

# **Tokenistic language rights and social barriers: Translation and language rights in the South African context**

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Contrary to the European context, language rights in South Africa pertain not only to minority or migrant languages, but, within a context in which colonial languages have historically dominated official discourse, even the most widely-spoken African languages have been subjected to linguistic discrimination. One thus encounters a case of marginalised majority languages. South African history has been characterised by exclusive language policies since European colonisation and these have dictated socially excluding translation practices. The transition to a true democracy and subsequent recognition of nine Bantu languages as official languages beside English and Afrikaans seemed to represent an improvement regarding language rights. However, a lack of policy implementation through translation has resulted in English assuming the role of de facto official language in public service delivery, while all ten other official languages have suffered neglect. This has serious implications regarding language rights, as English literacy is not prevailing.

In this paper, it is argued that language policy in this case merely fulfils a tokenistic function and enjoys no active support. This is due to its overly ambitious nature and the influence of neoliberal ideology, which has replaced apartheid in the oppressive role. In order to measure the (lack of) implementation of language rights in public service delivery, the paper proposes looking at translation's operation upon the so-called intelligibility barriers which divide South African society into prestigious and common language domains and correspond with other socially excluding barriers. Translation activities in two social systems – governance, media – are considered in relation to language policy and language proficiency to show the transgression of language rights. The very real relationship between translation and social exclusion is highlighted and the need for large-scale social reform rather than simply an increase in translation is acknowledged in order to solve the problem of social exclusion and marginalisation.