

From celebration to utilisation: How linguistic diversity can reduce epistemic inequalities

**Author:**

Marcus Grohmann^{1,2} 

Affiliation:

¹Jena Centre for Reconciliation Studies, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Jena, Germany

²Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Marcus Grohmann,
marcusgrohmann@sun.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 31 Aug. 2023

Accepted: 02 Oct. 2023

Published: 06 Feb. 2024

How to cite this article:

Grohmann, M., 2024, 'From celebration to utilisation: How linguistic diversity can reduce epistemic inequalities', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a2981.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.2981>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Working towards reconciliation, the undoing of structural inequalities and segregation often means transforming 'white spaces' into less white spaces, including but not restricted to Christian communities. However, it is often overlooked that greater representation of people of colour does not automatically challenge the epistemic authority that tends to rest with white people and/or Eurocentric knowledge systems.

This was the backdrop of a study carried out in a multi-'racial' South African congregation. The purpose was to understand how white people conceptualised and worked for reconciliation in a context they were culturally dominating. A constructivist grounded theory approach was used to generate and analyse data through ethnographic methods and relationship-based learning of isiXhosa.

This article presents the problem identified – the 'coloniality of knowledge' in 'reconciling' Christian communities. To challenge it and to render theologising more relevant in the intercultural contact zone, several concrete suggestions are subsequently made. They are focussed on creating environments favourable to embracing cultural-linguistic differences and to harnessing them for increased gospel relevance and epistemic equality. The value and the cost of such transformation will be discussed in the end with reference to the South African context.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Seeking relationships on the terms of the 'other' enables more profound ways of sharing different experiences of the gospel. This approach of decolonising theology can increase cultural and epistemic justice with implications for practical and systematic theology, mission and reconciliation studies, and research in general in cross-cultural settings.

Keywords: epistemologies; coloniality of knowledge; reconciliation studies; mission studies; multicultural church; REACH SA; decolonising theology; cultural linguistics; linguistic diversity; chosen vulnerability.

Introduction

With the advent of democracy, South Africa opted for a strategy of reconciliation to deal with the societal consequences of the colonial and particularly the apartheid era (Wüstenberg 2014). Ideals were – and mostly still remain – a 'non-racial' society (Alexander 2001) as well as increasing inclusion (Du Toit 2017:180). According to Grohmann (2023:5), many churches today – particularly in middle-class urban areas – regard it as their duty to contribute to the transformation of South Africa by following this vision.

Of course, such congregations would be experienced as more multicultural than others that have remained ethnically and culturally more homogeneous. Whether such lack of transformation is because of choice, location or capacity is another question. And yet, this integration-based 'reconciliation' in churches says little of the quality and the depth of transformation when it comes to what Kwenda described as 'cultural justice', that is a form of 'co-existence [which] is predicated on a degree of interaction that invokes the cultural worlds of the players, in essence, what they, in their distinctive ways, take for granted' (Kwenda 2003:69).

A case can be made for the 'coloniality of knowledge' (De Sousa Santos 2016) – an ongoing 'Western' dominance in the realm of epistemologies – to underlie much multi-ethnic togetherness in South African churches (Grohmann 2023:206; 40 f.). Unawareness and ignorance of this risks perpetuating rather than challenging existing inequalities that often run along 'racial' lines (Grohmann 2023:206).

This article is concerned with two questions: Firstly, with who does epistemic authority tend to rest, within a multicultural and multilingual church – not only but particularly in a post-apartheid South Africa? And secondly, how could it be more equally distributed? The basis for these considerations is formed by a recently completed PhD project in Cape Town. With an ethnographic approach, I studied white people's perspectives on 'racial' reconciliation in a multiethnic yet largely white-dominated church.

Generally, white people were found to show a desire to 'listen' to and learn from 'black brothers and sisters', about their lives in black communities, their experiences growing up, their faith journeys etc. Although conversations were supposed to bring better understanding and healing, the pattern whereby African language speakers by their choice of English kept adapting to those who wanted to 'reconcile' with them, still reflected the history of skewed intercultural relations in this country. Searching for redemptive alternatives to colonial domination, Erasmus and Garuba (2017) state that:

[T]he politics of language in contemporary South Africa challenges the idea that dialogue is the foundation for repairing its brutal history [...]. The evidence suggests the opposite: repair is the foundation for intersubjective dialogue. (p. 350)

In the following, it will become clear why these remarks are pertinent when we consider the nature of typical, supposedly multicultural churches in South Africa as well as the meaning and impact of the coloniality of knowledge. We will then concern ourselves with the potential of linguistic diversity before reflecting on several concrete ways it can be actualised in multiethnic settings, echoing the 'repairing' Erasmus and Garuba regard as prerequisite for restoration. The discussion will focus on the benefits of these suggestions as well as the potential costs for communities and individuals in South African contexts. It will be concluded that a paradigm-change towards seeking relationships with the 'underprivileged' on their own terms has far-reaching transformative potential.

Research design and methods

The project was situated at the intersection of reconciliation studies, cultural anthropology, sociology of religion, and linguistics.¹ It dealt with the overarching question of how white people in a multi-'racial', reformed evangelical Anglican church understood and worked for 'racial' reconciliation in a context where they seemed to be relatively influential: This 'dominance' was made out not only in their sheer numbers among the congregation or church leadership nor in the relative socio-economic positions of people. It was also seen at play with respect to language (the almost exclusive use of English), cultural practices, theology (primarily drawing on Western philosophical and theological traditions), and place (meeting in middle-class settings that were the norm for most white people but not necessarily for people of colour at the church). All of this, I subsumed under 'cultural dominance'.

1.This and the following two paragraphs are based on the Sections 1.2 and 1.3 in Grohmann (2023:11ff.).

The study sought to answer the questions, to what extent white people at the church were aware of their cultural dominance, how white people at the church imagined reconciliation considering their understanding of inter-cultural power relationships and lastly, in the light of their ideas about reconciliation, what reconciliation looked like practically for white people at the church. The goal was to reach a better understanding of reconciliation in contexts marked by coloniality, meaning the inherited unequal relations from colonial times in many spheres, which are not restricted to mere socio-economics. A more specific objective was to learn to what extent 'reconciling', progressively 'multicultural' (church) communities challenged or perpetuated structures of inequality.

A subsidiary study was undertaken in an isiXhosa-run African Initiated Church in a township, which allowed for the opportunity to experience church rooted in African rather than in Western traditions.

The research methodology² rested on the following pillars: a constructivist grounded theory approach, ethnographic methods as well as languaculture-learning.³ While the former assured a self-aware, iterative and concurrent analysis of the data, ethnography allowed for an exposure to and immersion in my research fields over a period of around 10 months. In the multiethnic church, apart from substantial participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the majority of the white adult regulars at the church as well as with the black junior pastor at the time. In the township church, no formal interviews were conducted. Data were collected from notes on participant observation and several clarifying conversations with the pastor, held in isiXhosa. As is common in qualitative studies and particularly in grounded-theory approaches, the analysis of all data involved software-based coding, constant comparisons, memo-writing, categorising, and theoretical sampling.

Working on the assumption of inequalities being partly rooted in the predominance of English, from the beginning of my research project I made an effort to learn isiXhosa as the dominant black South African language in the province. This enabled me to progressively engage with people speaking isiXhosa. Together with the regular sessions with my isiXhosa tutors, the time spent at the township church led to an increasing awareness of cultural-linguistic differences. This resulted in a subsidiary concept study of isiXhosa-English term pairs, which illustrated the potentially misleading nature of translation as well as possible and actual implications of the dominance of English in a multicultural church. For this study, four isiXhosa home language speakers were interviewed; both the interviews and the data analysis were conducted in isiXhosa.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their identities anonymised, for example by using pseudonyms.

2.This and the following paragraph draw on Chapter 3 in Grohmann (2023:47ff.).

3.Languaculture is a concept developed by the linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar. It highlights the ways in which the languages people use are inextricably intertwined with how they understand the world and live their lives (Agar 2002:60; 135ff.).

Western dominance in 'multicultural' South African churches

There are many examples – even in denominations that used to be known to be 'overwhelmingly white' like REACH SA⁴ (Balcomb 2004:15) – of 'racial' integration nowadays being part of the everyday experience in urban churches. One often speaks of 'celebrating' one's cultural diversity or the different cultures. In practice, this includes having people of different 'racial' backgrounds represented in various forms of church gatherings and church offices, in seeking relationships marked by equality and respect even outside church gatherings as well as by including songs in a variety of languages. These are typically translated into English on screen or combined with verses in English in the same song.

All of the above was certainly the case in the multiethnic congregation in which the field research of this study was carried out. It partly reflected the essence of what 'racial' reconciliation meant to white people at the church: the double goal of increasing equality and seeking 'racial' integration to overcome the divisions and hierarchies of the past and establish a community marked by inter-'racial' and multicultural togetherness. In terms of their 'racial reconciliation', the church was also regarded as dangerously progressive by some within their theologically conservative and historically white denomination. The extent was such that it was suggested they were too boldly tackling issues of 'racial' reconciliation and risking the harmony in the church by providing platforms to discuss issues of historical injustices (e.g. Interview Lillian, 26/11/2019). Indeed, engaging the South African legacy inside and outside of church entangled with personal stories and a variety of theological emphases did not go without conflict and some people left the church for different reasons prior to my field research. Despite these difficulties, the church leadership was adamant that such disagreements, frustrations or difficulties mustn't be deterrents in the congregation's quest of being an agent of healing and reconciliation after the apartheid era:

... [S]ometimes you are bashing your head against the wall, make no mistake, but it is, it is a worthy thing to desire, reconciliation, because that is what Christ did, he died for. (Interview with church elder Jeremy, 20/09/2019)

Nevertheless, a good number of the white people I interviewed made remarks such as the following when it came to describing their experience at the church, it was said to have:

'a western mind-set rather than an African mind-set'. (Interview Elisabeth, 10/11/2019)

'a white feel' (Interview Leo, 11/11/2019), there were certain 'ways of doing things'. (Interview Henry, 17/05/2019)

4. The Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church in South Africa, formerly known as CESA (Church of England in South Africa).

'a white context' (Interview Pamela, 22/08/2019), 'all the unspoken stuff that's hard to put your finger on'. (Interview Erika, 24/05/2019)

'a white lingua franca, it's a white style. It's the thought leaders and the sort of the whole context'. (Interview Jonathan, 27/05/2019)

How come a church that is able to display such a measure of cultural 'diversity' can be described in these terms?

Part of the answer is that the approach to reconciliation by white people at this increasingly multi-'racial' church is based on a stance which can be called 'Hope for transformation from within'. This attitude:

... [I]s based on a commitment to racial reconciliation and transformation. It acknowledges a responsibility for white Christians in South Africa to bridge cultural as well as socio-economic gaps to overcome the divisions of the past while being conscient of possible limitations. What is significant about 'Hope for transformation from within' is that it tries to change power relationships by altering existing – white dominated – structures rather than seeing white people becoming a minority in a black-instituted structure as a viable alternative. It therefore defines both the kind of change that people would like to see happening and the boundaries within which such change is conceivable or desirable and beyond which it is not. (Grohmann 2023:112f.)

If control is not abandoned or handed over but, in some way, retained, significant cultural transformation in the way church is understood, lived out and experienced is unlikely to happen. John Flett (2016) in his seminal work 'Apostolicity' points in a similar direction. He writes:

... [W]hile ecumenical theory may appear to cherish 'diversity', it does so insofar as this illustrates the supposed a priori universality of the church as experienced in the West [...] Diversity, especially when defined in the narrow terms of gift, is cherished to the extent that it reinforces and does not intrude on the specific Western cultural heritage of the universal church. (p. 182)

The two limitations identified in 'Hope for transformation from within' were the interconnected boundaries of language and theology. Whereas language and culture were indeed often acknowledged as central to people's receiving, understanding and practicing of theology, the perhaps paradoxical conclusion was reached that in a multilingual context, the almost exclusive use of English was justified. At the same time:

[C]ultural diversity [was] regarded as subordinate to theological orthodoxy. In this view, cultural diversity and theological orthodoxy can – at least at times – constitute mutually exclusive categories. (Grohmann 2023:123)

This attitude concealed the fact that the dominant theology at the church was itself rooted in certain epistemological and cultural traditions that did precisely *not* draw on Black or African theologies but on those of neo-Calvinist origins in the West.

Taking into account these related attitudes towards language use and theology is central in understanding how church

practice in similar congregations is often marked by a 'coloniality of knowledge'. In the following section, this coloniality of knowledge will be explained as to its pertinence to church environments.

Decoloniality and the coloniality of knowledge

The notion of coloniality refers to persisting consequences of the period of formal colonialism which, in Maldonado-Torres' words, had created a 'logic, metaphysics, ontology, and matrix of power [that is] intrinsically tied to what is called "Western civilization" and "Western modernity"' (Maldonado-Torres 2016:10). The 'patterns of power, control and hegemonic systems of knowledge that rationalized colonial domination' (Stroud & Kerfoot 2021:20) are understood to have created long-lasting imbalances that continue to privilege the former colonising nations.

The 'project' of decoloniality seeks to 'critique [...] the failures of Eurocentred modernity [assuming] the perspectives and life experiences of peoples from the Global South as points of departure' (Veronelli 2015:109). Despite the wide traction it gained in Latin America, Africa and beyond, this 'project' has also been criticised for its lack of nuance (Cheah 2006), and its simple West/non-West dichotomies and essentialism (Vickers 2020). Moreiras even saw in the 'decolonial option [...] not a democratic critique of imperial reason' but rather 'an imperial critique of imperial reason' or even 'a colonial critique of colonial reason' (Moreiras 2012:231), amounting to 'political theology' (Moreiras 2012:235). This critical evaluation of decolonial theory is important. However, it does not render a careful and balanced consideration of power imbalances in concrete contexts obsolete. Such is the purpose for the remainder of this article.

One of the several strands coloniality is commonly classified in is the coloniality of knowledge.⁵ The main problem here in which the West exerts power over others is that knowledge is taken to be universal and potentially complete rather than perspectival and of necessity, incomplete (De Sousa Santos 2016:201). By privileging Western, secular, scientific ways of knowing, other epistemologies are rendered absent or non-existent in Santos words (De Sousa Santos 2016:172, 174), resulting in epistemic monocultures and therefore 'epistemic injustice' (Stroud & Kerfoot 2021:21). A certain approach to translation is instrumental in that, mistaking it for 'a neutral medium for the transmission and reception of pre-existing knowledge [rather than] the key ingredient in the very constitution of knowledge' (Jaworski & Coupland 2014:3). Indigenous knowledges could thus be translated into colonial languages and claims made to the universality of knowledge (Stroud & Kerfoot 2021:23), concealing the fact that such supposedly universal knowledge had been constructed through the categories and frames available in European language systems.

5. Two other prominent subsets of coloniality, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013:11 f.), are the 'coloniality of power' and the 'coloniality of being'. Veronelli (2015), pertinent for the topic under consideration here, also adds the 'coloniality of language'. As it is intrinsically interwoven with the coloniality of knowledge, it is not given separate attention here.

In the following, I would like to illustrate how this abstract rendering of the problem finds practical expressions in the life of institutions that base their transformation on inclusion into a system where such coloniality of knowledge is found.

At this point, we need to take note of the following: If we are serious about this critique, we need to have the self-awareness to see how it impacts our centres of learning and our academic discourses as well. Echoing Santos, my using of English in this article could mean a marginalisation or production as absent of perspectives that are based on languacultures other than a Western English one – at least if what I am saying purported to be universally valid and universally accessible knowledge. Not wanting to simply settle for the coloniality that is embedded in such ways of thinking, I acknowledge the limitations of presenting my argument based on Eurocentric English to a languaculturally diverse readership. Considering the issues at stake from a different languacultural perspective is likely to result in different perspectives, engagement with which is of great value.

Besides these academic contexts, the coloniality of knowledge is of course relevant to the realm of faith-based communities that feature a diversity of cultures, in our case, churches. Against the backdrop of apartheid-era segregation, unity across 'racial' divides is often given a lot of emphasis in churches wanting to be truer to what they regard as the mandate of the church in places such as South Africa – a 'this-worldly' reflection of St. John's vision of the great multitude before the heavenly throne with people 'from every nation, tribe, people and language' (Rv 7:9). And indeed, in a miniature version this exists of course in many places as people worship in culturally diverse settings. Furthermore, this diversity is often *acknowledged* as well, be it by greetings in people's languages, by songs, instruments – although all of that usually has to fit into a Western framework – or by having people from different backgrounds in various leadership positions. When it comes to the practice of 'languaging',⁶ though, English commonly takes precedence. Sermons are preached in English, in Bible studies it is usually taken for granted that the discussions are based on English versions of scripture, and prayer – especially in group contexts – is practiced in English only in a consecutive, 'orderly' manner.⁷

As was mentioned earlier, the boundaries of language have an effect on what can be said – just like the boundaries of theology. In defining what counts as orthodox, cultural diversity is effectively being limited – to the extent that languacultures differ in their understanding, making sense of and responses to reality. At this stage, there is no need to discuss diverging convictions between different church

6. Veronelli understands 'languaging' as a way of thinking in which language is not already thought as a finished product but, rather, as an ongoing and situated activity' (Veronelli 2015:121). Language is thus seen as fundamentally relational and process-oriented, not something one possesses.

7. A key argument advanced for this form of prayer which is part of evangelical traditions is that whatever is done in a church service is meant 'to build up' the church. This need, Kroesbergen (2019:15) suggests, is not as keenly felt in black congregations who, being rooted in *ubuntu* traditions, do not have to build up community as "community" is commonly regarded as the point of departure for everything else' (Grohmann 2023:173).

traditions. Rather, I would like to give an example how this implicit insistence on English can lead to a stifling of healthy debate in a theological context – as is likely to be the case in many non-religious settings as well. We will look at a rule the denomination REACH SA laid down for its member churches:

Its handbook emphasises that ‘in terms of 1 Timothy 2:12 it is not permissible for a woman to preach in a Church service’ (REACH SA 2014:17). At the same time, one professes to highly value the role of women, and indeed, women do play a central role in the community and in church services, for example by public reading of Scripture and giving testimonies. People from certain isiXhosa-speaking churches may find this practice inconsistent. Preaching in isiXhosa is often referred to as *ukushumayela*. Being used as a translation, however, doesn’t mean that *ukushumayela* is an equivalent of ‘to preach’. As ‘giving testimonies’ (*ukungqina*) can be subsumed under *ukushumayela* (just as ‘prophesying’), allowing women to do the one but denying them to do the other may not make much sense (Grohmann 2023:174ff.). Furthermore, Chapter 2 of the gospel of Luke in the isiXhosa Bible presents Hannah as a prominent woman who is presented as *umshumayeli* – a term that would commonly be translated into English as a ‘preacher’. Being restricted to using English in multicultural contexts, it can be difficult for speakers of African languages to engage theological arguments that challenge their languaculturally based understanding of Scripture in this matter. Epistemic authority rests with those who are privileged by the fact that their home language happens to be the lingua franca of the church (Stroud & Kerfoot 2021:20; Venter 1998: 33). Truth being implicitly regarded as universal and universally translatable, what is truth in English consequently has to be truth for everyone.

This is a problem both for reconciliation and for theological relevance. For reconciliation it is problematic insofar as reconciliation’s intention includes a levelling of inherited power hierarchies. The assumed universalism embedded in the coloniality of knowledge makes it hard for people here to even see power as an issue. Rather, English is experienced as a leveller of hierarchies, not as an institution that upholds them. Pointing out a possible legitimacy of deviating theological convictions can be understood as undermining the foundations of the church by opening the door to arbitrary relativism. By keeping this door shut, though, for the sake of the protection of truth that people perceive so clearly in Scripture (in their own language), the ‘reconciliation’ of a community essentially depends on terms set by those who have epistemic authority – and do not realise that others are prevented from having it in the same way because of one language being privileged over others (Grohmann 2023:150f.).

The other consequence of the coloniality of knowledge in a church context is that theology lacks in relevance to certain speech communities. For theology contextual to the Anglo-American world to be relevant to those outside the ‘West’, what is required is a measure of assimilation into Western ways of thinking and perceiving the world. On a sidenote, this would arguably be true for large parts of African education systems

as well. If English based on secularist, Western assumptions is the context from which Scripture is read and understood, and at the same time the reality of contextual differences cannot be perceived – literally – for a lack of words in another language, what will be communicated will be contextual to the West and not to Africa (Harries 2018; Tshehla 2002).

This is illustrated by an issue uncovered by Dion Forster in his study on the divergent understanding of forgiveness between research participants who were white and others of colour. The latter emphasised a kind of forgiveness that was contingent on the conditions for forgiveness to be met in the community, that is it had an aspect of social transformation and ‘tangible expressions of remorse’ at its core (Forster 2018:83). On the contrary, white people tended to prioritise the spiritual dimension of forgiveness: After acknowledging to have been a beneficiary of apartheid, righting one’s relationship with God could be regarded as sufficient to ‘move on’ from a painful past (Forster 2018:84). Forster’s study did point out differences in the groups’ intersubjective orientations as a possible explanation for this divergence. The misunderstanding then serves as an indication for differences that can appear as symptoms in the form of disagreements. The supposedly shared language of English here conceals different ontologies. By prioritising English, they are produced as absent, in Santos’ words.

Let us consider the case of isiXhosa here: The word commonly translated as ‘to ask for forgiveness’ is *ukuxolisa*. ‘To forgive’ would be *ukuxolela* accordingly. These two words have a common root in *uxolo*, which is mostly translated as ‘peace’. Orthographically, this connection doesn’t exist between the English words ‘forgive’ and ‘peace’. Looked at from a Western English perspective, it seems likely, though, that in isiXhosa *ukuxolisa* (‘to ask for forgiveness’) – through its inherent link to the notion of ‘peace’ – comes with a much more comprehensive understanding of what is required for a request to be forgiven to be granted. Restricting discussions on forgiveness to English in a community that includes those of and others not of Western or English backgrounds risks riding roughshod over understandings that are based on different cultural–linguistic categories. Even if it can be acknowledged that isiXhosa might conceptualise, for example, ‘forgiveness’ differently, these differences are invisibilised, eclipsed, if English ends up being the platform where everybody meets. The concept in question will then be ‘forgiveness’, not *uxolelwano*. To ignore that risks perpetuating coloniality.

The suburban church environments that I was privileged to do research in had the vision to impart ‘solid’ theological understanding with relevance to whoever attended their gatherings. Not considering that their unnoticed ‘linguistic supremacy [carried] with it conceptual and normative prevalence’ (De Sousa Santos 2016:233), white people ended up inadvertently undermining objectives they were determined to sacrificially strive for in their quest for reconciliation, namely equality and cultural diversity.

Utilising linguistic diversity can reduce epistemic inequalities

The importance of linguistic diversity therefore exceeds the acknowledgement of people's heritages and their presence in an otherwise - practically speaking - monolingual space. Such acknowledgement is what is often framed as a 'celebration' of people's cultures (e.g. Interview Charlotte, 20/09/2019), upholding equality as a theological reality. Consider for example, the words of Amos:

In a church context I would say [reconciliation is] recognised in that these ['cultural others'] are my brothers and sisters in Christ and that we are equal image bearers, sinful image bearers saved by grace. (Interview Amos, 12/11/2019)

Unquestionably, the intention of moving towards a community where this equality before God becomes part of the lived experience of all is honourable and important. Nevertheless, the celebration of linguistic diversity falls short of realising this ambition if it is not matched by actually drawing on languacultures other than English and indeed, creating an environment where these can be acknowledged as having epistemic authority. If epistemic authority in a multicultural setting rests with English alone, central objectives of reconciliation and transformation are thwarted by keeping hierarchies of coloniality intact. Transformation of this kind might produce 'racial' integration but would lack equity and equality. It would equally hinder the transformative power of the gospel – both for those who are pressured into assimilation and for those who are prevented from deep intercultural learning because of the suppression of languacultural difference.

Van Wyngaard (2013) sketched David Bosch's uneasiness with liberation theology and his vision for and calling of the church to be an 'alternative community' as it radically sides with the poor and oppressed. Whereas his 'alternative community' was found to be 'standing close to the liberation movement', 'Bosch consistently fails to provide a concrete analysis concerning how this theological vision of a reconciled community would have an effect on the actual sociological liberation of people' writes Van Wyngaard (2013:92).⁸ Realising or practising linguistic diversity to a greater extent carries the potential of undermining epistemic hierarchies, inequalities and dependence. Because of that, it might be considered as an element that could fill the void made out in Bosch's understanding of the alternative community as being able to contribute to liberation holistically – without having to pay allegiance to a certain political project perceived by Bosch to be outside of the calling of the church.

Some may object and ask: Wouldn't an actual utilisation of linguistic diversity of necessity lead to renewed segregation? Isn't the coming together under one language a price we should happily be willing to pay for the overcoming of the divisions of the past?

8. Drawing on Conradie (2011:93).

Yes, this price may have to be paid at times to enable a measure of relationship building in languaculturally diverse contexts. We should, however, be more keenly aware of its limitations and strive for alternatives. Although the following suggestions cannot claim to fully resolve the problem,⁹ they do come with the potential of deepening cultural integration while seeking to reduce and counter coloniality.

How to challenge the coloniality of knowledge and to render theologising more relevant in the intercultural contact zone

To offset the shortcomings of an English monoculture in multicultural and theoretically multilingual South African settings, I would like to make three concrete suggestions. For the purposes of this article, they will be contextualised to church congregations.

Learning to practice equivocality in multilingual spaces

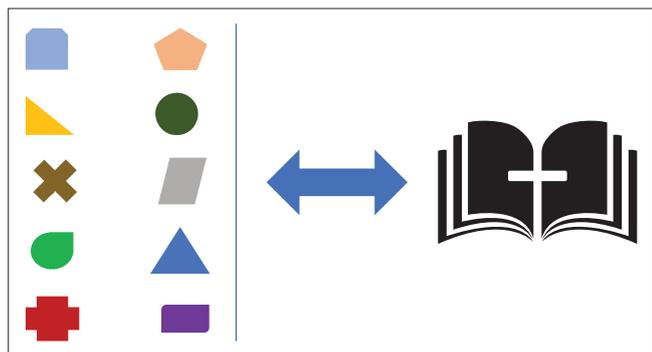
Equivocality takes into account the existence of multiple ways of perceiving and interacting with the world, which find expression in language. By expecting and being willing to learn about conceptual difference rather than taking conceptual similarity for granted, 'ontological dominance' (Stroud & Kerfoot 2021:28) can be countered. Viveiros De Castro (2004), promoting intercultural communication that is based on equivocality emphasises that through equivocality ...:

... [T]ranslation becomes an operation of differentiation – a production of difference – that connects the two discourses to the precise extent to which they are *not* saying the same thing, in so far as they point to discordant exteriorities beyond the equivocal homonyms between them. (p. 20, emphasis in original)

In a church context, to make it concrete, this could mean having Bible study meetings where people feel free to study the texts in versions of Scripture in their home languages. Through a multilingual reading of Scripture, the focus of discussion could now move from understanding 'the original meaning of the text' and 'its meaning for us today' to 'the meaning of the text read from my languacultural vantage point' and 'its meaning for those sharing my languacultural assumptions'. This is illustrated by Figure 1 and Figure 2. The differently shaped and coloured objects stand for the culturally and linguistically diverse congregation. In Figure 1, it engages with Scripture in a uniform, horizontal way. Practised equivocality transforms this into a circular engagement with Scripture and with each other, as depicted in Figure 2.

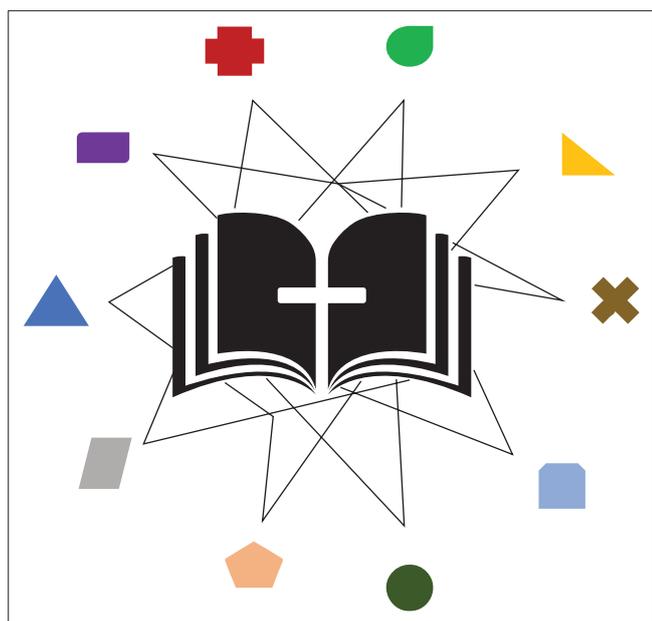
With this changed orientation, the multicultural character of the space could become more tangible. The learning in respect of theology would truly develop a more intercultural character. The pressure to conform to a supposedly universal

9. Sections 2.5 and 9.2 in Grohmann (2023) suggest that the concept of 'association from a distance' (Wrogemann 2016) could go even further than what is proposed here. Association from a distance can reconcile unity and plurality more fully. It does so through modesty (acknowledging the limitations of one's togetherness in cases of far-reaching diversity) and – during encounters – embracing the terms of the 'other' out of appreciation. This does not preclude critical engagement. It thus has the potential of complementing more well-known strategies of reconciliation.



Note: The differently shaped and coloured objects stand for the culturally and linguistically diverse congregation.

FIGURE 1: Uniform, horizontal engagement with scripture.



Note: The differently shaped and coloured objects stand for the culturally and linguistically diverse congregation.

FIGURE 2: Equivocal, circular engagement with scripture.

norm based on English (or white Afrikaans¹⁰) would considerably lessen. Epistemic authority would be more equally distributed as it comes to light that the perspectives shared are in fact emic and context-specific – not acontextual or transcultural.

In a church context, there are of course also other areas where equivocality could be imagined. In communal prayer, having people pray in their heart languages rather than conforming to an ‘Anglonormativity’ (Christie & McKinney 2017:166), possibly coupled with the mode of mass prayer, would allow for the experience of cultural difference within Christian community (cf. Grohmann 2023:169ff.). In preaching, a sermon based on exegesis – and possibly, with translation, preached – in an African language would mean an automatic engagement with African contextual matters and liberate the preaching from an inadvertent privileging of Western

10. I use this term to distinguish it from Kaaps, a variety of Afrikaans that is indigenous particularly to the coloured population of the Cape Flats. Stroud and Kerfoot (2021, 31ff.) write about how a conscious move to decolonise Afrikaans entail the self-confident adoption of the term ‘Afrikaaps’ for this language variety to signal its equality in status with Afrikaans (cf. Grohmann, 2023: 202).

thought. Equivocality in teaching would prioritise dialogue with the diversity of languacultural perspectives of the issues at stake over the transmitting of supposedly universally accessible and understandable content. In relationship-building in the absence of a shared functionality in an indigenous language, equivocality could – at the very least – translate into ‘epistemic humility’. This would mean realising one’s limitations in cross-cultural meaning-making in an apparently shared language.

Of course, the aforementioned would require an openness to changing old ways. It could be encouraged by realising that equivocation – or the practice of ‘translating by not translating’ but juxtaposing concepts and terms from different languacultural backgrounds – promises greater depth in cross-cultural relationships. It may, however, also cause some frustration at times, especially when the erstwhile taken for granted similarity at times appears to morph into a measure of incommensurability. This is why Stroud and Kerfoot point out the experience of vulnerability as a potentially central and transformative emotion that needs to be owned: moving towards epistemic justice and multicultural equality would of necessity involve ‘establishing [a certain] ethical relationship [namely], an ethics of “becoming with others”’ (Stroud & Kerfoot 2021:37). However, the reverse is true as well: A change of approach from (others) ‘becoming with me/us’ to (I/we) ‘becoming with others’ is an embodiment of transformation which despite or because of the experience of vulnerability on the part of the otherwise dominant can contribute to the ‘repair’ that Erasmus and Garuba suggested was needed as a ‘foundation for intersubjective dialogue’ (Erasmus & Garuba 2017:350).

For some, to learn African languages through deep cultural exposure

The second suggestion is that *some* white people or those steeped in Western traditions and languages should strive to learn African languages through deep cultural exposure.¹¹ Whereas the first proposal aimed at increasing epistemic variety, this one could contribute to creating an environment favourable to the appreciation of more cultural difference. At the same time, it might be an option for some committed people who find that their communities struggle with the proposed changes and want to radically deepen their cross-cultural understanding regardless.

Why should some linguistically dominant people thoroughly learn African languages? Several key reasons can be advanced. To start with, it serves to develop the necessary awareness for the conceptual world inhabited by people from different languacultural backgrounds (Krog, Morris & Tonkin 2010:22). Because a key reason for the invisibility or incomprehensibility of differences lies in using a language that is shared only at first sight, one needs to learn based on

11. Note that despite the broader challenge of ‘racial reconciliation’, the suggestions in this section are not primarily about ‘race’. They are concerned with people rooted in different epistemological traditions that may often but do not on principal always correlate with the formerly constructed racial boundaries.

the cultural-linguistic foundations of the people one wants to build deeper relationship with (cf. the examples of 'preaching' and 'forgiving' above).

Another argument for needing to do the hard work oneself is that it is unrealistic and perhaps also unfair to always rely on 'cultural others' to be our primary informers of cultural differences and potential dominance. Power dynamics may stand in our way, some aspects of culture may better not be spoken about, differences may even go unnoticed to the other side and lastly, if it is the desire of the 'privileged' to grow in understanding of the 'other', the former should take more responsibility in order to move towards such growth.

The final reason concerns the purpose of deepening cross-cultural understanding. Unawareness of differences often leads to patterns of dominance that most would agree are undesirable. Having some 'privileged' people in a given community or network who have contextual knowledge of those with less influence, can help others with privilege and power to become aware and more conscious of their dominance, make adjustments and in this way become allies of those at the margins (cf. Greenfield 2022:62).

What does learning through deep cultural exposure mean? The kind of languaculture learning that is proposed here is not a hobby. Although it may also be pleasurable at times, it requires long-term commitment and stamina and is essentially a lifestyle-choice. A textbook or a classroom cannot teach one how language is actually used, how words are understood as they relate to concrete experiences in everyday life. Therefore, if the goal is an ever-deepening cross-cultural understanding, regularly spending time in contexts where the respective language is spoken is crucial, as is learning to rely on communication in that language. This, even if done part-time, but on a long-term basis, can yield results that to a large extent offset the coloniality of knowledge (cf. Grohmann 2023:186f.).

For 'Westerners', to use African languages exclusively where possible

Building on the previous suggestion, some white people or those steeped in Western traditions, based on their growing competency in an African language, should attempt to use it exclusively in interaction with people from the respective speech communities, for example in personal relationships, social visits, discipleship, mentoring or teaching. By doing so, one would truly be building on ways – in Kwenda's words – 'that invoke [...] the cultural worlds of the players [and] what they, in their distinctive ways, take for granted' (Kwenda 2003:69). This would mean *acting* on the realisation of the often-present coloniality of knowledge – and choosing to avoid or to counter it. Through framing interactions in indigenous categories, the learner-speaker accepts the role of a guest and acknowledges the epistemic authority of the languacultural host. To be convincing and relevant in their speaking, those outsiders communicating on indigenous terms have to find ways to make themselves understood that make sense from an emic perspective. The acknowledgement of this challenge

alone should be sufficient to make people realise the necessity of language-learning in cross-cultural contexts. If it's hard to make oneself understood based on indigenous categories, why do we so often take it for granted that it is easier if indigenous language speakers choose or are forced to communicate in the dominant English language that, in its Western variety, does not share the same categories and cultural conceptualisations with their home language (cf. Sharifian 2017:168f.)?

Discussion: The impact of utilising linguistic diversity

How exactly would these various suggestions impact the nature, structure, vision and practice of a given congregation or denomination? I want to be careful not to become overly prescriptive – a weakness often inherent in so-called 'social-restorationist' approaches to reconciliation (cf. Du Toit 2018:141; Grohmann 2023:16). Rather, I'd like our thoughts to be guided by the realisation that oftentimes our intercultural togetherness is built on epistemic inequalities. Our vision of human and interhuman flourishing and of seeing more and more glimpses of God's kingdom being realised needs to be guided by a commitment to include in it as an integral part Kwenda's notion of 'cultural justice', referred to in the introduction.

As was shown in Grohmann (2023), the reliance on a commonly shared language such as English can lead to a perpetuation of Western dominance even in a congregation that is committed to working towards reconciliation based on the notions of equality, equity and 'racial' integration. Of course, moving from a celebration to a utilisation of linguistic diversity comes at a cost. Not only will it challenge the comfortable belief that understanding and agreement is generally possible when everyone speaks the dominant language. It can also expose the fallacy that what is considered to be orthodox belief is or has to be disconnected from cultural-linguistic perspectives (Harries 2017).¹² What is generally regarded as true in one language doesn't have to be true from the perspective of a different languaculture. Ignorance of this risks ending up in cultural dominance. On the one hand, this can cause a measure of discomfort among those who usually find themselves in dominant positions, theologically speaking. On the other hand, it can be of great benefit to them if practiced linguistic diversity leads to a deeper acknowledgment and appreciation of God's work in different cultural contexts. It can help the 'privileged' to understand how matters of truth and 'correct belief' can be engaged if people speak, think and act on different assumptions.

This can be amplified by white people or those from Western epistemological backgrounds making serious efforts at gaining proficiency in African languages and actually using them. Experiencing first hand that epistemic authority can be located differently if one communicates in a language not one's own can be transformative for

¹²See Garner (2012) for a proponent of this suggested, mandated disconnect or absolute pre-eminence of Scriptural authority over cultural proclivities.

everyone involved, including the observing communities of the language-learners. Interacting with African-language speakers on their cultural-linguistic terms and in relation to their respective contexts can deepen one's understanding of the gospel working in particular contexts and traditions in ways unattainable by English. The same is true for making intelligible and relevant contributions to these contexts.

Given the societal realities of contemporary South Africa, it is likely, however, that intentional and costly adjustments need to be made in one's lifestyle, possibly one's living standard, habits, expectations, norms, usual standard of safety and even beliefs if one earnestly seeks to learn language by exposing oneself to communities and churches where this language of choice is predominantly spoken. Here, congregations or communities could play a vital role in finding ways to encourage and enable such 'chosen vulnerability'.

Conclusion

We have highlighted the nature of epistemic inequalities in multicultural churches based on Eurocentric traditions. If equality and equity are indeed the sought-after foundation for togetherness in the post-segregation era, it was suggested that a mere celebration of cultural and particularly linguistic diversity is not enough. The reliance on a supposedly shared language such as English ignores the ways in which our language use is always shaped by cultural conceptualisations arising from the diversity of our cultural contexts. Equivocality was presented as a way out of the coloniality of knowledge trap, supported by the efforts of some "Westerners" to learn African languages and use the acquired languages in interactions with members of these speech groups. How exactly such a move from the 'celebration' to the 'utilisation' of African languages would play out in the life of concrete congregations and their relationships outside the church was purposefully left open. We can conclude that despite and partly also *because* of the costs involved for the 'privileged', such an approach to intercultural togetherness comes with enormous transformative potential (see also Grohmann 2020:153f.). The paradigm-change I am suggesting is for relationships to be sought on the terms of those who are often marginalised in different ways. It can rectify epistemic inequalities and contribute even to reconciliation in a different and more profound way.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exist.

Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural

Sciences, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Germany, and ethics consent was received on 15/04/2019. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study. The ethics approval number is FSV 19/23.

Funding information

The author is a postdoctoral research fellow funded by Stellenbosch University in the discipline group of Practical Theology & Missiology.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available because of their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants and are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author and the publisher.

References

- Agar, M., [1994] 2002, *Language shock: Understanding the culture of conversation*, William Morrow, New York, NY.
- Alexander, N., 2001, 'Prospects for a nonracial future in South Africa', in C.V. Hamilton, L. Huntley, N. Alexander, et al. (eds.), *Beyond racism. Race and inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States*, pp. 471–489, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, MA.
- Balcomb, A., 2004, 'From apartheid to the new dispensation: Evangelicals and the democratization of South Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34(1/2), 5–38. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006604323056705>
- Cheah, P., 2006, 'The limits of thinking in decolonial strategies', *Townsend Newsletter*, November/December, pp. 9–11.
- Christie, P. & McKinney, C., 2017, 'Decoloniality and "model C" schools: Ethos, language and the protests of 2016', *Education as Change* 21(3), 160–180. <https://doi.org/10.17159/1947-9417/2017/2332>
- Conradie, E.M., 2011, 'Missiology and soteriology: The power and limits of a multidimensional approach', *Missionalia* 39(1/2), 82–98.
- De Castro, E.V., 2004, 'Perspectival anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation', *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2(1), 3–22.
- De Sousa Santos, B., 2016, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*, Routledge, London.
- Du Toit, F., 2017, 'A broken promise? Evaluating South Africa's reconciliation process twenty years on', *International Political Science Review* 38(2), 169–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512115594412>
- Du Toit, F., 2018, *When political transitions work: Reconciliation as interdependence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Erasmus, Z. & Harry G., 2017, 'The South African Error: Restorative Justice sans Social Recompense', in K. Lefko-Everett, R. Govender & D. Foster (eds.), *Rethinking Reconciliation, Evidence from South Africa*, pp. 337–352, HSRC Press, Cape Town.
- Flett, J.G., 2016, *Apostolicity: The ecumenical question in world Christian perspective*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL.
- Forster, D.A., 2018, 'Translation and a politics of forgiveness in South Africa? What black Christians believe, and white Christians do not seem to understand', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4(2), 77–93. <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a04>
- Garner, D.B., 2012, 'High stakes: Insider movement hermeneutics and the gospel', *Themelios* 37(2), 249–274. <https://doi.org/10.1097/RLU.0b013e318242010c>

- Greenfield, C., 2022, *Subversive mission: Serving as outsiders in a world of need*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Grohmann, M., 2020, 'A foolish proposal? Vulnerability as an alternative attempt to contribute to decolonisation and reconciliation in post-colonial South Africa', *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 37(2), 140–159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820910452>
- Grohmann, M., 2023, *Seeking reconciliation in a context of coloniality: A study of white people's approaches in a multicultural South African Church*, (Re-)konstruktionen – Internationale und Globale Studien, Springer VS, Wiesbaden.
- Harries, J., 2017, 'Western theology in Africa: Christian mission in the light of the undermining of scientific hegemony', *International Review of Mission* 106(2), 241–260. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12183>
- Harries, J., 2018, 'Overcoming invented ogres: African traditional religions and world religions in African Christian perspective', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 42(2), 171–184.
- Jaworski, A. & Coupland, N., 2014, 'Introduction: Perspectives on discourse analysis', in A. Jaworski & N. Coupland (eds.), *The Discourse Reader*, pp. 1–35, Routledge, Abingdon.
- Kroesbergen, H., 2019, 'Religion without belief and community in Africa', *Religions* 10(4), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10040292>
- Krog, A., Morris, R.C. & Tonkin, H., 2010, 'Translation as reconciliation: A conversation about politics, translation, and multilingualism in South Africa', in H. Tonkin & M.E. Frank (eds.), *The translator as mediator of cultures*, pp. 17–36, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Kwenda, C.V., 2003, 'Cultural justice: The pathway to reconciliation and social cohesion', in D. Chidester, P. Dexter & W. James (eds.), *What holds us together: Social cohesion in South Africa*, pp. 67–80, HSRC Press, Cape Town.
- Maldonado-Torres, N., 2016, 'Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality', *Fondation Frantz Fanon*, viewed n.d. from http://frantzfanonfoundation-fondation-frantzfanon.com/IMG/pdf/maldonado-torres_outline_of_ten_theses-10.23.16_.pdf
- Moreiras, A., 2012, 'The fatality of (my) subalternism: A response to John Beverley', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 12(2), 217–246. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2012.0057>
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J., 2013, 'Why decoloniality in the 21st century?', *The Thinker* 48(1), 10–15.
- Reach, S.A., 2014, *Handbook of Procedures*, viewed n.d. from <http://reachsa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/02-Handbook-2014.docx>.
- Sharifian, F., 2017, *Cultural linguistics*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Stroud, C. & Kerfoot, C., 2021, 'Decolonizing higher education: Multilingualism, linguistic citizenship and epistemic justice', in Bock Z. & Stroud C. (eds.), *Language and decoloniality in higher education: Reclaiming voices from the south*, pp. 19–46, Bloomsbury, London.
- Tshehla, S.M., 2002, '"Can anything good come out of Africa?" Reflections of a South African Mosotho reader of the Bible', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 5(1), 15–24.
- Van Wyngaard, C., 2013, 'The church as alternative community and the struggle for liberation in the work of David Bosch', *NGTT – Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 54(3 & 4), 87–97. <https://doi.org/10.5952/54-3-4-394>
- Venter, D., 1998, 'Silencing Babel? Language Preference in Voluntary Associations – Evidence from Multi-Cultural Congregations', *Societies in Transition* 29(1–2), 22–39. <https://doi-org.ez.sun.ac.za/10.1080/10289852.1998.10520143>.
- Veronelli, G.A., 2015, 'The coloniality of language: Race, expressivity, power, and the darker side of modernity', *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies* 13, 108–138.
- Vickers, E., 2020, 'Critiquing coloniality, "epistemic violence" and western hegemony in comparative education – The dangers of ahistoricism and positionality', *Comparative Education* 56(2), 165–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2019.1665268>
- Wrogemann, H., 2016, *Intercultural hermeneutics*, transl. K.E. Böhmer, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL.
- Wüstenberg, R.K., 2014, 'Reconciliation as a political option? Different ways of dealing with the past – The case of South Africa', in M. Leiner, M. Palme & P. Stöckner (eds.), *Societies in transition. Sub-Saharan Africa between conflict and reconciliation*, pp. 135–151, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.