

REVISITING THE LANGUAGE–CULTURE–DEVELOPMENT NEXUS: A CASE STUDY OF ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The relationship between language, culture, and development has long been a subject of scholarly debate, particularly the nexus of language, culture, and development. This paper examines the argument that language and culture are critical determinants of national development, with particular focus on Zimbabwe, where marginalised languages and cultures potentially impede social and economic progress. In Zimbabwe, the multicultural nature presents both opportunities and challenges in development agendas, a situation where language can either facilitate or obstruct development across various regions. This study explores the intricate interplay between language and culture, emphasising their collective impact on societal development in marginalised areas of Zimbabwe. Grounded in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits that linguistic differences shape cognitive processes and cultural perceptions, the research employs a qualitative methodology that includes interviews, document analysis and surveys. The findings reveal that language and specific cultural beliefs are pivotal in either promoting or hindering development within communities. Considering these insights, the paper advocates for a comprehensive assessment of the language-culture nexus to enhance understanding and addressing of developmental disparities in Zimbabwe. This approach is essential for informing policies aimed at fostering inclusive growth and recognising the value of linguistic diversity.

Keywords: culture, development, intercultural communication, language, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

Introduction

Language is an indispensable medium of human communication, social interaction, and meaning-making. Scholars have long debated whether language constitutes an integral component of culture or serves primarily as its expression and marker of identity. Regardless of this debate, language undeniably plays a central role in the development of societies. In many post-colonial contexts, particularly in Southern Africa, the marginalisation of indigenous languages continues to impede social inclusion, equitable participation, and economic advancement across different regions. Social reality itself is constructed through intercultural communication mediated by

language (Said, 2021); consequently, linguistic differences can become barriers to social cohesion and development among people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Cultural identity, in this sense, is deeply embedded in and sustained through language.

This paper interrogates the dynamic relationship between language and culture and examines how this nexus shapes societal development. It explores how the effectiveness with which a language is developed, standardised, and utilised influences the progress of individuals and communities (Tola, 2022). Societies rely on language not only to preserve cultural heritage but also to structure thought, transmit values, and

construct shared worldviews. Focusing on the Zimbabwean context, the study analyses how language reflects cultural traditions, shapes conceptual frameworks, and influences patterns of social organisation.

Development, moreover, extends beyond economic growth. It is a multidimensional process involving the reorganisation of social, cultural, and institutional structures to improve the quality of human life (Sakalasoorya, 2020). As Streeten (1972) argues, development fundamentally concerns the transformation of human beings, their attitudes to work and life, as well as the institutions that govern social existence. Central to this transformation is the recognition of people as both agents and beneficiaries of development. Through socialisation and lifelong learning (Saras & Perez-Felkner, 2018), individuals internalise the norms, practices, and knowledge systems of their communities, becoming fully integrated members of their cultural groups. This process is mediated largely through language, which enables the transmission, negotiation, and co-creation of knowledge and ideas essential for improving collective well-being.

Language plays a critical role in enabling communication that can either promote or hinder development. The sociology of language examines how social structures and cultural norms shape patterns of language use and linguistic development (Chen, 1997). As a tool for social interaction, language influences access to resources, opportunities, and power relations, thereby reinforcing or mitigating social inequalities (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). It also facilitates the exchange of cultural knowledge and innovations necessary for societal advancement. Culture itself encompasses shared beliefs, values, customs, and behavioural norms (Naik et al., 2023), all of which are transmitted across generations through socialisation mediated by language. In this sense, language embodies culture, and together they exert profound influence on development processes.

Development has likewise been conceptualised as both a material condition and a psychological orientation toward progress. Pye

(1966) describes it as a multifaceted transformation aimed at improving living standards and restructuring social institutions across economic, political, and cultural domains. Language is indispensable to this process because it enables the communication, coordination, and knowledge exchange required for both individual and collective advancement. While language can foster social cohesion, it is not sufficient on its own to guarantee national development; it must operate alongside cultural sensitivity and responsiveness to local realities (Schteinman, 2015). Bernstein's view of language as a dual mechanism for structuring thought and preserving knowledge further underscores its developmental significance (Danzig, 1990).

Language and culture jointly shape societal values and behavioural patterns that underpin development (Tola, 2022). However, linguistic inequalities may hinder progress, particularly when certain languages lack terminology for modern scientific, technological, or administrative concepts (Schteinman, 2015). In linguistically diverse societies, development initiatives may therefore encounter communication barriers that limit participation and effectiveness. Ndhlovu (2010) emphasises the role of language as social capital in disseminating developmental information and advocates for inclusive language policies that recognise linguistic diversity. Despite formal recognition in legislation, many African languages remain marginalised in education, governance, and economic domains, restricting their potential contribution to national development (Chabata, 2013).

Ultimately, development is people-centred and depends on communication, knowledge transfer, and skills acquisition, all of which occur through language (Bamgbose, 2014). Indigenous knowledge systems, which are crucial for sustainable development, are most effectively transmitted within native linguistic and cultural frameworks (Mooko, 2009). In the context of Zimbabwe, the interdependence of language, culture, and development is therefore particularly salient. Effective communication promotes

participation, empowerment, and social progress, while cultural understanding enhances the relevance and sustainability of development initiatives. Recognising and addressing linguistic diversity is thus essential for achieving inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development in the nation. Nevertheless, despite this recognised importance, indigenous languages in Zimbabwe often remain marginalised in formal domains such as education, governance, science, and economic planning, where colonial languages continue to dominate. This imbalance restricts access to information, limits meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and weakens the dissemination and effectiveness of development programmes among large segments of the population. Linguistic diversity without adequate policy support may also produce fragmentation, miscommunication, and unequal distribution of resources. In addition, the absence of standardised terminology for modern concepts in some local languages, coupled with insufficient investment in language development, constrains their capacity to function as effective tools for national transformation. Consequently, development initiatives risk becoming exclusionary, culturally misaligned, or unsustainable, making the language–culture–development nexus in Zimbabwe both crucial and problematic.

Research questions

1. How do marginalised languages in Zimbabwe influence the social and economic development of their respective communities, particularly in the context of cultural heritage and identity?
2. In what ways does the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis provide insights into the relationship between language, culture, and development in the multicultural landscape of Zimbabwe?
3. What strategies can be implemented to enhance the role of marginalised languages and cultures in national development agendas, and how can these strategies address existing disparities in linguistic representation?

Theoretical framework

The study is guided by the linguistic relativity hypothesis. Sapir's linguistic relativity hypothesis states that the language people speak and think in shapes the way people perceive the world, and the existence of the various language systems implies that the people who think in these different languages must perceive the world differently (Perlovsky, 2009). Sapir argues that language has an influence on thought and perception, which implies that speakers of different languages think and perceive reality in different ways, as each language has its own worldview (Hussein, 2012). Developed in 1929 by Edward Sapir, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (the linguistic relativity hypothesis) states that a person's perception of the world around him or her and how individuals experience the world is both determined and influenced by the language that he or she speaks. Cibelli et al. (2016) reiterate the tenets of the hypothesis by stating that our thoughts are shaped by our indigenous language and that speakers of different languages think differently. The theory states that a person's perception of and how individuals experience the world is determined and influenced by the language that he or she speaks (Drew, 2023). It is language that carries the culture which mirrors the world and develops a shared meaning of what occurs in societies. The theory is appropriate in analysing the connection between language, culture and development in the Zimbabwean context, focusing on the sluggish development levels of Zimbabwean remote parts.

Methodology

Sample / Participants

The data provided insights into cultural nuances. The insights helped identify unique characteristics of various languages and cultures and their alignment with development projects undertaken by various stakeholders. Ten elders from various communities in Chipinge, Mbire, Rushinga and Binga Districts, custodians of their traditional culture, were randomly sampled and interviewed to identify how oral tradition can be deployed to reflect how language and cultural heritage shape people's thoughts and conceptual

beliefs that influence development or lack of it.

Instrument(s)

Telephone surveys and interviews were conducted with ten indigenous language speakers to gather information on their perceptions of the levels of development in ten (10) different remote locations in Zimbabwe where Tonga, Ndau, Tswana, Venda and Shangani languages and cultures are in existence in the sampled locations. Document analysis was used to analyse five songs, five proverbs and five folktales to gather information

on the traditional norms and values of each culture.

Data collection procedures

To collect data, the researchers sought informed consent from participants before conducting telephone surveys. Document analysis of Tonga, Ndau, Tswana, Venda and Shangani songs, proverbs and folktales was conducted to corroborate findings from telephone surveys.

Data analysis

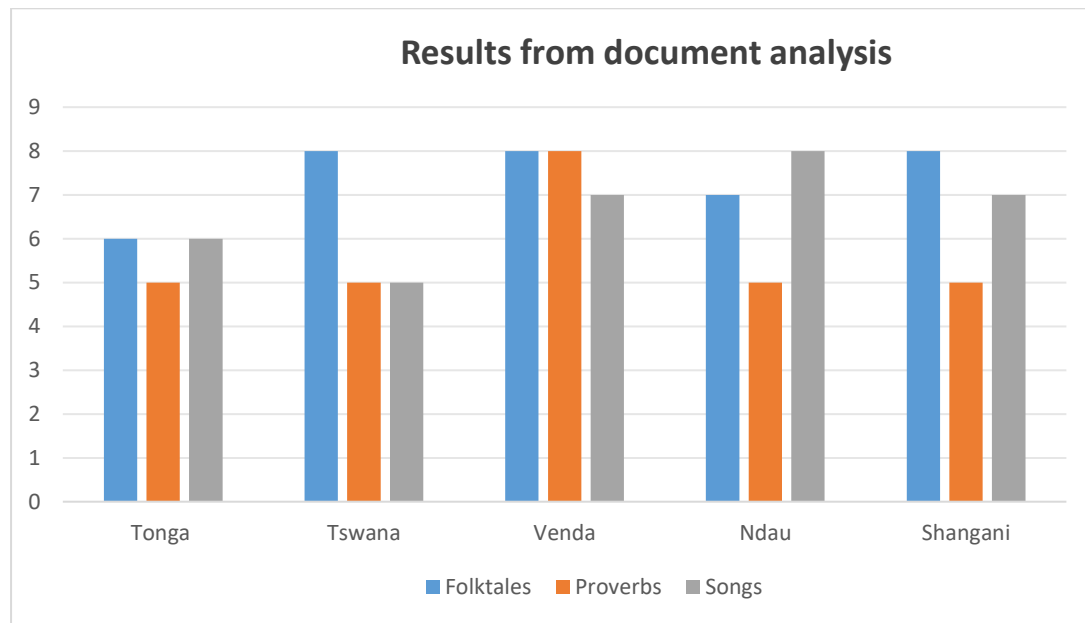
The data collected through telephone surveys and document analysis were categorised according to themes and analysed through narrative descriptions.

Results

Table 7.1 Results from the interview

| Participant | Language spoken | Comment on the development rate |
|---------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Participant A | Tonga | Slow |
| Participant B | Tonga | Slow |
| Participant C | Tswana | Slow |
| Participant D | Tswana | Slow |
| Participant E | Ndau | Slow |
| Participant F | Ndau | Slow |
| Participant G | Shangani | Slow |
| Participant H | Shangani | Slow |
| Participant I | Venda | Slow |
| Participant J | Venda | Slow |

Figure 7.2



The result reveals that the marginalised language users are influenced by linguistic and cultural values as reflected in their songs, proverbs, folktales, and cultural traditions that help to re-orient their perceptions of developmental agendas and discourses. These linguistic and cultural orientations led to either improvement or stagnation in community development. The linguistic landscape, language and cultural practices in Zimbabwe reflect a hierarchical policy. The same hierarchical structures are reflected in developmental programmes across linguistic and cultural zones. This is an anomaly which the current government is battling to address, as captured by Zimbabwe's President in the mantra 'Leaving no one and no place behind.'

Furthermore, the result suggests that the languages and cultures of remote parts of

Zimbabwe are marginalised, regardless of constitutional recognition. It emerged that most of these languages and cultures are not documented and have no formal orthography. These facts make it difficult to employ these languages and consider the cultures in high-level developmental programmes and discourse. Data also reveals that most communication with stakeholders requires translation, with cases of mistranslation being prevalent. It is very likely that such issues may cause misfired priorities, stagnation or retrogression of most peripheral areas of Zimbabwe.

The assumed inferior position of these minority languages and cultures may fail to communicate developmental ideas, leading to the underdevelopment of remote rural areas. This possibility is high because development must be

grounded in people's realities, culture, and language. If the locals' dialect is not the language of development, it may hinder development in the areas. This is particularly likely since indigenous cultural knowledge, which can contribute to sustainable development, can only be best understood in the languages of the people. The social capital value concept supports this view because people are more inspired to participate in development issues if they can represent themselves in their language and culture.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant influence of linguistic and cultural values on the development of marginalised communities in Zimbabwe. Language serves not just as a means of communication, but as a vessel of linguistic and cultural identity, shaping perceptions and attitudes towards development, resulting in varying developmental outcomes. The songs, proverbs and folktales that are integral to these communities reflect their unique cultural heritage, which can either promote or hinder their socio-economic progress.

Despite the constitutional recognition of various languages and cultures, many remain undocumented and lack formal orthography. This marginalisation poses a substantial barrier to effective participation in development programmes. The reliance on translation for communication with stakeholders often leads to misinterpretations, misunderstandings and loss of culture, further exacerbating the challenges faced by these communities. This situation aligns with the findings of Kadenge and Mugari (2015), who argue that linguistic inclusivity in development initiatives is crucial for fostering growth. Furthermore, the perceived inferiority of minority languages and cultures can contribute to a cycle of underdevelopment. When development initiatives do not resonate with the local dialects and cultural practices, communities may feel excluded from the processes that affect their lives. They may resist or disengage from development in their areas. This disconnect can result in a lack of motivation to engage with development programmes, as individuals may not see their own realities

reflected in the dominant language of development discourse, a sentiment echoed in the works of Khan (2014) and Mooko (2009).

The concept of social capital underscores the importance of language in fostering community engagement. Individuals are more likely to participate in development efforts when they can articulate their cultural needs and aspirations in their native languages. This aligns with the idea that effective communication is fundamental to development, as it allows for the sharing of knowledge and experiences that are rooted in local cultural contexts (Bamgbose, 2014). Moreover, indigenous knowledge plays a crucial role in sustainable development and is best conveyed in the languages of the people.

This notion supports the argument that development must be grounded in the realities of the communities it aims to serve. By embracing linguistic diversity and recognising the cultural significance of marginalised languages, stakeholders can create more inclusive and effective development strategies. The interplay between language, culture and development in Zimbabwe is complex and multifaceted. Addressing the marginalisation of languages and cultures is essential for fostering inclusive growth and ensuring that development initiatives resonate with the communities they are designed to benefit. The findings of this study advocate for a more nuanced understanding of the language-culture-development nexus, which can inform policies aimed at enhancing participation and promoting equitable development across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

Language and culture serve as powerful rallying points in the process of nation-building because they shape identity, social cohesion, and collective aspirations. They influence virtually all spheres of development at both local and national levels, including education, governance, economic participation, and social integration. However, language and culture alone cannot guarantee unity or development within any society. When deliberately manipulated as instruments for forging national cohesion in multilingual contexts,

they may instead generate tension, exclusion, or conflict. Historical and ongoing crises in linguistically diverse societies such as South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo illustrate the potential consequences of mismanaging cultural and linguistic plurality. Underdevelopment, therefore, does not arise from multilingualism itself but from underlying social, political, and attitudinal factors among citizens and leadership alike, since no nation achieves unity solely through monoculturalism. Rather, inclusive policies that recognise and harness diversity are essential for sustainable development.

Although the government of Zimbabwe has taken some steps toward addressing the language–culture–development nexus, further coordinated and sustained efforts are necessary to ensure that marginalised languages meaningfully contribute to developmental discourse.

Recommendation

Accordingly, this study recommends that the government expand investment in the planning, standardisation, and promotion of marginalised languages and cultures for their eventual integration into human development initiatives, particularly in peripheral regions of the country. Development programmes should actively incorporate local languages and cultural practices while creating inclusive platforms that encourage marginalised communities to participate in planning, implementation, and

evaluation processes. Developmental partners, while acknowledging their significant contributions to community advancement, should prioritise the linguistic and cultural contexts of target areas by supporting the growth of indigenous languages, respecting local cultural norms, and encouraging communities to utilise their own linguistic resources in development projects. Such partners should also provide space for local populations to articulate developmental needs and perspectives within their own cultural and linguistic frameworks, thereby enhancing ownership, relevance, and sustainability of interventions.

Furthermore, speakers of marginalised languages themselves—being both primary stakeholders and ultimate beneficiaries of development—should take pride in their mother tongues and cultural heritage, recognising them as valuable assets rather than obstacles to progress. They are encouraged to engage in linguistic and cultural advocacy for recognition in national development agendas and to participate confidently in development discourse using their own languages and cultural knowledge systems. Through these combined efforts, linguistic diversity can be transformed from a potential source of marginalisation into a strategic resource for inclusive nation-building and sustainable development.

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