

Language, Translation and Knowledge Production: A Framework for Intellectual Sovereignty and Epistemic Justice

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Abstract: *Despite language and translation being fundamental to knowledge production, they have traditionally been understood primarily as instruments of communication, education, and knowledge transfer. This conceptual paper argues that persistent epistemic inequalities within contemporary global knowledge systems require a broader understanding of how knowledge is produced, legitimised, circulated, and transformed. Drawing on decolonial theory, translation studies, language policy, and epistemic justice scholarship, the study examines how colonial and postcolonial linguistic hierarchies continue to shape research, higher education, and knowledge production across the Global South. It contends that uncritical dependence on dominant international languages and externally generated epistemologies reinforces intellectual dependency while it marginalises locally grounded knowledge systems. The article proposes a Language-Translation-Knowledge Production Framework that reconceptualises language and translation as interconnected infrastructures of knowledge production rather than being just instruments of communication or linguistic transfer. Within this framework, language functions as a repository of cultural memory, cognitive diversity, and intellectual agency, while translation is conceptualised as a process of epistemic negotiation through which knowledge is interpreted, localised, and co-constructed across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The framework demonstrates that sustainable development depends not on choosing between local identity and global engagement but on fostering equitable conditions for reciprocal knowledge exchange among diverse epistemic communities. The paper concludes that transforming the structures through which knowledge is recognised, produced, and mobilised is essential for advancing multilingual participation, intellectual sovereignty, and epistemic justice. The framework offers a theoretical foundation for more inclusive, locally grounded, and globally connected knowledge systems.*

Keywords: Decolonial theory, epistemic justice, intellectual sovereignty, Knowledge production, language policy, linguistic diversity, translation studies.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first-century knowledge economy has fundamentally reshaped the relationship between language, knowledge production, and national development. Contemporary societies

increasingly compete not only through technological and economic capacity but also through their ability to generate, translate, mobilise, and apply knowledge across multilingual, intercultural, and digitally connected environments (Marginson, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Within this context, language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as an epistemic infrastructure that shapes conceptual frameworks, cultural memory, scientific participation, and intellectual agency (Losey and Shuck, 2022; García and Wei, 2014; Kubota, 2020; Zhang-Wu et al., 2025). Likewise, translation has evolved from a predominantly linguistic activity into a strategic process of knowledge mediation through which ideas are interpreted, negotiated, and recontextualised across diverse epistemic communities (Baker, 2018; Cronin, 2017; Marais, 2019). Despite increasing recognition of multilingualism and intercultural collaboration, global knowledge production continues to reflect persistent asymmetries rooted in colonial histories, linguistic hierarchies, unequal research infrastructures, and differential access to scholarly visibility, particularly across the Global South (Connell, 2007; Curry and Lillis, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Contemporary debates surrounding knowledge production increasingly acknowledge that inequalities within global academia are not solely economic or technological but also epistemological. The dominance of a relatively small number of languages, particularly English, in scientific publishing, higher education, international research collaboration, and global policy discourse, has created asymmetrical conditions under which certain forms of knowledge attain legitimacy while others remain peripheral or invisible (Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 2002; Mbembe, 2016). Although the widespread use of English has undoubtedly facilitated unprecedented international collaboration and accelerated scientific communication, its institutional predominance has also reinforced structural barriers that marginalise indigenous languages, local epistemologies, and context-specific intellectual traditions (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Hamel, 2006). Consequently, participation within global knowledge networks often requires scholars from the Global South to adopt linguistic and epistemological frameworks that may inadequately represent local realities. Such approach reproduces what decolonial scholars describe as the continuing *coloniality of knowledge* (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2011, Munyangeyo, 2026).

The persistence of coloniality within contemporary knowledge systems extends beyond language choice to encompass deeper questions regarding whose knowledge is recognised as authoritative, whose methodologies are considered scientifically valid, and whose intellectual traditions shape global research agendas. Decolonial scholars argue that colonialism established enduring epistemic hierarchies that privileged European systems of knowing while systematically devaluing indigenous, African, Asian, and Latin American knowledge traditions (Mazrui, 2004; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, Munyangeyo, 2026). Although formal colonial administrations have largely disappeared, these hierarchies continue to influence academic institutions, research funding priorities, educational curricula, and publication practices. Universities across much of the Global South frequently rely upon theories developed within Northern contexts, publish predominantly in English, and evaluate scholarly excellence according to metrics established by institutions located within historically dominant knowledge centres (Connell, 2007). Such practices contribute to intellectual dependency by positioning local scholars primarily as consumers rather than producers of globally influential knowledge.

The concept of epistemic justice provides an important normative framework for interrogating these inequalities. Fricker (2007) argues that injustice occurs not only through unequal access to material resources but also when individuals or communities are systematically disadvantaged in their capacity as knowers. Building upon this perspective, Santos (2014) and Dotson (2014) contend that sustainable social development requires the coexistence and mutual recognition of multiple knowledge systems rather than the universalisation of a single epistemological tradition. These perspectives challenge assumptions that scientific progress necessarily depends upon linguistic or epistemological homogenisation. Instead, they advocate pluralistic knowledge ecologies capable of accommodating diverse intellectual traditions while fostering dialogue across cultural boundaries.

Within this broader decolonial project, language assumes significance far beyond its communicative function. Languages encode culturally situated conceptual categories, historical experiences, ecological understandings, ethical values, and modes of reasoning that shape how communities interpret reality (wa Thiong'o, 1986). The marginalisation of local languages therefore represents not simply a loss of cultural heritage but also the impoverishment of humanity's collective intellectual resources. Conversely, initiatives to strengthen multilingual knowledge systems enable societies to preserve cognitive diversity while enhancing their capacity to address complex local challenges through culturally relevant forms of innovation.

Translation occupies an equally pivotal position within this debate. Traditional approaches have often conceptualised translation as a neutral process of linguistic equivalence through which information is transferred between languages. Contemporary translation studies, however, increasingly recognise translation as an interpretive, political, and transformative practice embedded within unequal relations of power (Venuti, 2018). Translation inevitably involves processes of selection, negotiation, adaptation, and contextualisation that shape how knowledge is understood and applied within new sociocultural settings. From a decolonial perspective, translation inevitably possesses the potential either to reproduce existing epistemic hierarchies by privileging dominant knowledge systems or to facilitate more equitable exchanges through the localisation, reinterpretation, and co-production of knowledge across diverse intellectual traditions (Spivak, 2008; Baker and Jones, 2025).

This article argues that language and translation constitute strategic instruments for decolonising knowledge systems and advancing sustainable national development. Rather than viewing language solely as a vehicle for communication or translation merely as a technical process of textual transfer, the article conceptualises both as dynamic mechanisms through which knowledge is produced, negotiated, legitimised, and transformed.

Drawing upon decolonial theory, translation studies, language policy scholarship, and epistemic justice frameworks, the paper argues that intellectual sovereignty does not require withdrawal from global knowledge networks but rather the creation of equitable conditions under which local languages and knowledge traditions participate as equal contributors to global scholarship. In doing so, the article proposes an integrated conceptual framework that repositions language and translation as foundational infrastructures for knowledge democracy, epistemic plurality, and nationally grounded yet globally engaged development.

Rationale and problem statement

Contemporary debates on language, translation, and national development have largely been framed within functionalist paradigms that conceptualise language as an instrument of communication and translation as a technical process of transferring information across linguistic boundaries. Within these paradigms, multilingualism is commonly justified in terms of improved educational outcomes, enhanced access to public services, or increased participation in international commerce and diplomacy (Grin, 2003; Ricento, 2006). Translation is similarly valued for facilitating cross-cultural communication, supporting international collaboration, and disseminating scientific knowledge (Pym, 2023). While these perspectives have generated important insights into the practical dimensions of language policy and translation practice, they often leave largely unexamined the deeper epistemological questions concerning how language shapes knowledge production, whose knowledge is privileged within global circulation, and how translation itself participates in the construction, negotiation, and legitimisation of knowledge.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised that global inequalities are sustained not only through uneven access to educational and technological resources but also through asymmetrical systems of knowledge validation and circulation (Mugwaze, 2025; Mutongoza, 2025; Munyangayo, 2026; Seleke, 2026). The governance of scholarly publishing, international research funding, citation practices, and academic evaluation continues to privilege particular languages, institutions, and epistemological traditions, often limiting the visibility and legitimacy of knowledge generated in the Global South. Consequently, debates concerning development are increasingly framed in terms of epistemic inclusion, knowledge democracy, and cognitive justice rather than simply knowledge transfer, reinforcing the need to examine language and translation as structural dimensions of equitable knowledge production (Curry and Lillis, 2017; Hall et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2021).

The rapid internationalisation of higher education, accompanied by the expansion of global university rankings, bibliometric evaluation systems, and English-dominated scientific publishing, has created new opportunities for international collaboration while simultaneously reinforcing longstanding asymmetries in the production and validation of knowledge (Altbach and de Wit, 2018; Marginson, 2022).

This tension reveals an important conceptual gap within existing scholarship. Although considerable research has examined language policy, multilingual education, and translation as mechanisms for improving communication and educational inclusion (Shohamy, 2006), relatively limited attention has been devoted to understanding language and translation as constitutive dimensions of epistemic justice and intellectual sovereignty. Discussions of decolonisation within higher education have expanded significantly over the past decade, particularly following renewed global attention to movements advocating curriculum transformation and the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu, 2018; Hall et al., 2013; Seleke, 2026)). Nevertheless, these debates have often focused on curriculum reform, institutional transformation, or research ethics while giving comparatively less attention to the strategic role that language and translation occupy within

the broader architecture of knowledge production. As a result, the relationship between linguistic diversity, translation practices, and the decolonisation of knowledge remains theoretically underdeveloped despite its growing significance for national development and international scholarship.

The urgency of addressing this gap is further reinforced by contemporary geopolitical transformations that are reshaping global knowledge production. Scientific collaboration increasingly transcends national boundaries, digital technologies enable unprecedented access to research outputs, and international policy frameworks emphasise knowledge sharing as a prerequisite for addressing complex global challenges such as climate change, public health, artificial intelligence, migration, and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021). Yet participation within these global knowledge networks remains highly uneven. Research funding, editorial decision-making, citation practices, and institutional prestige continue to be concentrated within a relatively small number of countries and predominantly Anglophone academic institutions (Curry and Lillis, 2017).

Consequently, the circulation of knowledge often reflects unequal relations of power in which theories developed within particular historical and cultural contexts acquire universal status, while locally generated knowledge from Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Indigenous communities is frequently positioned as supplementary, context-specific, or insufficiently generalisable. These perceptions fundamentally reframe questions concerning language and translation. Rather than treating linguistic diversity as just a cultural resource, decolonial theory positions language itself as a site of epistemic struggle through which knowledge is authorised, contested, and transformed.

The persistence of linguistic hierarchies within contemporary academia illustrates this dynamic. English has become the dominant language of scientific communication, accounting for the overwhelming majority of publications indexed in major citation databases and serving as the primary medium for international conferences, collaborative research, and academic mobility (Hyland, 2016). While this linguistic convergence has facilitated unprecedented global communication, it has also generated what scholars describe as epistemic homogenisation, whereby alternative conceptual vocabularies, culturally embedded categories of analysis, and locally situated methodologies become increasingly marginalised within mainstream scholarly discourse (Kubota, 2020; Pennycook & Makoni, 2020).

Recent scholarship further demonstrates that neoliberal models of higher education continue to reinforce English-language dominance and colonial epistemic structures despite institutional commitments to multilingualism, highlighting the need for decolonial multilingualism as a strategy for reclaiming academic autonomy (Mugwaze, 2025). Researchers writing in languages other than English frequently encounter structural disadvantages related to publication opportunities, peer review, citation visibility, and international recognition, irrespective of the intrinsic quality of their scholarship. Consequently, linguistic inequality becomes inseparable from broader questions concerning whose knowledge acquires global legitimacy and whose intellectual contributions remain invisible.

Translation occupies an equally complex position within these dynamics. Conventional understandings frequently assume that translation simply enables the movement of knowledge from one linguistic community to another without substantially altering its meaning. However, contemporary translation scholarship demonstrates that translation is inherently interpretive, selective, and culturally situated (Baker and Jones, 2025; Tymoczko, 2014). Every act of translation involves decisions concerning conceptual equivalence, cultural adaptation, lexical innovation, and contextual interpretation. These decisions influence not only how knowledge is communicated but also how it is reconstructed within new intellectual environments. Translation therefore functions as a productive rather than merely reproductive activity, capable of reshaping knowledge itself through processes of localisation, reinterpretation, and intercultural negotiation.

This reconceptualisation becomes particularly significant within decolonial frameworks. If knowledge is recognised as culturally situated rather than universally neutral, then translation cannot be understood solely as the movement of fixed meanings between languages. Instead, it becomes a dialogical process through which diverse epistemic traditions encounter one another, negotiate conceptual differences, and generate new understandings that neither replicate dominant knowledge systems nor romanticise local traditions. Therefore, translation emerges as a critical mechanism for fostering what Santos (2018) describes as an *ecology of knowledges*, which is a pluralistic intellectual landscape in which different epistemologies coexist through reciprocal learning rather than hierarchical assimilation.

At the same time, a decolonial reconceptualisation of language and translation must avoid two opposing pitfalls. The first is epistemic universalism, which assumes that globally dominant languages and knowledge systems represent neutral vehicles for scientific progress. Such assumptions overlook the historical and political conditions through which certain epistemologies have achieved global authority while others have been systematically marginalised. The second pitfall is linguistic essentialism, which equates decolonisation with the exclusive valorisation of indigenous or national languages at the expense of international engagement. While the revitalisation of local languages is indispensable for preserving cultural memory and cognitive diversity, intellectual isolation would ultimately undermine opportunities for collaborative research, technological innovation, and participation within global scientific communities. Decolonisation, therefore, should not be interpreted as withdrawal from global knowledge networks but as their democratisation through more equitable conditions of participation.

This article responds to these challenges by putting forward a conceptual argument that integrates decolonial theory, translation studies, language policy, and epistemic justice into a coherent analytical framework. It argues that language should be understood as intellectual infrastructure that shapes the production, preservation, and transmission of knowledge rather than simply facilitating communication. Translation should equally be conceptualised as an epistemic practice through which knowledge is negotiated, localised, and co-produced across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Together, these reconceptualisations offer a more comprehensive understanding of how societies may simultaneously strengthen local intellectual traditions and participate meaningfully within global knowledge economies.

Such a perspective shifts the focus of development discourse from the unilateral transfer of knowledge toward the reciprocal co-production of knowledge under conditions of epistemic justice. In doing so, it provides a foundation for rethinking language and translation not as peripheral concerns within development policy but as strategic instruments for harnessing intellectual sovereignty, cognitive diversity, and globally relevant yet locally grounded knowledges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language, power and knowledge production

The relationship between language and knowledge has traditionally been examined through linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural perspectives that recognise language as more than a neutral medium of communication. Contemporary scholarship increasingly acknowledges that language structures not only how knowledge is communicated but also how it is conceptualised, classified, remembered, and transmitted across generations (Pennycook, 2010; Munyangayo, 2026). Consequently, debates concerning multilingualism, language policy, and linguistic rights have moved beyond questions of communication efficiency to encompass broader issues of epistemic participation, intellectual agency, and social justice. Within decolonial scholarship, language occupies an especially significant position because it mediates access to knowledge while simultaneously shaping the cultural frameworks through which reality itself is interpreted.

One of the earliest and most influential articulations of this relationship is found in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) critique of colonial language policies in Africa. Ngũgĩ argues that colonial education systematically displaced indigenous languages not merely to facilitate administrative control but to restructure cultural consciousness by disconnecting learners from locally embedded systems of meaning. Language, in his account, functions as a repository of collective memory, historical experience, ethical values, and cultural imagination. The suppression of indigenous languages therefore represents an epistemic loss rather than simply a linguistic one, limiting societies' capacity to reproduce locally grounded knowledge and to articulate alternative visions of development. Although Ngũgĩ wrote within the context of postcolonial Africa, his arguments continue to resonate across multilingual societies confronting the tensions between linguistic diversity and globalisation.

These concerns have been expanded through scholarship on linguistic imperialism, which demonstrates that contemporary linguistic hierarchies cannot be understood independently of historical power relations. Phillipson (1992) contends that the global expansion of English has been facilitated through political, economic, and educational structures that privilege English-language knowledge while marginalising alternative linguistic traditions. Although English undoubtedly enables international scientific collaboration and access to global research, its institutional dominance has also contributed to asymmetrical patterns of academic visibility in which research produced in English enjoys disproportionately greater circulation, citation, and influence than scholarship published in other languages (Curry and Lillis, 2017). Such

inequalities are not merely communicative but epistemological because they shape which theories become internationally recognised and which remain locally confined.

At the same time, contemporary scholarship cautions against simplistic interpretations of English as inherently oppressive. Canagarajah (2002, 2013) argues that scholars and communities frequently appropriate global languages strategically, adapting them to local communicative purposes rather than simply reproducing dominant ideologies. His concept of translingual practice challenges binary distinctions between local and global languages by demonstrating that multilingual speakers actively negotiate linguistic resources to produce new forms of knowledge and identity. Rather than viewing multilingualism as a problem requiring standardisation, Canagarajah positions linguistic hybridity as a source of intellectual creativity capable of expanding rather than diminishing epistemic diversity. This perspective shifts attention from language as a fixed system towards language as social practice embedded within dynamic processes of knowledge production.

This understanding has been reinforced by recent developments in sociolinguistics that conceptualise multilingualism as an epistemic resource rather than a communicative obstacle. García and Wei (2014) argue that multilingual individuals do not simply alternate between separate linguistic systems but engage in translanguaging, drawing upon integrated linguistic repertoires to construct meaning across diverse contexts. Translanguaging challenges monolingual assumptions embedded within many educational systems by recognising that knowledge production frequently occurs through fluid interactions among languages rather than within discrete linguistic boundaries. Recent research further demonstrates that multilingual learning environments foster cognitive flexibility, intercultural competence, and enhanced problem-solving capacities, all of which contribute to innovation within increasingly interconnected knowledge economies (Kubota, 2020; Munyangayo, 2026).

The implications of these perspectives extend beyond classroom practice to the organisation of higher education and research. Universities have historically functioned as institutions for preserving and legitimising particular forms of knowledge, yet their linguistic policies frequently privilege dominant international languages at the expense of local epistemologies (Marginson, 2022; Cantwell, Marginson and Smolentseva, 2018). This institutional preference encourages what Hamel (2006) describes as domain loss, whereby local languages gradually become excluded from advanced scientific discourse despite remaining central to community life. Over time, this process risks narrowing the intellectual functions of indigenous languages, reducing their capacity to generate specialised knowledge and weakening their role within national innovation systems.

Language policy therefore emerges as a central mechanism through which societies negotiate the relationship between local identity and global participation. Ricento (2006) argues that language policies are never politically neutral because they allocate symbolic and material resources among competing linguistic communities. Decisions regarding the languages of instruction, research dissemination, governmental communication, and scientific publication influence whose knowledge is institutionalised and whose intellectual contributions remain peripheral. From a decolonial perspective, language policy should therefore be understood as

a form of epistemic governance that shapes the conditions under which knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimised.

Recent scholarship from the Global South further challenges assumptions that multilingualism necessarily fragments national development. Pennycook and Makoni (2020) argue that linguistic diversity frequently provides the foundation for contextually appropriate innovation because locally embedded conceptual frameworks enable communities to interpret environmental, agricultural, medical, and social challenges through culturally meaningful categories. Similarly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Munyangayo (2026) argue that epistemic freedom requires recognising African languages not only as cultural artefacts but also as legitimate languages of scientific inquiry capable of generating original theoretical contributions and leading educational governance. These arguments reposition multilingualism from a perceived developmental constraint to a strategic intellectual resource capable of strengthening national research ecosystems while broadening participation within global knowledge production.

Collectively, this body of literature demonstrates that language functions simultaneously as a cognitive system, a cultural archive, an institutional resource, and a mechanism of epistemic power. Nevertheless, while sociolinguistic scholarship convincingly establishes language as constitutive of knowledge production, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the processes through which knowledge moves across languages. This omission directs attention to translation, whose significance extends beyond linguistic transfer to encompass the negotiation and transformation of knowledge itself.

Linguistic and epistemic justice

An ecology of knowledges promotes dialogue among multiple epistemic traditions without assuming that one system should dominate or absorb another. Such a perspective is particularly relevant to language and translation because linguistic diversity constitutes one of the principal mechanisms through which epistemic diversity is preserved and transmitted. Languages do not just label pre-existing realities; they encode culturally specific categories of thought, environmental knowledge, ethical reasoning, and social memory accumulated across generations (wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Recent scholarship has extended these foundational insights by examining how coloniality continues to shape global higher education and research systems. Bhabra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu (2018) argue that universities remain deeply embedded within colonial epistemic structures through curricula, disciplinary canons, citation practices, and institutional norms that privilege Northern theories while treating knowledge generated elsewhere as supplementary or locally bounded. Similarly, Stein et al. (2022) caution that institutional commitments to "decolonisation" often risk becoming rhetorical unless they challenge the deeper epistemic assumptions governing research, publication, and academic evaluation. Decolonisation, in this sense, requires more than increasing the geographical diversity of scholarly participation; it necessitates transforming the conditions under which knowledge itself is recognised and validated.

Within this broader intellectual landscape, language assumes strategic significance (Phillipson, 1992). Although multilingualism has expanded globally, the continuing dominance of English within international scholarship illustrates how linguistic hierarchies continue to mediate access to academic visibility and epistemic authority (Kubota, 2020; Mutongoza, 2025). Consequently, decolonising knowledge cannot be separated from critical engagement with language because the politics of language remain inseparable from the politics of knowledge production.

The decolonial literature therefore provides a crucial analytical lens for this article by demonstrating that contemporary linguistic inequalities are not accidental outcomes of globalisation but manifestations of deeper historical processes through which epistemic hierarchies have been institutionalised. Nevertheless, while decolonial scholarship has convincingly exposed the persistence of coloniality within global knowledge systems, it has devoted comparatively less attention to the transformative role that translation may play in facilitating equitable dialogue among diverse epistemologies.

Translation beyond linguistic transfer: Towards epistemic negotiation

Translation has long occupied a central position within intercultural communication, international diplomacy, literary exchange, and scientific dissemination. Traditional approaches, particularly those influenced by equivalence-based theories, conceptualised translation primarily as the transfer of semantic content from one language to another while preserving meaning as faithfully as possible (Nida, 1964). Although such approaches remain valuable for many practical applications, they are increasingly regarded as insufficient for explaining how knowledge itself is transformed as it circulates across linguistic, cultural, and epistemic boundaries. Contemporary translation studies instead emphasise translation as an interpretive, culturally embedded, and politically situated practice that actively shapes the production of meaning rather than merely reproducing it (Bassnett, 2014; Baker and Jones, 2025).

The so-called cultural turn in translation studies marked a decisive shift from linguistic equivalence towards broader questions of power, ideology, and representation (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). Translation came to be understood not as a transparent process but as an act of mediation influenced by historical context, institutional interests, and cultural assumptions. Every translation necessarily involves choices concerning lexical equivalence, conceptual framing, omission, emphasis, and adaptation. These choices affect not only how texts are understood but also how knowledge itself is reconstructed within new intellectual environments. Translation therefore becomes an active participant in knowledge production rather than a neutral conduit through which knowledge simply passes.

Venuti's (2018) influential critique of the invisibility of the translator further exposes the political dimensions of translation. He argues that dominant translation practices often domesticate foreign texts by assimilating them into the cultural expectations of target audiences, thereby obscuring linguistic and cultural differences. While domestication may facilitate readability, it also risks erasing alternative epistemologies by translating unfamiliar

concepts into categories that reflect dominant knowledge systems. Venuti advocates greater visibility for translators as cultural mediators whose interpretive decisions shape intercultural understanding. From a decolonial perspective, this insight is especially significant because translation can either reproduce colonial hierarchies by normalising dominant epistemologies or create opportunities for more equitable encounters among diverse systems of knowledge.

Spivak (2008) extends this critique by highlighting the ethical responsibilities of translation within postcolonial contexts. She argues that translation should not reduce linguistic difference to universal categories but should remain attentive to the cultural and political specificity of the source text. Translation, therefore, becomes an act of listening rather than appropriation, requiring sensitivity to the intellectual traditions embedded within language itself. Such an approach challenges assumptions that all concepts possess straightforward cross-cultural equivalents and instead recognises translation as a dialogical process through which meanings are continually negotiated.

Recent scholarship increasingly conceptualises translation as a form of knowledge mobility. Cronin (2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2012, 2021, 2017) argues that in an interconnected world, translation underpins global scientific collaboration by enabling ideas to travel across linguistic communities. However, knowledge does not remain unchanged during this movement. Scientific concepts are reinterpreted, adapted, contested, and localised according to the intellectual traditions of receiving communities. Tymoczko (2014) similarly demonstrates that translation expands rather than just transfers knowledge because it generates new conceptual possibilities through encounters among different cultural frameworks. Translation thus becomes a site of innovation where new meanings emerge from intercultural interaction rather than simple replication.

This understanding resonates strongly with decolonial perspectives on epistemic plurality. If knowledge is recognised as culturally situated rather than universally neutral, then translation becomes indispensable for facilitating dialogue among diverse epistemologies without assuming that one must dominate another. Baker and Jones (2025) argue that translators participate in constructing social realities through the narratives they reproduce and transform. Translation therefore possesses significant epistemic agency: it shapes which knowledge circulates globally, how that knowledge is interpreted, and whose voices become intelligible within international discourse. Such agency is particularly relevant for scholarship originating in the Global South, where translation frequently mediates engagement between locally grounded research and internationally dominant academic communities.

Despite these advances, much of the translation literature continues to focus on textual mediation rather than on translation's role within broader systems of knowledge production. This article therefore proposes a further conceptual shift by positioning translation as epistemic negotiation. Unlike transmission, which implies the movement of stable knowledge between fixed linguistic systems, epistemic negotiation recognises that translation involves reciprocal processes of interpretation, localisation, adaptation, and co-construction. Through these processes, neither the source nor the target knowledge remains unchanged; rather, new understandings emerge through sustained intercultural engagement. Such a perspective aligns closely with Santos' (2018) ecology of knowledges by demonstrating that translation provides

one of the principal mechanisms through which plural knowledge systems may interact without requiring epistemological assimilation.

Conceptualising translation as epistemic negotiation also carries significant implications for national development. Countries seeking to strengthen their knowledge economies cannot rely solely upon importing scientific knowledge through dominant international languages. Sustainable innovation requires translating global knowledge into locally meaningful conceptual frameworks while simultaneously enabling locally generated knowledge to enter international scholarly conversations without losing its cultural specificity. Translation thus becomes a strategic infrastructure for reciprocal knowledge exchange, fostering intellectual sovereignty alongside global engagement.

Taken together, the literature on language and translation demonstrates that neither can be reduced to technical instruments of communication. Both are constitutive dimensions of knowledge production that shape how societies generate, preserve, circulate, and transform intellectual resources. This synthesis provides the foundation for the final part of the literature review, which examines how language policy, higher education, and global knowledge networks institutionalise these processes and why addressing intellectual dependency requires rethinking the relationship between local identity and global participation.

Recent decolonial scholarship has extended this critique by arguing that inequalities in knowledge production are not simply problems of representation or unequal access to academic resources; rather, they concern the deeper conditions through which knowledge is produced, validated, translated, and circulated. The persistence of Western and Northern epistemic frameworks as universal reference points continues to shape academic disciplines, institutional priorities, and language practices, limiting the visibility of alternative intellectual traditions and locally situated forms of knowing (Loke and Owen, 2024; Bagga-Gupta, 2025).

Within this context, intellectual sovereignty should not be interpreted as academic isolation or resistance to international engagement. Instead, contemporary debates increasingly conceptualise it as the capacity of societies and institutions to participate in global knowledge exchange while retaining autonomy over research priorities, epistemic frameworks, and linguistic resources. This requires transforming global knowledge networks from systems of one-directional transfer into more reciprocal spaces where diverse languages, methodologies, and knowledge traditions can contribute to collective knowledge futures (Ndlovu and Woldegiorgis, 2024; Bagga-Gupta, 2025).

Global knowledge networks and intellectual dependency

The expansion of global knowledge networks has transformed the production and circulation of knowledge, creating unprecedented opportunities for collaboration while simultaneously intensifying existing inequalities. Digital communication technologies, international research partnerships, and global higher education systems have enabled scholars to participate in increasingly interconnected intellectual communities. However, scholars of global knowledge production argue that these networks remain structured by significant asymmetries concerning

research funding, publication infrastructures, academic prestige, and linguistic authority (Altbach and de Wit, 2018; Marginson, 2022).

One of the most visible manifestations of these inequalities is the concentration of academic publishing within a small number of institutions, journals, and languages. English has become the dominant language of international scientific communication, and major citation databases disproportionately represent research published in English-language journals (Curry and Lillis, 2017). While English provides a common platform for global scholarly exchange, its dominance creates unequal conditions for researchers whose intellectual traditions and linguistic resources do not align with prevailing academic norms. Scholars may therefore face pressure to adapt their research questions, theoretical frameworks, and writing styles to expectations established within dominant knowledge centres.

This phenomenon has been described as a form of intellectual dependency, whereby knowledge systems in historically marginalised regions become oriented towards external validation rather than internally defined intellectual priorities (Connell, 2007). Southern scholars may be encouraged to produce research that responds primarily to agendas established elsewhere, while locally significant questions receive comparatively less attention because they do not align with dominant disciplinary expectations or international funding priorities. As a result, global knowledge exchange can unintentionally reproduce patterns of dependency even when it is formally based on collaboration and partnership.

The concept of Southern Theory provides an important critique of this imbalance by arguing that social knowledge must emerge from multiple geographical and historical locations rather than being produced primarily within Western academic centres and subsequently applied elsewhere (Connell, 2007).

Recent debates on open science and knowledge democracy have further highlighted the importance of equitable knowledge circulation. UNESCO (2021) argues that open science should not simply expand access to research outputs but should also promote inclusion, diversity, and participation across different regions and knowledge traditions. However, openness alone does not resolve epistemic inequality. If global knowledge systems remain dominated by particular languages, methodologies, and institutional norms, expanded access may simply reproduce existing hierarchies at a larger scale. Genuine knowledge democracy requires attention not only to access but also to recognition, participation, and epistemic plurality.

Translation occupies a crucial but underexplored role within this debate. Although global knowledge systems depend heavily on translation, translation infrastructures remain unevenly distributed. Research from the Global South often requires translation into dominant international languages to achieve global visibility, while knowledge produced in dominant languages is less frequently translated into local languages for broader societal engagement. This asymmetry creates a one-directional flow of knowledge that reinforces intellectual dependency rather than reciprocal exchange (Cronin, 2017). A more equitable model would

involve multidirectional translation practices through which knowledge moves across linguistic communities in ways that support dialogue and co-production.

The literature reviewed in this section reveals a significant conceptual gap. Existing research has examined language policy, multilingual education, translation studies, and global knowledge inequalities as related but often separate fields. What remains insufficiently theorised is the relationship among these domains: how language and translation together function as infrastructures through which societies negotiate local identity, global participation, and epistemic sovereignty. Addressing this gap requires an integrated framework that moves beyond viewing language as communication and translation as transfer.

This article responds to this gap by proposing that decolonising knowledge requires a reconceptualisation of language and translation as foundational components of equitable knowledge ecosystems. Such an approach recognises that sustainable development depends not only on acquiring global knowledge but also on the capacity to interpret, transform, and contribute knowledge from diverse linguistic and cultural locations. The objective is therefore not to replace global engagement with linguistic isolation, but to create a more balanced relationship between local intellectual traditions and global knowledge networks.

Conceptual framework

This article adopts an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that brings together decolonial theory, epistemic justice, translation studies, and language policy scholarship to examine how language and translation shape the conditions under which knowledge is produced, circulated, and transformed. While existing scholarship has generated important insights into coloniality, linguistic inequality, and knowledge hierarchies, these debates have often developed within separate intellectual traditions. This article proposes an integrated framework, which is the Language-Translation-Epistemic Justice Framework. This framework conceptualises language and translation as interconnected infrastructures through which societies negotiate intellectual sovereignty, local identity, and global knowledge engagement.

The framework is grounded in the assumption that knowledge is never produced within socially or linguistically neutral environments. Rather, knowledge emerges through historically situated practices shaped by relations of power, cultural contexts, institutional structures, and linguistic resources. Consequently, decolonising knowledge requires not only questioning dominant epistemological assumptions but also transforming the linguistic and translational mechanisms through which knowledge becomes visible, legitimate, and internationally recognised.

Translation as epistemic negotiation

The key dimension of the framework reconceptualises translation as an epistemic practice rather than a technical mechanism of linguistic substitution. Traditional models often assume that knowledge exists independently of language and can therefore be transferred without fundamental transformation. However, contemporary translation scholarship demonstrates that

translation inevitably involves interpretation, negotiation, and cultural adaptation (Bassnett, 2014; Baker and Jones, 2025).

Drawing particularly on Spivak's (2008) work on the politics of translation, this framework understands translation as an ethical encounter between different systems of meaning. Translation requires attention to linguistic difference rather than the elimination of difference. In this sense, effective translation does not simply make unfamiliar knowledge accessible; it enables dialogue between intellectual traditions while preserving the conceptual richness of each.

This understanding is especially important in contexts where knowledge moves between dominant global languages and historically marginalised languages. Translation from local languages into global academic languages can increase international visibility, but it must avoid reducing culturally embedded concepts into categories that reproduce dominant epistemological assumptions. Conversely, translating global knowledge into local languages requires more than linguistic conversion; it requires contextual adaptation so that knowledge becomes meaningful within specific social and cultural environments.

Thus, translation functions as a bridge between epistemic communities. It allows knowledge to travel while simultaneously transforming both the source and receiving contexts. This makes translation a central mechanism through which decolonial knowledge practices can occur.

The Integrated Language-Translation-Epistemic Justice Framework

The framework proposed in this article conceptualises decolonised knowledge production as a dynamic interaction among three interconnected processes:

First, language provides the epistemic foundation of knowledge production. Languages contain historically accumulated concepts, classifications, and forms of reasoning that influence how communities understand themselves and their environments. Protecting linguistic diversity therefore contributes directly to preserving cognitive diversity.

Second, translation enables epistemic mobility. Translation allows knowledge to move across linguistic and cultural boundaries while facilitating adaptation, reinterpretation, and co-production rather than simple transfer.

Third, epistemic justice provides the ethical condition under which these processes occur. Without recognition of diverse knowledge traditions as legitimate contributors, translation may merely reproduce existing hierarchies by transferring dominant knowledge into subordinate contexts.

Together, these dimensions produce a model of equitable global-local knowledge exchange. Such exchange rejects both epistemic dependency and linguistic isolation. It does not seek to replace international languages or global scientific collaboration but to transform the conditions under which global knowledge networks operate. The goal is a more pluralistic knowledge

system in which local intellectual traditions participate as contributors rather than merely recipients.

The framework therefore advances the central argument of this article: that sustainable national development requires more than access to global knowledge. It requires the capacity to generate, translate, adapt, and circulate knowledge through linguistically diverse and epistemically just systems. Language and translation are consequently not peripheral concerns within development policy; they are foundational infrastructures for intellectual sovereignty and inclusive participation in the global knowledge economy.

Figure 1. *The Language – Translation - Epistemic Justice Framework for decolonised knowledge production and sustainable global-local engagement.*

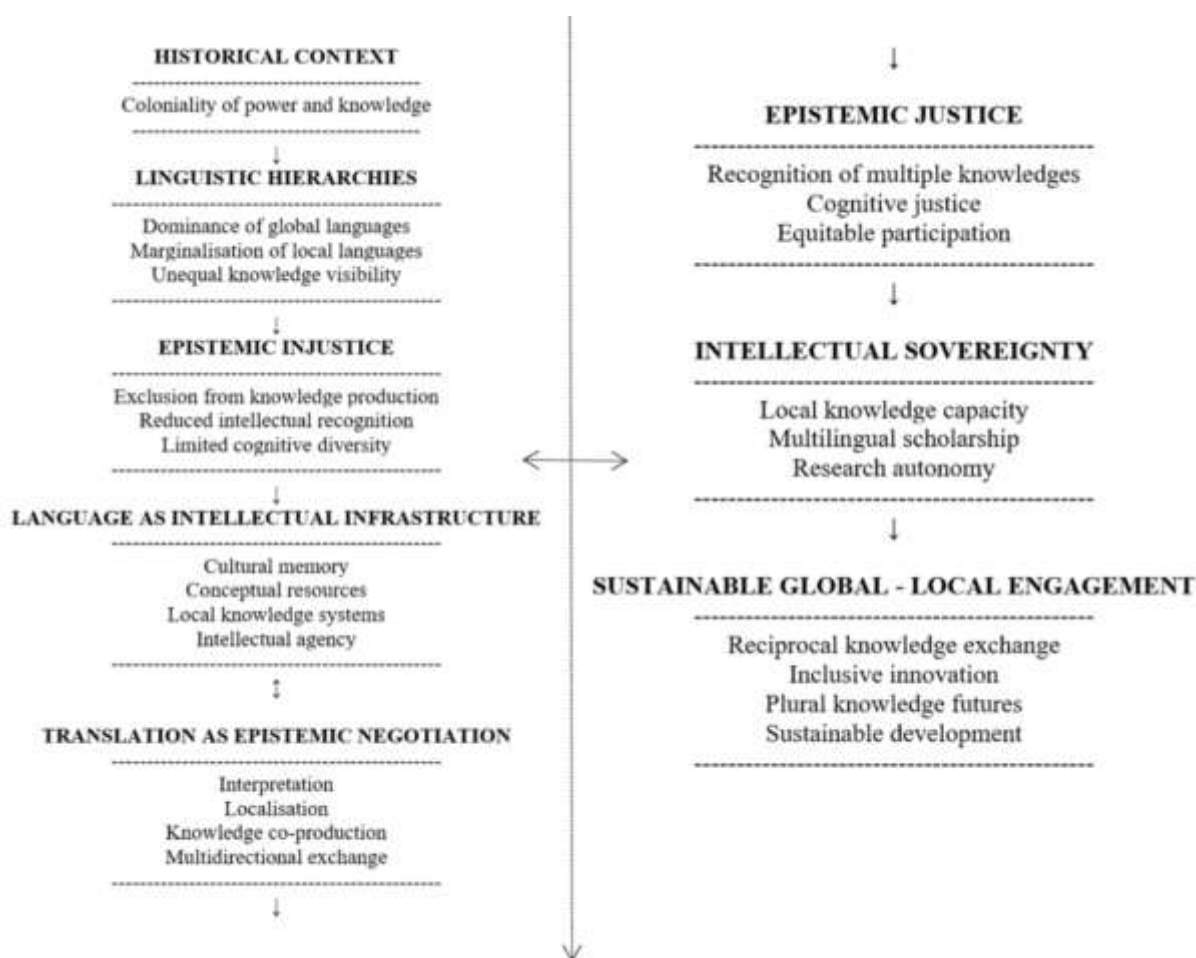


Figure 1. *The Language - Translation - Epistemic Justice Framework.*

Figure 1 presents the article's central conceptual contribution through the Language-Translation-Epistemic Justice Framework for decolonised knowledge production and sustainable global-local engagement. The framework illustrates how the enduring structures of

coloniality continue to shape linguistic, cultural, and epistemic hierarchies that privilege certain languages, knowledge systems, and modes of scholarly communication while marginalising others. These asymmetrical relations constrain whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate, who participates in global knowledge production, and how locally grounded epistemologies are represented within international academic and policy arenas.

In response, the framework reconceptualises language as a form of intellectual infrastructure that enables inclusive knowledge creation, while positioning translation as a dynamic process of epistemic negotiation through which diverse knowledge traditions are interpreted, mediated, and transformed without erasing their contextual integrity. Rather than functioning as just a technical mechanism for linguistic transfer, translation becomes an enabling practice that facilitates dialogue, mutual learning, and the co-construction of knowledge across heterogeneous epistemic communities.

Epistemic justice provides the normative foundation that guides these interactions by promoting equitable recognition, meaningful participation, and the redistribution of epistemic authority among historically unequal knowledge producers. Through these interconnected processes, the framework advances intellectual sovereignty by empowering local communities to contribute to, shape, and critically engage with global knowledge systems on equitable terms. Consequently, it reorients scholarly and policy perspectives away from conventional models of one-directional knowledge transfer, where knowledge is assumed to flow from dominant centres to peripheral contexts, towards collaborative models of knowledge co-production that value multiple epistemologies as complementary sources of innovation and understanding.

Methodology: A critical interpretive and conceptual approach

Research design and methodological orientation

This analysis adopts a qualitative conceptual research design based on critical interpretive synthesis. Unlike empirical studies that seek to generate primary data through observation, interviews, surveys, or experimentation, conceptual articles aim to develop, refine, or challenge theoretical understandings of complex phenomena through systematic engagement with existing scholarship (Jaakkola, 2020). This methodological approach is appropriate for the present study because the article's primary objective is not to measure the effects of language and translation policies empirically but to critically examine the assumptions underlying dominant approaches to knowledge production, knowledge circulation, and development.

The methodological orientation is informed by decolonial approaches to research that challenge the assumption that knowledge production can be separated from historical, political, and linguistic contexts. Decolonial methodologies argue that research practices themselves are embedded within relations of power that determine which questions are considered legitimate, which methods are valued, and which forms of knowledge receive recognition (Smith, 2021). Accordingly, this article treats methodology not simply as a technical procedure but as an

epistemological position concerning how knowledge is produced and whose knowledge is considered meaningful.

The article therefore adopts a critical interpretive stance that combines insights from decolonial theory, translation studies, sociolinguistics, higher education studies, and development theory. This interdisciplinary approach is necessary because the relationship between language, translation, and knowledge systems cannot be adequately understood through a single disciplinary lens. Language policy alone cannot explain epistemic inequality; translation studies alone cannot fully account for geopolitical knowledge hierarchies; and development studies alone often underestimate the role of linguistic and epistemological diversity in shaping sustainable futures.

Conceptual analysis and critical literature synthesis

The primary methodological strategy employed is conceptual analysis. Conceptual research seeks to clarify, interrogate, and reconstruct theoretical relationships among key concepts rather than test predetermined hypotheses (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). In this paper, conceptual analysis is applied to examine the relationships among four central concepts: language, translation, epistemic justice, and intellectual sovereignty.

The analysis proceeds through a critical synthesis of interdisciplinary literature. Critical synthesis differs from conventional literature review approaches because it does not simply summarise existing findings; instead, it examines assumptions, tensions, contradictions, and conceptual gaps within existing bodies of scholarship (Snyder, 2019). The literature examined in this article was therefore analysed according to three interconnected questions:

1. How have dominant knowledge systems historically shaped linguistic and epistemic hierarchies?
2. How do language and translation influence the production, circulation, and recognition of knowledge?
3. How can more equitable relationships between local knowledge systems and global knowledge networks be conceptualised?

Through this analytical process, the article identifies limitations in existing approaches that treat language primarily as communication infrastructure and translation primarily as information transfer. It then develops an alternative conceptualisation in which both are understood as constitutive elements of knowledge production and epistemic exchange.

Decolonial and interdisciplinary analytical framework

The methodological approach is guided by decolonial principles that seek to examine not only what knowledge is produced but also the conditions under which knowledge becomes legitimate. Following Smith (2021), decolonial inquiry requires attention to the historical

relationships between research, power, and representation. This perspective is particularly relevant when examining knowledge systems shaped by colonial histories, where research institutions and academic practices often continue to reflect inherited linguistic and epistemological hierarchies.

The interdisciplinary nature of the methodology is central to the article's contribution. Rather than positioning language policy, translation studies, and decolonial theory as separate fields, the analysis examines their intersections. This enables a more comprehensive understanding of how knowledge moves across linguistic and cultural boundaries and how such movements are shaped by historical and institutional conditions.

Scope, selection of literature and analytical procedure

The literature informing this conceptual analysis was selected according to three criteria: theoretical significance, relevance to the central argument, and contribution to contemporary debates on knowledge inequality and multilingual knowledge production. Foundational works were included where they established key theoretical concepts, including coloniality, epistemic justice, translation theory, and linguistic power. In addition, recent scholarship, particularly from 2018 onwards, was incorporated to reflect contemporary debates surrounding decolonisation, higher education transformation, global knowledge systems, and knowledge democracy.

The analytical procedure involved three stages. First, foundational theoretical perspectives were identified and examined to establish the historical and conceptual foundations of the debate. Second, interdisciplinary scholarship was synthesised to identify connections and tensions among language policy, translation studies, development theory, and epistemic justice. Third, these insights were integrated into the proposed Language-Translation-Epistemic Justice Framework that was developed in Section 4 on the conceptual framework.

This process reflects the methodological principles of critical scholarship, which seek not merely to interpret existing knowledge but to reveal possibilities for alternative conceptualisations. The aim is therefore constructive: to develop a theoretical framework capable of explaining how societies can participate in global knowledge exchange while maintaining linguistic diversity and intellectual autonomy.

Methodological limitations

As a conceptual article, this study does not claim empirical generalisability across all linguistic, cultural, or national contexts. The analysis is necessarily shaped by the theoretical literature selected and by the interpretive approach adopted. Future empirical research will be required to examine how the proposed framework operates within specific national settings, educational systems, and translation environments.

Nevertheless, conceptual research plays an important role in advancing scholarly debates by developing analytical tools that can guide future empirical investigation (Jaakkola, 2020). By

integrating insights from multiple disciplines, this methodology provides a foundation for examining language and translation as strategic dimensions of epistemic justice and sustainable development.

DISCUSSION

Language as intellectual infrastructure

The central argument advanced in this article is that language should be understood not just as a medium through which knowledge is communicated but as an intellectual infrastructure through which knowledge itself is produced, organised, and legitimised. This proposition challenges instrumental approaches to language that treat linguistic choices primarily as matters of efficiency, accessibility, or administrative convenience. While such considerations remain important, they overlook the deeper epistemological functions of language: its capacity to shape categories of thought, encode collective experiences, preserve historical memory, and determine whose knowledge becomes visible within formal systems of recognition.

The idea of language as intellectual infrastructure extends existing sociolinguistic scholarship by positioning language alongside other foundational infrastructures of knowledge production, such as universities, research institutions, publishing systems, and digital platforms. Just as physical infrastructures determine the movement of people and resources, linguistic infrastructures determine the movement of concepts, theories, and intellectual practices. A society's linguistic resources therefore influence not only how knowledge is transmitted but also what forms of knowledge can be generated and sustained (Pennycook, 2010; García and Wei, 2014).

This perspective is particularly significant within postcolonial and multilingual contexts where colonial language hierarchies continue to shape educational and research systems. The dominance of former colonial languages in higher education has often been justified through arguments concerning international competitiveness, scientific access, and economic development. However, such approaches frequently assume that knowledge exists independently of linguistic form and can therefore be transferred without conceptual transformation.

For example, indigenous and local languages often contain specialised ecological knowledge, social classifications, historical narratives, and ethical frameworks that may not have direct equivalents within dominant international languages. When such knowledge is excluded from formal educational and research environments, the consequence is not simply linguistic marginalisation but epistemic impoverishment. The loss of linguistic domains of use can restrict the ability of communities to generate knowledge in response to their own social, environmental, and developmental challenges (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

However, recognising language as intellectual infrastructure does not imply rejecting international languages such as English. A simplistic opposition between local languages and

global languages risks reproducing another form of exclusion by limiting access to international scientific collaboration. Instead, the challenge is to move beyond hierarchical multilingualism, where some languages are associated with knowledge production and others with cultural identity, towards equitable multilingualism, where multiple languages are recognised as capable of supporting intellectual activity (Hamel, 2006; Kubota, 2020).

This distinction is central to the article's contribution. Decolonising knowledge does not require replacing one dominant linguistic order with another; rather, it requires transforming the conditions under which languages participate in knowledge systems. A genuinely plural knowledge environment would allow researchers, educators, and communities to move across linguistic boundaries while ensuring that no language is automatically positioned as intellectually superior.

Such an approach has significant implications for universities. Higher education institutions are among the most powerful linguistic institutions in contemporary societies because they determine which languages are used for teaching, research, publication, and professional advancement. When universities operate exclusively through dominant international languages, they may unintentionally reinforce epistemic hierarchies by limiting the participation of scholars and communities whose intellectual resources are embedded within other languages. Conversely, multilingual universities can become spaces where diverse knowledge systems interact, producing new forms of intellectual creativity and social innovation (Marginson, 2022).

The argument, therefore, is not simply that local languages should be preserved for cultural reasons. Rather, local languages should be recognised as strategic resources within national knowledge systems. Their role extends beyond identity formation to include scientific innovation, democratic participation, and sustainable development. Language policy consequently becomes a form of knowledge policy because decisions regarding language determine whose knowledge can enter institutional spaces and contribute to national futures.

Translation as epistemic negotiation

If language constitutes the infrastructure through which knowledge is generated, translation represents the mechanism through which knowledge travels across linguistic and epistemic boundaries. The second proposition of this article is therefore that translation should be understood not as knowledge transfer but as epistemic negotiation. This distinction is critical because conventional approaches often conceptualise translation as the movement of stable information between languages. Such approaches underestimate the extent to which translation transforms knowledge through processes of interpretation, adaptation, and contextualisation.

Translation studies has long demonstrated that translation is never a purely technical activity. Every translation involves decisions regarding meaning, terminology, cultural reference, and conceptual equivalence (Bassnett, 2014; Baker and Jones, 2025). These decisions influence how knowledge is understood within new contexts. Translation therefore does not simply

reproduce existing knowledge; it actively participates in reconstructing that knowledge for new audiences and intellectual environments.

This insight has profound implications for decolonising knowledge systems. Within unequal global knowledge networks, translation has historically often operated through asymmetrical flows: knowledge produced in dominant languages is translated outward into other linguistic contexts, while knowledge produced in marginalised languages is less frequently translated into globally influential languages. This creates a pattern in which certain epistemologies circulate widely while others remain locally confined (Cronin, 2017).

The problem is therefore not translation itself but unequal translation infrastructures. A knowledge system in which translation primarily moves ideas from powerful centres to less powerful contexts risks reinforcing intellectual dependency. Conversely, multidirectional translation can facilitate epistemic reciprocity by enabling concepts, theories, and experiences to move across multiple linguistic communities.

From this perspective, translation becomes a form of intellectual diplomacy. It enables societies to participate in global conversations while retaining the conceptual richness of their own knowledge traditions. A translated concept is not simply imported; it is negotiated, adapted, and sometimes transformed through interaction with local intellectual contexts. This process can generate new forms of knowledge that emerge neither entirely from the source tradition nor entirely from the receiving tradition.

The implications are particularly important for research communication. Scholars from the Global South often face pressure to translate their research into dominant academic languages to achieve international recognition. While such translation can increase visibility, it also creates risks if locally grounded concepts are modified excessively to fit established disciplinary conventions. The challenge is therefore to develop translation practices that enable international accessibility without sacrificing epistemic specificity.

Recent debates on knowledge democracy reinforce this argument by suggesting that global challenges require more than the circulation of existing knowledge. They require the co-production of knowledge among diverse communities with different historical experiences and intellectual resources (Santos, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). Translation is central to this process because it provides the means through which different knowledge systems can communicate without assuming that one must become the universal standard.

Thus, translation should be understood as a creative intellectual practice that expands rather than diminishes knowledge. It creates spaces where concepts encounter one another, where meanings are renegotiated, and where new intellectual possibilities emerge. In this sense, translation is not secondary to knowledge production; it is one of the processes through which knowledge is produced.

Multilingualism as a national development strategy

The third proposition of this article is that multilingualism should be conceptualised not as a social challenge requiring management but as a strategic resource for national development. Dominant development models have historically approached linguistic diversity through deficit-oriented perspectives, often associating multilingual societies with administrative complexity, educational inefficiency, or barriers to economic modernisation. Such assumptions have contributed to language policies that prioritise linguistic homogenisation, particularly through the adoption of former colonial or globally dominant languages as primary vehicles of education, administration, and scientific communication (Phillipson, 1992; Ricento, 2006). However, contemporary scholarship increasingly challenges this perspective by demonstrating that multilingual societies possess significant cognitive, cultural, and innovative capacities when linguistic diversity is supported through appropriate institutional frameworks.

From the perspective developed in this article, multilingualism contributes to national development because it expands the range of intellectual resources available for understanding and responding to complex social challenges. Different languages provide access to different conceptual frameworks, historical experiences, and forms of knowledge. Consequently, linguistic diversity represents a form of cognitive diversity that can enhance creativity, problem-solving, and social innovation (Santos, 2014; García and Wei, 2014). This is particularly important in addressing contemporary challenges such as climate change adaptation, public health, sustainable agriculture, and community development, where locally embedded knowledge may provide insights unavailable through externally generated models alone.

The relationship between multilingualism and development is especially significant in contexts where local communities possess extensive knowledge derived from long-term engagement with particular environments and social conditions. Indigenous and local languages often contain sophisticated knowledge relating to ecological systems, health practices, agricultural techniques, and social organisation (Battiste, 2013). When these languages are excluded from formal knowledge institutions, valuable intellectual resources may remain disconnected from national research and policy processes. A multilingual development strategy therefore requires mechanisms through which local knowledge can enter formal systems of knowledge production while maintaining its cultural and conceptual integrity.

However, the promotion of multilingualism requires moving beyond symbolic recognition towards institutional investment. Language diversity cannot be sustained simply through policy declarations; it requires teacher education, terminology development, translation infrastructure, multilingual publishing systems, and research environments that recognise multiple languages as legitimate vehicles of intellectual production. Without these supporting structures, multilingual policies risk becoming aspirational rather than transformative (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Heugh, 2012).

Higher education represents a particularly important arena for implementing such approaches. Universities are often positioned as engines of national development because they produce

skilled professionals, conduct research, and contribute to innovation systems. Yet many universities in multilingual societies remain linguistically dependent on international languages for advanced knowledge production (Cummins, 2000). This creates a paradox: institutions may seek to address local development challenges while operating through linguistic systems that distance them from the communities they serve.

A multilingual university model does not require abandoning international languages. Rather, it requires recognising that effective global engagement depends upon strong local knowledge foundations. Universities can adopt flexible multilingual practices that allow research, teaching, and community engagement to occur across linguistic boundaries. Such approaches may include multilingual publication strategies, bilingual research dissemination, translation partnerships, and recognition of scholarship produced in diverse languages (Lillis and Curry, 2017; Marginson, 2022).

The developmental significance of multilingualism therefore lies in its ability to connect local participation with global innovation. A society that enables citizens to contribute knowledge through multiple languages expands the social base of research and innovation. Conversely, a society that restricts advanced knowledge production to a narrow linguistic elite risks limiting participation and reinforcing inequalities. Multilingualism, understood strategically, becomes a means of democratising knowledge production.

Intellectual sovereignty through equitable global engagement

The fourth proposition advanced by this article is that intellectual sovereignty represents the appropriate balance between local knowledge autonomy and meaningful participation in global knowledge networks. Intellectual sovereignty does not imply intellectual isolation, rejection of international scholarship, or resistance to scientific collaboration. Rather, it refers to the capacity of societies to define research priorities, generate knowledge through locally meaningful frameworks, and participate in global intellectual exchange as active contributors rather than passive consumers (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

This distinction is essential because contemporary knowledge production operates within increasingly interconnected systems. Scientific collaboration, digital communication, and international research partnerships have become indispensable for addressing global challenges. No society can realistically develop in isolation from international knowledge networks. However, participation within these networks does not automatically guarantee epistemic equality. Without deliberate strategies to address linguistic and institutional inequalities, global engagement may reproduce patterns of dependency in which knowledge flows primarily from dominant centres towards peripheral contexts.

The concept of intellectual sovereignty therefore challenges the assumption that development requires the simple acquisition and application of externally produced knowledge. Instead, it emphasises the importance of knowledge co-production, where local and global perspectives interact to generate contextually relevant solutions. This approach aligns with Santos' (2018)

argument that global knowledge systems should move from epistemological hierarchy towards an ecology of knowledges in which different traditions contribute according to their strengths.

Translation is central to achieving this form of equitable engagement. Effective participation in global knowledge networks requires the ability to translate local knowledge into internationally accessible forms while simultaneously translating global knowledge into locally meaningful contexts. These two directions of translation are equally important. When translation operates only from dominant languages into local languages, it risks creating dependency by positioning external knowledge as the primary source of expertise. Conversely, when translation enables reciprocal movement among knowledge systems, it supports intellectual dialogue and innovation.

This perspective also challenges dominant models of internationalisation in higher education. Internationalisation has often been measured through indicators such as student mobility, international publications, global rankings, and partnerships with prestigious institutions. While these activities provide important benefits, they can also reinforce existing hierarchies if they privilege a narrow set of institutions, languages, and knowledge traditions (Altbach and de Wit, 2018). A more equitable model of internationalisation would recognise knowledge exchange as a reciprocal process involving multiple intellectual centres rather than a movement towards a single global academic norm.

Intellectual sovereignty therefore requires transforming the conditions of global participation. This includes reforming research evaluation systems that disproportionately reward English-language publication, supporting multilingual academic communication, expanding translation infrastructures, and recognising diverse forms of scholarly contribution. Such reforms do not weaken global science; rather, they strengthen it by allowing a wider range of perspectives and experiences to contribute.

Integrative implications for policy, research, and knowledge futures

The integrated argument developed throughout this article suggests several implications for policy, research, and future knowledge systems. First, language policy must be repositioned as knowledge policy. Decisions concerning languages of education, research, and public communication directly influence national capacities for knowledge production. Governments seeking sustainable development should therefore invest not only in technological and scientific infrastructure but also in linguistic infrastructures that enable diverse communities to participate in knowledge creation.

Second, translation policy should become a central component of knowledge development strategies. Translation is often treated as an administrative service rather than a strategic intellectual activity. However, as demonstrated throughout this article, translation determines how knowledge moves across communities and whether such movement reinforces dependency or enables reciprocity. Investment in professional translation, terminology development, multilingual publishing, and digital translation technologies is therefore essential for building inclusive knowledge economies.

Third, universities must reconsider their role as institutions of epistemic mediation. Rather than functioning primarily as gateways through which global knowledge enters national contexts, universities should become spaces where local and global knowledge systems interact creatively (Seleke, 2026)). This requires institutional recognition of multilingual scholarship, interdisciplinary approaches to research, and partnerships that value communities as knowledge producers rather than merely research subjects.

Fourth, research evaluation systems require transformation. Current academic reward structures often privilege publication in internationally indexed English-language journals, creating incentives that may marginalise locally relevant scholarship. Developing more inclusive evaluation frameworks would require recognising diverse publication languages, community-engaged research, indigenous methodologies, and alternative forms of knowledge dissemination.

Finally, the article suggests that the future of knowledge production depends upon moving beyond the opposition between globalisation and localisation. The choice is not between preserving local identity and participating in global networks. Rather, the challenge is to create forms of global engagement that are grounded in epistemic plurality. Sustainable knowledge futures will depend upon societies' ability to connect diverse intellectual traditions through equitable linguistic and translational practices.

The central contribution of this discussion is therefore a reconceptualisation of decolonisation itself. Decolonising knowledge does not mean reversing historical movements of knowledge exchange or rejecting international collaboration. Instead, it means transforming the conditions under which knowledge circulates so that different communities can participate as equal epistemic partners. Language and translation are central to this transformation because they determine how knowledge is created, whose knowledge becomes visible, and how intellectual relationships are negotiated across difference.

Through the Language-Translation-Epistemic Justice Framework, this article demonstrates that language and translation should be understood as foundational infrastructures of sustainable development. They provide the means through which societies preserve intellectual diversity, strengthen knowledge sovereignty, and engage constructively with global challenges. In this sense, the future of knowledge democracy depends not on the dominance of any single language or epistemology, but on the capacity to create meaningful dialogue among many.

CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This article has argued that the relationship between language, translation, and national development must be reconceptualised within a broader decolonial understanding of knowledge production. Rather than treating language as a neutral vehicle for communication and translation as a technical process of transferring information across linguistic boundaries, the article has demonstrated that both constitute fundamental infrastructures through which knowledge is created, legitimised, circulated, and transformed. In a world characterised by persistent epistemic inequalities, asymmetrical global knowledge flows, and the enduring

legacies of colonialism, the decolonisation of knowledge requires more than widening access to existing knowledge systems; it requires transforming the conditions under which knowledge itself is produced and recognised.

Drawing upon decolonial theory, epistemic justice, translation studies, language policy, and development scholarship, the article has shown that contemporary knowledge systems continue to reflect historical structures of coloniality. These structures privilege particular languages, institutions, and epistemological traditions while marginalising others. Such inequalities are evident in higher education, international research collaboration, scholarly publishing, and language policies that frequently position dominant global languages as the primary vehicles of scientific legitimacy. While these linguistic arrangements have facilitated international communication and scientific collaboration, they have also contributed to the concentration of epistemic authority within a relatively narrow range of linguistic and geopolitical centres.

Against this background, the article proposed the Language-Translation-Epistemic Justice Framework as its principal conceptual contribution. The framework integrates insights from Quijano's theory of coloniality of power, Mignolo's epistemic disobedience, Santos' ecology of knowledges, Fricker's theory of epistemic justice, and Spivak's politics of translation into a coherent analytical model. In doing so, it demonstrates that language and translation should not be understood as peripheral concerns within development discourse but as foundational dimensions of equitable knowledge production. Language provides the conceptual and cultural resources through which communities understand their realities, while translation enables knowledge to move across linguistic and epistemic boundaries through processes of negotiation, contextualisation, and co-construction. Epistemic justice, in turn, provides the normative foundation that allows diverse knowledge traditions to engage as legitimate contributors rather than subordinate recipients.

The article therefore makes several interrelated theoretical contributions. First, it advances decolonial scholarship by extending analyses of coloniality beyond critiques of knowledge hierarchies towards a more explicit consideration of the linguistic and translational infrastructures through which those hierarchies are reproduced and contested. While decolonial literature has extensively examined epistemic exclusion, comparatively less attention has been given to the mechanisms through which knowledge travels across languages and how translation mediates relationships among different epistemic traditions. By foregrounding translation as epistemic negotiation rather than linguistic transfer, this article contributes to a more dynamic understanding of knowledge plurality and intercultural dialogue.

Second, the article contributes to translation studies by positioning translation as a constitutive process of knowledge production rather than a secondary activity occurring after knowledge has already been generated. Translation is conceptualised as a creative and transformative practice that enables concepts, theories, and experiences to be interpreted within new cultural and intellectual environments. This reconceptualisation moves beyond equivalence-based models of translation and emphasises the role of translators, multilingual scholars, and knowledge intermediaries as active participants in the co-construction of globally relevant yet locally grounded knowledge.

Third, the article contributes to debates on language policy and higher education by arguing that multilingualism should be recognised as a strategic intellectual resource for sustainable national development. Rather than viewing linguistic diversity as an obstacle to modernisation or international competitiveness, the article demonstrates that multilingual knowledge systems expand cognitive diversity, strengthen democratic participation, and enhance societies' capacities for innovation. Effective engagement with global knowledge networks therefore requires institutional arrangements that enable local languages to function not only as markers of cultural identity but also as legitimate languages of advanced scholarship, research, and professional practice.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the article also offers practical implications for policymakers, universities, research institutions, and international organisations. Governments should recognise language policy as an integral component of national knowledge policy, investing in multilingual education, scholarly translation, terminology development, and indigenous-language research infrastructures. Universities should reconsider research evaluation systems that privilege monolingual publication practices and instead encourage multilingual scholarship, reciprocal international collaboration, and community-engaged research. Likewise, funding agencies and international organisations should support translation initiatives that facilitate multidirectional knowledge exchange rather than reinforcing one-directional flows from dominant knowledge centres to historically marginalised regions.

The paper also highlights several directions for future research. As a conceptual study, its primary contribution lies in theoretical integration rather than empirical verification. Future studies should therefore examine how the proposed framework operates within specific national and institutional contexts. Comparative research across different multilingual societies would provide valuable insights into how language policies, translation practices, and research systems influence knowledge production under varying political, cultural, and economic conditions. Similarly, empirical investigations into multilingual publishing, research collaboration, digital translation technologies, and open science initiatives would further illuminate the practical implications of the framework proposed here.

Finally, the article argues that decolonising knowledge should not be interpreted as a rejection of global engagement or an appeal for linguistic isolationism. Such a binary understanding misrepresents both the realities of contemporary knowledge production and the aspirations of decolonial scholarship. Instead, decolonisation entails creating more equitable epistemic conditions under which diverse languages, cultures, and knowledge traditions can participate meaningfully in global intellectual life. Intellectual sovereignty is therefore best understood not as independence from global knowledge systems but as the capacity to engage with them critically, reciprocally, and on more equal terms.

In conclusion, the future of sustainable national development depends not only upon technological innovation or economic investment but also upon the capacity of societies to cultivate inclusive knowledge ecosystems in which linguistic diversity, translation, and epistemic plurality are recognised as strategic assets for innovation, social transformation, and equitable development. This article contributes to contemporary debates on decolonising knowledge by proposing the Language-Translation-Epistemic Justice Framework, which

reconceptualises language and translation as mutually reinforcing infrastructures that enable more just, inclusive, and sustainable knowledge production. Within this framework, language is understood not only as a medium of communication but as the intellectual infrastructure through which local knowledge, cultural memory, and indigenous epistemologies are articulated, preserved, and legitimised.

Translation, in turn, is repositioned beyond the narrow function of linguistic transfer to become an active process of epistemic negotiation, mediation, and co-creation that enables meaningful dialogue among diverse knowledge traditions while respecting their contextual integrity and epistemological distinctiveness.

By integrating language, translation, and epistemic justice within a single conceptual framework, this article demonstrates how equitable knowledge production depends upon recognising multiple epistemic traditions as legitimate contributors to global scholarship rather than peripheral recipients of externally produced knowledge. The framework therefore advocates for supporting intellectual sovereignty by strengthening the capacity of local communities to participate as equal partners in global knowledge networks while maintaining their linguistic and cultural identities. Consequently, it calls for a fundamental shift from knowledge transfer to collaborative knowledge co-production, from linguistic hierarchy to multilingual participation, and from epistemic dependency to reciprocal global-local engagement.

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