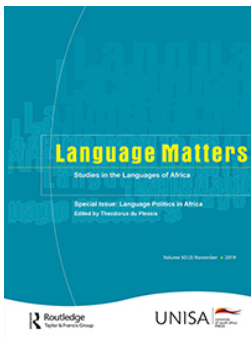

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Language Matters
Studies in the Languages of Africa

ISSN: 1022-8195 (Print) 1753-5395 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rlms20

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Isaac Mumpande & Lawrie Barnes

To cite this article: Isaac Mumpande & Lawrie Barnes (2019) Revitalisation of the Tonga Language in Zimbabwe: The Motivational Factors, Language Matters, 50:3, 46-69, DOI: 10.1080/10228195.2019.1691634

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2019.1691634

Published online: 08 Jan 2020.

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ARTICLE

Revitalisation of the Tonga Language in Zimbabwe: The Motivational Factors

Isaac Mumpande
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7498-9355
University of South Africa
isaacmumpande@gmail.com

Lawrie Barnes
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7555-8146
University of the Free State, South Africa
barnela47@gmail.com

Abstract

This article investigates the motivation behind the Tonga people's initiation of the language revitalisation process. It is based on research conducted in the Binga District, which was the epicentre of the Tonga language revitalisation project in the Zambezi Valley. The participants in the study were purposively sampled from various stakeholders in the project, inter alia, traditional chiefs, officials from the education sector, former and serving employees of NGOs, members of the Tonga Language and Culture Committee (TOLACCO) and Chairpersons of the Zimbabwe Indigenous Languages Promotion Association (ZILPA). The article identifies a number of socio-cultural and religious factors that motivated and propelled the Tonga people to embark on a project of language revitalisation. Within the theoretical framework of Human Needs Theory, the article critically analyses how these factors motivated the Tonga community to embark upon their language revitalisation initiative.

Keywords: language revitalisation; Tonga; endangered languages; Human Needs Theory; language shift; language loss; language maintenance; language death; Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Globally, there have been very few successful attempts to revitalise languages (Obiero 2008, 249). Although many language-revitalisation initiatives continue to fail, there are some well-documented examples of successful initiatives. These include Hebrew in Israel, Yurok in California, Kaurna in Australia, and Maori in New Zealand (Are 2015, 16). While the need to restore identity and preserve culture is a major cause for language revitalisation, there are also other factors that motivate endangered language communities to revitalise their language. It is the quest to unravel such causal factors which motivates linguists, including the authors of this article, to pursue further research.

Language Matters
Volume 50 | Number 3 | 2019 | pp. 46–69
https://www.tandfonline.com/rlms20

https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2019.1691634
ISSN 1753-5395 (Online), ISSN 1022-8195 (Print)
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Linguists should continue to search for lasting solutions to the puzzle of language shift and extinction. The importance of any given language cannot be overemphasised because every language lost means another world lost (Are 2015, 15). Furthermore, according to Krauss (1992, 4), up to 90% of the world's languages may be replaced by a few dominant languages by the end of the 21st century, thus reducing the current 7000 global language to less than 700. Others argue that, of the estimated 7000 languages of the world today, half of these will be extinct by the next century (Nettle and Romaine 2000, 7). According to Crystal (2000, 19), this situation implies that, on average, at least one language dies every two weeks. It is against this background that research on how endangered language communities are motivated to embark on the revitalisation of their language is imperative so as to appreciate what propels and sustains them. Such studies contribute knowledge to the broader field of language revitalisation.

The Tonga minority language[1] revitalisation project in Zimbabwe is one among the few success stories and stands out conspicuously in Zimbabwe from other minority language cases (Maseko and Moyo 2013, 249). Despite several studies on the revitalisation of the Tonga language (see Chikasha 2016; Ngandini 2016; Makoni, Makoni and Nyika 2008; Maseko and Moyo 2013; Ndlovu 2013; 2014; Nyika 2007b; and Sibanda 2013), little attention has been paid to the motivation behind the Tonga people's initiation and sustainment of a robust language revitalisation process. There is limited research focusing, for example, on the Tonga community's socio-economic, religious and political fabric and how these influenced the revitalisation process. Using Burton's (1997) Human Needs Theory, this article critically analyses how these factors motivated the Tonga community into embarking upon the language revitalisation initiative.

The aim of this article is to establish the motivation behind the Tonga people's initiation of the language revitalisation process and to identify the factors that sustained this process. The article attempts to answer the following question: "Why did the Tonga people embark on a process of language revitalisation?" Or more specifically, "What factors motivated the language revitalisation process?"

2. Background of the Tonga Language and People

The Tonga people are an ethnic group scattered across Southern Africa. They are found in different countries such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Namibia and Mozambique (Mumpande 2014, 46; Mphande 2015, 38). Thus, Tonga is a cross-border language; though a marginalised language in Zimbabwe

1 The term "minority language" has officially been outlawed in Zimbabwe for its derogatory nature and the term "former marginalised indigenous languages" has been adopted. However, since the global literature still uses the term "minority language," this article uses the same term. In terms of the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe, the Tonga language is one of the 16 officially recognised languages.

and other countries (Hachipola 1998, xviii), it is a major and official language in Zambia (Nkolola-Wakumelo 2013, 129–130).

In Zimbabwe, the Tonga are believed to constitute the third largest ethnic group after the Shona and the Ndebele (Hachipola 1998; Maseko and Moyo 2013). Hachipola (1998, 37) is, however, of the opinion that the actual population figures for the Tonga in Zimbabwe are not known because of their assimilation into other group identities. Some Tonga leaders claim that their population figures are always grossly underestimated (TOLACCO 2001, 4).

As Mashingaidze (2013, 387) observes, the Tonga people have a dark socio-economic history which greatly shaped and influenced their attitude and behaviour towards both the colonial and post-colonial governments of Zimbabwe. At least 60 000 Tonga people were forcibly displaced from the Zambezi Valley floodplains in 1957 to pave the way for the construction of the hydropower-generating Kariba Dam. In addition to suffering massive socio-economic losses, the Tonga people, on either side of the river, were forcibly resettled on arid and agriculturally barren lands and have been dependant on humanitarian assistance annually, turning them into "development refugees" (Weist 1995, 170). This forced relocation with its related losses, without compensation, has remained a deep scar in the socio-economic history and lives of the Zimbabwean Tonga people.

Until Zimbabwe's 2002 language policy, which was cemented by the 2013 national constitution, the post-colonial language policy in Zimbabwe was significantly influenced by the colonial language policies dating back to the 1930s. The colonial government of those days adopted a policy recommended by Doke's 1930s study on the linguistic landscape in Zimbabwe. The colonial language policy promoted English, Shona and Ndebele, while it suppressed other languages existing in Zimbabwe, virtually turning Zimbabwe into a two-indigenous-languages country. To compound the suppression of other indigenous languages, the colonial language policy was retained in an independent Zimbabwe. This was a key element of the nation-building policies adopted by several post-colonial states, including Zimbabwe, which sought to construct nation states amongst diverse ethnic groups by imposing the languages of the dominant ethnic groups (Chebanne, Nyati-Ramahobo, and Youngman 2001).

Following relentless advocacy pressure from ethnic minority groups, including the Tonga, the Zimbabwean government eventually succumbed to these groups' demands. From 2002, the language policy permitted the teaching of minority languages. This was consolidated by the 2013 national constitution. Section 6 of the 2013 national constitution officially recognises 16 languages in Zimbabwe, namely Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Khoisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa (Zimbabwe 2013, 17). According to the new constitution, the state and all institutions and agencies of government at every level must ensure that all officially recognised languages are treated equitably, and take into

account the language preferences of people affected by governmental measures or communications. Furthermore, the state must promote and advance the use of all languages used in Zimbabwe, including sign language, and must create conditions for the development of those languages (Zimbabwe 2013, 17).

3. Language Revitalisation: Theoretical Considerations

3.1. Perspectives on Language Revitalisation

Defining language revitalisation has been problematic as it has become a loosely used concept. However, there is general consensus among linguists that one crucial component of language revitalisation is the restoration of languages to life (Mufwene 2004, 208; Are 2015, 15; Grenoble 2013, 793). Other scholars go a step further in defining language revitalisation; for example, Henderson, Rohloff, and Henderson (2014, 75) define language revitalisation as "a process of seeking to reverse language shift within a speech community and extend the domains in which the affected language is used."

In the light of Henderson, Rohloff, and Henderson's (2014, 75) definition, it is clear that language revitalisation encapsulates two crucial processes. Firstly, it involves bringing back to life a completely extinct or partially lost language from a "linguistic graveyard." Secondly, it involves extending the use of an existing but threatened language into domains in which it was previously restricted or receding. Thus the Tonga language revitalisation initiative was in line with Henderson, Rohloff, and Henderson's (2014) definition as it aimed at reversing language shift and extending the domains in which Tonga is used. While the term "language revitalisation" is the most widely used concept, other synonymous terms have emerged such as "language regenesis" (Paulston, Chen and Connerty 1993), "language restoration," "language renewal," "language rebirth" "language rejuvenation," "language renaissance," and "language resurrection" (Ó Laoire 2008, 206; Edwards 2006, 110).

Language revitalisation as a topic of study in linguistics was introduced in the 1970s (Ellis and MacGhobhginn 1971 as quoted in Darquennes 2007, 61), but the topic remained at the academic periphery until the 1990s, which saw an upsurge in research around language endangerment, language shift and language revitalisation. Consequently, the 1990s period has been dubbed "a decade of language revitalisation" (Ó Laoire 2008, 203). Since the 1990s, language revitalisation has occupied a central place in sociolinguistics and has been likened by ecolinguists to the environmentalists' global crusade against the loss of biodiversity in the botanical worlds (Hale 1992, 1; Krauss 1992, 4). The increase in research on language revitalisation appears to have been fuelled by the publication of Fishman's 1991 monograph on reversing language shift and Krauss's (1992) alarming language endangerment statistics which were a rude awakening regarding the magnitude of language extinction.

There are numerous theories that inform studies on language revitalisation, amongst others, the Human Needs Theory (Burton 1997), the Holistic Empowerment Framework (Batibo 2005), the Linguistic Human Rights Theory (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1994) and the Reversal Language Shift Theory (Fishman 1991). Although all these theories are relevant to this study, this article focuses only on the Human Needs Theory, which was considered the most relevant to this topic.

3.2. The Human Needs Theory

This study is informed by the Human Needs Theory. This theory argues that basic human needs go beyond physiological needs such as food, water and shelter, and include non-physical elements for human growth, development and protection that human beings are innately driven to attain (Amoo and Odendaal 2002, 4). These non-physical human needs include *identity*, *security*, *participation*, *freedom* and *recognition* in their lives as individuals or collectively (Burton 1997, 31). As human beings are naturally driven to fulfil these human needs, they are a powerful determinant of human behaviour and social interaction. In some cases, people resort to insurgency when the social system excludes them and fails to meet their needs.

While a universally agreed-upon list of these physical and non-physical needs has been elusive, various scholars have identified several essentials which human beings are instinctively driven to attain. Burton (1997, 32), for example, argues that human beings need to belong to a clearly identifiable and distinguishable group that they can associate with (*identity*); they need to confidently feel that their language and culture are safe from other cultures and groups around them (*security*); they need to participate in decision making processes on issues that directly affect their lives (*participation*); they need to be free from any form of oppression, domination and discrimination (*freedom*) and they need to be respected and affirmed (*recognition*).

Other scholars submit different human essentials, citing them as equally imperative, such as self-esteem, safety, love, personal fulfilment, identity, cultural security, freedom, distributive justice, and participation (Amoo 1997, 20; Marker 2003; Walsh 2016, 287). Murray (1938, cited in Mitchell 1990, 155) also proposes 28 universal basic needs, both manifest and latent, while Reiss (2000, cited in Hansen 2008, 410), postulates 16 human needs, which include eating, physical activity, social contact and the need for power and vengeance. Thus, different scholars have focused on and emphasised different elements in the endless list of physical and non-physical needs.

However, Maslow (1954) has been one of the leading scholars on human needs, arguing that human needs can be organised into a hierarchy, as evidenced by his well-known Hierarchy of Needs. Yet Burton (1997), who has led the application of Human Needs Theory to social and political conflicts, differs from Maslow, arguing that although these human needs differ, they cannot be organised into a hierarchy because human desire

for fulfilment of these needs is not always necessarily hierarchical, linear and logical in practice.

Despite the divergence of views on the hierarchy and organisation of human needs, there is agreement among scholars that if human needs are unfulfilled, they generate frustration within the affected people and become root causes of conflicts. A strong drive is generated within ethnic groups/people for their effective satisfaction. Therefore, any attempts to suppress the quest for the satisfaction of these needs generates ethno-political conflicts because some of these human needs are non-negotiable.

Although this theory has been commonly applied to conflict and peace studies, it also finds relevance in sociolinguistics in that it accounts for minority ethnolinguistic conflicts. Ethnic minority language-related conflicts often centre on the suppression of important human needs and the values of equality, linguistic human rights, access, participation, inclusion, recognition, freedom, identity, democracy, cultural autonomy and preservation (Patten 2001, 691). It has been noted that ethno-political conflicts in Africa increased in the post-independence era as ethnic minority groups felt disillusioned and threatened by the nation-state building projects characterised by discriminatory language policies adopted by many post-independence African countries. These policies compromised and threatened the minority ethnic groups' non-physical human needs such as identity, cultural security, participation, freedom and recognition. This has been exacerbated by the ethnic minorities' exclusion from central government decision-making structures and processes and the unfair allocation of central government resources (Gurr 1996, 34). The language–identity question and the quest for group recognition, participation and autonomy have been at the core of most ethno-political conflicts globally (Cohen 1996, 40).

Thus, the Human Needs Theory has been credited with accounting for ethnic minority behaviour not only in linguistic conflicts but also in driving language revitalisation initiatives. This theory is useful in illuminating the causal factors for the behaviour of the ethnic minorities in Zimbabwe towards language revitalisation and their relationship with central government.

3.3. Revitalisation Initiatives in Africa

Even though 74.8% of African languages are either moderately or severely endangered (Batibo 2005, 155), language revitalisation programmes or initiatives have been rare in Africa. The biggest challenge in Africa that threatens endangered and minority languages is not the former colonial languages but either the dominant indigenous languages or the fast-growing urbanisation phenomenon (Mufwene 2006, 17). Other scholars attribute language loss in Africa to the post-colonial states' nation-building projects that prioritise and promote one indigenous language in the name of national unity, social integration and national identity at the expense of ethnic and linguistic diversity (Bamgbose 2011,

8; Ndlovu 2013; 2014; Ndhlovu 2007; 2008a; 2010; Nyota and Mapara 2014, 308). This has led to the perpetuation of discriminatory and exclusionary language policies in Africa. Most of the institutions and programmes launched to safeguard endangered languages are found in Europe, Australia and Americas. There are few available examples of language revitalisation in Africa; for instance, Obiero (2008, 251–260) chronicles a failed government-led initiative of revitalising the Suba language in Kenya in 1995, while Visser (2000, 195–215) gives the example of the Naro Language Project in Botswana, initiated and spearheaded by the Reformed Church, which managed to revive the endangered Naro language within the home domains.

Reviewing the literature on minority language revitalisation and the Tonga language in Zimbabwe, two distinct groups of literature emerge. Firstly, there is literature that discusses minority languages in general and their revitalisation in Zimbabwe. This literature has relevance to this study as it locates the Tonga language revitalisation initiative within the broader socio-economic, political, legal and policy framework of Zimbabwe. Such sources include Doke (1931); Hachipola (1998); Mutasa (1995); Mumpande (2006; 2010); Ndlovu (2013; 2014); Ndhlovu (2006; 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2010); Nyika (2007a; 2008a; 2008b) and Nyota and Mapara (2014). These sources give a national overview and the broader context in which the minority languages speakers were compelled to shift from their languages to the dominant indigenous languages. Therefore, any attempt to understand the dynamics of a single minority language, such as Tonga, should inevitably start by appreciating this bigger picture in Zimbabwe.

The second group of literature focuses exclusively on the Tonga language and its people in Zimbabwe and Zambia. This literature helps us to fully comprehend the general socio-economic and political organisation and dynamics of the Tonga people. These sources could further be subdivided into two: (a) the literature on the socio-economic organisation of the Tonga (Colson 1971; Tremel 1994; McGregor 2009; Mashingaidze 2013; Mumpande 2014; Mphande 2015; Muwati 2015) and (b) the literature on the revitalisation of the Tonga language (Nyika 2007b; Makoni, Makoni and Nyika 2008; Sibanda 2013; Maseko and Moyo 2013; Ndlovu 2013; 2014; Chabata, Muwati and Mashiri 2014).

The first group scrutinises the social and economic aspects of the Tonga people and how their forced displacement in 1957 from the Zambezi River to pave way for the Kariba Dam construction negatively impacted their lives. It also examines how the Tonga people have endured stigmatisation and socio-political marginalisation in Zimbabwe and how they have battled against this stigmatisation and exclusion from mainstream socio-economic and political developments in Zimbabwe. It is only when we appreciate these dynamics that it becomes easy to understand what inspired the Tonga people to undertake the initiative to revitalise their language boldly and sustain the process until its conclusion.

Focusing in more depth on the second group of literature, we note that Makoni, Makoni and Nyika (2008) analyse the Tonga language revitalisation project as a typical example of a powerful bottom-up language planning case study. They do not, however, consider the dynamics of what motivated the Tonga to initiate the language revitalisation process. They are more concerned about the end-product of language revitalisation, i.e. the change of the language policy. Ndlovu (2013; 2014) compares and juxtaposes the Tonga with other minority language groups, the Venda and Kalanga, who were unsuccessful in implementing the new language policy, but restricts his research to the implementation of the language policy in schools and pays little attention to the socio-economic, religious and political fabrics and dynamics of the Tonga people which seem to have bolstered the revival of the Tonga language in the home and education domains. It is these gaps that this research focuses on.

Chabata, Muwati and Mashiri (2014) admit that the Tonga community indeed played a pivotal role in the revitalisation of their language. They contend that the Tonga people's assertiveness and commitment contributed immensely towards sustaining the revitalisation of their language. However, Chabata, Muwati and Mashiri (2014) do not explore the reasons why the Tonga people were aggressive, assertive and committed in their approach to their cause, thus leaving these questions unanswered.

4. Research Methodology

This article is based on a larger research project which was carried out in Binga District in the Zambezi Valley, the epicentre of the language revitalisation process. It adopts a case study approach. The participants in the study were purposively sampled. Initially, they were selected from stakeholders known to be involved in the Tonga language revitalisation process. Selection of further participants was based on the principle of snowballing, that is, referrals by other participants.

A total of 44 participants were sampled (see Table 1 below). The following categories of participants were purposively sampled because they were believed to be in the best position to provide sufficient data for the research questions: (i) traditional chiefs; (ii) elected councillors; (iii) church leaders/elders; (iv) members of the Tonga Language and Culture Committee (TOLACCO); (v) chairpersons of the Zimbabwe Indigenous Languages Promotion Association (ZILPA); (vi) project officers for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that worked with the Tonga (such as the Binga Development Association, Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace [CCJP], Silveira House or Basilwizi Trust); (vii) district education officials from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education; (viii) school heads; and (ix) Tonga language teachers.

Table 1: Sampled Population

Population Category	Males	Females	Total Number of Informants
Traditional Chiefs	4	0	4
Councillors	3	1	4
TOLACCO Members	7	4	11
ZILPA Members	2	0	2
Church Leaders/Elders	6	0	6
Project Officers for NGOs	3	2	5
District Education Officers	2	0	2
School Heads	3	2	5
Tonga Language Teachers	2	3	5
Total	**32**	**12**	**44**

As the traditional chiefs and TOLACCO members were the engine of the Tonga language revitalisation process, they were considered crucial participants. Segmenting these informants into three groups based on three periods, that is, pre-1980, 1980–1998 and post-1998, enabled the researchers to gather as much information as possible on the different phases of TOLACCO and carefully analyse the role of TOLACCO at each stage of the Tonga language revitalisation struggle. The first group comprised the traditional chiefs and TOLACCO members who served during the pre-1980 era. Unfortunately, most of those who were directly involved in pre-1980 TOLACCO had passed on. However, two surviving pre-1980 TOLACCO members were located.

The second group of TOLACCO members interviewed comprised the traditional chiefs and TOLACCO members who participated in language revitalisation from 1980, when Zimbabwe attained its independence, until 1998, when the new crop of Tonga elites took over. Four TOLACCO members and two traditional chiefs who were very active during this TOLACCO epoch were interviewed.

The third TOLACCO group comprised the traditional chiefs and the new crop of Tonga elites that steered the revitalisation process to success from 1998 to 2018. These were intellectual Tonga elites, with university degrees from various academic disciplines, who joined hands with the traditional chiefs and other community leaders to spearhead the language revitalisation advocacy process. While the elites concentrated on engaging the government on its unfair and discriminatory language policy, the traditional chiefs played a crucial role in mobilising their communities around reviving traditional cultural practices. Five post-1998 TOLACCO members and two traditional chiefs of the same era were interviewed.

The elected councillors also played a crucial role in the language revitalisation process. They were ward representatives in the Rural District Council who were elected for a five-year term. They stood under the aegis of political parties, and subject to re-election, some had served for more than 15 years. They were development agents as well as important community leaders who were involved in mobilising communities around important socio-economic and political issues affecting communities at ward level. They also worked hand in hand with traditional chiefs and village heads in spearheading language revitalisation activities in the wards.

A total of six church-related participants were interviewed. As churches usually play a significant role in language revitalisation, their leaders (priests/pastors and elders) are valuable participants. Priests from the Roman Catholic Church and pastors from the Church of Christ were interviewed as it emerged during interviews that these churches were among the key stakeholders involved in promoting the Tonga language.

The project officers interviewed were from various NGOs that worked with the Tonga people, organisations such as the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), Silveira House, Binga Development Association, Save the Children and Basilwizi Trust. Although the researchers did not manage to contact all project officers that worked with the Tonga community during the peak period of the language revitalisation project, because of high staff turnover and mobility in the NGO sector, the few that were accessible were very informative. The researchers managed to trace three former NGO workers who had retired but worked for the CCJP, Binga Development Association and Silveira House during the language revitalisation era. Two more project officers from Basilwizi Trust, a still operational NGO in the Zambezi Valley including the Binga District, were interviewed.

The former and current chairpersons of ZILPA were interviewed because they worked closely with TOLACCO at national level. They provided valuable information about the Tonga people's strategies and how they differed from those of other minority language groups fighting for the same cause in Zimbabwe. ZILPA has been the mouthpiece of ethnic minorities in Zimbabwe and the majority of the marginalised language committees are affiliated to it.

Retired and still serving civil servants that interacted with TOLACCO and the Tonga community in various capacities during the language revitalisation process were interviewed. Two District School Inspectors (DSIs) (retired and current), selected school heads and Tonga language teachers in schools were interviewed. Five school heads were interviewed, two retired and three serving. Five Tonga language teachers from five different primary schools in the district were also interviewed. Not only did they shed more light on how Tonga language teaching was handled in schools during the peak of the language revitalisation project, but they also highlighted the role of community leaders and ordinary members of the Tonga community in the language revitalisation process. The retired school heads and Tonga language teachers lived and

interacted with the Tonga communities while they were still in service. The currently serving members are still living with the Tonga people in their communities; hence they continue to observe what the Tonga people are doing with regard to revitalisation activities. Fortunately, most of these retired civil servants were easily traceable.

The data-gathering techniques adopted in this research were interviews and documentary analysis on Tonga and other minority languages revitalisation projects. Participants were interviewed separately because they stay far apart from one another. Interviewer-administered, semi-structured questionnaires were used. All questions were open-ended to enable discussions with all participants. All interviews were recorded (using an audio recorder) to capture every detail of the interview. Questions were tailor-made for each group of participants, although the participants were interviewed separately, with a view to extracting relevant data from each group. Two Tonga-speaking research assistants helped in data gathering because the participants were scattered across the district. Each research assistant was provided with an audio recorder and a notebook. The interviews were conducted in the form of natural discussions with participants while questionnaires were used as guides during the discussion. These discussions were all recorded using audio recorders. After the interviews, the research assistants transcribed the recordings to ensure the data was stored in two forms (voice recordings and transcribed interviews as backup).

An analysis of documents gathered from TOLACCO and the NGOs that worked with the Tonga people formed part of the data. The following material was gathered: minutes of meetings, annual reports, briefing reports, evaluation reports, research papers presented by TOLACCO at conferences, letters and correspondence with government ministries (such as the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education), teacher training colleges and non-government stakeholders, and cuttings of relevant newspaper articles. In addition, government policy circulars and copies of videos on recorded advocacy events/meetings with government ministries were collected.

This study adopted a descriptive or interpretative analytic framework which seeks to understand and report the views and culture of those being studied, and to capture substantive meanings in the data. The data gathered from interviews were in the form of narratives, called free flowing texts (Ryan and Bernard 2005, 769), which were analysed using grounded theory. When analysing the narratives, themes were identified, described and compared across groups. The documentary material was critically analysed and the evidence was tested for reliability as rigorously as possible.

5. Research Findings

The participants identified the following factors as underlying the motivation behind the Tonga language revitalisation project: the need to restore the Tonga language and

people's identity; the need to dismantle the social caricature of the Tonga people in Zimbabwe; the need to restore the broken connection between the Tonga ancestors and the generations assimilated into the Shona and Ndebele cultures; the need to maintain the Tonga language presence on the land the Tonga occupied as the first Bantu people in Zimbabwe; and the effect of the lingering bad memories of the Kariba Dam debacle.

5.1. Restoration of the Tonga Language and Identity

The participants indicated that language defines human beings as individuals and as a group; therefore, it is one of the most critical elements in the restoration of identity and cultural revival. For a culture to survive, there must be a medium that transmits it not only within a generation but also inter-generationally, for which language is the ideal medium. The discussions revealed that the motivational factors for the Tonga people to embark on the struggle to revitalise their language were complex but all deeply rooted in restoring the Tonga identity, culture, and image, and in improving their relations with other language groups in Zimbabwe. Most participants noted that language revitalisation was of paramount importance and that the right to language, culture and identity was non-negotiable.

5.2. The Dismantling of the Tonga's Social Construction

Participants felt that other ethnic groups in Zimbabwe dehumanised the Tonga through use of derogatory labels such as people who are uncivilised, who sleep in trees, or who have tails and six toes or fingers. Thus, they wanted to dismantle this social caricature of the Tonga people by reviving their language and culture. They believed that once their language and culture were revitalised, that would help them regain their dignity in the eyes of other ethnic groups in Zimbabwe and hence arrest the use of derogatory labels. The continued social caricature of the Tonga had compelled them to abandon their identity in the form of Tonga names and culture. They favoured Ndebele and Shona names and culture in order to escape the relentless social battering and derogatory labels used against them in urban areas or even in rural areas where the Tonga coexisted with the Ndebele, Nambya and Shona people. Therefore, reviving the Tonga language and culture would restore their confidence in their language and culture.

What was also very clear from most discussions with the participants was that the negative social construction of the Tonga people had immense negative effects on their entire lives. Apart from devastating their self-confidence and esteem as human beings, it also gravely restricted their interaction with other ethnic groups and even their mobility into urban areas in search of jobs. Those that dared venture into urban areas were compelled by societal hostility to adopt Ndebele and Shona surnames such as *Dube*, *Mlalazi*, *Ncube*, *Ndlovu*, *Ngwenya*, *Nkomo*, *Nyathi*, *Nyoni*, *Sibanda*, *Tshuma*, and

Shumba as an adaptive measure to fit into society. When they used assumed Ndebele and Shona surnames, the participants said they enjoyed respect and recognition as human beings and secured jobs just like any other Zimbabweans. Realising and enjoying the "benefits" associated with changed names, the participants indicated that a large number Tonga were compelled to abandon their identity and dignity in favour of Ndebele and Shona names.

5.3. The Nexus between Language and Religion

The language shift among the Tonga had disconnected many generations born after the language shift from their ancestors as they were no longer able to communicate with them in Tonga. The traditional chiefs strongly believed that it was important to revive the Tonga language to reconnect the lost generations with the Tonga ancestors. Without the Tonga language, there was a communication breakdown between the two parties. The chiefs feared that the ancestors would curse the whole Tonga community if nothing were done to resuscitate connectivity between the assimilated generations and the ancestors through language revival.

The chiefs lamented that the assimilated Tonga generations used the Ndebele or Shona languages to communicate with their ancestors, yet the ancestors had died speaking Tonga only. Without using Tonga in the performance of traditional Tonga religious rituals, the assimilated Tonga generations could not connect with their ancestors. Consequently, these generations had no spiritual guidance in life, which accounted for their wayward behaviour, bad luck and lack of direction in life.

The chiefs argued that while religions like Christianity use any language to pray, worship and connect with God, African traditional religions are intricately linked to the language of the ancestors; therefore, it is considered necessary to understand the ancestral language to communicate effectively and perform all the necessary religious rituals for the ancestors. The traditional leaders lamented that scores of the assimilated Tonga generations performed Tonga religious rituals in the Ndebele or Shona languages, yet still expected their ancestors to connect with them, an expectation viewed as ridiculous by the traditional chiefs. The remarks by Chief Siachilaba at the watershed national language seminar in 2001 capture the Tonga traditional chiefs' concerns and frustrations in this regard:

> The younger generations are more Ndebele /Shona than being Tonga. A lot of misunderstanding is going on between the older and younger generations and with our ancestors. Our ancestors are crying because our children no longer speak our language. They even shun their tribe, religion and culture … as they do not want to be identified as Tonga again. (Silveira House 2001, 7)

5.4. The Tonga as the First Occupants of Zimbabwe

The Tonga traditional chiefs claimed that the Tonga people were the first Bantu people to occupy Zimbabwe. Therefore, the Tonga could not allow themselves to be assimilated by other language groups that came later into their ancestral land, known in Tonga as *bakezajilo* (people who came yesterday). Becoming completely assimilated and losing their language and culture would not only have been tragic but also tantamount to giving away to *bakezajilo* the identity of the first Bantu people on Zimbabwean land. The continued existence of the Tonga language and people in Zimbabwe was viewed by the chiefs as a "critical landmark" signifying the continuous existence of the "first Bantu settlers" on Zimbabwean soil.

The Tonga traditional chiefs' claim to being the first Bantu to settle in Zimbabwe is corroborated by two pieces of evidence: Chigwedere's (1998) theory on the roots of the Bantu and Mumpande's (2014) residual Tonga toponymic theory. Chigwedere (1998, 138–139) notes that the available archaeological evidence confirms that the first Iron Age Bantu to arrive in the land south of the Zambezi River were the Tonga people between 300 and 400 AD.

The residual Tonga toponymic evidence littered across Zimbabwe today also validates the Tonga traditional chiefs' claim and Chigwedere's (1998) theory. Toponyms are names of places and physical geographical features in an area (Chabata, Mumpande and Mashiri 2017, 110). Toponyms are usually socio-culturally, historically, politically, and semantically laden as they reflect the tradition, culture, and socio-historical lives of the people who lived or still live in a particular place (Chabata, Mumpande and Mashiri 2017, 110). According to Mumpande (2014, 46–47), Zimbabwean toponyms across the country reflect the Tonga language and culture. Some of the toponyms found in many places of Zimbabwe where Tonga-speaking people no longer reside today have retained their original Tonga form and meaning while others have been slightly modified or adulterated by other tribes now occupying those places. Mumpande proffers an array of toponymic examples criss-crossing Zimbabwe that are linked to the Tonga people, language and culture. This is strong evidence signifying the presence of the Tonga people across Zimbabwe in the past. The traditional chiefs' strong belief in this theory appears to have catalysed their struggle to revitalise their language as they, in their own words, did not want to be "foreigners on their own land."

5.5. The Lingering Bad Memories of the Kariba Dam Debacle

The traditional chiefs pointed out that it was necessary to avert a second catastrophe (of losing their language and culture) in the history of the Tonga people after the 1950s Kariba Dam tragedy. This tragedy forcibly displaced them in 1957, without compensation, leading to the permanent loss of their vast heritage and agriculturally rich land. This episode in their lives permanently destroyed their socio-economic fabric,

leaving them still impoverished today. They lost their land to the white men in the 1950s and they did not want to lose their language and culture to other tribes. One chief had this to say:

> We lost all our land and livelihoods without compensation after our forced and cruel displacement from the Zambezi River flood plains to pave way for the Kariba Dam construction. Therefore, to us Tonga chiefs the loss of the Tonga language and culture, through extinction, would be a double tragedy after the 1957 Kariba Dam disaster and we had to make all possible efforts to resuscitate our language and culture in fear of another disaster in the history of the Tonga people.

6. Discussion

6.1. The Centrality of Language to Collective Identity

Before analysing the findings using Burton's Human Needs Theory, it is important to put into perspective the centrality of language in the socio-economic and political spheres of people's lives. The importance of language to human beings cannot be overemphasised, and linguists concur that language and culture, to some extent, act as social glue among human beings in general and speakers of ethnic minorities in particular (Harrell 1995, 98; Fenton 1999, 7). This is further sustained by Fishman (1996, 15), who argues that language is not merely the conveyor of ethnic symbols and culture but is also viewed as "flesh of the flesh and blood of the blood," and therefore members of ethnic minority groups view it as something worth living and dying for. Language binds ethnic groups together, affirms their identity, and fosters their effective participation in local and national developmental discourse. A government's acceptance of a minority ethnic group language is not only a gesture of recognition of their existence but also of their acceptance into the mainstream nation (Kymlicka and Patten 2003, 5).

Therefore, ethnic minorities have a strong attachment to their language and feel that language is the first and most important element that gives a certain substance to their identity as a people (Kedrebeogo 1998, 180). Thus, losing one's language is believed to be equivalent to losing one's substance and becoming worthless because a person who is prudent does not abandon his or her mother tongue (Kedrebeogo 1998, 181). This confirms the belief that minority language speakers value their languages so much that, under normal circumstances, they would not easily shift to dominant languages. Yet thousands of minority languages in the world have been abandoned by their speakers. This buttresses the argument that the language shift that occurs within endangered speech communities is not a voluntary process, as Grenoble and Whaley (2006) claim, but rather a challenge beyond minority language speakers' control.

In view of the centrality of language in the lives of ethnic minorities, it appears that the language revitalisation process contributes significantly to the fulfilment of the tenets of Human Needs Theory (see section 3.2). Language appears to significantly contribute

towards assuring ethnic minority groups' identity, security, participation, freedom and recognition.

6.2. The Search for Group Identity

Burton (1997, 31) argues that, in their search of a distinguished *identity*, human beings aspire to belong to a clearly identifiable and distinguishable ethnic group that they can associate with among other ethnic or linguistic groups. In this study, the Tonga people's quest to restore their language and identity, and to preserve their culture and history (see section 5.1), is indicative of their desire to belong to a unique, clearly identifiable ethnolinguistic group that stands out among other ethnic groups in Zimbabwe. It has been noted that language is one of the key cultural elements that distinguishes one group from another (Manyena 2013, 30).

6.3. The Search for Group Security

Burton (1997, 31) indicates that in search of linguistic and cultural *security*, human beings strive to have the safety of their language and culture guaranteed from the influence of other cultures and languages around them. Therefore, the strong desire to restore the Tonga's cultural practices and religious language indicate the ethnic group's need to secure their culture. As noted in section 5.3, the chiefs argued that the continued broken connection between the Tonga ancestors and the generations assimilated into the Shona and Ndebele cultures was a cultural challenge which posed a threat to the groups' collective cultural security.

Without the *security* of their culture, religion and language, minority ethnic groups, like the Tonga, become victims of historical dislocation and cultural disintegration. Consequently, it is impossible for such a people to develop consciousness of self-worth and independence of thought and action. Once people have no consciousness of self and independence of thought and action, their human agency and dignity automatically fall under siege (Gwekwerere, Muhwati, and Gambahaya 2014, 241).

6.4. The Quest for Group Participation

According to Burton (1997, 31), *participation* is one human need that propels human beings to seek involvement in local, regional and national decision-making processes on issues that directly or indirectly affect their lives. The participants' desire was to restore their dignity (see section 5.2) and utilise their language to express themselves as they interact with other ethnic groups and stakeholders within the country and contribute towards the national development discourse. This is congruent with Asante's (1998, 8) observation that the movement of minority ethnic groups from the national periphery to the centre of national affairs, taking charge of their own affairs, is not only

an exercise of self-discovery but also self-reclamation. Such an undertaking speaks to their awareness and conviction that by regaining their own platforms, standing in their own language and cultural space and believing in their worldview, they would achieve the kind of transformation that they need to participate fully in a multicultural society like Zimbabwe.

It could be argued that the absence of the Tonga language (and other minority languages) from the national linguistic radar, before the revitalisation programme, and the continued social caricature and denial of their right to language (see section 5.2), made the Tonga view themselves as insignificant in the country at large, which deterred them from contributing effectively to the national development discourse. Yet according to Gwekwerere, Muhwati, and Gambahaya (2014, 242), people's achievement of human agency and dignity is inseparable from their daily participation in resolving the challenges of the society they live in. Society is shaped by continuous interaction of people as they share constructive ideas for the betterment of their society. The Tonga people's advocacy for recognition as equal human beings points towards their quest to participate and to engage other stakeholders using their own language and freely expressing themselves. It is important to note that language is the most precious possession of mankind, which restores a people's dignity by enabling individuals and groups to become fully functional members of their society/communities (Chabata, Muwati and Mashiri 2014, 325).

6.5. The Search for Group Freedom

The search for *freedom* from any form of oppression, domination and discrimination which makes them uncomfortable within the society they live is one of the key tenets of Human Needs Theory (Burton 1997, 31). An analysis of the participants' responses (see section 5.2) suggests that the participants were in search of freedom from linguistic and political domination, freedom from political and linguistic oppression, and freedom from social discrimination. The emerging Tonga micro nationalism, in the form of the spirited advocacy for the creation of a separate Zambezi Province for the Tonga-speaking people, was evidence of a growing self-consciousness and a need for the freedom to determine their own future. Apart from the community leader responses, the Tonga people's demand for a separate province is also clearly documented elsewhere. Ndlovu (2013, 521) clearly captured the views and aspirations of the Tonga traditional leaders on the issue of carving out a separate province as noted below:

> The Tonga proposed that they should have a separate province called Zambezi Valley province or Gwembe province. They argued that they are uncomfortable with being classified as the Matabeleland people because classifying them under Matabeleland compromise their identity and they interpret the act as an attempt to assimilate them into the hegemonic Ndebele group. Tonga speakers argued that to avoid assimilation, they should assert their ethnicity because the

> more geographically separated they are through provincial control behind a protective boundary, Zambezi Valley province or Gwembe province, the more they feel ethnolinguistically secure.

In claiming a separate province, the Tonga arguably want the freedom to manage the cultural and language influence from the encroaching Shona and Ndebele cultures.

6.6. The Search for Group Recognition

Burton (1997, 31) observes that, in search of the need for *recognition*, human beings strive for respect and affirmation as individuals and as a collective. The participants sought respect and affirmation of who they are from the entire Zimbabwean society in two ways. Firstly, it would appear that the participants wanted other ethnic groups in Zimbabwe to recognise them as normal human beings, like any other ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, by helping them to dismantle their social caricature (see section 5.2). Secondly, the participants wanted to consolidate their threatened status of being the first Bantu people settlers on Zimbabwean soil; the extinction of the Tonga language in Zimbabwe would have obliterated this status (see section 5.4).

As noted in section 5.2, the Tonga faced a myriad of socially constructed myths about their image in Zimbabwe. Thus, they wanted to dismantle their social caricature by reviving their language and culture and winning back their lost dignity. The participants believed that once their language and culture were revitalised, this would contribute significantly towards arresting the continued derogatory labelling, restoring their dignity and rehabilitating their battered image in Zimbabwean society. The participants' belief is also confirmed by Ndlovu (2014, 354), who observes that what kept the Tonga people united around their language revitalisation programme was their desire to debunk old stereotypes of being viewed as backward, subhuman and uncapable. These factors pushed them to remain hardworking towards achieving their goal of proving their detractors wrong.

The second aspect of the participants' search for recognition, which hinged on their occupation of Zimbabwe as the first Bantu people, also remained a contentious issue among them. In their view, the continued existence of the Tonga language in Zimbabwe was a "critical landmark" signifying the presence of the "first Bantu settlers" on Zimbabwean soil (see section 5.4). It could be argued that the revitalisation of their language is a first step towards demanding that other ethnic groups in Zimbabwe recognise their first-occupant status. It is, however, not clear how this recognition would assist the Tonga in transforming the current ethnic relations power-balance in Zimbabwe.

7. Conclusion

The reasons why the Tonga people embarked on a language revitalisation project were clearly established by this study. The Tonga people wanted to restore their language and identity and to preserve their culture and history; to rehabilitate their battered self-image in Zimbabwean society; to restore the broken connection between the Tonga ancestry and the generations assimilated into Shona and Ndebele cultures; and to restore the Tonga people's relevance on the land they occupied as the first Bantu people in Zimbabwe. These were driven by their need to re-establish their unique identity, to feel secure in the face of threats to their economic and social welfare, to participate fully as equal partners in Zimbabwean society, to be free from domination and oppression, and to receive their due recognition as an ethnolinguistic group.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is based on research by Isaac Mumpande towards a Master's degree in the Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages at the University of South Africa.

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