Centrality of Language in Development: A Case of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

   This paper examines the relationship between use of indigenous language and development. It is based on qualitative research employing unstructured interviews and observations data collection techniques. The paper argues for the placement of language at the centre of African states' efforts towards becoming developed. Language is hereby understood to be the method of human communication consisting of the use of words or symbols in a structured and conventional way. Every language mirrors a culture. Culture is the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively. It is the sum total of a community's ways through which it combats all the challenges that it faces in the world. Language and culture are often referred to as inseparable since every language carries a culture. Language, therefore, carries tradition which in turn refers to the transmission of customs and beliefs from generation to generation. Placing language at the foundation of every developmental endeavor would, therefore, means the upholding of the traditional wisdom and thus ensuring development that is original, properly situated and with very relevant fruits for the community in question.

Keywords: Language, Development, Developed countries, Developing countries.

1. INTRODUCTION

   Most African states continue being tagged as developing and it appears their efforts are in vain since they are bound not to come up with anything of their own. This is so since what most of them are doing is trying to imitate, maintain and repair what the developed ones have invented. In other words, most African countries' finest engineers, technicians etc are trained to do is to understand developed countries' inventions, maintain and repair them. Each time they come to know better about any of the inventions, the developed countries would have invented something new so they continue occupied with chasing. The research tries to identify loopholes in developing countries' approach towards development and come up with a possible alternative.

   In short, the paper focuses on finding a possible alternative approach for pursuing development in the African continent. It explores the possibilities associated with putting language at the centre of the whole developmental endeavour by African nations. This is done through a qualitative assessment of the potential of the Shona language used in Zimbabwe's Masvingo province to play this role.

   Having given the rationale of this paper in this introduction, the next part of the paper contextualizes the problem by giving some background information and discussing existing literature on indigenous languages and the development debate in Africa. Then comes a brief outline of the methodology employed in the paper looking at the findings and discussing the implication of these findings. The paper ends with an overall conclusion and some recommendations for improvement of the situation.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

   The theme of this paper is better outlined by Prah (1993) who observes that in their search for solutions to the development problems of Africa, students of African development have often ignored linguistic and other socio-cultural resources. This observation indicates a poor understanding of what exactly development means. The paper argues that development must rather be seen as the advancement of the systems of a particular society to suit its present needs. This is supported by Bodomo (1994) who sees development as the sustainable socio-cultural, economic and technological transformation of a society and believes language to be an important variable in the development process. It becomes an important variable since it is a carrier of a society's tradition and, therefore, the wisdom bank of the society. Thus it mirrors the important systems of the society that traditionally speaks it.

   Desai and Potter (2008) note that 'Development must be regarded as synonymous to enhancing human rights and welfare, so that self-esteem, self-respect and improving entitlements become central concerns'. This position puts a society at the centre of its own development programme. This would mean focusing on progressing from where the society is without beginning by hating and despising itself. It would, therefore, mean taking the society's tradition and placing it at the centre of every developmental endeavor. The paper argues that it is this kind of approach to developmental programmes that is likely to yield positive results. It has room for innovation which in turn is the only aspect that can buy other societies' attention and put the so-called developing countries on the map of development.

   The question likely to develop in many people's minds is how this would be possible now that not many

people still have enough knowledge of their traditions intact. This is so because the colonizer's main goal was to instill self-hate in order to destroy everything that had to do with the locals' traditions. Worse still, years after independence, people have not come to realise the danger with upholding this understanding resulting in continuous destruction of their own traditions. This paper is arguing that if people refocus and make an effort to reconstruct their traditional wisdoms, there are still useful traces. They still have some elderly people in possession of considerable knowledge about that. Their languages may also be manipulated since they are loaded with a lot of the cultural practices as well as traditional wisdoms. They have different aspects captured, for instance, in the form of proverbs, riddles and many popular sayings that can assist.

The so-called developed countries love and respect themselves and have their selves at the centre of everything they do. This is evidenced, for instance, by the language policies they have adopted. Their own indigenous languages are at the centre of their policies. Almost everything they do is done in their own languages. For instance, if one visits the countries like Japan or China for studies, he or she would have to take up lessons in their own languages, that is, Japanese and Chinese respectively, first as they are the media of instruction. English (the so-called international language) is just learnt in most of these developed countries as English as a foreign language (EFL). To them development is taken to mean a process of transforming their own socio-cultural and economic processes for their own good. They thus have enough love and respect for who they are as well as where they have come from. They move in their own direction rather than imitating what other people are doing. This ensures originality in what they do which makes everyone else look to them for their products. They are, therefore, assured of a permanent place on the map of developed countries.

On the contrary, in most developing African states, it appears the traditional socio-cultural and economic backgrounds have never been considered as important variables in the development process. Bodomo (1994) notes that whenever linguistic issues are addressed at all, the fact that there is a multiplicity of languages in African countries is often seen as a hindrance to the development of the continent. Efforts are often made to do away with most if not all of the indigenous languages. This has since resulted in language policies that threaten the lives of most of the languages. In Zimbabwe, for instance, there is a language policy neglecting up to 17 of the total number of indigenous languages in the country. Only two of the indigenous languages (Shona and Ndebele) have been promoted to a position closer to that of the former mother country's language (English). Instead the multiplicity of the languages must be regarded as signifying the multiplicity of the traditions and in turn the traditional wisdoms that are carried by those languages from which very useful ideas may be tapped. Time and resources must, therefore, be invested in trying to test and manipulate the potential of the different ideas embodied in the languages. Above all, if (Desai and Potter, 2008) understanding of development is to be adopted, then people must understand that there is no way one may talk of self-esteem and self-respect in a country with such a language policy. There would be a need to revisit policy issues in order to replace the self-hate that is now characteristic of most developing countries with self-love.

Bodomo (1996) notes that an allied notion of the general misunderstanding of the role and functions of language is that some people often say that it may even be better to use "scientific" languages such as English and French since African languages are incapable of expressing certain political notions and all the technical expressions that are inherent in many academic fields. The paper agrees that it is a misunderstanding since there is no language that is superior to the other. The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1916 - 1959) argued that language is a system of signs adding that languages are similar in the sense that each is a system of symbols for encoding meaning and the realities of the world. There are various lexicon expansion processes that can avail an infinity number of terms for everything people need to talk of. These include adoption and adaptation (borrowing words from other languages and molding them to suit the morphological as well as syntactic rules of the host language); coinage (creating new words from the scratch); blending (joining parts from different words to create one that means something related to both for example motel from motor and hotel); clipping (making use of a part of a word in place of the whole word); compounding (joining two or more words); acronym (making use of initials of a compound word for example SADC) as well as backformation (removing the front part of a noun usually to generate a verb related to it. These examples demonstrate that there is virtually nothing that may not be said out in any language. In Zimbabwe efforts by the African Languages Research Institute (ALRI) to prove this yielded a number of Shona and Ndebele lexicographic projects namely:(Mpofu, 2004) (dictionary of medical terms); (Mheta, 2005) (musical terms dictionary); (Nkomo and Moyo, 2006); (Chimhundu and Chabata, 2007);(Chimhundu, 1996);(Chimhundu, 2001);(Hadebe, 2001)(literature terms dictionary) with others such as Shona Advanced musical terms and Shona Advanced medical terms dictionaries still pending. These are works demonstrating that all that is said in the so called modern languages can be perfectly expressed in the other languages such as Shona and Ndebele.

Despite these and the recent successful experiments to teach indigenous languages in those indigenous languages in Zimbabwe at one or two universities in the country, teaching of indigenous languages is still done in English both in schools and universities. The aforementioned misunderstanding of what development must be

all about seems to be driving the Zimbabwean language policy this far. English has since remained the official language in the country. It has remained the license to employment and respect more than thirty years after independence. If people are to buy the view that language and culture are inseparable, then it is a lie that a country such as Zimbabwe has emancipated itself and trying to develop itself. The country still upholds the former colonizer's perception of reality, wisdom and way of life. They still cherish him as well as hate and despise their selves. The people have not understood what exactly developing themselves is all about. They have not reoriented themselves from where the colonizer left them and still believe in pursuing development through copying what developed nations have done and nothing more. The paper argues that if they do not revise their focus in as far as development is concerned, they would remain as good as nations which have never set for the journey.

In other words, to date, what development means to Zimbabweans and most of the developing African people is becoming the white man. The school curriculum's main goal is to teach the Zimbabwean children to speak, think, eat, look and do everything like the white man. They have come to perceive development as becoming whites. They always think of understanding and emulating what the whites would have done. This means they have decided to commit all their time and resources towards following the former mother countries in the name of development. It is crystal clear that this is an impossible destination that they have set for themselves. They would never achieve it as the white man continues moving forward.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a qualitative research design. It employs observation and unstructured interviews as the data gathering techniques. Permission was sort from authorities and the informants before they could be observed or interviewed. To ensure anonymity, no identity information was recorded.

Zimbabwe's Masvingo province was used as the case study for this particular research. Ndanga district was randomly sampled out and comprise of people who speak mainly the Karanga variant of the Shona language. The researchers mainly observed the richness of the Shona language at work in situations such as environments in which the elderly manipulate it, for instance, to clear the air when there are unfavourable relations between people as well as to reach proper judgments at trials. The very elders were also interviewed to come up with their insights on their perception of the advantages associated with the use of the indigenous languages at all levels.

In the initial stages of the study the researchers attended a traditional court session in Ndanga district where they observed and listened to the proceedings at the court. They then interviewed five elders over the implications of use of language and traditional wisdom thereof..

Focus of the data gathering exercise was placed on gathering data that demonstrate how language may be used as a link to the reservoirs of the traditional wisdom that may be tapped and used as a proper foundation for development that is appropriate for most developing countries. The data was classified according to the various speech types and qualitatively analysed. These include proverbs, idioms and popular sayings often used in the society. Efforts were made to find out how the data was and could still be manipulated in order to ensure that development is attained.

4. FINDINGS

The research found a variety of aspects in the Shona language which if properly manipulated may take the country to some higher level in as far as the journey towards development is concerned. These fall into a number of categories including proverbs, idioms and sayings.

Subsection 6.1 below presents the definitions for each of the categories as well as some of the useful examples that came out of the field work and how they may contribute towards development. It is worth noting that as a result of the nature of the selected case study, the examples are from one language, that is, Shona.

4.1. Proverbs

A proverb is a short pithy saying in general use stating a general truth or valid piece of advice in as far as the speakers are concerned. In Shona there are proverbs that are popularly used in typical Shona environments such as:

- Mwana washe muranda kumwe (A king's child is just an ordinary person in a foreign land). This advises people against taking their home status with them when they visit other people's places. This is an advice that ensures that people remain humble and avoid humiliation. Such a teaching ensures that people view their home positions and powers as only valid in certain environments. If this understanding is available fights over some unnecessary issues would be avoided.

- Chisi chako masimba mashoma (your powers over other people's things are limited). This teaching again makes people capable of understanding and accepting certain things. There are people who end up causing tensions by trying to impose themselves over other people's belongings. Wars often result

from such people's actions yet if they consider and give themselves their proper positions as advised by this proverb peace would be assured. Imperialists have done a lot of injustices and caused deaths as well as sufferings due to their inability to understand where exactly they belong. With such a lesson, therefore, peace and stability are assured in most cases. Peace and stability create a very conducive environment for development.

- Chara chimwe hachitswanyi inda (one thumb cannot crush lice). This proverb emphasizes the importance of unity amongst people. It highlights that unity is power. Work becomes more enjoyable and easy if done by people who are united. Divisions are anti-developmental. That is the reason it is said 'United we stand, divided we fall'. People should learn to value unity and guard against the sprouting of any seeds of division. Many countries like Zimbabwe got defeated by the whites in the first and second chimurenga as a result of the divide and rule tactic that saw Ndebele and Shona failing to unite against the common enemy.
- Zanondoga akapisa jira (a person who did not take advice has ended in trouble). This one emphasizes the need to value other people's ideas and advices. If one avoids ideas then he/she is likely to get into trouble. History has it that a lot of people and even kings have failed due to their inability to take other people's ideas. Lobengula, for instance, could not consult before signing treaties like the Moffat treaty and Rudd concession leading to his selling of the country without awareness.
- Rume risinganyepi hariroori (A man who does not lie will not marry). Whilst lies are normally bad, they are the only way through which certain very good things may be achieved. This means that there are certain bad practices that yield very good fruits in life. People should, therefore, be so careful when it comes to making decisions. At times, certain things must not just be taken for granted.

Thus, proverbs would ensure that if people abide by what they teach, progress is assured and there are slim chances of getting into trouble whether as individuals or communities.

4.2. Idioms
Idioms are groups of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words. Such expressions usually assist elders in the Shona community when they want to hide issues from the youngsters. This makes it possible to discuss vital issues without facing the danger of exposing them to an age that may get disturbed by hearing them. Examples include:

- Akatiza mukumbo (She got married). Such issues are usually kept silent up until the bride price is paid. Therefore, exposing the issue to young ones may lead to its spreading before time is ripe. At times this would result in certain complications.
- Mwana arema (the child is pregnant). Pregnancy is another issue that needs to be hidden from a certain generation in the Shona culture. This is basically because children have difficulties with keeping sensitive issues to themselves and if an issue of pregnancy is spread in all directions, it may get into the ears of witches who may take advantage of the vulnerable nature of an unborn baby. There is emphasis on carefully keeping sensitive information. Even some elders have difficulties with keeping secrets. During the second chimurenga, people failed to keep Nehanda's secret that made it difficult for the whites to shoot her soldiers leading to the defeat. Nehanda told her people to apply pounded leaves of a certain tree on their bodies to make sure the enemy's weapons would not harm them. It was only after the enemy got hold of the leaves that Nehanda's fighters began falling victim. Today there are certain nations that are making money from medicines they learnt of and took from Africans, for instance, to deal with HIV related problems. The owners are not getting any reward and in certain cases have to pay for the medicines that in actual fact belong to them. If such information had been preserved they could have made money out of them.

4.3. Sayings
These are short and commonly known expressions containing advices or words of wisdom. They are often used by the elderly to anchor their advices in tradition. They are then passed on to other generations and at times modified to incorporate other pieces of wisdom that may crop up on the way. Examples include:

- Mweni anonzi uya tidye kwete uya ufe' (you say to a stranger come let us eat together not come and die'. The Shona people are peace loving and full of hospitality. They usually encourage people to ensure a peaceful environment as this is the rightful atmosphere for development. They believe that one rips what he/she sows and that giving precedes receiving.
- Kandiro kanoenda kunobva kamwe (a plate will go where another is coming from) This is because they believe that everything that is done is always done in the eyes of the Creator who rewards each act

accordingly. With such a kind of belief, there would be a slim chance of outbreaks of wars and cruel leaderships in societies. Nowadays there is evidence of greedy leaders whose concern is solely on acquiring much more than what they and their families can consume throughout their lives whilst others have nothing to eat even for a single day. In other words the society is characterised by a huge gap between the rich and the poor as a result of ignoring the traditional importance of giving or sharing with those who do not have.

These findings demonstrate that language, in this case the Shona language, is rich in aspects that influence each and every sector of the society. If a community is fully guided by the wisdom contained in the language it will develop into a better place for survival. For instance, there would be peace, cooperation and unity if people uphold the advice coming out of the presented proverbs. Already if these are assured, the society would be a better place for people. Where cooperation, unity and peace are, new ideas could be shared and explored. In typical traditional Shona setups, people in such an environment would discuss and share knowledge on issues like preventing and combating various diseases using different medicines. Also better ways of farming and making better and more efficient tools for use in various tasks could be shared. The paper is arguing that if language is placed at the centre of developmental endeavors, it could facilitate development that is original to the people in question. The education they would dwell on allows creativity as it would be closely related to the people's society.

5. DISCUSSION
5.1. Problem with the Developing Countries' Current Approach to Development

The problem with the current type of approach to development is that the direction in which it is progressing is in a way not related to the direction that the developing countries' life is heading. There is need for a total reorientation of their focus if efforts towards development are to mean something to them. This is the reason so many diseases unheard of before have arisen and multiplying amongst the developing countries ever since the coming in of the new approach to life and development. For instance, due to a shift towards what they now perceive as modern or good food, there are more Africans succumbing to diabetes, BP, early blindness etc than the whites who brought the foods.

Currently, developing countries would need to wait for the developed nations to move on so that they can start learning about their products. The developed countries are the ones who are properly positioned at the moment to do the inventions. In such a scenario there is no room for the developing ones to come up with anything of their own. This results from the fact that there is some missing link between the developing ones' minds and the root that development is taking. In other words, the languages in which the thoughts are modeled as well as the aspects on the ground are not related. This is the reason (as mentioned earlier on) all the finest technicians and engineers in developing countries may only go as far as maintaining and repairing what the whites have produced. They are not properly oriented towards contributing anything of their own. It appears the developing ones are shy to come up with anything of their own. They do not believe in anything that is not a brainchild of the developed ones. It all goes back to the self-hate that has been instilled in them. They hate their own selves and look down upon their capacity and initiatives. This perception is rooted in the colonial orientation they were exposed to. This instilled the understanding that anything typical of the colonized was barbaric and had to be eradicated. A good example is the Zimbabwean musician Daniel Chingoma's effort that yielded a plane of its own kind but was attacked by fellow Zimbabweans as dangerous without even finding out whether it had weaknesses or not. This indicates that there is need for a cleansing exercise that would prepare the ground for development in former colonies.

If this is not done, there is evidence that the developing countries will remain developing countries forever. This is well said since development should ensure that a nation has become capable of, among other aspects, generating things of its own for which the world have no choice but to come for them. Currently the developing countries have to keep waiting for the developed ones to move in order for them to follow and they are assured to keep pursuing and thus developing forever. This argument is properly placed since by the time the developing countries would get to understand the products of the developed ones, there would be other more recent inventions for them to study, understand and start copying. Worse still, in most cases the owners make sure to expose knowledge enabling them only to repair and maintain those products but never be able to reproduce or modify them on their own. This is so because the owners of the products are entitled to some secrets that will always remain hidden from others in order to ensure that those ideas and products do not get stolen. The paper is arguing that the solution to this problem lies with the developing countries' perception of their selves and development. They need to redefine their understanding of development as well as their efforts towards it. They must develop self-esteem and self-respect. This would make them put their own selves and their traditions at the

centre of every endeavour they do. There is a lot of traditional wisdom that is housed in their own languages which if pursued properly would take them a long way in as far as getting developed is concerned.

5.2. Language as a Variable in Developmental Endeavors

Language refers to a system of vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates (Bloch and Trager, 1942). Language and culture are intertwined. Language is a carrier of culture and as such the traditional wisdom bank of each and every community. Neglecting a language is thus synonymous to throwing away the traditional wisdom bank of the community that traditionally spoke the language. This would mean ignoring all the ideas that had the potential of being developed into greater things. It is such ideas that the developed countries took time to explore and pursue to greater heights that have taken them this far. The so-called developing countries, Zimbabwe included, have agreed to succumb to the propaganda of the developed countries. They have come to associate their languages and traditions with backwardness and are adopting the developed nations' languages instead, now referred to as the 'modern languages'. They are, therefore, indirectly trying to adopt the wisdoms carried by those languages and perceive as well as pursue development from there. This paper argues that for the developing countries to fully develop, they need to put their languages at the centre of their efforts. This would mean taking their traditional wisdom as the foundation for their developmental endeavours. This would ensure development that is deeply rooted within that respective community and this would be quite relevant for the well being of that particular people.

As evidenced in the examples presented in the preceding subsection, language is full of wisdom which if properly manipulated, constitutes a worldview second to none. The stored wisdom is so complete that it is capable of controlling the ways in which people of various generations and origins relate to each other in a way that is so good for the entire community. Given a fair chance, the philosophy housed in the languages may form a very strong foundation for development that is original and good for the local people. In other words it provides an environment for development that the locals pursue at their own pace and with no future side effects.

From the examples presented earlier, peace is ensured and where violence erupts, peace may be restored as the people are taught to respect counseling that may be brought amongst them. Peace is the element that ensures development. The people are also encouraged to work together, respect and share ideas. This way the people are bound to develop so well considering the argument archaeology that the human race's ability to progress well beyond the other animals is because of their possession of language. It is language that transformed their pace and direction to an unparalleled level as it facilitated discussing and sharing of ideas that are good for development. The emphasis that is placed on keeping secrets is so important as it would bar outsiders from stealing ideas and products from the community before time is ripe for that. This would ensure a situation whereby the community has a say over its own products. It is this that makes the developed countries secure a distance over the others since all people would need to get to them and buy whatever they have. It is this kind of wisdom that should characterise the developing countries' approach to development.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper has demonstrated that being a developed country means, amongst other aspects, the community has something of its own for which other people are forced to come to it. The paper has argued that for this to happen, there is need for originality in what the country does. This is difficult to come by in the developmental programmes of most African states since they have decided to put the former colonizers at the centre of their endeavors towards development. This has denied them the opportunity to come up with anything they can claim to be their own as they are always concerned with learning and trying to copy what the others would have done. Unfortunately there is no credit for people who emulate what other people would have done. This makes them bound to remain developing countries forever. The paper is, therefore, advocating for putting the African at the centre and fight to develop him or her in a way that is best in the eyes of the African. This would create an opportunity for creating things that are owned by him or her and which also have a greater chance of attracting other people's attention and acknowledgement. The paper is suggesting the placement of the African language at the centre of the endeavors to get developed as one way of achieving the much needed progress. This is in place since language carries identity and traditional wisdom. The paper has also emphasized that this may only be possible if the Africans re-cultivate the self-esteem, self-respect and self-trust that the former colonizer invested in destroying during colonization. Without these, there would not be anybody to develop. There would rather be efforts to emulate other people rather than developing anything as development should be viewed as transforming someone or something that is there to another level.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends that policy makers in Africa and other affected developing countries:
- come up with policies and regulations that put their indigenous languages at the centre of their

development efforts;

- reengineer their mindsets and thus all their developmental endeavours to complement a positive attitude towards local languages to ensure that the majority of their population make intellectual contribution to the country's development efforts;
- encourage the development of self-esteem, self-respect and self-trust destroyed by colonialism to ensure that people have confidence in themselves and work towards self enhancement and development of their communities;
- encourage communications, innovation and initiatives through indigenous languages so that people are freed from the colonial yoke that makes them perpetual imitators; and
- place language at the centre of developmental endeavors.

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