

# **A NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY FOR ZIMBABWE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: MYTH OR REALITY?**

**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The thrust of the paper is on the activities that have taken place in Zimbabwe concerning the formulation of a plausible national language policy. The paper looks at how the current Zimbabwe's language situation affects its social, economic, political and educational development. The paper begins by tracing the history of language activities in Zimbabwe from the pre-colonial era and linking such activities with those that are taking place currently and how such activities have had an influence in development. The education act which is the only official policy document concerning language in Zimbabwe is scrutinized by focusing on how it is being implemented and practiced. Major focus concerning the education act is paid to the Matabeleland region since this is where there are a variety of languages that exist where the dominant language in education is Ndebele and when such languages mutually unintelligible with Ndebele. On the practice and implementation of the Zimbabwe's education act, the key players in education such as the responsible ministers and principal directors, education officers and teachers are going to be interviewed. The paper problematizes the idea of language and economic development as to which one between language development and economic development should come first. The paper concludes by scrutinizing the link between multilingualism, politics of the day and meaningful development.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper looks at the language planning activities that are taking place in Zimbabwe and the possibility of having a clear national language policy. This article begins by looking at the language situation and the language planning activities that have taken place in Zimbabwe dating back to the pre-colonial era. The paper scrutinizes the suggestions, acts and declarations that have been put in place regarding language issues in Zimbabwe. It goes on to look at language in the education sector, mainly the practice and implementation of the Zimbabwe's 1987 Education Act. Suggestions are also made regarding language use in vocational training centers especially those in peri-urban and rural areas. The main focus of the paper is language and development, but the paper goes a step further to problematize the issue of language and politics and language and nationalism. The paper concludes by looking at the possibilities of having a clear and an all encompassing language policy in Zimbabwe.

## **LANGUAGE SITUATION IN ZIMBABWE FROM THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA TO DATE**

At the moment Zimbabwe has more than eleven indigenous languages and these include Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, Nambya, Kalanga, Sotho, Hwesa, Sena, Chikunda, Doma, Tswana, Tswawo/Khoisan, Barwe, Fingo/Xhosa, and Chewa (Hachipola, 1998) and all of them are marginalized except for Shona and Ndebele. The two 'major' indigenous languages of Zimbabwe which are Shona and Ndebele can be identified in a true sense as hybrid languages. Shona being a hybrid of what are now referred to as dialects which include Zezuru, Ndau, Korekore, Manyika and Karanga after the unification by Clement Doke in 1931. Ndebele was originally Nguni or better still Zulu but got the influence of Kalanga, Sotho and Shona as Mzilikazi, the leader of the Ndebele incorporated some people from these other groups into his group.

The power of language can be seen from how Mzilikazi built the Ndebele group by incorporating people from other linguistic groups during the pre-colonial era. As Mzilikazi moved from Zululand in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, he expanded his group by incorporating members from the other groups through force, consent and coercion. The groups whom some of their members were incorporated into Mzilikazi's group include the Sotho, Tswana, Kalanga and the Shona. However, those incorporated into Mzilikazi's group had to forego their own languages and turn to the Nguni language which is now called Ndebele. This was Mzilikazi's powerful strategy for building nationhood. The quest for identifying as one was achieved through the adoption and use of one language which is today called Ndebele. Once people identify themselves as one then they form a nation. It has to be noted that this process was not a friendly one because once one was incorporated, he had to comply to the requirements of Mzilikazi's rule failure to which meant resistance. Some people from other groups surrendered themselves to Mzilikazi's group so as to seek protection from the raids.

This then shows that nationhood that is built through language is not a noble one because one state one language means forcing some members of the state to comply even against their own will. One is not born with a language so that he can later on forego it for certain other advantages, such an encounter is tantamount to total disposition. Even though Mzilikazi built

the Ndebele state through having those incorporated adopting the Ndebele language, it did not mean that they became equal with the Ndebele who came from Zululand. Those incorporated along the way were labeled as *Abenhla* and those incorporated in the present day Zimbabwe were labeled as *Amahole*. These two identity markers *Amahole* and *Abenhla* carried derogatory connotations, those of not being original. This kind of caste meant that in the Ndebele state there were what Mamdani calls the citizens and the subjects.

Then came colonialism in 1890, when what is today known as Zimbabwe went under the British rule and came to be called Southern Rhodesia. The following encounter will show how powerful language is since Shona and Ndebele languages were used in achieving total colonization of the country and its peoples. The demarcation of Rhodesia into provinces with the terms Matabeleland, Mashonaland and Midlands meant that in areas where the province was Matabeleland, the expectation was that it should be Ndebele that is used there; Mashonaland meant that it is the Shona language that was expected to be used there and in the Midlands, it was both Shona and Ndebele languages that were expected to be used there. Of interest to note is that in some parts of Matabeleland, there was totally no Ndebele speaker at the time of colonization. The Ndebele people were concentrated around what today is Bulawayo, the second largest city of Zimbabwe. In Matabeleland North, there were Tonga people in Binga, Nambya in Hwange and Kalanga in Tsholotsho. In Matabeleland South, there were Kalanga in Plumtree and Kezi, Sotho in Gwanda and some parts of Beitbridge and Venda in Beitbridge. All these languages mentioned here are mutually unintelligible with Ndebele. In Mashonaland West again in Chiredzi there was the Shangani people whose language is also mutually unintelligible with Shona.

It is clear, then that Shona and Ndebele were used to strengthen colonialism. Even the missionaries promoted only Shona and Ndebele and thus the bible was translated into these two languages in Zimbabwe. In industries, the dominant indigenous languages were also Shona and Ndebele. It is clear then that the dominance of Ndebele and Shona came through colonialism.

In 1987, after the unity accord between ZANU PF and ZAPU to form ZANU PF, there came an Education Act which stipulated that:

1. The three main languages of Zimbabwe, namely Shona, Ndebele and English, shall be taught in all primary schools from the first grade as follows:
  - a. Shona and English in all areas where the mother-tongue of the majority of the residents is Shona or
  - b. Ndebele and English in all areas where the mother tongue of the majority of the residents is Ndebele.

2. Prior to the fourth grade, either of the languages referred to in paragraph (a) or (b) of sub-section (1) may be used as the medium of instruction, depending upon which language is more commonly spoken and better understood by the pupils.
3. From the fourth grade, English shall be the medium of instruction provided that Shona or Ndebele shall be taught as subjects on an equal-time allocation as the English language.
4. In areas where minority languages exist, the Minister may authorise the teaching of such languages in primary schools in addition to those specified in sub-section (1), (2) and (3). (Part XI, Section 55, p.255)

This Education was revised in 1990, but still there were no notable changes. Although it was revised it remains with a lot of questions of loopholes. Although this policy was put in place many schools in the country in areas where minority languages exist did not implement it due to various reasons which are going to be outlined later.

## **POLICIES, DECLARATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

A number of suggestion and declarations have been put forward regarding the use of languages not only in Zimbabwe but in Africa and beyond. Zimbabwe has its own education act which is one of the clear signs that language matters are a cause for concern.

Mutasa (2006), points out that there are three declarations that have been made concerning the issue of languages in Africa. First there was The Language Plan of Action for Africa followed by The Harare and then The Asmara Declaration.

The heads of state and government met in of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) met in Ethiopia in Addis Ababa from the 28<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> of July in 1986 it was agreed that “language is at the heart of a people’ culture” (OAU 1986) and that economic and social development can be accelerated through the use of indigenous African languages. The discussions evolved around the following key notions:

- That Africa needs to assert her independence and identity in the field of language;
- That African state need to take practical action to accord their indigenous languages their rightful official role as provided for by the Cultural Charter for Africa which was arrived at in Lagos;

- That each sovereign state has the right to devise a language policy that reflects the cultural and socio-economic realities of its country;
- That the adoption and promotion of African languages as official languages of the state can be achieved when there is political will;
- That the promotion and adoption of African languages as official languages of the state is of advantage in education, in politics, cultural and political affairs of the state;
- That mass literacy campaigns cannot be achieved without the use of African languages;
- That the promotion of cross boarder languages is a vital factor in achieving African unity;
- That in coming up with a national language policy, multilingualism must be emphasized; (OAU 1986)

The following were the aims and objectives of the Plan of Action:

- To encourage each and every Member State to have a clearly defined language policy;
- To ensure that all languages within the boundaries of Member States are recognized and accepted as a source of mutual enrichment;
- To liberate the African peoples from undue reliance on the utilization of non-indigenous African languages as the dominant, official languages of the state in favour of the gradual take-over of appropriate and carefully selected indigenous African languages in this domain;
- To ensure that African Languages, by appropriate legal provision and practical promotion, assume their rightful role as the means of official communication in the public affairs of each Member State, in replacement of European Languages, which have hitherto played this role;
- To encourage the increased use [of] African languages as vehicles of instruction at all educational levels;
- To ensure that all the sectors of the political and socio-economic systems of each Member State is mobilized in such a manner that they play their due part in ensuring that the African language(s) prescribed as official language(s) assume their intended role in the shortest time possible;
- To foster and promote national, regional and continental linguistic unity in Africa, in the context of multilingualism prevailing in most African countries.

The Harare declaration came as a result of the Intergovernmental conference on language policies in Africa held in Harare, Zimbabwe from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 1997 organized by

the United Nations Education, Cultural and Scientific organization. At the conference it was declared that the following anomalies would be corrected:

- The richness of linguistic diversity in Africa and its potential as a resource for all types of development is not being recognized;
- The urgent need for African States to adopt clear policies for the use and development of mother tongues;
- Use of African languages is a prerequisite for maximizing African creativity and resourcefulness in development activities;
- The language policies introduced since independence have generally favoured the colonial languages by setting up language structures that confer a monopoly of official status to the languages of the former colonial powers;
- Most of the recommendations made to correct this situation have not been implemented;
- Only very few African countries have clear and comprehensive language policies and even fewer have enshrined the stipulations of such policies in their constitutions;
- Language policy decisions are actually political decisions that can only be taken up by national governments (UNESCO 1997).

The following are the recommendations that came out during the conference:

- Each country should have a clear Language Policy Document within which every language spoken in the country should find its space;
- Guidelines for Language Policy formulation should be sanctioned by legislative action;
- Every country's policy framework should be flexible enough to allow each community to use its language side-by-side with other languages while at the same time giving provision to wider communication;
- A language policy formulating and monitoring body/institution should be established within each country (UNESCO 1997).

The Asmara declaration came at the conclusion of a conference held in Asmara, Eritrea from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2000 where the discussion centered on examining "the state of African languages in relation to government policy and administration, publishing and public education, scholarship and intellectual (re)presentation and to the question of development more generally"(Mazrui 2012). The title of the conference was *Against All Odds* and the discussion was on African languages being threatened by the European languages especially English. At the end of the conference a declaration was made on African languages and literatures and the following were contents of the declaration were put forth by the writers and scholars:

- African languages must take on the duty, the responsibility and the challenge of speaking for the continent;
- The vitality and equality of African languages must be recognized as a basis for the future empowerment of African peoples;
- The diversity of African languages reflects the rich cultural heritage of Africa and must be used as an instrument of African unity;
- All African children have the unalienable right to attend school and to learn in their mother tongues. Every effort should be made to develop African languages at all levels of education (The Asmara declaration on African Languages and Literatures 2000).

There are many other declarations which were made at this conference, but those included here are those that are much relevant to this article.

The declarations from the Language Plan of Action for Africa by the OAU now African Union (AU); by UNESCO in the Harare Declaration; and by writers and scholars in the Asmara Declaration are very interesting in that years after these declarations have been made Zimbabwe still seems to be lagging behind in terms of implementation. This then raises the question of whether attaining a clear language policy in Zimbabwe would be a myth or reality.

These declarations are also open to criticism. First is clear in all these declarations that in all of them there are blames of the dominance of ex-colonial languages. One wonders whether is the colonialists who are still ruling Africa or it's the Africans themselves. Who should implement policies in Africa? Is it the former colonizer or it is the current rulers? When African countries gained independence the former colonizers did not come back and say continue using our languages, but decades after independence Africans are still concentrating on blaming the dominance of the European languages. If Africans feel that there can be development through the use of African languages, then who is stopping the use of those African languages. Concentrating on blaming would not bring development to Africa instead the African countries should know what they really want and then find ways of achieving their goals and they should also design clear policies of relating with their partners in a bid to achieve development.

The declarations are also questionable again on the emphasis of the dominance of the ex-colonial languages. They all declare that each African state should promote the use and development of every language that falls within its borders, but they overlook the reality that some indigenous African languages suppress and dominate other indigenous languages of Africa. The case in point is that of Shona and Ndebele in Zimbabwe which dominate other languages which are now being labeled as minority. Shona and Ndebele dominate such languages as Kalanga, Venda, Tonga, Nambya, Shangani, Sotho, Chikunda, Chewa and some others. If such circumstances are ignored then, African governments would always be reluctant in formulating clear language policies because there is nothing that would be pushing them since the first languages of those in power are always the one that dominate and are recognized in the unofficial policies. Phillipson (1992:84) observes that "Whether the decisions taken serve the interests of the mass of the population as well as the elites will depend on the

nature of the state in question, and the degree of popular participation in decision making."The good thing about these declarations is that they contain sentiments of the realization that governments are the ones that are responsible for policy formulation. Development will therefore only be peculiar to those whose languages dominate; those whose first languages are perceived to be inferior would not fully participate in development because of their perceived inferiority complex.

The Harare declaration leaves one with a lot of questions than answers if Zimbabwe would be able to attain a clear national language policy in the twenty-first century. The conference took place in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1997 and today, more than a decade after the declaration nothing contained in the declaration has taken place. Zimbabwe should have taken the initiative in implementing what was declared since the declaration carries the name of its capital city. Mutasa (2006) points out that what hinders development in Africa is planning without action. If such conferences are held and a lot of suggestions come out which at the end are not implemented then that is a clear sign of stalemate in development. With such scenario having taken place in Zimbabwe, then one is left wondering if attaining a national language policy in Zimbabwe would be a myth or a reality.

## **LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION**

The education Act of 1987 is the center of scrutiny under this heading. It is important to look at how far the primary schools in areas where minority languages exist have gone in implementing the teaching of these minority languages.

In Binga and Gokwe North where the dominant minority language is Tonga, it is only in November 2008 when the primary school books called *The Bwacha Lino Series* were launched. Teaching after the launch of the primary textbooks became difficult because of inadequate staff with the knowledge of Tonga language. Those with the knowledge of Tonga language also had challenges when it came to methodology, because there is no institution of higher learning in Zimbabwe that teaches Tonga. 77% of pupils in Binga's one hundred and thirty primary schools were already learning Tonga. Despite all the challenges, the first grade seven Tonga examinations were written in October 2011. The key players in the promotion of the teaching of Tonga in Binga were non-governmental organizations and not the government itself. Silveira House, a non-governmental organisation has been most active in the development and teaching of Tonga.

In Hwange, where Nambya is the dominant the situation is different from that of Binga. In Hwange there also exist a language called Dombe which some people claim is a hybrid of Tonga and Nambya and some say it is not, it is just a language that stands on its own. Because of the claim that Dombe is a hybrid of Tonga and Nambya, the Tonga claim that Tonga language is the one that should be taught in areas around Hwange, but the Namya people turn down this idea. This shows that the issue of dominating others and that of being dominating others is a sensitive one when it comes to language matters. In other words the Tonga people want to swallow the Nambyas through spreading their language around the Hwange areas. The Nambya



people did not and still do not have the privilege that the Tonga people have, that of having non-governmental organizations promoting the teaching of their language in primary schools. There are very few schools in areas around Hwange that have managed to implement the teaching of Nambya in primary schools.

Kalanga, a language which is found mainly in Plumtree and in some areas around Tsholotsho and Kezi is also taught in just a few selected primary schools. Kalanga has also not received any support from the government and the non-governmental organizations. It is only the Kalanga people who have lobbied through the Kalanga language society for the teaching of Kalanga language in schools. However this process has been difficult because of the lack of personnel and material resources. The situation of Kalanga is further worsened by the fact that it still does not have a standard orthography. Although being a cross-border language that is also found in Botswana it is also not being promoted in Botswana and that makes the language suffer worse. There is also no tertiary institution that exists in the Kalanga areas and that is also a factor that hinders its development. Most Kalanga people when they complete secondary education, they migrate to South Africa in search of employment and those who work in South Africa when they come back home as *injiva*, they have a kind of prestige attached to them. They will be speaking Zulu and most people tend to emulate them. Since Zulu is similar to Ndebele, then that implies that most of them will find themselves comfortable with Ndebele although they will also most frequently use Kalanga.

Sotho is spoken in Gwanda and in some parts around Beitbridge. Sotho is a cross-border language found in South Africa and Lesotho. However, although it is a cross-border language it does not fall on the border with any of the countries where it is found. It is also similar to Tswana that is found in Botswana and South Africa. Efforts to develop the Sotho in Zimbabwe are currently under way, but there are a number of problems being felt already. The efforts to develop Sotho have started with the writing of primary school text books. However some of these writers have used the orthography of the Sotho of Lesotho and some are using the Ndebele orthography as a basis although Ndebele is mutually unintelligible with Sotho. The inconsistencies in the writing of the Sotho language are playing a setback in the development of the development of the language. There are also a few schools that have embarked on the teaching of Sotho in areas where the language exists due to the shortage of teachers with the knowledge of Sotho and also due to inadequate material resources. The teaching of Sotho is also being initiated at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo teacher training college in Gwanda. Sotho is privileged because there is a tertiary institution that trains teachers where it exists, that is in Gwanda.

Venda is cross-border language that is found in Beitbridge and in the Limpopo province of South Africa. There is also a problem with the teaching of Venda in Zimbabwe although in South Africa there is a standard Venda orthography and there is a lot of literature in Venda language there. The Venda of South Africa and Zimbabwe share the same border and that implies that the two languages across the border are the same. It has become difficult to teach Venda in Beitbridge town because of it being a border town where people of diverse linguistic backgrounds mainly the Shona have come to settle in the border town. The language that is now widely spoken in Beitbridge town is Shona and Venda has since been pushed to the

periphery. Venda is commonly spoken in the rural areas of Beitbridge and in such areas most primary schools teach Ndebele instead of Venda. Efforts to develop Venda in Zimbabwe have come through the memorandum of understanding that was signed between Great Zimbabwe University and the University of Venda. This has seen some lecturers from the University of Venda going to Great Zimbabwe University to teach Venda there.

In the Language Plan of Action for Africa; in the Harare and the Asmara declarations, it is clear that there is a need to teach children, especially the early learners in their first languages. The Education Act of Zimbabwe also clearly states that the medium of instruction during the first three years of learning must be the mother tongue. The UNESCO (1953) also recommends that children must be taught to as late a stage in their mother tongues. However as has been shown above, such an initiative is not being complied with in Zimbabwe's primary school education system and that hinders cognitive development amongst the early learners because while they face the burden on grasping the new concepts, at the same time they face the burden of grasping the languages which those new concepts are transmitted in. If Zimbabwe is failing to implement the policy that is already there then one stands to wonder if ever there would be a clear national language policy.

### **LANGUAGE, POLITICS AND NATIONALISM**

According to Mazrui and Mazrui (1998); Phillipson (1992 and 2009); May (2008); and Ndhlovu (2008), language issues cannot be divorced from politics. Most players in Zimbabwean politics are the Shona and the Ndebele and that is the reason why Shona and Ndebele are seen to be dominating in all spheres of the society.

Can a nation be built through language? It is ideal but at the same time a violation of the linguistic human rights to promote a few languages at the expense of others in a multilingual state as a quest for nation building. In Zimbabwe nationhood is perceived through Shona and Ndebele. Ndhlovu (2009) dismisses the idea that multilingualism results in economic and social underdevelopment and in political misunderstandings as violation to fundamental human rights.

Can Zimbabwe be successful in building the nation through language? Mzilikazi was successful in building the Ndebele state through a one state one language policy although the success of it was achieved through fear of the spear. In the modern day where people are aware of their rights it would be impossible to adopt a few indigenous languages at the expense of others. By so doing people would forget about development of the nation and focus on language war. Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) point out that the exclusion of other languages has often provoked ethnic rivalry. Where there is a war development also stops. Those people whose languages are excluded will also feel abandoned by the nation. Their sense of belonging would be lost thereby forcing their minds to concentrate on their exclusion and forgetting about development.

Coulmas (1998) observes that the nation-state is the enemy of minorities.

## **LANGUAGE AND DEVELOPMENT**

Mutasa (2006) suggests that “Africans can improve their lives and overall living standards if they use their languages in domains related to economic development”

Zimbabwe is currently engaged in the indigenization policy drive where foreign owned companies are supposed 51% of the share to the locals. However, it is obvious that not everyone who is a citizen of Zimbabwe will benefit from this policy. It was going to be proper if those sectors that drive the economy of the poor and the middle class are also indigenized through language. In Zimbabwe, there are vocational training centers where people train for practical skills in dress making; cutting and designing; welding; carpentry and so on. The people who enroll in these centers are those who would not have done quite well in their secondary education, meaning that they have some academic challenges most probably because of the use of English in learning. It is queer then to continue teaching these people in the English language where they would face difficulties in mastering the language and at the same time trying to master the concepts. The noble idea would be to use the indigenous languages in vocational training centers and the indigenous language to be adopted should be that or those that are dominant in the area.

When people talk about language development in Zimbabwe, what comes first in their minds is to get Shona and Ndebele to compete with English especially in the fields such as science and technology. It would be difficult for Zimbabwe to develop scientific terminologies in Shona and Ndebele because the concepts that come in this field are not local product and when they get into Zimbabwe they come via the English. Those who have tried to device terminologies of various subject fields in Ndebele and Shona have further worsened the situation because the strategies that they use in creating such terms are transliteration or rephonologization and literal translation. Literal translation usually takes the form of explanations and such a strategy become even more awkward.

Multilingualism has also been mistakenly perceived as a threat to economic, social and political development. Multilingualism aides a sense of belonging and is important in any democratic state. When multilingualism is practiced all the citizens of the country have that sense of belonging and no development is hindered. When some people are marginalized they been to feel as if they are second class citizens and that sense of belonging is lost.

## **CAN ZIMBABWE ACHIEVE A PLAUSIBLE NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY?**

Given the timeframes that have elapsed after the declaration on languages were made and after the Education act was put in place without anything effective taking place it becomes difficult to imagine that Zimbabwe will ever have a plausible national language policy.

## **IS ENGLISH A TREAT TO MINORITY LANGUAGES?**

### **THE FUTURE OF ZIMBABWE'S LANGUAGES**

The future of Zimbabwe's minority languages is at risk as the two predators Shona and Ndebele are busy preying on them while at the same time English is also a big threat to Ndebele and Shona. Most of Zimbabwe's languages are at a risk of extinction. The case in point is that of a language called Nyubi which at the moment has only two speakers remaining yet in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was the dominant language in areas around Matopo. When the Ndebele people ran away from the colonialist in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to hide in the mountains of Matopo where the Nyubi people normally resided, the Nyubi felt threatened by the presence of the Ndebeles and as a way of despising themselves they had to abandon their language and adopt the Ndebele language.

Almost all the languages have certain associations attached to them. Chinese used to be attached/associated with martial arts but today the language is associated with *fong kongs* which in Zimbabwe some call *zhing zhongs*. English is associated with prestige and development, Ndebele is associated with pride. Shona is associated with public service and public administration especially the police. Tonga is associated with backwardness, dagga and fish. If Chinese changed from being associated with martial arts to association with *fong kongs* then what can stop the nation from endeavoring to associate languages that fall within their borders with development?

### **CONCLUSION**

It has been shown in this paper that despite all the suggestions, declarations, policies and other efforts put on paper for practical action Zimbabwe has done very little or nothing with regards to language matters. This then leaves wondering whether the attainment of a clear Zimbabwean national language policy would be a myth or a reality in the twenty first century where English is also taking center stage.

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