

MULTILINGUALISM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: SEARCHING FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY IN DIVERSITY

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Abstract

When the African countries gained independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they were confronted with three challenges, namely: to bring unity to the many and diverse semi-autonomous ethnic groups in the new nations, to forge sovereignty and national identity, and to build developed and modern states. The most crucial challenge was how to forge national identity and nationhood in a state of multilingual and multicultural diversity in each of the new states. Using the Optimal Language Policy Model, this study examines, in particular, the challenge of forging a national identity in a state of multilingualism or linguistic diversity. The article looks at how each of the southern African countries has dealt with the challenge, and the extent to which the chosen language policy has succeeded to bring true unity, identity, democracy and equality to all citizens, so as to ensure that they all have equal access to national resources and services. The study is based mainly on secondary data obtained from several sociolinguistic surveys. The findings of the study reveal that many southern countries have, rightly, opted for the inclusive and hierarchical language policies.

Key Words: Multilingualism, multiculturalism, ethnicity, national identity, language policy, lingua franca

1. Introduction

The African continent is characterised by the abundance of languages and cultures. According to Heine and Nurse (2000), Africa is a continent with not only the highest number of languages, but also the most complex ethno-cultural diversity in the world. Africa harbours over 2,200 languages and has an average of 40 languages per country. Thus, almost one-third of the world's languages are found in the continent. Each of these languages constitutes a semi-autonomous cultural group, with its own ethnic identity. Although multilingualism is seen as a resource, it is a formidable challenge if it is not well managed.

When most African countries gained their independence from colonial rule in the late 1950's and early 1960's, they were driven by a strong sense of nationalism. The aspirations of the new states included three important needs that Fishman (1971, 1974) has referred to as unification, authenticity, and modernity. Each of the new states needed to unify the many diverse ethnic groups, which constituted semi-autonomous ethno linguistic entities within its boundary; an identity of that distinguished it from other sovereign nations; and to develop and become part of the modern world in both the

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socio-economic and technological spheres.

It is clear from the foregoing that one of the major tasks that the newly independent states faced was how to forge national identities, as sovereign states, from inappropriate colonial legacies. As it is well known, British colonial rule was based on the principle of divide and rule, so as to weaken any resistance tendencies. Conversely, French and Portuguese rule was based on metropolitan assimilation, in which the colonised subjects became part of the ruler's culture and way of life, at expense of their own identities (Bamgbose, 1991).

2. The Search for National Identity in the Newly Independent States

Given the aspirations which the newly independent states craved for, namely, uniting the many and diverse semi-autonomous ethnic groups, dismantling colonial legacies and forging socio-economic development, the states realised that the challenges that they faced would be difficult to surmount. In view of this, they sought different strategies of creating their national identities, such as using ex-colonial languages, which were considered neutral, as national languages or popularising majority language in order to make them national languages.

National identity has been defined as a feeling of togetherness in a nation and as a possession of shared common and distinctive features that distinguish a nation from others (Bhugra, 2004). The most distinctive features, which may bring a nation together, include common ancestry and history, common heritage and traditions, common language and culture, identical names and personal traits and shared ethnicity (Bhugra, 2004). Unfortunately, most of these features were not present in the newly independent states, due to their multilingual and multicultural nature. As a result, they were obligated to determine new features of national identity. This study will therefore consider other features which could have been employed to build nation states in multilingual and multicultural Africa.

3. Forging National Identity in a State of Multilingualism

This study has examined the way in which each southern African state has endeavored to forge its own national identity. Although there are many social realities that are used for constructing national identity besides language, such as common background of the people, culture, ideology and socio-economic activities (Bamgbose, 1991), this study argues that language is the most critical feature. This is because it is a vehicle which engenders true unity, democracy, mass mobilisation and sustainable socio-economic development.

The study found that most southern African countries were constrained heavily by the prevailing state of multilingualism and multiculturalism. With its numerous languages, the situation was (and is still) highly complex. The situation was even made more complex because of the uneven distribution of languages per country. For example, Nigeria has 485 languages, Cameroon

has 280, DRC has 209, Tanzania has 152, Chad has 126 and Sudan has 121. In contrast, some countries have, practically, only one indigenous language. These countries include Rwanda, Burundi, Lesotho and Seychelles (Batibo, 2005).

Hence, the newly independent countries had to look for their own features of national identity, many of which were neither bonding nor distinctive. Their decisions included:

- Using some of the colonial legacies which they had inherited after independence. These legacies included territorial boundaries, government structure, sociopolitical system, and lifestyle;
- Adopting ex-colonial languages (English, French or Portuguese) as official and, at times, national languages. This decision gave rise to the categorization of these countries as Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone;
- Promoting a lingua franca to a national or official language. This was the case with Arabic in North Africa (Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, Libya, Sudan, and Chad); Kiswahili in Eastern Africa (was adopted as national and later as official language by Tanzania and Kenya). It is also an important language in Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC (Heine, 1970, 1990);
- Identifying a physical landmark in the country as a feature of identity. This is the case of Malawi, which has identified Lake Malawi as its feature of identity, calling one of its major languages Chinyanja (language of the lake). Chinyanja (also known as Chichewa) became the lingua franca of Malawi. Then President Kamuzu Banda made it the national language, as symbol of national identity;
- Using the country's national ideology as a distinctive feature in forging nationalism and national identity, as the case of *Ujamaa* ideology in Tanzania, which distinguished Tanzania in the late 1960's, from its neighbours, under President Julius Kambarage Nyerere;
- Being identified by a common homeland, as is the case of eSwatini (formerly Swaziland).

However, as mentioned above, these features were neither bonding nor distinctive. The African countries, therefore, continued to search for their national identity amidst their many linguistically and culturally diverse ethnic groups.

4. Language as an Important Feature in Forging National Identity

African countries also found language to be an important feature in forging national identity (Bamgbose, 1991; Janson & Tsonope, 1991; Whiteley, 1969). In fact, in recent years, the African Union, through its linguistic arm, the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), has paid more attention to the question of language as an instrument of integration, communication, and development (ACALAN, 2002). This is because of the following reasons:

- Language is one of the most sensitive features in any society, as it is a conspicuous social entity;
- A common language allows participation of all citizens in national affairs without excluding anyone. Hence, it promotes democracy and equality;
- The use of a common language forges national identity by bringing all citizens together, through communication, interaction and solidarity.

Obviously, most African countries endeavored to choose either an implicit or explicit language policy method. Some countries, such as Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia went as far as enshrining these policies in their constitutions, but most countries were contented with official decrees or government statements (Batibo, 2015).

5. The Optimal Language Policy Model

This study is based on the premise that national identity is forged on four features, namely language, culture, personal and location names, and ethnicity. Out of these features, language is the most crucial because of its conspicuousness and centrality in people's lives (Lamy, 1979; Pool, 1979). Hence, in forging a viable national identity, language is the most important factor.

However, in a multilingual country, there is a need to ensure that the language or languages chosen for national communication, interaction, and solidarity are selected optimally. For, in a country where languages are used for the benefit of all citizens, all people have felt a sense of belonging. This is because they have been recognised as part of the nation and have participated fully in the country's affairs. The optimal use of languages is expected to bring the most desirable well-being, equality, and true democracy to a country.

This conception has given rise to a language policy model, known as the Optimal Language Policy Model, which is based on the premise that true democracy in a county is determined by the level of participation and access to national resources of all citizens (Fishman, 1971, 1974; Bamgbose, 1991; Batibo, 2015). Such a language policy has to be as inclusive as possible, so as to ensure that all citizens in a country are actively involved in the countries' affairs, and that their rights are fully recognised and respected. It is only in this way that true democracy, equality, and solidarity are forged. Also, a true national identity in a multilingual and multicultural state would be established, as each citizen would have a sense of belonging to the nation. This model which, to a large extent, has been widely affirmed to be valid determines the most appropriate national language policy to be used in a country. As a result, such a country would be able to forge a solid national identity (Batibo, 2015).

6. Language Policies in Africa as a Reflection of National Identity Strategies

African countries have used national language policies as a tool in forging

national identities. Unfortunately, the types of choices they made have not always been based on the optimal national language policy model, but, rather, on the prevailing linguistic ecology, socio-political orientation and the impact of colonial legacies. This study has identified six language policies that have been used by African countries. They are as follows:

- *Adoption of the status quo language policy:* These are countries that chose to maintain the colonial legacy by maintaining the ex-colonial language as both official and national language. They are mostly Francophone and Lusophone countries, which are the result of colonial assimilation system. Such countries have tended to identify themselves with the metropolitan countries;
- *Exclusive language policy:* These are countries that chose a dominant lingua franca and made it the sole national language, at the expense of other local languages. This policy tends to marginalise minority languages. Therefore, true democracy, equality, and human rights (Bamgbose, 2000; Skutnab-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995) are compromised;
- *Partially exclusive language policy:* These are countries that selected a few major languages and made them national languages, at the expense of minority languages. Again, the excluded languages are marginalized;
- *Inclusive language policy:* These are countries that decided to promote all languages and make them languages of administration and education. Although this process is costly, countries that have adopted this policy have ensured that all people participate and have equal access to national affairs, including education and local administration;
- *Hierarchical language policy:* These are countries that have chosen a hierarchical system of language use, depending on the status and importance of each language. This has also ensured that each language is used in public to meet the speakers' needs;
- *Isolation language policy:* These are countries that chose to promote only one or several indigenous language at the expense of the ex-colonial language, which was considered a remnant of colonialism. Countries that took this line of action were usually led by the socialist ideology of considering ex-colonial languages as tools of imperialism. All these countries have now reversed their policies.

The preferred national language policies, among African countries, have usually been those that would involve least costs, such as adopting the *status quo* or promoting one dominant language, in an *exclusive language* policy, even where this would exclude the minority languages. Table 1 below shows the preferred national language policies in Africa, according to Batibo (2005).

Table 1: Preferred language policies among African countries (Batibo, 2005)

	Type of national language policy	% of countries
1	Adoption of status quo	36.2%
2	Exclusive policy	32.8%
3	Partially exclusive policy	13.8%
4	Inclusive policy	10.3%
5	Hierarchical policy	6.9%
6	Isolation policy	5.1%
	Total	100.0%

7. Methods of Data Collection

This study is based on secondary research, that is, a number of socio-linguistic surveys, which have been conducted in different countries to determine the most appropriate language policies. The studies include broad theoretical discussions on inclusivity and human rights (Fishman, 1971, 1994; Skutnab-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995; and Bamgbose, 1991, 2000) and case studies (Batibo, 2005, 2015; Chebanne, 2004; Chebanne & Moumakwa, 2017; Huth, 1994; Heine, 1970, 1990; Kadenge & Mugani, 2015; Lègere, 2002, 2011; Ndhlovu, 2007; and Nyathi-Ramagobo, 2002). Most of the cases provided information on what would be the most viable national language policy for forging true national identity.

8. The Position of National Language Policies in Southern Africa

From the foregoing, it is clear that most African countries have adopted either ex-colonial languages or the majority languages as their language policy. This is also true, to a large extent, of southern Africa, which consists of ten (10) countries: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, eSwatini), Zambia and Zimbabwe. Although the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has expanded to include some traditionally central and eastern African countries, such as the DRC, Tanzania, Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles, and Mauritius, this study will limit its scope to the traditional southern African countries. These countries have a number of common features which make it difficult for them to forge their national identities. This section briefly discusses the features.

8.1 Colonial Legacies

Most of these countries, except Angola and Mozambique, were under the British colony. Because of this, they have retained English language and “Anglophone” features.

8.2 *Degree of Multilingualism and Multiculturalism*

Because of historical reasons, the average number of languages per southern African country is only 25, compared to 40 for the whole of Africa.

8.3 *Linguistic and Cultural Diversity*

Southern Africa has a very diverse linguistic and cultural ecology; it harbours a variety of languages of different origins, including Eastern Bantu, Western Bantu, San, Khoe and Indo-European. According to Batibo (2005), there are about 100 languages spoken in the region. The main languages per country are as follows:

Angola² (39 Languages): The main languages are: Umbundu, Kimbundu (Luanda), Kikongo, Chokwe and Shikwanyama.

Botswana (30 languages): The main languages are: Setswana, Ikalanga, Shekgalagari, Thimbukushu, Naro and Otjiherero.

eSwatini (3 languages): The languages are: Siswati, IsiZulu and Shitsonga.

Lesotho (2 languages): The two languages are Sesotho and Phuti.

Malawi (39 languages): The main languages are: Chinyanja (Chichewa), Chiyao, Chitumbuka, Elomwe, Ngonde (Nyakyusa), Chiena and Chitonga.

Mozambique (33 languages): The main languages are: Emakhuwa, Elomwe, Chuabo, Makonde, Chitsonga, Chindau, Chiyao, Chinyanja and Chishangani.

Namibia (26 languages): The main languages are: Oshiwambo, Oshindonga, Oshikwanyama, Nama, Rukwangali, Otjiherero and Afrikaans.

South Africa (23 languages): The main languages are: IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, Afrikaans, English, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi, Shitsonga and Tshivenda.

Zambia (38 languages): The main languages are: Chibemba, Chinyanja, Chitonga, Chikaonde, Silozi, Luvale, Mambwe, Lungu, Chinamwanga, Chinsenga and Chitumbuka.

Zimbabwe (17 languages): The languages are: Chishona, Sindebele, Chimanyika, Chinyanja, Chikaranga, Chindau, Ikalanga and Chitonga.

As seen from the above, the degree of multilingualism and multiculturalism differs from country to country. While some have more than 30 languages, others have less than 10. In fact, the complexity of multilingualism is less pronounced in southern Africa than other African regions.

8.4 *Extensively Used Lingua Francas*

Unlike northern and eastern Africa, southern Africa does not have extensively spoken lingua francas, except for the following:

- Botswana (Setswana, spoken by 90% of the people, as 1st or 2nd)

² Each country is more elaborately discussed in section 9.

language);

- Zimbabwe (Chisona, spoken by 86% of the people, as 1st or 2nd language);
- Lesotho (Sesotho, spoken by 98% of the people, as 1st or 2nd language);
- eSwatini (Siswati, spoken by 85% of the people, as 1st or 2nd language);
- Malawi (Chichewa/Chinyanja, spoken by 67% of the people, as 1st or 2nd language).

Thus, only few countries in southern Africa have a lingua franca which could cover the whole country, so that all citizens would be able to participate actively in national affairs without being excluded or marginalised (Batibo, 2015).

9. Choice of National Language Policy in Southern Africa

Faced with the above linguistic diversity and complexity, the ten southern African countries chose their national language policies according to a number of factors, which included their historical legacy, whether or not there was a majority language used as a lingua franca, and the level at which the local languages had been developed. As a rule, former French and Portuguese countries adopted the ex-colonial languages as both official and national languages, as a result of the colonial assimilation policy, while the former English colonies adopted local languages, as a result of the colonial indirect rule policy. The policy decisions of each country are now discussed:

- Angola has largely adopted the *status quo policy*. It is a country with a total of 39 languages. It has three major languages, namely Kimbundu (Luanda), Umbundu (south) and Kikongo (north). Very little effort has been made to develop or promote the indigenous languages to be used in public domains. The country's national identity is therefore centered on its Lusophone legacy.
- Botswana has a total of 30 languages. Setswana is both the lingua franca and national language. It has 78.6% mother-tongue speakers, and over 90% of both mother-tongue and second language speakers (Batibo et al., 2003). There are 13 other Bantu languages, 13 Khoesan, 2 Indo-European, and one Botswana Sign Language. English is the official language while the other languages have no public functions. Botswana has therefore adopted an *Exclusive National language policy* on which its national identity is based, that is, the promotion of Setswana as the sole national language. This has caused the marginalisation of the other languages in the country (Chebanne & Moumakwa, 2017; Nyati-Ramahobo, 2002).
- eSwatini is a kingdom in which Siswati is the dominant and national language. There are two other cross-border languages, namely, IsiZulu (the bulk of the language being in South Africa) and Tshitsonga (the bulk of the language being in Mozambique). English is the official language. With SiSwati as the sole national language, eSwatini has an *Exclusive language policy*; hence, its national identity is based on an exclusive language policy that has projected the Kingdom as the land

of the Swati.

- Lesotho is a quasi-monolingual country, with Sesotho as the sole indigenous language, although there are remnants or pockets of small insignificant languages (Batibo, 2005). English is the official language. With Sesotho as the sole national language, Lesotho has moulded its national identity around Sesotho language, by adopting an *inclusive language policy*.
- Malawi has 39 languages. It has 3 major languages, namely Chitumbuka, in the north, Chinyanja/Chichewa, in the middle, and Chiyao in the south. During the time of President Kamuzu Banda, Chichewa, the majority language, was the sole national language, with English as the official language. But since the time of President Bakili Muluzi, all the three major languages have become national languages (Batibo, 2015). Therefore, Malawi has changed from an *Exclusive language policy* country to a *Partially Exclusive language policy* nation. Thus, its national identity is based on the three major languages, which are used in local administration, lower education and some public functions.
- Mozambique is a country with 33 languages. It has one dominant language, namely, Emakuwa, which has several varieties, including Cuabo and Elomwe. Other major languages include Makonde, Chiyao and Tshitonga. Until recently, Portuguese was both official and national language. New developments are now in place to introduce English and also give more roles to the indigenous languages, especially in literacy, education, and lower administration. However, Mozambique remains largely a country with a *Status quo language policy*, being a product of lusophone assimilation system. Hence, its national identity is still based largely on *status quo language policy*.
- Namibia is a country with 26 languages. Although Afrikaans is the *de facto* lingua franca, as Namibia was under South African rule during the Apartheid period. But, since its independence, the country has adopted and projected English as its official language. The major languages include Oshiwambo, Oshikwanyama, Oshindonga, Rukwangali, Nama, and Otjiherero. The country has adopted an *Inclusive language policy*, in which all indigenous languages are considered national languages. This policy has enabled the development of most local languages as languages of literacy, education, administration and public interaction, especially at lower levels (Legère, 2002, 2011). This policy, although costly, has allowed participation of all citizens in national affairs, hence cementing democracy, unity, and national identity of the country.
- South Africa has 23 languages, out of which 11 have been made official languages. The official languages include English, Afrikaans, IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, IsiSwati, IsiNdebele, Setswana, Sesotho, Sepedi, Tshitonga and TshiVenda. However, in practice, only English and Afrikaans are used most frequently, especially in the socio-political and economic spheres. English is the most frequently used language, particularly in administration, higher education and international relations (Mesthrie,

1995). With its 11 official languages, South Africa is considered a country with a *Partially exclusive language policy*. Therefore, it is building up a national identity based on a diversity of languages and cultures.

- Zambia is a country with 38 languages. Its major languages are Chinyanja, in the middle, Chibemba, in the north, and Chitonga, in the south. It has promoted 7 languages for basic education, namely, Silozi, Luvale, Chitonga, Chisenga, Chibemba, Chinyanja and Chikwande (Batibo, 2005). Although, for a long time, it had adopted a *status quo language policy*, it is fast moving towards a *partially exclusive language policy* and national identity.
- Zimbabwe has 17 languages. Chishona is the majority language spoken by over 80% of the population as first or second language. Sindebele is another major provincially dominant language, spoken by over 16% of the Zimbabwe population as first language. The other languages have mainly localised functions. Before 2016, the country practiced a *hierarchical language policy*, in which the dominant language had the most important national functions, and the less dominant languages had the lower functions. But after the launching of the new national constitution in 2016, Zimbabwe adopted an *inclusive national language policy* in which all languages are recognised and accorded national functions in administration, education, media, judiciary, and social services. Following this new language policy, Zimbabwe is forging a national identity based on an *inclusive language policy* which promotes democracy, equality, and participation of all citizens in national affairs. However, this new policy is yet to be effectively implemented (Kadenge & Mugani, 2015).

From the above, it is clear that southern African countries have adopted different language policies according to their circumstances, with the aim of forging solid national unity and cohesion. At the same time, the countries are consolidating their national identities, as independent sovereign states. The current position of language policies in southern Africa, on which these countries have based their national identities, is seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2: The current language policy options in southern Africa

	Type of language policy	% of countries
1	Adoption of status quo	20%
2	Inclusive policy	30%
3	Partially exclusive	30%
4	Exclusive policy	20%
	Total	100%

Following Table 2 above, and considering the dynamics of the language policy formulations, it is clear that the ten SADC countries are fast moving towards the most desirable national language policies, namely, inclusive

and hierarchical policies. This is because these policies not only ensure the participation of all citizens in all or essential domains, but also promote democracy, unity and cohesion. However, some countries have adopted partially exclusive national language policies, as a compromise, where there is a multiplicity of languages. Only the lusophone countries have continued with the colonial legacy in moulding their national identity. This is presumably due to the impact of the assimilation system which they had experienced during their colonial history.

10. Conclusion

Although national identity is shaped by many features, language is the most central feature of identity because of its sensitivity and conspicuous nature. African countries have used different language policies in order to forge their national identities. The degree of success of these policies has depended on how successful they have brought unity, cohesion and democracy, and enabled citizens to participate in their country's affairs.

The most ideal language policies have proved to be the inclusive and hierarchical since they involve all or part of the crucial public domains of the countries' languages. These are helping to ensure democracy, equality and, once again, the participation of all citizens in their countries' affairs (Bamgbose, 2000). In fact, if the (southern) African countries can succeed in forging their national identities, it would be easier for the African continent to form a solid and sustainable African identity (ACALAN, 2002).

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