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Translanguaging in the Digital Age: Rethinking Language-in-Education Policy in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The widespread diffusion of digital communication technologies has prompted the creation of new language forms, driven by translanguaging, the fluid and dynamic use of multiple linguistic features to express meaning and negotiate social relationships. This qualitative study explores the use of English online by students in Zimbabwe, and implications for language-in-education policy. Guided by the translanguaging theory, the study utilizes Content Analysis to explore English language use by students on WhatsApp and Instagram, and Document Analysis to examine the existing language-in-education policy documents in Zimbabwe. The findings reveal unique patterns of English language use by students on

social media, who construct innovative trans-digital repertoires to meet the demands of digital interactivity, brevity, and precision. The study argues that the current monoglossic language-in-education policy in Zimbabwe, which observes standard English as the sole language of instruction, overlooks the fluidity and diversity of English, perpetuating linguistic exclusion and pedagogical inequalities. Implications include the need to acknowledge English language diversity and accommodate the new varieties of English in the teaching and learning environment. Recommended is the development and implementation of a written language-in-education policy, which recognizes language diversity in the digital age, promoting linguistic equity and inclusivity, to enhance education outcomes in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Digital Communication, Language-in-Education Policy, Students, Translanguaging, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

The emergence of digital communication technologies has revolutionized access to information in virtual spaces (Yousif, 2025). García-Mateus and Palmer (2017) note that language use in the digital age has become more fluid, complex, and innovative, breaking traditional views of language boundaries and norms. In particular, English language, the main language of technology, has been profoundly impacted by the fast-growing digitization of communication (Xu and Shang, 2025). Jiang, Li and Leung (2024) explain that the advent of social media, web-based communication, and electronic message applications, has foreshadowed a new era of linguistic evolution, which according to Wei (2018), is driven by translanguaging, the fluid and dynamic use of multiple linguistic resources, drawing from various languages, language varieties and dialects.

As individuals engage in translanguaging practices online, new linguistic expressions and meanings are formed, expanding the English vocabulary, and enabling linguistic diversity (García and Wei, 2014). Notably, the

Internet has facilitated the creation of new forms of English such as ‘netspeak’ (informal written online language comprising forms such as emoticons, abbreviations and slang) and ‘textese’ (texting digital language that uses short forms and mis-spellings), redefining the boundaries of formal and informal communication (Thakur, 2021; Rehman, Perveen, 2024). As digital technology continues to influence translanguaging practices, English language will no doubt continue to evolve, reflecting the flexibility of online communication (Jiang et al., 2024).

This study investigates translanguaging practices in digital spaces among students in Zimbabwe, to evaluate its impact on language policies in education. Its specific aim is to explore the use of English on social media by students in Zimbabwe, and implications for language-in-education policy, recognizing the role of translanguaging in language evolution. The study addresses the following research question: ‘What are the patterns of English language use on social media among students in Zimbabwe and what are the implications for language-in-

education policy?' As the recognition of translanguaging in the digital environment is expanding, and with users increasingly blending linguistic sources to create new English varieties, it is crucial to explore how these evolving language practices impact the language-in-education policy in an English-based education system, interrogating its efficacy and relevance. This study's outcome can enlighten on the complex interface between language use, education policy, and educational outcomes, informing more inclusive and impactful language-in-education policies that acknowledge language diversity.

To achieve its objectives, the study employs translanguaging theory, which challenges traditional notions of language boundaries by emphasizing the fluid, dynamic, and creative ways in which multilingual speakers draw on diverse linguistic resources to communicate and construct identities, especially in digital environments. Based on García and Wei's (2014) principles, the framework highlights key concepts such as language fluidity, linguistic creativity, language

inclusivity, and social justice, which collectively justify and explore the use of non-standard varieties of English by students in Zimbabwe. While translanguaging effectively explains the complexity of multilingual language practices beyond rigid, bounded systems (Vogel and García, 2017), it has been critiqued for neglecting social and cultural contexts in which linguistic practices occur (Wlosowicz, 2020). Thus, this study integrates critical perspectives to account for power dynamics and social relationships influencing linguistic practices. Combining translanguaging with critical approaches offers a comprehensive understanding of how students navigate language use online, promoting recognition of linguistic diversity and informing inclusive language policies in education.

Literature Review: The Sociolinguistic Context of Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is a multilingual country with an extensive linguistic diversity, a home to over 16 languages, including several indigenous minority languages, all declared official languages in the 2013 National

Constitution, Amendment 20 (Mazvarirwafa and Moyo, 2022; Mukenge, 2021). This meant that all should be used in public records, provided as medium of instruction, and developed and promoted equally in all spheres of communication. However, despite the recognition of multiple languages as official, the linguistic landscape in Zimbabwe is complex, characterized by power dynamics in which only English, spoken as a second language by the majority, dominates the official domains including commerce, government, media and education, while Shona and Ndebele, designated as national languages, have a restricted official use (Nhongo, 2013). The rest of the Zimbabwean indigenous languages (Chewa, Chibarwe, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Shangani, sign language for the deaf, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa) have remained dormant with no significant role in development discourses or any prospects of growth (Nhongo and Tshotsho, 2020).

The prestigious status of English in Zimbabwe has roots in the colonial language policies and practices, which

favoured its use, while marginalizing indigenous languages (Makoni, 1993; Ngara, 1982). According Marungudzi (2016), the perpetuation of colonial language policies in Zimbabwe after independence in 1980 has had a gross impact on the development of a meaningful language policy to guide the use of languages. Consequently, language policies are implicit, professed in the national constitution and Acts of parliament, a strong barrier to advancing linguistic diversity and equality in the country (Kadenge and Mugari, 2015). Lack of a clear language policy implies that language use within official contexts has been much driven by unplanned considerations, rather than a consistent and overall policy direction.

English in Zimbabwe has maintained a prestigious position in education to date, following the Education Act of 1987, which declared its sole use as a medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards, (Magwa, 2010). In 2019, this Act was amended under Education Amendment Act (15-2019) to strengthen the prominence of English, mandating its use from Grade 3 up to

university level (Nhongo and Tshotsho, 2020). In addition, the initiative by the Zimbabwe Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education to promote the STEAM (Science, Technology, Mathematics and Engineering) discipline has further elevated the status of English language, observed as the main language for imparting scientific knowledge (Jongore, 2020). Paradoxically, there are concerns of English inaccessibility to the majority of indigenous learners and teachers in Zimbabwe, who use it as a second language, resulting in linguistic injustices and promoting malpractice in education (Mashuro and Higgs, 2025). Similarly, Makondo (2018) argues that this language barrier gives rise to poor academic performance, advocating for inclusivity of indigenous languages and varieties in learning and teaching. Mukorera (2019) agrees and argues that English is restrictive and limits learning opportunities for learners, also noting the need to reconsider the language-in-education policy frameworks, to allow for a blended approach which accommodates mother tongues.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study employed Content Analysis of students' English language use on WhatsApp and Instagram, alongside Document Analysis of Zimbabwe's language-in-education policies, to assess the alignment between language practices and policy frameworks.

Sampling Procedure

The sampling procedure was purposive in nature. Data from WhatsApp was collected from an Interact Club group chat consisting of 251 secondary school students in Harare, Zimbabwe. This group was deliberately selected because of its diversity in backgrounds and its ability to generate authentic language data. For the Instagram component, statuses from publicly accessible profiles of students who used English were chosen to provide relevant insights into informal digital communication. This targeted sampling approach ensured that the data were both meaningful and representative of genuine language use in online settings.

Data Collection

Data collection involved gathering WhatsApp messages over a three-month period from February to April 2025. The focus was on capturing linguistic features, styles, and emerging trends in conversations within the group chat. Simultaneously, Instagram statuses were extracted verbatim from public profiles, accompanied by contextual descriptions to facilitate analysis of language use patterns. The collected data were then subjected to Content Analysis, following Creswell's (2013) methodology. This process involved several stages, beginning with data screening to identify relevant and meaningful content that reflected students' online language practices. The selected content was then inductively coded, with the researcher identifying recurring patterns, themes, and linguistic features. These codes were subsequently organized into categories and sub-themes that represented the key features and trends observed across the data. The final step involved presenting the categorized data in tables, which made the findings more accessible and easier to interpret.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of policy documents, a thorough Document Analysis was conducted on three key texts: the Zimbabwe National Constitution of 2013, the Zimbabwe Education Act of 1987, and its 2019 amendment. The focus was on extracting and examining explicit declarations related to the language of instruction in education. The steps involved included identifying relevant policy statements, interpreting their intended meanings, and exploring their implications in relation to the observed language practices from social media interactions. An interpretive approach rooted in translanguaging theory was employed to understand how students negotiate meaning and construct identity online. This critical examination aimed to assess the consistency between policy declarations and actual language practices, with particular attention to issues of linguistic inclusivity and social justice.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Since all data were publicly

available, they were anonymized to protect the identities of participants. The research adhered to ethical guidelines by ensuring participant privacy, respecting confidentiality, and minimizing potential harm, especially given the involvement of young people.

Limitations

Nonetheless, the study faced certain limitations. The reliance on social media data introduced potential sampling bias, as only students with active, publicly accessible profiles were included. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent the broader student population or private communication contexts. Additionally, the informal nature of social media language might differ from classroom or formal contexts, which could influence the generalizability of the results.

Results and Discussion

Data emerging from students' WhatsApp messages reveals an interesting landscape of language use, characterized by a variety of new linguistic forms, divergent from standard English norms. The most

prominent novel linguistic features, which distinguish this new variety from conventional English include neologisms (invented words, adopted words, social media innovations), short forms (clippings, abbreviations, acronyms), derivatives (blends, compounds, phonological derivatives, back formations), informal expressions (loan words, colloquialisms, slang), and symbols (emojis or emoticons). These linguistic features dominate the students' speech online, creating a unique variety of English. Table 1, provides an overview of the creative and dynamic linguistic features, employed by students on WhatsApp.

***Table 1**: New Linguistic Features of English used by Students on WhatsApp*

Word Class	**Sub-category**	**Examples and Descriptions**
Neologisms	Invented Words	*Yabie* (girl); *Oan* (person); *Gwan* (rumors); *Huns* (girl/girls); *Bali* (father);

		Quan (mother); *Gaf* (gaze) *Gassing* (laugh); *Wagwan* (Hello); *Baddie* (attractive girl); *Stas* (sister); *Ops* (a rival); *Vey (*show); *Gag* (eager); *Cuffing* (dating); *Shak/Eassing* (fail); *Zaza* (drugs); *Stan* (fan); *Pookie* (cute); *Bop* (good); Geeking (excited); *Bae* (romantic partner); *Bougie* (high class); *Yeet* (violently throw an object); *Gwas* (eat); *Lekker* (good/yes)
	Adopted Words	*Cap* (disagreement); *Weave/brush* (beat up); *Buff* (someone very strong); *Ate* (impressive); *Touch*

		grass (step out); *Fell out* (unfashionable); *Main Character* (charismatic person); *Tea* (gossip); *Drip* (trendy style); *Fold* (nervous); Gagged (win an argument); Big back (to eat a lot); Rent free (thoughts); Whip (car); Slaps (something great); Mood (something relatable); dough/bread (money); Locked in (focused); Vanilla (boring); Serving (looking good)
	Social Media Innovations	*DM* (text me); *Friend zoned* (rejected); *Socials* (social media); *Tweet*; *Follow*; *Unfollow*; *Unfriend; Like/Likes*;

		Heartchain; *Meme*; *Influencer (popular social media personality)*; *Blue tick (ignore)*; *Clout* (popular on social media); *Moots* (mutual followers); *Vanish Mode; Finsta* (Fake Instagram); *LB* (like back); *FB* (Follow Back)
Short Forms	Abbreviations	*WYD* (What are you doing); *V* (very); *KMS* (Kill myself); *KYS* (Kill yourself); *G* (good); *W* (win); *L (*lose)
	Acronyms	*AF* (as fuck); *IGL* (In Game Life); *IRL* (In real Life); BFR (Be for Real); *NPC* (Non-Player Character); *YOLO* (You

		Only Live Once); *FOMO* (Fear of Missing Out); *NSFW* (Not Safe for Work); *DM* (Discord Message); *OMD* (Oh my Daisy); *YFM* (You feel me); *IYKYK* (If You Know You Know)
	Clippings	*Sis* (sister); *Sus* (suspicious); Ship (short for relationship) Fit (short for outfit)
Derivatives	Blends	*Femboy* (a male that partly identifies as a female); *Situationship* (somehow in a relationship); *Baecation* (vacation with your partner); *Comps* (Computer Science); Looksmaxxing (a form

		of self-enhancement); Hoco (Homecoming); Hangry (hungry and angry')
	Compounds	*Faggot* (gay); *Gatekeep* (not sharing); *Highkey* (openly emphasize); *Lowkey* (secretly emphasize); *Crashout* (to get really angry); *Brainrot* (low-quality online content); *Deepfake* (photoshop done to embarrass someone); *Deadass* (no joke); Bed rot (staying in bed all day)
	Phonological derivatives	*Twinning* (similarity with someone else); *Skimming* (to think); *Ghosted* (Ignoring

		someone online); *Shawty* (a short person); Druggie (a person takes drugs)**;** *Xul* (school); *Dahood* (a ghetto place); *Innit* (isn't it); *Bruzz* (boys); *Boi* (Boy); *Smol* (small)
	Backformations	*Lytie* (someone younger); *Rents* (parents); *Fam* (family); *Delulu* (delusional); *Thicc* (curvy women); *Bestie* (best friend); *Periodt* (end of statement); *Xtra* (something very good)
Informal Language	Slang	*Joll* (give me); *Den* (home); *L take* (disagreement); *Hits different* (stands out);

		Tune (say); *Creepy vibes* (weird); *Pipe down* (keep quiet); Boutta (about to); *Gonna* (going to); *Wanna* (want to); Dope (good)
	Colloquialisms	*Go off* (permission to go mad); *Hop off* (mind your own business); *Flex* (to show off)
	Loan Words	*Finesse* (French word meaning manipulating); Gucci (good); Karen (a woman who causes a scene in public); Juul/Julling (cigarette vaping); Catfish (someone who pretends to be someone else on social media)

Symbols	Emojis/Emoticons	 (joy/laughter/cute);  (begging/praying);  (disappointment)  (discomfort/awkwardness)  (love)  (excitement/gratitude)  (smiling but upset)  (compliment)  / (playful disapproval)  (teasing/flirting)  (unlucky/unfortunate situation)  (teasing)  (interested)  / (uncertain)  /  (frustration, embarrassment or disbelief)

Table 2 presents data from students' Instagram statuses. Interestingly, despite informal language use patterns, which also characterize WhatsApp data such as colloquialisms, abbreviations, symbols and neologisms, there is evidence of diverse syntactical styles which impact meaning and tone. The analyzed statuses are quoted and presented verbatim, providing corresponding standard English transcriptions.

***Table 2**: Students' Instagram Statuses*

Instagram Statuses (verbatim)	**Standard English Transcriptions**
W coms W coaching	The coach and the camera crew were great.
OOTD	Outfit of the day
On cloud nine and feeling fine! 😍 *#happiness*	I am happy and I am feeling fine
Zim Gents lying about how dope their party is gonna be	Zimbabwean gentlemen are lying about how great their party is going to be.

Me calling my brother who eats with the phone, sleeps with the phone but when I call him he never answers	I am calling my brother who eats with his phone, sleep with his phone, but when I call him, he never answers.
Lowkey hate mornings 	I secretly dislike mornings
Me ignoring that one green flag to be with my favourite red flag	I am ignoring that good person to be with my favourite bad character.
This is me in 30 years when my friends get married and start a family instead of becoming an alcoholic gambler with me	This is myself in 30 years' time when my friends get married and start a family instead of drinking alcohol and gambling with me.
Prime Instigator	A well-known instigator
Savage mode activated 	I'm being ridiculous and humorous

Ghost me and I'm calling Jamal	Ignore my messages and I will report you to Jamal (a big man)
When a teacher says I'm coming around to check books.	When a teacher says I'm coming around to check books.
Break a leg, everyone! 🦵 *#goodluck*	Good luck everyone!
When you find the perfect girl so life hits you with …	When you find a perfect girlfriend, life brings complications such as …
How 🐱‍👤 *s talk to you knowing they recycling the same script to 20 other girls.*	Boys talk to you knowing that they are using the same words they used on other 20 girls.
Dance or leave the house with your phone fully charged.	Would you rather dance or leave the house with your phone fully charged.

That one friend.	
4 months until 2026 and I still love you since 2022	I loved you since 2022, and now its 4 months away from 2026.
Flowers die! Give her a kid instead 🤣	Flowers die! Give her a kid instead
Red Devil fan repents finds Salvation in Arsenal	The red devil fan repents and finds Salvation in Arsenal
The only type of apology I'll accept …	This is the only type of apology I'll accept
How it feels when no one talks to you in the morning	This is how it feels when no one talks to you in the mornings.
I can't even afford to give AF about anything RN, maybe next year	I can't even afford to give a fuck about anything right now, maybe next year.

How it feels when you're third wheeling that couple that met each other through you	How it feels when you're unwanted by a couple that met each other through you
Lit fam 	This is an exciting family

While WhatsApp data reveals lexical meaning deviations from Standard English, Instagram data further indicates semantic meaning inconsistencies, including use of unconventional sentences, for example sarcasm, irony, grammatical errors, incomplete sentences, metaphors, figurative speech, idioms, and use of symbols. Examples include the following statuses:

Sarcasm/Irony: *Flowers die! Give her a kid instead* 

Ungrammatical Sentences: *Me calling my brother who eats with the phone, sleeps with the phone but when I call him he never answers*

Incomplete Sentences: *When you find the perfect girl so life hits you with …*

Metaphors: *On cloud nine and feeling fine!* *#happiness*

Idioms: *Break a leg, everyone!*  *#goodluck*

Symbols: *How*  *s talk to you knowing they recycling the same script to 20 other girls*

The unconventional language employed by students on social media serves both social and communicative purposes. Some social functions of online language include group integration (for example, the use of slang and colloquialisms to signal belonging to the student community), expressing individual identity (some participants expressed their personalities, interests, and values through their statuses). The participants also seemed to use unconventional language to adapt to the rapid flow of information in the digital environment,

necessitating the use of abbreviations, symbols and other slang words which facilitate fast and convenient way of conveying messages. Again, since digital platforms are visually supported, students conveniently used appealing linguistic forms (acronyms, figurative speech, emojis and emoticons) to engage others and enhance participation in online interactions. Notably, new forms such as neologisms, linguistic shortenings and derivatives were used by students to convey novel, complex ideas and emotions in a concise and precise manner. Overall, students' data presents a complex outlook of language use on social media, highlighting an innovative utilization of English language.

The findings of this study affirm the pervasive influence of translanguaging in creating a new language variety within online interactions, aligning with existing scholarship that emphasizes the fluid and dynamic nature of multilingual communication in digital contexts. As Lee and Canagarajah (2019) explain, online translanguaging involves the use of diverse digital linguistic resources and tools to develop innovative

language forms that are highly localized and contextualized. This perspective is reinforced by García and Wei (2014), who argue that translanguaging exemplifies the fluid boundaries between languages, challenging traditional notions of language purity and standardization. Building on this, the study suggests that the unconventional English forms emerging from online translanguaging practices are not merely informal deviations but represent a continuously evolving linguistic repertoire unique to Zimbabwean digital spaces. This view resonates with Ho and Tai's (2024) research on digital English language learning, which demonstrates how educators and learners draw on various registers and multimodal resources to produce localized English varieties, thus highlighting the pedagogical implications of translanguaging for digital language instruction.

Furthermore, the study's identification of digital linguistic resources such as audience demographics, contextual demands, and platform-specific features, aligns with Yousif's (2025) work, which emphasizes the

role of technological affordances and contextual factors in shaping online language use. These resources enable users to craft language forms that are flexible and responsive to immediate communicative needs, a phenomenon also discussed by Pennycook (2010), who highlights the transformative potential of digital environments in reshaping language practices and identities. In addition to neologisms, abbreviations, and derivatives, students draw from a range of local and foreign languages, as observed in the loan words cataloged in Table 1. This aligns with Moleleki's (2024) findings on multilingual translanguaging in Lesotho, where borrowing strategies and language crossing contribute to a hybrid linguistic repertoire that reflects the multilingual realities of social media users.

The complex and fluid nature of online translanguaging practices among students further challenges traditional views of language boundaries and standardization. García and Wei (2014) emphasize that such practices exemplify linguistic fluidity, where individuals draw on a broad spectrum of resources to communicate effectively across

cultural and linguistic divides. This study's findings support this view, demonstrating that translanguaging fosters a flexible and inclusive approach to language use that resists rigid classifications. Boumaza (2024) expands on this by asserting that digital social platforms give rise to unique linguistic forms that not only convey meanings but also serve as markers of cultural identity. These forms facilitate the construction of social identities, as evidenced by students' language choices on social media, which articulate their cultural affiliations and individual personalities.

The cultural dimension of translanguaging is particularly evident in how students construct identities through language on social media. The creative expressions observed in students' Instagram statuses reveal how language functions as a tool for aesthetic expression, value transmission, and identity positioning. Students' language choices often reflect communal worldviews related to family, friendship, and social cohesion, moving away from individualistic perspectives and demonstrating cultural consciousness. Moleleki (2024) underscores this

by highlighting how digital translanguaging not only broadens the linguistic repertoire but also deepens cultural engagement, illustrating the intertwined nature of language, identity, and culture in online spaces. These findings contribute to ongoing debates about the role of translanguaging in mediating cultural identities and suggest that social media platforms serve as vital sites for cultural negotiation and identity construction, echoing the arguments of García and Wei (2014) and Boumaza (2024).

Implications for Language-in-Education Policy in Zimbabwe

This study's findings reveal important considerations for rethinking Zimbabwe's language-in-education policies to better align with contemporary linguistic practices, especially in digital environments. The key implications are:

- Policies should recognize the variety of English forms used by students online, including slang, neologisms, and emojis, as legitimate modes of

communication. According to Canagarajah (2013), acknowledging students' linguistic resources fosters a more inclusive learning environment and validates their language practices.

- Digital translanguaging and informal English varieties should be incorporated into classroom instruction to make learning more relevant and engaging for students. García and Wei (2014) emphasize that translanguaging enhances students' linguistic repertoire and supports their identity development.
- There should be a shift from emphasizing prescriptive grammatical correctness to prioritizing communicative competence and effective language use in context. Halliday's (1978) functional approach highlights the importance of understanding language as a tool for social interaction rather than just grammatical correctness.
- Teachers need to be trained and equipped with skills to recognize, respect, and incorporate

students' diverse linguistic resources and practices in their teaching. Burns and Richards (2017) argue that teacher training programs must include digital literacy and plurilingual pedagogy to address the realities of multilingual classrooms.

- Policies should promote multilingualism by embracing indigenous languages alongside various English varieties, supporting learners' linguistic rights and cultural identity. Hornberger (2003) advocates for language policies that recognize linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a barrier to learning.
- Ongoing research is essential to monitor and understand evolving language patterns across digital and real-world contexts, ensuring policies remain responsive. Kramsch (2009) stresses the importance of research in informing language education policies that are adaptable to changing sociolinguistic landscapes.
- Educational policies must be designed to foster inclusivity and address pedagogical inequalities, supporting learners from diverse linguistic

backgrounds and promoting social justice. Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes culturally responsive pedagogy as a means to achieve equity and inclusivity in education.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the dynamic, creative, and fluid nature of English language use among Zimbabwean students on digital platforms, revealing a shift from formal to informal, innovative language practices driven by social media interaction. The current language-in-education policy, which privileges standard English, does not adequately account for these linguistic realities and risks perpetuating exclusion and inequality. Recognizing and integrating digital translanguaging practices into educational policies can promote greater inclusivity, engagement, and equitable access to knowledge. To achieve this, policy reforms should embrace linguistic diversity, prioritize communicative competence, and foster teacher training that supports inclusive language use. Such a shift will not only reflect the evolving

linguistic landscape but also contribute to the preservation of Zimbabwe's multilingual heritage and prepare learners for effective participation in a globalized society.

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Clemenciana Mukenge (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Creative Media and Communication at the University of Zimbabwe. She specializes in language and technology, as well as development communication. She has published extensively on contemporary issues in

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