

Ikalanga 50 Years On: A Cross Border Language Against Tremendous Odds

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Abstract

Ikalanga language is one of ‘minority’ languages of Botswana spoken in the North East District and in some villages in the northern part of the Central District. It is a cross-border Bantu language also spoken in the southern and south-western parts of Zimbabwe. As one of the minority languages in Botswana, the language does not have any official status hence it does not play any role in the education, administrative circles or the media. This is despite the fact that before Botswana attained Independence in 1966, the language was taught in primary schools in the Tati Reserve. Many Bakalanga elders recall their first lessons being in Ikalanga in the 1950s in villages such as Masunga, up to standard 3 or 4. However, this situation has not deterred Ikalanga communities from taking steps to develop and preserve their language. This paper, therefore, highlights steps taken by these communities within the last 50 years of Independence to promote and preserve Ikalanga against tremendous odds such as the unfavourable language policy in Botswana whereby only two languages, Setswana and English, enjoy some recognition as the national and the official languages respectively, at the exclusion of other languages in the country.

Introduction

Ikalanga is a Bantu language of the Shona group of languages spoken in the northern part of Botswana and in the southern and south-western parts of Zimbabwe in the region around Hwange and Plumtree. In Botswana speakers of this language occupy a large part of northern Botswana beginning around the city of Francistown and stretching further north to the border with Zimbabwe in what is called the North East District as well as in some villages in the Central District up to the Zimbabwean border (Mathangwane 1999). No official maps indicating areas where this language is spoken in the respective countries exist, however, Chimhundu (2010) provides some sketches. As noted in Mathangwane and Chebanne (2013), Ikalanga is an offshoot of the chiShona language which has, over the past few centuries, come under the linguistic and cultural influences of the non-Shona (see also Chebanne *et al* 1995; Wentzel 1983b-I, II; van Waarden 1991; Chebanne and Schmidt 2010). Though the dialectal differences between Ikalanga (also known as Western Shona) and Central Shona (ChiKaranga, ChiZezuru) are said to suggest a recent separation not exceeding 400 years, other scholars such as Doke (1931) contend that these differences are significant enough for Ikalanga to be considered as a language on its own right.

Also worth noting is that some superficial phonological variations exist between Ikalanga used in Botswana and that in Zimbabwe. However, the two remain mutually intelligible and in some instances families in villages along the border have relatives on either side and there are intermarriages between the two groups. The exact number of Ikalanga speakers in post-independence Botswana is not known because census in Botswana is not done by ethnic group. Different scholars have come up with different estimates over the years e.g. 150 000 speakers (Anderson and Janson 1997); 200,000 speakers (Mathangwane 1996 and 1999); while the 2001 census gives the figure 126,952 people who speak Ikalanga in their homes (see also Batibo, Mathangwane and Tsonope 2003). The latest census of 2011 did not include a question on language use as was the case in 2001, thus no recent estimation could be deduced from its results. In Zimbabwe, the actual number of Ikalanga speakers is not known because census is by area or district and not by ethnic group e.g. Matebeleland South, or Matebeleland North (Zimbabwe Census 2012). However, Hachipola (1996) citing the 1992 census in Zimbabwe, gives the figure 158,143 Ikalanga speakers in the Bulilimangwe District alone which figure excluded speakers in other regions such as the Hwange District (Andersson and Janson 1997).

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The aim of this paper therefore is to highlight some of the strides taken by Ikalanga speakers in Botswana within the last 50 years of Independence to promote and preserve their language against all odds such as unfavourable language policy in Botswana according to which only English, the official language, and Setswana, the national language, are used in the education system and administrative circles.

The paper is divided into the following sections: section one is the introduction, section two looks at the status of Ikalanga in Zimbabwe; section three is the status of Ikalanga in Botswana; section four highlights achievements made in promoting this language over the past 50 years; section five briefly considers Ikalanga as a cross border language; and finally, section six gives the conclusion of the paper.

The Status of Ikalanga in Zimbabwe

Even though a 'minority' language in Zimbabwe as well, Ikalanga has fared better than in Botswana in the sense that in Zimbabwe, it has been used as a medium of education up to standard 4 in primary schools in the Plumtree district (see Batibo, Mathangwane and Tsonope 2003), who also note the existence of some reading texts in this language. Malaba of the Kalanga Language and Cultural Development Association in Zimbabwe contends that in Zimbabwe Ikalanga was first taught in 2002 (Email communication 8 November 2016). Then they were faced with a problem of lack of teaching materials. Malaba further states that by 2008 work on producing materials started some of which were published in 2014. Now Ikalanga is taught from grade 1 to grade 7 in Bulilimangwe and Matopo and in the Hwange region, ChiNambya, a dialect of Ikalanga, is being taught. Thus, Zimbabwe Ikalanga is in a better position than Botswana Ikalanga in that it is taught in schools where it is dominant and some teaching materials also exist. Even more exciting are the recent developments in the new 2013 Zimbabwe constitution regarding the language situation. Ikalanga, together with other minority languages spoken in the country, were declared 'the officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe'. Section 6 of the Constitution on languages reads thus:

1. The following languages, namely Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa, are the officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe.
2. An Act of Parliament may prescribe other languages as officially recognized languages and may prescribe languages of record.
3. The State and all institutions and agencies of government at every level must--
 - a. ensure that all officially recognised languages are treated equitably; and
 - b. take into account the language preferences of people affected by governmental measures or communications.
4. The State must promote and advance the use of all languages used in Zimbabwe, including sign language, and must create conditions for the development of those languages (Republic of Zimbabwe 2013:17-18).

The Status of Ikalanga in Botswana

As noted by many scholars, Botswana is both a multi-ethnic and multilingual country with over 25 languages spoken within its borders (Batibo, Mathangwane and Tsonope 2003; Andersson and Janson 1997; Hasselbring 2000; Batibo 2005; Smieja and Mathangwane 2010; among others). Including Setswana, the majority language, and English, the official language, Batibo, Mathangwane and Tsonope (2003) put the number of languages to be about 28 (see also Chumbow 2008 among others). Of all these languages, only English and Setswana enjoy some recognition in the sense that the two have different functions or domains

in the country such as in schools, government administrative circles, media and so on. The rest of the languages are relegated to use in their own communities, as a result of which there is little or no development of these languages in terms of orthographies or reading and teaching materials. Such a situation as we have in Botswana is a threat to other indigenous languages (Mathangwane 2009 and Mooko 2006).

Ikalanga is one of the minority languages of Botswana. As a minority language, it does not have any official status nor is it used in the education system, administrative circles or in the media (Mathangwane 2014). Thus, it is misleading for Chumbow (2008:27) to categorise Ikalanga in Botswana together with Setswana as one of the 'four dominant languages' because unlike Ikalanga, Setswana is the national language of the country and as such it has a semi-official status being taught in schools, used in parliament, and other administrative circles, which is not the case with Ikalanga. Further, as noted by Bagwasi (2003:13), Setswana in Botswana is competing effectively with English as the official language. Thus, in terms of its status in the country, Ikalanga cannot be put into the same basket with Setswana as the so called 'dominant languages'.

Before Botswana attained its Independence in 1966, Ikalanga was taught in primary schools in the Tati Reserve (Mannathoko 1991). Many Bakalanga elders recall their first lessons being in Ikalanga in the 1950s in villages such as Masunga up to standard 3 or 4 (see Mosojane 2016). In a speech delivered at the Domboshaba Festival of Culture and History held on 1 October 2016, the guest speaker, Judge John Zwibili Mosojane recalls his first lessons in Ikalanga learning how to count and write in Ikalanga, learning the 5 Ikalanga vowels and letters of the alphabet before all that was stopped in 1972. As Mannathoko (1991:38) further notes, Ikalanga textbooks came from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and the teachers were also trained at Dombodema in that country. After Independence, the then government of Botswana took a decision to stop the teaching of Ikalanga in the name of unity of the nation or nation-building. All the other languages of Botswana, except for Setswana and English which assumed the roles of national language and official language respectively, were relegated to use in their own communities without any official status.

Ikalanga 50 Years On

Fifty years on, Ikalanga in Botswana remains one of the minority languages without any official status. However, just like several other minority languages in the country, Bakalanga have made some strides in an attempt to promote and preserve their language in the past 50 years of Independence. For instance, the formation of associations whose primary objective is to promote and preserve their language and culture. These associations include the Society for Promotion of Ikalanga Language (SPIL) formed in 1985 and Mukani Action Campaign (MAC), formed in 1997. The MAC is a group of Bakalanga writers whose main objective is to promote and preserve the language by producing publications on various cultural aspects of Ikalanga in Ikalanga. Their writings include short novels, short stories, poetry, Bakalanga customs covering their traditional religion, marriage, and confinement after birth (Mathangwane 2010). Use of the social media such as Facebook is another way of promoting the language. A Facebook group titled the 'History of Bakalanga' exists and its aim is to educate and empower Bakalanga about their history and culture (Mathangwane 2015). Annual events such as the Domboshaba Cultural Festival bring together Ikalanga speakers in both Botswana and Zimbabwe to celebrate their culture and to preserve their language.

The development of a standard orthography used by most Ikalanga writers also helps promote the language. Batibo, Mathangwane and Tsonope (2003) note that, Ikalanga continues to develop in that it has, a standard orthography, sufficient number of reading texts some of which date to pre-independence period; prospective mother tongue teachers many willing to extend their skills to the teaching of Ikalanga in schools. Also, as a cross border language which has been taught in schools for many years in neighbouring Zimbabwe, the language would benefit immensely from the textbooks and materials used in Zimba-

bwe. Hasselbring (2000) also observes that a large number of the elderly and adults can read the language with ease most probably because they were taught in the language at elementary school from as early as the early decades of the twentieth century.

Positive attitudes of the speakers towards their language were also observed. Batibo, Mathangwane and Tsonope (2003) observed that 100% of the Ikalanga informants in their study expressed the wish to be able to read and write in their own language. Ikalanga has also made its mark in the academia. Bakalanga scholars in Botswana have not been deterred by the fact that their language is not taught in schools nor does it have any official status in the country. These scholars continue to do research, produce and publish scientific analysis of their language and record the cultural practices of the people such as traditional music so that all is not lost to future generations. As we speak, numerous journal articles, book chapters, Master of Arts (MA) dissertations, PhD theses analysing the Ikalanga language scientifically have been produced and successfully defended in areas of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics of the language as well as on the history of the Bakalanga in general. In addition, Ikalanga grammars (Chebanne and Schmidt 2010) and cook books (Mathangwane and Chebanne 2013) have been published, which goes to show the determination and pride of Ikalanga speakers in their language.

According to Bamgbose (2006) there are four different practices in the use of African languages as a medium of instruction: (a) whereby a language is totally ignored or only used for oral presentations while the children are taught through an official language such as English or French. Bamgbose notes this to be the worst practice because it ignores a vital asset which is the language the child already speaks before coming to school; (b) whereby the languages are used for introducing children to literacy and then gradually phased out in favour of an official language; (c) used for teaching all subjects up to a certain level before a change-over to a different medium, which could be the imported official language; and lastly, (d) used as joint medium with an official language and used for teaching all subjects for as long as possible in the school system. Bamgbose notes the merits and demerits of these four categories in this brief paper. What is worrying the most in the case of Ikalanga in Botswana is that it falls into the first category which, according to Bamgbose is the worst practice. Ikalanga in Botswana is relegated to use in the community without any official status. Even more disheartening sometimes is when oral presentations are made in those areas where Ikalanga is dominant, official business is conducted in either Setswana or English despite the fact that some elderly people find it difficult to follow the proceedings.

With all the developments of the past 50 years listed above and dominant use of the language in many villages and towns in the Central District and the North East District, the Ikalanga speakers continue fighting that their language be introduced in the education system so that their children can benefit from mother tongue education. Until that is attained, the struggle continues to produce and preserve the language through different activities such as documenting it and oral traditions at different annual events.

Ikalanga as a Cross Border Language

As already alluded to above, Ikalanga is a cross border language that is common to two states, that is, Botswana and Zimbabwe. Though not a mega-language to qualify for inclusion into the category of vehicular cross border languages such as Setswana or Shona, it is an African language by all means important to the communities in both countries. Considering ACALAN's (African Academy of Languages) mandate and its fundamental objectives which include (AU 2006):

- (a) Promoting African Languages
- (b) Promoting Cross-border languages
- (c) Promoting vehicular cross border languages

Objectives (a) and (b) clearly apply in the case of Ikalanga which makes a strong case and urgency to pro-

mote this language. ACALAN should take advantage of the recent developments in Zimbabwe recognising Ikalanga as one of the minority languages declared official languages in the country and get the communities to support each other in training and materials production. Harmonisation of the two varieties would also go a long way in promoting teaching material sharing making it easy for teachers of the language and the pupils in general. The large number of cross border languages within the African Union country members should not be a deterrent because time may not be on our side, where positive developments take place such as in the case of Ikalanga in Botswana and Zimbabwe, ACALAN should see it fit to take advantage of the situation and use this to its advantage. Prioritising vehicular cross border languages first at the expense of other African languages, especially those that their communities have shown such resilience and determination to preserve their languages, as in the case of Ikalanga, may have detrimental results. Exceptions may have to be made before it is too late.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ikalanga speakers in Botswana are working hard to promote and preserve their language and culture. Even though the language policy of Botswana is not favourable to this language, amongst other minority languages in the country, Ikalanga continues to develop against all odds. Books are being written and scientific analyses of the language are being carried out, written histories of the people are on the increase, and textbooks or teaching materials are being developed in Zimbabwe where the language is taught in schools.

Developments in neighbouring Zimbabwe Constitution have spurred writers to continue working on the language which will also benefit Ikalanga in Botswana immensely if the language policy becomes amenable to the will of all its inhabitants on language issues. When that time comes, cooperation between the two countries will benefit both sides as each will have something to offer. Thus, we can conclude by urging that ACALAN treats these African languages case by case other than adopt a prioritisation strategy which leaves other equally important cross border languages behind. Ikalanga speakers' attitudes towards their language are also very positive, as noted by Batibo, Mathangwane and Tsonope (2003) in whose study the informants spoke out on the need for the development of their language in all the domains of use such as education, religion, government, public information, health and personal leisure.

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