

Abstract

The language debate in postcolonial Africa is a contentious one. The dominant issues in extant scholarship include the supremacist position of English in Africa (Mazrui, 2004; Phillipson, 2010), the dominion of other African languages at the expense of other African languages (Ndhlovu, 2009) and the ascension of other dialects in standardised language varieties (Mpofu, 2013). In Zimbabwe, while speaking against the dominance of English is naturalised, overtly speaking against the dominance of other indigenous African languages or dialects is suffice to mean being political, tribal and at times retrogressive. Whilst the academic platform provides a “free” space for this volatile indigenous language debate, the public space is a restricted one. Therefore, in ordinary speech, the marginalised speech communities can only speak against their marginalisation and the marginalisation of their languages in secluded and classified settings. Regrettably, the press and broadcasting media have not done any better in challenging linguistic hegemony of whatever form or according the marginalised communities space to speak against their exclusion. Instead, they participate in legitimising such language practices (Mpofu, 2014).

Against the argument that, social media have been hailed as liberative by having platforms which present space for free participation of people (Chibuwe and Ureke, 2016; Mhiripiri and Chari, 2017), in this chapter I interrogate the voices of marginalised language speakers on social media platforms, Facebook and WhatsApp, and explore how the incessant influence of social media supported by new media technologies bestow the subaltern (minority) languages speakers agency to speak against marginalisation of speakers, languages and dialects in the nation.

The argument which this chapter advances is that social media gives space to the previously marginalised African language and dialect speakers by giving them opportunities to speak back to power. While language associations have been instrumental in according language speakers union and the promotion of their languages, social media have enhanced these functions by allowing the marginalised language groups to radically speak in their languages and challenge dominance. Focusing on what Kietzmann et al. (2010) call the “groups functional block”, which represents the extent to which speakers of marginalised languages form virtual communities, I analyse how social media has (re)created linguistic cyber groups in Zimbabwe for people to communicate with others displaced in time and space but bound linguistically. Thus, the digital and social media have reinvigorated and democratised the indigenous African language debate, allowing the speakers of the same language to regroup and interact in first languages with pride. Thus, the online spaces, the cyberspace, constitute an important new space for the subaltern language speakers to exercise their agency.

The chapter is grounded in the concepts of hegemony, subalternity and computer-mediated communication. The concept of hegemony will allow me to grapple with the entrenched linguistic hegemony in postcolonial Africa and the socio-historical factors which have necessitated the dominance of certain language norms and usage. The concept of subalternity will allow me to come to grips with the identities, experiences and reactions of the subaltern, who are in this case the subordinated or minority language speakers. Computer-mediated communication addresses the question of how subaltern language speakers in Zimbabwe use the new media technologies and social media to speak against their domination. Empirical data for this chapter will be drawn from the discussions on WhatsApp and Facebook groups of minority language groups, such as Not all Zimbabweans are Shona or Ndebele, Rekete Ndau – Leave a Legacy (Speak Ndau – Leave a Legacy) and Ndebele Qho (Genuine Ndebeles). Data are also collected using interviews from the speakers of the minority languages in Zimbabwe.