



Research Article

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The Functionality of Sotho as a Previously Marginalised Language in a Multilingual Educational Setting

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Abstract

The language policy issues in Zimbabwe are embedded in three documents which are the Education Act of 1987, the Nziramasanga Commission, and the current constitution which was passed into law in 2013. The paper examines the negatives and positives of these policies in education and how they facilitate the inclusion and exclusion of Sotho. The vague policies which are evasive on how indigenous languages should be treated when it comes to their use as media of instruction are problematised. Data used in this paper was supplemented with information that came from interviews with eight teachers from schools in Gwanda. It is argued in this paper that the policies and pieces of legislation are not devoted to the equal advancement of indigenous languages. It is concluded that the functionality of Sotho in the education sector in Zimbabwe is mainly hindered by the government policies that do not recognise the co-existence of languages but rather create a linguistic war zone where they have to fight to dislodge one another. The paper advocates for the recognition of harmonious co-existence of languages in education where all the languages found in a geographical space are not restricted but are made to function equally and simultaneously.

Keywords: Language inclusion, linguistic functionality, Sotho, bilingual education, linguistic co-existence

1. Introduction and Background

The arguments raised in the paper are informed by an analysis of the contents of the current *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013*; *The Education Act of 1987*; and the *Nziramasanga Commission on Education (1999)*. While the pieces of legislation and declarations are meant to elevate all languages to the same level, it should not be forgotten that language policy issues are often political (Nhongo, 2013). The political connections can be made among these locally crafted

policies and commissions noting that the *Education Act* of 1987 was crafted after the political disturbances and hence its concentration on languages which were deemed nationally representative of contesting people, the Ndebele and Shona. However, because Sotho, Venda, Kalanga, Nambya, Tonga and Xhosa are found in Matabeleland, they were deliberately excluded because they were considered to be dialects of Ndebele yet they differ linguistically, culturally and historically. The scrutiny of functionality, treatment and promotion of Sotho as an 'officially recognised language' constitutes the main discussion in this paper. Language is a fundamental element and expression of identity and is of vital importance in the preservation of group identity.

In Zimbabwe, Shona has politically been placed above all indigenous languages found and spoken in the country and has subsequently been covertly planned for and assigned all official administrative functions (Ndhlovu, 2009). The Sotho community in Gwanda South has been forced to learn Ndebele at school to the detriment of their own mother tongue. It is against this background that, this paper is endeavouring to establish the functionality of Sotho where isiNdebele is dominating as a regional language, and English as the main language of instruction when all these languages are considered to be enjoying equal status as indicated in the *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013*. An inquiry is made into linguistic exclusion and inclusion as evident in Sotho experiences and in contradiction to what is spelt out in the current Constitution of Zimbabwe. The inclusion and exclusion of Sotho is analysed from a functionality perspective in a triglossic situation. In a triglossic situation there co-exist three languages in a hierarchised format, in this case, with English as the official language, Ndebele as the mostly accepted and widely used regional language and Sotho as the local language that is peculiar to a specific geographical location, that is Gwanda South. However, although the constitution states that these three languages have an equal status, the reality on the ground proves otherwise.

May and Aikman (2003, p. 14) believe that education is the only route which can be used by indigenous people to uphold their languages. The main language of instruction in schools is usually the language that is preferred by those in positions of power. Brock-Utne (2001) is critical of the Tanzanian government's policy of introducing the use of English as a medium of instruction at secondary school level. The unconditional use of Sotho as a medium will address the inequalities of language use in Gwanda South. The exclusive use of English language in African educational contexts overshadow the importance and functionality of African indigenous languages (Wa Thiong'o, 1987; Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998; Batibo, 2009). Bunyi (1999) and Prah (2003) argue that foreign language results in imperfect education in Africa. Whilst these researchers argue for the use of local African languages for academic literacy, they ignore addressing the issue of African languages also exercising hegemonic tendencies over other African languages. It is for this reason why this paper is looking at the functionality of Sotho in an environment where Ndebele is dominating and English is the language of wider communication.

The officially 16 recognised languages in the current Constitution of Zimbabwe that was passed into law in 2013, are Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Khoisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sign Language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa. Implications are that all the 16 languages should be used in the same manner, but English, Shona and Ndebele still remain the major languages and continue to obscure other local languages even in areas where the original inhabitants of the area do not speak these languages as their L1. English remains the official language of education, business, commerce, administration and many other areas of wider communication. It is therefore prudent that we analyse factors that mediate the socio-cultural and socio-linguistic context of schooling for the Sotho community in Zimbabwe.

With language perceived as a resource and form of identity to a nation, planning is therefore a requirement. As a country, citizens need to ensure that children learn to read and write in their own mother tongue to maintain their identity. Sow, Balogun, Aguessy, and Diague (1979, p. 26) posit that governments should:

Draw up a national cultural charter guaranteeing the respect, the dignity, the equality and the enhancement of the languages and culture of all their ethnic communities, and specifying how these principles will be enforced.

Today most debates are about promoting African languages (Ranaweera, 1976; Dlodlo, 1999; Babaci-Wilhite, 2016). Indigenous languages should be incorporated as languages of instruction in education (Babaci-Wilhite, 2016, p. xiv). The paper argues that while it is important to incorporate indigenous African languages in education, the challenge is in approaches that used by the government of Zimbabwe. Their approach is problematic in that they want to promote African languages so that these languages are taught merely as subjects. This paper advocates for an approach where African languages are used in communicating knowledge in all subjects. These languages should again not be used exclusively of others that they co-exist with but they should be used together with the goal of promoting communication and not facilitating the use of a particular language.

2. Literature Review

Previous researches have been advocating for equity between African indigenous languages and English and their use as medium of instruction in education. Other researchers have shifted their focus from the hegemony of English to concentrate on the dominance of African languages over other indigenous African languages. The major focus of this paper is on the functionality of Sotho in a multilingual educational context where it is a language of the majority of learners but is dominated by Ndebele as a regional language and English as the main medium of instruction.

Among the researchers who have been writing about the dominance of English over African languages in Zimbabwe are Kadenge and Nkomo (2011), who argue that English is a medium of oppression and a killer language as far as indigenous languages are concerned. On the other hand, researchers who include Mutasa (1995), Viriri (2003), Nyika (2008), and Maseko and Moyo (2013) advocate for the revitalisation of marginalised and archived African languages. They argue that these languages should be given a functional space, efforts to be made to induce them into the national scheme, and be promoted as they are intangible cultural heritage. Chimhundu (1992) blames the early missionaries and the colonial government for creating inequalities between indigenous languages in Zimbabwe. Another group of researchers is advocating for the use of African languages as medium of instruction, and these are, Peresuh and Masuku (2002), Thondhlana (2002), Ndamba (2008), and Chivhanga and Chimhenga (2013). However, contrary to the use of these African languages as media of instruction in education, Cleghorn, Mtetwa, Dube and Munetsi (1998), argue that it is important to introduce English language as a medium of instruction at the early stages of schooling so that learners prepare for English language-related demands of higher education.

Other researchers have moved away from blaming the hegemony of English and focussed on the perpetuated inequalities between African languages. Ndhlovu (2008) looked at the politics of language and marginalisation of other local languages in Zimbabwe. He concluded that the marginalisation of indigenous African languages by the dominant Shona and Ndebele is as a result of language planning that was done by the Rhodesian government through their consultation with Clement Doke, a linguist who was hired from South Africa, in 1931. Ndhlovu (2009) argues that the discussion about the hegemony of English is considered an old and exhausted question. Muchenje, Goronga and Bondai (2013) focused on the marginalisation of Chichewa by Shona and English at two primary schools in Zvimba in Zimbabwe.

Given the above scenarios, it is clear that the linguistic reality at any given place or time in Zimbabwe is either bilingual or multilingual. There is need therefore, to adopt a new approach where languages that co-exist are not put into competition or are made to fight for space through creating a conducive environment for harmonious existence. Translanguaging is one approach that advocates for such harmonious existence of languages that co-exist in a given geographical space. There is need for a shift from treating co-existing languages as autonomous but they should instead be regarded as dependent and complimenting one another in education.

There are a number of researchers who have focused on translanguaging as an approach that can be adopted in bilingual and multilingual educational contexts. Translanguaging refers to how bilinguals and multilinguals use their entire linguistic repertoire (Garcia, 2011). Chumak-Horbatsch

(2012, p. 56) argues that bilinguals translanguange by making use of a variety of communicative possibilities, practices, and choices.

3. Theoretical Framework

The ideas advanced in this paper are informed by dynamic bilingualism as a theory. Dynamic bilingualism refers to the multiple language practices that are exhibited by bilinguals and multilinguals. Dynamic bilingualism is concerned about the fluid linguistic functionality of multilinguals within a variety of contexts. Dynamic bilingualism is characterised by fluidity and flexibility where multilingual learners engage to make meaning and communicate in multilingual classroom contexts (Garcia, 2011; Flores & Schissel, 2014). This conceptual idea is used to argue that since learners in Gwanda South are dynamic bilinguals who are proficient in both Ndebele and Sotho and also having English as an additional language, the language policies that are put in place should not separate or hierarchise the languages but should emphasise on utilising all of them as valuable resources. Dynamic bilingualism as theory is used in this paper to assess how Sotho is included or excluded in language use in education where Ndebele dominates as the regional language and English as the main language of instruction while Sotho is the language of identity in Gwanda South.

4. Research Design and Methodology

As way of understanding the functioning of Sotho in schools in Gwanda South where it is the first language of the majority but dominated by Ndebele and English in education, the study uses a qualitative phenomenological research design complimented by textual analysis. The study investigates the experiences of teachers in the functioning of languages in a triglossic situation with particular focus on the use of Sotho in schools. The phenomenology design requires that in order to understand human experiences, there is need for immersive scrutiny of the research participants' thoughts and ideas about the subject under investigation (Creswell, 2017). The immersive penetration in this study was done through interviewing eight teachers equitably drawn from four primary schools in Gwanda South. Sampling of teachers was purposive and voluntary. Textual analysis was used where the Education Act of 1987, the Constitution of Zimbabwe and the Nziramasanga Commission were analysed as primary documents

As way of conforming to the ethics of research, the researchers explained to the participants that the study was about the inclusion and exclusion of Sotho in a triglossic situations of education contexts in Gwanda South. No one was forced or paid to participate in the study. The research participants were also assured that no name of any individual was going to be published.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study would be best understood if the contents of the documents that regulate language use in education are explained. These documents are the Nziramasanga Commision, the Constitution of Zimbabwe, and the Education Act of 1887 as amended in 2006. In other words, the language-in-education policy of Zimbabwe is enshrined in these documents.

5.1 *The Education Act of 1987 amended in 2006*

According to the *Education Act of 1987*, revised in 2006 as *Education Act Chapter 25:04, Part XII, Section 62*, there are mainly three languages that can be taught in all primary schools in Zimbabwe. The Act mentions the teaching of Shona, Ndebele and English, and 'minority' languages as optional in areas where they exist.

The provision of the *Education Act Chapter 25:04* pertains directly to the promotion of Shona and Ndebele since it stipulates how Shona and Ndebele should be treated as mediums. The Act stipulates

that languages are to be taught in schools as follows:

- (1) Subject to this section, 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 subsection (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 basis as the English language.
- (4) In areas where minority languages exist, the Minister may authorize the teaching of such languages in primary schools in addition to those specified in subsections (1), (2) and (3) (Education Act Chapter 25:04, Part XII, Section 62).

The serious anomaly that appears in this act is that there is emphasis of teaching Ndebele and Shona as subjects and not as languages of instruction in other subjects. The Education Act is emphasising on the teaching of African languages as subjects and not the teaching of other subjects through them. The inclusion of Sotho as a subject to be taught is optional where the act says 'where minority languages exist, the Minister may authorise the teaching of such languages'. The fact that the minister is empowered to allow the teaching of 'minority' languages means the government is neither taking the existence of these languages seriously nor is seriously considering the linguistic rights of the speakers of these languages. It is imperative to note that, even in areas where Shona and Ndebele are spoken by only a few, the Act gives them first preference ahead of the local language which might be dominant as noted with Sotho in Gwanda South. The use of the term 'minority' is clear indication that the policy makers still perceive some languages as minor, or having few speakers and not important which is against the UNESCO declaration of 1953 (Nhongo 2013). The contents of the policy acknowledge the co-existence of languages in Zimbabwe, but the same contents advocate for a monolingual approach in the functionality of these languages in multilingual settings.

5.2 Nziramasanga Commission on Education, 1999

The Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry of 1999 on language use in education in Zimbabwe was initiated as a move to increase access to education in the post-independence era in the country. The idea was to end the continued use of colonial policies in independent Zimbabwe. The restrictive policies can be compared to the racial education structures which are well articulated in the *Education Act* of 1965 which were crafted on racial grounds. Zimbabwe's post-colonial nation building approach is based on democracy and observing the needs of the majority and indigenous people, however, it is self-defeating when it becomes biased towards the minority languages that constitute several speech communities. Ndhlovu (2009) describes the subject of language elevation as exclusionary and susceptible to 'internal colonization' in that the government has mainly concentrated on the promotion and elevation of Shona and Ndebele. The Nziramasanga Commission has criticized the language practices in education and other public sectors for entrenching the dominance of English. The current language-in-education policy marginalises the majority of Zimbabweans who are not proficient in English, but operate effectively in indigenous languages. According to the recommendations made by Nziramasanga (1999), instruction in the indigenous languages does not result in a decrease in the mastery of English, and does not hinder the progression of the learners' mastery and proficiency in English language.

It is clear that the recommendations made by the Nziramasanga commission are opting for replacing one language by the other in education. We argue that replacing one language by the other

in multilingual contexts is not the best of approaches as such a move creates more confusion. A more noble approach would be to allow languages to function together in teaching and learning so as to enhance cognition amongst the learners and boost their morale. The learners in Gwanda South are already exposed to Sotho as their mother tongue, Ndebele as the dominant language and English as the language of wider communication meaning that all these languages should be used inclusively in knowledge sharing and dissemination.

5.3 *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Number 20, 2013*

In 2008, the Government of National Unity under ZANU PF and Movement for Democratic Change drafted and ratified the constitution which was signed into law in 2013. For the first time in the history of Zimbabwe, the constitution officially recognized sixteen languages. For years, Zimbabwe had never enjoyed its linguistic democracy as an independent country. The *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) of 2013*, Section 6 lists sixteen languages as officially recognised, and these are Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Khoisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sign Language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa.

The first observation that can be made from this constitution is that Section 6 falls under the founding provisions and according to law, the government is not obliged to implement anything that falls under founding provisions. The second problem contained under Section 6 is that the constitution says that these languages are 'officially recognised' which can be interpreted as a deliberate move of avoiding to openly declare them as 'official'. The constitution only talks about the recognition of these languages but those who interpret this clause may be misled to think that the constitution is calling for each linguistic group to stand on its own and use its own language. The history of Zimbabwe shows that there has been internal migration meaning that it is now difficult to find a single language being spoken in any one geographical location. In Gwanda South where Sotho is predominant language of the area, there have been efforts to replace Ndebele with it after the current constitution was put into law. In their everyday general conversation, children use both Ndebele and Sotho in Gwanda South but when it comes to education some prescriptivists want those children to learn Sotho only as a subject at school. There is need to consider the simultaneous use of all available languages in school instead of having one language dislodging the other. Trying to replace Ndebele with Sotho, would create confusion amongst the learners and hinder their cognitive abilities because they will be made to live a new linguistic reality in school which is different from that of their everyday life outside of school. A harmonious co-existence of Sotho and Ndebele outside of school should be integrated into the education system.

5.4 *The Current Situation in Inclusion and Exclusion of Sotho in Education*

On paper, particularly in the constitution, Sotho is included in education, but from the interviews it came to light that in practice, there are a number of factors that lead to the exclusion of Sotho in education. Such factors include, the deployment of non-Sotho speaking teachers to predominantly Sotho areas; the availability of a very few teachers who are trained to teach Sotho; some of those who are Sotho grew up speaking Ndebele making them not conversant with Sotho; Ndebele dominance; negative attitudes towards Sotho; and lack of will by those who are in positions of authority to implement Sotho in education. All these factors that lead to failure to the inclusion of Sotho in education are as a result trying to replace Ndebele with Sotho, the aim to teach Sotho as a subject and not to include it as a language for teaching, failure to recognise the co-existence of Sotho with other languages such as Ndebele and English.

It was observed that while Sotho is predominantly used as a home language, Ndebele has for long been used as a medium of instruction in primary and secondary education. Four teachers who were L1 speakers of Sotho indicated that they mix the three languages, Sotho, Ndebele and English when teaching. The reason why they mix these languages is because they are aware that learners in Gwanda South are

conversant with at least two of these languages. This paper argues that the mixing of these languages is the ideal way of dealing with the language impasse instead of trying to impose or dislodge other languages in an environment where languages co-exist. It is clear that in Gwanda South the learners are dynamic bilinguals or multilinguals and therefore translanguaging as an approach to teaching will be the best option instead of going for the exclusive use of a single language. The other four teachers who were not L₁ speakers of Sotho mixed English and Ndebele as a result excluding Sotho in conversations. The teachers indicated that mixing languages is rarely used as an ideal method of teaching but it is useful when explaining vocabulary, self-expression by the learners, as well as ensuring maximum class participation. Cohen (1995) posits that mixing languages is used as a scaffolding tool in reducing affective barriers and results in teachers' confidence in the classroom. Although teachers are sceptical about using more than one language in teaching, such an approach yields positive results. Poorahmadi (2009) argues that using L₁ and L₂ assists learners in developing how to read and translate making them gradually develop a reading ability on their own. It is clear that code-mixing and code-switching is unavoidable in these multilingual settings where English should be the main language of instruction. The problem lies with teachers who are not conversant with Sotho which is the learners' L₁ resulting in them using Ndebele and English only and thereby hampering the learners' dynamic bilingual functionality.

The teachers were also asked about how learners responded when English was used together with Sotho and Ndebele and the responses showed that the majority of learners felt comfortable in using Sotho and Ndebele in addition to English. This is a clear indicator that there is no need to come up with policies that stipulate on the use of just one language when reality shows that there is co-existence of languages. All languages that co-exist must be used freely during learning without restrictions because learners already have them as their cognitive enhancing resource. It was however mentioned that those who are not L₁ Sotho speakers and even some who are L₁ speakers of Sotho have a feeling that Ndebele occupies more linguistic space and as a result they do not feel comfortable using Sotho but prefer Ndebele. The implication might be that some learners are not Sotho or have a negative attitude towards the language. Although there was a feeling that Sotho, the dominant language in Gwanda South, was somehow excluded in learning, it came out during interviews that in the teaching and learning of English, Sotho was included, of course together with Ndebele.

The teachers were positive about the inclusion of Sotho as the learners' L₁ in the teaching of English as L₂ and other subjects that were taught through English as the main medium. Only one out of the eight teachers was opposed to the idea of involving the learners' L₁ in teaching English as L₂. The reason given by the research participant was that '*learners become reluctant and over relaxed thereby delaying the grasping of L₂ concepts once they establish a comfort zone in the L₂*'. The learners' L₁ and L₂ can be used concurrently to enhance the cognitive processes. Chumak-Horbatsch (2012, p. 53) is of the idea that dynamic bilingualism focuses on languages that speakers *use* rather than on separate languages they *have*'. That means that these learners in Gwanda South are dynamic bilinguals because they have Sotho but they can still operate in Ndebele and English. This calls for the inclusion of all languages that these learners already have instead of trying to force a new norm on them.

The teachers were also asked to give their views on what should be done to improve attitudes towards Sotho and also on how the language could be uplifted since it is now officially recognised in the constitution. The research participants proposed that Sotho should be made a compulsory subject at school and to be studied as a course or programme at university and other higher learning institutions. While the indigenous languages have been made official languages, the research participants recommended that government should go an extra mile and put in place policies which will enhance the social status of Sotho. They advocated for advertisements on television and radio programmes which would enhance its status. As an official and dominant language spoken in Gwanda, the research participants believed that assigning Sotho language a recruitment role in the employment of public servants will go a long way in conscientising the public about the existence of Sotho. They argued that a language can only improve in status if the government structures have policies which recognize its existence and functionality. One of the teachers said:

I think government should be sincere with the promotion and protection of these marginalised languages. I don't see any positive development in the upliftment of these languages if they are not made compulsory at school. The government should make English, Maths and an indigenous language compulsory if languages such as Sotho are to be respected and be taken seriously. By so doing it will make people change the negative attitude associated with the indigenous languages. If studies at secondary and tertiary level are made in Sotho, it will remove the inferiority tag associated with marginalised languages. I believe every language has a role to play in social, education, political, economic, research and scientific development in a country and as authors we coin the terms which are ever used.

It is clear that for Sotho to enjoy inclusion in a multilingual education environment, it should be given space in the linguistic landscape particularly in Gwanda where it is predominantly spoken.

6. Conclusion

The paper has put into perspective the linguistic provisions of the *Education Act of 1987*, *Nziramasanga Commission on Education 1999*, and the *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013*. The study has concluded that, the pieces of legislation in place are impeding the functionality of indigenous languages because they are only recognised as subjects and not as languages to be used in teaching other subjects. These pieces of legislation are not clearly acknowledging the co-existence of languages but rather adopt a separatist approach. These documents want to treat these languages as if they exist independently hence they should enjoy autonomy yet there is no situation in Zimbabwe's schools where only one language is found. One way in which Sotho can be accepted and included in education is to use it together with other languages such as Ndebele and English. The L1 speakers of Sotho are conversant in Ndebele and are also developing proficiency in English and that justifies why these languages should be used simultaneously. What is important is to facilitate learning through these languages and not a mere mastery of them. These learners that are found in Gwanda South are dynamic bilinguals because they can communicate knowledge through the use of all the three languages at their disposal. However, the policies that are put in place together with the motives of language prescriptivists are restricting the potential possessed by these dynamic bilinguals. The main problem in Zimbabwe is that the policies that are put in place seem to be promoting societal and not individual multilingualism. It has to be noted that bilingual or multilingual education is beneficial to cognitive development amongst learners, and also in the development of individual languages. The policies should not be designed in such a way that languages fight for recognition but rather for harmonious existence and functionality of co-existing languages.

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