LINGUISTIC NORMS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY

Micah Thomas PIMARO Jr[1]
Edor J. EDOR[2]
Emmanuel E. ETTAH[2]
Ncha Gabriel BUBU[2]
Mary Julius EGBAI[2]
Esther Orok IRONBAR[2]

Abstract: *While language enables meaning, constituting knowledge in courts, schools, or parliaments, who gets to decide what can be known? Is meaning only use or a result of power too? Pitting Wittgenstein's forms of life against Foucault's regimes of discourse makes linguistic norms appear as instruments of exclusion. Marginalised speakers – subaltern, indigenous, and non-normative are often rendered unintelligible. Epistemic justice demands more than inclusion; it demands considering how rules are set, who enforces them, and how meaning is being contextually built. A discourse-sensitive, epistemic theory of justice is proposed, based on Kripke's rule-following paradox and Dijk's discourse analysis, to show that language is not neutral but a battleground of struggle over meaning, recognition, and epistemic authority.*

Keywords: *Wittgenstein, Foucault, Kripke, Dijk, linguistic norms, epistemic justice.*

1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine language not merely as a medium of communication but as a constitutive mechanism that structures human cognition, mediates knowledge, and regulates epistemic authority. Language for us, shape what can be known, who is recognised as a knower, and how knowledge is validated. It is both a cognitive instrument and a socio-political technology, simultaneously enabling understanding and delimiting intelligibility.

[1] University of Bucharest, Romania.
[2] University of Calabar, Nigeria.

Recognising this dual role is essential for advancing a theory of epistemic justice that accounts not only for inclusion but also for the conditions under which knowledge claims are made, accepted, or excluded.

Historically, philosophical inquiry has explored the complex relationships between language, thought, and knowledge. Wittgenstein (1953) illuminates the normative and practice-oriented character of linguistic meaning through the concept of "language games". He illustrates that meaning is not determined by an abstract correspondence with reality but arises through socially embedded rules and practices. In the builder-assistant example, language is functional, operational, and situated; meaning is inseparable from the forms of life that sustain it. By examining diverse language games, from reporting and hypothesising to storytelling and ritualised interactions, he demonstrates the irreducible plurality of human linguistic practice and the impossibility of providing a fully exhaustive account of meaning (Zalabardo, 2024; Biletzki & Matar, 2008).

Complementing this social perspective, Chomsky's biolinguistic framework highlights the innate cognitive structures that enable humans to acquire and manipulate language (Chomsky, 1959). He contends that grammatical competence is not derived solely from exposure to linguistic input but depends on internalised syntactic principles inherent to human cognition. While he emphasises the universal biological underpinnings of language, Wittgenstein foregrounds its contextual, socially normative dimension. These perspectives underscore that knowledge acquisition is mediated both by the cognitive architecture of language and by its social embedding.

But language is never neutral. Institutionalised discourse can shape epistemic authority and determine whose knowledge is recognised and whose is marginalised. Foucault (2002) shows that discursive formations are structured regimes of statements and practices that establish what counts as truth, who is empowered to speak, and which forms of knowledge are sanctioned or suppressed. For example, medical discourse, formal legal language, or bureaucratic classifications do not merely describe reality; they actively produce subjects, norms, and hierarchies of intelligibility. Thus, linguistic rules are inseparable from power relations, and normativity is simultaneously a cognitive, social, and political phenomenon.

In this paper we build upon such insights to propose a **discourse-sensitive, epistemic theory of justice** by integrating Wittgenstein's social-practice view of meaning, Foucault's(1980), discourse/power analysis, Kripke's rule-following paradox, and Dijk's critical discourse methodology. Kripke (1982) demonstrates that rules cannot be privately determined; their normative force is derived from communal assent. Dijk (2008) extends this insight into the sociopolitical realm to show how institutionalised discourse reproduces and enforces epistemic hierarchies. These views highlight that language is simultaneously constitutive, normative, and politically charged. Such a framework can irradiate how linguistic norms operate as both instruments of intelligibility and mechanisms of exclusion and reveal the struggles over recognition, authority, and epistemic legitimacy that occur in courts, classrooms, academic publishing, and public discourse.

The stakes are high such that epistemic injustice is not limited to individual misrecognition but extends to systematic exclusion of knowers and knowledge forms. Subaltern, Indigenous, and non-normative epistemologies are routinely marginalised because the linguistic rules that confer authority are inaccessible or illegitimate within dominant discourses (Fricker, 2007; Dotson, 2014). Understanding these dynamics will require attending not only to the content of knowledge but also to the processes, institutions, and power relations that govern what counts as knowledge. Our theoretical framework will demonstrate that addressing epistemic injustice demands a twofold intervention of analysing how rules of language and discourse are socially and institutionally enforced and of creating mechanisms for pluralistic participation that recognise alternative modes of knowing. This approach has profound practical implications. For example, academic publishing, pedagogy, and cross-cultural communication are arenas where linguistic norms determine inclusion and exclusion. Initiatives to diversify editorial boards will incorporate multilingual scholarship and recognise that Indigenous epistemologies are not merely procedural reforms; they represent attempts to recalibrate the epistemic landscape and expand the range of intelligible voices and forms of knowledge. Similarly, cross-cultural language learning, when coupled with cultural immersion and reflexivity, will enable learners to navigate not only syntactic and semantic variation but also the underlying normative structures that govern epistemic authority in diverse communities.

We opine that, by integrating social-practice, biolinguistic, and discourse-analytic perspectives, and by situating Kripke's rule-following paradox at the core of our framework, language will become an active site of epistemic negotiation. It will become the terrain on which knowledge is constituted, contested, and legitimised. Recognising the constitutive and regulatory dimensions of language is therefore essential for theorising epistemic justice that will foster cross-cultural understanding and challenge the inequities embedded in dominant knowledge systems. Language, thus, is not neutral; it is a battleground where meaning, recognition, and authority are continually negotiated.

2. **Language and the contextual nature of meaning**

Here, we examine what language is and how situational context could shape the understanding of words and phrases. We draw on the notion of meaning-in-context and Wittgenstein's theory of language-games to highlight the context-dependence of linguistic meaning and the practical implications of language for effective communication. Dash (2008), opined that when a word is used in a text, it often indicates only one meaning out of the many meanings it has by nature. For this reason, we maintain that the workings of language are still not fully understood, since, in general, context determines which meaning of a word is operative in a given situation. This observation supports the conclusion that the meaning of a word is not fixed but varies systematically with its contextual use.

Nevertheless, a language user's intuitive competence plays a central role in identifying context. Accordingly, natural language texts are regarded as the most effective resources for this task, since words typically appear in them embedded within rich and varied contextual information. Language corpora, which are composed of various types of natural text, have been shown to contain a wealth of examples of word usage in context, which can be used to understand word meaning variation as well as to deduce the actual context-based meanings of words (Dash, 2007). This is because context is not always obvious; it could be concealed by the words that surround a word when it is employed in a given environment. Hence the need to consider the subject under discussion as a domain of necessary knowledge if we are unable to glean the meaning of a word from its immediate linguistic context.

Scholars have classified context into various types. For example, Miller & Claudia (200) distinguish between *local* and *topical* context. Local context refers to the one or two words that immediately precede or follow the target word under investigation, while topical context concerns the broader subject matter or theme of the text in which the word occurs. This distinction helps to clarify how different layers of contextual information contribute to the interpretation of meaning.

These perspectives are largely sufficient for grasping the actual contextual meanings of key lexical items within a text. In addition to local and topical context, scholars have also distinguished *sentential* and *global* contexts. Sentential context refers to the level immediately beyond local context; namely, the sentence in which a word is embedded, while global context encompasses the broader extralinguistic world, including shared knowledge, cultural background, and situational factors that inform interpretation (Dash, 2008). This layered understanding of context underscores the complexity of meaning construction and the multiple dimensions that contribute to linguistic interpretation. Although such a stratified layering of context is not always explicitly marked in a given text, it nevertheless provides a useful heuristic for visualising how different contextual levels contribute to the interpretation of meaning. This approach would enable a more systematic analysis of context, thereby helping to reduce errors in interpretation and to improve the accurate understanding of a word's contextual meaning within a text.

For Wittgenstein (1953), knowledge is fundamentally context-dependent, grounded in diverse forms of life and social practices as mediated by language. He argued that language facilitates the acquisition of knowledge by supplying the conceptual frameworks and structures through which individuals interpret and relate to their environment. Accordingly, the contextual use of language will promote clarity and precision, enabling shared understanding and meaningful communication as processes that, in turn, could shape how knowledge is constructed across different cultural settings. His claim is majorly concerned with problems of language and meaning. He maintained that linguistic tools are, in themselves, relatively simple, but that philosophers often obscure this simplicity through linguistic misuse and the formulation of pseudo-problems. His methodological aim was therefore therapeutic as to dissolve philosophical confusion and, as he famously put it, "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." For him, the

meaning of a word is determined by its use within a language-game, that is, within a particular context of practice. Thus, words are not defined primarily by reference to the objects they denote or by associated mental representations, but by the roles they play in the specific contexts in which they are being used.

3. **Language as a non-neutral Medium**

This section establishes that language is not a neutral medium but is deeply entangled with power and discursive practices, as argued by Foucault. He contends that discourse and power are intrinsically linked through language, such that discourses function as systems of power–knowledge that shape both our understanding of the world and our position within it. Discursive practices, in his account, refer to the ways in which language and knowledge are mobilised to produce, regulate, and legitimise authority. These practices concern not only what is said, but also who is permitted to speak, which topics are considered legitimate, and how they may be articulated. Consequently, language serves as a medium through which social power structures are both sustained and contested (Heracleous, 2006). This non-neutrality would enable language to shape and constrain knowledge by reinforcing particular power relations while marginalising or excluding alternative perspectives.

Foucault (2002) demonstrates how language is deeply intertwined with discursive practices and power structures that both shape and delimit what can be known and understood. This analysis challenges traditional views of language as a neutral or transparent medium of knowledge. Central to his argument is the notion of *discursive formations*, which highlights how institutional, linguistic, and epistemic frameworks regulate what counts as legitimate knowledge, thereby sustaining established power relations and preserving the status quo. Such a perspective departs from conventional assumptions by emphasising that language is not merely a communicative tool but a mechanism that can obscure, exclude, or distort knowledge. Linguistic formations, on this account, are neither passive nor benign; rather, they actively participate in the construction of social reality. His concept of discursive formation implies the capacity to determine which forms of knowledge are recognised as valid and which are dismissed or marginalised. Medical discourse, for example, possesses the authority to define what is

considered "normal" or "pathological", thereby shaping public perceptions, social attitudes, and behavioural responses to health conditions and illness. A significant implication of this analysis is that language systems are inherently biased. Such biases are not accidental but are structurally aligned with the interests of those in positions of power. This dynamic is particularly evident in political and legal discourses as well, which often reflect the ideologies of dominant groups while marginalising dissenting voices and alternative perspectives.

Such exclusion entails not merely the suppression of alternative opinions but the systematic erasure of entire frameworks for interpreting the world. Consequently, language possesses the capacity to function as an instrument of oppression, reinforcing existing power structures and obstructing the pursuit of genuine knowledge and social transformation (Cousins and Hussain, 1984). Foucault draws attention to the dynamic and contingent nature of knowledge and its inextricable link to power, arguing that what is accepted as "truth" is continually shaped by dominant discourses and the power relations they sustain.

This perspective challenges the traditional notion of knowledge as universal and objective, suggesting instead that it is context-dependent and historically contingent. His analysis carries profound implications for the acquisition and dissemination of information. In highlighting the inherent constraints and biases embedded within language systems, it illuminates the obstacles to understanding and underscores the necessity of critically engaging with the structures that shape our perceptions. Through such critical engagement, by questioning prevailing narratives and incorporating marginalised perspectives, it becomes possible to foster a more inclusive and equitable circulation of knowledge. In this regard, his Archaeology of Knowledge can provide a compelling critique of how language both structures and limits knowledge, to reveal the complex interplay between language, power, and epistemic authority. This understanding could urge us to reconsider the assumptions underpinning our understanding of reality and to remain attentive to the ways in which discursive practices shape not only what we can know but also how we come to know it.

4. **The contextual nature of knowledge**

In this section we examine the contextual nature of knowledge and emphasise how meaning is inseparable from the activities, practices, and

forms of life in which language is embedded. From Wittgenstein's perspective, language comprehension is fundamentally grounded in these diverse ways of living, highlighting that meaning is not fixed but arises from contextually situated use (Moser, 2021). Language is shaped by inherent biases and contingent on context and could both enable and constrain meaning. Recognising these factors is essential for fostering more equitable communication and overcoming linguistic obstacles that can hinder the dissemination of knowledge.

Duranti (1997) underscores this point from the perspective of linguistic anthropology where the author maintains that such core assumptions about language as a non-neutral medium with essential properties serve as the foundation for both theoretical inquiry and empirical research. By interpreting and operationalising these assumptions in specific research projects, linguistic anthropologists are able to examine how language functions within particular social and cultural contexts. This approach will not only shape the distinctive identity of linguistic anthropology within the social sciences and humanities but also demonstrate how attention to context informs both our understanding of language and the methods used to study its role in the construction and dissemination of knowledge. Building on such insights, we maintain that the contextual nature of language has broader epistemological and practical implications. While linguistic anthropology demonstrates how context shapes meaning within specific cultural and social settings, our view extends this analysis to highlight the normative and critical dimensions of context. Recognising that language is both situated and non-neutral allows us to see how communicative practices can reinforce or challenge existing power structures, shaping what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose perspectives are included or excluded. In this sense, attention to context is not merely a methodological concern but a fundamental component of understanding how knowledge is produced, transmitted, and contested. Engaging with the contingencies and biases inherent in language, can promote more inclusive and equitable forms of communication that acknowledge diverse ways of knowing. This perspective complements Wittgenstein's emphasis on language games and forms of life, as well as Foucault's analysis of discursive formations, by demonstrating that context is central to both the construction of meaning and the distribution of epistemic authority. Such views underscore that knowledge is neither fixed nor

universal, but dynamically situated within the social, cultural, and linguistic contexts in which it is enacted.

The conventional view that words possess inherent or fixed meanings is fundamentally challenged by the notion that meaning is context-dependent. This shift toward a more pragmatic understanding of language emphasises its social character, highlighting how our comprehension of words and concepts emerges from the communities and practices in which we participate (Ahmed, 2010). However, this perspective raises questions about the possibility of objective or universal knowledge, as Wittgenstein's emphasis on context may suggest a form of relativism, where meaning is contingent upon specific social and linguistic environments. Such contextual dependence can complicate the search for common ground or mutual understanding, particularly when different groups or "forms of life" engage in radically distinct language games. Wittgenstein addresses this challenge through his critique of the notion of a "private language", where he argue that language is inherently social and public. A private language, in which words refer solely to personal, subjective experiences inaccessible to others, is incoherent because word meanings are established through shared standards and public usage. This argument reinforces the view that knowledge and meaning are inextricably linked to social and linguistic contexts.

A further key aspect, for instance, is Wittgenstein's argument against his rejection of purely internal or private knowledge where he challenge Cartesian assumptions that understanding can be entirely individual. He demonstrates that even our most personal concepts, including those related to knowledge, acquire meaning only within a shared linguistic framework. While this perspective may risk underestimating the role of individual subjectivity in the construction of knowledge, we contend that recognising the interplay between social practices and personal experience can provide a better understanding. Although public linguistic norms shape meaning, individual interpretation and lived experience also contribute and highlight a dynamic tension between communal standards and personal insight that his framework may not fully capture. But phenomenologists might argue that Wittgenstein's framework does not adequately account for the crucial role of individual consciousness in shaping our understanding and engagement with the world. He, however, maintains that knowing is fundamentally a rule-governed

activity where knowledge is constituted by the conventions and norms embedded within particular language games, so that what is accepted as true in one context may not hold in another. Our analysis finds this perspective highly compelling because it situates knowledge within the specific rules and practices of particular forms of life, rather than treating it as governed by abstract, universal principles. This view highlights how what counts as knowledge is determined by shared social conventions and clarifies the interplay between communal norms and individual understanding, demonstrating that knowledge is both contextually grounded and socially constructed.

The idea that knowledge is rule-governed and context-dependent presents a powerful critique of traditional epistemology, which often seeks universal standards of knowledge. We argue that this perspective aligns more closely with a practical, practice-oriented understanding of knowledge, in which truth and justification are determined by the specific contexts in which they arise. Emphasising the contextual nature of knowledge can be challenging when considering the need for cross-contextual judgements or universal norms, as in fields such as science, law, or ethics, where it is often necessary to establish standards that transcend particular situations. In such cases, Wittgenstein's framework may struggle to account for how these norms can be upheld or justified, since knowledge is continuously shaped by context, and his approach may not provide sufficient tools to address broader, more generalised issues. At the same time, the contextual nature of knowledge is compelling when one acknowledges its deep connection to the particular situations, customs, and social practices in which it emerges. The notion of "language games" captures this dynamic effectively, illustrating how meaning is constructed through use in specific circumstances and casting doubt on the notion of fixed, universal meanings. As social behaviours and ways of life vary across communities, they further shape knowledge, revealing how tightly it is embedded in cultural and societal norms. Knowledge thus functions as a tool adapted to the unique requirements of different contexts. This is evident, for example, in variations in medical knowledge between rural and urban settings, as well as in historical and sociological evidence showing that knowledge evolves in response to intellectual and social developments, such as shifts in scientific paradigms. Moreover, from the perspective of cognitive and epistemic relativism, truth and knowledge are contingent upon cultural and

personal viewpoints, thereby challenging the idea of universal knowledge.

The contextual nature of knowledge can be understood as both justified and insightful, offering a fresh perspective on language, meaning, and knowledge that questions traditional assumptions. It presents a socially informed, practice-oriented view of knowledge, capturing its complexity, variability, and richness. The implication here is that social and contextual factors that shape understanding could highlight the interconnectedness of language, culture, and thought, underscoring the diversity and depth of meaning in human experience.

5. **Language as epistemic medium and mechanism of power**

This section explores the dual role of language as both a medium of knowledge and a mechanism of power. Conventional wisdom often treats language as a neutral conduit through which established facts are conveyed, an inert tool for the mere transmission of information. However, perspectives from Wittgenstein and Foucault reveal, in complementary but distinct ways, that language is far from neutral. It shapes not only what can be known but also how knowledge is produced and communicated and by whom. We advance the thesis that language functions simultaneously as an epistemic medium and an apparatus of power to establish the limits of intelligibility while distributing epistemic authority. The argument that language is non-neutral stems from its embedding in historically contingent, normative forms of life. Wittgenstein (1953) argued that the meaning of a word is not determined by an abstract reference to an external object but by its use within a "language game", which is a rule-governed practice situated within specific social contexts. In this framework, language is constitutive rather than merely representational, as it does not simply reflect reality but plays an active role in shaping it. The rules of language games are institutionally and socially sanctioned here, as they make meaning inherently local and context-dependent. Consequently, knowledge itself is discursively constituted; what counts as knowable is inseparable from the linguistic practices and social forms in which it is articulated.

Foucault develops this argument further where he emphasises that discourse is not merely a verbal habit or a method of making statements, but a regime of power that governs the production of truth. In *The*

Archaeology of Knowledge (2002) and *Discipline and Punish* (1995), he demonstrates how discursive formations determine what can be said, by whom, and through which channels. Knowledge is never independent of power; rather, it is produced within regimes of discourse, rendering some statements knowable while others remain invisible or unintelligible. For example, within institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons, linguistic practices do more than describe subjects; they actively constitute them. The criminal, the patient, and the pupil are not universal categories of being but are created through discourse, sanctioned by the epistemic authority of institutions.

Wittgenstein and Foucault converge in their recognition of language's dual character, as they maintain it enables knowledge by providing conditions of intelligibility but simultaneously constrains knowledge by imposing rules that include some perspectives and exclude others. Language games, in Wittgenstein's sense, determine not only how concepts function but also who is authorised to use them correctly. Foucault's discourse analysis further clarifies that these rules are politically charged, as they function as a mechanism of epistemic demarcation, reinforcing asymmetries of power. This concern aligns with contemporary scholarship in social epistemology. Fricker (2007) introduces the concept of epistemic injustice to explain how individuals and groups can be harmed in their capacity as knowers. Her notion of hermeneutical injustice occurs when structural deficiencies in shared interpretive resources prevent individuals from making sense of their experiences. These tensions are not accidental but are maintained by dominant discursive norms, leaving marginalised groups epistemically illegible. Dotson (2014) extends this analysis with the concepts of testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering, where speakers are inhibited from sharing knowledge due to the perceived hostility or unreceptiveness of dominant audiences. In both cases, language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a mechanism of control and silencing, governing who may speak and which statements are recognised as credible.

These insights are further reinforced within postcolonial and decolonial epistemologies, which illuminate the unequal distribution of epistemic authority across cultural and linguistic contexts. Mignolo (2011) describes the "coloniality of knowledge", whereby Western epistemic frameworks systematically erase, marginalise, or subordinate non-

Western forms of knowing. In a similar vein, Santos (2014) argues that modernity has perpetuated an epistemicide: entire systems of knowledge, particularly indigenous, oral, or affective, are invalidated under the guise of universality and rationality. Central to both analyses is the role of language. Knowledge is recognised only when expressed according to the idioms, norms, and protocols of Western science or analytic rationality. Non-Western epistemologies are thus excluded, not due to their intrinsic inadequacy but because their linguistic and institutional expressions do not align with hegemonic standards. Our perspective aligns with these critiques, but we maintain and acknowledge that while language mediates exclusion, we also argue that language itself constitutes knowledge. Following Wittgenstein, knowledge is inseparable from context, embedded in the social practices and "forms of life" that give meaning to words. Language games are not merely descriptive; they shape what is intelligible and what is not. But, Foucault reminds us that these contexts are never neutral: they are infused with power, producing hierarchies of epistemic legitimacy. Knowledge is thus always situated, socially sanctioned, and politically regulated.

From this vantage point, narratives of exclusion have counter-narratives that emerge from within marginalised epistemic communities. Indigenous knowledge, for example, resists erasure not simply by claiming equivalence to Western science but by operating on alternative principles, epistemic logics, and modes of expression that challenge the very assumptions of what counts as "valid" knowledge. Here, our perspective emphasises the critical interplay between language as a constitutive medium and language as a mechanism of power. While hegemonic discourses dictate the boundaries of intelligibility, subaltern epistemologies demonstrate that these boundaries are neither fixed nor inevitable; they can be contested, reinterpreted, and expanded. Nonetheless, this context-dependent view of knowledge also invites tension. Critics might argue, as traditional epistemologists do, that privileging contextuality risks relativism, undermining the possibility of cross-cultural or universal standards of truth. For instance, in law, science, or ethics, there is often a practical necessity for norms that transcend local contexts. Our counter-perspective recognises this concern but maintains that what is often framed as "universal" knowledge is itself historically and culturally situated. In foregrounding the social and linguistic conditions under which knowledge is produced, we can see universality

not as an abstract, context-free ideal, but as a negotiated and contingent achievement shaped by discourse and power relations.

Language emerges simultaneously as an epistemic medium and an apparatus of power. It enables the construction and communication of knowledge, but it also delineates what can be known, who may know, and which knowledge is recognised as legitimate. Language, therefore, is not neutral; it is both enabling and constraining, productive and restrictive. Recognising this dual role has profound implications: epistemology cannot be concerned solely with abstract criteria of truth or justification. It must also attend to access, authority, and legitimacy. To speak of knowledge without considering the constitutive and regulative role of language is to overlook the terrain on which epistemic struggles are fought. Our perspective integrates Wittgensteinian and Foucauldian insights with postcolonial critiques to offer a more socially grounded, practice-oriented account of knowledge. Wittgenstein provides the tools to understand how meaning and knowledge arise within context; Foucault illuminates how power permeates these contexts; and postcolonial scholarship exposes the historical and structural dimensions of exclusion. Both scholars' view underscore the fact that knowledge is never simply a matter of abstract reasoning; it is enacted, contested, and shaped within particular social, cultural, and linguistic worlds. The narratives of dominance and the counter-narratives of resistance reveal that epistemic landscapes are dynamic, plural, and profoundly political. Language is both the medium through which knowledge is constructed and the mechanism through which it is policed, and attending to this duality calls for a radical rethinking of epistemology itself.

6. **Rule-following and Normativity**

This section examines Wittgenstein's reflections on rule-following, a cornerstone of his later philosophy and a profoundly influential debate on meaning and normativity. We analyse how he challenge the conventional notion of what it means to obey a rule, and raise the questions about the relationship between finite actions and infinite possibilities. For example, consider the simple arithmetic pattern of "+2" where one might write 2, 4, 6, 8… But how can one be certain that the intention is not "+2 up to 1000, and then +4 thereafter"? This is not merely an abstract puzzle; he uses it to demonstrate that no written or mental rule, in isolation, can dictate a

single, determinate course of action. Rule-following, he argues, is not grounded in internal intention or private mental states but in publicly observable practice and socially sanctioned norms. In this sense, normativity arises from shared forms of life, highlighting that meaning and correct action are sustained through communal engagement rather than through individual cognition alone.

Kripke (1982) frames Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations as a sceptical paradox, and contend that there is no internal fact about an individual that determines what they mean by a rule. When someone claims to mean "addition" by "+", there is nothing within them, no mental image, formula, or intention that uniquely fixes the correct extension of the operation. The so-called "sceptical solution" is that meaning arises through collective assent as it is the community's agreement on specific patterns of use that confers normative force on rules. This perspective, he argues, can enable us to make sense of ordinary linguistic practice. For example, when a child responds that "68 + 57 = 125", the response is counted as correct because it aligns with shared mathematical conventions, not because the child possesses some hidden rulebook. Conversely, an answer such as "5" is judged incorrect not due to an objective or metaphysical falsity, but because it violates the communal norms governing arithmetic practice.

Kripke's interpretation, however, is not without its difficulties. Critics such as McDowell (1992) and Wright (2001) argue that his reading transforms Wittgenstein into an ineffective radical sceptic, and undermine the very possibility of normativity. They suggest that his intention was not to eliminate normativity but to relocate it within life practices. On this view, rules are not followed because they are intellectually grasped; rather, they are enacted through habituation within normative practices, sustained by education, correction, and social interaction. Normativity, therefore, is "immanent" rather than "transcendent "as it resides in the patterns of communal life rather than in abstract mental states or metaphysical truths. This interpretation underscores the inherently social character of meaning, situating linguistic correctness and rule-following within the broader framework of shared human practices rather than private cognition.

Foucault further provide a complementary, but more politically charged, account of normativity. For him, discourses are ordered sets of statements and are governed by regimes of truth that determine what

counts as knowledge, who is authorised to speak with authority, and how subjects are constituted within social practices. He illustrates how institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons generate norms of speech, thought, and behaviour. Language, according to this view, ceases to function merely as a vehicle for communication; it becomes a mechanism of surveillance, classification, and control. This perspective has significant implications for understanding rule-following. Rules are never neutral or innocent; they are historically sedimented, institutionally enforced, and deeply intertwined with power relations. For instance, standards of "proper grammar" often carry implicit assumptions about class and race. A student speaking Efik vernacular in schools in Calabar or Wurkun in schools in Jalingo may be judged "incorrect", not due to semantic imprecision, but because institutional norms dictate which language forms are legitimate. Here, normativity is not merely a product of collective assent, as Kripke might suggest, but is power-stratified because rules reflect and reinforce existing hierarchies that privilege certain groups while marginalising others. In this sense, the act of following a rule is inseparable from the social and political conditions that define the authority and legitimacy of that rule.

When juxtaposing Wittgenstein and Foucault, the resulting picture is complex and, at times, paradoxical because rule-following emerges both as a prerequisite for shared meaning and as a mechanism through which discursive power is exercised. This synthesis, however, also exposes deep tensions. Wittgenstein emphasises the organic emergence of normativity within "forms of life", grounding rules in the lived practices and communal habits of human beings. Foucault(1982), by contrast, stresses the constructed and coercive origins of normativity, highlighting how historical and institutional forces shape what counts as correct, permissible, or intelligible. Wittgenstein's approach is limited by its insufficient attention to historical contingency and political conflict, whereas Foucault's view might risk reducing normative order to instruments of domination, leaving little space for genuine agency or the justification of meaning.

Despite these divergences, both thinkers converge on a crucial insight where meaning is never a purely individual or isolated phenomenon. Whether one says "I understand" in a conversation or "I accept" in a courtroom, the intelligibility of these statements relies upon socially and rule-governed contexts. To grasp the nature of language, therefore, is to

investigate the social, institutional, and normative structures that make sense possible. Critiquing these structures, in turn, will entail more than examining the mechanics of speech; it demands an inquiry into who is permitted to speak, under what conditions, and with what authority. In this way, rule-following will illuminate the intersection of meaning, social coordination, and power to reveal language as both the medium through which understanding is achieved and the site on which epistemic and political hierarchies are enacted.

7. **Application and Contemporary Issues**

This section explores the practical and contemporary implications of understanding language as both an epistemic medium and a mechanism of power. We maintain that the terrain of knowledge is not simply a matter of linguistic convention; it is a profound philosophical and social battleground that determines who is recognised as a knower, what counts as valid knowledge, and how authority and legitimacy are conferred. In addressing contemporary issues, it is essential to critically examine the assumptions embedded in claims to universality, neutrality, and objectivity, recognising that these concepts often mask underlying hierarchies and exclusions. From this perspective, language is not merely a vehicle for expressing pre-existing truths but functions as a normative system that shapes intelligibility and inclusion. The ways in which words are used within particular social and institutional contexts establish the boundaries of what can be said, who can say it, and which statements are accepted as credible. These practices are embedded in broader social norms and institutional arrangements, creating structured conditions under which knowledge is produced, recognised, and contested. Understanding language in this way will allow us to analyse contemporary epistemic challenges, including the marginalisation of particular voices, the imposition of dominant conceptual frameworks, and the silencing of alternative perspectives. This underscores the need to attend not only to the content of knowledge but also to the mechanisms through which knowledge is legitimised and distributed. It will foreground the intersection of language, normativity, and power and will enable us to critically engage with contemporary issues of epistemic justice and illuminate how social and institutional structures continue to

shape who has the authority to know and what is acknowledged as knowledge.

However, Western epistemology's tendency to universalise its own discursive constructions as neutral or objective has historically disempowered other knowledge systems. African epistemologies, among others, have long resisted this erasure. Scholars such as Wiredu (1996) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) highlight how colonial epistemologies have marginalised traditional knowledge through the imposition of external norms of language, classification, and conceptual frameworks. Wiredu's call for "conceptual decolonisation" emphasises that philosophy must begin from the internal conceptual frameworks of a community, recognising that knowledge is inseparable from the lifeworld of the people who produce it. These reflections foreground how discursive norms, shaped over time by power relations, determine who is recognised as a knower and what counts as legitimate knowledge. Language is not a neutral conduit through which knowledge is passively transmitted; rather, it plays a constitutive role in determining what counts as knowledge, who has the authority to know, and how knowledge is evaluated. This argument, initially developed in different forms by both Wittgenstein and Foucault, has been further elaborated by contemporary theorists who demonstrate how discursive norms function as mechanisms of epistemic power.

Wittgenstein's insight that meaning is use grounds linguistic meaning in the normative practices of language users. Rules are followed within "forms of life", shared contexts in which language gains significance. This has direct implications for knowledge as what can meaningfully be articulated depends on the linguistic and normative practices of the community. Consequently, exclusion from dominant language games leads to epistemic marginalisation. marginalisation. Foucault radicalised this idea and theorises discourse as a power/knowledge regime. Discursive formations define what counts as truth, rendering other perspectives invisible or unintelligible. Knowledge production is thus inseparable from institutional power, not merely semantic correctness. Several contemporary theorists extend this analysis to global and sociopolitical contexts. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) identifies "epistemic apartheid", whereby African knowledge systems are relegated to the periphery of global knowledge. Mitova (2020) argues that dominant norms of justification marginalise non-Western epistemologies, calling for

greater epistemic pluralism. These critiques build on Foucault's insight by linking discursive power to global structures of epistemic hegemony.

The role of language in contemporary epistemic inequality is further explored by Finocchiaro & Perrine, (2023), who demonstrate how English, as the dominant language of academic philosophy, contributes to the unequal distribution of epistemic goods by marginalising scholars for whom English is not a first language. Similarly, Catala (2024) highlights how linguistic differences and academic mobility produce epistemic injustice, arguing that language norms are inherently political as well as pedagogical. Rosola (2025) further develops the concept of "grammatical hermeneutical injustice", to show how gendered grammar constrains the epistemic self-presentation of non-binary individuals. Following Wodak et al.(2009), who emphasises that discourse reproduces social inequality through ideologically marked policy and media narratives, these analyses collectively demonstrate the pervasive role of language in structuring access to knowledge. A Wittgensteinian feminist perspective, as articulated by Scheman (2015), underscores the importance of epistemic trust and social recognition in knowledge practices. She argues that epistemic authority has historically derived from social position and linguistic familiarity, further entrenching exclusionary patterns. These analyses reveal that linguistic norms are not neutral instruments of communication but are central to the distribution of epistemic power that can shape whose knowledge is recognised and whose remains marginalised.

According to Kim (2020), language teachers have long recognised that acquiring proficiency in a second language requires engagement with the associated culture. In this context, we endorse the view that direct exposure to a foreign culture can broaden learners' awareness of the diversity of human experiences and fosters empathy across cultural boundaries. Ho (2009) similarly argues that the most successful language learners acquire both language and culture simultaneously, demonstrating that teaching language and culture in isolation is insufficient. While proficiency in vocabulary and grammar remains a fundamental prerequisite, Rao (2002) observes that language instructors often undervalue cultural instruction, thereby limiting language learning's potential to cultivate cross-cultural understanding. From this perspective, language pedagogy not only facilitates linguistic competence but also supports the generation and dissemination of contextual

knowledge. Ideally, language learning should become a deeply rewarding human experience that offers learners a better framework for comprehending reality. These considerations underscore that knowledge formation is deeply embedded in linguistic and cultural contexts, suggesting that knowledge is neither universal nor context-independent. Concepts such as "justice" or "truth" can vary significantly across cultures, reflecting the distinct norms, practices, and interpretive frameworks, or "language games", that govern meaning in each context. This understanding compels us to interrogate how power dynamics shape what is accepted as knowledge within a given community. It is these dynamics that influence how people think, speak, and act, thereby shaping what is recognised as true or false in any particular context.

Importantly, language itself is a product of the social and historical conditions from which specific ways of knowing emerge. Recognising the contextual nature of knowledge highlights the importance of acknowledging the diversity of human experience and the decisive influence of cultural and linguistic factors in shaping what we know. Appreciating this, we are better positioned to understand knowledge not as a static, universal entity, but as a socially and culturally situated phenomenon that is continually produced, contested, and transformed within particular communities. It is therefore essential to understand the relationship between human behaviour and the ways in which language has evolved, both as a tool for conveying ideas and information and as a medium of social communication (Altarriba & Basnight-Brown, 2022). Language, by definition, is a symbolic representational system that encodes concepts and conceptual knowledge. As such, it functions as an abstract system of symbols representing information, ideas, opinions, actions, and other cognitive activities, with the primary aim of facilitating the effective communication of these concepts. It is significant not only as a communicative instrument but also as a determinant of cognitive and social processes. It influences decision-making, emotional processing, and cognitive development, while also shaping social identity, interpersonal interactions, and even interpretations of marketing and media messages (Del Maschio et al., 2022). Similarly, culture exerts a profound influence on thought and worldview, interacting with language to structure the frameworks through which individuals comprehend and engage with reality.

In scientific discourse, for example, language provides the conceptual scaffolding necessary to describe, categorise, and communicate phenomena. The terminology and structures employed in scientific communication define observations, frame hypotheses, and facilitate the precise articulation of complex ideas, thereby contributing to the development of specialised scientific concepts (Gonzalez, 2021). It thus plays an integral role in the creation, dissemination, and evolution of scientific knowledge as it shapes the ways in which scientists conceptualise problems, share findings, and engage in collaborative inquiry, while simultaneously reflecting the cultural and social contexts in which scientific activity occurs. These considerations highlight that the notion of objective, universal knowledge is complicated by the deep linguistic and cultural roots of knowledge production. Different linguistic communities develop distinct methods of interpreting and understanding the world, and language functions as a critical filter through which knowledge is generated, shared, and validated. In this sense, knowledge is not independent of its communicative and cultural mediums but is inextricably bound to the linguistic practices and cultural frameworks that make its formation and transmission possible.

8. **Reshaping Knowledge through Language**

This section advances the thesis that language is not a neutral instrument for describing or cataloguing the world but an active, constitutive force that shapes what can be known, who is recognised as a knower, and the criteria by which knowledge is legitimised. To approach this central concern, we examine language through multiple interrelated perspectives, starting as a normative system that structures intelligibility and inclusion; as a site where power relations operate to authorise or marginalise certain knowers; and as a vehicle for epistemic formation, through which communities collectively determine meaning and validity. Combining these perspectives for us would help in aiming to demonstrate how linguistic practices not only communicate knowledge but also actively participate in its production, delimitation, and social legitimisation. This approach emphasises the inseparability of language, social context, and epistemic authority, snd can allow us to analyse both the constitutive and exclusionary effects of discourse in contemporary and cross-cultural knowledge systems.

Far from merely organising categories, language delineates which perspectives are intelligible, authoritative, or excluded from consideration. In this way, linguistic practices are intimately implicated in epistemic justice or injustice, making the norms of language central to evaluating the ethics and fairness of knowledge systems. Consider, for instance, the Indigenous Māori concept of *whakapapa* in Aotearoa New Zealand, which interlinks people, land, and all beings through genealogical relations. When Māori environmentalists describe a river as an ancestor, most notably in the legal recognition of the Whanganui River as a legal person in 2017, it is not metaphorical but an ontological statement grounded in relational cosmology. In contrast, within a Western bureaucratic "language game", in which rivers are primarily understood as resources, such relational knowledge is often misrepresented or simplified as mere "cultural belief", effectively marginalising the legitimacy of Māori ecological epistemology. This example illustrates how dominant language practices can exclude alternative frameworks of reality, even in domains such as science or law that purport to be objective(Charpleix, 2018).

Institutions further enforce these epistemic hierarchies through discursive power. From this perspective, knowledge is inseparable from structures of authority, as institutions determine what counts as valid knowledge and who is authorised to produce it. Psychiatry provides a paradigmatic example where the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) defines mental illness through standardised symptoms to privilege biomedical frameworks while delegitimising non-Western or African understandings, such as spirit possession, ancestral calling, or "wind illness" among Somali communities(First , et al. 2018). Traditional healers or elders, along with the patients themselves, are rendered epistemically disenfranchised, as their lived realities and explanatory frameworks are excluded from sanctioned discourse. Institutional language thus does more than describe; it actively shapes what can be considered real, demonstrating the metaphysical and normative power of discourse.

The issue becomes further complicated when considering the political dimensions of rule-following. Kripke (1982) frames the rule-following paradox to demonstrate that no individual can determine the meaning of a rule in isolation; rules are only settled through shared communal practice. This insight gains political significance when applied to norms of

grammar, logic, or academic methodology. For example, Indigenous researchers employing narrative, circular reasoning, or collective voice may have their work dismissed by mainstream peer reviewers as methodologically deficient, presuming a violation of logical exposition rules. But within Indigenous epistemologies, such forms are coherent, rule-governed, and internally consistent. The paradox emerges because meaning is community-dependent, but if the dominant community establishes the standards of correctness, alternative rule systems become invisible or classified as incorrect. These perspectives highlight that language is not a passive conduit for knowledge but an active agent in its production, dissemination, and legitimisation. Linguistic structures, embedded in social, cultural, and institutional contexts, determine which voices are heard, which frameworks are recognised, and what counts as truth. To understand knowledge is therefore to understand the language games, power structures, and normative practices that shape it, as well as the epistemic exclusions they produce.

Dijk's (2008) critical discourse analysis framework brings into focus how exclusions are systematically inscribed in institutional texts and practices. Consider European immigration surveys that require respondents to specify a single "mother tongue" or "native language". For multilingual African, South Asian, or Indigenous individuals who navigate multiple languages across familial, regional, and ritual contexts, such questions impose a monolingual Western assumption that does not reflect their lived experience. This seemingly neutral form enforces linguistic hierarchies silently, where English or French is administratively legible, whereas other languages are rendered invisible. A similar phenomenon could occur in academic publishing, where articles written in Yoruba or in Wurkun languages are rarely considered for peer review, not because of intellectual inadequacy, but because of the English-centric norms that dominate scholarly discourse. These examples are not merely theoretical; they point to actionable strategies for promoting epistemic justice. Linguistic norms must first be restructured to accommodate marginalised modes of expression, including bilingual scholarly journals or educational curricula that integrate code-switching to acknowledge linguistic hybridity. As Kim (2020) observes, such reforms, which include the recognition of non-binary pronouns or Indigenous kinship terms, could reshape what is thinkable and sayable.

Subaltern voices must also be empowered to communicate knowledge in their own epistemic grammars. More so is that initiatives for Indigenous language revitalisation now make community-controlled linguistic resources publicly accessible and support cultural knowledge preservation. For example, the *FirstVoices* platform which enable Indigenous communities to document, promote, and share their languages, such as alphabets, audio recordings, words, stories, and songs, through secure, community-managed digital spaces should be encourage to help preserve linguistic heritage and related cultural knowledge (Llanes-Ortiz, 2023). Similarly, organisations such as the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages which assist communities in documenting endangered languages and training Indigenous youth to record and maintain linguistic traditions that reinforce community agency over language knowledge should be prioritised (Lyderson, 2009). These efforts demonstrate how digital and community-led tools can validate non-Western modes of linguistic and epistemic practice rather than subordinating them to external language hierarchies. Efforts toward redistributing epistemic authority also extend into research structures. Kaupapa Māori research, a paradigm rooted in Māori worldviews, values, and aspirations, centres knowledge production by, with, and for Māori communities, to position it epistemologies as legitimate frameworks rather than subjects of Western inquiry (Haitana, et al. 2020). This approach exemplifies how Indigenous peoples assert the right to define their own terms of inquiry and knowledge validity. Scholarly communities have increasingly called for greater representation of Indigenous scholars on editorial boards and in peer-review roles to address long-standing inequities in academic publishing and expand the range of epistemic voices considered legitimate (Emerald, 2022). Such structural shifts, from community-controlled linguistic archives to Indigenous research paradigms and calls for editorial inclusivity, illustrate concrete pathways toward epistemic justice, in which diverse knowledge systems and their carriers are recognised, supported, and centred in both local and global knowledge ecosystems.

Educational systems must actively foster epistemic pluralism. Rather than simply teaching "foreign languages", curricula can incorporate epistemic translation, including Buddhist logic, Yoruba divination systems, or Inuit spatial knowledge, to treat these as fully developed systems of thought. These measures can address both immediate

exclusions and the long-term marginalisation of non-dominant knowledge systems. Finocchiaro and Perrine (2023) critique English's dominance in global academia, which marginalises scholars from the Global South, which highlights "grammatical hermeneutical injustice" in gendered languages like Spanish and German, constraining non-binary identities. Language is thus not simply a medium for transmitting knowledge; it is the arena in which knowledge is produced, recognised, or excluded. More so is that achieving epistemic justice requires confronting the structural and metaphysical frameworks that sustain dominant discourses while creating spaces where diverse modes of speech, knowledge, and existence can shape the very future of what counts as knowledge.

9. **Challenges and Broader Implications**

In this section, we explain our theoretical claim to show that language is not a transparent medium for transmitting neutral facts but an **active site of struggle over meaning, recognition, and epistemic authority.** Language embeds normative conditions, organises cognitive frameworks, and distributes epistemic legitimacy; understanding these structures is necessary for addressing broader challenges in cross-cultural knowledge and epistemic justice. Our **discourse-sensitive, epistemic theory of justice** combines two philosophical insights into a unified conceptual framework. First, **Kripke's rule-following paradox** highlights that meaning and normativity cannot be grounded in private mental states or intrinsic facts alone. Second, **critical discourse analysis (CDA)** reveals how institutionalised discourses shape social hierarchies and power relations through language. These form the basis for understanding how epistemic injustice arises where language norms exclude or marginalise certain voices and forms of knowledge.

Kripke's interpretation of the **rule-following paradox** dramatises a fundamental problem in our assumptions about linguistic meaning. According to Kripke's sceptical reconstruction of Wittgenstein's argument, there is no fact about an individual's past usage or internal mental state that determines that they mean one rule rather than another when they employ a term like "plus". That is, no finite set of instructions or intentions can conclusively fix how a rule will be applied in every future case; meaning is underdetermined by private facts alone and

instead depends on **communal agreement about norms of use.** This suggests that **normativity emerges from shared linguistic practices**, not from subjective intentions or abstract definitions alone. This insight has profound epistemic implications. It shows that **there is no neutral foundation for meaning outside of the communal practices in which words are used.** If meaning arises through communal standards of correctness, then control over those standards is itself an epistemic form of power. When dominant groups define the norms of correct interpretation, whether in mathematics, morality, science, or daily discourse, they effectively set the boundaries of what counts as intelligible and authoritative knowledge.

Instantiated in social practice, **critical discourse analysis** elucidates how institutional power shapes language use and reinforces dominance (Fairclough, 1995). It treats language as "social practice" and emphasises **how discourse contributes to reproducing and challenging power relations in society."** Rather than analysing language purely for structural or formal characteristics, it investigates how linguistic practices are tied to **social structures such as ideology, domination, and inequality** and reveal how discourse can naturalise or obscure relations of power. These theoretical foundations justify our central claim that language cannot be neutral because it is normalised and regulated through socially and politically situated practices. The consequences of this claim are neither abstract nor merely philosophical; they play out in concrete arenas such as education, research, health care, legal systems, and cross-cultural communication.

To illustrate, consider how **cross-cultural knowledge** is frequently treated in educational contexts. Language learners must acquire not only linguistic forms but also the cultural norms embedded in those forms, as Kim (2020) and Ho (2009) observe. Effective cross-cultural competence, however, requires recognising that communicating in another language involves navigating patterns of politeness, metaphor, collective versus individual agency, and embodied practices of meaning. Language learners must learn to avoid culturally specific idioms, acronyms, or slang that will not translate faithfully across contexts, and they must attend to non-verbal norms such as the use or non-use of silence as communicative content. These demands reflect that **norms of intelligibility vary across cultural language games**, and failure to appreciate these differences can result not only in pragmatic miscommunication but also in **epistemic**

distortion or even **erasure of localised knowledge forms.** In academic practices, the implications are equally significant. Institutionalised norms of scholarly communication, rooted in dominant epistemic communities, often privilege particular styles, methodologies, and languages, especially English, at the expense of others. This exclusionary dynamic shapes who is recognised as a credible knower. While scholars in the Global South and Indigenous contexts have long advocated for epistemic inclusion, practical barriers persist. For example, **multilingual and Indigenous language scholarship often remains marginalised within the Anglophone academy**, limiting publication opportunities and tenure prospects for scholars who produce work in or about non-dominant language traditions. These structural inequities are not accidental; they result from entrenched norms about what constitutes rigorous scholarship and who gets to set those norms.

Our theoretical framework further explains why epistemic injustice cannot be resolved merely by adding marginalised voices into existing structures. Because belonging to the epistemic community depends on conformity to its rules, rules that are themselves historically and politically constituted mere representation is insufficient. Instead, achieving epistemic justice requires **transforming the normative frameworks themselves** so that a plurality of epistemic practices can be recognised as valid and authoritative in their own terms. One practical implication here is for educational curricula and research evaluation practices. Rather than maintaining a monolithic set of epistemic standards, institutions could adopt pluralistic modes of evaluation that validate **diverse modes of reasoning, narrative forms, and language practices**. Teaching modules in epistemic translation, such as comparative African ethical frameworks, Indigenous ecological reasoning, and East Asian conceptions of mind and body, can help students recognise that different traditions make distinct but equally coherent contributions to global knowledge. This challenges the presumption of neutrality in dominant epistemic norms and encourages learners to see their own frameworks as contingent and partial rather than universal.

In research governance, diversifying editorial boards and review committees to include scholars from marginalised linguistic and cultural communities would expand the range of epistemic voices considered legitimate. This aligns with broader calls within scholarly publishing for greater inclusion and representation across editorial structures. Reports

and resources in academic publishing are increasingly calling for more diverse editorial and peer-review bodies as a way to address systemic inequities in whose work is recognised and circulated. For example, a global inclusivity report from Emerald Publishing found that **70% of researchers surveyed believe publishers should be doing more to improve diversity and representation on editorial boards and reviewer pools**, highlighting broad support within the scholarly community for diversifying decision-making structures in academic publishing (Emerald, 2022). Such practices would redistribute epistemic authority in ways that make the standards of correctness and recognition more inclusive. At a deeper ethical level, our analysis underscores that **language shapes not only what is said but also what can be said**. When discursive norms allow only certain forms of conceptual articulation, other forms become invisible or unintelligible, effectively silencing alternative ways of knowing. Epistemic injustice occurs when individuals or communities are systematically excluded from the processes of meaning-making and validation. Addressing this injustice requires recognising that **conditions of intelligibility are normative and contestable**, not fixed or neutral.

A discourse-sensitive, epistemic theory of justice shows that language is a battleground over meaning, recognition, and epistemic authority precisely because rule-following norms are socially mediated and discursively enforced. The challenges of cross-cultural knowledge, academic inclusion, and institutional power relations reveal that knowledge is never simply transmitted but actively constructed through language practices embedded in social hierarchies. Addressing these challenges demands not only greater awareness of linguistic diversity but also a structural reconfiguration of the norms that delimit who may participate in epistemic communities and on what terms their contributions are validated. Nevertheless, we maintain that effective communication across national and cultural boundaries will demand a profound awareness of cross-cultural differences. Language and culture are inseparably intertwined; thus, mastering a language requires simultaneous engagement with the cultural context in which it is used. This dual focus will help prevent misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and inadvertent offence. Cross-cultural comprehension, defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and appropriately respond to individuals, events, or situations that may be misinterpreted due to cultural differences, is central to this endeavour (Hurn & Tomalin, 2013).

Achieving this understanding also will require sensitivity to the emotional and performative force of language, to recognise how words can energise, persuade, or even incite conflict. Thus, learning a language other than one's own will offer more than linguistic proficiency; it will provide insight into the diversity of human experience and the ways in which different cultures encode, structure, and transmit knowledge.

This awareness directly informs one's understanding of social relationships and power dynamics, which are crucial for both interpersonal communication and global cooperation. For example, multinational corporations seeking successful operations abroad must understand local social hierarchies, communication conventions, and cultural expectations before engaging effectively. Language socialisation, where individuals learn to use language to navigate social life, is therefore instrumental here. As Rymes (2008) notes, language socialisation is "an investigation of how language both presupposes and creates new social relations in cultural context." Developing communicative competence thus entails not only mastery of syntax and vocabulary but also an understanding of the social and cultural contexts that give words and phrases meaning. Cultural significance in language mirrors cultural significance in human experience, shaping how knowledge is created, shared, and interpreted.

However, the study and practice of cross-cultural communication are not without challenges. One persistent difficulty is the tension between cultural relativism and universalism. Cultural relativism, which emphasises understanding cultures on their own terms, might risk limiting the generalisability of findings across contexts. Universalism, by contrast, which seeks to apply overarching principles across cultures, can obscure unique local practices, assumptions, and epistemic frameworks. This tension might complicate the production of cross-cultural knowledge and raise questions regarding the validity and applicability of insights derived from one context when applied to another.

Another obstacle is the potential for interpretive bias, in which individuals are often linguists or researchers and impose their own cultural assumptions on the practices and language of others. For example, labelling Indigenous oral traditions as anecdotal rather than valid knowledge demonstrates a cultural bias that misrepresents the epistemic value of those practices. Such biases reinforce existing inequities and distort the recognition of diverse ways of knowing, highlighting the

ethical and epistemological stakes of cross-cultural engagement. Despite these challenges, incorporating multiple cultural perspectives can significantly enrich understanding, foster creativity, and generate novel problem-solving strategies. Exposure to diverse ways of knowing will broaden cognitive and ethical horizons and allow individuals and communities to approach global challenges such as public health crises or climate change with greater understanding and collaborative capacity. For instance, understanding local knowledge and community practices was critical for the design and implementation of culturally sensitive public health interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating the practical necessity of cross-cultural knowledge.

Corporate and organisational contexts similarly benefit from cross-cultural understanding. Ursu & Ciortescu (2021) emphasises that cultural patterns provide interpretive frameworks for understanding behaviours that initially appear unusual or counterintuitive. In internationalised corporate settings, failing to recognise such patterns can result in miscommunication, inefficiency, and conflict. Conversely, appreciating these frameworks will enable individuals to navigate and negotiate effectively within complex multicultural environments. From a broader epistemological perspective, language functions as both a conduit and a constructor of knowledge. It shapes what can be known, how it is legitimised, and whose perspectives are recognised as authoritative. Language is never neutral; it carries cultural assumptions and social hierarchies that influence knowledge acquisition and dissemination. Cross-cultural competence thus requires an attentiveness to the power relations embedded in language, alongside an appreciation of its role in constituting reality. As language learners develop the ability to navigate multiple cultural contexts, they also acquire the cognitive flexibility necessary to question dominant epistemic norms and to recognise marginalised or alternative knowledge systems. In practice, this would mean that language education should integrate cultural immersion, narrative practices, and reflective engagement with social norms. Language curricula that incorporate idioms, proverbs, kinship terminology, and local communicative conventions can provide students not only with linguistic tools but also with frameworks for understanding local epistemologies. For example, teaching the Māori concept of *whakapapa* alongside grammatical and syntactic structures will allow learners to grasp relational ways of knowing that are otherwise obscured

in a purely linguistic or Western scientific framework. Similarly, integrating Indigenous medical terminologies or environmental knowledge systems into formal education validates alternative epistemic perspectives, enabling learners to navigate a plurality of knowledge systems.

Cross-cultural knowledge is both a practical skill and a philosophical commitment. It requires recognising the interplay of language, culture, and power; understanding how knowledge is socially situated; and cultivating sensitivity to the diversity of human experiences. In an interconnected world, these competencies are essential not only for communication but also for ethical engagement, epistemic justice, and collaborative problem-solving. Language is the medium through which knowledge circulates, but it is also the terrain on which epistemic authority is negotiated, contested, and reconstructed. In this sense, cross-cultural understanding is inseparable from broader efforts to democratise knowledge and empower marginalised voices across linguistic and cultural divides.

10. **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have explored the intricate and inextricable relationship between language, knowledge, and power and argue that language is neither a neutral conduit for information nor a passive medium for the transmission of facts. Instead, language actively constitutes knowledge, delineates who counts as a legitimate knower, and establishes the criteria by which knowledge is validated. By situating our analysis within a discourse-sensitive epistemic framework, informed by the insights of rule-following paradoxes and critical discourse analysis, we have demonstrated that language functions simultaneously as an epistemic medium and a mechanism of power, shaping not only what can be known but also who is recognised as having the authority to know.

Central to this analysis is the recognition that linguistic norms operate within historically and culturally specific frameworks, and these frameworks are inherently bound to power relations. Meaning is never merely a property of words or sentences; it arises through practices embedded in social life, which are themselves shaped by institutional, political, and cultural forces. In this sense, knowledge is always contextually situated, emerging within networks of social and epistemic

authority. The interplay between linguistic practices and power structures ensures that some forms of knowledge are privileged, while others are marginalised or rendered unintelligible. Consequently, the task of epistemic justice cannot be reduced to merely including marginalised voices but must extend to interrogating the rules, practices, and power dynamics that determine which voices are heard and which knowledge claims are recognised as legitimate.

Our analysis has illustrated that normativity is central to this process. Language is not merely followed according to abstract rules but is regulated through shared practices that both enable and constrain understanding. Norms are historically sedimented and socially enforced, such that following a linguistic rule is never a neutral act; it is a participation in a broader structure that determines what counts as meaningful, correct, or authoritative. These normative structures are deeply political: they shape access to epistemic authority, mediate inclusion and exclusion in knowledge communities, and reproduce hierarchies of intelligibility. In this sense, rule-following is inseparable from questions of power, and epistemic authority is inseparable from the linguistic and social practices through which it is exercised.

We have demonstrated that epistemic injustice emerges not only through the silencing of marginalised voices but also through the structural exclusion embedded in dominant linguistic and cultural norms. These exclusions operate at multiple levels, such as through institutionalised discourse in education, law, and scientific inquiry; through the privileging of certain languages and styles of expression in academic publishing; and through social practices that define the boundaries of intelligibility in everyday life. The result is that marginalised epistemic communities like the indigenous peoples, subaltern groups, and speakers of non-dominant languages are often rendered epistemically illegible, their knowledge systematically devalued, misrepresented, or ignored.

We further maintain that cross-cultural knowledge will provide a practical illustration of these dynamics. Language learners and scholars alike must recognise that understanding across linguistic and cultural divides requires more than the mastery of grammar or vocabulary; it requires immersion in the social practices, conceptual frameworks, and normative expectations of the communities in which the language is embedded. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and epistemic

distortions frequently arise when linguistic norms are uncritically universalised or when learners impose their own cultural assumptions onto other epistemic systems. Thus, cross-cultural knowledge is both an ethical and cognitive enterprise, as it demands sensitivity to context, reflexivity about power dynamics, and an appreciation for the diversity of human understanding.

Our claim is that addressing these challenges requires a discourse-sensitive approach to epistemic justice. By combining insights from rule-following paradoxes and critical discourse analysis, we show that linguistic practices are arenas of contestation over meaning and recognition. This approach can illuminate the mechanisms by which dominant groups maintain epistemic authority and how marginalised communities are systematically excluded from it. More importantly, it suggests practical strategies for intervention that restructuring linguistic norms to accommodate multiple ways of knowing can legitimise non-dominant epistemologies within institutional and educational frameworks and foster pluralistic epistemic communities where diverse voices can contribute to knowledge production. These interventions are not merely symbolic; they reshape what is considered knowable and expand the range of epistemic possibilities available to society.

African epistemological frameworks provide an instructive model for this approach. In these traditions, knowledge is not conceived as a detached, abstract entity but as deeply embedded in communal life, social practice, and cultural context. Such epistemologies resist universalising tendencies by emphasising the validity of localised, relational, and collectively constructed forms of knowledge. When integrated into broader knowledge systems, these perspectives challenge the dominance of Western epistemic norms, highlight the contingency of knowledge claims, and reinforce the ethical imperative of epistemic justice. Recognising knowledge as situated and socially mediated can create space for more inclusive, context-sensitive forms of inquiry that honour the epistemic contributions of all communities. Language, in this sense, is both the medium and the battleground of knowledge. It will facilitate understanding to enable communication and structure cognition, but it simultaneously might enforce boundaries, mediate inclusion, and reproduce inequalities. The stakes are both theoretical and practical, as failure to interrogate the normative and power-laden dimensions of language risks perpetuating epistemic injustice, while a critical, discourse-

sensitive approach can foster more equitable knowledge practices. By foregrounding the constitutive role of language, we highlight how epistemic authority is never given but always contested, negotiated, and reinforced through social and institutional practices.

For us, knowledge is neither neutral nor universal; it is produced through linguistically and culturally situated practices that carry the weight of historical and institutional power. Epistemic justice will require attentiveness to these dynamics, a commitment to pluralism, and the redistribution of epistemic authority across communities. In integrating insights from normative rule-following, critical discourse analysis, and contextual epistemologies, we provide a comprehensive account of how linguistic norms both enable and constrain understanding, how knowledge is legitimised or excluded, and how the ethical and political dimensions of epistemology must be reckoned with. The pursuit of epistemic justice is inseparable from the project of critically examining language itself. Only by acknowledging the constitutive, power-laden role of language in shaping what counts as knowledge, who may know, and under what conditions knowledge is sanctioned can scholars, educators, and policymakers begin to foster more inclusive, pluralistic, and ethically responsible systems of understanding. Language is thus not merely a tool for transmitting information; it is the terrain on which knowledge is contested, power is exercised, and justice is enacted. Recognising this dual character of language as both enabling and constraining can offer a roadmap for expanding epistemic access, challenging entrenched hierarchies, and cultivating a genuinely inclusive and dynamic global epistemic community.

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