

Teachers' perception and awareness of Shona dialects vis-à-vis Standard Shona in the Zimbabwean classroom: Implications for teaching and learning

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ABSTRACT

Shona is a heterogeneous language in that a number of tribes use different dialects namely Karanga, Ndaou, Manyika, Zezuru and Korekore. However, in educational circles the Zezuru dialect is regarded as 'the language' while the other speech forms are erroneously seen as deviations from the norm, and are therefore stigmatised. This means that learners come to school with a win-lose package depending on the dialect or variety they speak and that impacts on the teaching-learning process. The basic aim of this paper is to show that language variation, especially in Shona, can be an interesting area of study for educationists in indigenous languages. If a learner is given the opportunity to study in a context where language diversity is either discouraged or encouraged, consequently the gap between home and school can be either widened or narrowed depending on which variety of Shona the learner speaks. In light of that, this paper examines the problems faced by, what the layman calls, 'non-standard' dialect speakers of Shona in the Zimbabwean classroom. The paper also explores ways that can improve dialect awareness amongst teachers of Shona. The paper then concludes by arguing that dialect diversity should not be seen as a problem but as a resource to be utilised in the language classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the days of Doke, Zezuru dialect has dominated the teaching, learning and examination of Shona language in Zimbabwe (Doke, 1931 p. 34). Examination results for Shona language as subject at grade 7, 'O' and 'A' levels over the years reflect very low pass rates compared to the other subjects. One reason that keeps coming up in research into the study of African languages in Zimbabwean education system is the fact that both the teaching-learning and examination processes have a dialectal bias. For that reason this paper specifically focuses on variation in the Shona speech community and the challenges it brings in the classroom context. The paper explores how the variation of Shona dialects influences their different status in the Zimbabwean Shona classroom before highlighting the importance of promoting and preserving dialects. Ways to affirm



every Shona-speaking learner's linguistic self-respect are suggested while arguing against the notion of either 'standardised' or 'non-standardised' dialects.

While scholars may argue that in the face of the campaign for the harmonisation of Shona language dialects as separate entities no longer matter much, this paper maintains that the study of Shona language is still haunted by the diglossic landscape created and maintained due to the language's heterogeneous nature. Hence the issue of dialects in the teaching-learning of Shona language in the Zimbabwean curriculum remains topical. Three fundamental questions guide the discussion in this paper:

- From a historical point of view, how are the Shona dialects ranked socially and academically?
- How does ranking of Shona dialects influence the nature of the teaching and learning of Shona language in Zimbabwean education?
- As a way forward, how can be the teaching of Shona language re-engineered in order to meet the needs of learners from 'non-standardised' dialects?

To address these questions, among others, this paper begins by giving a brief background on how the heterogeneous nature of Shona language was created and crafted.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE SHONA LANGUAGE

As highlighted above, the Shona speaking community is characterised by a number of dialects. Doke (1931, p. 25; 2005, p. 9) identifies five dialects namely Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Ndaou and Korekore. On the other hand, Magwa (2007, p. xii) increases the number to nine to include Kalanga, Barwe, Hwesa and Nambya. [At this point it is important to mention that the recently approved constitution now officially recognises Ndaou as a language (Constitution Parliamentary Select Committee 2013, p. 22). However, this paper shall not dwell on this development in the interest of keeping its focus]. Despite that, the fact remains that Shona is a heterogeneous language and its nature has impacted so much especially in the classroom context.

In an effort to unify the Shona dialects Doke (1931, p. 29), through research, established that the dialects are mutually intelligible. He noted the main features that bind the dialects into one language as follows:

- Common underlying unity of vocabulary;
- Common phonetic features such as the five vowel system, three significant tones, employment of whistling fricatives, phenomenon of velarisation and employment of implosives;
- Common grammatical features such as monosyllabic noun prefixes, significant super-addition of prefixes, tense system and decimal numeration.

On the basis of that, Doke had a strong case for unifying the dialects into a written language that came to be known as Standard Shona. Doke (2005, p. 9) selected and used

the Zezuru dialect as the basis for the standard spelling and grammar, with significant influence from the Karanga dialect and relatively less influence from the Manyika, Ndaou and Korekore dialects. Doke (2005, p. 23) justifies the choice of Zezuru with the following reasons:

- Zezuru included all the phonetic differences that were needed in unified Shona;
- There was minimal variation in pronunciation within the Zezuru cluster;
- Zezuru was spoken in the central geographical area thus strategically positioned to influence other dialects.

These attributes automatically gave Zezuru an advantage over the other dialects thus it was made the backbone in the standard Shona writing system with significant Karanga additions, because of a large number of speakers from the latter variety. The other dialects were thus accorded a lesser status.

Doke's recommendations have influenced policy and practice over the years because the 1931, 1955, 1967 'standard' Shona orthographies have remained basically unaltered. Any attempt to improve the alphabet and orthography has ended up as a mirror reflection of Doke's 1931 version. The written form of Shona used in Zimbabwe today has basically remained Zezuru and Karanga biased. That state of affairs has perpetually placed Shona dialects hierarchically in both social and educational circles as shall be examined in the next section of this paper.

3. STATUS OF SHONA DIALECTS

Although dialects are linguistically valid like any other language for the purpose of communication, socially and educationally some dialects are accorded low status. By virtue of existing side by side in the same community there arises a diglossic situation whereby one or some of the dialects are accorded a high status while others are stigmatised as low varieties. The high variety or dialect is often valued by public as being logical, more precise and even more beautiful than the low varieties or dialects. In sharp contrast, the low varieties are stigmatised as corrupt forms of the language. This is what obtains in the Shona speaking community and Shona classroom in Zimbabwe.

Due to the historical development of Shona orthography, dating back to the missionary days, Shona dialects can actually be ordered in a hierarchy according to social prestige. Karanga and Zezuru dialects are perceived as having high status while the rest (Ndaou, Korekore and Manyika) are conferred lower status even in the classroom. At the moment, the status of 'non-standard' Shona dialects in education is very low such that learners enter the education system as either winners or losers depending on the dialect they speak in their homes. Due to social and educational stigmatisation towards the lower varieties, learners naturally develop negative attitude towards their home dialect and this impacts on their academic performance.



Siegel (2006, p. 160) posits that learners who are more confident of their mother tongue are high performers educationally. Consequently negative attitude toward home dialect could result in negative self-image thus negatively impacts on academic achievement and future. In light of that, Nomlomo (2001, p. 80), writing on a similar linguistic set-up, also laments that teachers tend to show negative attitude towards the 'non-standard' dialects and do not accept them in the Xhosa classroom. Similarly one can conclude that teachers advocate the adoption of 'standard' Shona without recognising the sources of linguistic interference that result from the 'non-standard' dialects in the classroom. In fact they are viewed as 'illnesses' which need to be cured.

In Zimbabwe dialect stigmatisation is against the 1982 ministerial declaration which recommended that all Shona dialects be recognised in the classroom. Unfortunately many educationists, including this writer, never got hold of this very promising document. Nonetheless, the recommendation promoted recognition and acceptance of all Shona varieties and encouraged erosion of dialect prejudice in education. Contrary to such positive stance, there is continued negative attitude toward 'non-standard' dialects in the Shona classroom. It looks there are no tangible efforts by the education system to level the status of all Shona dialects and this impacts on the teaching and learning of Shona language as a subject of the curriculum.

With such an uneven and unfair landscape in the Zimbabwean Shona classroom, surely there is need for re-engineering the teaching and learning of the Shona language curriculum. That is the major concern of this paper.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Zimbabwean curriculum is underscoring the central role of dialect awareness in the teaching and learning of Shona. Teachers take it upon themselves to prescribe the 'best' dialect to be taught in the Shona classroom. This paper thus argues that dialect awareness should be fostered in the curriculum with special focus on the teacher who continuously uses texts and ancillary materials. The theoretical framework that guides such thinking is what Martinez (2003, p. 3) refers to as the classroom based dialect awareness model.

While writing on Spanish dialects, Martinez (2003, p. 3) suggests that dialect awareness in a classroom context should be guided by the following questions adapted from Baugh (1999):

- What dialect does the teacher use to impart instruction?
- What dialect does the teacher promote?
- What does the teacher think about the vernacular dialect of students?
- How does the teacher express prejudices in the classroom?
- How do these attitudes and expressions damage student's self-confidence?
- Is the use and promotion of a standard dialect an instance of educational malpractice?

The questions above indicate that awareness of the sociolinguistic issues is a critical component in the training of teachers. In turn, their pedagogical task is to help a learner develop an 'interior monitor' to assist in avoiding stigmatisation of other dialects (Martinez, 2003, p. 3). Dialects should be a social and not pedagogical issue. The teacher is there to bring a renewed pride and interest in all the dialects of a language.

In relation to the classroom based dialect awareness model, Wolfram et al (1999) also guide teachers on the following about dialects:

- That dialects are natural;
- That dialects are regular;
- That variation in dialects occurs at different levels.

Once a teacher keeps these at the back of his/her mind, it is argued, students from different speech communities tend to benefit.

As it is, the classroom based dialect awareness model gives students the tools to analyse language varieties from a scientific perspective. It helps students detach emotion and prejudice from the perception of dialects and to look at them as self-contained systems of human communication (Martinez, 2003, p. 6). Thus dialects should become a natural and normal phenomenon to the Zimbabwean Shona teacher as well.

With the classroom based dialect awareness model there is need to go beyond linguistic description by taking social values ascribed to different varieties. To that effect Martinez (2003, p. 7) suggests a social framework to handling of different dialects of a language in the classroom. The framework spells out the following:

- The functions of dialects;
- The distribution of dialects;
- The evaluation of dialects.

Such a social framework helps in answering the "why" of linguistic variations to the teacher first before cascading to the learner. These dimensions can be used to address sociolinguistic issues of language, power and inclusion. Once such aspects are embedded within the Shona curriculum, learners will thus better understand the social function of linguistic diversity and language variation can be viewed as a plus rather than as a liability. Before exploring the actual activities that can be employed in achieving that, the paper shall now look into problems faced by 'non-standard' speakers in the Shona classroom.

5. PROBLEMS FACED BY 'NON-STANDARD' DIALECT SPEAKER IN THE SHONA CLASSROOM

Wolfram et al (1999) are of the idea that if a teacher underestimates a learner's ability because of dialect differences, the learner might not do well in class. Nomlomo (2001, p. 80) also concurs by observing that learners denied use of their mother tongue perform



poorly in school. In light of such perceptions, Rowland and Marlow (2010, p. 2) realise that negative attitudes towards dialects are more visible in education circles than anywhere else. It follows then that learners from 'non-standard' Shona dialect speaking homes are possibly bound to face problems in learning 'standard' Shona, which is Zezuru and Karanga dialects flavoured.

Generally, many teachers believe that the 'standard' dialect has the potential to offer more opportunities in the future. Teachers therefore tend to 'correct' 'non-standard' dialect speakers thereby contributing to a barrier between home and school. This ultimately impedes chances for academic progress by 'non-standard' dialect speakers. Furthermore correcting a learner goes deeper than just the speech as noted by Rowland and Marlow (2010, p. 2). The two contend that the learner becomes less receptive to learn the so-called 'standard' dialect. The reason could be that it is quite impossible for a teacher not to denigrate the speaker in the process of correcting the 'illness.' Such an approach divorces the learner from him/herself, indirectly.

The home or ethnic language is the best language for cultural heritage. Having a sense of belonging contributes to one's self esteem. In the Zimbabwean Shona classroom the learner from a 'non-standard' dialect does not feel rooted in the culture of the 'standard' dialect. There is also the danger of not being understood in the 'standard' Shona context. Though few in number, words in some of the 'non-standard' dialects might not be intelligible in 'standard' Shona and that places the learner on the wrong side of the fence. It is best that the learner is allowed to use his/her home dialect as this would surely facilitate his/her expression of thought.

Learners from 'non-standard' dialects become culturally deprived when the learning process does not start from their own personal linguistic and cultural experiences. Such learners are alienated because it is widely acknowledged that language is a career of culture. Denying one of their home languages is equal to denying them of their culture and once that happens, one is sort of uprooted from their cradle.

Currently the 'non-standard' Shona dialects are still marginalised as incorrect forms. There are times when learners from 'non-standard' dialect speaking community refrain from participation in class because their tone or pronunciation is a source of ridicule. This deprives children of their linguistic rights that are necessary for schooling as espoused by the Human Rights Article number 22. It is for the above-described reasons, among others, that this paper argues that the education system in Zimbabwe needs to realise the importance of preserving and promoting all Shona dialects. The next section of this paper shall briefly explore that.

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTECTING AND PRESERVING SHONA DIALECTS

Carver (1989) defines a dialect as a language variety distinguished from other varieties by a set of grammatical, phonetic and lexical features. Although dialects vary they are as

important as any other language. In this section the paper explores the three functions of dialects which are cultural, social and academic. Scholars may argue that due to globalisation there is no need for heterogeneity in culture but this paper maintains that we are what we are because of what we value and treat as the norm. Dialects are synonymous to cultural heritage (Ji, 2001, p. 1). Protection of dialects means protecting our splendid national culture. For that reason, it is quite urgent that Zimbabwean education system protects all Shona dialects as they are increasingly endangered.

Like the Shona language itself, all its dialects are more than simple tools for communication. Rather, they are fossils that carry ethnic and regional culture. The different Shona dialects are witness to Shona history and therefore truly represent the people. The life of the Shona people and other aspects of history and culture are well recorded and reflected in the various dialects of the Shona language. Protecting dialects should therefore be prioritised as it means protecting the diversity of culture. This paper argues that schools are the springboard for that.

Despite the fact that there are some differences among Shona dialects, speakers of all these speech varieties share the same written form. It is human nature to speak a dialect and they are most likely to yield a sense of speaking a dialect spontaneously in the local social environment. Thus speaking one's own dialect as mother tongue is of utmost importance to protect dialects and the regional culture. This calls for a stronger need to consider recording the system of dialects to protect them as they are more likely to fade away and may be extinct one day. If this happens, the colourful and splendid culture of the *vaShona* people will become eclipsed and less valuable. The key is therefore to establish a favourable environment of local dialects and this should happen in the classroom first.

Those for the harmonisation of Shona dialects argue that dialects hamper the social progress of Zimbabwe. However, this paper takes Ji (2011, p. 5)'s stance that there is no evidence to show that unification of dialects into one language leads to progress, especially unification of a uniform language. In fact unification leads to the homogeneity of culture which finally makes the society vulnerable to impacts due to lack of diversity in the face of globalisation and social electronic platforms.

The Shona language should be based on the phonological system of dialects. Considerable words and expressions should be derived from its various dialects. Without deriving from the various dialects, the Shona language cannot develop. Although the Zezuru and Karanga dialects are dominant in Zimbabwe today, they still need re-defining by other dialects to extend vocabulary thus enriching Shona expressions.

A dialect is a reflection of local culture and also serves as a label of the ethnic group (Xin, Kong and Shao, 2008). In other words, a dialect serves as an invisible wire which links people to each other. No matter where they go or what they do, the sense of belongingness that is brought about by a dialect still appears to call together people from the same variety. A dialect enables people to share their thoughts, ideas and emotions



without barriers. Speaking a common dialect enables immediate identification and this is still very necessary even within educational circles. Dialects are widely used in works of literature, traditional operas and other forms. Literature with dialects is valuable because the dialects vividly describe the mind and spirit of figures (Ji, 2011, p. 6). Dialects therefore make art work more vivid and popular, hence should be promoted and preserved at all costs.

In brief, dialects are the basis for Shona language phonology, phonetics, rhetoric and modern linguistics. Dialects help maintain characteristics of Shona language in speech sounds, vocabulary and grammar in the original forms which are necessary for research into and development of the language. Dialects also have a close relationship with the human geography, history, folklore and traditional opera of people. Thus there is a strong reason for the classroom to ensure the survival of the different Shona dialects. And this clearly brings us to why this paper strongly advocates classroom based Shona dialect awareness.

7. THE ESSENCE OF CLASSROOM BASED DIALECT AWARENESS

There is no doubt that the status of Shona dialects has fallen. The government continues to indirectly impose 'standard' Shona on 'non-standard' dialect speakers through legislative, administrative and educational measures. This popularises 'standard' Shona which is in essence Zezuru and Karanga flavoured. The impact of promoting Zezuru and Karanga is so tremendous in the classroom such that the other dialects are disappearing in the context of strong strive for wide use of 'standard' Shona. The other dialects are regarded as old, uncouth and useless to the extent that people have developed negative attitudes toward them hence it is necessary and urgent to talk of dialect awareness.

Negative attitudes toward dialects are best dealt with through educational programmes designed to bring awareness (Rowland and Marlow, 2010, p. 2). Dialect awareness programmes are designed to send the message that all dialects in any language are systematic. It is therefore the job of linguists to inform and educate the public about that and the task becomes easier when it begins within the classroom set up.

The merits of instituting dialect awareness in the classroom include the following:

- Places teachers in a better position to deal with dialectal differences and language mistakes;
- Addresses the match between learning with demands of learner day-to-day real life communication situations;
- Promotes additive bilingualism which enhances the learning process of the 'standard' variety;
- Improves the self-image of 'non-standard' dialect speakers;
- Erases dialect stereotyping and myths, hence leading to positive understanding of all dialects;
- Removes language conflicts between school and home hence narrowing the gap;

- Enhances access to a variety of the language's resources which in turn improves language skills like editing and creative writing;
- Enables learners to see how language works and understand sociolinguistic issues like the origin and development of dialects.

All these will ensure that marginalised dialects are made objects of study, hence overshadowing the marginalisation, and reducing ethnic and social classroom discrimination. The onus is on the classroom practitioner to take the task upon oneself as the next segment highlights.

8. SHONA TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND CLASSROOM BASED DIALECT AWARENESS

As has been pointed out, the teacher is the most important agent behind a successful dialect awareness venture that might take place in any speech community. The teacher must meaningfully communicate with learners in a way that provides academic freedom and achievement. Schools are there to encourage cultural pride rather than cultural deprivation. Schools should therefore use and affirm culture and language as foundation for learners' academic success rather than trying to erase language and culture. The education system should encourage bi-dialectal education for students to succeed in higher education (Nomlomo, 2001, p. 82). Teachers ought to be really sensitive to learners' linguistic needs and cultural differences.

Currently, the situation in a Zimbabwean Shona classroom is not that conducive for 'non-standard' dialect speaker hence this paper argues for the great need to revive Shona dialects thus preserving ethnic culture. The non-standardised Shona dialects could be accommodated in the classroom through classroom based dialect awareness. On that note, this paper encourages teachers to try out the following suggested strategies in their Shona classrooms:

- Allow and encourage use of non-standardised dialects in the classroom for that enriches the standardised dialects indirectly;
- Fully accept the non-standardised dialect speakers' natural language; it allows for freedom of expression and increases classroom participation leading to better examination results;
- Make non-standardised dialects an object of study in discussions and literature to bridge the gap between home and school;
- Merge study of dialects with other subjects to promote integration of knowledge thus addressing some of the millennium development goals. For instance, in the History subject, learners can trace the history of Shona ethnic groups while in Sociology there could be a link between language and identity or language and society. Similarly, the distribution of different speech communities can be dealt with in Geography. That way, students can understand the nature of the Shona language and its dialects.



The teacher and his/her learners can also research into ethnic groups around the school while focusing on dialects spoken in the vicinity. In such researches, Wolfram et al (1999) suggest the following activities:

- Checking on forms and their usage;
- Observing dialect diversity at first hand;
- Inviting resource persons;
- Writing reports; and
- Discussing as class.

Such activities provide opportunities for active learning experience while preserving culture and oral traditions. Again the gap between home and school is narrowed as all dialects speakers are taken aboard.

Interviews with community members and immigrants in the communities could be also carried out. Learners can thus note dialect differences like *zhira* (Karanga) and *nzira* (Ndau or Korekore) (translated 'path' in English). The element of ridiculing some dialects is thereby dealt with indirectly. Learning could also focus on names of food, drink, plants, and animals in the different dialects and that will help learners not only have a wider linguistic resource base and appreciate dialect diversity but build self-awareness as well.

What all this amounts to is that the Shona teacher must view dialect diversity as a resource rather than as a liability.

9. CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that dialect awareness in the classroom offers the greatest opportunity for changing the negative attitudes that many Shona teachers and the Shona speaking community have toward dialect variation. Increasing the teacher's knowledge of dialect differences will go a long way in improving the self-esteem of learners from the non-standardised dialects. This automatically impacts positively on the academic performance of such learners. That being the case, this paper concludes by calling for a close scrutiny of the language policy in education and its implementation by all stakeholders with regards to the heterogeneous nature of the Shona language. There is need for re-engineering the teaching of Shona in the Zimbabwean education system. The paper advocates a policy that is inclusive of all Shona dialects in the teaching of Shona. Since the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, as of November 2014, has begun the process of reviewing the Zimbabwean education curriculum, this paper suggests that the review also reflects dialect diversity for a correct representation of the Shona speaking community. It is hoped that such curriculum review would influence the teaching-learning and examining of Shona thus levelling the ground for learners from the different varieties of Shona language.

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