



LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: PERCEPTIONS OF THE SHONA-NDEBELE LIVING IN ZAMBIA

**Mbono Dube,
Daniel Mpolomokaⁱ**

Lecturer,
Zambian Open University,
Zambia

Abstract

This paper is informed by observations and revelations of long-drawn experiences with families of the Shona-Ndebele speaking people living in Zambia. At the core of exploring, the duo's stay in Zambia is an undertaking to critically analyse their language movements, ethnic mobilisation and allegiance to their home country, Zimbabwe. The paper aligns itself to the contention by Bourdieu (1977) that the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships.

Keywords: Shona, Ndebele, language, identity

1. Introduction

The paper explores ethnicity, which also involves language issues. Many of the participants who took part in this study migrated into Zambia as early as when Zambia got its independence (1964). An estimate of 10,000 spoken languages have existed, with only about 6,000 languages spoken but not taught to children. According to Davis (1999) more than half of these languages are unlikely to survive the next century.

This phenomenological study explored the language and identity of the two, Shona and Ndebele speaking people living in Zambia. Predominantly, focus group discussions, field notes, individual and focus individual interviews, document review observations were used to collect data. Meanwhile, participants were selected to take part in the study purposively. The importance of discussing language and identity cannot be underestimated. Research for instance, UNESCO (1996) contends that any form of identity is complex, for individuals are defined in relation to other people - both individually and collectively - and the various groups to which they owe allegiance, in a constantly shifting pattern.

ⁱ Correspondence: email mpolomokadl@gmail.com

2. Philosophical underpinning

This paper is anchored on a four-stage model on heritage and language development. The models are complementary and not hierarchical in nature. Wallace (2001) describes several types of subject positioning based on self-identification with heritage and mainstream cultures.

- In the *home base/visitor's base model*, heritage language speakers consider one culture (mainstream or of the heritage language) as the home base in which they are most comfortable operating. The other culture becomes a frequently visited environment in which the attachment to cultural practices, including language, is not as strong as in the home base cultural environment.
- In the *feet in both worlds model*, heritage language speakers balance their identity in both cultures in almost equal amounts. They feel at ease in both cultural environments speaking the dominant and the heritage languages.
- In the *life on the border model*, heritage language speakers position themselves on the edge of the two cultures, sometimes creating a border culture. This is challenging, as the process of identity negotiation is always on the edge and requires a balancing act.
- The *shifting identity gears model* is the most comfortable for heritage language identity, since one is able to swiftly shift identity according to the linguistic and cultural context.

2.1 Contextual understanding of key words

Language use and identity are entwined and much depends on many facets humans engage into and interface with. In this paper 'identity' should be understood to entail the aggregate of a person's self-beliefs, which may be private or public and may differ from one relational context to another (Taylor, 2013a). To a great extent, identity is not seen entirely as an extraordinary, static and distinct to an individual, but as spontaneous, vibrant and social construct that is a sum of a person's entire experiences.

'Relational context' will be used in this paper to refer to a given social situation where an individual interacts with other persons in a particular social capacity, responding to particular social expectations. Instances of relational contexts being referred to include: familial interactions, pupil-pupil, teacher-pupil, church-individual, peer cohort based (Taylor, 2013b).

2.2 The subtleness of identities

Some people call themselves Ndebele or Shona speaking but have never been to Zimbabwe, have never learnt the same speech tribes in Zambian schools where they have undergone primary, secondary and tertiary schooling. This makes one wonder why such individuals call themselves as Ndebele or Shona. All their lives, these individuals have grown up in Zambia, it is difficult to comprehend why and how they participate in activities that depict their speech tribes. For instance, at funerals, weddings, traditional marriage engagement ceremonies, prayer meetings the Zambian-Ndebele and or Zambian-Shona clearly exhibit their Zimbabwean traditions and cultures.

Overtly, they are identified; identify others in their macro-system societies, with peers, with various professional. Language and identity are compounded by and influenced by dwelling place surroundings, workstations and social interactivity. For example, at a compound popularly known as Mandevu, many Shona and Ndebele man are brought together by work. Those of similar skills like carpentry, welders, farmers, tinkers, and iron smiths come together and work at the same place. In the words of one carpenter, "*Nxa sihlanguana lapha, akula Shona akula Ndebele. Yingxabangxoza*" (When we meet here, there is no Shona, no Ndebele. It is a mixture of everything). True to this carpenter's words, the people in the workshop code switched and code mixed the two languages at will. Young children hovering around the workshops communicate freely in either language too. In addition, in their day-to-day activities, they adapt and adopt their typical Shona or Ndebele traditional norms. Does it mean that their first language, the typical Zambian language is less dominant than their second language (Shona or Ndebele)? Is Shona or Ndebele their first?

2.3 Shona-Ndebele living in Zambia's identity in language use

They often hold no memories of Zimbabwe, its language, people, culture, but they speak the languages very fluently and align themselves to Zimbabwe more than they do to Zambia their country of birth (for most of them) and dwelling place ever since. Some old people still hold on to the documents that they used or were used by their parents to immigrate into Zambia. Doubtless, they have no experience growing up as Ndebele or Shona, let-alone learning either of the two languages right in Zimbabwe. What amazes many though is that they have a unique and spectacular Ndebele-Shona accent and disposition. One elderly Ndebele man says:

"Ulimi luka Lobengula loMzilikazi ngeke lwageziswa lulanje. Lwanguena lwagxila."
(Lobengula's and Mzilikazi's language cannot be simply wiped out. It cuts deep).

Asked on how it is so, the old man claims that a child of a snake will not one day wake up a bird. This means that once born Shona or Ndebele you cannot decide to wash it away. Some of his colleagues bemoaned the rise of identity crisis due to the fact that some parents have denied their children the use of the ethnic language. Language is indeed a social phenomenon that strengthens ethnicity among other strong ethnic languages.

Findings of this study indicate that Shona or Ndebele speaking people in Zambia who grew up with their mothers of such speech tribes or those whose mothers were Zambian and fathers who were Zimbabwean (Shona or Ndebele) were fluent and eloquent learnt the language with its fine characteristics. This is strange as compared to other tribes who when there is intermarriage, one language dies, especially that of the father. Strong partisans of ethnicity, as already mentioned above, take the upper hand here. A Tonga woman married to a Ndebele man, said she is known as MaKhuya (Ndebele totem) among the family members and that makes her feel at home. Although she speaks Ndebele with a heavy accent, she says that she had to learn the language fast so that she could belong:

“Akumnandi ukutshiwa ngaphandle abanye besenzikini ngenxa youkungazi ulimi”
(It is not nice to be left out when others are discussing deep issues of the family).

This way, the mother’s influence on the children goes a long way to inculcate the ethnic language in them. Zambia and Zimbabwe, like most African countries have multiple languages with the most widely used being English, Shona and Ndebele (in Zimbabwe); while Zambia has seven local languages in use officially (Lozi, Bemba, Tonga, Nyanja, Kaonde, Lunda and Luvale) in addition to English the official language. Interestingly, in Zambia, Shona and Ndebele languages coexist. The speakers have been favoured by this coexistence in that it encourages the development of linguistic ethnicity in a number of ways. Partisans of these two languages have, from time immemorial, focused their energies on building these two languages. John (2004) states that to maintain a language, a speech community has to have a ‘constructionist spirit, an institutionalist status’. Through weddings, funerals, kitchen parties, cooperatives and lobola (dowry) negotiations, as one interviewee observed, continue to construct and institutionalise the two languages. However, as John further observes, ethnic identity, focused more on descent and on a cultural heritage shared because of common descent than on political aspirations for autonomy. With strong partisans of ethnicity in a speech community, there will be no chances for language death.

What is more interesting is that in Zambia, the languages with respected cultural capital are Bemba, Nyanja and English. Other languages do not have as much cultural or market value as these. Yet, the Shona-Ndebele in Zambia favourably enjoy use of their language. Thus, in order to better understand language development of and use by heritage language speakers, it is important to understand how language identity develops. Critical contemporary approaches to the understanding of identity and specific characteristics of heritage language identity can be viewed from the perspective of a narrative approach. Researchers also state that identity is negotiated in discourse and thus influenced by language, which creates the medium for its negotiation (Belz, 2002; Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001; Djité, 2006; Joseph, 2006; Ros i Solé, 2004; Shi, 2006; Warschauer, 2000). Understanding of these features of identity is particularly important when considering identities of heritage language speakers, as it is necessary to account for a “*set of ambiguities and complications*” (Weiyun He, 2006, The Learner of Chinese section, para. 4) that arise when individuals speak and interact with two or more languages.

2.4 Social identity

In this paper, it is hard to understand whether the Shona-Ndebele living in Zambia are born as Christians, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims or other religious affiliations or attachments. This comes in the light of the strong affiliations they enjoy as kinsmen of the similar origin (Zimbabwe) and cultures. Thus, religious affiliations may have as much influence as culture on the co-existence and gregariousness exhibited by the Ndebele-Shona living in Zambia.

What seems to be apparent with the Shona-Ndebele living in Zambia is quite spectacular primarily because geographical regions in which a person is born does not seem

to provide a particular familial lineage (inclination), instead when born individuals seem to adopt explicit identities like Ndebele or Shona.

However, this is in the exception of the Mandevu community (popularly known as Mapostora in Zimbabwe.). They are easily identified by the garments they wear every day and their polygamous habits. Through their worship that is done in either Shona or Ndebele or both, language is exposed to the young ones who will have to learn it in order to take over the church activities when the elders die. In as much, it is clear that retrospective data collected during this study revealed that (Zambian) national boundaries in which the Shona-Ndebele were born do not define the identity to affix to them. They do not align themselves as Bemba (Northern), Lozi (Western), or Tonga (Southern). They remain distinctly Shona or Ndebele. These findings corroborate with interactional sociolinguistics' contentions (Bourdieu, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Butler, 2006) and what contemporary research on language, culture and identity uncovers regarding the use of language to co-construct their everyday worlds and their own social roles and identities and those of others.

Marfany (2005) adds that religion has always been an important positive factor in the survival of the so-called minority languages. Apart from the Mandevu community, some Shona-Ndebele speakers in Mumbwa, Ten Miles and Chongwe who belong to especially protestant churches, as confirmed by an individual interviewee, services are done in either language and sometimes translation is done when they have visitors. They use vernacular hymn books and Bibles which they buy from Zimbabwe. The ability to read these two books helps them to know the lexicon of the two languages. The discussions that they are involved in at church, further influence the survival of the two languages.

Apart from religious affiliations, the 'chit chat' has enhanced the survival of these two minority languages. Actually, Evas (2014) confirms that minority languages have survived through 'chit chat'. Speakers use this informal way of speaking at home or among friends but they will have to switch to the majority language in formal situations such as at school or work. In the words of one key informant:

"Pamafekitori mazhinji ungonzva: tete, sekuru, maiguru kunge hama dzeropa izvo ndevchirudzi chete"

(In a number of factories you just hear: aunt, uncle, as if they are blood relatives, and yet they are just from the same tribe).

With all these 'relations' at work, young and old, one is bound to take pride in one's language. During tea break, lunch break and at any given opportunity, a 'chit chat' takes place. *"The Ndebeles will be showing off their clicks while the Shonas will be pretending to click,"* added one man. Someone who joined one focus group discussion without an invitation alluded to the fact that the Shona-Ndebele speakers seem to like being in one place so that they chat in their language. He further said that he finds them more united than other tribes. This in turn leads to a feeling of belonging rather than be a disaffected member in a mixed group.

Other than informal talk, Evas (2014) further poses a question: Is there survival of minority languages in a digital world? There was a positive response from the younger

generation and a negative one from the older generation. Most old Shona-Ndebele parents felt that everything in the digital world is in English. Their fear was that English, already the lingua franca of the whole world, would in the long run wipe out the minority languages. But the younger generation, especially those who live in urban areas, were of a different view. They claimed that the digital world has actually helped them to perfect their ethnic language skills in both written and oral. They subscribe to social media groups where only Ndebele or Shona are the language of communication. Such groups have more of their relatives 'from across'. A young man said that his mother gets worried when she sees him glued on his android mobile gadget:

"Zvavasingazivi ndezvekuti ndinenge tichitodzidza mutauro"

(What she doesn't know is that I will be learning my ethnic language).

Another young lady said that social media is like a bridge between those who know the language well and those who are striving to learn more about it. She further said:

Kunyangwe ndichigara kure nehama dzangu dzoku Zimbabwe dzandisati ndaona kana kusangana nadzo, mafoni namakomputa aitiitira nyore. Totoite nyaya kunge vanhu vatakakura navo. Social media irikutibatsira Nomazvo,

(Even though I live far away with my Zimbabwean relatives whom I have never seen or met, mobile phones and computers have made life easy. Chat with them as if I grew up together).

More and more communities are fast developing online around a shared interest which includes a shared language. Facebook blogs, Whatsapp groups have turned into a global village. Through such learning skills in one's language has been made easy.

Some families have taken drastic and deliberate measures to make sure that the ethnic language is the only one spoken at home. Experiences of some young people and the confessions of their parents reveal that without such strictness, some children might have lost their ethnic language permanently considering the multilingual country they live in.

2.5 Identity of a cultural adherent language speaker

A cultural adherent is a person who supports and upholds norms and dictates of his/her culture without compromise or with minimal compromise. There is no compromise on culture regardless of the society they find themselves in – within or outside their home country. One astonishing revelation of language use and identity among Shona-Ndebele living in Zambia is their unwavering support for their tradition and culture. Research on the link between language and identity abound and points to the dynamism of the subject matter (Achugar, 2006; Berard, 2005; Block, 2007; Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001; Norton, 2000; Norton Pierce, 1995; Pietikäinen & Dufva, 2006; Ros i Solé, 2004; Valdés, 2001; Wallace, 2004; Weiyn He, 2006).

During three mixed focussed group discussions with young parents, the theme of naming children became the centre of the discussions. They were aware of the fact that names are important carriers of identity. Most Ndebele and Shona young parents revealed that in their desire to give meaning to the name, they either ask elders to name the child or ask from their relatives from Zimbabwe. One young woman said that to name all her three children, she had to use the online Shona-English Dictionary. Names given, contends John (2004), do prompt one to want to align to the ethnic language. Therefore, individuals use language in such a way as to signal or create their cultural identity. Naming children creates intense cultural bonds. Names like Tsitsi (Mercy), Sphiwe (we have been given), Tendai (be thankful), Babusi (kings) and the like are just a few names common among the Shona and Ndebele people of Zambia. The owners of the names even know the meanings.

Living among very strong languages and emerging strong partisans of their own languages to the extent that names do not die is commendable. Some children are even given names of their grandmothers/fathers, grandaunts/uncles just for the sake of identity. One young woman was given her grandaunt's name 'Maibe' which means someone ugly. The young woman knows the meaning of her name very well but the fact that it is a name that carries her grandaunt's name forward is enough for her to accept it. Bottom line, she will know and continue to define it to her children and her grandchildren. This way, people can know the language through the meanings of names.

Those Shona-Ndebele speakers who live in the rural areas maintain their languages by coming up with cooperatives for weeding, harvesting and clearing the fields. The focussed group discussions in these rural areas passionately discussed the Shona-Ndebele songs that they sing during such get-together work parties. During such work parties, other activities that enhance and solidify the languages are riddles, anecdotes, and humorous pranks. This way, language is further maintained. At weddings, they depict the traditional Zimbabwe weddings. Funerals and lobola negotiations are not different. Their Zambian neighbours say that they look forward to attending the Shona-Ndebele events. Mostly, instead of hiring disco and d-jays, the Shona-Ndebele speakers prefer to entertain themselves through song and dance like 'inqguzu' 'isitshikitsha', 'mbakumba' 'muchongoyo' and many others.

3. Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that knowing and using a language is a prerogative of the speech community. The collective efforts pay handsomely in seeing the minority language refuses to die or be deliberately murdered. From the 60's to present, generation after generation, the two languages have survived the test of times. They may never be a time these two languages will be recognised as part of the recognized 73 plus majority and minority languages in Zambia. As already mentioned earlier, Zambia has chosen only seven languages to be official. Shona and Ndebele are no way near recognition. But, the Shonas and Ndebeles can come up with radio station and even TV time just so they get to listen and watch themselves. There is little or no threat of the two languages dying at the moment. There is need to encourage the speakers to be proud of who they are and where they come from.

About the Authors

Dr. Daniel L. Mpolomoka is a lecturer in the school of education at the Zambian Open University (ZAOU), specializing in literacy, special and adult education. He holds a PhD in literacy and development. Daniel served as course coordinator of the ZAOU Transformative Engagement Network (TEN) Project supported by the Programme of Strategic Cooperation between Irish Aid and Higher Education Research Institute. He spearheaded the integration of HIV & AIDS in ZAOU curriculum, an initiative funded by the Association of African Universities. He is a fellow of the International Scholar Exchange Program championed by the African Council on Open & Distance Education (ACDE).

Dr. Mbono Dube is a lecturer in languages and linguistics at the Zambian Open University (ZAOU). She has vast experience in teaching at primary, secondary, college and university levels. Dr Dube loves writing novels, books, short stories and research papers. She is married, mother of three – one boy and two girls.

References

- Achugar, M. (2006). Writers on the borderlands: Constructing a bilingual identity in Southwest Texas *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 5(2), 97-122.
- Berard, T.J. (2005). On multiple identities and educational contexts: remarks on the study of inequalities and discrimination. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 4(1), 67-76.
- Block, D. (2007). The rise of identity in SLA research, post Firth and Wagner (1997). *The Modern Language Journal*, 91, 863-876.
- Crawshaw, R., Callen, B. and Tusting, K. (2001). Attesting the self: Narration and identity change during periods of residence abroad [Electronic version]. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 1(2), 101-119.
- Evas, C.J. (2014). Minority languages fight for survival in the digital world. Retrieved from www.theconversation.com/minority-languages-fight-for-survival-in-the-digital-age-22571.
- John, E.J. (2004). *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Marfany, Joan-Liuis. (2005). Religion and the survival of 'minority' languages: the Caltan Case. *Social History*, 30(2).
- Myhill, J. (2010). Identity, territoriality and minority language survival. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 20(1).
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education Limited.
- Norton Pierce, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 9-31.
- Pietikäinen, S. and Dufva, H. (2006). Voices and discourses: Dialogism, Critical Discourse analysis and ethnic identity [Electronic version]. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10(2), 205-224.

- Ros i Solé, C. (2004). Autobiographical accounts of L2 identity construction in Chicano literature [Electronic version]. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 4(4), 229-241.
- Taylor, F. (2013a). Self and identity in adolescent foreign language learning: A relational-context perspective. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Taylor, F. (2013b). Relational views of the self in SLA. In Mercer, S and Williams, M (eds), *Multiple perspectives on the self in SLA*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Valdés, G. (2001). Heritage language students: Profiles and possibilities. In J. K. Peyton, D.A. Ranard, & S. McGinnis (Eds.), *Heritage languages in America: Preserving a national resource* (pp. 37-77). Washington, DC and McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems.
- Wallace, K.R. (2004). Situating multi-ethnic identity: Contributions of discourse theory to the study of mixed heritage students. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 3(3), 195-213.
- Weiyun, H.A. (2006). Toward an identity theory of the development of Chinese as a heritage language. *Heritage Language Journal*, 4(1). From <http://www.heritagelanguages.org/>

Creative Commons licensing terms

Author(s) will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions, and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions, and conclusions of the author(s). and European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics Studies shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflicts of interest, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated into the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).