A survey of the language situation in Zimbabwe

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Is there a Zimbabwean variety of English? If so, who speaks it?

Introduction

Although Zimbabwe is a multilingual speech community, the Shona language, which is composed of dialects and sub-dialects, enjoys numerical dominance because it is spoken by the majority of the Zimbabweans. On the other hand, English, the official language, enjoys status dominance and it occupies a special position in the lives of many Zimbabweans. There is dispute, however, whether English in Zimbabwe is an interlanguage, and its speakers have adopted the native variety as a model, or whether it is better to observe that there are many varieties of English in Zimbabwe which are pragmatically identifiable as Zimbabwean, and that the vast majority of Zimbabweans appear to speak an English which reflects the linguistic characteristics of Shona.

Background

In Zimbabwe, 77% of the people speak Shona, while Ndebele, which is spoken in the Matebeleland region, constitutes 18% of the total linguistic population. English, according to Chimhundu (1997:132), is the official language in Zimbabwe and is the native language of people of European origin. Chimhundu (1994:36) also reports that the English language dominates as the language of business and instruction. In 1977, the white population was 273,000. The population of the whole country then was five and half million. Today, the population has more than doubled.

Chimhundu (1983:231) has categorised the language groups of Zimbabwe as follows:

GROUP I	(a) African	Shona, Ndebele
	(b) European	Mainly English
GROUP II	*Languages of Indigenous Minorities*	
	(a) Shona-dominated	Barwe, Hlengwe, Tonga, Chikunda, Venda
	(b) Ndebele-dominated	Kalanga, Lilima, Shangwe, Dombe, Birwa, Tswana and Lozi
GROUP III	*Languages of Migrant Minorities*	
African	(a) Nyanga, Sena, Bemba, Sotho	
Non-African	(b) Afrikaans, Portuguese, Hindi, Greek and Italian	

Ngara (1977:41) estimates the proportions of speakers of the languages in Zimbabwe as follows:

Shona	75%
Ndebele	18%
English	5%
Other	1–2%

The 5% here refers to native speakers of English but excludes blacks who also use it as their mother tongue. The Shona language, according to Thondhlana (1994:16) and Chimhundu (1998:2), is the language of the majority of Shonas and is the most dominant indigenous language. Ngara (1977:66) however, distinguishes status dominance from numerical dominance. English has status dominance because it is viewed by many as the most prestigious, while Shona enjoys

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numerical dominance because it has the largest number of speakers.

The Shonas, who according to historians may have been in this country since 1000—1200 AD, are found mainly in Mashonaland while the Ndebeles are resident in the Matebeleland region. The term *Shona* can be traced to a study conducted by Doke (1931) in which he referred to a number of dialects, which are linguistically related. The main dialects of Shona, according to Thondhlana (1994:16) and Chimhundu (1994:5058), are Karanga, Zezuru, Manyika, Korekore and Ndau. However, some dialects, e.g. Ndau and Zezuru, are so different that they can be considered distinct and separate languages in their own right. It should be noted that these Shona dialects have several sub-dialects of their own. The dialects and sub-dialects have been presented in detail here to show the complexity of the Shona language. Many Shonas can speak several dialects of their language as well as several sub-dialects of their dialects.

Table 1 shows dialects of Shona and their sub-dialects and areas where they are spoken.

In addition to the linguistic groups referred to above, there are a few who belong to minority language groups. The term *minority languages* in Zimbabwe, according to Hachipola (1998:8), is used by government officials and educationists to refer to any Zimbabwean African language which is not Shona or Ndebele. Hachipola also reports that speakers of minority languages are small ethnic groups found nearly throughout Zimbabwe. Some of these minority groups are bilingual. Table 2 presents minority languages of Zimbabwe and areas where they are spoken.

Very little or no English at all is spoken in 'minority language areas' referred to above, except perhaps in cities and towns. This has led some scholars in Zimbabwe, e.g. Makoni (1993:102) and Hachipola (1998:8) to argue that in rural Zimbabwe, English is a foreign language. The divide between a foreign language and a second language has always been very thin and sometimes a little confusing. Ngara (1977:53) and Mhundwa (1987:46) have suggested that English is a second

Table 1: Dialects of Shona and their sub-dialects

Karanga	Duma	Bikita
	Mhari	Chivi
	Govera	Gutu
	Gowa	Churungwi
	Nyumbi	Mberengwa
Zezuru	Mbire	Hwedza
	Zezuru	Mazoe
Ndau	Danda	Mozambique border
	Gowa	Sabi Valley
	Ndau	Chipinge, Chimanimani and Mozambique border
	Garwe	Chimanimani
Manyika	Guta	Mutare area
	Jindwi	Zimunya
	Bocha	Bocha
	Ungwe	Rusape
Korekore	Pfungwe	Mrewa
	Nyangwe	Mt Darwin
	Tande	Dande
	Guruve	Guruve
	Shamwe	Binga, Gokwe
	Tavara	Zambezi valley
	Gova	Zambezi Valley
	Budya	Mtoko
	Bunji	All in the Nyanga area
	Karombe	
	Nyatwe	
	Nyamuka	
	Unyama	

Table 2: Minority languages in Zimbabwe and areas where spoken

Language	Area where spoken
Venda	Beitbridge
Sotho/Tswana/Venda	Gwanda
Shangaan	Plumtree, Tsholotsho, Chiredzi
Tonga	Kariba, Hwange, Mudzi
Nambya	Hwange
Chikunda	Guruve
Wesa, Barwe and Sena	Nyanga
Xhosa	Bembezi
Khoi-San	Tsholotsho
Tswana	Plumtree
Gujarati	In most towns
Afrikaans	Among commercial farmers in the countryside

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language if it is used as a medium of instruction, trade and commerce, parliamentary debates, for law courts and for the television, radio and newspapers. In this sense, English is a second language in Zimbabwe. It is a foreign language if it is not used as described above and if it is used only for specific purposes. In this sense, English is a foreign language in countries like Angola and Mozambique. In rural Zimbabwe, English is limited to the classroom while African languages are used for general communication, a point made clear by Chimhundu (1998:32) when he argues, 'In their ordinary lives, the vast majority of Zimbabweans continue to use Shona and also Ndebele.' Hachipola reports that most people in these areas hardly ever speak English. From this point of view therefore, perhaps there is an extent to which there can be a justification in the suggestion that in rural Zimbabwe, English is a foreign language. However, in my opinion, I think it is reasonable to say that generally, in Zimbabwe, English is essentially a second language, mainly because of the role it plays in the school system.

Brief description of English teaching

The Education Act of 1987 stipulates that there would be three official languages in Zimbabwe, namely, Shona, Ndebele and English, and that all the three languages would be taught in schools from Grade One. And in areas where Shona is the dominant language, the pupils will be taught two languages, Shona and English. And in areas where Ndebele is the dominant language, pupils would be taught English and Ndebele as school subjects. In both cases, all the other subjects will be taught in both English and Shona or Ndebele. From Grade Four onwards, English will be the medium of instruction for all subjects except Shona and Ndebele. In areas where minority languages exist, the minister has the power to authorise the teaching of such a minority language prior to Grade Four. But if the majority of the pupils speak any of these two major languages, Shona and Ndebele, that particular language will also be taught as a subject together with English and other subjects.

The English language is usually taught using the communicative approach, and less commonly using the traditional drill method. At primary school, English is allocated a total of eleven teaching periods a week on the timetable. Each period is thirty minutes long. But, according to one education officer, at some schools, the rule is not always observed. Some periods allocated for the teaching of Shona are used for the teaching of English. This is because many teachers and headmasters feel that the English language, which has status dominance, deserves greater attention than Shona and Ndebele, which have a much lower status. Perhaps it is one of the main reasons why English examination results at Grade Seven are always better than those of Shona.

English in Zimbabwe

According to Ngara (1977:53) the English language was introduced to Zimbabwe by settlers from England under the leadership of Cecil John Rhodes and the British South African Company in 1890. The settlers made it the language of instruction in the schools, administration, parliamentary debates and law courts. And as already explained, it achieved status dominance while local languages enjoyed, and still enjoy, numerical dominance. The widespread use of English in Zimbabwe opens up debate as to whether there is a local variety that can be called Zimbabwean and whether this variety, if it exists, can be called an interlanguage. Before we elaborate on this argument, it may be helpful for us to give a description of the term *interlanguage*. The term *interlanguage* (IL) was first used by Selinker in 1972 to refer to learner language which is independent of the learner's first language as well as the second language that he wants to acquire. It also refers to a series of interlocking systems that characterise the process of second language acquisition. Bialystok and Sharwood Smith (1985:102) have also described interlanguage as a 'manifestation of a coordinated set of systems', while Huebner (1979) cited in Mclaughlin (1987:71) has suggested that the learner's interlanguage appears chaotic but it is characterised by systematicity. And alternative terms have been used to describe interlanguage: e.g Corder (1971) refers to 'transitional competence' and 'idiosyncratic dialects', Nemser (1971) refers to 'approximative systems', while Ellis (1985) and Klein (1986) refer to 'language learner language'. Makoni (1993:97) suggests that although these terms refer to 'learner variety' of English, they have subtle differences in meaning.

Drawing on the work of the proponents of the interlanguage theory such as Nemser

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(1971), Selinker (1972), Adjemian (1976), Corder (1981), Ellis (1985), Klein (1986), Mclaughlin (1987), Sorace (1990) and Sharwood Smith (1991), Makoni (1993) has suggested that the English variety which is spoken in Zimbabwe is an interlanguage because it is characterised by fossilisation, variability, permeability as well as indeterminacy. Moreover, its use is restricted only to formal and institutional settings in urban areas. Makoni (1993:103) goes on to contend that for English in Zimbabwe to be considered a 'localised' variety, it has to be proved empirically that it is more stable than interlanguages and that it is in fact as stable as other full-fledged grammars.

Makoni (1993:6) has argued that the concept of Zimbabwean English implies that the English spoken in Zimbabwe is a localised variety. He argues that some black local scholars do seem to want to africanise the English language in a way which is comparable to the manner in which African literature and African history were africanised. Those who want English to be localised, he argues, aim at achieving linguistic independence to match the political independence. McGinley (1987) cited in Makoni (1993:8) argues that the idea that there is a variety of English that can be called Zimbabwean came only after black majority rule in 1980. However, Ngara (1982:56), who appears to have been inspired by the contrastive analysis scholars e.g Lado (1957) and Selinker (1972), argues that there is an explicit Zimbabwean variety of English especially at the level of pronunciation. He goes on to say that in general terms, African languages influence the L2 speakers' articulation of English sounds. L1 influence on L2 has long been recognised by the advocates and supporters of the contrastive analysis hypothesis. One such scholar is Ellis (1985:7) who argues that the learner's L1 is partly responsible for his failure to reach target language competence. Two other researchers, Dulay and Burt (1974:37), have called this influence the transfer of the L1 into the learner's production of the L2. Sharwood Smith (1991) cited in Makoni (1993:97) describes this as cross-linguistic influence. Ngara (1977:38) has suggested that the Shona speaker of English approximates the sounds of English in the production of the L2. He suggests that this is so because the Shona language uses five vowel sounds, thus [a], [e], [i], [o], [u]. These same vowels are used in his production of English sounds. Ngara suggests that these linguistic forms can also be found at the semantic, syntactic and lexical levels, even though they are more explicit at the level of pronunciation.

The reference point for correct English according to educationists and government officials is the native speaker and any variety which does not conform to native variety norms is said to be deviant. McGinley (1987) cited in Makoni (1993:8) has argued that his research confirms the above argument. Makoni (1993:101) has argued that the white variety of English is used as a norm or reference point because whites have greater economic power than blacks. So the variety of English that tends to be used as a norm is for those who have greater economic power. But rural children have only the classroom as a source of comprehensive input. The variety of English spoken in these areas is not only different from the native speaker variety but is also different from the L2 variety spoken in towns. The native speaker plays a powerful role in determining the norms to be used. As McGinley (1987) cited in Makoni (1993:8) has argued:

> In Zimbabwe, it is not without sociolinguistic significance that the term Zimbabwean English gained popularity in some circles at the same time as people began to complain about standards of English.
>
> (McGinley 1987 in Makoni 1993:8)

As has already been stated, Makoni (1993:103) argues that in Zimbabwe, the variety of English spoken by non-native speakers of English cannot be called Zimbabwean because it is an interlanguage that tends to use the native variety as a model which makes it difficult to talk of a distinct Zimbabwean variety. Makoni (1993:103) also emphasises that English in Zimbabwe cannot be called Zimbabwean because, among other things, it is neither stable nor compact.

The implication for this is that the linguistic hierarchy in terms of prestige of varieties spoken and in relation to local languages in Zimbabwe would be in descending order something like the one in table 3.

Table 3 represents what I have called language variety prestige hierarchy in Zimbabwe. This is based on Mhundwa (1987) and Makoni's (1993) perception of the language situation in Zimbabwe. The native variety of English is considered the most prestigious

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Table 3. Language prestige hierarchy in Zimbabwe.

English	a	Native variety
	b	Near native variety
	c	Acrolect
	d	Mesolect
	e	Basilect
African Languages	f	Shona/Ndebele
	g	Minority languages

'language' whilst local languages occupy the last two bottom slots and are considered the least prestigious. This 'inferior' position of local languages from the point of view of some Zimbabweans is clearly articulated by Chimhundu (1998:18) when he describes Shona and Ndebele as 'marginalised'. He also argues: 'English is prestige laden and enjoys high status. Shona and Ndebele enjoy relatively low status. And minority languages enjoy even lower status' (Chimhundu 1998:18).

Shona and Ndebele as well as minority languages are included in the table to emphasise that the least prestigious variety of English is considered more prestigious than local languages. Next to the native variety is what has been called the 'nose brigade' variety of English. This is a variety said to be spoken by pupils and students who live in English acquisition-rich residential areas like Highlands, Mount Pleasant, Glen Lorne, Borrowdale, Avondale, Chisipite and many others. In terms of accent and pronunciation, this variety is believed to be nearer the native variety than other varieties. The speakers of this variety are said not to want to have social interaction with people from English acquisition-poor environments, who speak what is referred to as rural English. These 'rural' people are said to speak English in a manner which is consistent with their rural backgrounds and have been nicknamed SRBs which is an acronym for '*strong rural background*'. These so called SRBs attend schools which are located in English acquisition-poor residential areas such as Highfields, Mbare, Kambuzuma, Mufakose and Dzivaresekwa. The term 'nose brigade' was coined by 'SRBs' to denote the manner in which these youths from English acquisition-rich environments 'speak their English through the nose' in an attempt to speak like native speakers of English who are said to speak in this manner. The term is derogatory because it is meant to capture what they say is a snobbish and patronising attitude the youths from 'rich' residential areas have towards their poor counterparts. Youths from these 'rich' areas are also referred to as 'salad kids' or 'salads' by the so called SRBs because they are said to eat salads and other expensive foods which are associated with privilege. The term is derogatory because it is meant to denote those who are affluent but who are also perceived to be affected. These children from 'rich' areas are considered 'misguided' by the so called SRBs because they are perceived to be uninterested in their African culture or African ways of life. It appears that to many 'SRB' children 'nose brigadism' is synonymous with 'saladism'. In retaliation, the so called 'nose brigades' coined the term '*strong rural background*' (SRB) in order to identify and denote those who are perceived to speak English which is heavily influenced by their first languages. These 'nose brigades' and the 'SRBs' are antagonistic towards each other.

There are varieties which are indicated in table 3 as acrolect, mesolect and basilect respectively. These terms are used by sociolinguists to refer to points on a linguistic continuum – from most local to most standard – which is often found in linguistic communities where languages are in contact. The term *acrolect* is used to refer to a prestige variety of a language, whereas the basilect is a linguistic variety which is most remote from a prestige variety. A mesolect is a linguistic variety which falls between the acrolect and the basilect. When the above linguistic classification is applied to the Zimbabwean sociolinguistic context, it can be said that the acrolect is spoken by educated people who hold university degrees, people such as doctors, lawyers, professors, lecturers, secondary school teachers and top government employees. The mesolect variety can be said to be a variety of English spoken by lower middle class Zimbabweans who do not hold university degrees. And lastly, the basilect is a variety of English spoken in most cases by Zimbabweans with only primary school education.

The native speaker at the top of this hierarchy will consider it degrading to speak a variety below this native variety category. Although the linguistic boundaries between categories cannot be said to be rigidly stratified, it would be reasonable to suggest that in

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many cases, the speaker of a variety does not mind speaking any variety above his own because this is associated with upward social mobility. However, some blacks consider the 'nose brigade' variety as superficial, yet at the same time, they send their children to former whites only schools, where very often the 'nose brigade' variety is acquired. It seems to me that this is the paradox of life which many people in Zimbabwe might have to live with for many more years to come.

Attempts to create Zimbabwean English may be constrained by attempts by some speakers of some varieties to move from one linguistic category to another, but it is important to point out that not every speaker of English desires to do this. Makoni (1993:101) argues that a Zimbabwean variety of English needs to satisfy the following criteria:

a) It should be taught in schools;
b) It should not be a native speaker model;
c) It should be used in the media as well as for creative writing.

It appears, therefore, that the idea of 'English in Zimbabwe' is complex. There are people who argue that black Zimbabweans in general cannot adopt a local variety as a model because there are many people in Zimbabwe who prefer standard English as their model. Some argue that a local variety of English, as long as it is not native, whatever form it may take, will be viewed by many as inferior and substandard.

Zimbabwean English

I think it is a fact that varieties of English used in Zimbabwe have not been institutionalised in the strictest sense of the word. However, I think it is also a fact that there are many varieties of English spoken in Zimbabwe which are pragmatically identifiable as Zimbabwean. The fact that these forms have not been overtly recognised or institutionalised does not suggest that they do not exist. For example, the juxtaposition of lexical items such as *return* and *back* in 'I will return back' instead of the standard English syntactic form 'I will return', as well as the use of the lexical item *cousin brother* instead of the standard English form *cousin* are obvious manifestations of the emergence of Zimbabweanisms. Other differences that exist between Zimbabwean English and standard English are more subtle than the examples cited above. For example, the term *there* (standard English, *over there*) which is spoken with a rising intonation to denote something which is some distance away, and perhaps as far as the horizon, is in my opinion a localised variety of English or a Zimbabweanism. Another lexical item which has made its way into the Zimbabwean English lexicon is *sadza*. Sadza is a Shona word which is used to refer to the Shona peoples' staple food. Some speakers who have used the English term *thick porridge* to refer to sadza do not appear to have won themselves many friends for their efforts. In fact, they have made themselves objects of derision.

There is a large number of people who live in rural Zimbabwe who do not have access to any variety of English other than the one they speak to each other, if the need arises. I think that it is linguistically problematic to expect these people to use native varieties of English as their models when in fact there is virtually no contact between themselves and native speakers of English. In support of this view, Cook (1998:4) has argued, 'The view taken here is that L2 users are not to be judged by the standards of another group from which they are excluded.' The existence of Zimbabwean English is a 'de facto' rather than a 'de jure' phenomenon and an official recognition of its existence, perhaps by education authorities, will only confirm what already exists 'on the ground'. A Zimbabwean variety of English, which I have said is already in operation 'on the ground', needs to be given official and formal recognition.

Conclusion

With this article, I have argued that although Zimbabwe is a multilingual speech community, the linguistic situation is dominated by both the Shona language which enjoys numerical dominance as well as by English which enjoys status dominance. I have also argued that English, which is the official language, occupies a special position in the lives of many Zimbabweans. I have attempted to draw a distinction between the terms *English in Zimbabwe* and *Zimbabwean English*. The term 'English in Zimbabwe' has been used to refer to a variety of English which uses the native speaker model as a norm whilst 'Zimbabwean English' has been used to refer to localised forms of English. The view taken in this study

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is that it is a fact that there are many varieties of English in Zimbabwe which are pragmatically identifiable as Zimbabwean. The vast majority of Zimbabweans appear to speak varieties of English which reflect the structural properties of Shona particularly at the level of phonology. The fact that these varieties have not been overtly recognised or institutionalised does not suggest that they do not exist. A follow up paper will focus on the uniqueness of Zimbabwean English in relation to standard English. ■

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