

THE DEVASTATING PROCESS OF IDENTITY LOSS IN BOTSWANA

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Abstract

Many foreigners, who are not familiar with Botswana, assume that the country is monolingual, as they equate the name of the country with the main ethnic group, namely, Batswana. But Botswana is a typical multilingual country, with no less than 30 languages, most of which are highly diverse in form, structure and lexicon. This misconception of Botswana's linguistic and cultural reality, both locally and internationally, has given rise to several devastating consequences. This article examines the devastating process of identity loss of the marginalized minority language groups of Botswana. The article identifies the main killer factors and proposes ways of alleviating the situation. The Lamy-Pool Identity Loss Model is evoked to determine the fate of the helpless languages. The study is based mainly on secondary data obtained from several sociolinguistic surveys carried out on the minority languages of Botswana. The findings of the study show the seriousness of ethnic identity loss and how it is affecting the whole country.

Keywords: Multilingual, ethnic identity, language shift, exclusive language policy, negative attitudes, identity loss

1. Introduction

Many foreigners, not familiar with Botswana, assume that the country is monolingual and mono-cultural, as they equate the name of the country, Botswana, with Batswana, the dominant ethnic group in the country. Because of historical and social reasons, this dominant ethnic group, constituting about 78.6% of the country's population, has projected the image of this nation-state (Batibo et al., 2003). In fact, the term *Batswana* is used ambiguously to refer either to the ethnic group members or to all citizens of Botswana.

In reality, Botswana is a multilingual country with at least 30 languages, most of which are highly diverse in form, structure and lexicon (Batibo et al., 2003). This misconception of Botswana's linguistic and cultural reality is not only cherished outside Botswana but also within the country itself. As a result of this misconception, which began during the colonial days, the multilingual and multicultural reality has been eclipsed. This has given rise to devastating consequences, as most of the other languages, many of which have no common ancestry with Setswana, have been marginalised (Chebanne & Moumakwa, 2017).

The most dominant linguistic group in Botswana is the Bantu. It constitutes over 95% of the country's population (Batibo et al., 2003). Bantu languages, numbering about 650, are spoken in most countries of Africa,

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south of the Equator (Nurse & Philipson, 1990). Apart from Setswana, there are 13 other Bantu languages spoken in Botswana. However, most of them are not mutually intelligible. The Bantu languages, although now dominant in Botswana, came into southern Africa only about 1,700 years ago (Phillipson, 1977; Ehret, 1973, 1996). The other Bantu languages in Botswana include: iKalanga, Shekgalagari, Thimbukushu, Ruciriku (Rumanyo), Sebirwa, Setswapong, Silozi, isiNdebele, Shiyeyi, Zezuru, Nambya (Najwa), Chikuhane (Sesubiya) and Otjiherero.

The next linguistic group found in Botswana is known as Khoisan. Khoisan languages are found mostly in southern and eastern Africa. Botswana has the highest number of Khoisan languages, approximately 13 (Traill, 1995). The languages have historically different origins. There is the San group, which is the first group of languages to inhabit southern Africa, and the Khoe group, which came into southern Africa about 4,000 years ago (Barnard, 1992). The Khoisan languages are characterised by clicks and complex phonological systems. Those found in Botswana are: Naro, Nama, !Xóǀ, †Hoan, Sasi, Khwedam, Jul'hoan, †Kx'aulein, Kua, Shua, Tshwa, G'wi and G'lana.

Botswana also has two Indo-European languages. The first is English, which was introduced into the country by missionaries and colonial rulers for colonial administration, education and missionary activities. It has now been adopted by the country as the official language. Although it is mainly spoken by Batswana as a second language, many citizens, especially the educated young people, speak it as their first or primary language. The second is Afrikaans; it is spoken mainly by Afrikaner settlers in the western parts of the country. It is considered Indo-European because it originated as a Dutch pidgin in the Western Cape in South Africa. Currently, there are also some Batswana, who have acquired it either from the South African mines or from association with the Afrikaner farmers and ranchers in Botswana.

The last category of languages in Botswana is Sign Language. This is a special language that is now used in many public gatherings and in television broadcasts.

2. Data Collection

This study is based on secondary research, that is, on a number of sociolinguistic surveys conducted on the different languages of Botswana. The surveys include: the Report on *third language teaching project in Botswana* (Batibo et al., 2003), *Report on the survey of patterns of language use, culture and identity in Botswana, Part 1* (Department of African Languages and Literature, 2014) and *Report on the survey of patterns of language use, culture and identity in Botswana, Part 2* (Department of African Languages and Literature, 2016). The last two surveys were carried out by the Department of African Languages and Literature (DALL) at the University of Botswana between 2013 and 2016.

The study also used data from earlier studies, namely: *A sociolinguistic*

survey of the languages of Botswana (Hasselbring et al., 1999, 2000), *Language shift, cultural identity and language loyalty in Botswana* (Smieja, 1996) and *A sociolinguistic survey of eastern Khoe* (Chebanne & Nthapelelang, 2000).

All these research projects involved extensive, comprehensive and thorough investigations of the minority languages of Botswana. Most of them considered the number of speakers, the level of language vitality, the degree of language transmission to younger generations, the speakers' attitudes towards their languages and the degree to which the speakers had preserved their ethnic identity.

3. The Ethnic Identity Loss Model

This study examines the way in which the ethnic identity of many of Botswana's ethnic groups is being lost or eroded. But before describing the process of identity loss, it is proper to begin by defining ethnic identity itself. According to Bhugra (2004), ethnic identity is a feeling of togetherness prompted by real or perceived shared ancestry, history, heritage, traditions and culture. These are the features which bind people together in an ethnic group. Other authors such as Lamy (1979) and Pool (1979) have identified other important features, namely, linguistic identity, cultural identity (including socio-economic aspects), autonymic identity (personal and place names) and ethnonymic identity (ethnic name). In order for an ethnic group to remain vibrant, all the four features have to be present.

However, when a more dominant or more socio-economically prestigious group comes into contact with a less dominant or less socio-economically prestigious group, the smaller group may start losing its ethnic identity due to pressure from or attraction of the dominant or prestigious group. In this case, the process of language shift to the dominant group may take place. This process of identity loss will normally be progressive and systematic. It usually starts with the loss of linguistic identity, followed by the loss of cultural identity, and then the loss of autonymic identity. The last feature to disappear, according to this model, is ethnonymic identity. At this point, the ethnic community in question will have shifted to the dominant group, leaving no trace behind (Lamy, 1979; Pool, 1979).

A number of studies on ethnic identity loss have largely attested to the validity of this model and the ethnic loss process that it describes. The studies have involved languages from many parts of the world. They include: Welsh and Canadian French (Pool, 1979), Otjiherero-Mbanderu (Molosiwa, 2000), Botswana Ndebele (Moloi, 2009), Naro (Visser, 2000), Shiyeyi (Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2000), Kenyan Suba (Rottland & Okombo, 1992), Zaramo (Batibo, 1992), Aasax (Winter, 1992) and South African Hindi (Mesthrie, 2002).

In all these studies, the languages involved came from different origins, namely, Indo-European, Bantu, Cushitic, Nilotic and Khoesan. In most of these cases, speakers of a certain language may have lost their language

and culture, but would still keep their personal, location or ethnic identity names. For example, most Ovaherero living in southern Botswana villages, such as Tsabong, Omaweneno, Maralareng, Khisa, Draihhoek and Phepheng, have lost their language and culture, and now speak Nama, Shekgalagari and Setswana (Molosiwa, 2000). But they have maintained their personal names, such as Chipura, Hambira and Jakura. They are also proud to be known as Ovaherero and Ovabanderu, which are their ethnonymic identity names.

4. Status Imbalance between Botswana Languages

There is a tremendous status and prestige imbalance among Botswana languages. The most prestigious and high-status language is English, as it is the country's official language and language of international communication. It is used in the most prestigious domains, such as higher education, science, technology, judiciary, government business, media and high level public functions. It is a language that every citizen of Botswana aspires to be competent in. The second language in the prestige hierarchy is Setswana. It is the country's national language and main lingua franca. It is used in lower education and *Kgotla* (ward) meetings; and for public functions and wider communication. Sometimes, it is used semi-officially in government offices. At the bottom of the prestige scale are minority languages, popularly known as community or ethnic languages. They are usually called minority languages not only because of their often small number of speakers, but also because of their marginalisation in public functions. The languages are confined to village and family communication as well as local cultural activities. Because of their exclusion from public functions, these languages have no prestigious or recognised status (Bamgbose, 2000).

Three categories of minority languages, which are often small demographically, may be recognised. The first are those languages which are still vibrant in that they are still being actively used. Such languages include iKalanga, Shekgalagari and Naro. These languages are not only demographically important, but also well placed in terms of their history, location and level of empowerment. Hence, they are still relatively safe.

The second are cross-border languages. They are languages which are also spoken in neighbouring countries where they are developed and used in higher public domains. They include Afrikaans, Nama, Otjiherero, Thimbukushu and Silozi. Because of their active use elsewhere, they are also safe.

The third are languages that are demographically and socio-politically marginalised in Botswana. They include Rucgiriku, (Rumanyo), Shiyeyi, Sebirwa, Setswapong, Chikuhane (Sesubiya) Nambya (Najwa) and isiNdebele (which are of Bantu origin) and !Xóǀ, Gǀwi, Gǀlana, †Hoan, Sasi, Kua, Shua, Tshwa, *Juǀhoan and †Kxǀaulein (Khoisan origin). These 17 languages are severely endangered in Botswana due to majority language dominance, demographic inferiority and socio-economic marginalisation. Although Shiyeyi, Chikukane, Nambya, Sindebele Tswaa and Juǀhoan are cross-

border languages, they are severely endangered in Botswana as well.

5. Main Causes of Ethnic Identity Loss

Having ascertained that there are many languages which are severely endangered in Botswana, the study sought to find out the causes of the identity loss or the massive shift of speakers to other languages. The main cause of ethnic identity loss in Africa has been explained by another model known as Marked Bilingualism Model (Batibo, 2004, 2005). According to this model, speakers of a minority or marginalised language shift to another more dominant or prestigious language due to inequality of status and prestige.

Many of the more than 2,200 languages of Africa today are severely endangered due to the dominance and prestige of neighbouring languages, which are often used as lingua franca or go-between languages. Setswana is such a language in Botswana, as it is used very extensively in many important domains: social services, public gatherings, lower education, inter-ethnic communication, *Kgotla* meetings and so on. Although English may appear to be a threat, it is confined mainly to higher domains, including professional and technical spheres, which do not involve the people at the grass-roots level.

The many small and marginalised languages in the country are, therefore, in serious danger of dying because the speakers are abandoning them in favour of the more attractive or prestigious dominant languages. The dominant languages have better opportunities for speakers of smaller languages, such as access to education, paid jobs and wider communication (Chebanne & Moumakwa, 2017). Hence, the speakers of the smaller languages are ready to systematically abandon their languages, cultures, personal names and ethnic identities in order to be identified with the majority groups.

6. Factors Causing Ethnic Identity Loss

The findings of the study show that the main factor which has caused this severe language endangerment is Botswana's exclusive national language policy (Republic of Botswana, 1994). Following this policy, Botswana recognises only two languages in public functions, namely, English, as official language, and Setswana, as national language. The other languages, as already indicated, are confined to villages, settlements, families and cultural activities. The non-use of the minority languages in the public sphere has given rise to many serious consequences.

First, the non-official public use of the minority languages has created negative attitudes among their speakers who do not see them as useful in their lives and in the lives of their children. They consider the languages useless as they cannot provide the speakers a means of livelihood.

Second, as a result of the negative attitudes, the speakers of the minority languages are no longer keen to transmit their languages to the younger generations. Most parents want their children to learn only English

and Setswana, as both will give them access to higher education, good employment and wider communication. Hence, children grow up speaking only Setswana and English. In this way, the minority languages and cultures are gradually abandoned in favour of the major and more socio-economically prestigious languages and cultures.

Third, once the transmission of the minority languages to the younger generations stops, the number of speakers of the language decreases. What has happened in Botswana is that the non-transmission of the minority languages to younger generations has resulted in language shift to Setswana and English, which are also the languages that the children encounter in school. Eventually, only the older generations will speak minority languages. In fact, gradual passing on of the older generations has so depleted the number of people who speak Khoisan languages that some of them now have fewer than 1,000 speakers. These people are mostly aged 60 years and above. The languages that have been adversely affected are †Hoan, Sasi, G|wi, !Xóǀ, Glana, Kua and Tshwa. Most speakers of these languages have shifted to Setswana, Shekgalagari, iKalanga or Naro.

Fourth, the decreasing number of speakers, usually, goes hand in hand with the reduction of domains of language use. Given that the dominance of Setswana is expanding rapidly to the grass roots, in most villages and settlements, the presence of the language is being felt more and more. In fact, through school and public interactions, most children are becoming more proficient in Setswana than in other languages. As they acquire Setswana language, they also acquire Setswana culture and names. Some even shift their ethnic identities.

Fifth, one important sign of identity loss is the rapid reduction of proficiency in the minority languages. This reduction includes the loss of cultural vocabulary, particularly those referring to socio-economic life: hunting, farming, herding, bee-keeping; environment: fauna, flora, landscape; and customs: societal norms, traditions and practices. Also most stylistic expressions, including metaphors, idioms and proverbs would be substantially reduced in many of the minority languages.

Lastly, the social media has very much affected the patterns of language use in Botswana, especially among young people. Social media has become very detrimental to younger generations because it has influenced them negatively, linguistically and culturally. Many young people have abandoned their cultural norms and practices in favour of foreign values. This is true of language, dressing, hair style, manner of speaking, among others.

7. How to Salvage the Situation or Slow Down the Process

7.1 Stopping the Process of Ethnic Identity Loss

The only way to salvage or slow down the process of identity loss in Botswana is, primarily, to review the country's current national language policy. There is a need to have a policy which takes all the languages, including

minority languages, on board. There are only two possible policies. The first, the inclusive language policy, ensures that all languages are used in all the domains which concern the common citizen. Such domains include government business, education, media, judiciary, social services and public gatherings. Such a policy is practised in Namibia. Zimbabwe has also opted for this policy in its revised national language policy. However, this policy has been found to be impracticable in Africa, where most countries are multilingual with dozens of languages.

The second policy favourable to minority languages is the hierarchical language policy. This is a language policy in which all languages are allocated public functions, but at different levels, depending on the importance of the language. Such a policy is practiced in Ethiopia. Before Zimbabwe embarked on its new inclusive language policy in 2016, it had opted for a hierarchical language policy (Kadenge & Mugari, 2015; Ndhlovu, 2009).

7.2 Empowering Minority Languages

The current national language policy of Botswana is inappropriate or inadequate, as it has excluded the minority languages in national affairs and the formation of a realistic national identity. Once an appropriate language policy is put in place, all citizens of Botswana will have access to full participation in the country's affairs, as their languages and cultures would be recognised and actively used in public. Moreover, all languages and cultures in the country would be recognized and promoted, giving the country a true sense of democracy, where everyone's language and culture is officially recognised and developed. This would enhance self-esteem, particularly among the Khoisan speakers (Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2004).

Once each minority language is allocated certain public roles, however minimal, the speakers will not only value their languages, but also consider themselves as recognised communities. The domains in which their languages could be used would include kindergarten, primary education, local administration, local media and local courts of law. Such an expanded use of the minority languages would enable them to become written, allowing literacy among the speakers, and to be used in the culture and tourism industry. As a result, the speakers would develop self-esteem and pride in their languages, cultures and ethnic identities.

8. Conclusion

Although Botswana has consolidated its unity and nationhood through a one nation one language policy, it has not resolved the question of how to preserve the country's linguistic and cultural wealth and promote equal access and opportunities for all. It needs to act fast if it wants to salvage and preserve its linguistic and cultural diversity, which is a very valuable national resource. Accepting such diversity also gives equal access to education, information and participation. It is important that Botswana builds national identity which covers all its citizens. The current exclusive national language policy,

although popular in Africa, is not the most satisfactory. This Europe-based model has also been adopted in other African countries, including Tanzania, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Sudan, Madagascar, Tunisia, Mauritania, Niger and Morocco.

Since Botswana is a typical multilingual country, it should maintain this linguistic and cultural diversity in order to ensure true democracy and participation of all citizens in national affairs. Such an ideal would fulfil one of the major goals of Botswana's *Vision 2016/2036* (Republic of Botswana, 1997), which is that "all Batswana will have access to the media through national and local radio, television and newspapers" (p. 4). This can only be realised if all Batswana have access to these media in their languages, in which they can best express themselves. It is in this way that full participation and true democracy would be attained, as all citizens would be realistically taken on board. This would include those whose voices of agony have not been heard or whose languages are at death's door (Batibo, 2015; Hasselbring et al., 1999, 2000).

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