes meaningful communication over rigid, inherited linguistic expectations. It also points to the importance of recognising the complex, dynamic nature of language identities, particularly in multilingual and multicultural

contexts such as South Africa. The phrase "by the order of things" suggests an awareness of societal or cultural norms that traditionally ascribe paternal lineage as a determinant of cultural identities, including language as an identity marker. This aligns with research on linguistic patriarchy, where the father's language is often expected to be dominant in intergenerational transmission (Kamwangamalu, 2000; Pauwels, 2016). The participant's initial assertion that "it's supposed to be Sepedi" followed by a realization that isiZulu is the dominant language in her daily life reflects an ongoing negotiation between inherited linguistic identity and practical language use. This resonates with scholarship on language shift and identity construction, which argues that language choice is often shaped by lived experiences rather than static cultural expectations (Weber & Horner, 2012).

She further explained that, despite being multilingual and regularly speaking both isiZulu and Sepedi at home, she never had the opportunity to study any African languages in school because they were not part of her school's curriculum. Instead, English was designated as the Home Language in her schooling environment. Reflecting on this, she stated:

I basically was in an English medium school where English was my Home Language... there were none of my home languages (referring to Mother Tongue). They were all new languages that I had to learn and adapt from grade one.

Student participant 4, a multilingual student who identifies as Xhosa, shares a similar experience. Although isiXhosa is the primary language of communication in her home, her schooling experience was also shaped by an English-medium education system. However, unlike other students who had no access to their Mother Tongue in school, the participant attended a primary school that offered three compulsory languages: Afrikaans, English, and isiXhosa.

So, throughout my school career, right, I went to English home-language schools, right? And so, all of them, every school that I've ever gone to has used English as a Home Language, so we didn't get a choice on which language you got to choose as a Home Language was straight English, and then you only, in primary school, you didn't get a choice between isiXhosa and Afrikaans. You did both from grade one, and you did both up to grade seven, and it's only in grade eight (secondary school) where you got to choose whether or not you wanted to go to isiXhosa or Afrikaans. And the one I chose was Afrikaans as a First Additional Language, yeah.

In secondary school, students had the choice to pick between Afrikaans and isiXhosa as additional languages. The participant's parental influence led her to select Afrikaans over isiXhosa as an additional language. The parental reasoning for choosing Afrikaans "you speak isiXhosa at home" reflects a broader societal discourse around language hierarchy and the perceived value of different languages in South African education (Msila, 2014; Makwakwa, 2019). The use of repetition e.g., "English as a Home Language," or "at home" reinforces the participant's effort to delineate a clear difference between school and home-language practices. Reflecting on this, she stated:

Mostly it was because of my parents because *bathi isiXhosa ndiyasithetha endlini enza i-Afrikaans* (they said I speak isiXhosa at home, therefore I should study Afrikaans at school).

Parental involvement is a key principle emphasized in the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996, which grants significant authority to parents in matters concerning school governance—particularly in relation to language policy. Through their representation on School Governing Bodies (SGBs), parents are empowered to influence decisions around the choice of language(s) of learning and teaching, including the selection of additional languages for their children (Department of Education [DoE], 1996). However, language choice is often shaped by broader socio-political and historical factors. Krashen (1996) observes that globally, when given the choice, parents tend to opt for languages of perceived 'higher status'. In the South African context, this typically translates into a preference for English and Afrikaans—languages historically and

currently associated with socio-economic mobility, prestige, and access to opportunity—often at the expense of African languages. This tendency reflects the residual influence of colonial and apartheid-era language hierarchies, where African languages were systematically marginalised. Makwakwa’s (2019) study further highlights the internalised linguistic hierarchies among parents. While many parents identify with their home languages and use them in informal settings, they often do not perceive them as having practical, instrumental value—particularly in domains such as education, government, or employment. As a result, there is a reluctance to promote or pass these languages on to their children in formal educational contexts.

On the other hand, students who attended public schools reported a different linguistic experience. They indicated that their Mother Tongue, an African language, was used as the LoLT for most school subjects. This is the same language they would use to communicate with family and friends, reinforcing its role as both a social and academic language in their daily lives. However, despite being taught in an African language, they were still assessed in English. In this context, English was introduced as a subject, categorized as the FAL. Scholars such as Heugh (2009) and Probyn (2009) have criticised this practice, noting that assessing learners in a language to which they have limited exposure compromises both their academic performance and confidence (Antia, 2021; Banda, 2018; Sebolai & Mutakwa, 2024). It creates an inequitable learning environment that privileges English and marginalises the linguistic realities of the majority of learners. Moreover, challenges also arise from the educators’ side. Many teachers, particularly in rural or under-resourced schools, have limited proficiency in English, which affects their ability to teach the language effectively. Studies by Uys et al. (2007) and Banda (2010) reveal that some teachers resort to using African languages to teach English, inadvertently creating a hybrid or code-switched classroom environment. While this may provide temporary clarity for learners, it often reflects the educators’ own discomfort with English and contributes to inconsistencies in language acquisition and instruction.

Student Participant 3 comes from a predominantly monolingual educational background where Sepedi was the primary language of instruction for all subjects, including English. She recalls that even English lessons were taught through Sepedi, highlighting the strong reliance on the home language in the learning process. She reflected:

So, ever since I was born, I was raised in a home where we only spoke Sepedi, no English, no Ndebele, no nothing. And even in school, my Home Language was Sepedi, and I come from a very, I wouldn't say poor school, but I come from a village. So sometimes even when we were taught English, we were taught English in Sepedi anyway, because even in English class we would speak our own language, which is Sepedi. So, I've never had that thing of speaking English every now and then, it was a foreign concept.

Student Participant 9, a student who identifies as Xhosa, shares a similar experience of receiving education primarily in her Mother Tongue. She attended public schools for both primary and high school, where isiXhosa was the primary medium of instruction, and English was rarely spoken in daily interactions. Its use was largely restricted to designated English classes. She reflected on this experience, stating:

So... primary school and high school were public schools, of which most of the time we were taught in Xhosa, and then English was not something that was often spoken. So in higher secondary, when they tell us to go to the English class, we would speak English, but then in other classes, we speak Xhosa. But because we are Xhosa, we speak Xhosa even though they tell us to speak English. What we used to do was keep quiet and not talk instead of speaking English when they tell us to speak in English.

Two out of the three interviewed psychologists shared similar language experiences with the students. They indicated that their Mother Tongue, an African language, was the primary medium of instruction (LoLT) for most subjects during their early schooling years. This was also the language they predominantly used in personal interactions with family and friends. Psychologist 1 provided insight into their educational journey, stating:

During my primary school years, I attended a township school where English was introduced as a secondary language, while Setswana was the official language of instruction. Even subjects like Mathematics were taught in Setswana, depending on the linguistic context of the hometown. In my case, Setswana was the dominant language in my community. However, transitioning to high school brought a shift in language dynamics—Afrikaans became my Second Additional Language, English was my First Additional Language, and Setswana remained my Home Language.

Psychologist 2 explained that during her early primary school years, she was taught and learned in her Mother Tongue. However, as she progressed in her education, she transitioned to an English-medium school, where English became the primary language of instruction and Home Language.

So from grade-R to grade 3, I went to a school in the rural areas. And I mean, the first or the Home Language was isiZulu. And we were taught in isiZulu, I mean, all academic-related things.

We only speak English when you are in the English period. And even there, I mean, it's not like the teacher will speak English throughout the lesson. You're just taught to like translate words from Zulu to English. And then from grade four to grade seven, I moved to an Indian school. So there, the transition was quite hard, especially in terms of language. Because as I've said, I was from a school that is like dominantly, not even dominantly, was Zulu speaking. And now moving on to the school that speaks English, the Home Language is English. You are taught every subject in English.

This background equips these psychologists with what can be described as linguistic accommodation and sensitivity—key competency for effective psychological support in multilingual and multicultural settings (Swartz, 2006). Their ability to navigate between their Mother Tongue and English allows for more inclusive and empathetic counselling practices. practitioners who share a similar linguistic and cultural background with their clients are more

likely to foster a sense of belonging, safety, and trust in therapeutic settings (Swartz, 2006). Their dual ontologies—rooted in both African language communities and professional psychological training—allow them to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, thereby enhancing students’ access to meaningful and effective support. Moreover, their experiences reflect broader educational trends in South Africa where African languages are used as LoLT in the early years but are later replaced or overshadowed by English, particularly in assessments and higher education contexts (Probyn, 2009). This shift not only affects academic performance but can also impact self-perception and linguistic confidence—factors that are often central to counselling work with students navigating academic and personal pressures in a second language.

5.3 Language preference for psychological counselling

Both students and psychologists were then asked about their preferred languages for psychological counselling. The students’ choices were influenced by several factors, including their linguistic backgrounds, described in 5.2 above, their cultural identities, and the language in which they felt most comfortable expressing their emotions. Majority of students emphasized the importance of using a language that enables them to articulate their thoughts and feelings with depth and nuance, highlighting the connection between language, emotional expression, and psychological well-being. The psychologists were also asked about their preferred language for conducting counselling sessions and which language, based on their professional experience, students tend to prefer. Students’ language preferences are discussed in sub-section 5.3.1 below while those of psychologists follow in 5.3.2.

5.3.1 Students’ language preferences for psychological counselling

The following student participants (Table 5.1) prefer to use their Mother Tongue for psychological counselling. Their linguistic preferences are deeply influenced by their early educational background and family language dynamics, where their Mother Tongue was the dominant language of communication. Growing up in environments where their native languages were primarily spoken has shaped their linguistic identity and emotional expression, making their Mother Tongue the most comfortable and authentic medium for discussing personal and

psychological matters. When asked which language they would prefer for psychological counselling, these were their individual responses:

Table 5.1 Participants' Reflections

Student Participant	Original Transcript
Student Participant 3	I would say my language, which is Sepedi
Student Participant 9	I would prefer isiXhosa

Even though the following participants had English as the medium of instruction in the schools they attended and were exposed to multilingual social, educational, and family environments, they still preferred to speak their Mother Tongue for psychological counselling. This preference suggests that while they may be proficient in English, their emotional depth and authenticity of self-expression are more effectively accessed through their native language. When asked which language they would prefer for psychological counselling. These were their responses:

Table 5.2 Participants' Reflections

Student Participant	Original Transcript
Student Participant 1	I think my mother's, my home language, Zulu. At least, or the option to choose. I can, I have two. I would rather prefer Zulu because that's the one that we use the most. So, I should actually name that as a home language because I prefer talking in that language. In expressing my feelings, it would come easier. And I think it will maybe help my healing process faster if I'm in that psychological state of needing help.
Student Participant 8	It's Xhosa

However, it is notable that not all students prefer counselling in their Mother Tongue. While they may be in the minority, some students express a preference for English. Although these participants do not explicitly state a preference for English, they emphasize their greater comfort and proficiency in speaking English compared to isiXhosa.

Table 5.3 Participants' Reflections

Student Participant	Original Transcript
Student Participant 7	<p>I've never had issues speaking about mental health issues in a different language, which in my case is English. But I have problems expressing mental health issues in Xhosa.</p> <p>I was comfortable in the language that the counsellor or the therapist or psychologist used, which was English because that's also the language I understand and have no trouble in understanding generally.</p>
Student Participant 4	<p>I guess I also spoke English from a very young age. It's very much, I guess, another home language, so to speak. Even though I consider my home language to be isiXhosa it's very much sort of ingrained in that. So, I guess I've always been comfortable using it. Yeah. So, no, I didn't feel uncomfortable expressing myself in English.</p>

While participants identified single languages of preference for psychological counselling, it also emerged that some participants prefer linguistically flexible counselling sessions that permit shifting between their Mother Tongue and English without restriction. This can be seen for the responses below:

Table 5.4 Participants' Reflections

Student Participant	Original Transcript
Student Participant 6	<p>I wouldn't choose just one language to be honest with you, but I would prefer a person osaziyo isiXhosa. <i>Uyabona njeng'ba mna nawe sithetha kanje?</i> this is how I speak on a daily basis. Yeah. I mix English and isiXhosa so it's nice to have someone who also understand English and also understands Xhosa because sometimes maybe I might not be able to express myself, but I mix the languages.</p> <p>Xhosa part translated to English</p> <p>Do you see how me and you speak now?</p>

Student Participant 5

Code-switching is definitely an option. Because I can be comfortable using Xitsonga, Sepedi, any English sometimes. So, I'll be searching whether I want to move to Vernac, and I will feel more comfortable speaking in Vernac. And then they're searching whether I want to speak in English. So, I think code-switching should be an option that is given to us. Because they feel kind of restricted to, like, you need to speak in English or it's wrong. So, I feel if they gave you that option of you can code-switch or you can use your home language, I think that would be a better option for some people.

The above datasets demonstrate that linguistic background significantly influences students' language preferences for psychological counselling. Students whose linguistic backgrounds are rooted in mother-tongue use as their primary mode of communication tend to prefer their Mother Tongue in counselling sessions. This reflects a desire for convergence, where students hope the psychologist will adjust their communicative style to accommodate the student's linguistic

preference, thereby reducing social distance and enhancing therapeutic connection (Giles et al., 1991). Those who have been exposed to English from an early age often prefer English for counselling, referring to it as their "second home language." This preference can be seen as a form of maintenance, where individuals sustain their usual language use without necessarily expecting the other party to accommodate. In this case, students do not require the psychologist to shift linguistic codes because they already feel comfortable in the dominant institutional language.

However, the data also highlights that linguistic background is not the sole determining factor in language preference for counselling. Emotional expression and cultural identity also play a critical role. While some students share similar linguistic backgrounds, their language preferences for counselling still differ. This variation aligns with what Grosjean (2012) describes as the "Complementarity Principle," which suggests that "multilinguals use different languages depending on the context, interlocutors, and purpose" (Grosjean 2012, as cited in Dewaele et. 2021). In the context of counselling, this means that even if two individuals have a shared linguistic background, one might prefer English due to their academic training, while another might choose their Mother Tongue because it allows for deeper emotional expression. That is why, in psychological counselling, the concept of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to language use is ineffective due to linguistic individual differences. Psychological counselling is inherently client-centered, meaning that language use should be individualized to align with the client's linguistic background, emotional needs, and cultural identity. Grosjean (2012) argues that, multilingual individuals do not have a fixed preference for one language across all contexts; instead, their choice of language varies depending on factors such as emotional expression, comfort level, and prior exposure to certain languages in professional or educational settings (Grosjean, 2012). Therefore, for counselling to be effective, practitioners need to assess and accommodate each client's unique linguistic and cultural needs, rather than assuming that a single language—such as English—will work for all clients.

5.3.2 Psychologists' language preference in counselling

When discussing personal language preferences for psychological practice, all psychologists indicated a strong preference for English. This preference reflects a form of maintenance within

CAT, where individuals continue using their habitual linguistic code (in this case, English) without modifying it to accommodate others. This preference was largely attributed to their academic training, where psychology is predominantly taught in English. They referred to English as the "theory language," emphasizing that psychological concepts, frameworks, and terminologies are rooted in English, making it the default language for professional practice. One psychologist explained:

It's English. Yeah, because you draw from theory. So theory, sometimes it's easier to use the theory language. You can go to levels of breaking it down, but you can imagine it's quite important to stick with the theory from the theory perspective.

Additionally, while their psychology curriculum included some "hints" of cultural sensitivity, they noted that the use of African languages in psychological practice was not widely explored. One participant highlighted that certain courses touched on the need for an African-centered approach but did not integrate African languages into the training.

African psychology and community psych do hint at the need for understanding and valuing an African-centered approach, but the use of African languages in practice is not deeply explored.

This linguistic preference cannot be viewed as a neutral choice; it is deeply embedded in broader questions of epistemology and professional identity. The psychologists' professional ontologies—the ways in which they have come to "know" and perform psychology—are shaped by a monolingual curriculum that privileges Western theories and English-medium instruction. This alignment with English as the sole or primary professional language risks producing practitioners who are less attuned to the sociolinguistic realities of their clients, particularly those from African language-speaking backgrounds.

This raises serious concerns about the responsiveness of psychological services in multilingual contexts like South Africa. While English may facilitate engagement with academic knowledge, its dominance can lead to what may be termed "epistemic rigidity"—a form of professional

practice that leans heavily on textbook definitions and diagnostic categories, often at the expense of contextual, culturally grounded understanding (Ratele, 2016; Fanon, 1963). In such cases, there is a danger that psychologists may overlook the nuanced, lived experiences of clients because these do not easily map onto the conceptual frameworks they were trained in. As researchers like Swartz (2006) and Duncan (2018) have argued, client-centred practice in South Africa must involve more than empathy; it requires linguistic convergence, epistemic humility, and contextual literacy—the ability to “read the room” beyond the textbook, and to recognise how language, culture, and socio-economic histories shape the client’s experience of distress and healing.

On the other hand, one psychologist expressed a preference for both English and her Mother Tongue, isiZulu. She emphasized the importance of being *“person-sensitive”* and adapting to the client's linguistic needs.

I'll say a bit of both English and isiZulu. I think it's also dependent on the client, and I like to be person-sensitive in terms of what the client needs. So if the client wants a session to be conducted in isiZulu, I would prefer that. But if it's up to me, I'd choose a bit of both.

Her bilingual preference was influenced by her education at the university she attended where the curriculum actively incorporated African languages and IKS. She explained that the university promoted linguistic inclusivity by allowing lecturers to translate learning materials between isiZulu and English, ensuring that students engaged with psychological concepts in both languages.

So even at ... [anonymous university], they're very flexible in terms of language. They do accommodate both English and IsiZulu, and some lecturers translate learning materials from isiZulu to English.

She further highlighted that the university prioritizes an African-centered approach to mental health, exposing students to IKS and emphasizing linguistic competence in diverse cultural

contexts. This perspective points to the significance of institutional recognition and integration of dual ontologies—that is, the co-existence of professional identity shaped by formal, often Westernised, psychological training and the personal, community-based knowledge systems embedded in African languages and cultures. When curricula and training programmes acknowledge and incorporate these dual realities, they create space for developing more holistic and adaptable practitioners. The example of this psychologist illustrates the potential outcomes of such recognition: the emergence of “person-sensitive” psychologists who are not only technically competent but also attuned to the sociolinguistic and cultural realities of their clients. These professionals are more likely to engage in linguistic convergence, code-mixing where appropriate, and culturally resonant modes of communication—practices that can significantly enhance the counselling alliance and overall efficacy of psychological services (Duncan, 2018; Swartz, 2006). The psychologist reflected:

I must say, ... [anonymous university] has this as part of their vision—to include African psychology and Indigenous ways of understanding mental health. From undergrad, we were exposed to these African systems and how mental health is understood from an indigenous perspective. So I was really exposed to that, along with the inclusion of language, to become more competent as a psychologist in a diverse country like ours.

This dataset highlights the profound impact of the psychology curriculum structure and the language of instruction on how psychology students later approach language use in practice. Psychologists trained in an English-dominated curriculum tend to prefer English in their professional practice, as psychological theories and frameworks were primarily taught in English. This reinforces the argument by Pillay and Peterson (1996) that although many psychology students express interest in learning an African language, few graduate with sufficient proficiency to conduct consultations in one. This is possibly true to graduates of other academic and professional disciplines, affirming Kaschula and Maseko’s (2012) observing that South African universities continue to produce professionals who are incompetent enough to satisfy the needs of the country’s linguistically diverse population.

5.4 Language negotiation in psychological counselling

Having established the language preferences of both students and psychologists, the purpose of this section is to determine whether the language preferences of students were actively negotiated during psychological counselling. The data suggest that language choice was seldom addressed explicitly at the start of counselling; rather, it emerged *ad hoc*—often only after signs of communicative strain became apparent. Psychologists reported that they raised the possibility of switching languages only when they sensed “linguistic discomfort” on the part of the student.

All student participants unanimously reported that they had not encountered any explicit language negotiation during their initial admission for psychological counselling or in their interactions with assigned psychologists. This suggests that linguistic considerations were not systematically embedded into the initial stages of counselling. The students’ individual responses to the question of whether language was negotiated during the admission process or during interactions with the assigned psychologists were as follows:

Table 5.5

Student Participant	Original Transcript
Student Participant 8	<p>I don't think it was anything language-related on the form,</p> <p>because I think had there been one, I was definitely going to need Xhosa or Zulu speaking,</p> <p>because then it would have been easier for me. I think she just assumed that I'd be comfortable with English.</p>
Student Participant 4	<p>I think it was just, like, assumed, like, the default language</p> <p>that everyone speaks, I guess, is English. And, yeah, no, it wasn't discussed. I don't even remember seeing it in the form. Like, there was nothing about language there. It was just, like, in English, and you had to, like, and I guess I just accepted that we were just going to do the counselling sessions in English.</p>
Student Participant 5	<p>When I was there, they just were asking me, okay, can you fill in this form? It's in English, obviously, I'm a student. I was able to fill it in. There was no option when they said you want to speak to someone who speaks your Mother Tongue.</p>

On the other hand, psychologists believe that language negotiation occurs in the admission of students in counselling, even though it is not formalised.

Table 5.6

Psychologist Participant	Original Transcript
Psychologist 1	Definitely, in my experience, yes, it is, it is negotiated.
Psychologist 2	...from my side, no negotiation is formalized, and depending on how press the person feels, if they are feeling so pressed at some instances it'll just be a casual.
Psychologist 3	I don't often like communicate that beforehand. It's only when I see that the student is maybe struggling to express how they're feeling, or maybe their experiences, then that's when I would, I mean, ask or probe on that.

The researcher observed that, despite the absence of an explicit, structured negotiation process, psychologists and students employed adaptive informal language negotiation strategies to accommodate students' linguistic needs. Such strategies could be understood within the framework of CAT (Giles, 2016), which emphasizes the ways in which interlocutors adjust their language to enhance comprehension and rapport. These are presented in the subsections below.

5.4.1 Contextual and cultural cues

Some student participants reported relying on contextual and cultural cues—such as the psychologist’s name, geographic location, and accent—to assess the psychologist's linguistic compatibility. The students used these indicators to pre-emptively assess the possibility of linguistic convergence, to gauge whether the psychologist would be able to understand them if they chose to speak in an African language.

Student participant 5 describes her experience with a Tswana psychologist where she was able to switch between Sepedi her mother-tongue and Setswana, the psychologist’s Mother Tongue due to the similarities between these two languages. She reflected:

He was Tswana, so sometimes I would switch to Tswana, because Tswana and Pedi, it's nearly the same

When asked how she knew that the psychologist could speak Setswana, this was her response:

I think I could tell by his name, and when I would speak in my language, he would understand, even though we didn't really negotiate, which, okay, you can speak your language, that's fine, I can understand.

Student participant 6 notes that language preference was not explicitly addressed during the counselling process. Her first experience involved a white English-speaking psychologist where no language-related considerations were made, while their second experience with a black psychologist allowed for code-switching and linguistic flexibility because they were both isiXhosa speakers. She reflected:

No, it was not negotiated, especially with the first one. The first time I went, it was a white lady, obviously. So there wasn't a form, it was just like come to the date of your consultation, and then we will proceed. But then the second time, still, there was no formal writing, you can choose a language, but because it was a black lady, it just flows, you just mix languages.

When asked how she knew that the psychologist could speak isiXhosa this was her response:

I think it was just an assumption I made because we are in the Eastern Cape. *Yayingusisi onegama lesiXhosa*—it was a lady with a Xhosa name. I can't really remember her name, but I was like, I can relate. *Igama lakho*—your name tells me that you are a Nguni speaking person. So even if I speak isiXhosa and ungumZulu, you will understand me. So.. *yenzeka elohlobo wethu lonto*—that's how it happened. If I see a black person in the Eastern Cape, you bound to at least understand a conversation in isiXhosa.

Student participant 6 relied on contextual and cultural cues, such as the psychologist's name and geographical location (Eastern Cape), to determine linguistic compatibility. This experience highlights an expectation of convergence. When such convergence was achieved, the student reported increased comfort and cultural alignment, which enhanced the counselling relationship. She highlights that cultural understanding, often intertwined with language, played a significant role in the effectiveness of counselling. They contrast the cultural disconnect experienced with the first psychologist to the cultural and linguistic alignment with the second psychologist.

This reliance on non-verbal and socio-cultural cues suggests a lack of explicit language disclosure or negotiation in the counselling process. Instead of being directly informed about the linguistic options available, students were left to make assumptions based on surface-level characteristics. This approach may contribute to uncertainty or hesitation in using their preferred language, potentially impacting their level of comfort and engagement in counselling.

One student shared that after his initial encounter with a white English speaking psychologist, he requested either a translator or a different psychologist who could speak his Mother Tongue,

isiXhosa. However, his request for a translator was not accommodated, and he was instead told to wait for a week—despite the urgency of his case. Reflecting on his experience, he stated:

Ndade ndaya ke the next day ndadibana nomlungu phaya, I can't remember igama lakhe ngubani. So, ndayibona zisuka ukuba andizokwazi uyithetha lento ndifuna uyithetha ngelihlobo ndifuna uyithetha ngalo. So ndatsho kuye ukuba no ndicela an interpreter or someone else because andizokwazi uyithetha ngeEnglish. So watsho ukuba abekho abanye abantu ngoku, I must come back some other time ndabizwa I think a week later.

English Translation

I went there the next day and met with a white person there, I can't remember what their name was. So, when I saw them, I immediately realised that I wouldn't be able to say what I wanted to say in the way I wanted to say it, in the language I wanted to use. So I told them that I would like an interpreter or someone else because I wouldn't be able to express myself in English. They said that there was no one else available at that time and that I should come back another time. I was called back, I think, a week later.

Despite the institution's stated commitment to multilingualism, the failure to provide an interpreter or an isiXhosa-speaking psychologist in an urgent case reflects systemic implementation gaps in university language policies. This casts doubts about the institution's preparedness to provide an environment where "language is not a barrier to equity of access, opportunity, and success," as stated in its language policy. While English remains the primary language of communication, the institution commits to offering "translation and interpretation into isiXhosa and Afrikaans for students and staff where necessary and feasible" (Rhodes University Language Policy, 2019). However, based on the student's experience, this commitment was not upheld.

This implementation challenge can be attributed to the retention of limitation clauses such as "where practicable," "where feasible," and "subject to availability," which perpetuate a lack of accountability and commitment to proper implementation. Similar to national policy frameworks—particularly the 1996 Constitution—institutional policies often include limitation clauses such as “where possible” and “where practicable,” which ultimately allow institutions to

evade their responsibilities regarding the use and development of African languages (Cele, 2021; Rhodes University Language Group Transformation Summit Report, 2018). The Language Group Transformation Summit Report (2018) argues that such clauses are often strategically included to protect universities from potential legal consequences arising from non-implementation. In this way, institutions appear to commit to multilingualism on paper, while simultaneously creating loopholes that enable them to prioritize English and sidestep their obligations to promote African languages in practice.

5.5 Chapter summary

This chapter presented and analysed qualitative data from participants' interviews, aligning with Objective 3 of the study: to explore students' language preferences in the context of psychological support services. The findings illuminated the diverse and complex linguistic repertoires of both students and psychologists' participants, shaped by their home environment language practices, the LoLT in their schooling and professional training, and whether they attended public or private schools. These contextual factors played a significant role in influencing how participants construct and articulate their linguistic identities and ultimately their preferred language to use for psychological counselling. The chapter revealed that students' preferences for psychological counselling were informed not only by their language proficiency but also by their cultural identities and the emotional significance of particular languages. All participating psychologists indicated a preference for conducting therapy in English with an exception of one with a bilingual preference (English and isiZulu). For psychologists, these preferences were attributed to their professional training. The chapters also highlighted a significant mismatch between students' stated language preferences and how psychologists perceive those preferences. While student participants predominantly expressed a preference for using their Mother Tongue during psychological counselling, psychologists reported a contrasting view based on their professional experiences—believing that students generally prefer to communicate in English. This dissonance suggests a possible misinterpretation or under-recognition of students' actual linguistic needs and preferences, which may impact the quality and accessibility of the support provided. The next chapter continues with the presentation and analysis of data, now turning to objectives 2,3, & 4.

CHAPTER SIX

LINGUISTIC, CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL ISSUES IN STUDENT PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING

6.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses three objectives of this study. It also seeks to answer three key research questions of the study: (1) How do students describe their language-related experiences and perceptions of accessing psychological counselling within the current institutional structures, cultures, and language practices?; (2) How does the Rhodes University Language Policy influence the implementation of multilingual support in student psychological services?; and (3) How is the psychology curriculum and training perceived to prepare professional psychologists for practice in a multilingual and culturally diverse society? This chapter offers an in-depth engagement with participants' narratives in relation to these questions. Firstly, it seeks to explore the linguistic challenges in psychological counselling faced by students who speak African languages as their Mother Tongue at a historically white English university (Objective 2), and how psychologists navigate and respond to these linguistic challenges in their counselling practices within the institution. This analysis draws on the theoretical lens of the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), introduced in Chapter 3, by examining how convergence, divergence, and maintenance operate—not only as communicative choices and strategies but also as outcomes of language negotiation within the counselling encounter. Secondly, the chapter critically engages with higher education language policies, using Rhodes University's as a case study, to interrogate how institutional language frameworks shape, limit, or facilitate multilingual practice within student psychological services (Objective 3). Thirdly, the study aims to explore how the Psychology curriculum and training in South Africa prepares psychologists to work effectively with linguistically diverse clients. (Objective 4). Through this threefold focus, the chapter provides a grounded discussion of the intersection between language policy, communicative practice, and access to psychological support in a multilingual university context.

6.2 Student psychological wellness from a language policy perspective

As noted in Chapter 1, Rhodes University is a Historically White University (HWU) with deep-rooted European cultural influences and English as its dominant language of communication. Under apartheid, it was among the institutions designated exclusively for the advancement of white South Africans, a legacy that has continued to shape its institutional culture and linguistic landscape in the post-apartheid era (Bantjes et al 2023). One of the most visible remnants of this history is the centrality of English in teaching and learning, which has often marginalized African languages and reinforced the prestige associated with English.

However, despite its historical context, the university has been one of the more proactive HWUs in South Africa in engaging with transformation efforts, particularly in the realm of language policy (Kaschula & Docrat, 2015). While not without its shortcomings, the institution has made notable strides in promoting multilingualism through its language policies. These efforts align with national and provincial policies, including the Higher Education Language Policy Framework and the Eastern Cape Language Policy for Higher Education Institutions, both of which advocate for the intellectualization and equitable use of African languages in academia. The university's current language policy designates English as the primary language of learning and teaching (LoLT) and the official medium for institutional communication. However, in alignment with its commitment to multilingualism, the university actively promotes the integration of other languages—particularly IsiXhosa and Afrikaans—to support learning through translanguaging pedagogies (see Magadla et al., 2024). This approach aims to create a more inclusive linguistic environment by leveraging students' full linguistic repertoires in the learning process.

However, a critical question that arises is why a multilingual policy explicitly names certain languages in a linguistically diverse institution. The answer lies in the geographical and sociolinguistic context of the university, as well as its alignment with the Eastern Cape Provincial Language Policy, which prioritizes the official languages of the province, namely: IsiXhosa, Afrikaans, Sesotho, and English. Nevertheless, this linguistic focus does not fully reflect the broader diversity within the university community, raising concerns about the exclusion of other African languages spoken by staff and students.

The university's institutional approach to the language question is shaped in part by the LPHE (2002), which emphasised the need for multilingualism in universities as a way to redress historical inequalities and promote equitable access. The 2002 LPHE provided the foundational policy vision for transforming the linguistic landscape of higher education institutions, urging them to move beyond English-only practices and embrace African languages as vehicles of knowledge (DoE, 2002). However, the revised 2020 version of the LPHE introduced a more ambiguous formulation. While it maintains that universities must develop language implementation plans that promote multilingualism, it limits this ambition by specifying that such plans should incorporate "at least two official languages" in addition to the primary LoLT. This phrasing arguably constrains the vision of linguistic inclusivity, potentially reinforcing hierarchical preferences for dominant regional languages and neglecting the broader diversity of the student body (Bamgbose, 2000; Madiba, 2014).

One of the most persistent challenges in language policy development is the gap between policy formulation and practical implementation. While multilingual policies are often well-articulated in official documents, they frequently lack clear implementation plans, and mechanisms for accountability—both at the national and institutional levels. Additionally, effective monitoring and evaluation remain significant hurdles in ensuring sustained policy enforcement. Despite those challenges, Rhodes University has made commendable strides in moving beyond mere documentation towards the active implementation of its language policy as part of broader institutional transformation efforts. Recognizing both the strategic importance of African languages and the demand from students, the university reintroduced IsiXhosa Mother Tongue courses in 2008, with a significant milestone reached in 2017 when the first Rhodes University PhD written in IsiXhosa was successfully completed and awarded by the institution (Magadla et al., 2024). Vocation-specific courses incorporating IsiXhosa have been developed in Journalism, Law, Education, and Pharmacy, with the Journalism module being made compulsory at both Mother Tongue and second-language levels (Rhodes University Language Group Transformation Summit Report, 2017). Furthering this transformation, the Faculty of Humanities has endorsed the submission of postgraduate theses in languages other than English, marking a significant shift towards linguistic inclusivity in academic discourse. Language has thus emerged as a visible marker of the Africanisation process at the university, which was historically one of the most

Eurocentric universities in South Africa (Rhodes University Language Group Transformation Summit Report, 2017).

Rhodes University prioritizes and acknowledges the critical role of African languages in facilitating access to knowledge, a concept that aligns with what Morrow (1994) defines as epistemic access, which refers to "access to the goods distributed by means of academic practice" (Morrow, 1994, p. 3). This form of access extends beyond mere physical entry into higher education institutions, emphasizing the necessity of ensuring that students can fully engage with and internalize academic content within an inclusive linguistic environment. In advancing epistemic access, Rhodes University has articulated its commitment to multilingualism through its Institutional Development Plan - 2023-2028 (IDP 2023). This strategic document explicitly states the university's objective to "develop an enabling multilingual environment in which African Languages can develop as languages of scholarship, research as well as teaching and learning and support student access and support" (IDP 2023:44). This vision aligns with the 2020 Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions, which mandates universities to actively work towards the intellectualization of African languages for academic and professional purposes.

However, it is crucial to recognize that student support services in higher education extend beyond academic instruction. While the primary function of universities is knowledge dissemination, they also provide a range of non-academic support structures that contribute to student success. Among these, psychological counselling services play a vital role in student well-being, a dimension often overlooked in discussions of language policy implementation. Soricone and Lisa (2014) emphasize that comprehensive student support structures in higher education must integrate academic advising, non-academic guidance, social services, and psychological counselling to foster holistic student development. Given this, discussions on linguistic inclusivity should not be confined to teaching and learning alone but must also extend to student support services, ensuring that all aspects of university life are linguistically accessible. Rhodes University's Language Policy (2019) proclaims a commitment to multilingualism, language equity, and "creating an environment where language is not a barrier to equity of access" (Rhodes University Language Policy, 2019). However, this stated commitment appears contradictory, as the policy simultaneously designates English as the "language of wider communication within the university" while only offering

translation and interpretation services into isiXhosa and Afrikaans "where necessary and feasible" (Rhodes University Language Policy, 2019). This inconsistency raises concerns about how linguistic barriers may impact access to psychological counselling services at the institution's Student Counselling Centre. Given that the psychologists at the Centre are university staff members, they are expected to adhere to the institution's language policy in practice. The implications of this will be explored further in the subsequent sections.

6.3 Language barriers in student psychological services

Eight student participants expressed experiencing language barriers during their psychological counselling sessions. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013), language barriers refer to any obstacles in communication that arise when the individuals involved do not share a common language or when one party has limited proficiency in the language used. These difficulties were largely attributed to a lack of language accommodation from the psychologists and to cultural clashes between the psychologists and students during counselling sessions. In the absence of meaningful efforts to acknowledge or integrate students' African language repertoires, English remained the dominant language of communication—creating a dynamic where many students felt out of place in sessions that were meant to offer emotional safety.

6.3.1 Linguistic anxiety

Student participants expressed experiencing a sense of fear and self-consciousness regarding their use of grammar and vocabulary during counselling sessions where English was the primary language of communication. This phenomenon, often referred to as linguistic anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), impacted their overall comfort and willingness to be vulnerable during psychological counselling. Student participant 5 recalls experiencing embarrassment during a counselling session due to uncertainty about the English word "sentimental." She hesitated, unsure whether the term accurately conveyed her intended meaning, which added to her discomfort. She reflected:

I wanted to say something that, like, as much as I'm not someone who's sentimental, I really didn't know what the word sentimental, where does it fit, but then I said it, and I was, like, quite embarrassed, because I don't know if I said the right words, considering the fact that I'm staying with people who know big English, and that's really hard sometimes.

This moment of linguistic uncertainty reflects the broader challenge of expressing complex personal experiences in a secondary language which in the participant's case is English, where doubts about word choice can disrupt the flow of communication and contribute to feelings of self-doubt or frustration in psychological counselling settings. Student participant 9 experiences persistent anxiety whenever she has to speak English during counselling sessions, worrying about whether her language use meets the perceived standard of "good English". She reflects:

During my counselling sessions, *xa ndithetha ngeEnglish andibikho* comfortable enough because *ndibanala fear yokuba* what if *andithethi esona silungu sifanelekileyo*. And then *esiXhoseni* its fine, *ndicomfortable* throughout, *ndicomfortable kakhulu esiXhoseni*.

English Translation

During my counselling sessions, when I speak in English, I am not comfortable enough because I have the fear of what if I don't speak an English that is acceptable and of good standard. And then in Xhosa it's fine, I'm comfortable throughout, I'm very comfortable in Xhosa.

In contrast, she feels significantly more at ease when speaking IsiXhosa, her Mother Tongue, as it allows for a more natural and uninhibited expression of her thoughts and emotions. As she puts it:

I feel like for mna nhe, xa mhlambi ndiyakhumsha I feel like andiyithethi ngelihlobo ndifuna ukuyithetha ngalo what I am going through. Xa mhlambi ndiyithetha ngesiXhosa, I feel more comfortable. I am able to share ii-emotions zam unlike xa ndinantsika ngeEnglish.

English Translation

I feel like when I speak in English I don't articulate myself well the way I want. I feel more comfortable when I speak in Xhosa and I am able to share my emotions unlike when I speak English.

One psychologist acknowledged having observed students experiencing linguistic anxiety during counselling sessions, noting that, *“it is mostly them struggling with distress or fear—fearfully hesitant, struggling to avoid making mistakes while speaking with you.”*

Research has consistently shown that anxiety is one of the most prevalent mental health disorders among higher education students, with a significant number seeking psychological support for anxiety-related concerns (Auerbach et al., 2018; Lipson et al., 2019). The *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines anxiety as “an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness or worry about something that is happening or might happen in the future” (*Cambridge English Dictionary*). The concept of linguistic anxiety is not new, it “encompasses the feelings of worry, fear-related emotions associated with learning or using a language that is not an individual’s Mother Tongue” (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012, p. 103). Linguistic anxiety has traditionally been examined in the context of learning English as a second language (ESL) or using a second language for academic purposes (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). However, data from the present study

suggest that linguistic anxiety extends beyond the classroom into the psychological counselling environment, particularly when students are unable to express themselves in their most proficient and emotionally resonant language. This raises critical concerns, as counselling services are expected to be safe spaces for managing anxiety disorders. Yet, when language barriers are present, they may paradoxically become sources of additional stress and discomfort, creating another layer of anxiety rather than alleviating it.

6.3.2 Cognitive strain

Student participants who encountered language barriers during counselling sessions reported a mental challenge of frequently having to mentally translate their thoughts from their mother tongue into English before speaking. This process imposed a significant cognitive strain, shifting their focus from emotional healing to linguistic formulation. Student participant 1 reflects as follows:

I would say that because the barrier is because you're constantly thinking. You're not really addressing emotive parts of your healing if there is the issue there. Or you're not addressing behavioural issues if there are. Because you're constantly focusing on trying to make sense of, instead of letting your guard down. Because I feel like part of healing in psych is letting your guard down. Exactly. So, your guard is not down in another language.

They expressed having to *"constantly translate something from one language to another so that it makes sense to the psychologist."* Instead of fully immersing themselves in the counselling process and allowing themselves to be vulnerable, they found themselves preoccupied with structuring their speech, which hindered their ability to engage authentically in the counselling process. To illustrate the cognitive strain she experiences when expressing her thoughts and emotions in a language other than her mother tongue, Student participant 1 compares her interactions in English to those in IsiZulu, her mother tongue. She describes how, when speaking to her mother over the phone in IsiZulu, she feels completely at ease: "I feel relaxed, my guard is down, and I can say

anything—it just comes easily.” In contrast, when speaking English, she must consciously construct her sentences, which adds an additional layer of mental effort and self-monitoring. She reflected:

Constructing your feelings in a language that's not necessarily your mother tongue. Because when I'm thinking about it, okay, I'm going to make a short example now. I'm on a call with my mom using our language. I feel relaxed and I feel like my guard is down and I can speak anything and it comes easy. But also with English, my cognitive ... is highly functioning. I'm constantly translating something from another language to another language so that it makes sense for another person.

These reflections underscore the emotional and cognitive toll that language barriers can impose during counselling. Rather than serving as a space for vulnerability and healing, sessions conducted in English—particularly for students who are not first-language English speakers—can become sites of heightened cognitive alertness and performance. The constant need to translate, filter, and monitor language use diminishes the psychological safety required for effective counselling. This highlights the urgent need for more linguistically inclusive practices in university psychological support services—practices that validate and accommodate the mother tongues of students.

6.3.3 Institutional language power dynamic

Student Participant 3, whose mother tongue is Sepedi, expressed a deep sense of linguistic restriction within the institution. While she would prefer to speak her home language, she feels that English is the only language permitted for communication in academic and social settings. She highlighted that, despite potential struggles in articulating herself in English, there was no expectation or allowance for her to express such difficulties, as English remains the dominant medium for "everything, everything, and everything." Moreover, she noted a perceived linguistic hierarchy, stating that if she were a Xhosa speaker, she might have been more accepted in using her home language, given that isiXhosa is widely spoken within the institution. This left her feeling

further isolated, as she believed that linguistic accommodation was primarily extended to isiXhosa speakers rather than speakers of other African languages. Reflecting on her experience, she shared:

I don't think it was expected of me to say I might not be able to articulate myself in English because we use English for everything, everything, and everything. Unless maybe I was Xhosa, because a lot of people here speak Xhosa, maybe that would be acceptable. But it was really hard.

This account underscores the challenges faced by speakers of African languages other than isiXhosa in navigating institutional language norms, revealing both the dominance of English and the uneven acceptance of African languages in the space. This finding highlights that language barriers are not solely a result of English dominance but can also emerge between speakers of different African languages. This may be influenced by the institution's location in the Eastern Cape, where isiXhosa is widely spoken, leading to an implicit expectation that students should understand or communicate in the language. The language policy of the institution, as discussed in Section 6.1, recognizes English as the primary language of communication within the institution. Additionally, it promotes the use of isiXhosa and Afrikaans as supporting languages in alignment with the provincial language policy and the geographical context of the university. As a result, staff members, including psychologists and receptionists (as previously mentioned), feel comfortable using isiXhosa when engaging with students. While the use of isiXhosa can be advantageous for isiXhosa-speaking students and staff, it is important to acknowledge that this default linguistic practice can disadvantage students who do not speak isiXhosa, particularly in sensitive environments such as psychological counselling. In such contexts, language serves as more than just a tool for communication—it shapes accessibility, inclusivity, and the overall effectiveness of support services. This aligns with Alexander's (2003) argument that, as universities develop their own approaches to transformation, language must be central to these discussions. Institutions should critically examine which languages are actively used and heard, as well as the specific contexts in which they are employed.

Student participants whose Mother Tongue is an African language other than isiXhosa reported experiencing language barriers when interacting with Mother Tongue IsiXhosa-speaking

psychologists and receptionists at the counselling centre. They reported that the staff members predominantly communicated in IsiXhosa without first confirming whether the students understood the language, which sometimes hindered effective communication. Student participant 1 experienced the default use of IsiXhosa by both the receptionist and the counsellor, which created occasional challenges due to unfamiliar words. She reflected:

... when I went to submit the form, I went there personally to submit the completed form. So, on arrival, immediately they speak Xhosa. I know they overlap these languages, but then Xhosa has like some words that like they throw you off and you have to stop the person like, okay, what does that mean? So, they speak Xhosa and my counsellor was also Xhosa.

She describes a scenario in which the psychologist, attempting to offer life advice, spoke in isiXhosa. While the psychologist was outlining the scenario, there were certain words and parts of the conversation she struggled to understand due to her unfamiliarity with the language.

So, she made an example about like her going to the shops, like her routine. I think she was just trying to show me like how to structure my life in an ordered way. Okay. So, in her saying that, she spoke the whole thing in Xhosa. Some of the things I got to miss, she was talking about iphara. I didn't know what iphara was then. Now I do (laughing). She mentioned, like she was talking to iphara on the way from the motor shop to her house and like she was saying, you know, usually people tend to sideline these people. But actually, she learned something from that iphara. But like I said, there were some things, like words that threw me off.

In the case of Rhodes University, and particularly in the domain of psychological counselling for a linguistically diverse student body, a crucial question arises: Why should a multilingual policy simply enumerate official languages without fully addressing the linguistic realities of a diverse academic community? This calls for a more nuanced and intentional approach to language policy, ensuring that all students—regardless of their linguistic background—experience equitable access to essential services such as psychological support. The revised Language Policy for Higher

Education (2020) attempts to shift away from rigidly naming languages by instead encouraging institutions to promote multilingualism in a more flexible and inclusive manner, responsive to their unique sociolinguistic contexts. This shift is significant, as it moves the focus from compliance to accommodation—prioritising practices that meet the linguistic needs of students rather than ticking off policy checklists. However, for this vision to be meaningful, it must be accompanied by intentional strategies that go beyond policy rhetoric. This includes expanding language learning opportunities, not just for students, but also for staff, including psychologists and support personnel. Such efforts would help cultivate environments where language diversity is not merely tolerated but actively leveraged as a tool for access, care, and epistemic inclusion. In the context of psychological counselling, this means training practitioners to work within and across languages—recognising, for example, how translanguaging practices can create therapeutic spaces that feel safer and more authentic for students. It also implies providing institutional support for the development of multilingual psychological resources, hiring linguistically diverse practitioners, and embedding linguistic sensitivity into the core competencies of student support services. These recommendations emerged directly from the voices of the participants in this study. As such, they reflect lived realities and on-the-ground insights from students and psychologists engaging with linguistic barriers in psychological counselling. A more detailed exploration of these participant-driven recommendations will be provided in Section 6.7, where their suggestions are discussed.

6.4 Impact of language barriers on psychological counselling effectiveness

The lack of language accommodation in psychological counselling had tangible negative effects on the perceived effectiveness and continuity of care. For three student participants, the psychologists' use of the maintenance strategy—where the practitioner sustained a fixed communication style and consistently used English as the primary language—led them to discontinue counselling altogether. One participant, feeling linguistically and emotionally alienated, made the decision to physically diverge by seeking psychological support outside the university where they hoped for a more culturally and linguistically responsive experience. In another form of divergence, five participants reported emotional withdrawal during counselling sessions. Although they remained physically present, these students experienced a psychological

distancing from the process, a result of feeling unable to express themselves fully or be understood in their preferred language. This kind of emotional divergence reflects a subtle, but significant, barrier to effective psychological engagement and well-being.

6.4.1 Emotional withdrawal: “English is a language of pretence”

When asked whether she felt heard and understood by the psychologist during counselling sessions in English, Student participant 3 describes English as a *“language of pretence,”* highlighting the linguistic challenges and emotional withdrawal she faces when using it in a counselling setting. Since English is not her primary language of communication, she finds herself ultimately compromising the authenticity of self-expression.

I feel like, for me, English is a language of pretence. If I speak English, I'm more likely to lie to you, rather than speaking my own language.

Student participant 2 echoes similar sentiments, using the contrasting isiXhosa phrases *“ibhrashwa ngaphezulu”* (it's surface level/it's being brushed on the outside) and *“ndizakunaba kengoku”* (I will delve deep) to illustrate the depth of emotional expression possible in isiXhosa compared to English. When sharing her emotions and feelings in counselling, she finds that communicating in English limits her ability to fully engage with and articulate deeper emotions. To her, English remains a surface-level medium that does not allow for the richness and nuance required for deep emotional introspection. In contrast, speaking in isiXhosa enables her to express herself more profoundly, accessing emotions that might otherwise remain unspoken.

The student participants' experiences of emotional withdrawal align with the idea proposed by Aragno and Schlachet (1996), De Zulueta (2006), and Bayson (2010) that, emotions may not be authentically conveyed when using a language learned later in life, as this language can construct a version of the self that feels inauthentic, thereby diminishing its effectiveness in therapeutic settings. On the other hand, Bond and Lai (1986) and Gonzalez-Reigosa (1976) contest the latter idea by arguing that even though expressing deep emotions in a second language may be difficult, the emotional distance it creates can actually help. They suggest that this detachment allows people to talk about painful experiences more easily without being overwhelmed. As a result, using a

second language in therapy can be very helpful. Bond and Lai (1986) and Gonzalez-Reigosa (1976) 's argument is notable in student participant 5's experience of discussing mental health in English versus in her Mother Tongue, Sepedi. She notes that using English in psychological counselling felt "calmer," whereas switching to "vernac" (African language) "felt wrong." This sense of calmness when using English may stem from its normalization as the dominant language in formal and professional mental health discourse. English provides a widely accepted framework for discussing psychological well-being, making it feel like the expected or default mode of communication in such settings, making it feel "calmer" and possibly less emotionally confronting. She reflects:

So, I was more comfortable, it was more calmer. Okay. Then when we moved to vernac it felt wrong.

However, despite this discomfort, she recalls understanding the psychologist better in 'vernac' than in English as she stated "*It felt wrong, but I also understood her better in vernac*".

She believes that "*the language does change how you see the sessions*". English makes the session feel like "*oh, I am having a psychology lesson*" which could indicate a sense of detachment or intellectualization of emotions. In contrast, speaking in mother-tongue humanizes the interaction "*that's when you realize, I'm talking to someone*", making the session feel more intimate and less clinical. This suggests that language does not just communicate meaning but fundamentally alters the experience of counselling—for student participant 5, English creates emotional distance, while Mother Tongue fosters deep emotional closeness. She reflected on her experience as follows:

I can say the language does change how you see the session. Okay. Because if you speak in English, it's, oh, I am having a psychology lesson. She's talking to me, it's fine. And then you go to Vernac, that's when you realise, I'm talking to someone. So, it's kind of a difference in how you feel. Because in English, it's like, oh, I have a therapist. You're like, okay, a therapist. But when someone says, oh, I'm speaking to someone about my mental

health, and then it's in vernac, that's when you realise I'm actually having a conversation with someone. Yeah, so it felt like deeper.

Student participant 5 mentions that her counselling session was conducted via Zoom, yet she experienced a heightened emotional connection when communicating in her Mother Tongue. She describes this as an “*intriguing*” and “*strange*” feeling, noting how, despite the physical distance and digital medium, speaking in her native language created a deep sense of connection with the psychologist. This suggests that linguistic familiarity plays a crucial role in fostering emotional intimacy, even in virtual counselling spaces where non-verbal cues are limited. Her experience challenges the assumption that face-to-face interactions are always superior for emotional depth. Instead, it highlights how language itself can serve as a bridge for emotional resonance, making counselling impactful, even in remote settings. She initially rationalizes the intensity of connection by considering the lack of face-to-face interaction, but their reflection implies that language itself was a major factor in shaping emotional presence.

6.4.2 Counselling discontinuation

While the student participants initially indicated "no" on the questionnaire when asked whether language posed a barrier to accessing psychological services, a different pattern emerged during the interviews. When the same question was posed in a more open-ended discussion, some students revealed that language barriers during counselling sessions contributed to their decision to discontinue therapy early. They explained that their inability to fully and authentically express themselves in English made the sessions feel ineffective, ultimately discouraging them from continuing with counselling.

Student Participant 10 reflects on his experience, expressing that he needed a safe space to vent and confide in someone while ensuring confidentiality. However, he found this difficult due to the

use of English in counselling sessions. The language barrier prevented him from fully expressing his thoughts and emotions, ultimately limiting the effectiveness of the service for him. He reflected:

Yes, umzekelo zange ndiphinde ndiye phaya because waye watsho ukuba we can have sessions maybe twice a week but I knew ukuba andizophinda ndize apha because zange ndincedakale. At that time I needed someone to vent out to knowing that akazoyipapasha lento ndimxelela yona but I couldn't vent out properly because of language barriers.

English Translation

For example, I never went back there because they had said we could have sessions maybe twice a week, but I knew I wouldn't be coming back because I hadn't received any help. At that time, I just needed someone I could vent to—someone I could trust wouldn't share what I told them. But I couldn't vent properly because of the language barriers.

Before discontinuing counselling, Student Participant 10 recalled requesting a translator to assist with interpreting from isiXhosa—his Mother Tongue—into English, the only language spoken by the psychologists. He was informed that a translator was not available at the time and was asked to return after a week. However, even after waiting, no translator was provided. He reflected on the experience as follows:

Ndade ndaya ke the next day ndadibana nomlungu phaya, I can't remember igama lakhe ngubani. So, ndayibona zisuka ukuba andizokwazi uyithetha lento ndifuna uyithetha ngelihlobo ndifuna uyithetha ngalo. So ndatsho kuye ukuba no ndicela an interpreter or someone else because andizokwazi uyithetha ngeEnglish. So watsho ukuba abekho abanye abantu ngoku, I must come back some other time ndabizwa I think a week later.

English Translation

So, I went the next day and met a white person there—I can't remember their name. I could immediately tell that I wouldn't be able to express what I wanted to say in the manner I wanted to say it. So, I asked for an interpreter or someone else, because I couldn't say it in English. I was told that there was no one available at that time and that I should come back another time—I think I was called back a week later.

This account raises serious concerns, particularly given that Rhodes University's Language Policy (2019) commits to providing interpretation and translation services in isiXhosa and Afrikaans for both students and staff, where "practical" and "feasible." In this case, the absence of an interpreter and the prolonged delay contradict the institution's stated commitment to linguistic inclusivity and equitable access to services. Furthermore, such a delay can have significant implications for the student's mental health and academic progression. Psychological distress often requires timely intervention, and deferring support—especially due to language barriers—may exacerbate existing emotional struggles. For a student who has taken the step to seek help, being turned away or made to wait may lead to feelings of rejection, frustration, or hopelessness, potentially worsening their mental state. This emotional burden can, in turn, affect academic focus, motivation, and performance. When students are unable to articulate their psychological needs in a language they are comfortable with, they are effectively denied access to support systems that are critical to their wellbeing and academic success.

Student Participant 2 shares a similar experience, stating that language and cultural barriers played a significant role in her decision to discontinue counselling. She felt that these barriers prevented her from fully engaging in the counselling process, leading her to seek support outside the

institution, where she could access services better aligned with her linguistic and cultural background. She reflected:

Ewe because I feel like I couldn't express myself fully and the person didn't understand where I was coming from.

She acknowledges that, although the counselling centre did not fully meet her needs, the experience helped her gain clarity on the type of support she required. As she puts it, *"I've got an idea of the kind of help that I need. So, say yes and no."* This suggests that while the counselling sessions were not entirely effective for her, they still played a role in guiding her towards more suitable support outside the institution. However, this guidance did not come directly from the counselling centre or the assigned psychologist. Instead, it came from someone outside the institution who suggested alternative forms of support. As she explains, *"I didn't express it to them. I expressed it to someone else who recommended me another alternative to deal with."* This indicates that while the counselling experience helped her reflect on her needs, the institution itself did not actively provide the necessary direction or tailored support.

Rhodes University's language policy statement emphasizes "the creation of an environment where language is not a barrier to equity of access, opportunity, and success." However, the implementation of this principle within psychological service provision appears to be inconsistent. The data from this study indicates that while all students technically have the same opportunity to access counselling services, their actual experiences of access vary significantly based on language. For students who do not speak English as a first language—the dominant language used in counselling—the effectiveness of these services is often compromised. Participants in the study reported experiencing language barriers that hindered their ability to fully express themselves during sessions, ultimately affecting the therapeutic outcomes. Some students even chose to discontinue counselling altogether due to these linguistic challenges. This highlights a systemic issue where institutional language policies, while inclusive in theory, may not adequately address the lived realities of multilingual students. Without intentional efforts to integrate linguistic inclusivity into psychological service provision, the university risks reinforcing inequities rather than eliminating them. The Rhodes University Language Group Summit Report (2017) argues

that, the success of a language policy in institutions of higher education depends not only on its implementation but also on continuous monitoring to assess its effectiveness in practice across different contexts within the institution. Merely having a language policy in place does not guarantee equitable access or meaningful linguistic inclusion; rather, the policy must be evaluated and adapted based on real-world challenges and student experiences. This aligns with Shohamy (2006), who argues that language policies should be flexible rather than rigid to accommodate diverse linguistic realities and institutional contexts. In *Language Policy: Hidden Agendas and New Approaches*, Shohamy emphasizes that language policies must be adaptable and responsive to shifting social, cultural, and educational dynamics to ensure they serve their intended purpose effectively. Similarly, Spolsky (2004) in *Language Policy* highlights that policy implementation alone is insufficient; there must be ongoing assessment and willingness to modify policies based on their practical impact. Without proper monitoring, language policies risk becoming symbolic statements rather than functional tools for inclusion and accessibility in higher education. Thus, institutions should not only implement language policies but also actively engage in evaluating their impact, ensuring that they are not just theoretical frameworks but practical mechanisms for linguistic equity and student success.

6.5 Strategies used by psychologists and students in psychological counselling

The second part of Objective 2 aimed to explore how psychologists navigate language barriers in psychological counselling. While the psychologists themselves reported not experiencing difficulties in articulating themselves in English—the primary language in which counselling sessions are conducted—they did observe students facing language-related challenges. From the data analysis, it became evident that both psychologists and students employed specific communication adjustment strategies to manage these language barriers. These strategies are discussed in the following subsections.

6.5.1 Greeting the students in their Mother Tongue

One of the notable strategies employed by psychologists to navigate language barriers was the intentional use of students' Mother Tongues during the initial stages of counselling sessions—particularly in the form of greetings. While psychologists may not have been fully proficient in the

student's home language, they would make an effort to greet the student in that language as a way of building rapport and signalling cultural sensitivity. This practice often followed instances where the psychologist had observed signs of linguistic discomfort during earlier sessions. In subsequent meetings, the psychologist would then converge toward the student's linguistic repertoire through small, yet meaningful, acts such as greeting in their Mother Tongue. This micro-level convergence not only acknowledged the student's linguistic identity but also contributed to fostering a more inclusive and affirming counselling environment.

Psychologist 1 recounted an experience in which she recognized the likely Mother Tongue of a student she was counselling based on the student's name, which was in Xitsonga. Despite not being proficient in Xitsonga, she made a deliberate effort to greet the student in their language. Reflecting on this interaction, she emphasized the significant impact that even a simple greeting in a student's home language can have on the therapeutic relationship. She noted that when the session initially began in English, the student appeared somewhat disengaged and hesitant. However, the moment she greeted the student with "Avuxeni" (a Xitsonga greeting), there was an immediate shift in the student's demeanor. The student responded with visible surprise and warmth, expressing how rare it was to hear her language spoken at Rhodes University. Although there are cultural societies on campus, she explained that only a small number of students speak Xitsonga, and many feel pressured to adapt to an English-dominant environment.

I think the most beneficial thing is even just knowing the greeting, okay, has just done an immense amount of work to the connection that you have with the client or the student. So, for example, I had a Xitsonga speaking client and I could tell from her name. When we started, obviously in English and hold the conversation, but then she was more not leaning towards me, because we're speaking English, and then immediately I said "Avuxeni" (a Xitsonga greeting) on her face. She was like here in Rhodes, there's no one that can hear that type of language, although we have societies, but it's a few of us, and not all of us are more culturalized to English.

Psychologist 1's willingness to adapt linguistically and culturally to build rapport with the student, despite not being proficient in Xitsonga, exemplifies Ting-Toomey's (1999, p. 3) assertion that

“...the achievement of effective intercultural communication is dependent on people’s ability to manage differences flexibly and mindfully.” Ting-Toomey’s concept of mindful intercultural communication emphasizes the importance of being adaptable, open, and reflective when engaging with individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In this case, the psychologist’s linguistic flexibility, even with minimal proficiency, played a crucial role in creating a more inclusive and affirming counselling environment. Lanham’s (1980, p. 11) states that “language is the vehicle of culture.” This perspective suggests that the way languages are used and perceived within university spaces directly shapes the institution’s cultural environment.

In this case, the absence of Xitsonga in everyday interactions at Rhodes University creates a perception that the language—and by extension, its speakers—are not fully recognized within the campus community. As the student remarked, it felt as though “no one can hear that type of language” at the university, reinforcing a sense of linguistic invisibility.

Psychologist 2 later acknowledged a potential drawback of using a student’s Mother Tongue for greeting without being proficient in the language. While initially intended to build rapport, this approach sometimes led students to become overly comfortable, assuming that the psychologist had a greater understanding of their language than was actually the case. Reflecting on this, Psychologist 2 explained:

The challenge with linguistics is that once students hear a greeting in their Mother Tongue, they become extremely comfortable and begin expressing themselves deeply in that language, forgetting that I do not fully comprehend it. For example, with Xhosa-speaking students, if I show any indication that I understand the language, they might naturally switch to complex expressions. Then, I have to ask them to slow down and clarify, which can disrupt the flow of the session. While their comfort is beneficial for the therapeutic process, it can also create difficulties in fully understanding their experiences, leading to moments where I lose track of key details.

This challenge suggests that while small linguistic gestures can enhance rapport in client and psychologist relationships in counselling, they should be accompanied by clear communication boundaries.

6.5.2 Code-mixing

Psychologists also employed strategic use of substitute words from the student's Mother Tongue in place of English terms. One psychologist explained this method, stating:

...substitute certain words instead of using an English term. For example, I might say ngoku or use uphangela when referring to work, if that's how the student expresses it. Small insertions like these help bridge the language gap.

Student participants shared similar experiences but in a broader sense. While psychologists incorporated a few substitute words from the students' Mother Tongue despite not being proficient in those languages, students employed a more fluid linguistic strategy known as translanguaging (Mateus, 2014; García, 2009; Creese & Blackledge, 2010). Student Participant 6 reflected on this practice, stating:

...I was like, I can relate. *Igama lakho*—your name tells me that you are a Nguni speaking person. So even if I speak isiXhosa and ungumZulu—you are Zulu, you will understand me.

This suggests that students instinctively assessed the psychologist's linguistic repertoire and, upon recognizing alignment with their own, felt comfortable shifting between languages.

The concept of translanguaging has been widely explored by scholars in the fields of language and learning (Bamgbose, 1991; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Cummins, 2001; Obanya, 2004; Mateus, 2014; García, 2009; Creese & Blackledge, 2010). These scholars emphasize the intricate relationship between cognition, learning, and language, highlighting how multilingual individuals draw on their full linguistic repertoire to enhance understanding and meaning-making. This approach acknowledges that multilingual speakers do not compartmentalize their languages but instead use them dynamically to construct knowledge and express themselves effectively. At Rhodes University, the institutional language policy promotes multilingualism and the use of African languages as tools for enhancing teaching and learning. Within this policy framework,

translanguaging is encouraged as a means of bridging linguistic gaps, fostering deeper comprehension, and ensuring that students can fully engage with academic content. Mwanza & Nyibili (2024) explored translanguaging practices in counselling sessions among university students in Zambia and found that translanguaging plays a crucial role in fostering a welcoming and inclusive therapeutic environment. Their study highlights that when counsellors embrace linguistic flexibility, it helps establish rapport, demonstrate acceptance, and create opportunities for deeper emotional expression, regardless of language differences. The findings of this study align with Mwanza & Nyibili's (2024) research, as student participants expressed a preference for linguistic flexibility in counselling sessions. They reported experiencing more positive counselling outcomes when they had the autonomy to mix languages rather than being restricted to English.

6.6 Cultural barriers

While three student participants did not experience cultural barriers, seven participants reported encountering such challenges in their interactions with their psychologist. All psychologists reported no experience of cultural barriers. In most cases, these cultural barriers were closely intertwined with language, reinforcing the idea that communication extends beyond words to include cultural nuances, values, and lived experiences. As 1 Student Participant aptly stated, "*Obviously, language comes with culture.*" This insight underscores the intricate relationship between language and cultural identity, suggesting that a lack of linguistic and cultural alignment in psychological support settings may hinder meaningful engagement and emotional expression. This section also illustrates how the psychologist's ability to merge their professional ontology—rooted in English-medium academic training—with a more person-sensitive, culturally responsive approach contributed to more flexible and effective counselling experiences.

6.6.1 Language comes with culture: cultural relatability and linguistic fluidity

Student participant 6 discussed a scenario where cultural expressions common in Xhosa communities were misunderstood by the a psychologist who is of a different race, language, and culture, causing a cultural disconnect. She highlighted the difficulty of translating culturally embedded expressions from isiXhosa to English while retaining their intended meaning and emotional weight. The psychologist's response suggested a more individualistic, possibly Western

perspective, which conflicts with the participant's culturally embedded understanding of familial communication.

So, you know how amaXhosa athanda ukuthi “Yho! Ukhohlakele wena” and we use it so lightly, it doesn't mean that you're so evil. So, because of the type of personality I have, ekhaya bayathanda ukuthi “yho! Ukhohlakele, ukhohlakele wena” so now I go to the lady and I'm like, I'm having problems with my family, the first lady, I'm having problems with my family. They say that I'm very evil and mean (laughing), because I didn't know how I can translate it loosely in English with the same sort of like impact. I don't know how to translate it to show that It's not meant to make me feel bad. You understand? So kuye wabe esithi ‘No! your family shouldn't say that. How can they nton-nton-nton..’ Uyayiqonda nalanto yoba thina maXhosa, I know it's not right for us to do that, mhlambi xa umnyama kuthwe unguMnyamana, xa unamehlo amakhulu kuthwe “Hayisuka! Lento inamehlo amakhulu” I know it's wrong right, but I don't feel like we mean it to put you down. You understand? But now, because bona balolwahlobo balulo, uzayithatha ngokuba hayi you are body-shaming the child...

English Translation

You know how we Xhosa people like to say, “Yo! You're so evil,” and we say it so lightly—it doesn't actually mean that you're evil. Because of my personality, at home they often say, “Yo! You are evil, you are evil.” So now I go to the psychologist—the first lady—and I say, “I'm having problems with my family. They say I'm very evil and mean” (laughs), because I didn't really know how to translate that loosely into English with the same kind of meaning or tone. I didn't know how to explain that it's not something meant to hurt me or make me feel bad. You understand?

But she responded by saying, “No! Your family shouldn't say that to you... how can they?” You see, as Xhosa people, I know it's not necessarily right for us to say certain things—like when someone is dark-skinned and we refer to them by their skin tone, or when someone has big eyes and we comment on that. I know it's seen as wrong. But I honestly don't feel like we say these things to insult or put someone down. You understand? But because the psychologist comes from a different worldview, they might interpret it as body-shaming or being emotionally harmful.

The psychologist's response suggests a more individualistic, possibly Western perspective, which conflicts with the participant's culturally embedded understanding of familial communication which the participant perceives as judgmental toward their family's way of expressing affection or critique. This feeling of being judged, language and cultural disconnect led her into discontinuing with counselling.

So that's just one thing I didn't like about that first session. Now you are judging my family and it's not as if, they know what you know. That's how they do things emakhaya. So I was like, she doesn't understand the way we do things. So it's better for me to find someone who understands it the way that I am used to. I don't know if I'm making sense.

This data set reveals that when psychologists remain rigidly anchored to their professional ontology—without adequately adapting to the linguistic and cultural needs of their clients—it can lead to negative counselling outcomes. Such inflexibility often results in students feeling judged, misunderstood, and emotionally alienated, which in several cases ultimately led to the premature termination of counselling.

In contrast to her initial experience with a psychologist from a different racial, linguistic, and cultural background, student participant 6 later sought counselling from a psychologist who shared her race, language, and cultural heritage. This shift significantly enhanced her sense of comfort and openness, allowing her to be more vulnerable in the therapeutic space. The cultural and linguistic alignment fostered a deeper connection, enabling the psychologist to not only understand her concerns from a clinical perspective but also to interpret them within a culturally relevant framework. As a result, the psychologist was able to recognize subtle cultural and spiritual cues, ultimately identifying the possibility of an ancestral calling (*ukuthwasa*) and providing guidance that resonated with student participant 6's lived experiences. This highlights the critical role of cultural competence in mental health support, particularly in contexts where traditional and spiritual dimensions are integral to an individual's well-being.

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...the second black lady, could actually pick up and go, maybe you need to also seek help traditional way, and not solely rely on us. Because nendlela othetha ngayo, I'm suspecting, but I don't, like it's not my field or anything. We are able, even like with family dynamics ebeyiza ngento yoba I understand icontext yama Xhosa.

English Translation

...the second Black lady (referring to the psychologist) was actually able to pick up on certain things and said something like, “Maybe you also need to seek help in a traditional way, and not rely solely on us.” Because of the way I was speaking, she said, “I’m suspecting something, though it’s not really my field or area of expertise.” Even when it came to family dynamics, she engaged with me in a way that showed she understood the Xhosa context.

The cultural and linguistic alignment fostered a deeper connection, enabling the psychologist to not only understand her concerns from a clinical perspective but also to interpret them within a culturally relevant framework. The psychologist was able to merge their professional ontology—shaped by clinical training and psychological theory—with a culturally situated understanding of the student’s lived experiences. This dual framing allowed for more nuanced interpretations of the student's concerns and demonstrated the value of culturally attuned psychological practice in improving therapeutic outcomes. As a result, the psychologist was able to recognize subtle cultural and spiritual cues, ultimately identifying the possibility of an ancestral calling (ukuthwasa) and providing guidance that resonated with student participant 6' lived experiences. This highlights the critical role of cultural competence in mental health support, particularly in contexts where traditional and spiritual dimensions are integral to an individual's well-being.

6.6.2 Individualistic approach versus Ubuntu

Student participant 5 observes a stark contrast between her cultural beliefs, rooted in Ubuntu, and the individualistic perspective of her psychologist. As the eldest daughter, she embraces the responsibility of caring for her parents, viewing it as a reciprocal relationship where support flows both ways. She explains, "It's more like you're working together," reflecting the interconnectedness and communal values inherent in Ubuntu.

In contrast, the psychologist applies an individualistic framework, emphasizing clear boundaries between parental and child roles, stating, "*No, you're just a child. You don't have to do that.*" This perspective reinforces the notion that "a child must be a child, and a parent must be a parent," which directly opposes the student's lived experiences, where children are expected to contribute to the well-being of their families.

This cultural misalignment illustrates a broader issue in psychological support settings—when practitioners approach clients from a singular, often Westernized perspective, they risk invalidating deeply ingrained cultural values. Student participant 5's experience highlights the importance of culturally responsive counselling approaches that acknowledge and integrate diverse worldviews, particularly those that emphasize collectivism, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

Student participant 5 also struggles to articulate a deeply ingrained cultural responsibility in a way that aligns with the psychologist's understanding. This highlights how language can be a barrier in accurately conveying culturally specific emotions and values. She differentiates between guilt and responsibility, emphasizing that her role in supporting her mother is not based on personal fault but on a culturally embedded expectation. This contrast suggests that Western psychological models may not always accommodate the nuances of communal duty and intergenerational support that exist in African and other collectivist cultures.

And also, there was a time when I couldn't describe the feeling I had, the responsibility I had over my mom. And then she was like, oh, I think you're feeling guilty that your mom is going through something. I was like, no. What I'm trying to say is I'm not feeling guilty. I just feel responsible. So, I wasn't able to communicate that part to her. I had to really sit down and explain it in a more normal way for her to understand that I'm saying I'm not guilty. That I'm not doing this for my mom. I'm saying I'm feeling responsible that I have to do something for my mom. And then it took a long time for her to understand, but eventually she did.

The theme of individualism is also evident in Student participant 6's experience. The psychologist's response appears to reflect an individualistic, possibly Western perspective, which contrasts with the student's deeply rooted cultural understanding of Xhosa familial communication. While the psychologist may have intended to encourage personal autonomy and self-expression, the student perceived this approach as misaligned with their lived reality. The psychologist's interpretation seemed to frame the participant's family dynamics—where affection and critique are intertwined—as problematic rather than recognizing them as culturally embedded forms of interaction. This disconnect underscores the tension between Western psychological frameworks and collectivist cultural values.

6.7 Recommendations from research participants

At the end of each interview, participants were invited to share their recommendations on how the Rhodes University Student Counselling Centre could more effectively accommodate the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of students in the provision of psychological support services. In line with the principles of participatory and user-centred service design, it is essential to draw improvement suggestions from those who directly experience the service, as their insights are grounded in lived realities and practical engagement (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). The feedback provided by both student and psychologist participants revealed a shared vision for a more inclusive and responsive counselling environment. Key suggestions included the provision of psychologist profiles indicating language competencies and cultural

backgrounds, the incorporation of language preference options in initial intake forms, the recruitment of more linguistically and culturally diverse counselling staff, and the use of trained interpreters when necessary.

6.7.1 Provision of psychologist profiles

Student participant 6 proposed that the Rhodes University Student Counselling Centre consider offering brief, publicly accessible profiles of each available psychologist. These profiles should highlight key details such as linguistic capabilities and cultural backgrounds, enabling students to make informed decisions about which counsellor best aligns with their personal and cultural identities. She explained that this kind of transparency would help students feel more comfortable and supported, particularly in contexts where language and cultural familiarity are critical to building trust and openness in therapeutic relationships. Reflecting on her own experience, the participant shared:

...it would be nice to also get a profile of the psychologists that are actually there...cause like now the therapist that I go to, I, I actually researched on *umntu oyipsychologist, ongumNguni, owazi izinto zesintu, izinto zamagqirha* and all those things so that *sizothetha ulwimi oluvana-* I actually looked for a psychologist who is umNguni, someone who understands traditional practices — things related to amagqirha and our Indigenous ways so that we could speak a language that resonates, a language where we truly understand each other. So I think it would be basically that—have profiles, so you know who you're dealing with, be it culturally or linguistically.

This participant recounted how she had to seek psychological support outside the university environment, specifically searching for a Nguni-speaking psychologist familiar with African spiritual and cultural practices. Her testimony underscores the value of culturally and linguistically congruent counselling services, and how institutional structures that fail to offer such information risk alienating students whose worldviews fall outside dominant Western paradigms.

The call for more accessible and transparent psychologist profiles aligns with broader literature advocating for culturally responsive mental health services in multilingual and multicultural societies. According to Sue et al. (2009), cultural competence in psychological practice is not only about language matching, but also about understanding the cultural frameworks that shape clients' experiences, expressions of distress, and pathways to healing. By providing language and cultural details up front, institutions can foster a sense of inclusion and safety for students seeking help, and reduce the cognitive and emotional burden of having to explain or justify their cultural frames of reference in therapeutic contexts.

6.7.2 Incorporation of language preference options in initial intake forms

Three student participants suggested the incorporation of a language preference section in the initial intake forms used by the Rhodes University Student Counselling Centre. They emphasized that students should be given the opportunity to indicate the language in which they would prefer to receive psychological support, rather than the institution assuming that all students are most comfortable with English. This proposal reflects a recognition of the diverse linguistic backgrounds of students and the importance of linguistic compatibility in establishing trust and therapeutic rapport. Student Participant 4 articulated this need as follows:

If they could have like maybe an option, like on their forms—like when you first go, you have to fill out a form and everything. Maybe one of the options on those forms could be your preferred languages. And maybe one of those languages, they might—there must be one, at least one practitioner who speaks like one of those languages, like other than English.

Student participant 5 gave similar suggestion:

I think one of the advice I would give is, I understand that there's a shortage of psychologists, but can they just put that option in when you're still writing with the receptionist to ask, do you want to speak to someone who knows your language? Or do you actually prefer English only? There are certain people who are comfortable speaking in English. So they can just bring that option and be like, sometimes you won't get someone who speaks your language because there's a shortage. But if there is someone who speaks your language, we would recommend them to you.

Psychologist 3 shared the same suggestion and reflected on the practical benefit of adding a dedicated section on language preference to the intake form, which students complete prior to beginning their sessions:

...there is an intake form that clients have to fill out before they arrive for sessions—maybe for them to have a section where a person chooses what language they prefer using for their therapy sessions? Maybe a person can tick Venda, and then already you know that we have a psychologist that is proficient in that language, so you will be assigned to that psychologist so that you are able to express yourself.

Including language preference options in intake forms would not only facilitate better student–practitioner matching but also signal institutional recognition of linguistic diversity as a legitimate and valued part of the counselling process. As Naidu (2021) argues, integrating language-sensitive practices into administrative and therapeutic procedures is essential for creating more inclusive and culturally responsive support environments.

6.7.3 The recruitment of more linguistically and culturally diverse counselling staff

Student participant 2 proposed the deliberate recruitment of psychologists who are linguistically and culturally diverse. Specifically, she recommended that higher education institutions, such as Rhodes University, employ psychologists who are proficient not only in English but also in one or more of South Africa's official African languages. This, she argued, would enhance inclusivity and allow for a broader spectrum of students to access psychological support in a language and cultural context that resonates with their lived experiences. She reflected:

I feel like they should have people who come from different cultures, who speak different languages to accommodate everyone

Psychologist Participant 3 echoed the call for greater linguistic and cultural diversity within the counselling staff at Rhodes University. She emphasised the practical limitations of the current staffing structure, which does not adequately reflect the linguistic diversity of the student population. In her reflection, she stated:

So firstly, I'll say to hire diverse psychologists, intern psychologists, just so... because looking at our current staff, I mean, not everyone can speak all the languages, and some of us cannot speak some of the official languages that South Africa has. And we do get clients that speak maybe Venda, Tsonga, and we do not have staff that understand those types of languages. So I think maybe the first advice that I'll give them is to hire a diverse—I mean—psychologist.

While the recruitment of multilingual psychologists is a necessary step toward inclusivity, its feasibility is inextricably linked to the structural transformation of academic and professional training programmes. If African languages and AIKS continue to be sidelined in the education and

accreditation of mental health professionals, then the pool of practitioners equipped to counsel in African languages will remain limited. Heleta (2016) and Makalela (2019) call for the decolonisation of university curricula as a critical move towards legitimising African ways of knowing and communicating, particularly in high-stakes domains such as mental health.

6.7.4 The use of trained interpreters

A recommendation commonly raised by both students and psychologists in this study was the potential use of translators in counselling sessions, particularly to accommodate students who are not proficient in English or whose preferred language is not spoken by the available psychologists. The suggestion reflects a broader awareness of linguistic diversity within the university context and a desire to make psychological services more accessible and inclusive. Student participant 7 articulated this perspective by suggesting:

What I would suggest is that... maybe it would be a useful investment to have people who would translate or people who are very knowledgeable in many different languages... But one who is going to not play a similar role to the psychologist, but have a psychological background...because psychology is, I mean, psychotherapy is a one-on-one and intimate experience, so to have a third party there would kind of bridge or break the whole confidential intimacy policy

This statement acknowledges both the practical value and the ethical complexities of involving a third party in counselling. The student highlights that while translation can facilitate understanding, the presence of an additional person may compromise the confidentiality and emotional intimacy that characterises effective therapy.

Psychologist 1 echoed similar sentiments, recognising the utility of translators in multilingual communities but also pointing to the challenges posed when translators lack psychological training:

Having a translator sometimes is useful... but now that again, translation within psychology influences [the process], because if it's someone not trained in psychology, it might be difficult for them to even understand the setting that you are working in... it might be overwhelming for the translator.

This concern is consistent with findings in global mental health literature. Studies such as Tribe and Thompson (2009) and Brune et al. (2011) have shown that while interpreters can bridge linguistic gaps in mental health settings, their presence introduces challenges related to confidentiality, the accurate interpretation of culturally nuanced emotional expressions, and role confusion if interpreters are not appropriately trained. For translators to be effective in psychological settings, scholars have argued that they must receive training in basic psychological principles and ethics, including maintaining client confidentiality, understanding therapeutic boundaries, and recognising the sensitivity of mental health discourse (Miller et al., 2005). Without such training, there is a risk of mistranslation, ethical breaches, and disrupted therapeutic alliance (Miller et al., 2005).

In addition to the previously discussed suggestions, Student Participant 10 proposed a sustainable and contextually relevant solution to address language barriers in psychological counselling: the strategic involvement of postgraduate students in African Language Studies, particularly those specialising in Translation Studies. He suggested that these students could be engaged in practical interpretation work at the university's counselling centre as part of their community engagement and professional training. Reflecting on this idea, he explained:

In terms of language barriers and promoting multilingualism, there should be an interpreter from among the students here because akhonto ingenziwayo apha esikolweni. Yonke lemisebenzi yenziwayo apha esikolweni iyafundelwa—for example, thina bantu bazi postgrad students should have some work in terms of community engagement, giving back to the institution's community. For example, people who do translation studies can volunteer as interpreters and help out when needed.

This suggestion not only addresses immediate linguistic challenges faced by students during counselling but also aligns with the educational mission of the university. It recognises that the institution already offers relevant training through its Translation Studies programme, which could be more effectively linked to practical service-learning opportunities. As articulated by community engagement scholars such as Lazarus et al. (2008), higher education institutions have a responsibility to foster mutually beneficial relationships between academic programmes and surrounding communities—both within and outside the university. Integrating translation and interpretation students into campus mental health services could serve as an innovative model of applied learning while simultaneously enhancing inclusivity and access to psychological support.

Furthermore, such an initiative could help bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world application, reinforcing the role of African languages in professional and institutional domains. However, for this to be ethically and professionally viable, appropriate training, supervision, and adherence to confidentiality protocols would need to be established in collaboration with both the African Languages department and the Counselling Centre.

6.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has illuminated the multifaceted linguistic challenges encountered by African language-speaking students when accessing psychological counselling at Rhodes University. Through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory, the analysis revealed that while some psychologists attempt convergence strategies, such as code-switching or cultural rapport-building, systemic limitations and a lack of formal language negotiation procedures often result in

communicative divergence and maintenance of dominant language norms. The dominance of English, and to a lesser extent isiXhosa, reflects broader institutional language hierarchies that marginalize speakers of other African languages, reinforcing existing barriers to effective mental health support. Furthermore, the chapter highlighted a disconnect between Rhodes University's stated commitment to multilingualism in its language policy and its actual implementation within student support services. While some progress has been made in teaching and learning domains, psychological services remain predominantly monolingual in practice. This disconnect underscores the need for institutional reforms that not only recognize language as a medium of instruction but also as a vital component of student wellbeing and inclusivity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

This chapter serves a dual purpose: firstly, to review the entire thesis, consolidate the core findings and recommendations that emerged from the research, and secondly, to offer a concluding discussion that situates these insights within the broader context of the transformation of psychological support services in higher education with a focus on language. The chapter opens with a synthesis of the preceding chapters to remind the reader of the research journey undertaken in the next section. It then presents a summary of key findings in Section 7.4, followed by recommendations in 7.5 Section 7.6 concludes the chapter and the entire thesis.

7.2 Thesis overview

This thesis set out to investigate how language influences students' access to and experiences of psychological counselling services at Rhodes University, with particular attention to students who speak African languages as their Mother Tongue as well as the experiences and perspectives of psychologists who provide those services. The study was guided by four core objectives as indicated in section 1.4 of chapter 1. These objectives emerged in response to a research problem rooted in the persistent underrepresentation of African languages in student support services domains within higher education—particularly in psychological support services—despite post-apartheid policy commitments to multilingualism and transformation. The literature reviewed in chapter 2 explored the intersections of language, psychological support, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), anchoring the discussion within the disciplinary field of Language Planning and Policy (LPP). The review also emphasised that, while significant strides have been made toward integrating African languages in curriculum and pedagogy, similar efforts in psychological support services remain lacking. The theoretical framework presented in chapter 3 was grounded in Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which provided a lens for understanding the language dynamics within counselling sessions. CAT enabled the study to

examine how convergence, divergence, and maintenance functioned not only as communication strategies but as outcomes of communication. CAT proved instrumental in interpreting the findings of this study, particularly in understanding how students and psychologists navigated linguistic differences during counselling sessions. The theory illuminated the ways in which both parties employed adaptive strategies to bridge communicative gaps. While Giles (1987) originally introduced convergence, divergence, and maintenance as key strategies within CAT, this study extended their conceptualisation by positioning them not only as strategies but also as potential outcomes of communication. In emotionally sensitive and support-driven contexts like student counselling, the interactional effects of accommodation—or lack thereof—can culminate in either strengthened engagement or disengagement from psychological support services. CAT thus enabled a nuanced interpretation of how language, ontology, and institutional language practices intersect in shaping students' access to meaningful support.

This qualitative study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, as presented in chapter 4, to understand students' lived experiences of counselling in a multilingual environment. Data was collected using two primary methods: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with both students and psychologists. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure that participants were linguistically and culturally representative. Ethical considerations were meticulously addressed, and data analysis was conducted with a focus on thematic development to ensure the depth and richness characteristic of IPA. Data was presented and analysed across two chapters, 5 and 6, where the former spoke to objective 1 and the latter to the other three objectives. The findings from the two data analysis chapters are summarised in the next section.

7.3 Summary of findings

7.3.1 Summary of findings for research question 1

Research Question: How do students describe their language-related experiences and perceptions of accessing psychological counselling within the current institutional structures, cultures, and language practices?

This study revealed that students who speak African languages as their Mother Tongue encounter multiple language-related and cultural barriers when accessing psychological counselling services at Rhodes University. Despite having physical access to the institution's counselling centre, these students often experience exclusion within the system due to its dominant monolingual English practices. A primary finding is that the lack of linguistic and cultural alignment between students and psychologists presents a significant barrier to effective psychological support. These barriers are further entrenched by the absence of formal mechanisms to negotiate language preferences during initial consultations or throughout the counselling process. The study found that language choice is rarely addressed explicitly; instead, it surfaces informally and reactively, often only after communication challenges become evident. Students often rely on contextual and cultural cues—such as a psychologist's name, geographic background, or accent—to predict whether linguistic compatibility exists. This indicates an underlying expectation of misalignment and a coping strategy rooted in prior experiences of exclusion.

Language barriers manifested in several distinct ways:

- **Linguistic Anxiety:** Students expressed anxiety over the adequacy of their English, which affected their willingness to fully engage.
- **Cognitive Strain:** Many reported the mental burden of having to translate thoughts from their Mother Tongue into English, which hindered emotional expression and diverted attention from therapeutic goals.

- **Institutional Language Power Dynamics:** Students expressed a deep sense of linguistic restriction and perceived linguistic hierarchy where English and IsiXhosa dominate at the detriment of other African languages spoken by other students in the institution. This perception underscores how institutional norms and regional language dynamics interact to shape linguistic inclusivity

These barriers often led to emotional withdrawal, diminished trust in the therapeutic process, and in some cases, discontinuation of counselling altogether. Despite these challenges, both students and psychologists demonstrated resilience through adaptive strategies aimed at mitigating linguistic barriers. These included:

- **Greeting Students in their Mother Tongue:** A small but meaningful gesture that built initial rapport.
- **Code-Mixing:** Switching between English and African languages as a pragmatic approach to communication and expression.

The study also revealed that students' language preferences for counselling were deeply influenced by their linguistic backgrounds, emotional needs, and cultural identities. While students from predominantly mother-tongue speaking environments preferred using African languages in counselling, those with early exposure to English tended to prefer English. However, language preference was not uniform even among students with similar linguistic backgrounds, illustrating the nuanced interplay between language, identity, and psychological comfort.

Furthermore, a critical finding emerged regarding a perceptual mismatch: psychologists believed that students generally preferred English, based on their observed behaviour in sessions. However, students reported that their use of English was often a result of necessity rather than preference, pointing to a misalignment between institutional assumptions and lived experience.

While psychologists reported not experiencing cultural barriers in their practice, many student participants articulated that cultural disconnects were a significant obstacle during counselling sessions. These barriers were not experienced in isolation but were deeply intertwined with language, reinforcing the idea that effective communication in psychological support is not merely about linguistic accuracy but also about cultural resonance. A recurring tension was the contrast between the psychologists' perceived Individualistic Approach to counselling and students'

expectations rooted in Ubuntu—a relational, collective ethos fundamental to many African cultures.

7.3.2 Summary of findings for research question 2

Research Question: How does the Rhodes University Language Policy influence the implementation of multilingual support in student psychological services?

The findings indicate that while the Rhodes University Language Policy (2019) articulates a formal commitment to multilingualism and linguistic inclusivity, the practical implementation of this policy within student psychological services remains limited and inconsistent. While the policy articulates a vision of linguistic inclusivity and equitable access—stating the intention to create an environment where language is not a barrier—it simultaneously reinforces English as the primary language of communication across the institution. This dual positioning undermines the policy’s effectiveness, particularly in spaces where language plays a critical role in emotional expression and psychological support. Progress has been made in the use of isiXhosa in teaching and learning, aligning with the geographical and provincial linguistic context of the Eastern Cape. However, this progress has not extended to student support services, such as the Student Counselling Centre, where the implementation of multilingualism remains unsatisfactory and less of a priority compared to advocacy and efforts related to teaching and learning. Psychologists and administrative staff often use isiXhosa in interactions with students, assuming a shared understanding of the language. While this benefits isiXhosa-speaking students, it has led to feelings of exclusion among students whose Mother Tongue is an African language other than isiXhosa. These students reported encountering language barriers when engaging with staff who defaulted to isiXhosa without first confirming whether students could understand it. Moreover, while the university’s language policy acknowledges English as the primary language of communication, it also states that translation and interpreting services into isiXhosa and Afrikaans will be provided “where necessary and feasible” for both students and staff (Rhodes University Language Policy, 2019). However, findings from this study reveal a troubling gap between policy and practice. A notable case involved a student who was forced to wait an entire week to access psychological support due to the unavailability of a translator. This incident not only exposes the limitations of current implementation strategies but also highlights a broader issue of institutional

unpreparedness in accommodating linguistic diversity within essential student services. Such delays in care are particularly concerning in the context of mental health, where timely intervention can be critical to student well-being and academic continuity. Overall, the findings suggest that the language policy's influence on student psychological services is limited and inconsistent. While the policy sets out noble goals, its application does not extend equitably to all institutional domains. As a result, African language-speaking students, especially those who do not speak isiXhosa, remain underserved in critical areas of wellbeing. This gap between policy and practice highlights the need for a more comprehensive, student-centred approach to multilingualism—one that recognises the essential role of language in psychological care and the broader university experience.

7.3.3 Summary of findings for research question 3

Research Question: How is the psychology curriculum and training perceived to prepare professional psychologists for practice in a multilingual and culturally diverse society?

The findings of this study suggest that the current psychology curriculum and training in South Africa are only partially responsive to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the society it aims to serve. While some modules in the curriculum touch on the socio-economic and cultural contexts of South Africa and highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity, they fall short in addressing the practical and epistemological roles of African languages in psychological practice. Psychologist participants noted that although the curriculum occasionally acknowledges the value of an African-centred approach, it does not meaningfully integrate African languages or AIKS into core professional training. Consequently, African languages are not positioned as legitimate tools for psychology. The absence of African languages in training contributes to a professional environment where English is not only the dominant medium of instruction but also the default language of practice. All psychologist participants indicated a strong preference for using English in their professional practice. This preference, however, was not merely practical—it reflected the linguistic culture of their academic training, where psychological theories, diagnostic frameworks, and therapeutic methods are predominantly taught and validated in English. This institutionalised linguistic preference cannot be viewed as a neutral choice; it is deeply tied to broader issues of epistemology, professional identity, and what counts as legitimate psychological knowledge. The

findings indicate that psychologists often experience a disjuncture between their personal and professional ontologies. While they may have personal affiliations with African languages and cultural frameworks, these are often suppressed in practice due to the dominance of English and Western paradigms in their training. This has resulted in what may be described as epistemic rigidity—a tendency to rely on textbook definitions and diagnostic categories that may lack contextual or cultural resonance (Ratele, 2016). However, the study also highlighted a counter-example that illustrates the transformative potential of more inclusive training. One psychologist who had studied at an institution that actively incorporated African languages and Indigenous Knowledge Systems into the curriculum reported feeling more linguistically flexible and culturally grounded in her practice. Her bilingual preference for both English and isiZulu allowed her to adapt her therapeutic approach to better align with the linguistic and cultural realities of her clients. In summary, the psychology curriculum as it currently stands does not adequately prepare psychologists to serve a multilingual and culturally diverse society.

7.4 Recommendations

The following recommendations emerge from both the research process and the findings of this study. As a researcher, observing the linguistic struggles faced by students who possess some proficiency in English but still encounter significant barriers highlighted a more pressing concern: how much more severe must these barriers be for the broader communities with limited or no English proficiency? This question points to a broader structural issue that extends beyond the confines of Rhodes University, reflecting systemic linguistic inequalities across the post-apartheid South African society. While the study focused on a single institution, the findings have broader implications for national efforts to ensure equitable access to psychosocial support in multilingual settings. The marginalisation of African languages in student support services—despite their official status—raises critical questions about linguistic justice and inclusivity (Heugh, 2009; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007).

As discussed in Chapter 4, I positioned myself as an insider in this study. As a student at Rhodes University who, like some of the participants, speaks isiXhosa as a Mother Tongue and has previously accessed support at the Student Counselling Centre. This shared experience—both

linguistically and institutionally—allowed me to relate more closely to the participants’ perspectives and to approach the interviews with empathy, cultural sensitivity, and deep understanding. I found that participants were more open to sharing emotionally complex and often vulnerable experiences, perhaps because they sensed a shared background and a safe, familiar space. This positional closeness gave me powerful insight into the role language plays beyond mere communication—it shapes access, belonging, and dignity. It became even clearer to me how the dominance of English in psychological support settings often alienates students who would otherwise benefit from counselling, particularly those who wish to express themselves in their Mother Tongues. At the same time, I became more aware of the difficult position psychologists find themselves in, often working within systems that limit their ability to accommodate linguistic diversity. Conducting this study deepened my appreciation for the urgent need to challenge linguistic hierarchies in student support services and to advocate for a more inclusive, multilingual approach to psychological care—one that affirms the identities and lived experiences of African language-speaking students. Accordingly, this study recommends a multi-layered institutional response.

7.4.1 Institutional Language Policy

First, Rhodes University should adopt a pragmatic, context-sensitive approach to language planning and policy implementation in line with Mesthrie and Smith’s (2006) argument that the urgency of language-related challenges necessitates practical, contextually grounded strategies. This includes developing immediate, low-resource interventions as well as long-term structural reforms. The university’s Language Policy (2019) must be subjected to routine monitoring and evaluation to assess its implementation beyond academic contexts. While the policy articulates a commitment to multilingualism and language equity, its effectiveness should be judged by its impact across all spheres of student life—including access to psychological services. Monitoring should involve participatory evaluation methods, incorporating student voices to ensure that policy aspirations align with lived realities.

7.4.2 Training and Practice

One such reform should be the implementation of multilingual intake forms for students and targeted training programmes for intern-psychologists. These programmes should orient trainees to the sociolinguistic realities of the student body, particularly the cultural and linguistic diversity they will encounter in practice. This would not only enhance the interns' preparedness but also foster a more inclusive and empathetic approach to psychological care. Furthermore, Rhodes University should establish formal partnerships between its African Language Studies and the Counselling Centre. Such collaboration would allow for the inclusion of trained postgraduate students in translation and interpretation to support multilingual counselling services. This model has been shown in other contexts to improve linguistic access and bridge communication gaps in therapeutic settings (Brock-Utne & Skattum, 2009). Importantly, these partnerships would also contribute to the intellectualisation and practical application of African languages in higher domains. Only through such sustained, systemic engagement can the institution move toward realising a linguistically just and culturally responsive environment that supports the holistic well-being of all its students.

7.4.3 Future Research

Given that the mental health practitioners who participated in this study are intern psychologists with limited professional experience, future research would benefit from exploring the perspectives of more experienced psychologists who have been in the field for a longer period. This would offer deeper insight into how language influences therapeutic processes beyond the training phase. This study is based on the experiences and perspectives of psychologists but does not include an analysis of the structure or content of the Psychology curriculum and its modules. Therefore, future research could focus on training and curriculum development by investigating how language inclusivity is currently addressed in Psychology programmes across South African institutions. Such research could also explore how curricula can be improved to better equip future practitioners to work effectively with linguistically and culturally diverse clients.

7.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study set out to explore the language-related experiences of students and psychologists at the Rhodes University Student Counselling Centre, with a specific focus on how language practices, institutional policy, and professional training shape access to psychological services in a multilingual and culturally diverse context. Guided by three research questions, the study critically examined the intersection of language, culture, and psychological counselling within a higher education institution that proclaims a commitment to multilingualism. The findings revealed a complex and often disempowering landscape for African language-speaking students. Although these students may be functionally proficient in English, their counselling experiences are marked by linguistic anxiety, cognitive strain, and emotional withdrawal—consequences of being unable to fully express themselves in their preferred languages. The language practices within the counselling centre not only neglect the nuances of emotional expression tied to Mother Tongue use but also reflect deeper institutional power dynamics. English is the biggest proverbial white elephant in the psychological counselling room. It is not simply a medium of instruction or communication; it is embedded in the epistemological foundations of psychology training, institutional culture, and student support structures. Further, the Rhodes University Language Policy, while aspirational in its support of multilingualism, falls short in practice, particularly in non-academic domains such as psychological services. The prioritisation of isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and English aligns with regional language policies but inadvertently marginalises speakers of other African languages, highlighting a gap between policy rhetoric and lived reality. The broader implication of this study is that language is not merely a technical tool but a carrier of culture, identity, and epistemology. Addressing language-related barriers in student psychological services requires more than linguistic translation—it calls for a fundamental rethinking of institutional practices, curriculum design, and professional development. As a researcher, witnessing the linguistic constraints faced by students who are relatively proficient in English raises critical concerns about those with less access to the language of institutional power in the townships and rural areas. This thesis contributes to the growing body of work that makes a case for the intellectualisation of African languages, the transformation in higher education, and the decolonisation of psychological practice.

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Appendices

Appendix 1A: Recruitment email for Student Participants

Email Subject: Invitation to participate in a research project on Language and students' access to psychological support at a South African University: An Exploratory Case Study

Dear Students,

You've been invited to participate in a study titled: Language and Students' access to psychological support at Rhodes University: An exploratory case study. The intention is to explore the role of language in psychological support provision for students at Rhodes University. The study seeks to focus on how both the practitioners and students experience the role of language during professional sessions at the university's Counselling Centre. By agreeing to participate in this research, you will be contributing towards the promotion of multilingualism and creating an environment where language is not a barrier to equity of access. Participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The study is completely anonymous, your views and opinions will be kept confidential.

To participate, you must meet the following eligibility criteria:

- Speak one of South Africa's official African languages as a primary language/mother-tongue. E.g.- Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, isiNdebele, isiXhosa or isiZulu.
- Have used or are currently using the Rhodes University's counselling services at the Student Counselling Centre.

Participation in this study will involve completing a language centred demographic questionnaire and taking part in a language centred interview which will be recorded, the purpose of which is to ensure the accurate recording of your views/responses. The interviews

will be a one-time event, subject to your availability, comfort, and mental capacity to sustain the interview.

If you would like to participate, please reply to this email with **“I would like to participate”** to payigwen@gmail.com

A separate consent form will be provided to you and once you have signed the consent form you will be a participant in the study.

If you require further information please contact Gwen Payi (payigwen@gmail.com) or the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za)

Regards,

Gwen

Appendix 1B: Recruitment email for Psychologist Participants

Email Subject: Invitation to participate in a research project on **Language and students' access to psychological support at a South African University: An Exploratory Case Study**

Greetings,

I hope this email finds you well

My name is Gwen Payi, I am pursuing a Master's Degree in African Language studies at a South African University. I am inviting you to participate in my Master's research, titled: Language and students' access to psychological support at Rhodes University: An Exploratory Case Study. The intention is to explore the role of language in psychological support provision for students and Psychologists at Rhodes University. The study seeks to focus on how both the practitioners and students experience the role of language during professional sessions at the university's Counselling Centre. I am kindly asking you to complete a questionnaire and participate in a follow up interview which will form as the basis of my study. By agreeing to participate in this research, you will be contributing towards the promotion of multilingualism, transformation, and creating an environment where language is not a barrier to equity of access. The study is completely anonymous, your views and opinions will be kept confidential.

A separate consent form will be provided to you and once you have signed the consent form you will be a participant in the study.

For participation, please email "I would like to participate" to Gwen Payi (payigwen@gmail.com) 060 963 1903.

For any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me (payigwen@gmail.com) 060 963 1903.

Thank you for your time, I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Kind Regards,

Gwen Payi

Appendix 2A: Questionnaire for Student Participants

Follow the link below to access the questionnaire.

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1HMngvzSpq7OEne3tNLAzi18_7yW5lb3ZrhwlfmZR_dY/edit

Appendix 2B: Questionnaire for Psychologist Participants

Follow the link below to access the questionnaire.

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Y8MOdC1b0WNSIES2pE-Vk_Z2CgUeay_MtZ425QULiok/edit

Appendix 3 A: Interview Questions for Student Participants

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

Language and students' access to psychological support at a South African University: An Exploratory Case Study.

1. Language Related Schooling Experience:
 - a. Could you provide me with some language-related information regarding your educational background prior to attending Rhodes University? Which language was used at your school (s) for teaching and learning?
 - b. Which language or languages did you choose as Mother Tongue/HL? Which language or languages did you choose as additional (1st, or 2nd) ?
 - c. and why did you choose them?
 - d. which language do you personally consider as your Mother Tongue?
2. On the questionnaire, you indicated that you have made use of the Counselling Centre before. For how long have you made use of the counselling services?
3. On the questionnaire you stated that you are mostly proficient in **(name the languages)**, is the proficiency in both writing & speaking?
4. On the questionnaire you stated that you consider **(name the language)** as your Mother Tongue even though at school you studied **(name the language)** as MT/HL, why is that?
5. Was language preference negotiated when you were seeking psychological provision at the counselling centre? For example, maybe you had a discussion with the psychologist about the language you are most comfortable speaking or maybe even when you were still booking for a

service you were asked about the languages you speak and which language (s) you would like the counselling sessions to be facilitated in?

6. Have you ever felt uncomfortable discussing mental health issues in a language other than your Mother Tongue?

7. From your personal experience, did you experience any linguistic challenges or language barriers during the counselling sessions, can you please take me through that experience and also maybe include specific words, phrases, or sentences that you find it difficult expressing & articulating in a particular language?

8. Did you express that you are experiencing linguistic challenges? If the answer is no, why did you not?

9. How did you deal with the linguistic challenges?

10. How did the psychologist solve the challenge?

11. How would you have liked the psychologist to respond or deal with the linguistic challenges you were experiencing?

12. How did the language used by the psychologists affect your comfort and openness during sessions?

13. Has there ever been situations where you answered in one language while the psychologist spoke in another? Perhaps you react to a question they pose in one language while they ask it in another language.

14. From your personal experience, did you experience any culture related barriers during the counselling sessions? If you did, can you please take me through that experience.

15. Can you please take me through a time where you felt dismissed or misunderstood by a psychologist because of language or cultural issues or differences?

16. Which language or languages do you prefer your psychological provision to be facilitated in? Why?

17. Have you ever found your self having to discontinue or have actually discontinued counselling due language and cultural barriers

18. Would you say that language use affects or has affected your decision to continue seeking mental health services at the Counselling Centre?

19. Based on your experience, would you say that the counselling was effective overall, you received the assistance you needed?

20. Based on your experience of using the RU Counselling Centre, would you say that the counselling psychologists are sensitive and responsive to the cultural & linguistic needs of students?

Expectations and Recommendations:

21. What recommendations or suggestions would you give the Rhodes University Student Counselling Centre to better accommodate the linguistically and culturally diverse student body?

Appendix 3B: Interview Questions for Psychologist Participants

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

Language and students' access to psychological support at a South African University: An

Exploratory Case Study

1. Language Related Schooling Experience:
 - a. Could you provide me with some language-related information regarding your educational background prior to attending Rhodes University? Which language was used at your school (s) for teaching and learning?
 - b. Which language or languages did you choose as Mother Tongue/HL? Which language or languages did you choose as additional (1st, or 2nd)?
 - c. and why did you choose them?
 - d. which language do you personally consider as your Mother Tongue?
2. Can you describe your experience working with students who speak African languages? What are some common linguistic challenges you face during counselling with those students?
3. How do you address these challenges, and what strategies have you found most effective in overcoming language barriers during sessions?
4. Have you encountered situations where the language barrier significantly affected the therapeutic outcome or led to misunderstandings? If so, can you provide examples?
5. Have you ever used an interpreter or any other form of linguistic support for counselling?
6. Is language something that is negotiated or discussed with the students/patients before starting counselling sessions, in your experience working at the Counselling Centre?
7. What strategies do you use to manage language differences during therapy with students who speak African languages as their Mother Tongue?

8. Do students explicitly request therapy sessions in their Mother Tongue, and how do you respond to such requests when they arise?
9. How do you navigate situations where students might have limited proficiency in English but prefer not to disclose this?
10. Have you observed any particular language preferences from African language-speaking students during your sessions? If so, how do these preferences impact the therapeutic process?
11. Has there ever been situations where you asked a student a question in one language and they responded using another? Perhaps they react to a question you posed in one language while you asked in another language.
12. Are there any language selection standards for Psychologists employed by HPCSA and RU Counselling Centre, as far as you are aware?
13. During your training as a counselling psychologist, did the curriculum include Indigenous Knowledge Systems or address the use of African languages in psychological practice?
14. Have you had any formal training or support in working with students from diverse linguistic & cultural? If not, how do you prepare for such sessions?
15. How do you currently prepare, or how did you prepare in the past, to apply psychological concepts in languages other than English in practice?
16. Have you observed any particular language preferences from African language-speaking students during your sessions? If so, how do these preferences impact the therapeutic process?
17. Are there any differences in communication or comprehension when working with students whose first language is an African language versus those whose first language is English?
18. Would you say that the Psychology academic and professional training adequately equips you to provide psychological services to people from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, based on your experience and opinion?
19. Which language are you most comfortable using or prefer to use when rendering counselling services and why?

20. Overall, would you say that language plays a role in attaining effective access to psychological provision/mental health services?

Recommendations and Advice

21. What recommendations or suggestions would you give the Rhodes University Student Counselling Centre to better accommodate the linguistically and culturally diverse student body?

Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form



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PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION (To be signed by research participant/s)

Project Title: Language and students' access to psychological support at Rhodes University: An Exploratory Case Study

Gwen Payi from the School of Languages and Literature in the African Languages and Literature Studies Section at 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 explore the role of language in psychological support provision for students at Rhodes University. It seeks to focus on how both the practitioners and students experience the role of language during professional sessions at the university's Counselling Centre.
2. Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project (2024-7913-8897) 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:

Raising Awareness: The thesis can provide a deeper understanding of the role language plays in students' access to psychological support services. Raising awareness and pinpointing some of the challenges that language presents to receiving psychological services. By raising awareness of this, Rhodes University and possibly other universities may see advances in the way language is perceived and applied in psychological provision for linguistically and culturally diverse students.

Policy Implications: The research may have implications for policy development regarding language accessibility in psychological support services, potentially leading to improvements in institutional policies and practices.

Cultural Sensitivity: By exploring the intersection of language and psychological support, the
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ethics-committee@ru.ac.za t: +27 (0) 46 603 7314



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thesis can contribute to the development of more culturally sensitive approaches to mental health services, especially in multicultural or multilingual settings.

Equity: Creating an environment where language is not a barrier to equity of access.

Higher Education Transformation: This study may draw attention to the complicit nature of the language question in the sluggish higher education transformation processes not only regarding the academic project but also the institutional cultures.

4. I will participate in the project by completing a research questionnaire and taking part in an interview. The questionnaire will include a collection of demographic questions. The nature of the human interaction will be in the form of physical interviews which will be recorded, the purpose of which is to ensure the accurate recording of my views/responses. The interviews will be semi-structured and in-depth. The interviews will be a one-time event which will last between 30-60 minutes, subject to my availability, comfort, and mental capacity to sustain the interview.
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 will not be compensated for participating in the research, but my out-of-pocket expenses will be reimbursed.
7. The following risks are associated with my participation:
 - There is a possibility of evoking negative emotions and trigger. In a case where I become triggered and uncomfortable, I will be advised to discontinue with the interview, unless I specifically desire otherwise. I will be advised not to disclose –information of my counselling sessions.
8. The Researcher intends to publish the research results in the form of a Master's Degree Thesis. 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/recognize that as a public figure my identity will inevitably be/become known, in which case I agree to accept the loss of anonymity.*

Ethics Coordinator, Rhodes University Research Office,
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- 9. 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.
- 10. 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).
- 11. In terms of the POPI Act, I possess the right to receive feedback about this research. This will take the form of receiving access to the final thesis once it has been published through the Rhodes University digital repositories unless *I elect not to receive this feedback*.
- 12. Any further questions that I might have regarding the nature of the research and/or my participation in it will be answered by Gwen Payi (g17p4225@ru.ac.za).
- 13. 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.
- 14. 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. *Participant's Signature*.....

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.

Ethics Coordinator, Rhodes University Research Office,
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Appendix 5: Ethical Approval Certificate



Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee
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<https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/>
NHREC Registration number: RC-241114-045

11 September 2024

Ms Gwen Payi, ,

African Languages and Literature

Email: payigwen@gmail.com

Review Reference: 2024-7913-8897

Dear Ms Gwen Payi

Re: Language and students' access to psychological support at Rhodes University: An Exploratory Case study

Researcher: Ms Gwen Payi

Supervisor(s): Dr Melvin Ouma, Prof. Dion Nkomo

This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC). Your Approval number is: 2024-7913-8897

Approval has been granted for 1 year. An annual progress report will be required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the annual report is due.

Please apply for a protocol amendment should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators. Email your request to ethics-committee@ru.ac.za.

Please submit a brief report to the ethics committee on the completion of the research. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully, if any aspects could not be completed, or if any problems arose that the ethical standards committee should be aware of.

If a thesis or dissertation arising from this research is submitted to the library's electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) repository, please notify the committee of the date of submission and/or any reference or cataloguing number allocated.

Sincerely,

Dr Janet Hayward

Chair: Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC)