

**LANGUAGE AND DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE: THE  
ROLE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN TECHNOLOGICAL  
DEVELOPMENT WITH REFERENCE TO SINDEBELE  
LANGUAGE**

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**ABSTRACT**

In view of the low percent population distribution, age 15-59, of persons having completed secondary education and above and considering that 'For the 2002 Population census, the population age at least 15years who have completed grade 3 was classified as literate' [Census 2002 Bulawayo 2004:21], the paper sought to determine the extent of the role of the Zimbabwean Indigenous languages in technological development in Zimbabwe. The fact that language is usually defined as a tool of communication and development defined in terms of industrial technology results in language, indigenous languages in this case, and development being viewed as non- related concepts. The findings from the literature review revealed that language plays a role in concept formation through which development emanates from. A highly developed language system leads to refined abstractions and refined critical thinking and explanations. Questionnaires were sent to college students studying languages, commercials and sciences. The findings from the questionnaire revealed that whilst language is noted to play a role in propounding and explaining technological development the respondents were not committed to developing indigenous into languages of science and modern technology. Indigenous languages were seen to be confined to domestic chatter and cultural issues. As long as development in Zimbabwe remains expressed in a foreign language then only the 'literate' will participate and this will slow down the pace of the technological development for Zimbabwe.

**KEY TERMS;** language, culture, development.

**\* BULAWAYO**

## 1.1 Introduction

The fact that language is usually defined as a tool for communication and the fact that development is defined in terms of industrial technology has resulted in language and development being viewed as non related concepts. Before a baby acquires language, his or her control over the immediate environment is quite limited. The linguistic power gained after two years, no matter how limited, enables the baby to gain control of his/her immediate environment. Through self expression the baby is able to negotiate meanings and finally adopt his or her life according to the needs of the environment. This is a great achievement on the part of the baby and it comes by through use of language.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

This paper, therefore, seeks to spell out how language and development remain strongly interlinked such that advancement of one leads to the advancement of the other.

## 1.3 Objectives of the paper

The paper sought to determine and establish the following;

- The role of language in technological development
- That all languages have the potential of growing in order to fully explain the social and technological views of their speakers
- The extent to which using a foreign language affects communication between the development implementer and the client system

## 1.4 Clarification of concepts and arguments for meaningful development through local language growth.

Collins Cobuild' English Dictionary defines language as;

‘.....a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols which are used by the people of a particular country or region for talking or writing in.’

This definition highlights the communicative function of language as a result neglecting other aspects of language. One can also define language from the traditional perspective which views language through its role of transmitting culture from one generation to the next. It is from this view that Ngugi wa Thiongo [1987; 15] says;

‘Values are the basis of a people’s identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried in language. Language as culture is the collective bank of a people’s

experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking articulation and indeed transmission from one generation to the next.'

Each and every language can, therefore, be said to be best suited to express the culture of its speakers and, therefore, the language people speak determines the type of culture to be transmitted to the next generation. Culture involves the 'know how' one has to possess in order to afford the task of daily living in a particular society. That knowledge although dynamic, remains covered by the language of the people hence the Whorfian Hypothesis strong version that the people's language 'determines the way in which the speakers of that language view the world'. [Wardhaugh 1998:216]. As individuals interact and share meanings they have a link with the past which helps them determine both the present and the future and all this is reflected in the existing language structure.

Language can also be viewed from its role in the formation of concepts. Bloom and Lahey [1976; 4] says

'Language is a code whereby ideas about the world are represented through a conventional system of arbitrary signals.'

People do not merely label items but they use these labels to make abstractions and to understand their environment better. Speakers of a language are able to think critically to remember and to generalize each time going deeper than concrete representations permit because of language.

Thus according to Lev Vygotsky in Gibson [1980; 47];

'.... Thought is not merely expressed in words, it actually comes into existence through them....if we have not learned a word or words for a concept then we cannot think about it.'

As mentioned earlier the human being, being a social animal, is able to shift meanings through interactions. Shift of meanings is usually aimed to meet present challenges. Societies will therefore, develop a language that will help them survive in their social and physical environment. Sapir in Wardhaugh [1998:216] thus says,

'It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language of the group.'

Development can thus be said to occur when people are able to use their language to think critically and finally come out with ways that will help them to adjust meaningfully to their given situation. In life it is quite natural for people to discuss problems when they think that thinking has failed them. As explanations are made solutions are created through use of language. Various alternatives are considered and compared to finally come out with suitable solutions. The whole process is complete when the introduced solutions are accommodated into the lives of the people to make them view life from a different perspective and consequently the ideas developed form a foundation into the future. Development should thus not be mistaken for mere acceptance of foreign industrial technology. Of course, some ideas may be adopted from developed countries, but they still need to be adapted to suit our local needs and functionally explained as well and all this can be negotiated through language. Can we, therefore, achieve meaningful development if a foreign language continues to be used to dissect nature for local Zimbabweans, including the rural population?

### 1.5 Methodology

Second year students at a Teacher's college were used and quota sampling to cover students studying sciences, commercials, humanities and languages was implemented. A questionnaire survey was used and the questionnaires were distributed to the groups identified above.

### 1.6 Data analysis and discussion

Table 1 and 2 reflect the data collected from the respondents. [Appendix 1 and 2]. Table 1 shows gender, age, highest academic education and respondents' are of specialization at secondary teachers' college level. All the respondents had an A' level qualification and they all spoke English as a second language. There was an almost even balance in the gender distribution, 47% were male and 53% were female. Most respondents were within the 22-23 age groups and since all were above 18 one could safely say they were all mature in age and opinions expressed. Table 2 reflects the opinions of the respondents on language and development particularly viewing the role of local languages in development issues. Opinions on the growth potential of local languages to express current needs were also captured.

A majority of the respondents [82.3%] agreed that all languages have the potential to express the world view of their speakers. Only 17.6% were neutral and no one disagreed with the statement. 76.5% of the respondents also agreed that technological development and language were

complimentary. 23.5% were neutral and no one disagreed. When asked whether using English in development issues, in Zimbabwe, communication between the implementer and the client system was reduced, 58.8% agreed, 11.8% were neutral and 29.4% disagreed with the statement. Surprisingly most respondents 94.1% agreed that the rural population in Zimbabwe is not fluent in English. Only 5.9% were neutral and no one disagreed with the statement.

Describing a similar situation in Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiongo[1986:17] brings out a situation where, because of colonization, a school child read books in a foreign language, conceptualized in a foreign language resulting in thought taking 'the visible form of a foreign language'. This resulted with the child having to operate in two unrelated worlds, the school guided by a foreign language, and the home guided by the local language. Ngungi wa Thiongo [1986:17] thus says: 'There was often not the slightest relationship between the child's written word, which was also the language of his schooling and the world of his immediate environment in the family and the community.'

The local language remained the missing link between the school and the home whilst the language of imposition was being used to help the child in his search for meaning. What meaning really if that language being used remained divorced from the child's fears, thoughts and dreams and why was the child being educated if that education would make him alien to his immediate environment?. That most respondents agreed the rural population in Zimbabwe is not fluent in English gets to be contradicted when only 58.8% agree that using English in development issues in Zimbabwe reduces communication. By communication we mean when the receiver interprets the message and is able to make the necessary links with his or her immediate environment in a way that whatever information has been received is used productively. If the rural population is not fluent in English then using English in developmental issues would obviously reduce communication between the two parties.

According to 52.9% of the respondents, there were certain socio- economic and technological terms which siNdebele language could not express. 23.5% were neutral and 23.5% disagreed with the statement. The same percentage 52.9% agreed that it was possible to develop local languages to express all technological and social issues, 17.9% disagreed and 29.4% neutral. Whilst 82.3% had agreed in question 1 that all languages have the potential for growth, only 52.9% see this as practically possible with their own languages. Currently local languages might lack those terms, the 52.9% however agree that if given a chance the languages can grow like

any language to express all socio- economic and technological concepts. It would be interesting to know the reasons given by those languages especially considering what Wardhaugh [1998:219] says:

‘If language A has a word for a particular concept, then that word makes it easier for speakers of that language A to refer to that concept than speakers of language B who lack such a word and are forced to use a circumlocution. Moreover it is actually easier for speaker A to perceive instances of the concept.’

Interestingly 82.4% agreed that language is indispensable for the development of understanding. Could it be any language or each speaker needs his or her own local language in his or her search for meaning? From Wardhaugh’s statement above one can conclude that speakers with an advanced language remain at an advantage in as far as development of meaning is concerned. However, it is further interesting to note that speakers of local languages do not believe that technological development can be promoted greatly through the use of a local language, this time referring to SiNdebele, or any local Zimbabwean language. Only 59.9% agreed, 23.5% were neutral and 23.5% disagreed. In the light of the above findings and discussions flow the following recommendations.

### 1.7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Each and every language has the ability to construct unlimited number of meanings and thereby foster development for its speakers as the global situation demands. Where lexical items limit perception, some lexical items have been coined or loaned from other languages so as to enhance the versatility of a particular language. When the whites came to Zimbabwe in the 1830s, our forefathers there after spoke of *umbheda* (bed), *itshukela* (sugar), *itiye* (tea), *ikhiye* (key) and many more. Words had to be loaned and then given SiNdebele syllabic characteristics. Incorporating words in such a way facilitated understanding and perceptions needed at that time and into the future.

There is also this assumption and mistaken view of SiNdebele basically and traditionally being a language for domestic chatter and cultural practices. What should be known, especially by speakers of these local languages, is that Ndebele or any other language can also be used for critical thinking and problem solving. There are no special languages particularly appropriate for expressing developmental issues. Our own local languages are the appropriate tools to be used to further our national development with a high degree of relevance for after all these are the best

languages to express our human existence in this cultural setting. The speakers of these languages should not let tradition confine them to domestic chatter for once this occurs the languages will be forever viewed as limited and inferior. Constant and constructive talk will sharpen thoughts and therefore if we constantly use our languages productively in critical thinking and problem solving our languages will rise to meet all our developmental challenges of the present century.

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APPENDIX A.

Table 1: Gender, age, academic education and are of specialization at college.

Characteristic	Detail	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	16	47
	Female	18	53
	Total	34	100
Age	18-19	0	0
	20-21	4	11.8
	22-23	24	70.5
	24-25	4	11.8
	Above 25	2	5.9
	Total	34	100
Highest academic qualification	O' Level	0	0
	A' Level	34	100
	Total	34	100
Area of specialization	Languages	12	35.3
	Humanities	10	29.4
	Commercials sciences	6	17.6
	Total	34	100

Table 2

1. All languages have the potential to express the world view of their people.

	F	%
SA	20	58.8
A	8	23.5
N	6	17.6
D	0	0
SD	0	0
TOTAL	34	100

2. Language and technological development are complementary

	f	%
SA	14	41.3
A	12	35.3

N	8	23.5
D	0	0
SD	0	0
	34	100

**3. Using English language in development issues in Zimbabwe reduces communication between the implementer and the client system.**

	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
SA	10	29.4
A	10	29.4
N	4	11.8
D	8	23.5
SD	2	5.9
	34	100

**4. The rural population in Zimbabwe is fluent in English**

	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
SA	0	0
A	0	0
N	2	5.9
D	14	41.2
SD	18	52.9
	34	100

**5. There are certain socio-economic and technological terms which SiNdebele cannot express.**

	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
SA	8	23.5
A	10	29.4
N	8	23.5
D	8	23.5
SD	0	0
	34	100

**6. It is possible to develop SiNdebele to express all technological and social issues.**

	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
SA	12	35.3
A	6	17.6

N	10	29.4
D	4	11.8
SD	2	5.9
	34	100

**7. Language is indispensable in the development of understanding.**

	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
SA	16	47.1
A	12	35.3
N	6	17.6
D	0	0
SD	0	0
	34	100

**8. Technological development can be greatly promoted through use of a local language.**

	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
SA	8	23.5
A	10	29.4
N	8	23.5
D	8	23.5
SD	0	0
	34	100