

# The Vernacularization of African Languages after Independence

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To vernacularize a language is to reduce it to a vernacular. In 1953, UNESCO defined a vernacular as the language of a group that is politically or socially dominated by a group that speaks another language. This paper argues that this domination need not be colonial or racial, and that in fact many postindependence African rulerships are more comfortable in situations that are contrived to ensure that the indigenous languages of their own countries continue to be vernacularized. The same foreign language that was used in the past by a racist colonial minority is now used by an indigenous elitist minority to keep the majority disempowered by making grassroots participation in national issues and debates difficult or impossible.

Defenders of the status quo advance the same old arguments as their former colonial masters: that English, French, and Portuguese facilitate wider communication within and outside their own borders; that they make it possible for them to do business with the rest of the world; and that in any case any attempt to promote any of their own languages and to make them the official languages would be divisive; in effect, promoting African languages would be promoting tribalism. Recent studies in ethnolinguistic history have shown that these arguments are based on exaggerations inherited from the colonial era, and that they have derived some credibility only from being repeated so often for so long. However, we have no time in this paper to show that they are based more on prejudice and historical accident than on fact.

What is relevant to mention is that, as a result of this mentality and the selfish designs of a minority that seeks to entrench itself in power, no serious attention is paid to language issues in many African countries. In other words, the ruling elite feel safer by simply doing nothing to promote or develop the main languages of

their own country, although these may be called national languages, and by and large the minority languages are ignored. Under these circumstances the development, or indeed the survival, of many African languages will depend on the numbers of those who use them as a mother tongue and on the creative genius of their speaker-writers.

### **The Language Situation**

Zimbabwe's language situation is less complex than elsewhere in Africa. Shona, spoken by at least 75 percent of the country's estimated population of 10.5 million, and Ndebele, spoken by 10 to 16 percent, clearly are the dominant indigenous languages. Both are branches of Southern Bantu and are sometimes referred to as national languages, along with English, which in fact is used for most official purposes.

There are about six small but significant minority language groups, which together account for another 6 percent of the population: Tonga and Nambya/Dombe in the two western provinces of Matebeleland North, Venda and Kalanga in Matebeleland South (in the past these provinces have been designated Ndebele-speaking), and Kalanga and Shangaan in the southern, eastern, and northern border areas, which have previously been designated Shona-speaking. Other indigenous minorities are Lilima, Shangwe, Birwa, Tswana, and Lozi in Matebeleland and Barwe-Tonga, Hlengwe, and Chikunda in Mashonaland.

In addition, there are a number of African migrant minorities, notably Cewa/Nyanja, Sena, Bemba, Sotho, and Fengu, as well as non-African migrant minorities, such as English, Afrikaans, Portuguese, Hindi, Hebrew, Italian, and Greek. While the distribution of all the indigenous minorities is regional, that of the African migrant minorities is scattered and both rural and urban, and that of the non-African migrant minorities – except English, the national official language – is scattered but mainly urban.

Although not more than 1 percent of Zimbabweans are mother-tongue English speakers, English continues to dominate, not only as the language of business, administration, politics, and the media, but also as the language of instruction in the education system at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. At the same time African languages continue to be downgraded in the schools and vernacularized in the wider community.

### **Literature and Language in Education**

Policy on language in the schools in Zimbabwe is quite confused, although the 1982 population census gave reasonably accurate estimates of ethnolinguistic statistics on which more definite policy could have been formulated.

The Education Act of 1987 in fact failed to honor a commitment made through the Minority Languages Committee in 1985 that, in areas where they were predominant, specified minority languages should be taught to the exclusion of Shona/Ndebele. The new act merely said that these minority languages could be taught in addition to Shona/Ndebele. As a result, the situation became very unsatisfactory, particularly with regard to the availability, use, and quality of syllabi, materials, and teachers, not only in the minority languages, but also in the teaching of Shona and Ndebele as second languages in the whole education system, particularly in the former whites-only or Group A schools, while English remained entrenched as the medium of instruction as well as the key to qualification for further education and training at all levels.

The 1987 Education Act states that either Shona or Ndebele may be used as the medium for instruction in the first three school grades when it is more commonly spoken and better understood by the pupils, but from the fourth grade upwards, English is to be the medium of instruction in all the schools while Shona and Ndebele are to be taught only as separate subjects. Further, the teaching of minority languages, where these exist, may be authorized in addition to English and Shona/Ndebele.

In Zimbabwe there is relatively more written literature in Ndebele and Shona than in the languages of many other African countries. Published literature in Zimbabwean African languages covers a wide variety of genres ranging from folklore, proverbial lore, and oral poetry to modern novels, anthologies of poetry, and plays. This literature is growing, particularly in response to the demands of the high school market where prescribed texts for literature courses are changed routinely.

In theory, there is a sizable market in Zimbabwe for books published in Shona and Ndebele because of the massive expansion of education after independence, with primary and secondary school enrollment increasing tenfold and the educational literacy rate climbing from 45 percent to nearly 80 percent from 1980 to 1990.

## The Media

After independence, English has continued to dominate in both the electronic and print media, Shona and Ndebele have continued to be vernacularized, while the other local languages are hardly used. In 1990 the usage of the majority language Shona at the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) was 55 percent on Radio 2, 49 percent on Radio 4, 1.5 percent on Radio 3, and 1 percent on Radio 1. At the time of this writing, there are still very few television programs in Shona, with only the daily news summaries having regular slots. Only 1.5 percent of cinema is in Shona, and this comprises mainly films that are development- and education-oriented, such as those on health and family matters. The reasons given for this embarrassing situation are lack of funds, negative attitudes, and what is perceived to be lack of development in the African languages themselves.

Of the four radio stations of the ZBC, only Radio 2 is dedicated to broadcasting in African languages. Almost all of this station's programs are in Shona and/or Ndebele, with a very few in minority languages such as Venda and Shangaan. The other station that uses Shona and Ndebele in a good number of its programs is Radio 4, which is educational. Radio 4 also broadcasts a few programs in some of the minority languages. The other two stations broadcast in English, and, when airing music, pay only minimal attention to African music. Radio 1, formerly an English service called Radio Rhodesia, plays adult contemporary and Western classical music. Radio 3, the new "popular" (i.e., mainly foreign) music station, tries to emulate Western, and especially American, pop music stations in its selection and presentation of music.

Zimbabwe Newspapers Limited (1980) dominates newspaper publishing. Zimbabwe Newspapers (Zimpapers) owns all three dailies in the country, the two main Sunday newspapers, and the only weekly newspaper published in Shona and Ndebele. Zimpapers publishes the *Herald*, which had a circulation of 136,000 in late 1990, the *Chronicle* (66,405), the *Sunday Mail* (137,021), and the *Sunday News* (66,720). Another Zimpapers daily, the *Manica Post*, had a circulation of only 17,464 in 1990, while Zimpapers' Shona weekly *Kwayedza*, which incorporates the Ndebele weekly *Umthunywa*, had a circulation of 62,365. However, the actual readership of *Kwayedza/Umthunywa* is much larger because each copy sold is read by an estimated fifteen people in the rural areas and

ten in the urban centers. This newspaper is popular because it carries more entertainment and human-interest stories than news articles and political commentary. Even so, its total readership comprises only 1.5 percent of the newspaper-buying public and 10.7 percent of the Shona-speaking population.

Elias Rusike (1990) has listed more than forty other independent local and regional newspapers, magazines, and professional or special-interest magazines that are published weekly, monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly. Virtually all are published in English, although a few, particularly the rural newspapers, may sometimes include articles in Shona or Ndebele.

### **Language Use**

Chimhundu (1983: 237) points out that the terms Ndau, Karanga, Zezuru, Manyika, and Korekore are "arbitrarily chosen, but accepted labels for clusters of local speech forms" within the wider Shona-speaking community. As is typically the case with natural languages the world over, linguistic variation within the Shona-speaking community is only partly regional. The capital, Harare, seems to have an important unifying influence linguistically because a prestige-laden Harare-based variety has emerged to dominate both the spoken and the written Shona in most of the country. The selected norm on which standard Shona is developing is of Zezuru-ChiHarare, which is being promoted widely, but mostly informally, as the spoken language on radio and television and in public speeches and as the written language in the published literature, newspapers, commercial consumer advertising, and the performing arts. However, there are differences between the emerging predominantly Zezuru-ChiHarare spoken Shona and standard written Shona.

As elsewhere in the postcolonial world, we have in Zimbabwe an unbalanced bicultural and bilingual situation in which the H, or high-status, language is the official language of the former colonial power, while the indigenous languages are the L, or low-status, languages. At the national level, we thus have a situation of diglossia where roles as societal norms have been assigned to the languages available to the speakers. If we ignore English, we have a similar diglossic situation at the provincial or district level, where either Shona and Ndebele now assume H status vis-à-vis a minority language (ML) such as Shangaan or Kalanga. Again if we ignore

English, we have yet another diglossic situation within the Shona-speaking community at the local or ideolectal level, where a predominant and generally spoken (GS) variety of Shona becomes the H while the local patois or spoken variety (LV) becomes the L. In terms of general patterns of language use within a multilingual setting, we thus have patterned access to the language varieties available to bilinguals, which may be represented either as multiple diglossia, and illustrated as follows:

H = E            or        S/N        or        GS  
L = S/N        or        ML        or        LV

or as triglossia (diglossia at two levels) and illustrated:

H = E  
L = S/N        or        GS = H  
                  ML        or        LV = L

Unlike Shona, Ndebele has no dialects or regional varieties. However, there are certain forms and usages that are peculiar to people of particular areas, and these are the result of influences from other languages spoken in those areas, notably Kalange in Plumtree, Lilima (Tswana?) in Gwanda, Lozi in Hwange, Shangwe in Gokwe-Nkai and Shona in Gweru-Midlands.

Both Shona and Ndebele are changing, mainly at the lexical level, where borrowing is extensive. My research has shown that Shona has adopted numerous lexical items from several languages with which it has been in contact, not only through direct importation of lexemes, or elements that are then used mainly as roots in verbs and as stems in nouns, but also through changes and/or shifts in the meanings of both indigenous and borrowed forms. At the same time, completely new terms are also coined to match those that are used in the other languages, while some of the older terms have become archaic or obsolete because the things they refer to (e.g., traditional forms of dress) have been discarded in the modern culture. The most extensive borrowing has been in the areas of imported material culture and technology.

The most pervasive influence on Shona vocabulary has come from English, the language of the ruling white minority during the colonial period and the preferred language of the ruling black elite after independence. However, Shona has also borrowed from other languages, notably from Nguni and Afrikaans, and to a lesser extent from Cewa/Nyanja, Sotho, Portuguese, and Arabic. There

are also the odd vocabulary items that can be traced to more distant sources such as Swahili and certain Oriental languages.

This extensive borrowing does not seem to have influenced the basic structure of the Shona language in any significant way, apart from the fact that new consonants and consonant combinations that are not part of the indigenous phonology have come in via borrowed forms. The five-vowel system of Shona has remained intact. So have the morphology and the syntax because, once the borrowed forms have been assimilated into the language during the process of integration that involves phonological and morphological adjustments, they will behave like any other forms in the constituent classes to which they have been allocated.

There is also widespread code-switching in the speech of most Shona-English bilinguals. It is sometimes claimed that many Shona speakers cannot finish a sentence without using some English. Several patterns of code-switching have been observed by Chimhundu (1983), Chikanza (1985), and Ngara (1982). All are characteristic of unequal coexistence of languages in a bilingual community in which the first language or mother tongue is the L variety in a diglossic situation and the second language is the H variety. The code switches themselves range from single morphemes or switch-words and phrases and clauses within Shona sentences to whole sentences and paragraphs or speeches in English.

Zimbabwe is an example of neglected multilingualism and unbalanced bilingual behavior by its citizenry. English is now firmly entrenched as the language of government, business, the media, education, training, and specialized information, as well as of upward social mobility and wider communication within and outside Zimbabwe's borders. However, a diglossic situation obtains where, in the daily lives of the vast majority of Zimbabweans, roles have been assigned as societal norms both to African languages as mother tongues with L status and to English as the official language with H status. It is partly this pattern of role allocation in which African languages are predominant in what are perceived as being the relatively unimportant family, social, and cultural domains, and partly the lack of attention that is paid to the indigenous languages by officialdom, that encourage the thinking that all African languages are vernaculars. As a result, African languages continue to be downgraded, particularly in the educational system and in public life. In this situation, where the absence of compre-

hensive policies to promote them is not only significant but deliberate, one can actually argue that the vernacularization of African languages is policy in many countries on this continent in the post-colonial era.

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