

The Heart's Desire versus the Dictates of Reality: Exploring Zimbabwe and Africa's Tongue Aches

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Abstract: *The following article is a reaction to a number of emotional ones which appear in various literatures bemoaning the continued marginalization of African languages even in independent countries. This paper argues that globally dominant languages especially English, French, Spanish and Arabic have ceased to be preserves of their original countries-they have become part of African culture and should be embraced. It would be foolhardy to throw away the said languages because of the way in which they found their way to Africa. Implementing language policies is an expensive undertaking that many African countries cannot afford. Expenses aside, there is also the question of feasibility and logistics. For instance out of the 220 African languages in the D.R.C. which one/s should be the official one/s? It is not a question of replacing a former colonizer's language with an African one because very few African countries are monolingual. Such decisions have far-reaching socio-politico-economic implications and are very likely to be vehemently and violently resisted. A global village requires a global language, or a few languages, for wider communication. Reality dictates that not all languages can be used thus. Therefore some languages will be, in the eyes of society (and not intrinsically), more equal than others. It should be stressed again that this is a societal construct and may it be emphasized that this paper is not advocating the death of local languages. On the contrary these will continue to be indispensable for intranational and limited international communication. The educational satchel has limited space and cannot therefore carry everything our hearts desire. This may sound cruel, callous and unAfrican to some (who might even call for my tongue!) but it is reality not Utopian idealism.*

Key words: *Language, Education, Marginalization, Globalization*

Background

The author of this article, it should be stated from the onset, has absolutely no quarrels with recognition of indigenous African Languages and fully shares what UNESCO stated more than half a century ago thus:

Psychologically the mother tongue is the system of meaningful signs that in the child's mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he (*sic*) belongs. Educationally he (*sic*) learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium. (UNESCO, cited in Mazrui (Ed.), 1993:531)

The teaching of African languages including the so-called Minority Languages up to tertiary level is a very noble ideal but one wonders on the feasibility of implementing such endeavours especially taking cognizance of the fact that most of Africa is ultra multi lingual with the exception of less than ten which have a threshold of 90%+ namely Burundi (99 % Kirundi), Lesotho,(99% Sotho),Somalia (98% Somali),Madagascar (98% Malagasy), Botswana (97% Tswana),Seychelles (93 % Creole), Rwanda (95% Kinyarwanda) Mauritius (94% Creole) and Swaziland (91%Swazi) (Bambgose,1991).

What 'experts' always say and never do.

The UNESCO pronouncement quoted earlier was made almost sixty years ago yet very little has been done to fulfill it. This shows that there is something wrong with the implementers or the goal that might be too lofty to be achieved. The following UNESCO-sponsored conferences are further examples of the rhetoric that has been going on on the uplifting of African languages for more than half a century:

1. *Meeting of Specialists on the Use of Vernacular languages in Education*, Paris,15 November-3 December,1951 where pronouncements were made in favour of mother tongue use in education.
2. *Meeting of Experts on the Contribution of African languages to Cultural Activities and Literacy Programmes*, Yaounde, 1970 which examined current use of African languages and their values as instruments of education and sociocultural developments and suggested measures to be taken to promote such values.
3. *Meeting of Experts on the Promotion of African languages as instruments of Culture and Lifelong education in Eastern and Central Africa*, Da es Salaam, 1971 which looked at the value of African languages in the region as vehicles of culture, science, technology and lifelong education.

4. *Inter-governmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Africa: Languages and Oral Traditions*, Accra, 1975 recommended the choice of one or more National Languages, a more intensive study of languages and increased use of these languages as media of instruction and in mass literacy.

5. *Conference of Ministers of Education of African member States*, Lagos, 1976 recommended the indigenisation of African education through the introduction and use of African languages as media of instruction.

6. *Meeting of Experts on the Use of African Regional and Sub-regional languages as Media of Culture and means of communication on the continent*, Bamako, 1979 recommended the promotion of languages spoken across national boundaries as a means of enhancing inter-African Communication and their use for administrative, political and economic purposes (Bamgbose, 1991).

The above are quite high sounding and intentions on paper quite musical to Pan-African ears but what the high-level meetings have achieved leaves a lot to be desired.

In addition to the above Macel Diouf cited in Mutasa (2006) cites the following which again have achieved close to nothing in terms of uplifting African languages especially in not only dislodging the erstwhile colonizers' languages as the official ones but also in providing space for them on the school curriculum and other uses:

1. The OAU Charter of 1963 Article 29 adopted and states that the working languages of the organization should be African languages as well as English, French and Portuguese however only Ethiopia used her indigenous language, Amharic, at the OAU from 1963 to 1991.

2. The Pan-African cultural Manifesto of Algiers, 1969 which recommended the translation of works and use of African languages however nothing much was achieved.

3. The Final Report on the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Africa, Accra, Ghana. Its achievement was the establishment of regional centres and nothing pertaining to the use of African languages in teaching, at government level or intergovernmental conferences was achieved.

4. The Cultural Charter for Africa adopted by the OAU, in July 1976, Port Louis, Mauritius. This did not bring any meaningful change in the actual use of African languages in intergovernmental instances.

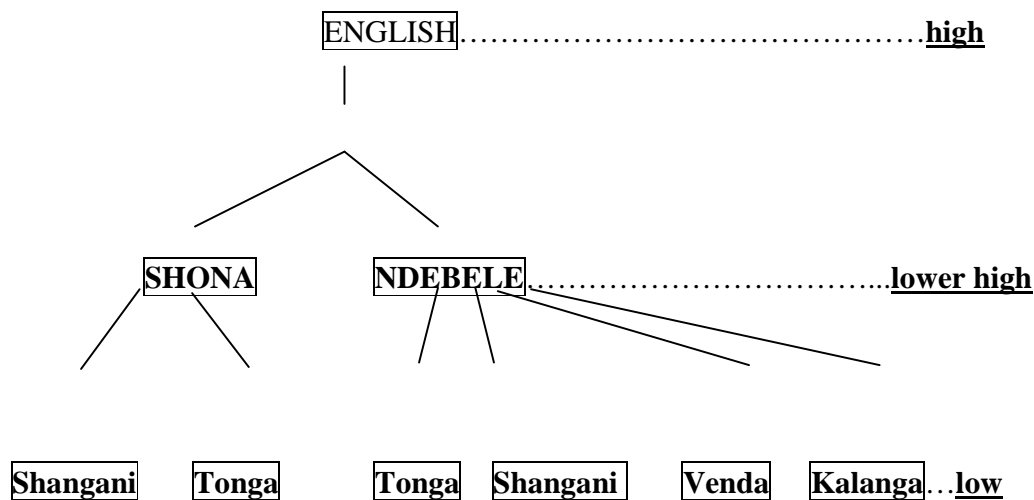
5. The Treaty establishing the African Union in 2000 in Lome, Togo. The document which replaces the 1963 OAU Charter *reintroduces* the possibility of using African languages in various organs of the African Union thirty seven years after the initial undertakings.

The sentiments expressed by some speakers about yet another UNESCO-hosted gathering, 'Language Policy Planning Conference' held in Harare in 1997 that it 'was one of several rhetoric-laden gatherings held using 'hard-sourced' funds without any positive outcome' (Mumpande, 2006: 5-6) can be said of its predecessors cited above and most probably its successors in future.

The current Zimbabwean linguistic landscape

In Zimbabwe there are 17 African languages namely ChiShona, Ndebele, Kalanga, Tonga, Nyanja /Chewa , Shangani, Sotho ,Venda ,Chikunda/Sena ,Tswawo ,Doma, Xhosa, Tonga (Mudzi), Nambya, Tswana, Wesa and Barwe . (*Source*: Inter-governmental Conference on Linguistic Policies in Africa, Harare, 20-21 March 1997). The current Zimbabwean linguistic landscape can be referred to as **polyglossic** (*poly*-many and *glossia*-language) with English assuming a superordinate or high status and the other languages assuming subordinate statuses. Polyglossia is a term which is related to diglossia a concept first used by Ferguson to describe "a situation where two, very different varieties of a language co-occur throughout a speech community each with a distinct range of social functions." (Crystal, 1992:103)

The Zimbabwean situation subscribes partially to Fishman's concept of diglossia where English, as the Official language, assumes the High status and Shona and Ndebele, which are described in Zimbabwe as National languages, and all the other African languages the low. The other African languages are referred to as Minority languages. This shows that the languages are stratified, which means there are some which are regarded as more important than others. English as the High variety is used in more formal situations such as the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary, is considered to be more prestigious by the users and has a richer literary heritage than the African languages. The former is used in such supranational organizations as the U.N., SADC and A.U. Since indigenous languages are not used for formal international communication they have tended to be accorded an inferior status. English is viewed as a master key one can use to open doors of opportunity, not only locally but also outside our borders, more so with the advent of globalization which has resulted in the world becoming small and English assuming a very dominant role in it. Locally the language is a passport to post 'O'-level education and training. Such practices give the language an edge over the local ones *not* because of its intrinsic superiority but because of the greatness thrust upon it by history. This situation whereby English enjoys an unfair advantage over the others is a historical antecedent, which we cannot wish away. The polyglossic scenario can be represented diagrammatically as follows (not all languages have been included):



N.B. This is an extended version of Fishman's concept of 'diglossia'. The addition is the *lower high* varieties, which, though subordinate to the High are also highs in as far as the minority languages are concerned. This scenario prevails in situations whereby children from minority groups learn their mother tongue up to Grade 3 then switch on to Shona or Ndebele. We can also have a *lower low* variety when a learner's mother tongue is not on the school curriculum so a child acquires a mother tongue then learns, from Grade1-3 a new minority language before switching again to yet another new language, a national language before learning the official language. This is the situation with children of migrant workers from neighbouring countries who are mainly situated on farms and mines.

The different statuses are not inherent in the languages concerned but are societal constructs; it is society which decides whether a code is a dialect or a language, official or national or even minority .In spite of the fact that English is spoken natively by about 1% of the Zimbabwean population, for example, it is the official language.

How feasible is teaching all African languages up to high school or tertiary level?

As pointed out earlier there are 17 African languages in Zimbabwe. Out of these, two, Shona and Ndebele are taught up to university while Venda and Shangani are taught *at* university level (at Great Zimbabwe University) .It is noble, ideal, patriotic, pan-Africanist etc to lobby for the teaching and learning of the rest of the African languages up to the aforementioned level but do we have the resources to:

-Train the suitable teachers.

-Translate Shona and Ndebele existing textbooks, dictionaries and novels or publish new ones for the other languages. At the moment there is a dearth of reading materials throughout the education sector: books are simply beyond the reach of the majority. If they are available they

are not accessible, for example even professionals are finding it difficult to buy daily or weekly newspapers let alone novels or books which are now costing an arm and a leg.

-Set and mark examinations in all the 17 languages and pay the markers meaningfully. Currently the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) is struggling to attract and retain experienced personnel to mark and process examinations. The 2012 marking of Grade 7 examinations was delayed by two weeks because of cash flow problems. The whole national budget would be required to train the required personnel and provide study materials and examine the candidates.

The Permanent Secretary's Circular 3 of 2002 dated 28 January 2002 has the following as one of its expected learning outcomes under the Primary School Curriculum 'Communicate effectively in both the written and spoken forms of the local languages and English' (p2). The same circular states:

...all primary schools should offer the following subjects from grades 1 to 7:

Shona or Ndebele up to Grade 7...Tonga, Kalanga, Nambya, Venda, Shangani and Sotho as mother tongues will be introduced in their respective areas in phases as follows:

Up to grade 4 in 2002

Up to grade 5 in 2003

Up to grade 6 in 2004

Up to grade 7 in 2005

These subjects will be offered together with Shona or Ndebele...' (p3)

The circular specifies only six out of the fourteen so-called minority languages. Such silence on Barwe, Chewa, Chikunda, Doma, Fingo/Xhosa, Hwesa, Tswana and Tswawo, is unfortunate. Some may ask if some so-called minority languages are more equal than others. If the decision is to upgrade so-called minority languages then there should be no favourites otherwise, the critics of the dominance of English risk falling into their own trap.

In an article entitled 'Schools To Start Teaching Minority Language Subjects' The Sunday Mail of 20-26 August 2006 says:

Schools will begin teaching minority languages next year and the government has given ZIMSEC the green light to make the subjects examinable up to Zimbabwe Junior Certificate...

This came out of a Zimbabwe Indigenous Languages Promotion Association (ZILPA) meeting which was attended by the relevant Permanent Secretary, Chief Shana and Chief Nekatambe from Hwange and the programme director of Silveira House, a Catholic organization working with the Basilwizi Trust in promoting and facilitating workshops on local languages. 'Next year' in the above quotation refers to 2007 and according to The Permanent Secretary's Circular 3 of 2002 the announcement was by the time of publication of the article already behind schedule. In fact the Zimbabwe Junior Certificate is yet to be resuscitated and very little of teaching of the said languages is being done beyond grade three at the moment. According to the said article ZILPA president Ephraim Makwati the association was proposing that Tonga, Kalanga, Nambya, Venda, Shangani and Sotho be examined by the said year.. These are only six of the fifteen affected languages. Are there some so-called minority languages which are more important than others? If not why should these chosen few go as far as Z.J.C. at the expense of Barwe, Chewa, Chikunda, Doma, Fingo/Xhosa, Hwesa, Tswana and Tswawo? Are the so-called minority languages already stratified? What was the criterion used to select the six? According to the *Inter-governmental Conference on Linguistic Policies in Africa* Chewa has 1% speakers while Venda, Shangani and Sotho have less than 1% each. Why then were the latter chosen ahead of the former if the criterion of percentage of speakers was used? Is it a question of the clout of those representing the language?

If the policy outlined in The Permanent Secretary's Circular 3 of 2002 above had been attended to Tonga, Kalanga, Nambya, Venda, Shangani and Sotho would have had their first grade seven graduates in 2005 and could have been offered at Form 1 level in 2006, Form 2, in 2007 and Form 3 in 2008 but this was not the case. It should be pointed out that some of the languages are now (2012) being examined at Grade 7. The programme is largely lagging pathetically way behind schedule in spite of just wishing to introduce the languages as subjects and not as media of instruction, which is more demanding. This is a typical example of how policy does not always graduate into practice.

Let us briefly go beyond our borders and look briefly at the linguistic scenarios there:

Country	No. of African languages	Official language/s
Nigeria	394	Hausa (North of the country) Yoruba (West of the country) Igbo (East of the country) English (Whole country)
Chad	250	Arabic
Cameroon	237	English

		French
D.R.C.	220	English French
C.A.R.	44	French
Gabon	42	French

Statistics extracted from UNESCO, cited in Mazrui (Ed.):1993)

How feasible is it for Nigeria, for instance, with her 394 languages to teach all of them up to university? Congo had a population of 1 740 000 in 1987 and 31 languages (Bamgbose,1991) an average of 56 129 032 first language speakers per language while The Central African Republic had 3 400 000 inhabitants and 68 languages (Robinson and Varley cited in Mumpande,2006) an average of 50 000 first language speakers per language. In the case of these two countries ,which have been taken as examples, the powers that be may want to see mother tongues being used as per recommendations from UNESCO,A.U. and many other fora but the cost of just catering for a handful users may be prohibitive. In fact of the few speakers only a small percentage will be in school. In the light of the astronomical costs involved, we should be contented with ensuring that the minority languages are at least taught meaningfully up to Grade 3 wherever such speech communities exist.

It is the contention of the author of this paper that:

- Globally dominant languages especially English, French, Spanish and Arabic have ceased to be preserves of their original countries-they have become part of African culture if ‘culture’ still refers to a way of living not, as many seem to believe, something to be kept in a locker to be brought out as need arises on ‘culture days’ or when entertaining tourists and foreign dignitaries. Though colonialism was a painful experience, it cannot be wished away together with its entrenched institutions-physical and otherwise (language policies inclusive).It would be foolhardy to throw away the said languages because of the way in which they found their way to Africa.
- Implementing language policies is an expensive undertaking that many African countries cannot afford. Expenses aside, there is also the question of feasibility and logistics. For instance out of the 220 African languages in the D.R.C. which one/s should be the official one/s? It is not a question of replacing a former colonizer’s language with an African one because very few African countries are monolingual. Such decisions have far-reaching socio-politico-economic implications and are very likely to be vehemently and violently resisted.

- A global village requires a global language, or a few languages, for wider communication. Reality dictates that not all languages can be used thus. Therefore some languages will be, in the eyes of society (and not intrinsically), more equal than others. It should be stressed again that this is a societal construct and may it be emphasized that this paper is not advocating the death of local languages. On the contrary these will continue to be indispensable for intranational and limited international communication.

- The way forward linguistically

Minority languages should continue to be taught up to Grade 3. It is this paper's contention that the African peoples of this country share many cultural traits eg. quite a number of proverbs are direct translations. This shows that people from different sub-cultures share a common worldview or at least a large chunk of it. Lawton, a renowned curricularist, views curriculum (what is taught in school) as "a selection from culture" (Lawton, 1975:6). We cannot run away from 'selection' in education because we simply do not have the time and resources to include everything our hearts desire. Even the 'lucky languages' which are taught up to university are still subjected to this process-not everything in them can fit on the timetable and in various syllabi. Of course there are various nuances, which differentiate one subculture from another, and we are fully aware of those. By the way, even in a monolingual scenario one will find the idiolects, sociolects and dialects which refer to peculiarities in the use of a language by an individual, a sub-group and even a larger social group in a speech community, respectively. There is so much in culture that selection, in spite of its inherent shortcomings, is still desirable and inevitable.

We need to maximize what we have in place linguistically. For instance Shona and Ndebele, the National languages should be written on different days instead of concurrently to enable bilingual learners and those who have a flare for languages to study and write them in one sitting. This will greatly benefit the many bilingual communities especially in the Midlands, Matebeleland and Masvingo provinces. This also means that the school timetables need to cater for learners who would like to study both. Such a move would go a long way in fostering national unity and harmony. A combination of English, Shona and Ndebele would be ideal for someone intending to pursue a career in eg. Journalism, education, law, public relations etc.

English has now become one of the world languages (used for wider communication) not just a preserve of the English people. It has been a unifying force in countries where it is not a National language. If the truth be said, many non-English speakers would rather have English as their lingua franca than any of the local ones for various reasons. Non-Shona speakers in this country would raise hell if Shona, spoken by 75% of the population, was to be elevated to official language status. They would rather wrestle with the imported language which is only spoken natively by approximately 1% of the Zimbabwean populace and which has a much wider social

distance from their own! The following sentiments on Nigeria may also prove true for other multilingual African countries:

In Nigeria, there is no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects the three poles: Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would be even more seriously threatened than it is if any one of these three languages were promoted by the government as being the one National Language. (Nida and Wonderly, 1971 : 65)

If we agree that English can unify us, why can't we embrace it and adapt it to suit our local needs? Many renowned African authors began this process way back by writing in a distinctly African idiom or flavour. What comes quickly to mind are works by such literary gurus as Charles Mungoshi, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thion'go and Chenjerai Hove. Works such as Waiting for the Rain, Bones and Things Fall Apart have received international acclaim in spite of being written in 'African flavoured English' in parts. This is evidence enough to show that English can be adapted to reflect our own sensibilities as a people. However we should hasten to point out that this new variety should not *stray* too far from code(s) used internationally in order to maintain mutual intelligibility with the rest of the world. Of course we should continue to develop our local languages for they are indispensable for intranational communication.

Countries which share a language, which are quite many in Africa ,for example:

-10% of Mozambicans are Shona-speaking.

-Kiswahili, which is spoken by 90% Tanzanians, is also spoken in Kenya, Uganda, D.R.C., Burundi, Rwanda, Mozambique, Malawi, Somalia and Zambia.

-Hausa, which is spoken, by 32% of Nigerians is also spoken in Niger, Chad, Ghana and Cameroon.

(Source: UNESCO cited in Mazrui (Ed.): 1993)

This could alleviate problems in as far as provision of reading materials and personnel are concerned, by linking up with sister nations in the region where there are established literary heritages in the said languages and excess experts. Transnational bureaus could be established to oversee the implementation of such policies. In as far as this cross-pollination is concerned, Great Zimbabwe University in Masvingo is already benefiting from personnel from the University of Venda who are teaching Venda and Shangani in the Faculty of Arts.

Conclusion

Languages were originally meant to be taught primarily at home with parents, siblings and other relatives as unpaid tutors in a situation where the learner was immersed in the

language. The modern set-up requires us to build educational institutions in which to teach the children and to draft a timetable, purchase learning materials and pay the tutors. This artificial set-up, which is as artificial as formula milk, should not be expected to be a panacea to solve our language teaching and learning problems. The educational satchel has limited space and cannot therefore carry everything our hearts desire. This may sound cruel, callous and unAfrican to some (who might even call for my tongue!) but it is reality not Utopian idealism. This is why 59 years after UNESCO's proclamation on the virtues of teaching in the mother tongue not much has been done to change the linguistic scenario which obtained in colonial times (We suggest that this phenomenon, whereby an independent people perpetuates linguistic policies of their erstwhile colonizer, be christened **linguistic inertia**). Teaching and examining all minority languages up to tertiary level (even up to O-level) is a 21st century pipe dream for most African countries akin to the Rozvi's dream to reach the moon on a magnanimous wooden ladder, emotionally appealing but difficult to realize.

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