

Influence of an African Language on European place names in Zimbabwe: Is it language corruption, language development or resistance?

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DOI: 10.2436/15.8040.01.138

Abstract

The main focus of the paper is on the English place names in the southern parts of Zimbabwe that have been transformed or modeled along the phonological, morphological and semantic patterns of the Ndebele language. Most English place names have followed the levels of linguistic analysis of Ndebele which happens to be the dominant language in the Matabeleland region and is accorded an official language status alongside Shona. The paper scrutinizes the term creation strategies in transforming these place names from English to Ndebele from the linguistic and social perspective. Emphasis is put on whether there is a relationship between some social aspects and term creation. As the paper develops the discussions revolves around the following key questions:

- Why are the English names modeled along the linguistic patterns of the Ndebele language?
- What yardsticks are used in coming up with the resultant name?
- Which term creation strategies are used in coming up with the resultant names and what are the implications of such strategies?
- What sort of controversies result in such kind of creation of the place names?
- Are there any effects on the referents when considering the names that were there prior to the European ones?

After the above questions have been answered the paper will then conclude by showing the interplay between socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-economic, socio-linguistic, socio-historic and term creation.

Introduction

The paper focuses on European place names in the Southern parts of Zimbabwe where Ndebele is predominantly spoken. Ndebele alongside Shona are the two main national languages that have recently been upgraded to official language status in Zimbabwe for use in public domains. The existing scenario with regards place names in Zimbabwe is that the European place names are officially recognized and gazzetted and remain the official record for use on maps, signs, registry documents and even on voters' roll. These European place names are exogenetic in nature and they carry along with them a very strong foreign origin. Most of these names being names of former British monarchs, missionaries, founders, explorers, and commissioners as well as names of transposed European landscapes. Despite what appears as official record, there exists a localised parallel nomenclature for these European names that has been created by the Ndebele user community as a way of creating their own social, cultural as well political narratives and worldview. It has to be noted that while the remodeled localised versions of the European names are not yet official record, they are fast becoming tools of re-assertion and control by the Ndebele user community.

This paper therefore makes a comparative analysis of the original European names and their parallel and localised Ndebele versions. It assesses the extent of the transformation and attempts to explain whether the variation that results is corruption, language development or resistance. The paper begins by tracing the background of the colonial names as a way of establishing the factors that brought the Ndebele people in contact with the Europeans in their zone of influence. The paper explains the importance of a language and its status through place naming by examining the reactions that came as a result of contact between European and African languages in the Zimbabwe. The paper further investigates the contribution of