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The multilingual university: language ideology, hidden policies and language practices in Malawian universities

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation is increasingly affecting universities worldwide. In African contexts, language policies exhibit an inheritance situation in which countries continue to implement policies which favour colonial languages in education. This paper investigates the Malawian higher education context and the ways in which staff engage with multilingualism. It examines the implementation of language policies by staff in their classrooms and explores the attitudes of staff members towards the current monolingual language policy and practices in higher education in the country. The paper draws on a 4-month ethnography carried out in eight Malawian universities. Findings indicate that the language 'rules' imposed by staff are highly variable and that diverse language 'policies' are implemented and enforced by staff, some of whom operate strictly monolingual approaches while others adopt multilingual approaches. Staff display a range of attitudes towards multilingualism, influenced by competing pressures of ensuring students comprehend the subject matter while also seeking to improve their English skills against the broader backdrop of language practices and expectations in the country.

1. Introduction

Globalisation and the internationalisation of Higher Education (HE) are increasingly affecting universities worldwide (Liddicoat, 2016). Institutions have developed policies which recognise that they are operating in a global context, beyond the confines of national borders (Stromquist, 2002). English – as a global language – plays a key role in language planning for universities worldwide (Doiz et al., 2013). Internationally, the use of English as a medium of instruction (MOI) at universities continues to grow (Dearden, 2014) and, at an institutional level, the use of English often acts as a symbol of the internationalisation of universities (Duong & Chua, 2016).

In many African contexts, language policies exhibit an 'inheritance situation' (Bámgbóṣé, 1991, p. 69) in which countries continue to implement policies which reflect those of the

colonial period and favour the use of colonial languages in education (Kamwangamalu, 2018). As Wolff (2016, p. 38) notes 'most if not all African countries aim for HE to be run through a foreign language'. Internationalisation of HE and the ability of African universities to engage with, and adapt to, globalisation is viewed as a crucial factor in being able to produce graduates who can contribute effectively to societal needs, both within the continent and across the globe (Puplampu, 2006). This results in a situation in many countries in which, at a policy level, colonial European languages are considered as the most suitable languages for use as MOI in HE, further resulting in a notable absence of African languages (Brock-Utne, 2003).

This is the situation in Malawi, a country in Africa which was colonised by Britain. Malawi is a multilingual country with reports on the number of languages in Malawi varying between 12 and 35 (Makoni & Mashiri, 2006, p. 65). While language policies in Malawi have undergone numerous changes since the colonial period (see Kayambazinthu, 1998; Miti 2015), they have continued to be English dominant, with English being the legislated MOI after the initial stages of primary school. Since the establishment of the first university in Malawi in 1965, English has also been the *de facto* MOI for HE. However, in low-resource, multilingual contexts such as Malawi, the promotion of English and the prestigious position it holds can cause challenges for both students and staff.

A perceived tension between the use of English and the use of Malawian languages has long been identified as a fundamental issue in language-in-education policy (LIEP) in the country (Kayambazinthu, 1998). Language policies, and discussions around policies in the country, are embedded within a monoglossic perspective and concern themselves with when to move from a single language as MOI to another single language as MOI (Reilly, 2021). This monoglossic perspective views language as discrete bounded entities in a way which does not reflect the language practices or linguistic realities of individuals (Erling et al., 2017; Makoni & Mashiri, 2006; McKinney, 2020). Moreover, an 'inherited monolingual bias' (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021, p. 62) is consistently present within Malawi's language policy approach. McKinney (2020, p. 116) states that 'the monolingual myth and the dominance of English are a product of coloniality'.

The value of engaging with learners' multilingual resources for education across much of Africa has not been seriously considered at a policy level (Erling et al., 2021; Reilly et al., 2023). Rejecting monoglossic ideologies and the dominance of English, and incorporating learners' multilingual resources in education could also present an opportunity to decolonise language use in HE in Malawi, moving towards 'the possibilities of an otherwise' (Walsh, 2018, p. 17). Despite the dominant perceptions of English as the sole language of HE in Malawi, translanguaging practices are commonplace and students exhibit complex attitudes towards the use of English medium instruction (Reilly, 2019, 2021). Ndhlovu and Makalela (2021) also suggest that the adoption of multilingual and translanguaging pedagogies could offer a means through which to decolonise African HE more widely.

The aim of this paper is to provide an additional perspective on multilingualism within Malawian HE, through focusing on the experiences of university staff. We explore the ways in which staff members engage with multilingualism within HE, responding to two research questions:

(1) How do staff implement language policies within their own classrooms?
(2) What are the attitudes of staff towards the use of monolingual versus multilingual MOI?

In answering these questions, the paper will highlight the important role which staff members take as implementers of language policy and the tensions which emerge when monolingual policies do not reflect multilingual realities. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of language policy in Malawi universities. Section 3 discusses relevant literature concerning language use in African universities. Section 4 outlines the ethnographic approach adopted in this study. Section 5 highlights the ways in which staff members use language within the university. Section 6 provides a discussion of the attitudes which staff members have towards multilingualism. Finally, Section 7 offers a number of conclusions.

2. Language policy in Malawian universities

Malawi's first language in education policy (LIEP) after independence legislated Chichewa as MOI for the first four years of primary education, after which time English would take over (Chilora, 2000). In 1996, a mother tongue policy directive was circulated which stated that children's 'mother tongue' should be used in the first four years, before switching to English (Kayambazinthu, 1998, p. 412). However, this mother tongue policy directive was never implemented (Kishindo, 2015). As part of Malawi's New Education Act, in 2014 a new English-only MOI was announced (Miti 2015). It is unclear to what extent the English-only policy has been implemented in the country, and studies show that teachers remain unaware of this policy (Chavula, 2019; Kamtukule, 2019). In the 2016 National Education Policy, implementation of the English-only policy is noted to be an 'ongoing' strategy (Government of the Republic of Malawi, 2016, p. 48). It has been reported that the majority of schools in the country still use Chichewa and English (Kretzer & Kumwenda, 2016). However, Chavula (2019) finds that teachers also use additional Malawian languages in contexts in which children are not familiar with Chichewa.

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) is the designated body for accrediting universities in Malawi. The MOI in Malawian universities is generally accepted to be English (International Association of Universities, 2013); however, there is currently no specific official nationwide policy which covers tertiary level education. While the NCHE states that individuals graduating from universities in Malawi should have competence in English, it does not explicitly stipulate that the MOI for universities should be English. In their criteria for accreditation, the NCHE refer to language use on two instances:

> Students completing programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels demonstrate good communication skills in English. (NCHE, 2014, p. 15)

> Students successfully completing an undergraduate programme demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English. (NCHE, 2014, p. 18)

Institution-level language policies are uncommon. In light of this, in the current paper we seek to explore the different ways in which this (absence of an explicit) provision for an MOI at HE in Malawi is interpreted by staff, and how staff engage with the various language-related pressures operating in their local contexts.

Language policies, as noted by Spolsky (2004, p. 6) exist within 'highly complex, interacting and dynamic contexts' and are affected by a range of non-linguistic factors such as 'political, demographic, social, religious, cultural, psychological [and] bureaucratic' factors. Spolsky (2004) suggests that the existence of an explicit or official written language is

not essential for a language policy to exist. In researching language policy, written documents do not then constitute the only data which is needed to ascertain the policy situation. Spolsky (2004, p. 5) identifies three components of language policy within a community as follows:

(1) Language practices – the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire
(2) Language beliefs or ideology – the beliefs about language and language use
(3) Any special efforts to modify or influence that practice by any kind of language intervention, planning or management

Language policy within a given speech community can therefore be seen as a combination of the above factors, all of which can be influenced by, and influence, one another. Within a speech community, these three components however may not necessarily be in agreement or alignment with one another and may reveal seemingly different or contradictory language policies (Spolsky 2004, p. 217). Often, there is a disconnect between policy and practice with Spolsky (2004, p. 218) suggesting that the 'real' language policy of a community can best be ascertained by looking at the reality of their language practices. By engaging with participants at universities in Malawi, this study provides an insight into the 'real' language policy through investigating the self-reported language use and language attitudes of staff.

While acknowledging the value in considering language policy as more than just written, official legislation, Johnson (2013) questions whether all instances of language practice and language ideology should be considered to be 'policy'. He further distinguishes between different types of policy: Top-down versus Bottom-up; Overt versus Covert; Explicit versus Implicit; and De jure versus De facto (Johnson 2013, p. 10).

In this paper, we focus on the implicit policies which arise in Malawian universities as a result of the language practices and language attitudes of staff. We follow Bonacina-Pugh et al. (2022, p. 1107) in viewing language policy as 'being a multi-layered social and discursive process that involves interconnected texts, discourses and practices' and as something which is continuously re-negotiated within the educational space, by the interactions of multiple individuals at different places and at different times.

In the educational space, staff members are key figures in controlling the construction and implementation of language policy (Reilly et al., 2022). While individual staff members may have control over their own classrooms spaces, they also act, alongside students, as a complicated network of language policy actors, mediating how policies manifest at the micro level (Liddicoat, 2016). The language ideologies of individuals are influenced by wider ideological discourse (Liddicoat, 2016) and, as such, university staff are likely to be heavily influenced by aforementioned discourses around the globalisation and internationalisation of HE.

3. Language use in African universities: an overview

This section discusses research from studies of language use in African university contexts. These studies are drawn from contexts which have important distinctions from one

another politically, linguistically, and culturally. However, there are broad similarities regarding experiences of coloniality and multilingualism which make these distinct from university contexts in the Global North. They therefore offer a useful perspective against which to discuss the Malawian context.

A key initial finding from previous research is that, as in Malawi (Kamwendo, 2003), students in Tanzania (Komba, 2015), Botswana (Ntereke & Ramoroka, 2017), and South Sudan (Barnett et al., 2008) struggle with the use of English as a MOI in HE. Similarly, Ferguson (2013, p. 37), referring to Kenya and South Africa, notes further that these difficulties lead universities to establish additional classes which offer English communication skills support for first-year students. Additionally, this can lead at times to multilingual language practices being utilised by students and staff to aid students in their comprehension (Ferguson, 2013).

In Morocco, Chakrani and Huang (2014) find that the setting and who the interlocutors are, have a significant influence on the choice of language used by students. They suggest that students conform to a strict monolingual French-only policy when in classes, which is illustrative of the hegemonic role which French has in the Moroccan education system while local languages are viewed as inadequate. Kalmanlehto (2014) investigates students' language use patterns in Tanzania, finding that the dominant pattern is that English is the language of the classroom and Kiswahili is the language outside of the class. Also in Tanzania, Halvorsen (2010) finds that students will use both English and Kiswahili when engaging in ICT (information and communication technology) activities at university. Similarly, Njurai (2015) has shown that mathematics students in Kenya make use of their multilingual repertoires when engaging in mathematics tasks, with practices varying from student to student. In Rwanda, Marie (2013) finds that students in universities utilise their multilingual skills to enable them to negotiate an English MOI. The formal dominance of English within universities has also been noted in South Africa (Dominic, 2011) and Uganda (Bayiga, 2016), while multilingual practices occur across both educational and social domains in both of these contexts. Although policies often explicitly state what should happen within classrooms, they do not dictate the reality of language use and these findings illustrate that people respond to and enact policies in varying ways.

Wills et al. (2014) find that university lecturers in Madagascar covering maths and science subjects teach predominately in French, while acknowledging that only one-third of their classes could fully understand the language. As a result, the teachers use Malagasy to clarify concepts for students. Kouega (2008), reporting on language use at a university in Cameroon, has found a notable absence of any African language in the university context under examination. French is the dominant language within the university; however, some courses are taught in English. Kouega does not report the presence of any multilingual language practices in the university context. Also in Cameroon, the University of Buea's 'Anti-Pidgin Campaign' sought to directly manage students' language use on campus, discouraging the use of Pidgin (Tande, 2006).

To summarise, within a range of African HE contexts, there is a general pattern of language use in which English or French are the dominant languages used in formal domains. However, it has also been shown that students and staff draw on their multilingual resources to enable them to more effectively engage with their university

experience. As these multilingual repertoires are often not officially sanctioned students, however, cannot use their multilingual resources in examinations or assessment and are evaluated in university based on their monolingual performance. In the context of a high use of former colonial languages within university education there are calls for the introduction of African languages and the promotion of multilingualism at university level across Africa (Dyers, 2015; Oduor, 2015). As there is a tension and contradiction between formal policy and language practices, it is essential to investigate specific contexts to understand the linguistic reality within HE. This paper adds to our understanding of the discrepancy between policy and practice by providing an insight into a little researched context – Malawian Higher Education.

4. Materials and methods

This paper reports findings from a four-month linguistic ethnography of Malawian universities. Linguistic ethnography provides a valuable methodological tool for investigating how multilingualism manifests in institutional contexts such as universities (Copland & Creese, 2015; Costley & Reilly, 2021). In total, eight Malawian universities were involved in the study. This includes all public universities in the country and one private university.[1] Public universities were selected to provide an overview of the public university sector in Malawi, with the private university added due to the lead researcher's networks providing access to this institution. The data collection took place over 4 months in late 2016 and involved spending 1–4 weeks at each institution. Ethical approval to conduct the research was granted by the College of Arts, University of Glasgow (where the lead researcher was based at the time) and approval was granted by specific institutions in Malawi as required during the data collection. All participants provided informed consent before being involved in the study. Participants were recruited via the friend-of-a-friend and snowball sampling methods, with minimal selection criteria, as the goal was to get a broad range of perspectives from individuals studying different topics and at different stages of their courses. The findings discussed in this paper draw on 8 student focus groups, 65 student interviews and 27 interviews with academic and professional services (e.g. technical and administrative) staff from the eight universities, highlighting their language ideologies and self-reported language practices.

The data were qualitatively analysed using *Nvivo* via an iterative thematic coding process to highlight the major themes concerning language attitudes and language practices. Each interview or focus group transcript was reviewed, and coded for instances where participants referred to language, language use, language policy, and for comments which highlight specific language attitudes. After completing coding of each transcript, the entire dataset was reviewed again and general themes developed from the existing codes. Given the focus of this paper on staff and teacher attitudes towards multilingualism and language practices in HE, this paper draws substantially from staff interviews. However, a select number of student interviews are also used to provide illustrative examples on key points.

The following sections report on findings focusing on the experiences of staff members within the university. The data which has been selected highlight the ways in which staff members use and view language. The dominant and recuring themes which emerge

through the interviews concerning motivations and intended consequences are presented below.

5. Results: language in use

5.1. Language use inside the classroom

In terms of behaviours inside the classroom, a range of practices were observed, including the use of English, the use of Chichewa, and translanguaging practices. Some staff note that English is a language whose domain is the classroom. English is positioned as the language of education as it is 'the official language … in Malawi education system' [Staff #85]. As a result, it is not a language for other areas of the university, it is 'just for the classes, just for the classroom' [Staff #44]. What emerges here is similar to the common perception in many African countries that English means education (Kamwendo, 2003; Matiki, 2001) and as such English is afforded a particular status. However, it is also the case that English is not the only language used in the classroom environment.

Overall, the data shows that Chichewa is reported to be used in the classroom for two broad purposes: interpersonal relationships/classroom management and content clarification. One staff member notes that they would speak Chichewa as it 'brings level of connectedness, if I speak to my students here in Chichewa' [Staff #82]. Drawing from a range of linguistic resources can engage students and can also be used to express solidarity with them. A crucial reason mentioned for the use of Chichewa in lectures is to clarify subject content to ensure students fully understand. Staff reported that they would use Chichewa to aid student comprehension with, for example, one staff member stating that they would use 'local languages … when you are trying to explain something that probably they are not comprehending' [Staff #81].

Often, however, there is a perception that, while Chichewa may be used in the classroom by a lecturer, it is not really a language of teaching and learning. There is a sense that English is the 'official' language of teaching and learning and that the use of Chichewa is for informal purposes or to compensate for a deficiency in students' understanding. When Chichewa is used in this way it is as 'a fall back' [Staff #81]. Its use is not viewed as pedagogically valid or appropriate and it is not seen to be of value in the academic space of the classroom.

Individuals, while acknowledging that Chichewa is used in the classroom for pedagogic purposes, still claim that 'we are strictly required to communicate in English' [Staff #81]. One staff member states that even if you are using Chichewa to 'clarify more' then it remains 'just a slip of the tongue' and while in classes 'always it's English communication' [Staff #85]. Further, the use of Chichewa for content clarification is not a technique employed by all lecturers as some adopt a solely English monolingual MOI approach. As a result of the strong association between English and education, even at times when Chichewa is being used for apparently pedagogical purposes, it is not viewed as a language of education and is therefore not viewed as 'formal' or appropriate teaching. There is therefore a contradiction – or a tension – of sorts as Chichewa is used to clarify classroom concepts but at the same time is not seen as having a role in the classroom environment.

5.2. Language use outside the classroom

When students and staff interact outside of the classroom, the languages which are used are, again, largely dependent on the staff member and on the topic being discussed. Some staff state that if a student were to approach them in their office and they 'want to speak to you in Chichewa' then 'you'll say "no speak to me in English"' [Staff #44]. One lecturer states that if a student spoke to him in Chichewa he would initially respond in English; however, 'if they still [continue] in speaking in Chichewa then okay I would speak Chichewa' [Staff #64].

Additionally, some staff members note that they will ensure that they use English to communicate with students at all times, to reinforce their position of authority and command respect, further reflecting and reinforcing the 'elevated' status of English. One staff member notes that, in the department in which they work, students can think that they are 'inferior' [Staff #91]. In this case 'speaking Chichewa' would be like 'lowering yourself' so they choose to speak in English 'to show them that we can also speak this language' as it gives them 'a prestige' [Staff #91].

Similarly, another staff member refers to the 'power relations' between staff and students and notes that by 'speaking English there will be some kind of respect' as they are able to present themselves as 'an academic, a learned colleague in English' [Staff #48]. The use of English then becomes a way in which staff can assert their positions as educated academics, as well as distinguish themselves from students. This also reflects the link between language use/choice and socio-economic class, with English being associated with those who are more educated and thereby carrying – and acting as a conduit to – greater social capital.

Staff perceptions of students' language use differ, with some believing that students are likely to solely use English when conducting academic based discussions as 'it's just natural in Malawi that when you are doing something academic, something that is official, they will go into English' [Staff #91]. This belief is illustrative of the close connection between English and education as discussed above. Other staff, however, do not perceive student-based academic discussions to be English-only environments. They report that students will adopt a multilingual approach when discussing academic work, using various parts of their linguistic repertoires for different purposes, as described in the excerpt below.

> Staff #87: Okay, they'll use Chichewa because eh it's handy, it's easy to use, um but they will blend in English because of most of the co- concepts we are discussing would not be easily translated into Chichewa. They can't quickly translate into Chichewa so they would blend in English so that they can take care of those concepts.

In this way, students can be considered as engaging in translanguaging. While this still positions English as the language of academic concepts and terminology, it also highlights that students may be likely to use all of their linguistic resources to communicate in a way that is comfortable and effective, that is 'handy'. That English remains the academic language is echoed by another staff member who states that students would have to use elements of English as there are certain concepts that you 'cannot teach [and students cannot discuss] in a vernacular' [Staff #81]. While this places the 'vernacular' in a lower position to English, it also shows the necessity of a multilingual approach when students are working together on academic topics.

5.3. Implementing language policy

As part of the interviews, staff members were asked specifically about their knowledge of language in education policy for HE. Table 1 provides an indication of staff members' knowledge of university language policy. Immediately evident from these responses is that there is no general consensus on whether there is a language policy for Malawi's universities. 44% state that there is no official language policy, with 16% clarifying this to state that the Malawian national language policy of English as official language applies in Malawi's universities. 48% of staff state that there is an official language policy for university and that the official language which should be used at the universities is English. These differing perceptions of whether there is a language policy for universities in Malawi could impact how language use is regulated – and viewed – in different contexts, as will be highlighted through the following discussion of the interview data.

Some members of staff said that, while the official policy states that they should teach only in English, and that English should be the only language used within the classroom, they bend these rules at times. While 'it's supposed to be English', one lecturer reports that they 'hear people explaining things in Chichewa sometimes maybe because a student hasn't understood' [Staff #46]. Other lecturers acknowledge deviations from English as an exception to the rule that 'when a lecturer is having problems maybe explaining an example to students should be at the very extreme that you have no choice and you have to use Chichewa' [Staff #47]. The aim for lecturers then is to use English as the sole MOI where possible, but it is acknowledged that at times this is not always practicable.

It is also suggested that the use of Chichewa happens unconsciously at times as 'you can be carried away to drop in a little Chichewa thing' but that 'you have to be alert to remind them [the students] to say they have to try to speak English' [Staff #10]. While staff may themselves deviate from the English norm, it is also their responsibility to police language use and enforce the English-only norm on the students. This is not always done in practice as although 'we say "no you have to speak English because that's the official language" … they are allowed to speak in Chichewa once in a while' [Staff #84]. For others, however, an English-only approach is adhered to strictly, as exemplified by one staff member who states that they 'wouldn't even allow' students to speak Chichewa but instead 'would say at this stage, university, English all the time, everything you're doing, English' [Staff #47].

It becomes clear that staff bend the rules for students' language use as well as their own. There are discrepancies between staff as to whether they think the universities have a specific language policy, and what this language policy is. One consequence of this is that individual staff members, as authority figures in positions of power, are able to dictate the language policies within their own classrooms to a degree. This causes a

Table 1. Staff responses to 'Is there an official language policy in universities in Malawi?'.

Selected response	No. of responses (percentage of total)
No	7 (28%)
No - not a specific policy but national language policy applies (English as official language)	4 (16%)
Don't know	2 (8%)
Yes - English	12 (48%)

situation in which different members of staff produce different language rules for students to follow in their interactions with them both inside and outside of the classroom. This is one reason for the complexity involved in describing the language use situation within Malawian universities, as experiences of how language is used are specific to each individual based on their interlocutors. The difficulty this poses for students was highlighted in a student focus group. During the focus group one student discussed the idea that there 'are some hidden, I think, policies' [Speaker #2 Focus Group #1].

This imposition of these informal 'hidden policies' on students does differ between lecturers and sometimes the same lecturer will impose different rules on their classes depending on 'what type of mood they're in, sometimes they're okay with Chewa[2] and then they'll be like "no don't ask me in Chewa"' [Student #16]. Lecturers then will also react to students who use Chichewa in class in different ways, enforcing language rules on their students differently. Some will directly tell the students to speak in English, as one student reports that a lecturer would respond by saying 'we are in class speak English' [Student #43]. Others will not directly tell a student to change the language they are using but would repeatedly respond by saying 'I didn't hear that' or 'I didn't get that' until other students tell the student to speak in English while others are said to ignore students speaking in Chichewa [Student #24].

A consequence of these differing practices is that there is what some students perceive to be a hypocrisy on the part of some staff who will speak Chichewa themselves but who do not allow students to use the language in their classrooms. This situation arises because of the position of power which staff members have. For students, 'the lecturer is the boss yeah so sometimes he can express in whatever language he wants' but they are not able to do so 'because we don't have [as] much freedom as lecturers' [Student #33] and while students 'have to speak English … when … [the lecturer] speaks Chichewa we don't question her' [Student #83]. Overall, within the classroom, there exists a hierarchy in terms of who has the power to regulate language use, with staff being at the top.

Discrepancies in the ways in which lecturers choose to enforce language rules also exist outside of the classroom when students seek help from lecturers either in their offices or between classes. One student recalls going to ask a lecturer a question in Chichewa, in the lecturer's office and being met with the following response: 'I'm teaching you how to communicate in English so just coming to me again and asking Chichewa uh just get out of my office' [Student #1].

Staff members report their reasoning for enforcing a strict English-only monolingual language rule onto students both inside and outside of the classroom, as exemplified by the extract below:

> Yes … they have attempted to speak in Chichewa. I have stopped them 'sorry it is for your own good to speak to me in English so that you improve you English you … skills in English because the books you will be reading are in English, the essays you will be writing will be in English, so the more you speak this the better, the higher chances of you improving your language otherwise you could fail because you are not able to express yourself'. [Staff #60]

As in classroom contexts however, this strict approach is not enforced by all lecturers as one notes that they 'don't disadvantage them, I want to hear what they are coming there [to their office] for' so will accommodate whatever language the students wish to use [Staff #64].

A major reported reason behind the motivation for staff to encourage the use of English for students is that students are believed to need to improve their English skills. One staff member notes that 'the idea is still to encourage the student to learn how to express himself, present things in English and not to get used to bringing in Chichewa when the situation is tough' [Staff #47]. Universities are viewed as spaces in which students have the chance to continue to develop and improve their language skills in English. In some instances, the language rules which are enforced by some are directly linked to the belief that students need to improve their English skills and should therefore speak English more frequently. In addition, as examinations and assessment are conducted solely through English, lecturers must prepare students for these.

This section has illustrated the ways in which staff members impose language rules on students in different spaces in the universities in Malawi. What emerges is a clear picture of the complexity of these 'rules'. Students are subjected to a variety of regulations on their language use based on the practices of different lecturers. While some lecturers seem to legitimise the use of Chichewa in their own language practices, they still censor and stigmatise the language when used by students.

6. Staff attitudes towards multilingual approaches

Staff members exhibit differing views towards the use of a multilingual language policy. For some, the linguistic diversity in Malawi is a key issue which inhibits the use of multiple languages as it is viewed as impossible to accommodate all students' needs. As one staff member notes:

> The problem is every university, we have public or private, in one class there all learners from all the languages so what wo- will determine your choice of a particular local language. Again, I'm saying we are having this problem because of linguistic pluralism there is in this country, it can be very tricky if in a class I keep on using Tumbuka, cause I'm Tumbuka and say let's say 20% of that class is Tumbuka. The other students from other tribes will say 'you are doing this deliberately so that you can advantage the Tumbuka speakers at our expense'. [Staff #60]

Some believe it to be too difficult to use multiple Malawian languages in an equitable way which does not negatively impact students. This, in part, is one of the reasons English is viewed positively, as it can act as unifying language amongst individuals with 'so many different backgrounds' [Staff #64].

However, a common theme emerging from interviews with staff is that a more flexible approach which allows for the use of more than one language within the classroom could be beneficial. One lecturer notes that 'even us lecturers, there are a number of us, many who also struggle to explain themselves' when using English only and that 'if you use Chichewa' it allows you to be able to 'give an example quicker' as you can 'just immediately give that example' [Staff #48] without struggling to express it in English. Incorporating Chichewa allows staff to 'speak the language that you are used to' and to be 'where you belong … go back to your roots' [Staff #86]. One staff member, considering whether other members of staff would opt for a policy which allowed use of both Chichewa and English states:

> I don't know um but uh though they may not support that but most they do that in one way or the other because if they combine English and Chichewa what are they telling you? They're

telling you that probably this is the best way for these students to understand, yeah so I would think that they would say no but their actions are showing, their actions are showing that. [Staff #50]

The perception of this staff member suggests that, while others may not explicitly state they are in favour of such a policy, in practice they are aware that the reality is that it can aid student comprehension.

One staff member suggests that a multilingual policy 'can be easy' as 'people will be very comfortable in both' [Staff #39]. Adopting a multilingual approach enables individuals to be more comfortable in the university by not restricting them to only using certain aspects of their linguistic repertoires. There is a view that a multilingual approach offers the flexibility to use Chichewa in classes as and when it becomes necessary for students' learning. This view is common amongst participants, such as one staff member who believes that 'English is the best for teaching purposes', but that Chichewa can be used to 'just make two or three comments' [Staff #91].

Another staff member states that their preferred policy would be 'English, code switch where necessary' for when some students are 'completely struggling and you think you can explain better' [Staff #44]. For some, the important aspect of a multilingual policy is that it does not restrict language use to being only English, but allows the use of other languages, mainly Chichewa. A multilingual policy which will 'recognise the English' as 'the main medium of instruction' but that also recognises 'the other languages' [Staff #39] is viewed to be a potentially effective and desirable policy. For the majority of participants, discussions centred around the role of English and Chichewa which is likely due to the already dominant position of Chichewa in Malawi.

Views regarding the extent to which multilingualism should be accepted or enshrined in policy also differ. One staff member states that while they would 'allow that to happen' they 'wouldn't encourage it' [Staff #35]. A situation in which it 'happens informally' although it is 'not part of the official policy' [Staff #35] is viewed as an acceptable arrangement. There are differing attitudes towards the extent to which the way in which language is used, and regulated, in the universities is currently appropriate and may need to change. For some, it is not an issue which needs much serious attention. For example, one staff member suggests language issues should not be considered 'a policy issue at university level' [Staff #85]. Others however do see a need for change with one staff member suggesting that 'the way we are doing things' in terms of 'policy … and also practice in our schools and universities' is something which 'requires some serious reform' [Staff #39].

7. Conclusion

A number of issues emerge from staff experiences of the linguistic reality within Malawian universities. Primarily, it can be seen that a monolingual approach is not strictly adhered to in HE in Malawi. Language practices are linked closely to context and the language practices being used and sanctioned by staff are further tied to particular activities and interactions. Multilingual practices are present in a range of contexts including social interactions, staff meetings, and within lessons. One interview excerpt provides a good summary of the overall approach which staff members adopt - 'you can be carried away to drop in a little Chichewa thing' [Staff #10]. However, these multilingual

practices are often stigmatised or even erased as in the case of minutes within staff meetings.

To answer the research questions set out at the beginning of this paper, from the self-reported data in interviews and focus groups, we see that language policy is enacted in different ways by different lecturers. The language 'rules' which lecturers enforce and which students are expected to abide by are not consistent. There is therefore no explicit language policy for students to follow but rather vague and hidden policies which they must adapt to depending on the context. We see a policy vagueness which is widespread in may educational contexts within Africa (Erling et al., 2021; Reilly et al., 2022). The power dynamics between students and staff result in staff having more ability to control language practices.

There is a dominance of English language use reported by staff, which is to be expected given the wider policy changes in Malawi which promote an English-only approach in the whole of the education system. This finding mirrors other studies into language use in African universities in which English, and European languages, are found to be the dominant languages within academic domains. Previous research has shown this is the case in Burundi (Irakoze 2015), Cameroon (Kouega, 2008), Madagascar (Wills et al., 2014), Morocco (Chakrani & Huang, 2014), Nigeria (Adriosh and Razi 2016), South Africa (Dominic, 2011, South African Department of Higher Education and Training 2015), Tanzania (Kalmanlehto, 2014), and Uganda (Bayiga, 2016)

In terms of attitudes, there are different views towards the use of monolingual or multi-lingual approaches. There are also a range of perspectives on the extent to which a multi-lingual approach should be formalised in official policy. Where staff are in favour of multilingual approaches, this is often in favour of Chichewa and English and no other Malawian languages. The attitudes and practices of staff are influenced by the pressures which staff face. On the one hand, they need to ensure that students understand subject content. On the other hand, however, they also see their role as contributing towards students' English proficiency as the formal work of assessment is in English and it is the dominant language through which progress continues to be measured.

This study highlights the ways in which language policy as practice (Spolsky 2004) is mediated largely by the power which individual lecturers posses (Liddicoat, 2016). We see that when there are vague MOI policies at a national level, staff members become key actors at the micro level. They are themselves influenced by multiple discourses. While individual staff members may have control over their own classrooms spaces, they also act, alongside students, as a complicated network of language policy actors, mediating how policies manifest at the micro level (Liddicoat, 2016). They are themselves also influenced by prevailing discourses of education (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2022), particularly the role of English within the internationalisation of HE globally (Doiz et al., 2013). In the Malawian context, we clearly see that, without clear guidance on MOI, the prevailing tensions between English and Chichewa manifest (Kayambazinthu, 1998).

Positively, multilingual practices are found within the university space, and we illustrate how staff members can be powerful agents in creating inclusive multilingual environments. This reflects a growing trend in higher education, in which translanguaging practices are used, often in the midst of English-dominant contexts (Mazak and Carroll 2016). However, while there are multilingual practices within the university space that challenge a monoglossic position and enable individuals to engage with

their multilingual repertoires, these practices are often side-lined and are not celebrated. These multilingual practices and competencies are not viewed as a resource but rather often an unfortunate necessity which should remain hidden. Monolingualism and English are viewed as legitimate and valid options which can be made visible via official policy. In the multilingual Malawian university, we see ideologies within maintain the products of coloniality in the dominance of English and monolingualism (McKinney, 2020) but also practices that, if allowed to more fully developed, could provide a decolonial approach to MOI (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021; Reilly, 2021) and Higher Education more broadly.

There are therefore a number of practical implications which emerge from the study. These have implications for language policy and planning in HE both in Malawi and globally given the globalisation and internationalisation of HE (Liddicoat, 2016). (1) The role of staff members as key actors in the development and implementation of language policy must not be overlooked. Staff should be engaged in the development of policies which impact their working environments, and clear guidance for implementation must be given. (2) Monolingual ideologies and policies do not reflect, and often ignore, multilingual realities leading to tensions and issues for teaching and learning. There is an urgent need to rethink how multilingualism is viewed and accommodated in HE language policy in a global HE context which is dominated by English and other former colonial languages. (3) Vague language policies result in the proliferation of multiple hidden language policies which create an inequitable learning and teaching context for both students and staff. Language policies in HE must be clear and contextually relevant for tertiary level, contain practical steps for implantation, and consider the language skills which students and staff bring to their education and the skills which HE should aim to develop. Revealing the hidden language policies in HE is a key first step in developing equitable approaches. We advocate for language policies which view multilingualism as a resource within the context of the globalised HE sector, and use this perspective as a starting point to build policies which can acknowledge multilingual realities, develop pedagogical strategies for engaging with staff and students' multilingual repertoires, and enable students to effectively develop the skills and experiences they need at university to flourish while in education and beyond.

Notes

1. The public university system in Malawi has since been restructured. In Malawi, historically the majority of universities were 'public' in that students received support from the government to pursue their courses. Recently, there has been an increase in fee-paying private universities in the country. The National Council for Higher Education was established in 2014, and accredits all university courses.
2. 'Chewa' here refers to the language 'Chichewa'

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