

Chapter 20

The Use of Signs and Symbols in Communication Amongst the Vhavenda

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ABSTRACT

Signs and symbols are also known to be an integral part of secret language that is expected only to be understood by the speakers of that language. Signs and symbols have been used by different African communities to transfer meaning since time immemorial, and Vhavenda communities are not immune to such phenomena. This means that the meaning of a sign and/or symbol is not necessarily readily or easily apparent to a non-speaker of the language. Non-speakers may struggle to understand what is conveyed by the speaker. This chapter seeks to explore the characteristics, types of signs and symbols used by the Vhavenda communities to communicate meaning. Data will be collected from elderly members of the Vhavenda communities within Thulamela local municipality. Fifteen elders will be engaged through face-to-face interviews as well as focus group discussions for data collection purposes. Data for this book chapter will then be analysed thematically.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focusses on the use of signs and symbols in communicating messages and meaning within the Vhavenda communities. It seeks to redefine, conceptualize and contextualize communication from the perspectives of African and Vhavenda communities specifically. This section discusses signs and

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symbols in terms of what they are, their physiognomies and how they have been used generally in the world, in Africa and in South Africa.

Humans consciously strive to make sense of their surrounding environment. There are symbols such as gesticulations, signs, objects and words which assist people comprehend that world. They provide clues to understanding experiences by conveying recognizable meanings that are shared by societies. Signs and symbols are crucial because they convey the message without saying a word, they convey same information more precisely and in brief.

Since time immemorial human beings used symbolism as a communication channel to assist them to unravel the mysteries of life. We are surrounded by signs, images, ideas which we may be or not aware of their meanings and interpretations. A symbol has a deeper meaning than a sign. A symbol in its nature represents another thing more profound than itself. Symbolism is a form of communication and has a meaning that is often hidden and communicated without the use of words (Nengovhela, 2010.p2). Symbols are culture -based but, surprisingly, most African cultures share a lot of the same symbols and meanings though some scholars allude that interpretations differ from culture to culture. Morcel (2011: 27) says signs are images or meanings while symbols are the deeper meaning attached to signs, images, and patterns used in the expressive visual language embedded in the oral and traditional belief. According to Milubi (2007:02) a symbol may be figurative or presentational in its outlook. Figurative symbols point to or stand for what they symbolise. They do not have the quality of the thing they symbolise. Let us look at few animals as examples.

Communication is the act of developing meaning among individuals or groups using tacit or express signs and symbols that are understood by the communicator and the recipient. The main fundamental characteristic of communication have been described as the formation of communicative motivation or reason as well as message composition. Communication is the act of giving, receiving, and sharing of information, in other words, talking or writing, and listening or reading. Good communicators listen carefully, speak or write clearly, and they are able to respect opinions from different people. The ability to communicate effectively is one of the most important life skills. Communication can be verbal, non-verbal and visual, depending on the content and context. Communication is defined as conveying information to produce greater comprehension. Communicators continuously exchange information, meaning people always seem to be either receiving or giving information. Signs and symbols are the foundations of all communication.

THE VHAVENDA PEOPLE

The Vhavenda people occupy an area in and around the Soutpansberg Mountains in the north-eastern section of South Africa's Limpopo Province and specifically in Vhembe District Municipality (VDM), close to the borders with Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The name Venda refers only to the area or territory and the people are called Vhavenda. Kruger National Park is located on the eastern side of Venda towards the boarder to Mozambique. The southern part of Venda is occupied by Vatsonga cultural group who speaks Xitsonga language (Matshidze, 2013). The western boundaries are formed by agricultural farmlands and cattle ranches owned by English- and Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans as well as areas inhabited by the Northern Sotho. To the north is the Limpopo River, the international boundary with Zimbabwe, where many Venda people live under seven chiefs in the southern and central parts of that country (Ralushai, 1978).

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