

INTERVIEW | ENTREVISTA | ENTREVISTA

# UBUNTU TRANSLANGUAGING AND MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: AN INTERVIEW WITH LEKETI MAKALELA

TRANSLINGUAGEM UBUNTU E EDUCAÇÃO MULTILÍNGUE NO SUL GLOBAL:  
UMA ENTREVISTA COM LEKETI MAKALELA

UBUNTU TRANSLINGUA Y LA EDUCACIÓN MULTILINGÜE EN EL SUR GLOBAL:  
UNA ENTREVISTA CON LEKETI MAKALELA



A conversation with **Leketi Makalela**<sup>1</sup>

Interview by **Kleber Aparecido da Silva**<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **Leketi Makalela** works in the Wits School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. His research interests include translanguaging, African multilingualism, and African languages and literacies. E-mail: leketi.makalela@wits.ac.za

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor 3 of the “Brazilian Portuguese as a Second Language” course and the Postgraduate Program in Linguistics and International Relations at the University of Brasília. General Coordinator of the Group for Critical and Advanced Studies in LanguageS. E-mail: kleberunicamp@yahoo.com.br.

It goes without doubt that multilingual education practices and policies in most of the Global South follow often rigidly Western-based epistemologies and pedagogies. These include exogenous notions of plurality that are not aligned with the ways of knowing and the cultural competence of the local people. Gatsheni Ndlovu refers to this way of encroachment as epistemicide with consequences that are negative for sustainable development in the Global South. Research is replete with the findings that monolingual bias found in the Global South context is derived from the European Enlightenment period where the ideology of 'one nation – one language' influenced the socio-political thinking of this period. Noteworthy however is that rapid changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> C have made it possible to encounter more complex linguistic encounters driven by immigration in the Global North while the Global South is simply awakened to linguistic practices that had always defined their ways of being, acting, and knowing. Translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy has in this connection shifted orientation to what speakers do with languages rather than what languages look like.

Translanguaging emphasizes a case for the use of translingual communication that transcends boundaries between languages. Brazil and South Africa, prototypical Global South countries have always experienced waves of multilingualism that include a blend of Indo-European languages and the indigenous languages that typically fall within the Bantu language group. In Brazil, indigenous languages include languages of African slaves, which were transported from Mozambique and other Lusophone countries in Africa. Based on Northern theories and perspectives of language, the global South countries experienced a wave of counting errors or misinventions of multitudes of languages (Makoni, 2003) and an entrenchment of a monolingual bias that favored exclusive use of ex-colonial languages for educational success, political activity and upward social mobility.

While many studies on translanguaging have critiqued the imposition of the linguistic landscape and realities from the West/Global North, there are few frameworks developed to account for ontological, epistemological, and methodological framing relevant to the Global South discourses and epistemologies. In the view of categorical Southern theory to explain translanguaging , we question the validity of using Global North world views to describe local ways of sense-making. We use the cultural competence of *ubuntu*- a humanist approach to complex co-existence (I am because you are and you are because I am) and apply tenets of what Makalela (2016, 2022) coined as *ubuntu translanguaging* as an alternative conceptual framework to understand the disruption of orderliness and simultaneous recreation of new ones in languaging practices of the majority of the Global South citizens. At the end of this interview, we show how reinterpretation of multilingualism from a Global South theory has implications for dynamic language policy formulation and implementation. Recommendations for using *ubuntu translanguaging* pedagogy are considered at the end of the paper for adaptation in comparable Global South contexts.

**Kleber Aparecido da Silva asks: What is translanguaging? What are the main characteristics of a translingual orientation based on critical and decolonial linguistic education?**

**Leketi Makalela:** I have come to understand that translanguaging is a communicative practice employed by bilingual or multilingual individuals who engage in the simultaneous use of multiple languages to construct meaning. This practice often unfolds unconsciously, with speakers prioritizing the conveyance of meaning over adherence to the structural conventions of any single language. From a translingual perspective, the focus shifts away from the traditional linguistic structures to what speakers achieve with their linguistic repertoire. In educational contexts, this shift emphasizes identity development and epistemic access—how individuals understand themselves and the world around them. Moreover, translanguaging is critically aligned with decolonial pedagogical practices, challenging the dominance of colonial languages by valorizing the linguistic diversity present in the classroom. It represents a move away from the monolingual ideologies propagated during the European Enlightenment, advocating for a pedagogical stance that respects and incorporates the full range of students' linguistic capabilities, thereby promoting ways of being, knowing, and acting that are inclusive and equitable.

**Kleber Aparecido da Silva asks: In your opinion, what is the difference between a monolingual orientation and a translingual orientation?**

**Leketi Makalela:** I believe there is a crystal clear difference between these two concepts. The difference between a monolingual orientation and a translingual orientation is profound, both in philosophy and practice. A monolingual orientation is predicated on the notion that only one language should be used for learning, teaching, and assessment within educational settings. This approach stems from historical, nation-state ideologies that equate a single language with national identity and unity, often marginalizing or excluding other languages and by extension, the identities of multilingual individuals.

Conversely, a translingual orientation embraces the fluid and versatile coexistence of languages within educational spaces. It recognizes that meaning-making processes in multilingual individuals involve the integration and interplay of multiple languages. Unlike the monolingual approach, which is externally focused and prescriptive about the languages of instruction, a translingual orientation mirrors the internal linguistic landscape of the multilingual mind. It sees the classroom as an extension of this landscape, where the linguistic diversity of students is not only acknowledged but leveraged as a pedagogical resource. This approach fosters a more inclusive, reflective, and dynamic educational environment, where languages and cultures intersect freely, enriching the learning experience for all involved.

**Kleber Aparecido da Silva asks: How do you define translingual pedagogies?**

**Leketi Makalela:** My definition of translingual pedagogies is that these pedagogies encompass the array of practices, routines, and strategies employed by educators who intentionally integrate the use of multiple languages within a single lesson, including in assessment practices. This pedagogical approach is characterized by its deliberate and purposeful inclusion of multilingual resources to facilitate teaching and learning. The key distinction of translingual pedagogies lies in their foundational premise that leveraging more than one language in educational settings enriches the learning experience, promotes deeper understanding, and reflects the authentic linguistic landscapes of multilingual students. By consciously choosing to utilize multiple languages in instruction, educators adopting translingual pedagogies validate and celebrate linguistic diversity, while simultaneously challenging traditional monolingual norms and expectations prevalent in educational contexts.

**Kleber Aparecido da Silva asks: How does translanguaging relate to linguistic ideology and power issues in contemporary society?**

**Leketi Makalela:** Translanguaging represents a significant departure from the monolingual ideologies that have historically dominated linguistic thought, where the use of multiple languages was often viewed with suspicion and associated with mental confusion. Such ideologies were predicated on the belief in the purity and superiority of single languages, aiming to maintain linguistic homogeneity and prevent the perceived dilution of linguistic integrity. In contrast, translanguaging challenges these notions by demonstrating the cognitive, cultural, and societal benefits of multilingualism. In an era marked by global migration, technological advancement, and increasing cultural exchange, the rigid adherence to monolingualism is increasingly untenable.

Translanguaging inherently addresses issues of linguistic power and ideology by advocating for the equal value and legitimacy of all languages within educational and societal contexts. It confronts and seeks to dismantle the linguistic hierarchies that have historically marginalized non-dominant languages and their speakers. By promoting an inclusive approach to language use, translanguaging contributes to the reevaluation of linguistic norms, encouraging a more equitable distribution of linguistic capital and challenging the structures that have perpetuated linguistic and cultural imperialism.

**Kleber Aparecido da Silva asks: What is the (inter)relationship between translanguaging and post-, de-, and/or transcolonial thinking?**

**Leketi Makalela:** Translanguaging is deeply interconnected with postcolonial, decolonial, and transcolonial frameworks, offering a lens through which to critique and reassess the legacies of colonialism in linguistic and educational practices. These frameworks share a common goal: to address and rectify the enduring impacts of colonial dominance on languages and cultures. Translanguaging, within this context, acts as a decolonial strategy that resists the colonial imposition of linguistic separation and hierarchy. It recognizes the role of language in the colonial project—notably, how languages were used to divide, rule, and categorize colonized peoples—and seeks to subvert these divisions by promoting linguistic integration and fluidity.

In specific contexts like South Africa, the colonial and apartheid legacies of using language as a tool for segregation and control illustrate the power dynamics embedded in linguistic policies. Translanguaging challenges these historical injustices by fostering linguistic spaces that transcend colonial-imposed boundaries, encouraging a blending and coexistence of languages that were once forcibly segregated. This approach not only critiques the colonial past but also imagines a postcolonial future where languages serve as bridges rather than barriers, reflecting a commitment to linguistic justice and equity that aligns with broader decolonial and transcolonial objectives.

**Kleber Aparecido da Silva asks: Could you please talk a little more about "Ubuntu Translanguaging" and its importance to decolonial research in Critical Applied Linguistics?**

**Leketi Makalela:** In my extensive research within Critical Applied Linguistics, I've cultivated a deep appreciation for the intricacies of language as they pertain to identity, power, and knowledge. One of my seminal contributions to the field is the development of the Ubuntu Translanguaging framework, a concept that is fundamentally interwoven with the decolonial project in linguistics. This framework is not just a pedagogical tool; it represents a crucial epistemological stance that honors the linguistic pluralism inherent in multilingual societies, especially within the Global South.

Drawing from the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which succinctly encapsulates the essence of humanity's interconnectedness—I often explicate the phrase "I am because we are" to illustrate how this relates to our understanding of language use. My stance is that languages do not operate in isolation; they are part of a communal existence, dynamically influencing and complementing each other. This interconnectedness of languages is reflective of the communities that use them—a reflection of Ubuntu.

In my work, I argue that the colonial imposition of a monolingual paradigm is not merely a linguistic constraint but an epistemic violence that silences the rich tapestry of multilingual discourse. The Ubuntu Translanguaging framework thus serves as a decolonial mechanism that validates the linguistic repertoires and cultural identities of historically marginalized communities.

Through this framework, I've posited that the integration of languages in educational settings is not merely a mix of languages for practical communication; rather, it's a critical approach to rethinking and challenging the colonial legacies that have shaped language education policies and practices. It is about recognizing the fluid and dynamic nature of language as it occurs naturally within multilingual communities—communities that have been practicing translanguaging long before it was acknowledged within academic discourses.

My call has consistently been towards an educational praxis that is inclusive, that reflects the lived experiences of multilingual individuals, and that dismantles the linguistic hierarchies imposed by colonial structures. The Ubuntu Translanguaging framework, therefore, is not just a reflection of the complex multilingual encounters but a means to empower individuals through the affirmation of their linguistic identities.

In essence, Ubuntu Translanguaging is more than a theoretical construct; it is a lived reality and a celebration of linguistic diversity. It is an acknowledgment that each language enriches another, and in doing so, enriches the human experience. As such, it is imperative that our educational systems and linguistic policies not only recognize but actively incorporate this worldview.

Ubuntu translanguaging, grounded in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, can be visualized as a structure supported by several key pillars that reflect the interconnectedness and communal values inherent in this approach:

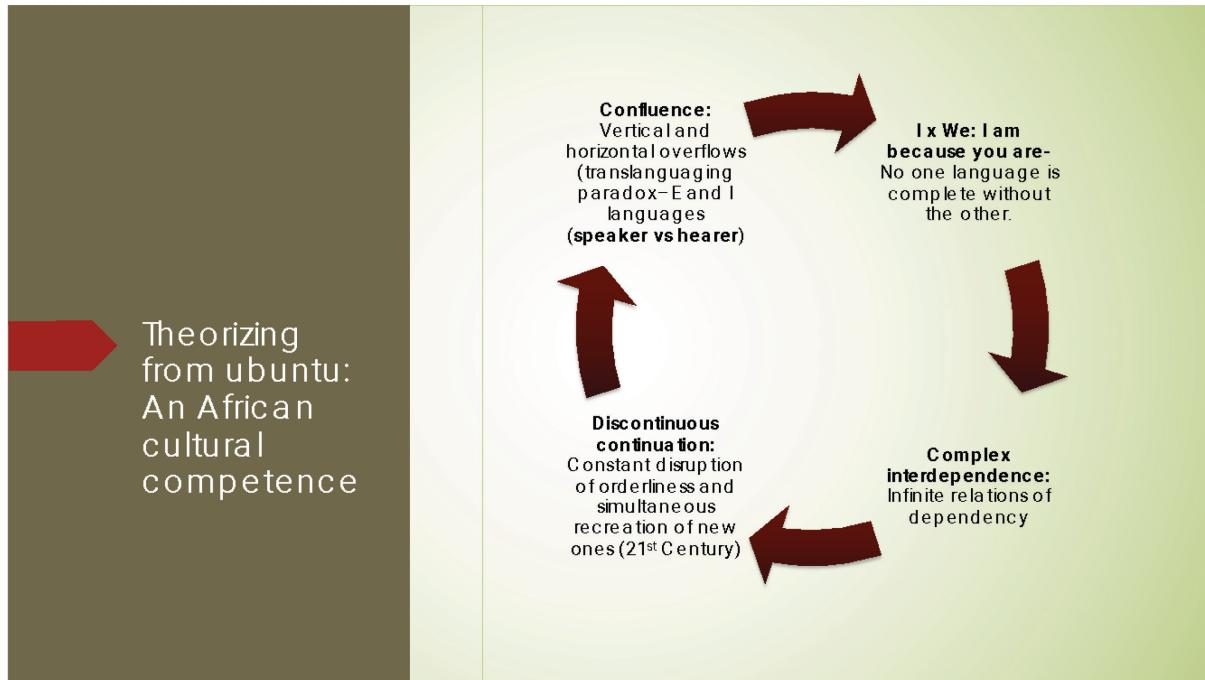


Figure 1: Ubuntu translanguaging

Let me delve deeper into the pillars of Ubuntu Translanguaging that guide my work in decolonial and critical applied linguistics. These pillars are not mere abstractions; they represent the foundational tenets upon which we can construct a more equitable and authentic approach to multilingual education.

### *Temporal Fluidity*

In my conception of Ubuntu Translanguaging, the acknowledgment of temporal fluidity is paramount. This idea counters the linear progression of history favored in Western epistemologies. Languages, like histories, are not merely sequences of events or lexicons but a confluence of past, present, and future, each shaping and reshaping the others. This pillar recognizes the continuity of linguistic practices that predate colonialism and remain alive in the speech acts of individuals today.

### *Interdependence*

The second pillar I focus on is the notion of interdependence, echoing the Ubuntu saying "motho ke motho ka batho," or "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu," which means 'a person is a person through other people.' In a translanguaging context, this principle articulates that no language can be understood in isolation—languages derive meaning and context through their relationship with each other. This principle challenges the idea of autonomous languages, promoting instead a view of language as inherently relational.

### *Discontinuation and Continuation*

Another critical pillar of Ubuntu Translanguaging is the dual process of discontinuation and continuation. This reflects the dynamic and non-linear nature of language practices—languages evolve, adapt, and transform in response to the needs and contexts of their speakers. They are marked by disruption—moments where traditional language boundaries are crossed or blurred—but also by continuity, where linguistic practices persist and are adapted to new realities.

### *The "Ix We" Principle*

Central to the Ubuntu Translanguaging framework is the "Ix We" principle, which posits that individual identity (I) is realized through the community (We), and vice versa. This is extrapolated to the linguistic domain, where the individual's linguistic identity is formed and informed by the collective linguistic repertoire of their community. Each language and linguistic act thus reflects and contributes to the identity of the community as a whole.

These pillars are critical not only in understanding linguistic phenomena but also in guiding pedagogical practices that align with the lived experiences of multilingual speakers. In my work, I have consistently emphasized the need to transform language education to reflect these pillars, thus honoring the ways of knowing and being inherent in the communities we serve.

Ubuntu Translanguaging, as conceptualized through these pillars, calls for a radical reimagining of language policy and education. It is a step towards truly decolonizing our understanding of language, recognizing the full humanity of the speakers, and embracing the complex tapestry of linguistic interrelations that define our shared human experience.

**Kleber Aparecido da Silva asks: Can you discuss the impact of your work on multilingual education on your professional and human education, particularly as a black man/researcher advocating for rights?**

**Leketi Makalela:** My work on multilingual education, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, has been deeply intertwined with my identity and my advocacy for rights. Championing translanguaging has allowed me to contribute to a pedagogy that echoes the communal and inclusive character of African-descended people, especially those with Bantu language backgrounds. The notion that multilingual education is not merely about language competence but is also a cultural competence has profoundly shaped my professional endeavors. It emphasizes that authentic and relevant education for people of African descent cannot exist outside the framework of multilingualism. This stance has not only guided my scholarly activities but has also deeply influenced my personal growth, reinforcing my position in the world as a subject of rights and as an advocate for educational practices that resonate with the cultural realities of African communities.

**Kleber Aparecido da Silva asks: What contributions has your research in Africa made to language education and teacher education in the Global South?**

**Leketi Makalela:** As the founder of the Hub for Multilingual Education and Literacies at the University of the Witwatersrand, I have been at the forefront of redefining language education in Africa and the Global South. My pioneering work in translanguaging has been pivotal in influencing language education policies and practices. Notably, my leadership in conducting the National Rapid Assessment study led to a Ministerial conference that significantly influenced the national adoption of mother-tongue-based bilingual education in South Africa, marking a historic moment in the country's language policy implementation.

In my capacity as a scholar and educator, I have designed and conducted tutorials and mentoring programs across the continent, establishing courses for university staff and students under the banner of Ubuntu translanguaging. Through these educational initiatives, I have cultivated a platform for dialogue and knowledge exchange, which has been sustained over 11 years of conducting an enriching and international conference. This conference has fostered dialogic encounters resulting in numerous publications that contribute to the field of language education.

Holding an endowed chair on multilingualism, I have played a crucial role in mentoring and nurturing the next generation of scholars in the field. Through keynote addresses and workshops, I have disseminated the central idea of Ubuntu translanguaging, advocating for language practices that embrace the linguistic and cultural diversity of learners.

My work has had a profound impact on teacher education, shaping pedagogical strategies that encourage a culturally responsive and inclusive approach to teaching in multilingual classrooms. This is particularly significant in the context of the Global South, where linguistic diversity is a norm rather than an exception. It is my assertion that through these concerted efforts, we are laying the groundwork for a decolonized language education paradigm that truly reflects the rich linguistic tapestry of African societies.

## Concluding remarks

The interview aimed to assess ubuntu translanguaging as a model for the decolonization of language policies and practices in Brazil and South Africa. We sought to review the language used in the context of complex multilingual encounters and to use the local perspectives of multilingualism to develop a framework for fluid multilingualism as a norm to decolonize. Contrary to this sociolinguistic reality, we have pointed out that monolingual bias still dominates official language practice in Brazil and South Africa and creates tensions between the expected policy proscriptions and the real language practices of the local people. Having an ethnographic account of the past linguistic predisposition of southern Africa and a brief glimpse into the Brazilian past, the paper has shown that fluid and dynamic multilingualism is a cultural competence that can be explained through the value system of ubuntu: *I am because you are: you are because I am*. To disconnect monolingual narratives and ideologies of oneness, it was necessary to look back at this value system of ubuntu to offer a historical consciousness model for decolonization.

Grounding translingual practices as indigenous to Brazil and South Africa, we are able to support the development of a theory of interdependent multilingualism under the model of ubuntu translanguaging. Here, the pillars of incompleteness and interdependency, on the one hand, and the vertical and horizontal flow of information, on the other hand, epitomize complex multilingual encounters found in many complex sociolinguistic spaces. There is therefore an argument that an alternative system based on the ubuntu translanguaging model and its attendant ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy as conceptual frameworks can guide language planning and literacy development for knowledge access and identity affirmation.

It is important to repeat that *ubuntu translanguaging* allows educators and policymakers to discover a plural vision of interdependence in the language systems and their fluid, overlapping, and discursive nature to match the everyday ways of communicating where the use of one language is incomplete without the other. In particular, there is a need to shift from monolingual multilingualism to the fluid and porous worldview and the logic of 'I x we' consonant with complex multilingual cultural competence. Taken together, there is a need for empirical research to explore various modalities of the ubuntu translanguaging framework for adaptation in comparable contexts of complex multilingual encounters.

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