

Factors Contributing to Language Endangerment of Minority Languages in Rural Communities Near Mine Towns of Zambia: A Case Study of Lamba and Swaka Languages

Elliot Machinyise

Department of Literature and Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University, Kabwe, Zambia

Email address:

Machinyise@yahoo.co.uk

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Abstract: The Zambian linguistic landscape is deliberately designed in such a way that each of the ten provinces of Zambia has a dominant language accorded the status of regional official language with speakers of other minority languages mandated to use it for all local official transactions. This paper examines the factors contributing to language endangerment and loss of vitality of minority languages, specifically the indigenous languages of Zambia whose native speakers live in the close proximity to the cities. A case study was conducted in the local villages on the outskirts of two cities of Zambia; Kabwe and Ndola. Around Kabwe town Swaka native speakers were selected while in Ndola on the Copperbelt, Lamba language speakers were equally selected for this study. This study was conducted to find out the language attitudes, domains of language use and mother tongue and regional lingua franca proficiency of these native speakers. A questionnaire was used to elicit the participants' language proficiency, preference and domains of language use. Interviews and observations were used to find out language attitudes and reasons for language choice by participants. The results of this study show that the regular contact of native speakers of the minority languages with the city has negatively affected the vitality of the local languages in villages around these cities. Increase in mobility of people from other regions in search of employment, exchange of goods and information coupled with entertainment to and from cities has driven a powerful trend towards the extinction of native languages in the villages closer to big cities. The study has also revealed that if the owners of industries, mines and other multinational investors do not give employment priorities to locals and continue employing and recruiting workers from other regions, local languages within the investment areas will gradually go into total extinction.

Keywords: Regional Official Language, Minority Languages, Language Shift, Language Endangerment, Swaka, Lamba

1. Introduction

Globalised economies and media are the most prominent social factors that have successfully changed the cultural landscape of the entire globe, affecting negatively the languages humans speak. It cannot be gainsaid that indigenous languages whose speakers are affected directly by these modern global trends are on the verge of extinction as they cannot resist the influence of powerful languages that are associated with these trends. Industrialisation attracts significant social changes that have a bearing on speech

communities whose inhabitants are in frequent contact with these industries. The most prominent effect of industrialisation is endangerment of the minority languages of the community. According to the [1] UNESCO report an endangered language is a language that is at risk of falling out of use as its speakers shift to speak another language. The report also states that those languages and dialects with the potential of extinction can also be referred to as threatened languages.

According to the [2] UNESCO report (2003), a good number of languages in the world are endangered because

children no longer learn them and are shifting to using more commonly used dominant languages instead of their mother tongues. This report distinguishes four levels of endangerment:

1. Vulnerable- Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g. home)
2. Definitely endangered- Children no longer speak or learn the language as mother tongue in the home domain.
3. Severely endangered- Language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it but they do not speak it to children or among themselves.
4. Critically endangered- The language is spoken by grandparents and older generations, and they speak the language partially and infrequently.

Languages which are vulnerable to endangerment are those referred to as minority languages. Minority dialect or minority language can be defined as a language with a relatively small number of speakers living within the domain of a more widely spoken language whose knowledge is usually necessary for full participation in society. [3] Kashoki (1998) defines minority dialect as those languages within the boundaries of a nation whose speakers have been placed in a disadvantageous position as a result of being dominated either numerically or in many other ways by more numerous or dominant groups of the national population. For instance in Zambia there are a number of minority languages whose speakers are by policy forced to use regional dominant language as both official and language of instruction in schools.

The practical and obvious end result of these endangered languages is no doubt Language Shift and Language Death. [4] Austin et al (2011), point out causes that prevent or discourage speakers from using a language or that can trigger language endangerment:

1. Political repression- This happens when the government or local authorities work to promote single national language limiting opportunities of using minority languages in the public sphere, schools, the media and elsewhere, sometimes even prohibiting their use altogether.
2. Cultural/political/economic marginalization/hegemony

This happens when political and economic power is closely linked to a particular language and culture so much that there is a strong incentive and benefits for individuals who use the privileged language. This compels speakers of the minority language to abandon their language in favour of another more prestigious. This usually happens when speakers of minority languages, in order to attain a higher social status, adopt the cultural and linguistic traits of a people that have come to dominate them through economic and political supremacy, conquest, or invasion.

An example of this kind of endangerment where speakers shift to a more prestigious language is the Lamba language on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia where the Lamba ethnic group are abandoning their language in favour of

Bemba a language of job seekers from Northern and Luapula provinces of Zambia.

[5] Kashoki (1999) points out that among the causes of language endangerment and shift, cultural, political and economical marginalization accounts for most of the world's language endangerment. Kashoki, (1999) explains how some types of marginalization can lead to language shift: Economic dominance negatively affects minority languages especially that poverty leads people to migrate towards the cities or to other countries, thus dispersing the speakers. Cultural dominance can also lead to language endangerment when literature and formal education is only accessible in the majority languages while political dominance occurs when education and political activities are carried out exclusively through the medium of majority language.

Since this study looks at the sociolinguistic landscape of Central and Copperbelt provinces, it is important to confine this discussion on Bemba, the regional official language and Swaka and Lamba the minority languages of the province which under investigation. [6] The Central Statistics Office (CSO 1997) reports that Bemba is one of the seven major languages spoken in Zambia and used in the local electronic media. In Central province of Zambia Bemba and Tonga are the two major languages used as languages of communication and media of instruction in schools. Bemba language is an ethnic language of Northern Province of Zambia while Tonga is based in the Southern Province of the Country. In Central province, Bemba is widely spoken in the northern districts while Tonga is the main language spoken in the southern districts of the province. On the other hand Bemba is the sole regional official language for the Copperbelt province while Lamba is the native language for most of the rural areas of the province.

Despite Lamba and Swaka being the native languages of the two provinces, their use in most domains has reduced tremendously. In other words, it should be stated without fear of being biased that Bemba language has dominated Lamba and Swaka in almost all domains of language use. [7] The Times of Zambia (Monday 25th January, 2016) reports that some minority languages that have been in contact with Bemba especially in the urban parts of Central and Copperbelt provinces of Zambia, are slowly getting assimilated in the province and besides, even their native speakers are losing the oral communicative competence and fluency. [8] Kula (2008) reports that if one visited the interior villages in districts of the Copperbelt, one would discover that Lamba is only spoken by parents and grandparents.

It is against this backdrop that this study was set to investigate factors contributing to language endangerment of the minority languages around the mining cities of Kabwe and Ndola towns of Zambia.

2. Literature Review

A lot of studies on language endangerment and language shift have been carried out within and out of Zambia for some time. Some significant factors responsible for language

endangerment leading to language shift have been highlighted which include attitude, economic reasons, political factors and migration among others.

Kula N (2008) notes that the issue of language attitude plays a very significant role in language endangerment and shift in any given linguistic environment because attitudes have a vital influence on patterns of language choice and language use and help explain certain aspects of sociolinguistic change such as language shift and language maintenance. [9] Ngidi (2007) defines language attitude as strong positive or negative emotions experienced by people when they are faced with a choice between languages in a variety of situations or are learning a language. The above explanations point out that speakers always want to be integrated and be part of speakers of a language that would either give them social status in society or provide economic benefit and prestige. The identity imposed by one's group membership is a crucial factor for language choice and use. As people aspire to learn a language spoken by the majority in the speech community, they become bilinguals and they gradually begin to lose their proficiency and ability to use their mother tongue.

Some studies have also shown that political factor plays a pivotal role in facilitating Language shift and endangerment. In multilingual countries such as Zambia, government authorities usually select one language as a lingua franca or national language so as to unify various ethnic groups. Kashoki (1999:60) observes that, "the designation and actual employment of one of the native languages as an official language has an effect of turning it into a language of prestige causing speakers of non official languages or minority languages to acquire and use it as a second or even first language and as a result, becoming a lingua franca." This observation by Kashoki shows that minority languages become endangered as the number of their speakers begins to decline lowering the vitality of these endangered languages. Although Governments claim that the sole objective of adopting one of the local languages as national language is to enhance and promote unity and national identity, the result is detrimental to the minority languages. [10] Kayambazinthu (1994:3) describes the Malawian linguistic scenario as detrimental to the vitality of other native language. "Although speakers of minority languages enjoy using Chichewa as a national language, their non officially supported languages have lost popularity" [11] Machinyise (2010) observes that imposing some language subjects on learners creates and raises status of those languages learnt by majority of learners while disadvantaging those that are not classroom subjects.

[12] Kuncha and Bathula (2004) in their study discuss Language Shift being triggered by demographic or migration factor. Their study revealed that migration is the most influential factor that can facilitate language endangerment leading to language Shift. When a community of speakers moves and settle in a region or community where the language spoken is different from theirs, there is a likelihood of shifting to a new language. This however can happen the

other way round where speakers of the host language can adopt and embrace the language of new comers or settlers at the expense of theirs. This is similar to the situation of central and Copperbelt province of Zambia where Swaka and Lamba speakers have shifted to Bemba, language of outsiders. On the other hand the process of migration can lead to multilingualism. [13] Ravindranath (2009) points out that "as people move from one country to another, there is contact with various speech communities in a natural setting, which brings about multilingualism." This statement has some historical evidence as history has revealed that most of African languages evolved and while others died as ethnic groupings migrated from one region to another.

3. Method

The data was collected by using questionnaires and in-depth interviews from a sample of 50 respondents comprising 20 residents and five traditional leaders from each study area of Mukonchi and Mushili chiefdoms respectively. The researcher personally administered written questionnaires and conducted interactive interviews with the residents and traditional leaders in Mukonchi Kabwe rural and Mushili Ndola rural respectively. Qualitative method was used to collect information pertaining to opinions and views of respondents on language choice while quantitative was used to collect statistical data. Purposive method was used on traditional leaders (Headmen or Basulutani) in both research areas due to pre-determined nature of information that was required from those who presided over the cultural heritage and traditions of the residents in the speech communities. The questionnaire was designed in such a manner that it contained provisions for both qualitative and quantitative data.

4. Findings and Discussions

The findings have revealed that the indigenous languages of Kabwe and Ndola are not considered to be as important as Bemba which is not indigenous to Central and Copperbelt provinces. The 20 traditional leaders interviewed gave various reasons why Swaka and Lamba languages are losing native speakers to Bemba.

Political factor

Political factor is one of the major reasons given by traditional leaders from the research areas as being the contributing factor to the endangerment of Lamba and Swaka languages of Central and Copperbelt provinces respectively. Some Headmen of Mukonchi and Mushili complained about the use of Bemba as medium of instruction and subject for their Lamba and Swaka children. They complained that their children are compelled to learn and master Bemba in order to pass school examination to the detriment of Swaka and Lamba their mother tongues. Some parents from both research areas felt that the use of Bemba as medium of instruction in Mukonchi and Mushili areas has seriously affected the vitality of Lamba and Swaka as their children no

longer have sufficient domains in which they could speak their mother tongues.

The declaration of Bemba as regional official language in Mukonchi and Mushili is seen as the major political factor that is detrimental to the vitality of Swaka and Lamba languages. The traditional leaders complained about listening to national broadcaster Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) news in Bemba instead of Swaka and Lamba. They felt marginalised and neglected because it was quite difficult for them to express their traditions and views on national issues when they know that whatever they say will be translated into Bemba language. According to the respondents of both areas, all the official notices and communications are written and announced in Bemba.

As revealed by the study, political decisions pertaining to language policies are the driving force for language endangerment and shift. Imposing a regional official language from other region is not only a recipe for ethnic rivalry but favourable catalyst for language endangerment for non officially supported native languages. It cannot be gainsaid that the selection and declaration of one indigenous language among many as official language, compels speakers of other languages to learn and master it to the detriment of theirs.

Negative attitude towards indigenous languages.

Traditional leaders interviewed also attributed the endangerment experienced by their languages to the negative attitude by the youths towards their mother tongue. They pointed out that Mushili youths are in constant contact with their fellow youths from the city who speak Bemba. They pointed out that many youths in the villages feel that by speaking Bemba they are well integrated into modern society and Bemba language is associated with city life and civilisation.

Parents from both areas explained that the advent of modern entertainment and art are the major causes of reduction in the vitality of Lamba and Swaka because most of the songs played and listened to by the youths are in Bemba and Nyanja. This scenario entails that expression of emotions and feelings is obviously done through the medium of Bemba and Nyanja. Some respondents pointed out that that parents play a vital role in teaching values associated with their mother tongues.

There is always a motivating factor behind an attitude towards a language. As revealed by the study, the integrative motivation plays a vital role in developing language attitude among speakers. Members of the speech community, specially youths, always want to be associated with a language of high prestige.

Migration

When asked if the people who settle in their areas speak the native languages of the areas, all traditional leaders of Mukonchi and Mushili pointed out that despite Bemba being related to Swaka and Lamba, settlers who are land to settle opt to speak Bemba instead of the native languages. It was also observed that most of the settlers in these two areas are either Tonga from Southern province or retirees from the

cities. Some parents however felt that Bemba being the regional official language and also being the language most widely spoken in the country should be embraced by everyone including their villages.

According to the respondents in the two research areas, the influx of people of diverse ethnic background has caused massive intermarriages in these two areas. The result of these intermarriages is that children born in these homes definitely speak Bemba the regional official language. The traditional leaders fear that this continuous intermarriage coupled with mobility of goods and services to and from cities will eventually send Swaka and Lamba languages into gradual extinction

As revealed by the study, migration comes with a lot of effects on the host languages. This is a phenomenon that cannot be controlled as immigrants come with their own familiar languages. In a community in which residents of different linguistic background live together, language contact is unavoidable. It is the most powerful language that survives depending on political support from the authority and language maintenance measures put in place by indigenous speakers.

Economic factor

The study also revealed that there is massive interaction between residents of Mukonchi in Kabwe rural and Kabwe traders who frequent Mukonchi farms to buy farm produces for sale in the urban markets. Farmers also travel to Kabwe town to sell their agricultural produce such as maize, groundnuts and vegetables. On the other hand in Mushili area, rural residents interact with town residents on a daily basis as rural residents work in town and return home in the evening.

During this interaction with the people from the city of Ndola and Kabwe town, there is linguistic biasness as speakers of the minority languages, Swaka and Lamba are the ones who switch to Bemba. This linguistic imbalance has a negative impact on the vitality of the minority languages.

5. Conclusion

This study has clearly revealed that language endangerment and shift among Swaka and Lamba speakers is triggered by the proximity of their communities to the cities of Kabwe and Ndola. The interaction of speakers of these minority languages plays a significant role in the linguistic dynamics of these speech communities. The study has also revealed that the attitude of speakers of these minority languages and the language status of these languages have facilitated the gradual language shift to Bemba the regional official language. The study has also revealed that speakers of these minority languages have put in a disadvantageous position by some language policies formulated by the government. Being closer to the cities, these communities are hosts to immigrants who retire from formal employment in the cities and decide to settle in the rural farming communities near the cities. This migration and ethnic integration has contributed to the linguistic transformation

among speakers of these communities.

It should be noted that language shift does not only affect the dominated or threatened language alone but it also influences the vocabulary of the dominant language. The fact that Swaka and Lamba speakers are shifting from speaking their mother tongue to speaking Bemba means that Bemba will be influenced by Swaka and Lamba vocabularies thereby creating some partial transformation to the language. This study makes recommendations to the government to support and promote traditional ceremonies and cultures of minority languages so as to promote the use vitality of these languages. It is also recommended that the status of Swaka and Lamba languages should be elevated to learning subjects so that children in these areas can learn their mother tongue in schools.

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