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PROMOTING THE USE AND TEACHING OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This paper is a discussion of the work that has been done by the Zimbabwe Government and The African Languages Research Institute in trying to promote the use and teaching of African languages in the country. It briefly discusses the colonial and post-colonial language policies that resulted in the marginalisation of African languages. The discussion also focuses on the challenges and constraints that have been encountered in trying to use an African language as a language of wider communication and medium of instruction. The paper finally gives some practical suggestions on how Zimbabwe and other African countries can promote indigenous languages.

Introduction

The language situation in Zimbabwe is less complex than elsewhere in Africa. Shona, spoken by at least 75% of the population and Ndebele spoken by 10% to 16% are the dominant indigenous languages. These two languages are often referred to as national languages, along with English that is used for most official purposes (Chimhundu, 1993). In addition to these, there are at least fifteen small but significant minority language groups which account for another 6% of the population. These include Kalanga, Tonga, Nambya, Barwe, Venda and Shangaan among others (Hachipola, 1998). These indigenous languages are threatened with extinction because they are being marginalised through the education system and the colonial legacy. This scenario is not peculiar to Zimbabwe alone, but to many African countries that still assign superior roles to foreign languages.

Colonial Language Policies

After colonising African countries, the colonial masters were eager to impose their own languages on all their subjects. They introduced their language as the linguistic tool of administration and power. The syllabi were designed to portray

the settler's culture as the epitome of civilization. In the then Southern Rhodesia, the English language was seen as prestigious and viewed as a gateway to success. In order to be considered for further education and employment, one had to pass English at O-level. Shona and Ndebele were not viewed as acceptable linguistic substitutes. Supremacy was given to English at the detriment of Shona and Ndebele. Thus, throughout the colonial period, English was given the status of a national and official language while Shona and Ndebele were looked down upon.

Different colonial masters had different language policies. The British and the Belgians favoured a policy of separate development or association and allowed the teaching of African languages (John, 1971). This resulted in "a little bit of English for everyone and a lot of English for a selected few" (Moyana, 1988: 53). This was achieved through the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction for the first three years of primary education. From Grade 4 onwards, pupils were supposed to use English as a medium of instruction. Unlike the British and the Belgians, the French and the Portuguese had a policy of assimilation that encouraged the use of their own languages and discouraged the use of African languages. The Germans also favoured a German medium of instruction in schools in the territories they had conquered, except in East Africa, where Swahili was already flourishing as a *lingua franca* (Wolfgang, 1973). All these policies resulted in the marginalisation of indigenous languages.

In the then Southern Rhodesia students were forced to speak English and they ended up adopting a foreign culture. Morris Nyagumbo (1980:30), one of Zimbabwe's post independence cabinet ministers had this to say about St. Augustine's Mission:

The only thing I did not like here was that we were required to speak English for six days of the week, from Monday morning to Saturday evening. The system in which debates were held was also very bad for me.

The use of English alienated black children from their culture since language is an embodiment of cultural values and a symbol of identity. If a language is denigrated, then the culture embodied in that language is also denigrated. Use of English in schools was not peculiar to Southern Rhodesia alone, but to some African countries as well. Ngugi WaThiong'o (1987:11) says of the colonial education in Kenya:

One of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment: three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY.

With such encounters, Africans had no choice, but to learn the language of the colonial master and did not have lessons in indigenous languages. In Southern Rhodesia, Shona was introduced as a subject at O-level in 1957 for Group B schools in high density areas and Ndebele was introduced in 1967. In former Group A schools, Shona was introduced in 1964, and Zulu instead of Ndebele was introduced in 1977, and, subsequently, Ndebele in 1979. The first group of Shona students enrolled at the university in 1963, and for Ndebele in 1968. This amply demonstrates that indigenous languages were left out of the curriculum of the university until much later.

Even though Shona and Ndebele were introduced in schools, they were not taught by qualified personnel. According to Chiwome (1996), Shona teachers were often chosen on the basis of their spoken competence rather than professional training. White untrained second language learners often considered themselves competent enough to teach Shona. The time slots allocated for instruction of indigenous languages was unfavourable. Shona was usually allocated time in the afternoon when it was quite hot and students were tired and not concentrating. The prime teaching period in the morning usually went to the teaching of English and Mathematics and other subjects that were considered to be more important. In some schools, indigenous languages were offered as options to French or Latin. For love of adventure and prestige, students opted for foreign languages. Also, parents and teachers wanted their children to pass English, and this led to social stratification which undermined the unity of the indigenous people.

Post-Colonial Language Policies

The post-colonial language policy in Zimbabwe has not shifted from the colonial one. Zimbabwe does not have an explicit language policy document. The legal status of languages in the country is stipulated in the Education Act of 1987. According to this Act, English is the official language and Shona and Ndebele are national languages, with restricted official use. It also states that the home language should be used as a medium of instruction for the first three years of primary education, and English should be used from Grade 4 onwards. The government has also recognised five minority languages, namely Kalanga, Tonga,

Venda, Shangaan and Nambya. These languages are also used as medium of instruction from Grade 1 to 3. From Grade 4 upwards, speakers of the minority languages learn either Shona or Ndebele and English. English is still used as a medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards. This is a replica of the colonial language policy, which favoured foreign languages.

Measures taken to promote the use of African languages in Zimbabwe

Even though the post-colonial language policy in Zimbabwe still favours the use of English, there are some steps that have been taken to try and promote the use of African languages. Soon after independence in 1980, Shona and Ndebele were made pre-requisites for teacher training. However, this was later abolished in the late 1980s and emphasis was, once again placed on passing English. Presently, the government has called for passes in indigenous languages. The Ministry of Education Sport and Culture has declared that passes in Shona, Ndebele and History among other subjects, are essential for a student to be regarded to have a full O-level school certificate (Nyarota, 2002). Another positive development was the introduction of Shona and Ndebele examinations at Grade Seven in 1990.

Educational enrolment and literacy levels have increased from about 45% to 80% between 1980 and 1990. This, in turn, provided a ready market for the literature published in indigenous languages. In Zimbabwe, there is relatively more literature in indigenous languages, in this case Ndebele and Shona, than found in other African countries. Initially, fiction in indigenous languages focused on moralisation and didacticism, but now the literature has grown and is now diversified, and has completely broken away from church strings (Chimhundu, 1996). Production of literature in African languages continues to grow, particularly in response to the demands of high school syllabi, where prescribed texts for literature courses are routinely changed.

The use of African languages in the electronic media has also increased considerably. Radio Two, which has recently been renamed Radio Zimbabwe, broadcasts solely in indigenous languages. Most of the station's programmes are in either Shona or Ndebele, and very few in minority languages like Venda and Shangaan. Radio Four, which has been renamed National FM, also uses Shona and Ndebele in a good number of its programmes. The latter is mainly an educational station (Chimhundu, 1993). It also broadcasts quite a number of programmes in minority languages.

The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings has embarked on a drive of airing more Shona and Ndebele programmes. It has declared that 75% local content should be broadcast on both television and radio. Television One is screening entertaining dramas on Mondays and Tuesdays. *Sinjalo*, a multi-language local drama has been widely accepted by the Zimbabwean public. It is presented in a mixture of Shona, Ndebele, Zulu and Kalanga:

This drama carries an important message that all Zimbabweans should share the same spirit of love, unity, togetherness and cut the old mentality of tribalism and even boosts the morale and recognition of the minority such as the Kalangas, (Masukume, 2002:4)

Only 30 minutes were initially assigned to news in indigenous languages on television, but this has been increased to one hour. Quite a number of agricultural and cultural programmes are being aired in Shona and Ndebele. Comedies in both Shona and Ndebele are/were screened, in Shona the popular ones are *Parrafu*, *Gringo* and *Bhonzo nechikwata*. Zimbabwean movies, *Neria* and *Yellow Card* were produced in English and have both been translated into Shona and Ndebele. The translations have been screened on television under the popular programme *African Movie of the Week* on Saturday evenings. Important issues like the February 2000 historic referendum in Zimbabwe were advertised in Shona, English and Ndebele. This amply demonstrates that even the electronic media is on a drive to have more programmes in indigenous languages.

The print media has also made some remarkable strides in using Shona and Ndebele. Soon after independence, there was a weekly newspaper, *The People's Weekly*, which was written in Shona, Ndebele and a little bit of English. Even though the country's national dailies, *The Herald* and the defunct *Daily News* are published in English, they usually carry important information in indigenous languages. The National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) conveyed its press statements in the three languages. This was greatly welcomed by the Zimbabwean populace. The Shona weekly, *Kwayedza*, and the Ndebele weekly, *Umthunywa*, are widely read especially in rural areas.

Zimbabwe has also made some remarkable strides in moving away from the Anglo-American tradition, which holds that language management is best left to publishers of dictionaries and text-books who respond to wishes of the market (Chimhundu, 1999). Zimbabwe has adopted the tradition of direct intervention used in Scandinavian countries and France, among others. This latter tradition according to Chimhundu (1999) "holds that language management is too

important to be left to publishers versus the market". In such countries, language management policies are founded on acts of parliament and Zimbabwe is moving in that direction.

The Department of African Languages and Literature of the University of Zimbabwe started an African Languages Lexical (ALLEX) project in 1992. This later developed into the African Languages Research Institute (ALRI) in the year 2000. The Institute works in collaboration with its Nordic partners from the University of Oslo (Department of Scandinavian Studies and Comparative Literature) and The University of Gothenburg (Department of Swedish) (Chimhundu, 1999). It is dedicated to research and development of African languages in Zimbabwe. Its research agenda focuses mainly on corpus development and maintenance, computational lexicography and language technology applications. It published the first Shona monolingual dictionary, *Duramazwi ReChishona* in 1996. This dictionary has been endorsed by the Shona Language Committee as a "milestone in the promotion and standardisation of the Shona language" (Maruza, 1996). The institute has also published *Duramazwi Guru RechiShona* (2001) and *Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele* (2001). These latest publications were launched in July 2001 in both Harare and Bulawayo, and were widely accepted by the Zimbabwean populace. Shona corpus now has about 2, 600 000 running words and Ndebele corpus has about 1, 200 000 running words. Currently, the institute is working on other indigenous languages of Zimbabwe, which include Kalanga, Nambya, Tonga, Venda, Shangaan and Sotho. Work is in progress to produce dictionaries and, finally, to standardise these languages as well.

The ALRI is also producing specialised glossaries in indigenous languages. It has started with a glossary of musical terms and will move on to a glossary of linguistic and literary terms and will finally move over to other subject areas like medicine, law, science and information technology. It is also training terminologists. The institute intends to produce authorised versions of the National Constitution of Zimbabwe in Shona and Ndebele. In 1999, the institute translated the proposed draft constitution of Zimbabwe into Shona and Ndebele. However, the draft constitution was rejected by the Zimbabweans in the February 2000 Referendum.

Apart from developing terminology and translations, the Institute also offers language advisory services to language workers in the media and government officials who are involved in language planning and development (Chimhundu,

1999). The institute also works in co-operation with other departments of the university. It teaches dialects studies, lexicography and translation courses in the Departments of Linguistics, African Languages and Literature, and Curriculum and Instruction. Establishment of an archival centre for all research in indigenous languages of Zimbabwe is the major goal of the Institute. ALRI has finally put African languages on the map and is being applauded for that by all Zimbabweans.

Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are also helping to produce literature in some of Zimbabwe's minority languages. Save the Children Zimbabwe is working with communities in the Zambezi valley to produce some Tonga books for Grades 4 to 7. The Catholic Church has assisted the Nambya speaking community with the publication of the first testament in that language as well as a dictionary (Dongozi, 2002). There is also Usiba Publishing House which is dedicated to publishing literature in minority languages. With the assistance of Silveira House, the Zimbabwe Indigenous Languages Promotional Association (ZILPA) was formed in May 2001. Its major aim is to promote the so-called minority languages of Zimbabwe so that they can be taught in areas where they are predominantly spoken. It strives to produce literature in these disadvantaged languages. Already ZILPA has managed to have the first book in Tonga published, *Tusimpi: Proverbs*. It was published by Silveira House with the help of some donations from the World Bank. Silveira House is a developmental wing of the Catholic Church. The first Tonga publication lays a firm foundation for the development of Tonga literature. The chairman of ZILPA, Saul Ndlovu is currently working on a manuscript in Kalanga, called *Zwidiyo zweniKalanga*. Thus, in Zimbabwe serious efforts are being made to promote the use and teaching of African languages.

Constraints in African Languages Education

About 25 years after independence, African languages still have not yet been elevated to official status. English still remains the language of power and administration. It is used in the promulgation of laws. The Government of Zimbabwe confirmed the use of English in parliament with its statement in *The Herald* of 22 March 1996 as cited by Roy-Campbell and Gwete (1998), that *The Hansard*, the official record of parliamentary debates, would not be translated into Shona and Ndebele. This forces the majority of Zimbabweans who are not conversant with the official language to the fringes of the society. They cannot actively participate in the economic development of the country and their own

economic upliftment because they are left out in the cold by the foreign language used. Rural communities that do not speak the official language have greater difficulty in accessing health, education and employment facilities than those for whom the language is a home language. Advertisements for jobs and admission into college still call for five O-levels, including English. It is so disheartening to see secondary school leavers who excel in local languages at O-level roam the streets with a certificate with seven subjects, excluding English, "because they are unemployable" (Masukume, 2002). The majority of Zimbabweans are left out of mainstream development. Thus, the colonial master might have left the country as a result of the protracted liberation struggle, but continues to dominate the indigenous people through the use of the English language.

In Zimbabwe, there is a lot of rhetoric about the need to preserve, promote and develop African languages and culture, but very little is done in practice (Chimhundu, 1996). The country has no clear language policy document. The closest to a language policy is The Education Act of 1987, which states that the mother tongue or home language should be used as a medium of instruction for the first three years of primary education. From Grade 4 onwards, English will be used as a medium of instruction. Either Shona or Ndebele will be taught as subjects from Grade four upwards, even to non-speakers of these languages like the Kalanga, Tonga, Shangaan, Nambya and Venda. This means that the minority language speakers have to learn three languages, while the Ndebele and the Shona learn only two. In spite of a resolution adopted in 1976 by African ministers of education that national languages should be restored as languages of instruction and vehicles of scientific and technical progress, the education practice in Zimbabwe has largely remained unchanged. Indigenous languages continue to be downgraded particularly in the educational system and public life.

Shortage of financial resources has also impeded the production of up-to-date materials for teaching African languages. Some of the organisations that were funding indigenous languages projects have withdrawn aid to Zimbabwe citing lack of good governance. For example, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), which was the major funding body for the African languages research withdrew its funding in 2001.

The country is going through severe economic problems due to Economic Social Adjustment Programmes and new land redistribution policies. This has resulted

in the reduction of the government's educational budget and, in turn, reduced the amount of money allocated for the production of educational books in indigenous languages. The impact of the HIV/AIDS scourge has also shifted the government's attention from language development to combating the epidemic. The few financial resources available are being channeled into the health sector, the government's top priority at the moment. Failure to have books published in indigenous languages would see the death of these languages and extinction of the indigenous people's culture.

The other setback on the development of indigenous languages is that their teaching does not focus on grammar, but puts more emphasis on proverbs, composition and comprehension. The serious attention on morphology, phonology, semantics and pragmatics is left out at lower levels only to be taught at university. Even though Shona and Ndebele are taught up to degree level, the Department of African Languages and Literature of the University of Zimbabwe still teaches in English. The simple grammatical descriptions for indigenous languages are only available in English. Critical works on Shona and Ndebele literature are still written in English, for example, Emmanuel Chiwome's *A Social History of the Shona Novel* (1996) and George Kahari's critical works which include *Aspects of The Shona Novel* (1986), *The Rise of the Shona Novel* (1990) and *Plots and Characters in Patrick Chakaipa's Novels* (1990). There is need to ensure that such texts are available in indigenous languages.

Recommendations for Possible Intervention Strategies

As has been discussed above, the Zimbabwean community has made some efforts in trying to promote African languages. However, 25 years after independence, Zimbabwe is still very far from elevating indigenous languages to official status. Instead, they are being looked down upon. It is hoped that the following suggestions, if properly followed could promote the use and teaching of African Languages.

Elevating Indigenous Languages to Official Status

Indigenous languages should be elevated to official status and this should be implemented. They should be made compulsory at secondary school level and should be pre-requisites for admission into college or for obtaining a job. Once this is done, the low status associated with African languages will disappear, for they will also be a gateway to success. Once they are made official, it means

that every person in the country will be able to participate in the country's affairs i.e. politics, industry and commerce.

There are some countries that have done very well by using their indigenous languages. For example, English is not taught in China and 95% of the people do not speak it or write it, and yet the Chinese are visibly prosperous. The economic miracle of Japan was not based on widespread dissemination of English. It was a result of indigenisation of such technology, and the translation of the processes into terms that an ordinary Japanese factory worker could understand. Also, some European countries for example Germany, France, Italy and Denmark, use their own languages for education and other purposes, but they are highly successful. In these countries, English is only taught as a subject.

Afrikaans was used in apartheid South Africa for more than 40 years, and yet it is less than 100 years old. It was only recognised as a language in 1925, but is now a language of instruction in several universities. It is also a language of science and technology. Indigenous languages should be allowed to develop in a similar manner that Afrikaans did. Languages are dynamic and can develop terminologies as they are required. No language is more expressive than the other:

Formulation of a Clearly Defined Language Policy

Zimbabwe needs a clearly defined language policy which is not characterised by vagueness. The policy should encourage the use of African languages by giving them an official status. Tanzania, for example, through government initiative, chose Swahili as its national language. Government intervention made the implementation of this policy possible. Mlama and Matteredu (1982:14) argue that after several years of resistance by some government officials to the use of Kiswahili in government, the President's office issued a cabinet directive:

... from now on, all communication to the cabinet ... or any other Ministerial sitting, must be Swahili. As per the above directive, all concerned secretariats will return to the respective offender all correspondence written in English nor will such documents receive the Minister's attention in their sitting.

This made the use of Kiswahili compulsory in Tanzania. Zimbabwe needs to follow the example of Tanzania and encourage the use of African languages in the day today running of societal issues.

Establishment of Tertiary Institutions that Train Teachers of African Languages

At the moment, Shona and Ndebele are being offered as subjects in most teachers' colleges and universities. According to Bamgboes (1991), methodology for first language learning is often neglected, the assumption being that if one can speak the language, one should be able to teach it. This is a wrong assumption and should not be allowed to continue. What Zimbabwe needs at the moment is an institution that specifically trains teachers for Zimbabwe's various indigenous languages. This will enable qualified personnel to teach these languages. Some countries have already done this. Ghana for example, has established a specialist training college at Ajumoko, specifically for the training of professional pre-university teachers of Ghanaian languages. Zimbabwe should emulate what Ghana has done.

Broadcasting in Indigenous Languages

Even though Radio Zimbabwe and National FM are broadcasting in indigenous languages, some stations like Power FM and Sport FM solely use English. The use of indigenous languages should be extended to such radio stations as well. Given the high illiteracy rates in developing countries, it is obvious that the mass media can only effectively reach the masses through local languages. The UNESCO compilation of 1975 on world communications emphasises the importance of using indigenous languages on both television and radio. Botswana, for example, is able to reach 90% of the people by broadcasting in seTswana.

Extensive Use of Indigenous Languages in the Print Media

In Zimbabwe, at the moment, most of the newspapers are published in English. These include, *The Herald*, *The Standard*, *The Independent*, *The Chronicle*, *The Financial Gazette* and the *Manica Post*, among others. These newspapers only target few urbanites and educated people. It is only *The Kwayedza* and *Umthunywa* that are published in Shona and Ndebele, respectively. Zimbabwe needs to produce more newspapers in indigenous languages because this is what the locals, especially the rural population, enjoy reading. In Burundi, three bi-weekly journals are published, two in Kirundi with a circulation of 45 000, and one in French with a circulation of 1 500 (Bamgboes 1991). This amply demonstrates that people enjoy reading articles written in their indigenous languages.

The Three-Language Formula

Every Zimbabwean should be encouraged to learn three languages no matter where they stay. Those who speak and write in Shona should also learn English and Ndebele. Similarly, those who speak and write in Ndebele should also learn English and Shona. Currently, the minority language speakers are only using their mother tongue as a medium of instruction up to Grade 3. It would be a very good idea if these minority language speakers also go on with their studies up to university level. However, "the government could consider giving such children the option of studying their mother tongue, English and just one national language in secondary school", (Sithole: 1997: 2). This would enable Zimbabweans to communicate in either Shona or Ndebele despite their place of abode. Also, no one should be allowed to teach and work in Zimbabwe without the knowledge of at least two African Languages. South Africa has already taken some steps in promoting the use of indigenous languages. According to Benjamin (1994) quoted in Roy-Campbell and Gwete (1998), in order for one to teach in their schools, he or she should know at least one indigenous language.

Co-ordinating with Neighbouring Countries

In order for Zimbabwe to promote the so-called minority languages, it should make a concerted effort to work with the neighbouring countries. Kalanga is spoken in Botswana and there is a lot of literature in that language. This country should get Kalanga literature from Botswana. Even though there are differences in orthographies, Zimbabweans could learn something from the disjunctive orthography of the Kalanga spoken in Botswana, to develop their own conjunctive orthography. Mukani Cultural Organization based in Botswana has actually offered its printing facilities for books in Kalanga (Dongozi, 2002). Tonga literature is readily available in Zambia, Shangaan in Mocambique and Venda in South Africa. So, for a start, Zimbabwe could get literature from the region and later on develop hers. This is what happened with the teaching of Ndebele in Zimbabwe. Initially, Zulu was taught in schools and the literature came from South Africa. Later, literature in Ndebele was produced and is currently being used for educational and communication purposes.

Conclusion

It is true that the indigenous languages of Zimbabwe may not be well-developed, but they will never be unless Zimbabweans decide to use them. Thus a decision

should be made in favour of elevating indigenous languages to official status and immediate steps should be taken to develop the spread and use of African languages in a wide range of domains. Once this is done, then African countries will be able to preserve their cultures. This is because language and culture are inseparable, as both complement the maintenance of the other. Since language is a vehicle of culture, it means that culture cannot flourish in the absence of language, especially in written form. If African languages continue to exist only in oral form, they could easily face extinction as there would be no reference points.

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