

A NOTE ON MULTILINGUALISM IN BOTSWANA AND IMPLICATION FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

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Abstract

Botswana is a multilingual nation with close to 30 languages. However, language use practice acknowledges Setswana and English only. This minimalist language use practice creates an impression of a monolithic ethno-linguistic country. This practice happens even as the constitution purports to afford citizens equal rights in all domains of development. The contradictory practice could mean that language is not part of citizen rights. This paper discusses marginalization of ethnic and linguistic communities within a sociolinguistic perspective. It further demonstrates endangerment for other indigenous languages because of the minimalist language use practice, with most urgency for Khoesan languages. Recommendations are made for harmonious development and promotion of marginalized languages and cultures to curb their pending dearth and death.

Key words: Botswana, multilingualism, language policy, marginalized languages

Introduction

Botswana is the land of Batswana in the official nomenclature, and there is a perception that indigenous populations within the country all speak Setswana as a mother-tongue. This perception has popularized the view of a monolingual state in which Setswana is the only native language (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1997). However, Botswana is multi-ethnic and multi-lingual with at least 26 languages spoken by various ethnic groups within its borders (Andersson & Janson, 1997; Nyati-Ramahobo, 2002). There are Bantu languages spoken comprising Setswana, iKalanga, Shekgalagari, Chikuhane, Thimbukushu, Shiyeyi, Sebirwa, Setswapong, Nambya, Otjiherero and Zezuru, Khoesan languages comprising many linguistic entities which include Naro, !Xoo, †Hua, Jul'hoan, †Kx'au †'ein, Nama, Kua, Shua, Tshwa, Kwedam, Glui, and Glana, and Indo-European languages comprising Afrikaans and English (Batibo et al., 2003). The former colonial language, English, is considered the official language of Botswana.

The UNESCO declaration of 2002 and the United Nations declaration of language rights of 2001 make a forceful argument for indigenous languages of nation states. The import of these declarations is the actualization of human rights and democratization of societies (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2002).

In line with UNESCO declaration of 2002 and the United Nations declaration of language rights of 2001, the aim of this paper is to argue that the multiplicity of Botswana languages needs to be formally acknowledged and given developmental benefit. The paper further posits that it is important to move from seeing language diversity as hindrances for national unity to seeing it as a resource that can contribute in development and democracy.

Sociolinguistic perspectives on mulita-linguistic settings

Issue of language management

A sociolinguistic critique of a language use situation in a multilingualism set-up starts with a review of relevant perspectives that help account for how a country manages its languages: as a resource or a problem (Ruiz, 1984). When a country plans a minimalist usage of language, which creates hegemony, then it sees language as a problem. This has dampened the enjoyments of linguistic and cultural ideals by all groups in the country. However, when a country celebrates language diversity, it sees languages as a resource (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2000). According to Batibo (2010) there are several policy questions that a country should consider in a multi-linguistic setting: 1) which policy formulation would be the most appropriate? 2) What modalities need to be put in place for the ideal use of languages? 3) Should minority languages spoken by few people be also considered? 4) How are the problems of ethnicity that are perpetuated by linguistic

diversity to be dealt with? 5) What language or languages should qualify for use in education?

Batibo (2015) points that African governments generally fail to deal with multilingual situations, opting instead for four types of language use: a) the colonial language as the official language, b) nationally dominant languages as national languages, c) provincially dominant languages as regional languages and d) local languages as community languages. Botswana is among countries that opted not to have any clear language policy, nevertheless operating on the basis of points a) and b).

Language use policies

Fishman (1974) presents six types of language policy, namely status quo, exclusive, partially exclusive, inclusive, hierarchical and isolating. Inclusive language use policy considers all indigenous languages for use in all domains (education, administration, media, etc.). The partially inclusive policy type considers major indigenous languages for elevation to national level for use in administration, education, media, and other official domains. The exclusive policy limits how many languages can be used, and often takes a dominant indigenous language and treats it as a national language to be used in all public domains (education, media, administration, etc.). The hierarchical policy presents languages for use in a hierarchical manner ranging from official to national, to regional/district with allocated functions (education, administration, media, etc.). Higher functions such as the judiciary, higher education, national affairs are allocated to the dominant languages. The status quo language use policy type adopts the colonial language as the official and one indigenous language as a national language, and neglects all other indigenous languages. The isolationist language use policy is where national languages are put above international or colonial languages and a policy of subtractive bilingualism is applied. In this situation nationals can choose which foreign language to learn for a specific purpose that may include getting contact or dealing with international or foreign partners.

The construction of a linguistic hegemony

Of the types of language policies presented above, Botswana adopted the status quo model type where English and Setswana are used as official language and national language respectively (Batibo, 2015a; Chebanne & Moumakwa, 2017). This exclusive, rather restrictive language policy/model limits languages for official and national use and marginalizes the rest of the languages. Speakers of these marginalized languages are expected to master competence in choice languages to function effectively in the country, leading to large-scale linguistic hegemony as the majority of speakers of marginalized languages switch to Setswana, the national language and the only indigenous language of

school and other significant domains. Table 1 shows the distribution of language use according to different domains.

Table 1: Language use domains with Setswana

Early primary school literacy	Only Setswana is used for all, everywhere even where children have no fluency.
Mass media (radio, television, print)	Setswana is used in all programmes
Public meetings	Setswana in all public domains and public meetings.
Inter-ethnic communication	Setswana is used by ethno-linguistic groups among between themselves and with Setswana speakers.
Trans-regional communication	Setswana is used for communication with neighbouring countries.
Parliament	Setswana is used informally but effectively competes with English in oral expression.
Courts	Setswana used to translate proceedings for those not competent in English.

Source: Chebanne and Moumakwa (2017)

Table 1 shows the domains of Setswana use including in Botswana parliamentary and council discourse. It is the language of choice in the dissemination of political messages in public forums, political campaigns and in the media. In customary courts, proceedings are carried out exclusively in Setswana. Interpretation is usually offered in instances where those who appear before the court have minimum competency in English. Setswana is used widely in the army and in the police service in spoken form. However, in written communication such as the writing of police statements and official communication, English is used consistently. Setswana is also used broadly in the health sector, but only as it relates to the dissemination of information to the general public, such as in the billboards, pamphlets and the broadcast of health information on radio and television. Official health communication and reports are largely in English. Setswana is also broadly used in church services and the spread of Christianity. This is in part because the language was codified by missionaries (Otlogetswe & Chebanne, 2018).

In the education domain, the languages of education, Setswana and English, are compulsory subjects for all Botswana citizens at both primary and secondary schools. At colleges of education, Setswana grammar and literature are taught in Setswana. However at university Setswana linguistics and literature are taught in English. Otlogetswe and Chebanne (2018) argued that while Setswana was taught as a subject through primary and

secondary education, it was generally considered to be of minimum value in regards to the educational and economic development of the country. Therefore, despite its status as the national language, Setswana is still under great pressure from English, just as it in turn puts pressure on other indigenous languages in local official domains. Chebanne and Kewagamang (2020) summarise this in Table 2.

Table 2: Language domains in Botswana

Language	Language domain	Comments
Setswana	National: school; public information, national programs intended for inter-ethnic audiences	Inter-ethnic language, intervenes in public and private information systems especially in rural areas
English	Official: school; public information, national programs	Limited usage but intervenes in all official domains.
Other languages of Botswana (28 languages including sign language)	Family and personal domains	Limited to mono-ethnic usage and limited to rural and family domains. Children under 6 years would have rarely heard Setswana and English spoken

Source: Chebanne and Kewagamang (2020)

It can be seen from Table 2 that marginalised languages have been relegated to family and personal circles. Younger generations who speak these languages come to school without any knowledge of school languages (Chebanne & Kewagamang, 2020). The situation is even desperate for Khoesan languages that are marginalized by larger local languages. It is evident that children whose mother tongue is not Setswana have language difficulties, especially at pre-school and in the first year(s) of learning. The conjecture in this matter is that there will be many psychological, cultural and educational problems in the school process especially for the Khoesan child.

This article argues that political will and an appropriate curriculum that integrates ethno-knowledge and cultures is what is needed to address the situation discussed above. Objectively, this does not even call for the suppression of the current language policy in education, but the integration into it of hitherto excluded ethnic languages. It is important to look creatively and proactively into issues that will make curriculum content more representative. A culture-infused curriculum requires that teachers be prepared to deal with community issues in education (Chebanne & Moumakwa, 2017). The current language-in-education policy needs reform to objectively empower curriculum development to embark on programmes that respond to education democratization and

to the social ideals of Visions 2016 and 2036 that make claims of social equity and development. In the education sector, mother tongue education, with its concomitant culturally relevant pedagogy, will be the most practical way to operationalize this vision.

From another perspective M'bokolo (1995) argued that without Africa's languages resources, it would be difficult to formulate cultural policies. Quite evidently therefore, overlooking multilingualism in the national language use has a bearing on the loss of national identity (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2002). There is therefore a need for Botswana to creatively and proactively put in place measures that respond to the UNESCO declaration of 2002 and the United Nations declaration of language rights of 2001. The United Nations Guide for Indigenous Peoples (2001) also provides a framework on how indigenous languages can be made national resources, both in education and in culture.

Implication for learning and teaching

This article raises questions about languages which do not feature in education (Chebanne & Kewagamang, 2020). Learners whose mother tongues are not featured in education have real language hurdles in their learning, and language hurdles have serious implications for other subjects where language is critical in conveying knowledge (Chebanne, 2015b). While linguistic hegemonies are credited for national unity, they have many causalities in the sense that languages that are not promoted and functionalised in public space become endangered (Batibo, 2010; Chebanne & Moumakwa, 2017). Multiculturalism and multilingualism present the beauty of diversity in a national culture and celebrate democracy and linguistic rights. There is therefore a need for harmonious development and promotion of marginalized languages and cultures in education and other public spheres, and this would further go a long way towards curbing their pending dearth and death (Batibo, 2010).

Conclusion

This article has argued that language use practice in the country does consider languages as a resource, and as a result relegates most indigenous languages in the country to social and family communication only. The view that equality and equity can be conceptualized outside linguistic consideration is a difficult approach in social development. The point is that ethnic and linguistic communities constitute a heritage that has developed throughout their linguistic history and cultural knowledge. Mismanaging this reality through restrictive language use choices is not desirable as it directly contributes to the dearth and death of these languages, and of an holistic national identity. It should be noted that whereas the pre-colonial language situation was by and large determined by socio-economic and political dynamics, the colonial and post-colonial ethnic language situations were based on language policies of expediency. These policies were interested

in the creation of political entities and the promotion of certain groups over others. The article however argued that a political will and an appropriate curriculum that integrates ethno-knowledge and cultures is what is needed to address the situation.

What has motivated this paper in terms of the literature gap? I am concerned that the paper merely reviews literature and reiterates arguments that are either commonsensical or are available in the literature. I am not convinced that this adds any new insights on the subject. Also, no empirical data is used to support arguments against the use of Setswana as a national language or the negative effects of the monolingual indigenous language policy that favours Setswana over other native languages. I think this paper just sounds incomplete without data that could show the negative impacts of the current language policy in Botswana, which are many but have to be demonstrated in the paper.

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