

LANGUAGE POLICY THE LIKELY SOLUTION FOR ZIMBABWEAN PROBLEMS

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Abstract

Zimbabwe, just like the others in Africa, is a developing country whose distance away from becoming developed is not getting any shorter inspite of a whole lot of programmes that have been implemented to address the issue. This demonstrates a need for reorientation in as far as the perception of development and the methods of pursuing it are concerned. The paper argues for the need to revisit the country's language policy and efforts towards the attainment of development in the light of how well-developed countries like China have got to where they are. It is a qualitative research-based paper that relied on observing Zimbabwean people in relation to their policies. It emerged that maladministration, high levels of corruption, high levels of deadly diseases like HIV/AIDS are examples of the major obstacles to development in Africa and these result mainly from the absence of *unhuism* or *ubuntuism* that is typical of a typical Zimbabwean community. This raises the need for the nation to understand the role of language, culture and tradition in development.

Keywords: Language Policy, Development, Culture, Tradition

1. Introduction

Language policy is, in simple terms, the hierarchical ordering of the languages in a speech community that comes as a result of a language planning exercise. This is reiterated by Shohamy (2006) who describes language policy as what a government does either officially through legislation, court decisions or policy to determine how languages are used, cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or to establish the rights of individuals or groups to use and maintain languages. It, thus, serves as the determinant of the ultimate contribution of each language, together with the culture associated with it, to a nation's well being. A nation may opt for an exoglossic language policy that emphasises the promotion of exotic languages, which is the case with almost every developing country, or an endoglossic policy, which is the case with almost all developed countries.

This trend has induced in the researcher the desire to find out if it does not point to some secret link between language policy and development.

The objective sounds well placed considering Shohamy's (2006) observation that the preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity in today's world is a major concern to many scientists, artists, writers, politicians, leaders of linguistic communities, and defenders of linguistic human rights. This is so due to the observation that more than half of the 6000 languages currently spoken in the world are estimated to be in danger of disappearing during the 21st century (Spolsky, 2012). Spolsky further notes that many factors affect the existence and usage of any given human language, including the size of the native speaking population, its use in formal communication, the geographical dispersion and the socio-economic weight of its speakers. This clearly demonstrates the need to ensure that every language has a part to play in a community as there must be some incentive behind the use of every language in a country. Therefore, language policy is the sole determinant of the longevity of every language and the culture that it carries.

But what is culture? In simple terms, it is the knowledge bank of a community's norms, values and beliefs. Hence Malinowski's assertion that culture is an integral whole of three components: artifacts, including means and mode of production; organizations, including social, economic and political organizations; and the ethics and values (www.anthrobase.com/Browse/Cit/M/bronislaw_k_malinowski.htm). One's value orientation is not innate, but is rather acquired during one's childhood, and is passed from one generation to the next. Thus, the core ethical values of a nation's culture are transmitted from generation to generation through the interactions of children with their parents and surrounding people. Language is the tool for tapping knowledge from a culture and this point to a close relationship between language and culture that most scholars rightly describe as inseparable.

As a result, it is important to note that the death of a language means the disappearance of the culture associated with it. This will mean the loss of the traditional, values, wisdom and knowledge housed in that language. It is also important to note that some languages are still alive but their insignificance in as far as the national policy is concerned makes no one interested in using them together with the cultures and traditions they carry. With the passage of time, the departure of the elderly speakers would also mean the permanent disappearance of those languages, their cultures and traditions. For instance, one may take the arrival of the whites in Africa whose language policies demoted the indigenous languages at the same time labelling African cultures and traditions as backward, barbaric and evil. The failure of the post-independence policies to rectify this order is leading to the

ultimate disappearance of important knowledge that would have seen the advancement of these nations towards development.

This makes it necessary to define the term development. It is the process by which someone or something grows or changes and becomes more advanced (www.dictionary.cambridge.org). People thus need to perceive development as focusing on making their selves better than before. www.usinessdictionary.org also defines development as the process of economic and social transformation that is based on complex cultural and environmental factors and their interactions. This brings into place the need for one to bear in mind that there must be consideration of what is there and how it can be made better rather than making a complete shift from the present. In the light of this, the problem with most African countries appears to stem in the west's desire to make them shift completely towards western oriented development. This is the reason its development cannot really take place as its finest engineers, technicians and doctors can only maintain the imported machines and use the imported medicines etc without being creative about them. They cannot add anything of their own and thus have nothing to contribute towards the world's betterment. What has become more important to them is the way most recent developments in the external world can be learned about and practiced.

2. Linguistic and Cultural Values in Development

According to Francis X (2009), the first writer to propose a cultural explanation for underdevelopment was the political scientist Edward Banfield in his 1958 volume *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* who attributes the slow economic growth in southern Italy to the excessive pursuit of narrow self-interest by people who have never learned to trust anything outside their family. Francis X adds that in an even more recent book, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, David Landes concludes that the success of national economies is driven by cultural factors more than anything else adding that thrift, hard work, tenacity, honesty and tolerance are the cultural factors that make all the difference. In his view, one can suggest that social attitudes and values have the decisive say on what economies will succeed and which will fail.

According to Muhammad (2010), there are some forces that influence economic growth through their impact on the core variables of growth. For instance, 'self-control' that affects saving behaviour and the fertility choice that consequently impact the investment in physical capital (Lewis, 1955) and the population growth rate (Malthus, 1798) respectively; or the desire for self-improvement, which influences the decision to invest in education, which, in turn, enables people to acquire skills and build human capital

(Azariadis and Drazen, 1990). However, there are some other factors that have a relatively less clear link with the core variables of growth, but they can be arguably and convincingly regarded as important factors affecting growth. Among these are found the moral commitment of one's own, that induces work ethics and is one of the main determinants of work effort and thus of labour productivity, trust and the willingness to cooperate, that impact the subjective cost of cooperating with strangers and can have a profound effect on trading networks which help shape the size and the expansion of markets (Muhammad, 2010). Similarly, mutual respect and honesty, which are the foundations of business ethics and property rights, influence the costs of contracts and minimize distortions such as corruption, theft, coercive acts and deceptive information.

It may be mentioned that some of the above factors and forces - self-determination, honesty, cooperation, trust, mutual respect, self-improvement, freedom of thought - depend on individual attitudes, which, in turn, are based on a set of beliefs, values and norms that change very slowly. It may, therefore, be argued that one can devise a series of factors that are defined or influenced by the customary beliefs, values and norms of the society, which have important real economic roles, and include them in the typical neoclassical growth models whose empirical estimation can show their probable effects on economic growth. The Asian tigers have suggested that economic growth was more a matter of human behaviour than of endowment of others' economic variables. In Zimbabwe, the concept of *unhu*, which Chivero (2012) calls good behaviour emphasises all the cultural factors above, that is, self-determination, honesty, cooperation, trust, mutual respect, self-improvement, freedom of thought. These are, however, disappearing due to the current exoglossic language policy that has seen people questioning the value of their languages and cultures and moving towards being identified with foreign languages and behaviours. Unfortunately they cannot really fit into the European and cultures resulting in a culture that is neither Zimbabwean nor fully European. This has seen a rise in practices such as corruption, prostitution, child abuse, robbery, thefts, rape, high unemployment, more divorce cases leading to more orphans, high levels of HIV/AIDS etc which are antidevelopment.

Significant contributions of the period, for example, by Putnam's (1993) and Fukuyama's (1995) bestsellers in Muhammad (2010), have evidently identified that cultural values play a very vital role in explaining economic growth all around the world. Additional evidence available further suggests that cultural differences are an important part of the story of economic growth and development. According to Muhammad (2010), by comparison, most African economies have experienced low level of growth rates during the same period of time. Both societal-level and individual-level

evidence suggest that it is not only a society's economic and political institutions but also its cultural factors like values, norms and belief factors are important in determining the economic development of any country.

Coyne and Williamson (2009: 13) argue that, “in societies with lower levels of social capital, and hence lower levels of respect, the extent of the market will be limited to close kin and friendship networks”. In line with these arguments, higher levels of respect are likely to lead to an increase in the level of economic growth and development. Finally, obedience, taken as the fourth cultural measure, may affect economic growth negatively. If children are taught to obey and individualism is not desirable, the children also have control and autonomy at lower levels, they may, therefore, unlikely to engage in risky behaviour to take the necessary entrepreneurial spirit (Harper, 2003). Baumol (1990) suggests that an appropriate institutional environment, people spend their time on developing their talents in productive entrepreneurship, but in poor settings, individuals have different incentives and engage in unproductive entrepreneurship. This may explain the high levels of fraud in some countries, for instance. A good example is the high level of corruption and manipulation of the systems for individual benefits associated with developing countries like Zimbabwe. Such are both unAfrican and antidevelopment.

3. Chinese Language Policy and Development

A close look at the history of Chinese development shows that they began by valuing their traditional medicines and knowledge. She is a typical beneficiary from an appropriate endoglossic language policy. The economy of China was once poor and pathetic as the official English language alienated their languages and cultures to the periphery. This changed when the government revised the policy making Mandarin Chinese the official language (www.worldpoliticsreview.com). It was not native to most Chinese people but it was well received locally and now internationally making it one of the 6 languages used in the United Nations. Chinese have since developed a sense of ownership as well as a passion to see the advancement of their country. Their language policy has made their graduates capable of being creative with the knowledge as there is harmony between the knowledge imparted in a local language and the environment around them. Their culture has gained immense value and today the country is popular for its medicines which resulted from a transformation of the traditional medicines into modern ones (www.herbintro.com). Thousands each year gain training in their Chinese medicine research institutes. It is this that has cemented the Chinese's position amongst the most developed countries in the world.

According to Francis X (2009), the Chinese case is a good example of how culture impacts on development. All over the world, they are one ethnic

group that does so well in business even when they are minorities in other cultures. He indicates that Chinese in the Philippines, accounting for less than two percent of the population, control 60% of the nation's private economy, including the country's four major airlines and almost all the country's banks, hotels and shopping malls. But it is not just in the Philippines that Chinese ethnic minorities have made their mark. They have come to dominate business in other parts of Southeast Asia as well—especially Indonesia, Thailand, Burma and Malaysia. Even closer to home, Chinese have distinguished themselves in the Solomons, Tonga, and in Majuro, triggering occasional reactions from the local populations. Francis X (2009) notes that all this has happened even where both groups have similar opportunities and provisions due to cultural aspects such as trust, belief in the importance of individual effort, generalised morality, autonomy, ethics of hard work and thrift.

4. Zimbabwean language policy and its implications

According to the Financial Gazette of 15 September 2015, the old constitution only recognised English, Ndebele and Shona as the official languages of Zimbabwe. This is a policy that was put in place by the former colonisers and it made the three languages appear placed at the same level in the country. However, in actual fact, as evident in the education act of 1987, English enjoyed the highest status in the country. Shona and Ndebele (the indigenous languages involved) were and are still acting as national languages rather than real official languages. They enjoy a position well below that of English. The policy came with the former colonisers who also tried all they could to turn the locals against their cultures and traditions. These were described as evil, backward and barbaric. As a result most locals seem to have a confused perception of their selves. They have come to hate their norms, values and beliefs so much that some even labour to have their children acquire none of the indigenous languages as their first language. Some schools have since emerged very popular with these people after adopting a policy that does not allow the teaching and use of all indigenous languages. Such a position makes the people fall in between the identity of the former coloniser and the Zimbabwean one. In other words they do not perfectly belong to any of the groups which seem to explain some of the unusual behaviours that are now typical of the Zimbabwean society (like having one of the highest levels of corruption and devising ways of stealing money using evil ways such as Satanism). No country is known to have developed through such means.

Section 6 (1) of the current Constitution reads: “The following languages, namely Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Khoisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana,

Venda and Xhosa, are the officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe.” This again seems to place all the 16 languages spoken in the country at the same level. However, it is well known that only English enjoys the status of a real official language followed by Shona and Ndebele enjoying the status of national languages taught up to university level. Only these 3 are mandated to be taught up to university level. The other 6 (Kalanga, Tonga, Shangani, Nambya, Sotho and Venda) are official minority languages. These are supposed to be taught in schools where they are spoken up to grade 7 though in most areas this is only so in theory. According to the Financial Gazette of 15 September 2015, most of the languages do not even have orthographies and groups are tired of lobbying for these. A good example is Basilwizi lobbying for the Tonga orthography in Binga. Similarly Zimbabwean Shangani has no orthography which makes it difficult for it to be taught properly. This shows how limited the government’s desire to promote the languages and their cultures is. This also demonstrates how useless the languages and cultures are in the eyes of the government which in turn influences the society’s perception. Remember, people usually value languages and cultures that provide access to scarce resources.

The rest of the languages are only identified as other minority languages that are supposed to be used where they are spoken up to grade 3. However, an observation has demonstrated that the deployment of teachers to areas where such minority languages are spoken does not take this issue into consideration. There is no effort by the ministry of education to deploy in these areas teachers who can speak the languages which would guarantee instruction in those minority languages up to grade 3 as stated by the curriculum. Most of the teachers can neither speak the language nor understand the cultures that are carried. This has made the students and the society realise the insignificance of the languages. This is forcing them to say it is better to stop using the languages as their use would make their children acquire a language that is of no use as a first language. In most cases they have turned towards the use of the national languages (Shona or Ndebele) as these have some value in education though limited. This certainly has a huge effect on the well being of the cultures that are carried by the languages since it becomes difficult to pass on the cultures without the languages. Language itself is culturally transmitted which makes the two inseparable.

English language and culture is still enjoying the top position in Zimbabwe. It is the language that provides an avenue to all the scarce resources like education and employment. This is making the people question the value of the local languages as well as the cultures that go with them and most are shunning them in favour of English. Various cultures have very useful knowledge on things like medicines, health and longevity.

However, these have been painted black, first by the former coloniser's policy and the explanations that justified it as mentioned earlier and now by the policy outlined in the old and new constitution. A close observation done on Shangani speakers in the Zaka district of Masvingo province demonstrates that most of them no longer want to be identified with their language and culture. They no longer perform some of their traditional practices like circumcision which has now been proved globally to be very good for health. In the past they used various types of medicines (for example to cure tooth aches, avoid blindness, infertility etc) that they no longer want to be identified with. As a result most of the elders who knew about them have passed away without passing on the knowledge to others as they consider it evil and barbaric. This is so with most of the local languages and it is very pathetic considering the high level of things such as early blindness, low expectancy and frequent tooth removal exercises in the country.

5. Conclusion

Contrary to the Chinese situation, in Zimbabwe Western countries are the ones coming to study some of the traditional herbs transforming them into modern medicines and so forth, like the recent development that has seen one of the Zimbabwean traditional herbs being developed into aloe vera oils, tooth paste etc. Even the finest local doctors could not see that opportunity due to the nature of their learning exercise that has kept a gap between imparted knowledge and the environment around them. It does not warrant them the power to be creative at a time when no one is eager to preserve the herbs and knowledge about their uses. The argument here is that, if the Zimbabweans revise their educational language policy to make the imparted knowledge fit for creativity, they might have a chance to develop themselves and this can only start with a reorientation of their perception of the value of the cultures and the languages going with them. The only challenge is that if they take too long to realise that, the elderly people who are aware of the various ways and medicines might be taken by nature. Worse still, trees and herbs are being destroyed at an alarming rate following the recent land redistribution and no one preserves them if they are of no apparent use to a society.

The concept of unhuism typical of a true Zimbabwean emphasises honesty, decency, respect, trustworthiness among other values. It appears when the former coloniser declared everything that was Zimbabwean to be backward, evil and barbaric, that concept's sacredness was lost. They no longer respect their true values any more. This perception has been concretised by the nature of the language policy that does not so respect the local languages and their cultures. In fact, respect and scarce resources like

education, employment and promotions, are for those who are good in a foreign language, English. This has led to all sorts of practices that have turned the country into a living hell, as indicated earlier. The nation is at its knees because of greedy people without any respect for anybody or any passion to see their lovely country advance. These are the factors making the nation unable to sustain itself.

6. Recommendations

There is need for Zimbabweans to revise their perception of their selves. They must revise their language policy. Efforts must be made to preserve the various' indigenous languages' cultures and wisdom and such must be studied and modernised. Unhuism is a concept that must be promoted at all costs.

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