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Cross-border Language Harmonization: A Case of Xitsonga (South Africa) and Shangani (Zimbabwe)

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ABSTRACT There has been much debate concerning language harmonization of some of the African languages in South Africa. These debates were fuelled by, among others, the close relationship that exists in the languages to be harmonized. Nhlapo and Alexander proposed the harmonization of the Nguni languages (IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, Siswati and IsiNdebele) and Sotho languages (Setswana, Sesotho and Northern Sotho), respectively. The reason for this proposal was because there were no linguistic reasons to be developed in the unrelated linguistic system. The objective of this paper is to discuss the harmonization of cross-border languages, namely, Xitsonga (South Africa) and Shangani (Zimbabwe). Historically, these languages originated from one parent language. However, political borders were used to serve the colonial government's divide and rule policy. The findings in this paper advocate for good reason to harmonize these two languages because there are more linguistic commonalities than differences.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to examine the possibilities of harmonizing two cross-border languages, namely Xitsonga and Shangani. Despite the politics around the unification of some African languages in South Africa, the paper will endeavor to prove that the proposed languages to be harmonized cannot be classified as different languages linguistically. The observation made during this research is that these languages are regarded as minority languages in their respective countries. Therefore, for their speedy development to take place it is crucial that they are harmonized to become one language in terms of orthography and maybe, to a lesser extent, their culture, customs, traditions and beliefs.

Xitsonga and Shangani are languages spoken in South Africa and Southeastern Zimbabwe respectively. Some authors such as Mesthrie (1995) regard Xichangani (spoken in Southern Mozambique) and Shangani as dialects of Xitsonga. According to Mesthrie (1995: 45), this "group as a whole shares more phonological and grammatical features…" In South Africa, ironically, Xitsonga is referred to as a minority language although it is one of the eleven official languages. The speakers of Xitsonga are mainly found in the Limpopo Province where they share a linguistic space with Tshivenda and Northern Sotho. According to Statistics South Africa (1996), the speakers of this language constitute 1.4 percent of the South African population. Although they are densely populated in Limpopo, they are also scattered in the other eight provinces.

Shangani, like Xitsonga, is one of the minority languages spoken in Zimbabwe. Chabata (2007: 282) concurs when he says that,

"The bulk of the languages without standard orthographies are a country's 'minority' or community languages, examples of which include, among others, Shangani, Tonga, Sotho, Chewa, Tswawo and Venda."

In Zimbabwe, the speakers of Shangani are predominantly found in the Chiredzi district in the Masvingo Province. Hachipola (1998: 22) noted that the Chiredzi district has a population of 160,192 and out of this number, the speakers of Shangani are said to be 121,787. In this district, Shangani shares a linguistic space with Chishona and Isindebele. These two languages (Xitsonga and Shangani) are also spoken by a large number of speakers in Mozambique and to a lesser extent in Swaziland and Lesotho. It could therefore be said that the proposed languages to be harmonized are spoken in five countries in Southern Africa.

Historically, it is believed that these languages originated from one parent language. According to Mesthrie (1995), these are Bantu languag-

es, which belong to zone S.50. A single variety common to all the languages should be developed as a way of facilitating a closer unity among these languages spoken in different countries. The reason why the speakers of these languages are in two different countries is because of the wars, which took place since time immemorial.

Literature Review

Chiocchetti (2015) in her paper titled *Harmonising Legal Terminology in Four Languages: the Experience of the Alpine* cites that the linguistic harmonization carried out within the Lex-ALP project aimed at attaining each term used within the Frame Convention and its Protocols expresses the same or similar characteristics of the relevant concept. According to her paper, legal terms are strongly embedded in their legal systems of origin because they express a specific organization of society that are peculiar to each legal system.

Kurgat (2014) argues that mutual intelligibility of Kalenjin dialects can be achieved through a harmonized orthography for literacy. In his concluding remarks, Kurgat (2014) points out that the phonological, morphological and lexical aspects need to be focused on in the harmonization and standardization of Kalenjin dialects in order to create a truly harmonized and standardized writing system acceptable to the speakers of Kalenjin language. Kramer (2013) gives some insight on the implications of law and language for the harmonization of the law, particularly in the EU context, and for the cross-border litigation. According to Kramer (2013) law and language are intertwined in many respects because the law is expressed in linguistic terms, and in turn linguistic terms bear significance for the interpretation of the law. The paper further gives the account about the framework of language and the law against the background of the harmonization of private law in the EU, the obstacles in cross-border litigation and communication between courts and ways to tackle these, the introduction of English as an optional court language and the protection of language rights in multilingual states.

The present paper will mainly focus on the harmonization of Xitsonga of South Africa and Shangani of Zimbabwe.

METHODOLOGY

The overall design of this research study is qualitative in nature. This approach was considered suitable because this paper is an exploratory study and aimed at gaining understanding of language harmonization by the speakers of the languages in question. The information was gathered through interviews. The participants were purposively selected on the basis of their typicality. Grinell (1988: 253) indicates, "A primary assumption in purposive sampling is that by selecting persons who are "typical" with regard to the study's variables, any errors of judgment in selection will tend to counterbalance one another." Ten speakers of these languages were interviewed, namely, lecturers, language practitioners and language graduates. It has to be indicated that these participants were selected because of their willingness, availability during interview sessions and experience in language matters.

Data Collection Procedure

In order to proceed with the process of collecting data, participant permission was requested. The participants were assured that their anonymity would be kept confidential. They were further informed that their participation would not financially benefit them. The participants were not persuaded to participate in this study and did so out of their own will. They were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study if they desired to do so. All the interviews were conducted in either the researcher's office or a place chosen by the participants. A friendly and non-intimidating atmosphere was created for participants to relax and talk freely. As a result, the participants gave the researcher a permission to audio record the interviews verbatim.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Definition of the Concept Language Harmonization

Other researchers sometime interchangeably use the concept language harmonization with language unification. The term denotes a particular kind of practice where two or more related languages are combined to form one language. According to Asher and Simpson (1994), lan-

guage harmonization refers to a situation whereby two or more different languages are unified to form one language that does not contain contradictory features. It needs to be mentioned that harmonization does not necessarily refer to a situation where only languages are unified, but it could be dialects of a language which are harmonized to become one. However, the focus of this paper will be on language harmonization and not the harmonization of different dialects of the same language.

Language Harmonization: The Case in Yugoslavia

The issue of language harmonization was not first suggested in regards to South African languages. It has been a thorny issue in countries such as Yugoslavia. In Yugoslavia, three languages, namely Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were unified against Germanization and Magyarization. Through this language harmonization, a standard language, which was officially called Serbo-Croat or the Central South Slavic Language (CSSL), came into being (Deprez and du Plessis 2000: 159). The reason why these languages were easily unified was because their dividing factor as different nations was not language, but religion and culture. Deprez and du Plessis (2000: 11) aver, "the religious differences were minimized and the differences between the dialects were considered to be no obstacle to the creation of a common language". Obviously, in situations where two related languages are harmonized, there should be some differences here and there. In the case of Serbo-Coat, due to this harmonization, two different spellings emerged, a Latin and a Cyrillic one. At first, many speakers of these languages accepted the unified Serbo-Coat language. However, as time went on, Duprez and du Plessis (2000: 11) noted, "…after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the creation of several independent states, we speak of four different languages: Bosnian, Croat, Montenegrin and Serb, which all serve as national "flags"."

It will be true to say that these four different languages came as a result of political intolerance amongst the speakers of these languages. In view of this discussion thereof, the researchers are of the opinion that although there might be some problems, politically, socially or culturally, but as long as they are not language related, language harmonization is possible in a country or countries where the speakers of these related languages have a common interest to do it. By related languages the researchers mean that these languages are not dialects of other languages but have many common features with each other.

Language Harmonization: The Case in South Africa

Language harmonization was not an issue that ended in Yugoslavia and other countries in the West. Africa is one of the continents, which can present a strange phenomenon. It is a divided continent not only politically, but linguistically as well. Its official languages are by large those of its erstwhile colonial masters. Sociolinguists in some African countries, such as South Africa, also took a step in the same direction as the one for Yugoslavia as illustrated above. This was because Africa is a sociolinguistically complex continent with a multiplicity of languages and cultures. According to Crystal (1997: 316), in Africa, about 2000 languages are spoken as first languages by more than 480 million people. In South Africa, a politician, Jacob Nhlapo, first proposed the debate on language harmonization or language unification. This proposal was made in 1944 and revisited by Neville Alexander and C.T. Msimang. Mesthrie (2002: 22) says that:

"One solution that generated a great deal of debate was a proposal by Neville Alexander (and was made earlier by politician, Jacob Nhlapo) that a new standardized Nguni language be enhanced, comprising of the 'cluster' of Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele and Swati, as well as a new Sotho standard based on North Sotho, South Sotho and Tswana."

Accordingly, Neville Alexander first proposed that the Nguni languages consisting of Isizulu, IsiXhoza, Siswati and IsiNdebele should be harmonized into one language called Nguni. At times the idea of language harmonization comes from the speakers of the languages to be harmonized. This is evidenced by the speakers of the Nguni languages as indicated by Alexander (2002: 67) when he avers, "there have been several calls to 'harmonize' the Nguni languages into a single written standard, the most recent by Alexander (1989)". The reason why these languages were proposed to be harmonized was their linguistic relatedness as shown in the examples below:

IsiZulu	*IsiXhosa*	*Siswat*	*Isidebele*
Abantu	abantu	abantu	abantu (people)
Izandla	isandla	tandla	isandla (hands)
Uyaphi	uyaphi	uyaphi	uyaphi (where to?)
Ngiyeza	ndiyeza	ngiyeta	ngiyeza (I'm coming)
Izindaba	Iindaba	Tindzaba	Iindaba (news)

The pronunciation, spelling and meaning of the words given as examples above are the same or similar for all the languages. Therefore, it is right to say that the reader of these words who knows one of these languages will get the meaning without great difficulty. Scholars such as A.N. Tucker, G.P. Lestrade, C.M. Doke and C. Meinh of mentioned the idea of unified Sotho languages. The suggestion was the unification of the Sotho languages, namely, Northern Sotho, Setswana and Southern Sotho. These languages were to be harmonized to become one language called Sotho language. Hereunder are some of the examples:

Northern Sotho	*Southern Sotho*	*Setswana*
Kgomu	kgomu	kgomu (cow)
Letswae	letswae	letswae (salt)
Maoto	maoto	maoto (legs)
Tlhogo	Tlhogo	Tlhogo (head)

It needs to be mentioned that the promotion of both, Nguni and Sotho languages, was done during the apartheid era with the intention of separate development. Comparatively speaking, although there are challenges from both language clusters, namely, Nguni and Sotho, Finlayson and Slabbert (2002: 23) say that the attitudes and linguistic practices of people within the Sotho cluster (Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho and Tswana) make the harmonization of this language group a better possibility than for the Nguni cluster.

Webb and Sure (2000: 19) noted that this suggestion has since been heartedly debated and rejected by many language workers. The reasons for their rejection were not linguistic, but political. In fact, they fear that the language whose speakers have political powers will dominate their traditions, customs, and philosophy of life. Mesthrie (2002: 27) says, "When linguists expressed a strong doubt about the feasibility of such unification at the spoken level, Alexander stressed the benefits at the written level".

Alexander (2002: 23) exudes, "the hope that in the long-term, at least at the level of writing and publishing, the languages within each cluster could be brought together rather than forced apart".

Harmonization of Xitsonga and Shangani

Xitsonga and Shangani are languages spoken in two different countries as alluded above. These languages are mutually intelligible such that the speakers of these languages can easily communicate with very few, if no, difficulties. This is the reason why Mesthrie has regarded Shangani as a dialect of Xitsonga. Genetically, these languages could be said to be related. Mesthrie (1995: 29) is of the view that "genetic relationship is indicated when there are large numbers of lexical similarities in form and meaning between two languages. It can be proven only when regular sound correspondence has been set up". Xitsonga and Shangani are related in terms of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The following are the examples:

Verbs

Xitsonga	*Shangani*
Sweka	sveka (to cook)
Raha	rhaha (to kick)
Vabya	vabwa (to get sick)
Veleka	b'eleka (to give birth)

Nouns

Xitsonga	*Shangani*
Ririmi	lirhimi (language)
Xilo	cilo/chilo (a thing)
Byanyi	bwanyi/bwasi (grass)
Byalwa/Byala	bwala (beer)
Byongo	bongo (brain)
Dyambu	dambo (sun)
Swakudya	swakuda (food)

Looking at the given examples one could notice that Shangani words have an influence of Shona words. It was noticed that this influence is prevalent in both, speaking and writing. The reason for this influence is because of the dominance of linguistic preference of the conqueror language, namely Shona. Until recently, Shangani speakers were expected to learn Shangani until grade 3 and from grade 4 to 7 Shona replaced their mother language. Although there are still some negative attitudes towards the teaching and learning of this language by some parents, teachers and school masters, the policy of introducing the teaching of this language

from primary through secondary until tertiary can be regarded as a step forward in the recognition of this language and their speakers.

There is a need for the two languages in question to be harmonized for the promotion of cultural diversity. According to Madlome and Hlungwani (2014: 16), there is mutual intelligibility between Xitsonga and Shangani languages spoken in South Africa and Zimbabwe. They further state that the phonological and semantic variations in various parts of speech of these languages could have been caused by many years of separation and influence of other languages, which are in contact with both languages. Madlome and Hlungwani (2014) conclude by stating that differences in core vocabulary, which show originality should be utilized fully by increasing the corpus base for both, Xitsonga and Shangani respectively, regardless of which country the words originate from.

Chabata (2007: 285) avers, "Unfortunately the history of colonization has led to the creation of artificial boundaries between these otherwise highly related varieties". The relatedness of these languages is in terms of morphology, phonology, semantics, phonetics and syntax. Because of the national boundaries, which divide the speakers of these languages having mutual intelligibility, it makes it very difficult for these speakers to share information due to these political boundaries. However, the development and expansion of the corpus base for Xitsonga and Shangani, as alluded to, will ultimately enhance the harmonization of these languages and benefit all the speakers concerned in South Africa and Zimbabwe respectively.

Findings

The findings in this paper revealed that although attempts are being made to write Shangani dictionaries, terminologies, grammar and literature books, a very small number of words could be found defining the difference between Xitsonga and Shangani. The same, with grammatical differences between these languages, was hard to discover. These similarities are due to the fact that scholars from different institutions such as the University of Venda were afforded an opportunity to give linguistic advice to develop this language. Similar to this Chabata (2007: 279) noted that:

"To date, efforts towards developing the African languages spoken in Zimbabwe are more than a century old. Researchers, both foreign and local, as individuals or small groups, have made varying contributions towards the standardization and documentation of the country's different languages."

This among others was the reason why the speakers of Shangani led by the Shangani Promotion Association facilitated an agreement between the Great Zimbabwe University and the University of Venda to teach this language.

The speakers of both languages who participated in this research are in agreement that these languages should be harmonized for their speedy development to take place. However, Shangani speakers indicated their fear that the fact that Xitsonga is in a stronger position with many written materials might dominate and relegate the former to a further lower status. The challenge as stated of the current undeniable status of Xitsonga as compared to Shangani could be minimized by a language policy to be drawn when the harmonization of these languages has been made.

CONCLUSION

Communications between nations is important and this could be achieved through among others, language harmonization. It is clear from this paper that the battle of language harmonization must be fought on many fronts if this process is to be realized. There is a strong need to lobby by language practitioners, researchers, teachers, students, politicians and those responsible for developing language policies to play their pivotal roles. The latter being important because language promotion, its teaching and learning should be enshrined in government policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that linguists and other scholars strive to standardize and harmonize African languages with the aim of unifying and developing the African continent. They should also strive to position the African continent as a part of the "know-how" and allow Africa to participate equally with the rest of the world in the global village. The researchers also recommend that the orthographies, dictionaries and terminologies of cross-border languages be developed, standardized and utilized for development of the African society in a uniform way.

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