

Chapter 33

Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge through Indigenous Languages in Zimbabwe

Lawton Hikwa

National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe

Esabel Maisiri

National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

The chapter seeks to demonstrate the need to preserve indigenous knowledge through the preservation of indigenous languages in Zimbabwe. This is premised on linguistic determinism which states that language precedes thought and determines one's worldview. Therefore, by preserving indigenous languages, which in Zimbabwe have continued to be marginalized, the country would be preserving its intangible heritage and maintaining the diversity of its knowledge base. Activities undertaken to preserve indigenous languages are assessed and suggestions put forward on how library and information science professionals could also take part in preserving the knowledge resources. The chapter is based on a literature review.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language and knowledge has been explored from a number of perspectives. One of these perspectives, which this paper subscribes to, views language as “a medium for the formation and communication of thoughts and knowledge about the world” (Nwafor, n.d.). By extension, this means that people without own specific language, are not able to develop as well as sustain the development of their knowledge base including passing on the knowledge to future generations. In short, the death of a particular language means the demise of the knowledge of the people who spoke the language. Highlighting such a scenario, UNESCO (2016) observes that of the more than 6,000 languages spoken in the world, half are endangered. Among the endangered, those which have not been written or documented, will disappear by the end of this century. The effect is that “humanity would lose not only an irreplace-

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able cultural heritage but also valuable ancestral knowledge embedded, in particular, in indigenous languages” (UNESCO, 2016). This is because indigenous language “embodies the unique cultural wisdom of a people” (Wamalwa & Oluoch, 2013, p. 258). Against this background, a question arises on what modalities are in place in Zimbabwe, within the library and information science profession, to preserve indigenous knowledge through indigenous language. Indigenous languages in Zimbabwe can be viewed as endangered considering that out of the 16 languages spoken in the country only 2 local language, Ndebele and Shona, and English are used in official communication. A study of indigenous languages and how they are preserved in Zimbabwe, from a library and information science perspective, has not been done before. Hence, attempts in this chapter to tackle the subject matter.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to assess the current status of endangered indigenous languages in Zimbabwe, and also highlight the place and role of libraries, among other institutions, in the preservation of indigenous languages for the posterity of indigenous knowledge. The premise upon which the assessment is based on is that indigenous language is a precursor to indigenous knowledge, thus the preservation of indigenous language translates into the preservation of indigenous knowledge. To do this, the paper first gives a context of the language situation in Zimbabwe which includes the current state of indigenous knowledge. A statement of the problem follows, then a discussion of language and human communication. Covered here are issues on language and transmission of culture, indigenous language and culture, the importance of indigenous languages and functions of indigenous language. The following main section is on the protection and preservation of indigenous language with subheadings on the preservation of indigenous knowledge in Zimbabwe and on libraries and knowledge preservation. The three last sections are on, respectively, solutions and recommendations, future research directions and conclusion.

THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN ZIMBABWE

The chapter is conceptually and theoretically anchored to the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013, which recognizes and guarantees the official status to sixteen national languages. This is in line with the recommendations of the Select Committee of Parliament on the New Constitution (COPAC) which was appointed in 2009 to coordinate the constitution-making process. The process was one of the deliverables of the Global Political Agreement (GPA) that was signed in September 2008 by the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) led by Robert Mugabe, and the two formations of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), namely, the MDC-T led by Morgan Tsvangirai, and the MDC-N led by Welshman Ncube (KuvakaZim, n.d.). The GPA was brokered by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and it ended the election dispute of 2007 between Tsvangirai and Mugabe, leading to the formation of an inclusive government that came into place in February 2009 (Dzinesa, 2012).

The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013, recognises the importance of diversity in languages in its Founding Values and Principles. The officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe are Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa (Zimbabwe, Constitution, 2013, p. 14). Further, the Constitution states that “an Act of Parliament may prescribe other languages as officially recognised languages and may prescribe languages of record” (Zimbabwe, Constitution, 2013, p. 14). State institutions and agencies of government are compelled to ensure that all the officially recognised languages are treated

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