

IMPROVING MINORITIES' ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES IN BOTSWANA: HOW CAN PUBLIC SERVICE INTERPRETING HELP?

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Abstract

Effective communication between public service providers and users is critical in accessing public services and providing services that directly and positively affect the lives of people. The most important element for effective communication between service providers and users is a common language that can facilitate access to services and enhance the quality of the services received. Lack of such a language may either lead to users' reluctance to access services or compromise the quality of the services they receive. Yet in Botswana, language is never incorporated into measures that improve public service access and quality of communication. Accordingly, this paper argues that the English and Setswana-only language ideologies that characterise Botswana's linguistic landscape not only deny speakers of minority languages access to public services but, also, expose them to low- or poor-quality services. The paper recommends the implementation of Public Service Interpreting to help improve the situation.

Keywords: Minority languages, public services, discrimination, interpreting

1. Introduction

Section 15(2) of the Constitution of Botswana (Republic of Botswana, 1966) protects individuals from being "treated in a discriminatory manner by any person" (p. 13) while they are being attended to in any public office or by any public authority. The expression "discriminatory", according to Section 15(3) of the Constitution, means "affording different treatment to different persons, attributable wholly or mainly to their respective descriptions by race, tribe, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex (p. 13)". Language, one of the group identity features against which individuals are usually discriminated, is omitted from this list. This omission, according to Nyati-Ramahobo (2006), can be viewed as a calculated and deliberate process initiated and sustained by the Botswana government. The author notes, rightly, that in omitting language from the list, the Constitution permits people to be discriminated against on this ground.

It is now clear that minority languages, for example, are side-lined in the provision of public services (De Varennes, 2018; Nyati-Ramahobo, 2008). Setswana and English are the only languages used by service providers even in cases where the user is not proficient in either of the two languages. In the two documents governing the administration of public services in Botswana, the Public Service Charter (Directorate of Public Service Management, n.d.) and the Public Service Act (Directorate of Public Service Management, 2008),

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there is no mention of the language in which the service is to be delivered, even though the vision of the Directorate of Public Service Management (DPSM), with the statutory responsibility for administering the Public Service, is to enhance communication through an effective communication strategy.

What, therefore, are the linguistic policy measures that can be implemented in order to improve communication between public service providers and minority language speakers? In response to this question, the paper recommends the implementation of Public Service Interpreting (PSI). The paper begins with a description of the linguistic situation of Botswana and then establishes the link between the language policy and the provision of public services before discussing the role that PSI can play in improving communication between public service providers and users. The paper will also discuss the challenges that need to be addressed in order to implement PSI effectively.

2. Languages of Botswana and the Language Policy

Botswana is a multilingual and multicultural society. There are about 29 languages spoken in the country, and all of them are living languages (Lewis, Simons & Fennig, 2013). Research has not established the exact number of languages in the country due to the blurred distinction between language and dialect (Batibo & Smieja, 2000). There are two widely spoken languages: Setswana and English. Setswana is spoken, as a lingua franca, by approximately 80% of the population (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2004). English is learnt as a second language by speakers of Setswana while minority groups learn it as a third, fourth or even fifth language (Ibid.). In addition to Setswana and English, there are eleven vibrant Khoe and San languages (!Ani-Buga cluster, Cua-Kua cluster, G!ana and G!ui cluster, Shua_Tciretcire cluster, Ts'ixa, Naro, #Hua-Sasi cluster, !Xoon, Ju' ho-!Xun cluster, Danisi Ganadi cluster, and G!oro) and seven dynamic Bantu languages (Chiikuhane, Shiyeyi, Herero, Shekgalagari, Ikalanga, Mbukushu, and Sebirwa-Setswapong Cluster) (Seloma & Chebanne, 2007). There is also Afrikaans which is a language widely spoken in the southern parts of Botswana (Chebanne, 2008).

On paper, Botswana recognises the linguistic diversity in the country and provides that people should have access to information in a language in which they are proficient. Although not stipulated in the Constitution, they should be protected from any form of linguistic discrimination. The Botswana National Cultural Policy (Republic of Botswana, 2001) draws particular attention to the multicultural and multilingual diversity of the country. The policy considers the vast language mosaic composing the country's linguistic ecosystem as a mirror through which multi-ethnic value systems, traditions, and beliefs are reflected. Thus, the policy rightly advocates the protection and the promotion of minority languages.

It is important to protect and promote Botswana's languages and the cultures which they represent. To achieve this, the national cultural policy aims to compile a language inventory. The inventory would include all the

indigenous languages of Botswana, their levels of development and the functions which are assigned to them. The policy would also compile an inventory of policies that directly and indirectly impact the development and use of Botswana's indigenous languages. The purpose of these inventories is to encourage the use of all indigenous languages at the local level to facilitate national cohesion. Furthermore, by safeguarding indigenous languages, the policy supports speakers of minority languages and their aspirations for social justice. It also provides an environment that enables them to participate in the social, economic and political life of their country.

However, strictly speaking, Botswana does not have a language policy, consciously planned and national in scope (Batibo, 2015). Also, she does not have a national language policy document on which the country's language practices are based. The country's language policy is usually inferred from the language practices that characterise various spheres of life. According to Chebanne and Creissels (2001), the practices are found in texts and documents from official or semi-official organisations. The practices indicate that English is the official language and Setswana is the national language. Some organisations even go to the extent of designating the two languages as co-official. All the other languages have a minority status.

Nonetheless, these designations are inexact from the legal point of view in the sense that no language spoken within the territory has a formally recognised status. The official language status that the English enjoys in Botswana relates to its administrative and statutory functions. The Constitution alludes to the status or function of English in Article 61 which states that to be eligible for elections to the National Assembly, a person should be "able to speak, and, unless incapacitated by blindness or other physical cause, to read English well enough to take an active part in the proceedings of the Assembly" (Republic of Botswana, 1966, p. 28). No other mention of language appears in the document. English, therefore, enjoys the status of being the official language of the State while Setswana is the *de facto* the national language (Chebanne & Nyati-Ramahobo, 2003). Hence, only English and Setswana are permitted in the official domain. At government and official levels, Setswana is used both in the spoken and written form to communicate with regional authorities and the local population. Setswana is also used as the language of many official and formal meetings; the records or minutes of such meetings are later translated into English (Bagwasi, 2003).

Nyati-Ramahobo (2004) notes that the Botswana Government opposes the use of minority languages for formal administrative, educational, political and business purposes. It cites national unity as the reason for this attitude. There is also the assumption that everybody can functionally communicate in Setswana and English. This wrong assumption has been noted in the sociolinguistic literature of Botswana (Chebanne, 2015a, 2015b). The generally accepted view is that the Setswana and English-only languages ideology disadvantages linguistic minorities in various service sectors (De Varennes, 2018; Nyati-Ramahobo, 2008).

Education is the most researched of the service sectors. Numerous studies (Chebanne, 2014; Magogwe, 2007; Hays, 2002; Mazonde, 2002; Nyati-Ramahobo, 1999) attest that children from linguistic minorities are usually disadvantaged by the language of instruction when they start schooling, given that the two languages of instruction, Setswana and English, are in most cases their second and third languages. Thus, Botswana's language-in-education policy has been the subject of discussion and debate among a wide and diverse group of education stakeholders and role-players.

For the first ten years of her independence, Botswana did not have a defined language-in-education policy. Most schools used the policy that existed before independence. The colonial policy recommended the use of Setswana as the medium of instruction in the first two or three years of primary school. It also recommends a switch to English for the remainder of the primary school period. English was taught as a subject from standard one and Setswana as a subject after the transition to English as the medium of instruction. Some schools even went to the extent of using Setswana for the duration of primary school education (Republic of Botswana, 1977). In December 1975, a National Commission on Education was appointed by President Sir Seretse Khama to conduct a broad-ranging review of Botswana's education system. The report of the Commission, generally referred to as *Education for Kagisano*, was submitted in April 1977 and it became the first national policy on education.

One of the recommendations in the report is that in the interest of national unity only the two official languages, Setswana and English, can be used as media of instruction in the nation's schools. The Commission, nevertheless, recommended that Setswana should be used as the medium of instruction for the first four years of the primary education and that English should become the medium of instruction in standard five. English should continue to be taught as a subject from standard one in order to prepare pupils for the transition to English as a medium of instruction in standard five. The 1977 report was revised in 1993 (Republic of Botswana, 1993). An amended report was published in 1994 (Republic of Botswana, 1994). The revised report advocated the use of English as the medium of instruction from standard 1 by 2000. This was later amended to read: "English should be used as the medium of instruction from standard two as soon as practicable" (Republic of Botswana, 1994, p. 59) Setswana would be taught as a compulsory subject to all citizens of Botswana throughout the primary school system.

In what could have been termed a good development towards the inclusion of minority languages, the report recommended that where parents request that other local languages be taught to their children, the school should make arrangements to teach them as co-curricular activities. However, the Commission observed that this recommendation may result in undue pressure on schools to offer various languages spoken in Botswana, and that the schools may lack the capacity to do so. In consequence, the education system may not be able to support such a development. Further,

the recommendation was deemed contrary to the national language policy. The Commission also recommended that children in pre-primary schools should be taught in the language dominant in the area where the schools are located. English and Setswana should be introduced gradually. This recommendation, like the previous one, was not accepted on the basis that it was contrary to the national language policy.

It is evident from this brief historical review of the language-in-education policy that the government is not ready to create some public space for minority languages. This is a clear warning to those who want to modify the linguistic landscape of the country by agitating for the recognition of minority languages. Any proposition for change should, therefore, be done with utmost care and should not be interpreted by the authorities as a threat to the dominance of Setswana, the national language.

3. Interpreting for Minority Language Speakers

In the education sector, the solution to the linguistic discrimination would be to allow the use of minority languages as media of instruction for the first few years of schooling in the areas where they are dominant, as recommended by the Revised National Policy on Education Commission (Republic of Botswana, 1994). And the tide seems to be changing. There is a renewed interest in the introduction of mother tongue in the curriculum at an early age, as can be attested by the Botswana Education and Training Strategic Plan - 2015-2020 (Republic of Botswana, 2015). The *Daily News* of Monday 16 March 2020 also announced, starting from the 2021/2022 financial year, the introduction of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction at lower grades up to Standard Four (Thatayamodimo, 2020). However, for other service sectors such as health, justice, housing, to name but a few, other solutions need to be identified and implemented. To cope with the communication barrier between minorities and service providers, the nation should make a considerable and sustained effort to put in place measures that would help to overcome the barrier. One way of achieving this objective will be for the authorities to offer public services in all languages in the country through public service interpreting.

Public service interpreting is defined as the “interpreting that enables people who are not fluent in the official languages of the country to communicate with the providers of public services to facilitate full and equal access to these services” (Roberts, 2002, p. 127). Pöchhacker (1999, p. 126) adds that public service interpreting takes place in “institutional settings of a given society in which public service providers and individual clients do not speak the same language”. The author also notes that it “facilitates communication within a social entity that includes culturally different sub-groups” (p. 172). Public service interpreting is most closely associated with the “provision of and access to public services in the welfare state of the late 20th century” (Pöchhacker, 1999, p. 128). It “is responsible for enabling professional and client [...] to communicate to their mutual satisfaction”

(Shackman, 1984, p. 18).

Internationally, public service interpreting increased due to migration, hence its strong association with migrants and refugee seekers. It is only in pioneering countries like Australia that the service was put in place to serve local minorities, and then extended to migrants thereafter. Australia has made great strides towards an all-inclusive public service through public service interpreting by adopting a comprehensive approach involving widespread provision of specialised language services, a certification system, a training regime, and a degree of policy planning and evaluation (Ozolins, 2010). This approach has helped in professionalising public service interpreting. As the service became professional, its quality increased and the number of serviced languages also increased.

Australia has certainly advanced the rights of linguistic minorities and closed the communication gap between service providers and users to a satisfactory level. There are, for example, between 3000 and 5000 interpreters of the Translation and Interpreting Services who offer free telephone interpreting services on behalf of the Australian government in over 170 different languages and dialects 24 hours a day and 7 days a week (Australian National Audit Office, 2015). Nevertheless, PSI is still searching for legitimacy in several countries. Most public service providers still resort to “interpretation provided by non-professional interpreters” (González, Vásquez & Mikkelson, 1991, p. 29) and which frequently involves “untrained individuals” and is often associated with “amateurism and ad hoc solutions” (Wadensjö, 2009, p. 43). It “is still all too often the domain of children or other relatives, of bilingual neighbours, of hospital cleaners, of passers-by, of the patient in the next bed, or of anyone who has, or claims to have, a knowledge of two languages” (Shlesinger, 2010: p. 2). No consideration is given to the fact that volunteers usually have an unbalanced language profile, no public service competency, and no interpreting competency. There is thus the fundamental misconception that proficiency in two languages is sufficient for successful linguistic and cultural mediation (*Ibid.*). This is the form of interpreting that is practised in Botswana and from which the country needs to move.

4. Interpreting Services in Botswana

Botswana is still far from recognising interpreting as a profession. This is the typical pattern of a profession in its infancy; it corresponds to the first phase of the Tseng Model and is known as Market disorder (Tseng, 1992). Mikkelson (1996) summarises this phase in the following way: “the profession is characterised by a lack of standards for training, [...] a lack of recognition of the profession among clients and the public, and poor working conditions” (p. 1). Currently, only the legal sector recognises interpreting as essential to its functioning by offering the free services of court interpreters to its clients (Republic of Botswana, 2006). However, as court interpreting is still not recognised as a profession, training is limited to in-service experience.

Specialised legal interpreting training is limited to short skills development programmes presented by the University of the Free State in South Africa. At the end of the training, a certificate of attendance is awarded (South African Qualification Authority, 2018). This over-reliance on the ingenuity of individuals has negative effects on the quality of the services offered. Indeed, it is generally agreed among interpreting scholars that the high standard of accuracy expected in legal interpreting is not possible if practitioners do not receive any specialised legal training (Liu & Hale, 2018). This is the case of court interpreting in Botswana.

In terms of educational qualifications, a mainstream court interpreter in Botswana is expected to have at least a Diploma or Bachelor's degree in Humanities with majors in English and Setswana or related fields (Industrial Court of Botswana, 2013). Court interpreters for linguistic minorities, or Assistant Bench Clerks, must have an O'level Cambridge Certificate / Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE), with credits in both English and Setswana (Administration of Justice, 2018). Mainstream court interpreters are not required to be proficient in minority languages whereas Assistant Bench Clerks are expected to be fluent in a number of minority languages spoken in the regions where they work. From the above, we can safely assume that mainstream court interpreters are not expected to interpret for the minorities. Indeed, the lower certification for minority language interpreters is clearly indicative of the lack of seriousness that attends matters, including public services interpreting, related to minority groups in Botswana.

In addition to the above, court interpreters and assistant bench clerks are not required to possess a minimum qualification in Law even though they are expected to interpret legalese. This is a clear evidence that, while the Administration of Justice considers interpreting as an essential component of judicial work, the interpretation problems that may arise during proceedings, as a result of court interpreters' with limited or no proficiency in the legal language, are not treated with the seriousness they deserve. By way of comparison, a court bailiff, whose main duties include serving court orders on individual litigants and carrying out the actual execution of judgments and court orders physically on individual litigants, is expected to have a Certificate in Law or Certificate in Court Administration or a related field (Industrial Court of Botswana, 2013). Furthermore, court interpreting is not recognised as a separate occupation and is performed by employees as an adjunct to their normal duties. For instance, while court interpreters are employed primarily to interpret court proceedings, they are also expected to ensure that the parties, attorneys, witnesses and exhibits are ready before court starts; act as clerks of the Honourable Judge in court; translate documents brought before courts; and prepare monthly returns (Industrial Court of Botswana, 2013). In addition, while they are not employed as court interpreters, bench clerks are also expected to interpret court proceedings (Administration of Justice, 2018).

From the foregoing discussion, it comes as no surprise that numerous researchers on Botswana's court interpreting conclude that the poor quality of the service offered may lead to potential miscarriages of justice (Miyanda, 2009; Mosaka, 2005). Cases of defendants accusing court interpreters of not competently interpreting what the courts are saying or lawyers having to come to the rescue of interpreters have been reported (Morewagae, 2009). Other specific problems related to court interpreting have also been explored, notably, the lexical problems of court interpreters interpreting from Setswana to English and from English to Setswana (Mojuta & Arua, 2016); the errors that occur as a result of the cultural distance between Setswana and English (Nhlekisana, 2008); and the typological differences between English and Setswana (Matiki, 2010). Unfortunately, no research on the problems faced by minority languages interpreters has been found.

While court interpreting is just beginning to emerge in this country, albeit with obvious growing pains, other types of community interpreting are far behind. In the health sector, De Varennes (2018) indicates that minority languages are rarely used during medical consultations, mainly due to the dominance of Setswana and English. He noted that in such cases accurate diagnosis of health conditions and the resulting prescriptions may be compromised. This is the only research that we know of that gives insight into interpreting in the health sector. Other sectors such as infrastructure (housing, water, electricity, and telecommunications), transport, immigration, etc. seem not to have benefited from any research at all.

5. How Can Public Service Interpreting Redress the Situation?

The government has made considerable efforts to improve both access to and quality of public service through the establishment of the Botswana Public Service College (BPSC), a department within the Botswana Ministry of Public Administration and Governance, and the development of the E-Government portal (Republic of Botswana, 2011). The objective of BPSC is to cater for capacity building of public servants at different stages of employment in the public service while E-Government aims to provide universal access to services provided by the government through the use of appropriate strategies and technologies. On the one hand, the BPSC mission is service provider oriented. It was not established with the user in mind. On the other hand, E-Government not only excludes those who have no access to technology (Internet and smartphones) but equally does not address the question of linguistic minorities. Consequently, the concept of access and quality is meaningless when those who are supposed to benefit from it are linguistically excluded. So how do we move from the current situation? How will public service interpreting fill the existing gaps?

Public service interpreting improves both access to and quality of the services rendered. Taking the health sector as an example, studies have found that professional interpreter services can increase delivery of health care to patients who have limited English proficiency (Jacobs et al., 2001). This is

because the interpreter enables a clear dialogue between the service user and the service provider. If the service is offered in the form of remote interpreting through video or telephone (Braun, 2015; Sperling, 2011; Mouzourakis, 2006; Moser-Mercer, 2005), then public services can be provided to even the remotest of areas quickly. Furthermore, as we mentioned earlier, utmost care should be observed when proposing measures that modify the linguistic landscape of the country. Such measures should not be interpreted by the government as a threat to national unity, for which the Setswana plays a pivotal role. Public service interpreting reduces the fear of minority languages replacing state languages and provides a less confrontational way of circumventing the institutional resistance to the transformation of past (language) practices (Erasmus, 2002). This is because, when interpreting, the official and national languages remain present. The role of the minority languages would only facilitate communication that would otherwise be impossible between the service provider and the user. Such languages would not replace mainstream languages.

Interpreting as a public service requires the service provider, the government, to take full responsibility for ensuring that all citizens and residents have access to public services and receive services of good quality. It also implies that the service provider should be held accountable for any disparities in access to services based on language. Minority language speakers should not blame themselves for their inability or limited ability to speak Setswana and English. In this regard, the service provider should ensure that minority language speakers are able to access services similar in quality to those available to mainstream language speakers. As already noted, there is, currently, a qualitative difference in the minimum qualification requirements of interpreters for linguistic minorities (Cambridge Certificate /BGCSE) and interpreters for mainstream languages (Diploma or Bachelor's Degree in Humanities) which affects both access to and quality of services.

Considering interpreting as a public service also calls for adequate training and registration of specialist practitioners (Guéry, 2014). This would guarantee the availability of skilled and trustworthy interpreters. For example, interpreters for people with limited English proficiency in the United States of America, who were trained both as service providers and interpreters, have been observed to produce services of excellent quality (Karliner et al., 2007). After thoroughly examining scientific articles in which professional medical interpreting was associated with clinical care for patients with limited English proficiency, the authors concluded that professional rather than ad hoc interpreters greatly improved clinical care. They also concluded that professional interpreters appeared to raise the quality of clinical care to the level that approached or was equal to that of patients without language barriers. This means that to raise the quality of interpreting services in Botswana, court interpreters should be knowledgeable in law and health interpreters should have a solid background in medicine, to give just two examples. Once trained, interpreters could then be accredited

by the Botswana Qualifications Authority either at a basic level if they were trained in interpretation without any specialisation or at a specialised level if they received interpretation training in a specific area of the public service sector: health, law, immigration, among others. All interpreters, irrespective of whether they are interpreting for the minorities or not, should have the same training. Indeed, other public service officers (police officers, teachers, health practitioners, etc.) are not trained differently depending on whether they will be serving the minorities or the majority.

6. Conclusion

All persons within the borders of Botswana should have equal access to the public services to which they are entitled. As such, helping citizens and residents with limited or no proficiency in English and Setswana overcome the linguistic hurdle as it relates to public service delivery should be seen as an overarching aim of the government. Given the fact that service providers cannot speak all the languages in the country, and that the government cannot employ service providers for each language in all the public administration centres, it is clear that public service interpreting is the key to the solution. Furthermore, public service interpreting establishes the rights of persons belonging to national minorities to use their language(s) for administrative purposes. Communicating through a common language between public service providers and users is a key factor in the provision of efficient and effective public service. Any attempt to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery should factor all the languages in Botswana into the equation. All measures taken to improve the accessibility and the quality of public service delivery without considering the languages of the service users are doomed to failure. However, interpreting for linguistic minorities and people who are not proficient in the languages of the service provider should not be left to individuals, no matter how brilliant they are. In considering interpreting for users who do not speak mainstream languages, the government should provide overarching guidance to interpreters and formulate policies and procedures for language use in the public service sector.

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