



The Linguistic Dilemma in Namibia's Zambezi Region: Is the dominance of the Silozi language a curse or a blessing?

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ABSTRACT

The geographically isolated Zambezi Region, formerly known as the Caprivi Region/Strip is the land of contrasts with a history unique to Namibia. In this part of the country, people are geographically, socially, culturally and linguistically different from the rest of Namibia. The Region is home to about eight (8) languages and language groups, viz *Subia*, *Yeyi*, *Fwe*, *Totela*, *Mbukushu*, *Barakwena*, *Mbalangwe* and the region's lingua franca, Silozi. Despite their Bantu provenance and classification, the languages of the Zambezi Region are somehow different to those of a similar nature in mainland Namibia, and are much closer to those of nearby Zambia and Botswana. The Silozi language is the most dominant in the Region and exclusively used in most domains of local governance at the expense of other indigenous languages of the Region. Technically, it can also be argued that Silozi is not a Namibian language, but rather that of neighbouring Zambia where it is spoken as a first language by close to a million people. How Silozi became part of Namibia's eight (8) nationally recognised languages is largely historical and political and this was discussed in this paper. The frequent political tension in the region is often exacerbated by linguistic differences. It is this linguistic and political differences which are partially blamed for the formation of the secessionist movement called the Caprivi Liberation Army which launched a short lived insurrection against the Namibian state in the region in August of 2009. It is from this premise that the paper intended to investigate how and why Silozi became the dominant language mostly used in the region and how this impacts the development of other indigenous languages.

1. Introduction

Silozi forms part of the Bantu language continuum of the Niger-Congo language family. It is spoken by the people of Eastern Caprivi now Zambezi largely as a second language, and as a first language in south-western Zambia. Silozi is classified with the Bantu languages of the Niger-Congo as a macro phylum¹. While it is derived largely from the Sotho dialect spoken by the Makololo who conquered the Malozi,

it displays modifications, especially in phonetics and vocabulary. There is a strong similarity between the Silozi spoken in the former Caprivi western Zambia². However, according to this author's observation, the two (2) dialects are gradually drifting apart due to geographical factors. Zambian Silozi is now being influenced by other Zambian languages such as Nyanja/Chewa and others; whereas Namibian Silozi is now largely influenced by local languages spoken in the Zambezi Region. In Namibia, Silozi spoken in either a *Subia* or *Fwe* tribal area is likely to be influenced by the said languages.

¹ Sitwala, J. N. (2010). Language Maintenance in the Malozi Community of Caprivi. A Thesis Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the subject sociolinguistics at the University of South Africa. p.6

² Ibid

With the recognised status of Silozi as a language that could be written, read and be understood by the people of Caprivi, Silozi assumed the status of being the medium of instruction in schools in the Caprivi Region as well as a school subject. Originally, the radio station for Caprivi, broadcasts from South Africa through to South West Africa (present-day Namibia). It was known as the South West Africa Broadcasting Cooperation (SWABC) and employed Silozi as the “language of broadcasting” in the then Caprivi. After independence, Silozi language remained as the official language of the then Caprivi region.¹ There are calls for other local languages to be recognised and be taught at schools like Silozi.

Objectives of the study

The primary purpose of the research was to investigate the root causes of Silozi language’s dominance in Namibia’s Zambezi region and to find out whether such dominance was a blessing or a curse?

Literature review

Language is the most important aspect of humanity as it is only human beings among the living organisms of the earth that communicates using language. Moreover, language has no universal definition. However, some scholars have attempted to define language in their own understanding. According to Lieberman language can be operationally be defined as a communications system that permits the exchange of new, unanticipated information.² Whereas Wardhaugh on the other hand defines language to be: “a knowledge of rules and principles and of the ways of saying and doing things with sounds, words, and sentences rather than just knowledge of specific sounds, words, and sentences”³.

¹ Sitwala, *ibid*, p.8

² Lieberman, P. (1973) On the evolution of a language: A unified view. Paper prepared for the Ninth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Chicago, U.S.A, September 1973.

³ Wardhaugh, R. (2002). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (Fourth Ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. p.220; see also Wardhaugh, R. (2006), *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, (5th edition), Blackwell Publishing, USA. p.73; Wardhaugh, R. (1987) Languages in Competition. Basil Blackwell. London. p.90

Language as a medium of instruction, mirrors one’s identity and is an integral part of culture. According to Wa Thiongo language is regarded as the soul of culture.⁴ Language is “the necessary means of communion; it is the one indispensable instrument for creating the ties of the moment without which unified social action is impossible.”⁵

Makoni and Trudell⁶ posits that in sub-Saharan Africa, language functions as one of the most obvious markers of culture. Cultures are systems of symbols for the identification of a people and language is one of the most potent symbols in the network. Even when language shift has taken place, cultural identities remain despite the use of new linguistic codes of a Language of Wider Communication (LWC).⁷

Language is a means of expression and allows a person to participate in community activities. It can be used as a medium of fostering a democratic culture. In this sense, language policy plays a vital role in the process of democratic transition.⁸ In this view, language is above all an instrumental tool for communication, and linguistic homogeneity facilitates market cooperation and political unification. Here value is assigned to the smooth operation of the market and the political state, and linguistic diversity is seen as generally imposing costs rather than benefits to society.⁹

The language politics of Namibia’s Zambezi region has been on-going for generations. It is this ethnic differences that is often believed to have led to the short-lived uprising by a group calling itself the Caprivi Secessionist Movement in 1999. As indicated

⁴ Wa Thiongo, N. (1986) *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann Educational.

⁵ Diamond, A.S. (1959) *The History and Origin of Language*. Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, p.12.

⁶ Makoni, S. and Trudell, B. (2006). ‘Complementary and conflicting discourses of linguistic diversity: Implications for Language Planning. pp. 14-28

⁷ Emananjo, E. N. (2002). *Language Policies and Cultural Identities*. p.10. Available online at: http://www.linguapax.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/CMPL2002_Plenari_EEmananjo.pdf

⁸ (<http://portal.unesco.org/education/ev.php>)

⁹ Paz, M. (undated) *The Tower of Babel: Human Rights and the Paradox of Language*. p.3. available online at: web.law.columbia.edu/sites/.../the_tower_of_babel_moria_paz.docx

by one advocate of “Caprivi” nationhood in one of the leading local daily:

“Mr President, why don’t you let the United Nations to organise a referendum in the Zambezi region? Mr. President you know that Zambezi is not Namibia and it will never be Namibia. Our culture is different from that of the Namibians. We are a different nation. The people of Zambezi do not even change to winter time which is a clear indication that we are two different nations.”¹⁰

The secessionist uprising forced the Namibian government to pay increased attention to the integration of Caprivi into the rest of the nation. In turn, this has exacerbated local political and social tensions. The uprising was alleged to have been instigated by members of the Mafwe ethnic group, which was then generally supported by the opposition party, the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA). The other major ethnic group in the region, the Masubia, generally supports SWAPO.¹¹ This ethnic rivalry has a political impact across Caprivi as the government is seen to be more supportive of Masubia’s interests than that of Mafwe. To this day there are deep feelings of enmity between these two ethnic groups.¹²

Below are instances of tribal animosity as reported by local newspapers between the two (2) ethnic groups in the Zambezi Region.

A prominent politician and Member of Parliament of the ruling party who happens to belong to the Mafwe tribe, while addressing members of his tribe who were jostling for political party positions uttered the remarks below about the Masubia people:

“Whoever emerges as a leader, please come to your people (Mafwe). Don’t go astray. We have to clean these positions for ourselves, especially Katima Urban and even Kabbe North, where we have sections of Mafwe. When some of you guys get into

a relationship with a Subia girl, you start associating with them. We must not rub shoulders with these people. Let’s not give them room to be where they are.”¹³

In retaliation, another senior government official had the following to say about the Mafwe people:

“Tell me, is there anything a Mbalangwe (a sub tribe of the Mafwe people) has done that went in the records of this country and authenticated as success, except for tribalism and dreaming to go to Dukwe refugee camp after stealing a cell phone, and joining Swapo with an idea of ‘if I can’t win them let me join them’ and what we call [the] politics of eating in the name of Swapo? The secessionist plot of August 2, 1999 was instigated by the Mbalangwes, joined by few confused Mafwe who wanted to take control of the then Caprivi strip “with the aim to “kill all Subias and then remain in the strip alone”.¹⁴

This tribal division was so serious that the South African authorities commissioned an anthropologist to write a report on it (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry to define and inquire into the boundary dispute existing between the Masubia and Mafwe tribes in the Eastern Caprivi, South West Africa Administration, Windhoek, 1982*), apparently with the intention of trying to exploit these divisions in order to advance their “divide and conquer” policy of playing African peoples against each other.

In an effort to placate the tribal tensions in the region, and in the search for a unifying language, the newly formed South West Peoples’ Organisation (SWAPO) led government chose Silozi as the official lingua franca of the region. Lozi is thus seen as a unifying language and a language of wider communication among the different tribes of the region. Together with English, it is the language of local administration, education, trade, liturgy, radio and mass meetings.

Multilingualism is the accepted norm in Africa. Three (3) types of languages play a role. The first is the language of the former colonial powers. European languages, mainly English, French, and Portuguese which have spread throughout all African countries and have become the official

¹⁰ Anonymous. Namibian Newspaper SMS section. 01 August 2016

¹¹ Harring, S. L. & Odendaal, W. (2012). God stopped making rain. Land rights, conflicts and the law in Namibia’s Caprivi Region. Available online at: <http://www.lac.org.na/projects/lead/Pdf/godstoppedmakingland.pdf>

¹² Ibid

¹³ Staff Reporter. “Sipapela caught in tribalism storm”. New Era Newspaper. 08 December 2015).

¹⁴ Aaron Mushaukwa. “Bukalo’s Limbo stirs tribal storm in Zambezi”. New Era newspaper. 02 June 2016.

languages of many of those countries¹⁵ However, the use of European languages have been mostly restricted to certain domains, such as higher education, politics and business and to a small number of people. Only ten percent or less of the rural African population have a considerable competence in any of these European languages. The second type of language is the African lingua franca. Kiswahili is the most common African lingua franca, but there are a number of other such high-prestige, urban languages that an increasing number of speakers are speaking as a second language. The third type of language is the indigenous languages¹⁶

It is an acceptable fact that major African languages pose a threat to smaller African languages. In this vein, Mufwene¹⁷ posits that the closest approximation of European values is evident in the development of urban societies, in which traditional and colonial ways have mixed and the new indigenous lingua francas (such as Wolof, Swahili and Lingala) have gained economic power and prestige, and have gradually displaced (other) ancestral ethnic languages. It is these that can be said to have endangered indigenous languages, to the extent that some rural populations have been shifting to the urban vernaculars, abandoning some of their traditional cultural values for those practised in the city. On the other hand, the city has also been perceived as the source of some negative transformations and the main beneficiary of economic progress at the expense of the rural environment. Negative attitudes towards it have often been concurrent with resistance to its language, thus providing the ethnic languages an identity function that has slowed down their demise.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ando, N. (1995). Identity and Language Death in Africa.p.6. Available online at: http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10066/10664/Ando_thesis_1995.pdf?sequence=3

¹⁶ Breizinger, M, Bernd H, and Gabriele S. (1991). "Language Death in Africa." *Diogenes* no153 Spring 1991.pp. 19-41.

¹⁷ Mufwene, S. (2002). "Colonization, Globalisation, and the Future of Languages in the Twenty-first Century". *International Journal of Multicultural societies*, Vol. 4, No.2. p.16. available online at: <http://www.unesco.org/most/v4n2mufwene.pdf>

¹⁸ Ibid

Mufwene's assertion best exemplifies the situation in the Zambezi. According to this author's observation, English is not a major threat to the survival of other Zambezi/Caprivian languages, rather it is Silozi. Language shift from a local minority language to Silozi is noticeable in some other communities of the Zambezi. A typical example is a Village called Imukusi. This town is about 10 Kilometres from the regional Capital Katima Mulilo. Historically the village used to be inhabited by members of the local minority tribe, the Totelas who speak their own dialect. However, this is not the case anymore, as the current inhabitants of Imukusi are 99% Lozi/Rotse speakers. This is a perfect example of how Silozi continues to decimate the population of native language speakers in the region.

Research Methodology

Desk research or secondary data

Desk research was the methodology mostly used in this paper. Published reports, textbooks and statistics were cited as sources for this paper.

Research Design

Qualitative research method was employed in this study. I chose qualitative research method because of its advantages. Qualitative techniques are extremely useful in social research. This type of design are much easier to plan and carry out. The broader scope covered by these designs ensures that some useful data is always generated, whereas an unproven hypothesis in a quantitative experiment can mean that a lot of time has been wasted.

Population of this study

The target population for this study was teachers, ordinary residents and other stakeholders from the Zambezi Region. Silozi language teachers were chosen because of their experience in teaching the language to learners. The said teachers expressed the complexities of using Silozi as a medium of instruction to learners whose first language is not Silozi. Ordinary residents of the Region were randomly selected to air their views on the pros and cons of using Silozi as a language of local governance in the Region. Ordinary residents interviewed spoke different dialects other than Silozi and mostly resided in the regional capital –Katima Mulilo.

Sampling method

Pursuant to the qualitative research method adopted for this paper, purposive Sampling was employed in this study. The sample of the population stated are mostly (5) language teachers, (5) ordinary residents as well as other key stakeholders such as traditional leaders (2), local politicians (2) who are directly or indirectly involved in language planning and politics of the region.

Methods of data collection

(a) Interviews

Two local politicians who happen to be government officials, five (5) language teachers and other five (5) ordinary residents of the Zambezi Region were interviewed on a face to face basis. The said local politicians cum government officials were selected because of their in depth understanding of the language politics of the Zambezi. They provided this author with valuable information on the reasons for the dominant status of Silozi in the Zambezi Region. As I stated above, the said teachers were selected because they informed the author about complexities of using Silozi as a medium of instruction to learners whose first language is not Silozi.

Procedures

Speakers of languages other than Silozi were interviewed on whether Silozi posed a threat to the survival of their languages. The researcher interviewed five (5) language teachers, three (3) ordinary members of the public and three (3) traditional authority members from the said communities. A questionnaire regarding the subject matter was used in this regard.

Study results and discussion

The research yielded the following results:

- Silozi remains the Zambezi Region's language of wider communication. It remains the only language of use on radio, television, political gatherings, and liturgy; and while English is the medium of instruction in education.
- Whereas Silozi is the Region's language of wider communication, Subia is the biggest

natively spoken language in the region. It is the main language spoken at home and there are indications that it is challenging Lozi's status as the region's lingua franca.

- Like English, Silozi is seen as a useful language in terms of one's upward social mobility, at least in relation to the Zambezi region.
- The Zambezi Region is a political "time bomb" with occasional inter-tribal clashes largely centered on identity and competition for limited resources. Silozi thus serves as a unifier of all "warring" tribes.
- There is a lack of political will on the part of the central and local government to promote and protect other indigenous languages spoken in the Zambezi Region.
- The Zambezi dialect of Silozi is deviating away from its Zambian counterpart at a gradual rate. Namibian Silozi is largely influenced by local indigenous languages spoken in the region.
- Silozi serves as a vehicular, trade and economic language between the Zambezi Region and Zambia's Western province.
- There are growing calls by Subia and Yeyi language speakers for the government to develop their respective languages and for those languages to be taught in schools.

The threat posed by English and Silozi to the long term survival of local indigenous language of the Zambezi is real. It is thus vital for the government and other stakeholders to ensure that all resources are made available to ensure that these languages do not die. Digitalizing oral literature from local unwritten languages will help preserve thousands of years of human and cultural progress. The loss of a language is not only a loss to that particular community, but a loss to humanity as a whole.

Due to the difficulties in analysing the linguistic composition of the population of the Zambezi Region, Table 1 above does not indicate the predominance of Silozi language in the region. It clusters all languages spoken in the region as "Zambezi languages" in itself, a contentious categorization. It should be noted that numerically, the Masubia people constitute the largest percentage of all ethnic groups in the region.

Table 1. Distribution of households by main language spoken in the Zambezi Region

| MAIN LANGUAGE | NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS | PERCENT |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------|
| Zambezi | 21 283 | 100.0 |
| San Languages | 101 | 0.5 |
| Zambezi languages | 19 070 | 89.6 |
| Otjiherero languages | 90 | 0.4 |
| Kavango languages | 828 | 3.9 |
| Nama/Damara languages | 264 | 1.2 |
| Oshiwambo languages | 240 | 1.1 |
| Setswana | 0 | 0.0 |
| Afrikaans | 89 | 0.4 |
| German | 7 | 0.0 |
| English | 347 | 1.6 |
| Other European languages | 191 | 0.9 |
| Other African languages | 44 | 0.2 |
| Asian languages | 12 | 0.1 |
| Don't Know | 0 | 0.0 |

Source: National Housing Census 2011

Pursuant to data in table 2 above, Kangumu,¹⁹ a renowned Historian and academic from the Zambezi Region, argues that in all the censuses taken during the colonial period there is no category for 'Lozi speakers'. A common error often made even in scholarly presentations is reference to 'Caprivians' as Lozis. Apart from a generalisation, I doubt whether such a high proportion of 'Caprivians' speak Lozi. In any case, being able to speak Lozi does not make the majority of 'Caprivians' Lozis. Kangumu stresses.

Citing the 2001 National Housing Census, Kangumu further argues as follows:

"The Census included a question on language usually spoken at home. In the Caprivi Region several languages were identified.....Caprivi languages are the most spoken languages in households in the Region, with 88% of the households communicating in these languages. Of the Caprivi languages, Sisubiya is used by 38% of the households which speak Caprivi languages."²⁰

The controversy surrounding the language of instruction in schools has not escaped scrutiny in post-independence Namibia, more so in the Zambezi Region. This issue is not only a Namibian problem, but an African problem at large, as many countries

on the continent have for so years failed to promote the use of African languages as a medium of instruction in schools. Silozi is the only language of instruction in all public schools in the region.

Learners in the region struggle to understand Silozi as a medium of instruction in the classroom. Learners further struggle to speak and read Silozi vocabulary. This is partly because of the fact that the majority of Zambezi residents use Silozi as a second language and use their mother tongue in their own communities. This has intensified calls for other language to be developed so they are also used as medium of instruction in public schools.²¹

The benefits of mother tongue education far outweighs education in a second language setting. In this light, Bamgbose argues that the advantages of a good mastery of a Language of Wider Communication (LWC) and a prominent role for it in the educational system in Africa seem too obvious to require any special pleading. As long as science and technology are transmitted in these languages, an almost unchangeable role is assured for them as media of instruction in secondary and tertiary levels of education.²²

Language of instruction, or the language in which education is principally conducted, is one of the most far-reaching and significant features of any education system.²³ The language of instruction, the language of educational formation, in any society is also the language of hegemony and power. It is the language in which basic skills and knowledge are imparted to the population, and the medium in which the production and reproduction of knowledge take place. Implicit in this is the acknowledgement that it is in this medium that knowledge is accumulated and deposited.²⁴

²¹ Chisao wa Chisao. "Silozi Dominance over Indigenous Languages In Caprivi". 03 July 2017. Available online at: <http://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?id=55142&page=archive-read>

²² Bamgbose, A. (1991). *Language and the Nation: The Language Question in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh University Press. pp. 14-15. *Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh University Press. pp.4-5

²³ Prah, K. K. (2005) *Language of instruction for education, development and African emancipation*, p.27. In *languages of instruction for African Emancipation: Focus on Postcolonial Contexts and Considerations*, edited by Birgit Brock-Utne and Rodney Kofi Hopson.

²⁴ Ibid

¹⁹ Kangumu, B. (2008) *Contestations over Caprivi identities: from precolonial times to the present*. Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the History Department of the University of Cape Town. p.19

²⁰ Quoted in Kangumu above, p.20

Table 2: Census figures for the Zambezi/Caprivi Region for 1930 and 1939 taken by the South African authorities

| Year | Mafwe men | Mafwe women | Mafwe Children | Masubiya men | Masubiya Women | Masubiya children | Totela men | Totela women | Totela children | Grand Total |
|------|-----------|-------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|-------------------|------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------|
| 1930 | 1036 | 1454 | 2379 | 750 | 936 | 1469 | 1786 | 2390 | 3848 | 8024 |
| 1939 | 1182 | 1908 | 3026 | 906 | 1251 | 2151 | 2088 | 3159 | 5177 | 10424 |

Unlike other local languages of the Zambezi, Silozi has its own orthography and literature. In order, to improve its vocabulary, Zambia clarified its orthography in 1977¹. Plans are underway for Namibia to follow suit. This may prove a challenge as Namibia does not have enough linguists specialised in the Silozi language.

Like in Namibia's Zambezi Region, Silozi serves as an important lingua franca in Western Zambia. Silozi is broadcast in Namibia and Zambia. The Zambian Bureau of Information publishes the monthly newspaper *Liseli* in Silozi (*Webbook*). The Ethnologue notes that it is used on radio and in newspapers, and that it is "recognised for education and administration purposes" in Zambia.²

Table 3: Predominant Language Group by Census Year, Zambia in % (1980 – 2000).

| Language group | Percentage of Total Population | | |
|------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 |
| Bemba | 39.7 | 39.7 | 38.5 |
| Tonga | 13.3 | 14.8 | 13.9 |
| North-Western | 7.7 | 8.8 | 7.7 |
| Barotse | 8.0 | 7.5 | 6.9 |
| Nyanja | 19.0 | 20.1 | 20.6 |
| Mambwe | 3.2 | 3.4 | 3.2 |
| Tumbuka | 3.2 | 3.7 | 3.2 |
| English | 4.6 | 1.1 | 1.7 |
| Other | 1.4 | 0.8 | 4.3 |
| Total Percent | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Total Population | 5,226,895 | 7,001,936 | 8,702,932 |

Source: CSO, 1980, 1990 and 2000 Censuses of Population and Housing

Table 2 above shows the place and importance of Silozi in neighbouring Zambia. Lozi is among the nation's nationally recognised languages and it serves as the de facto official language of the country's Western Province.

¹ Kashoki, M. F. (1999). Language policy in multilingual countries. *Journal of Humanities*. 2:41-62.

² Quoted in Nambala, S. V. (2003). *History of the church in Namibia 1805-1990*. Collingswood: Lutheran Quarterly. 123

Conclusion and recommendations

The Lozi languages' dominance of the Zambezi Region's socio-economic and political life is apparent. Despite its alleged "foreignness", it serves as an important language of inter-ethnic communication. This is vital taking into consideration the political fluidity of the region. Linguistic and other socio-political differences have already led to a short lived secessionist insurrection in the region. However, the role that other local languages can play in promoting inter-ethnic harmony and developing the region cannot be underestimated. The calls by the *Masubia* and *Yeyi* ethnic groups to have their languages be taught at school should be heeded. Contrary to popular belief, people from the Zambezi are not Lozis. They speak different languages and either self-identify as: *Subia*, *Mbalangwe*, *Totela*, *Yeyi* and *Hambukushu*. As wrongly presented by some scholars, Silozi was never an amorphous amalgamation of the local dialects. It is a language on its own and its closest relatives are Sotho, Pedi, Setswana languages and not local Zambezi dialects. In addition to promoting inter-ethnic harmony, investing in other indigenous languages of the region will further preserve the indigenous knowledge systems confined within the said language groups.

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