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# A losing battle? Interrogating the importance of ‘minority’ languages in expressing symbols of national identity in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the importance of minority languages in expressing symbols of national identity in Zimbabwe where minority languages have been officially recognised since 2013. The national symbol of focus is the national anthem. Using critical sociolinguistics, the study analyses responses from speakers of selected minority languages in Zimbabwe with regard to their language preferences, choices and limitations as they express national symbols. Selected groups comprise speakers of Sotho, Kalanga, Nambya and Tonga. Language activists and scholars have lobbied for the use of minority languages in every sphere of Zimbabwean life. The extent to which ordinary citizens advocate similarly is less understood as speakers of minority languages have different concerns in terms of the role played by their languages in fostering a Zimbabwean identity, especially through identity markers such as national anthems. This study seeks to fill that lacuna in the literature. Findings indicate ambivalent positions among speakers of minority languages as not all of them subscribe to the activist thinking. The group which fully embraces activist advocacy is the Tonga speakers who have historically exercised autonomy. Other groups’ identities are shaped by the speakers’ protracted experience with dominant languages and consequent attitudes towards dominant and minority languages.

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## Introduction and background

This paper uses critical sociolinguistics to analyse the role of ‘minority’<sup>1</sup> or marginalised languages in expressing symbols of national identity. The analysis specifically looks at the case of Zimbabwe where minority languages have been elevated to the ‘officially recognised’ status since 2013. Language advocates and activists such as Ndhlovu (2008), Magwa (2010, 2015), and Gondo (2019) have been lobbying for the use of all the minority languages in all spheres of Zimbabwean life which include education, service provision in public offices, national development as well as national symbol expression. Minority languages can be described as those languages which are spoken by a small percentage of the population in a particular country. The size of the speaker population is the major

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determining factor in the classification of a language as minority as opposed to a dominant language (Grenoble & Singerman, 2014). As a way of elevating some of the minority languages, in 2013, Zimbabwe enacted a new constitution which under founding provision number six (6) states that;

- (1) The following languages namely Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa are the officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe.

While there is a plethora of symbols of national identity, this study focuses on the national anthem in particular as it is the most often used symbol which is internalised by all citizens. The national anthem of Zimbabwe is officially expressed in English, Shona and Ndebele. The versions that exist in minority languages have been translated through the efforts of language activists in the particular linguistic communities. Following the position of language advocates who argue that 'African languages and cultures must have equal status as that of English in all intents and purposes of national life' (Gondo, 2019, p. 6), this paper looks at the responses of the minority linguistic communities to the idea of expressing the national anthem in their languages.

An important point to note is that the arguments in this paper are based on the relationship between the dominant indigenous languages and minority languages in Zimbabwe, thereby excluding the English question. Ndhlovu (2008) sees the question of English hegemony as irrelevant in contemporary discussions when some indigenous languages are continuously promoted at the expense of minority languages. In the same vein, Mathe and Motsaathebe (2023) in their study of indigenous local media observe that there is a link between the demographic size of an ethnolinguistic group and the (political) economic potential of that group. One may contend that the size of a linguistic group may determine the reaction and feelings towards national emblems due to the fact that languages are political objects (Mpofu & Salawu, 2018). The nature of the political and social environment regulates how minorities treat national symbols. Zimbabwean ethnolinguistic groups are seen as contesting for representation in public spaces, education and politics. However, Mpofu and Salawu (2018) note that marginalisation and exclusion which is shown by the daily forms of linguistic hegemony associate linguistic minorities with inferiority, low self-respect and belittlement. Consequently, language differences bring complications to national unity. It is therefore, the goal of this paper to ascertain the role of minority indigenous languages vis a vis dominant indigenous languages in expressing the national anthem from the point of view of the speakers of these minority languages.

## Language and national identity

This section highlights sentiments from different scholars on language and national identity. Some of the scholars support the notion that language is an important marker of national identity while others make critical comments on the issue.

Language remains a powerful resource which is symbolic when it comes to national identity. Bamgbose (1991) is against the idea of discarding issues of language when trying to achieve national integration. For the furtherance of national integration, the symbolism

attached to language has to be considered. He mentions the tribe-to-nation approach to national integration where he outlines the difference between the tribe and the nation. The tribe is characterized by ethnic loyalty, sometimes with persistent conflict with rival groups while the nation is cohesive, politically organized with broad support and legitimacy and regarded as crucial to fostering national identity and development.

Hailemariam et al. (1999) focus on the linguistic situation in Eritrea. They contend that nationalism is understood to represent a socio-cultural identity that may not have a corresponding geo-political realization. When elites of nationalist movements took power from the colonizers, they inherited various population groups with distinct languages and cultures. While these elites in most African countries have been successful in rallying their populations to independence, they have been far less successful in attempts to create a strong sense of nationhood. According to the scholars, Eritrea's multi-ethnic composition has been exaggerated and used to present the country as too fragmented linguistically and religiously to sustain a single nation. This is an important background when looking at the construction of national identity in many African countries.

Indigenous languages can be more preferable to English because problems of cultural identity and ethnic tensions arise if English takes centre stage (Ha et al., 2013). English is then seen as only necessary for strategic neutrality. Language planning should be based on recognition and respect for linguistically expressed cultural identities. In their description of the Malaysian experience, Ha et al. (2013) reveal that the post-independence language policy changes which promoted the use of one indigenous language as a national language was done to foster a national identity. At the same time, the language policy adopted the use of English for strategic reasons such as competence in the global environment.

Madiba (1999) avers that multiple indigenous language policies promote nation building. In the South African case, where the language policy considers 11 official languages, it has been noted that multiple indigenous languages are a resource for democratisation in a pluralistic democracy. This ensures political stability since a multilingual approach solves some identity conflicts that might be based on language. South Africa's multilingual language policy embraces language as a basic human right which solidifies identities (Hornberger, 2002). Under such a policy, endangered and minority languages are made to flourish rather than to disappear. Nonetheless, Hornberger mentions that in implementing multilingual language policies, there are challenges of confronting community attitudes which favour the language of power in the society. An example given is one study by Banda (2000) who explores the paradox whereby black and coloured parents in South Africa increasingly demand English medium instruction in schools even while academics and researchers agree that English medium instruction is largely responsible for the general lack of academic skills and intellectual growth among blacks at high school and tertiary levels (Banda, 2000, p. 51 cited in Hornberger, 2002). The above example shows that the inheritance of a language of power creates a deep suspicion of the less powerful languages. This breeds a situation where multilingual language policies become difficult to implement.

A survey which sought to identify the geographical extent of minority language communities and to document important issues pertaining to minority groups was carried out by Hachipola (1998). The survey is important as it gives demographic information which has influenced many views and decisions on the language situation in

Zimbabwe. It underscores that although Zimbabwe is made up of many people with different ethnic identities, this fact is usually forgotten by the general population because the impression that has been created is that Zimbabwe has two categories of the African population, namely the Shona and Ndebele. Hachipola studies each language in detail taking into account the history and current trends surrounding the minority languages as well as their relationships with other languages. Of notable prominence is that, he condemns the non-use of minority languages in both electronic and print media. He also delves into the situation of these languages in the education system and notes that the languages could be taught but policy issues have become a hindrance. This idea can be extended to all other spheres where even national symbols, in this case the national anthem, also disregard the use of minority languages. Yet, Mumpane (2020) observes that speakers of minority languages love their languages and would not voluntarily shift to dominant languages.

Along similar lines, Ndhlovu (2008) says in Zimbabwe, linguistic membership is always associated with tribe and issues of tribalism. As a result, ethnicity and linguistic diversity are a taboo when it comes to open debates. Therefore, issues relating to linguistic pluralism and multiculturalism have been over politicised and treated as sacrilege to a point where citizens feel content when they ignore such issues. Tremmel (1994) became one of the first voices to expose the marginalisation of minority groups when he wrote about the Tonga communities. In Ndhlovu's (2008, p. 2) words;

... post-colonial efforts at trying to avert perceived language-based political divisions have resulted in the so-called tribal balancing policies that have promoted Shona and Ndebele as the only national languages of Zimbabwe . . . . This has left the status of minority languages and their speakers at low ebb, since they have not been fully integrated into the national agenda.

In Zimbabwe, Shona and Ndebele became languages of power and domination through print technology. Printing of such languages also resulted in integrated fields of communication and identity through creating a false sense of homogeneity as people use one common language. Ndebele and Shona are languages of the political elite which are spoken in most parts of Zimbabwe to the detriment of marginalised languages.

On the other hand, language can be deployed by those who are in power in order to reinforce their positions (Hailemariam et al. 1999). Linguistic efforts become biased towards the ruling elite and the symbols that represent them. In their example of Eritrea, they argue that Eritrea's multi-ethnic composition has been inflated and used to present the country as linguistically disjointed. Another argument that comes to the fore is that the most commonly used categories of national identity such as 'ethnic' are based on political discourses and the attempts by the states to influence the language repertoires of the citizens (Helbling, 2008). Hence, language choices in that setting are sometimes directed by the social position of a language more than any policy resolutions. Simpson (2008) reveals that Africa presents a challenge in national identity construction due to its multilingual nature and its historical ties to colonial languages. In some places, other factors such as religion and geographical land are more important identity markers than language. An example is Mali where the indigenous languages are difficult to delineate from non-indigenous languages due to a cycle of migrations. In Mali, religion is the main identity index as postulated by Skattum in Simpson (2008, p. 101) who says

... these [economic] centres contributed to the spread of Islam, which in turn became the most important uniting factor ... Islam became part of their identity and sometimes over-ruled ethnic relationships.

Again, South Africa gives the best example of the geographical territory being the stronger identity index than language. All indigenous languages in South Africa are tied to certain geographical places of origin. They denote the geographical identities of speakers and none of the languages dominates over the other and none even cuts across territories as a national lingua franca (Mesthrie in Simpson, 2008). Phaahla (2012) focuses on South Africa as she studies language and identities as notions of citizenry. She believes in language and identity being dynamic to the extent that individuals are able to make their own choices and empower themselves where there is a need. Identities are produced through social interactions and they are always open to challenge and re-negotiation. Identities are therefore not of a fixed nature. Socio-economic and political changes influence the continuous linguistic changes.

### The Zimbabwean national anthem

Zimbabwe's national anthem was written in Shona by Solomon Mutsvairo and was officially introduced in March 1994 (Mutemererwa et al., 2013). According to Vambe (in the Herald newspaper of 26 June 2007), at independence, Zimbabwe adopted the lyrics of *Ishe Komborera Africa* (God Bless Africa) which was originally a Xhosa song composed by a black South African, Enock Sontonga, as an anti-apartheid song (Redmond, 2013). Information from the South African Government official page purports that 'the words of the first stanza were originally written in Xhosa as a hymn ... the first stanza is generally sung in Xhosa or Zulu ...' The song was used by a number of southern African countries who translated it in the fight against colonialism.

National symbols in terms of national anthems and flags are signs that bear a special relationship to the nations they represent, distinguishing them from one another. National anthems are seen as having similar functions for all nations, yet they vary in their make-up (Cerulo, 1993). The different phases in economic and cultural development influence the differences in the structures of national symbols. Therefore, the government of Zimbabwe later decided to have its own anthem that would reflect the history and realities of Zimbabwe's past, present and future aspirations. The government organised a competition to compose the national anthem. Words for a specifically Zimbabwean national anthem were chosen in 1990 from a national competition won by Mutsvairo. It took another four years to find suitable music (Fisher, 2010). The government organised a competition to compose the national anthem. Solomon Mutsvairo won the competition and his lyrics were adopted by the government of Zimbabwe as the national anthem that came to be known as *Simudzai Mureza Wedu weZimbabwe* 'Raise high our Zimbabwean flag'. In Ndebele, it is known as *Kalibusiswe Ilizwe leZimbabwe* 'Blessed be the land of Zimbabwe'.

The following is a presentation of Zimbabwe's national anthem in its three official renditions.

## ENGLISH

O lift high the banner, the flag of Zimbabwe  
The symbol of freedom proclaiming victory;  
We praise our heroes' sacrifice,  
And vow to keep our land from foes;  
And may the Almighty protect and bless our land.

O lovely Zimbabwe, so wondrously adorned  
With mountains, and rivers cascading, flowing free;  
May rain abound, and fertile fields;  
May we be fed, our labour blessed;  
And may the Almighty protect and bless our land.

O God, we beseech Thee to bless our native land;  
The land of our fathers bestowed upon us all;  
From Zambezi to Limpopo  
May our leaders be exemplary;  
And may the Almighty protect and bless our land.

## SHONA

Simudzai mureza wedu weZimbabwe  
Yakazvarwa nomoto wechimurenga;  
Neropa zhinji ramagamba  
Tiridzivirire kumhandu dzose;  
Ngaikomborerwe nyika yeZimbabwe.

Tarisai Zimbabwe nyika yakashongedzwa  
Namakomo, nehova, zvinoyevedza  
Mvura ngainaye, minda ipe mbesa  
Vashandi vatuswe, ruzhinji rugutswe;  
Ngaikomborerwe nyika yeZimbabwe.

Mwari ropafadzai nyika yeZimbabwe  
Nyika yamadzitateguru edu tose;  
Kubva Zambezi kusvika Limpopo,  
Navatungamiri vavenenduramo;  
Ngaikomborerwe nyika yeZimbabwe.

## NDEBELE

Phakamisan' iflegi yethu yeZimbabwe  
Eyazalwa yimpi yenkululeko;  
Legaz' elinengi lamaqhawe ethu  
Silivikele ezitheni zonke;

Kalibusiswe ilizwe leZimbabwe.

Khangelan' iZimbabwe yon' ihlotshisiwe  
Ngezintaba langemiful' ebukekayo,  
Izulu kaline, izilimo zande;  
Iz' sebenzi zenam', abantu basuthe;  
Kalibusiswe ilizwe leZimbabwe.

Nkosibusis' ilizwe lethu leZimbabwe  
 Ilizwe labokhokho bethu thina sonke;  
 Kusuk' eZambezi kusiy' eLimpopo  
 Abakhokheli babe lobuqotho;  
 Kalibusiswe ilizwe leZimbabwe.

It is the first time that Zimbabwe has recognised a variety of languages (sixteen) at constitutional level which could mean a lot, not just for the education sector but for other national expressions such as the national anthem. Nation building and fostering a national identity has always been an objective in the constitution of Zimbabwe and the study investigates whether language is a viable national identity tool when it is used in the context of national anthems. Hence, the study of how language situations impact on nation building is prudent in the face of a new experience like Zimbabwe's, where different responses definitely unfold. The responses of the minority language speakers become important in evaluating the role of such languages in the broader aspect of national identity. The study is expected to contribute to the language debate in Zimbabwe where advocates for marginalised groups continue to fight for the use of minority languages in every sector even after the official recognition of these languages in the constitution. Language advocates believe that before the official recognition of the minority languages in 2013, members of these communities were part of the nation in Zimbabwe and subscribed to a certain national identity which needs to be unravelled. An example is the Tonga identity which is felt to have been dislocated by their displacement in the 1950s (Muwati, 2015). National identity is not an innate quality in human beings. It has to be learnt or imagined (Anderson, 1983, 2006 and Wiltgren, 2014). The question, therefore, is whether minority linguistic communities envisage a renewed national identity if their languages are used in national symbols such as the national anthem.

### Critical sociolinguistics

This study takes a critical sociolinguistic approach to tackle the responses or views of the minority language speakers in relation to the general language advocacy for the use of minority languages in expressing national symbols. Critical sociolinguistics focuses on the role of language in the construction of social differences and social inequalities or social opportunities. According to Heller et al. (2017), people conceptualise and make sense of the world around them through language. Relationships with others are also negotiated through language. This means that, whatever people become and whatever resources they can access, are all shaped by language. Therefore, critical sociolinguistics delves into how some linguistic and social processes bear consequences for speakers of different languages. In short, critical sociolinguistics holds that language matters socially, politically and economically because it is connected to how social phenomena are produced, circulated, consumed and valued; by whom and through what kind of activities (Heller et al., 2017). In other words, critical sociolinguistics engages the processes by which social inequalities are created and sustained (Mesthrie, 2000). Critical sociolinguistic research takes the critical theory stance which handles critical analyses of political discourse and ethnographies that identify normative claims about language and the valuing of some speakers over others (Albury, 2017). Using critical



sociolinguistics in this study makes it possible to explicate linguistic inequalities as they manifest in the community and are realised through functions allocated to dominant languages as opposed to minority languages.

## Methodology

Research in critical sociolinguistics should be approached as a social experience where social life is produced by people as they engage with each other. Such an approach demands an ethnographic research design where research participants are met in their area of habitat and are able to share their practical experiences with the researcher. In this study, the researcher solicited information from four minority linguistic communities by way of questionnaires and focus group discussions as a follow-up to some questionnaire responses. Interviews were held with language activists and language researchers. Geographical areas where data was accessed from were Hwange, Jambezi area (Nambya) and Binga, Pashu area (Tonga) in Matabeleland North as well as Plumtree, Tokwana area (Kalanga) and Gwanda, Manama area (Sotho) in Matabeleland South. Speakers of the specified languages were chosen because their languages are now officially recognised through the country's constitution.

Taking part in the study was voluntary. The participants signed a consent form to give consent to participate. According to Baker (1999), informed consent . . .

... is achieved if the subject knows what the study is, understands his/her level of confidentiality in the study, comprehends the objectives of the study and agrees to co-operate.

In this way, invasion of privacy is avoided and coercion is also excluded. The researcher explained the study to the participants in a comprehensible manner. In addition, the matter under discussion in this study (national anthem) is of national and government concern hence this requires full disclosure of the findings.

## Views from the linguistic communities

The data below was elicited from populations in areas where minority languages are spoken. The specific areas are in Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South where Ndebele is the dominant language even in the education sector. From the North, data was collected among Nambya and Tonga speakers and in the South; information was drawn from the Kalanga and Sotho speakers. The table below shows the distribution of responses.

### *Languages chosen to sing the national anthem*

Participants were asked about the languages which they prefer to use when singing the national anthem. The measure of responses is as shown in Table 1. It is evident

**Table 1.** Participants' language choices.

	Kalanga	Sotho	Tonga	Nambya	Total	Percentage
Those preferring to use Ndebele (dominant)	10	9	0	8	27	41,54%
Those preferring to use minority languages	7	6	20	5	38	58,46%
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>100%</b>

from the table above that 58,46% of the respondents prefer to sing the national anthem in marginalised languages. This is more than half of the respondents and the indication might be that they all favour using their languages. However, when one takes a closer look at the table, it shows that the group with the highest number of respondents who prefer singing the national anthem in their language is the Tonga. The Tonga respondents all noted that they sing the national anthem in their language. This may have historical implications where the Tonga as a linguistic community did not yield to domination by the Ndebele. Although Ndebele as a language has been taught in Tonga-speaking areas, the Tonga speakers have not given priority to Ndebele. They have always made efforts to exercise autonomy in many areas of life due to the historical marginalisation which was initiated by their displacement from the banks of the Zambezi River to pave way for the building of Kariba dam in the 1950s (Tremmel, 1994). Apart from that, the Tonga people also composed their own district anthem in their language in 1982 soon after independence. The district anthem is only significant in the Tonga territory and is seen by scholars as a negotiation for space and recognition by the Tonga people after unpleasant historical marginalisation (Muwati, 2015). Furthermore, the existence of language activist group such as Venda, Tonga, Kalanga Association (VETOKA), Tonga Language and Culture Organisation (TOLACO), Kalanga Language Development and Culture Association (KLDCA) and Zimbabwe Indigenous Languages Promotion Association (ZILPA) has assisted marginalised linguistic communities in the revitalisation of their languages (Mumpande, 2020). Mumpande (2020) also observes that the strategies adopted by the Tonga community in reviving its language appear to have been unique in Zimbabwe as the Tonga recorded more success than other minority languages. The table below shows a sample of responses from those who prefer using minority languages to sing the national anthem, including the Tonga. While Table 1 presents the quantitative results for language preferences, Table 2 shows the qualitative responses relating to the preference for minority languages.

Helbling (2008) avers that national identity is a characteristic of the individual, but it is the same characteristic for everyone, therefore it makes everyone theoretically equal and erases basic disparities. With that in mind, speakers of minority languages see the need to remove linguistic differences by involving all languages in national endeavours. However, while respondents indicate a potential functionality of minority languages, they also expose some results of activism and advocacy within the minority groups. The fact that individuals can sing the national anthem in the minority languages confirms the existence of unofficial translations of the national anthem. It would seem as if marginalised groups play an active role in involving themselves as distinct groups in national issues. By the same token, language

**Table 2.** Reasons for preferring minority languages.

**Why do you prefer using that particular minority language?**

- Because it is my mother tongue
- To preserve and promote my language
- I understand what I sing better in my language
- To feel I play a part as a unique citizen
- To understand the message carried by the national anthem
- It makes us fully recognised and be part of the rest of the nation

activists feel that the unofficial translations of the national anthem indicate a positive response to the constitutional position of recognising the marginalised languages. Table 3 shows the views of language activists as they support the use of minority languages in singing the national anthem. There were participants who expressed a preference for Ndebele in singing the national anthem. Although they are speakers of minority languages, they brought forth their views as shown in Table 4.

Respondents who noted that they use Ndebele to sing the national anthem comprise 41.54%. This is a very significant figure which is almost half of the respondents. It can then be argued that the dominance of Ndebele over other languages in the Matabeleland regions has turned the language into a resource that is viewed as necessary in order for one to assume a national identity. Ndebele has been part of the life experience of the marginalised groups in Matabeleland. For example, it is the language that has been taught in schools for many generations and it has become inseparable with individuals who are from minority linguistic groups. Respondents expressed that it is not a matter of preference to sing the national anthem in Ndebele but that it is a matter of the position of the language in the society. Furthermore, some respondents revealed the different attitudes towards minority languages where they associate them with lower status and negativity. The table below shows some responses which favour the use of Ndebele.

**Table 3.** Views from language activists.

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**Language activist's voices on preference for marginalised languages**

- Using one's language to sing the national anthem is a step in the right direction because the government has shown willingness to include our societies in national issues
  - All along we have been treated as outcasts or foreigners, now we can assert ourselves
  - Every language has a right to be used in all facets of life and it is the right thing that has been done to recognise every language in the constitution
- 

**Table 4.** Reasons for preferring Ndebele.

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**Why do you prefer using Ndebele?**

- It is the language I learnt first
  - Because my school is dominated by Ndebele people
  - Because Ndebele is considered a main language in Zimbabwe
  - I don't prefer Ndebele but people have a negative attitude towards singing in our language
  - I don't prefer Ndebele but that is how the situation is
  - It is a national language of the country
  - Because I understand the meaning more than in any other language
  - Because it is widely spoken
  - It is how I was taught and Ndebele is the language I know better
  - It is a requirement to sing the national anthem in Ndebele when you live in Matabeleland North or South
  - It is a language that is favoured in Matabeleland regions and bridges the minority languages in Matabeleland provinces
  - I don't prefer the Ndebele anthem but I was taught the anthem in Ndebele before it was translated to my language
  - My language was not official
  - The region I grew up in uses Ndebele, hence I learnt Ndebele
  - It is one of the two national languages that were taught in schools
  - It makes me understand my status in my nation.
-

## Language, identity and national expression

It is worth noting that language remains a powerful resource which is symbolic when it comes to national identity. Hence, respondents were asked to give the significance of using their own languages in expressing national symbols. What came out was that a sense of belonging and confidence can be boosted when using one's language in expressing national symbols like the national anthem. Language and identity are closely intertwined. Hence, to a certain extent, a nation will be seen as exclusive if it ignores the languages of others in the construction of national symbols. This then explains the efforts undertaken by the minority groups to translate the national anthem. Bamgbose (1991) notes that many African countries are pre-occupied with how to ensure oneness and a sense of belonging together while taking into consideration the pluralistic nature of society. On the other hand, Latin reveals that politicians and intellectuals in Africa have ambivalent positions when it comes to language. At times, they speak as champions of their mother tongues, arguing that each of the languages of Africa reveals and preserves Africa's rich cultural heritage. Yet at other times, these same intellectuals passionately advocate a politics in which each country chooses a single indigenous language as the official language of the state. Language activists who participated in this study revealed different sentiments regarding language as a strong tool for national identity. One of them expressed positive sentiments on language as follows;

Language is a strategic identity fabric for any person. It is a vehicle for anyone's culture. Culture and anyone's identity are things that are inseparable and when you want citizens of a particular nation to be effective, in both being themselves and contributing meaningfully to the corporate development of that particular society, the first most important thing is to help them to discover or rediscover and reconcile with their true identity.

The above response shows that minority language advocates believe that language is a strong tool of national identity. It is believed that ethnic differences are buried through the recognition of other languages in the constitution and the identity crisis which compromises nation building is thwarted. Another respondent felt that the marginalisation of the languages had been through legal framework; hence nation building through language must take the same route. The respondent had this to say;

The marginalisation of other linguistic groups emanated from legal documents hence when recognition comes through the same, it shows the state's acknowledgement of the existence of the languages, hence building the nation through the legal framework.

The above respondent sees the issue of language practices as influenced by legal framework. One question which arises from such a response is whether national identity can also be of legal/illegal nature when it can be an individual choice with a certain extent of malleability when it is renegotiated (Phaahla, 2012). Ndhlovu (2008) considers the tendency to portray Zimbabwe as just bilingual as emanating from policy-related documents which spell out the policy relating to institutional and functional statuses of Zimbabwe's languages.

On the other hand, some of the respondents felt that it is possible to take advantage of dominant languages to foster a stronger national identity. It was also mentioned that the marginalised groups have been exposed for far too long to dominant languages and

therefore nothing can stop them from claiming that same identity. This emphasises the point that the status quo has become normal. These views point to the fact that in Matabeleland, where data was collected, and indeed in Zimbabwe, the minority groups have found a comfort zone in the dominant languages. However, despite the acceptance of the status quo by the marginalised groups, national identity in Zimbabwe seems to be constructed on a framework which gives a choice to the citizens through opening possibilities for options.

Ndhlovu (2008) also notes an uneasy alliance between nation building and multilingualism in Zimbabwe. Hence, the multilingual nature of Zimbabwe can pose problems when it comes to nation building and national identity construction. One critic who participated in this study noted problems of multilingualism in nation building said thus;

Multilingualism is double edged in the sense that it can lead to nation building but it can also lead to sub-national issues ... I think we are approaching the whole concept of multilingualism from a very perfunctory understanding of what multilingualism is and what it can do ... in reality do we need sixteen official languages?

A point which is raised by the response above is that multilingualism is not always a resource when it comes to nation building. It may actually be a problem, especially if understood from a perfunctory basis. The choice of many languages for national symbols may indicate some political tendencies such as divide-and-rule which only serve to strengthen the hegemony of the ruling class without necessarily contributing to the building of national identity. Along the same lines, Madiba (1999) observes that multilingualism can be seen as a barrier to nation building and national identity construction especially if a common language approach is used whereby one national language is adopted for use despite the existence of other languages.

### Language and national symbols as expression of values

Cerulo (1993) says that national anthems are the strongest and clearest statements of national identity. By the same token, language remains a powerful resource which is symbolic when it comes to national identity. These views can be intertwined to express the importance of language in expressing the national anthem. The national anthem is a national symbol which can be said to be expressing the values of the nation through different languages. In response to the question on the languages that are used to sing the national anthem in Zimbabwe one of the respondents said;

... the national anthem is a national symbol and you want to do (sing) it in your own mother tongue, so if you are to sing it in English it will not really give you the impact. If you sing it in Ndebele when you are not Ndebele-speaking you will not really get ... because you must be inspired and have that sense of owning that national anthem. But this can happen provided you use your own language. The language that you use to dream, the language that you use to even express fear ... that is the sound of your heart and it is the language that you must use to sing the national anthem. So, as it is right now, it is good for the Shonas and Ndebeles and the English people but it is not really appropriate for these other language groups.

The response above shows that some sections of society believe that every linguistic group should be given the opportunity to sing the national anthem in their own languages. This is consistent with Ndhlovu's (2008) view that nation building should be

about inclusion, incorporation and managing diversity. This ensures that nation building is fostered as opposed to empire building. Another respondent confirmed the nature of the national anthem as a national piece as well as the importance of expressing it in one's language. The respondent expressed thus;

... things like a national anthem are national items. And then a national anthem being there in the nation, you have no option but to also sing it and also as a way of identifying yourself ... but maybe where it might be a challenge is how it then links up with my heart's feeling of identity ... when I sing it, do I sing with understanding or I sing because I was just given an explanation of what it means and yet it is not taking the real me into its lyrics in terms of the language, the vocabulary and ultimately the understanding of what I am singing.

The respondent is expressing the importance of singing the national anthem in a language that one understands. This brings out the hegemonic nature of the relationship between Ndebele and other languages within the Matabeleland Provinces of Zimbabwe. Speakers of minority languages feel that due to Ndebele hegemony, they cannot find an identity as they attempt to participate in the nation due to the constraints posed by the dominance of Ndebele. However, other views on language as an expression of values were proffered where language was said to be laden with values and the same values should define the nation. One respondent had this to say;

... even if we render it (national anthem) in all the sixteen languages can we sing them? Do we need to sing in all the sixteen languages? It's something that cannot be done, it's weird ... There is unnecessary celebration of multilingualism yet language is just an expression of values. A nation is built on values of which language is used to express those values.

The above responses point to the notion that language is not just anything one says, but the importance and dignity of language is in what it expresses. Ngugi (1987) speaks of language as a vehicle of culture and a means of communication. Culture embodies values and values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. Ngugi's (1987) views resonate with what the above respondent suggests when he says that values should be identified first and then be expressed in a chosen language.

### **Translating the national anthem to foster identity**

As alluded to before, it has been noted that there are some unofficial translations of the national anthem among the different linguistic groups. This means that it is possible to have the national anthem translated if the different linguistic communities find it beneficial to them. Respondents who were interviewed observed different sentiments concerning the translation of Zimbabwe's national anthem to different languages. Some find it highly beneficial while others think it is vain effort. Respondents who appreciate the idea of translating the national anthem brought out the following opinions;

- (A) The unofficial translations are part of the contestation against Ndebele hegemony and at the same time they show commitment of the communities to implement the constitutional language stipulation without government effort.

- (B) The national anthem should be translated deliberately and taught deliberately as an official move to make sure that everyone sings the national anthem in the languages they know better.
- (C) The current translations that have been made so far show pride and love for their language. Government should bring in professionals to help with translations since the supreme law now allows them to participate.

This shows that speakers of the minority languages and some of the language advocates believe that it is feasible to translate the national anthem into the available local languages. However, other respondents have a contrary view as they think it is of no significance to translate the national anthem.

... Yes we can sing and sing in the different languages, but will that help to build the nation? ... Is it possible to sing in the sixteen languages whenever we have a national gathering? ... There should be national languages to be used in national gatherings. I am still struggling to understand, of what service is it to sing in different languages?

This brings the idea that language issues are not automatically obvious because society has different attitudes and responses to the issue due to various experiences, exposure and perhaps the ability to negotiate and re-negotiate national identity according to the obtaining situation.

## Conclusion

This paper has interrogated the importance of minority languages in expressing symbols of national identity in Zimbabwe, specifically the national anthem. The main focus was to extract some views from the speakers of minority languages and compare them with language advocacy and activist views. The study uses the critical sociolinguistics approach which focuses on how language produces social phenomena such as identities. The qualitative study was carried out with speakers of Sotho, Kalanga, Nambya and Tonga who abide in Ndebele dominated areas. It has been seen in the study that some scholars feel national identities are tied to indigenous languages which include minority languages (Ha et al., 2013, Hornberger, 2002; Ndhlovu, 2008). Critical views also emerge where language is seen as a negotiable component in identity construction (Phaahla, 2012; Simpson, 2008). Preference for the national anthem in the study was driven by the desire to shift from the usual studies about language in the education sector, especially after the 2013 constitutional amendment which officially recognises 16 languages. Language activists and scholars alike have argued that there is need to use minority languages in all spheres of Zimbabwean life, not just education. This sentiment is equally shared by minority language speakers particularly the Tonga. All the Tonga participants in the study displayed a preference for their language. There is a unique attitude which seems to be hinged on their history of almost total marginalisation, leading to the composition of their own Tonga district anthem. On the other hand, most of the other minority language speakers have a preference for Ndebele when singing the national anthem, mostly due to the ties that have existed for a long time between Ndebele and Sotho, Kalanga as well as Nambya. These minority groups, like critics, question the idealistic aspirations of the language activists and advocates. These members of minority groups as well as critics find the issue of language

very perfunctory and one that does not contribute to the construction of national identity. It is evident that the language issue in Zimbabwe as far as national symbols are concerned is fairly settled. While language advocates argue that it matters, this is a view only shared strongly by Tonga language speakers. Other minority language speakers are of the view that language matters little in the creation of national identity, a sentiment that can be attributed to the long linguistic contact with the dominant indigenous languages which have made it difficult to separate linguistic behaviours and practices.

## Note

1. Scholars like Ndhlovu (2008) have argued against the use of the term minority in reference to linguistic groups as it is felt that it is a constant reminder of an inferiority stereotype. This study uses the term interchangeably with the term marginalised to convey marginalisation and in no derogation to the linguistic groups here mentioned.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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