

Possibilities and Challenges of Harmonizing Xitsonga Cross-Border Varieties in the Southern African Region: A Case of Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Xitsonga is a cross-border language spoken in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique and Swaziland. This language is known by different names in these four countries. In South Africa it is known as Xitsonga, in Mozambique it is known as Xichangana and in Zimbabwe and Swaziland it is known in official records as Shangani even though the Zimbabwean speakers commonly calls it Xichangana or Xihlengwe. The speakers of these varieties generally agree that what they speak are simply variant forms of Xitsonga language. This paper is going to discuss how this language came to be known by different names in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa. Even though it seems that this is one language spoken in different countries, there are remarkable similarities and differences amongst these varieties. Words showing similarities in these three countries are going to be highlighted as examples to prove that Xitsonga is one language existing in these countries. The paper is also going to discuss words which show some differences as evidence of separation of these varieties over a long period of time. This also can be attributed to colonial influences, current political and social-economic factors. The main aim of this paper is to discuss the possibility of the harmonisation of Xitsonga varieties spoken in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa since the speakers of this language were merely separated by man-made boundaries. The paper shall also discuss the challenges in harmonising Xitsonga varieties across borders. This paper shall give recommendations which try to redress the misconceptions on the Xitsonga ethnonym.

Keywords

harmonisation, cross-border, varieties, ethnonym

Introduction

Xitsonga is classified under South Eastern Bantu which belongs to the Niger-Congo group of languages and falls under zone S.50 (Mesthrie, 1995). Xitsonga is spoken in Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. People living in this region did not necessarily choose to stay in their present day frontiers. The linguistic boundaries do not match the political ones. Fasold (1987:12) asserts that “...sociocultural groups do not always select their area of residence for the convenience of political boundary drawing. As a result, in many areas the borders between countries, there are people who are citizens of one country, but members of a sociocultural group based in the other”. This supports the situation in which the Tsonga speakers of present day Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique and Swaziland are found.

However, this paper discusses the possibility and challenges of harmonisation of Xitsonga varieties in Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Harkness (2010:1) defines harmonisation as “developing a common version (vocabulary or

structure) for different regional varieties of a ‘shared’ language”. This implies that languages which can be harmonised are those which share common vocabulary and other linguistic features. Heine and Nurse (2000:340) define harmonisation as “a special case of standardisation. It involves the unification of distinct and sometimes quite distant that is mutually non-intelligible dialects which may have been considered different languages for historical, geographical or ethnic reasons, to converge on one standard which is at least written if not spoken”. This implies that harmonisation may also be done on dialects which are considered as different languages for various reasons. This also tells us that harmonisation can create a standard written language for the region which has these dialects even if it is not necessarily spoken. This may also apply to Xitsonga varieties which are called by different names due to socio-political and historical reasons. Harmonisation can also bring people of common ancestry together.

The problem experienced in Xitsonga varieties is that they are written differently in these three countries. Hence there are challenges for the

speakers who may want to benefit from literature and any important documents or communication which is written in any of Xitsonga varieties, especially when we are looking at future events in the Great Limpopo Trans-frontier region. Another issue is that the speakers of what seems to be one language seem to be polarised due to these man-made boundaries to the extent that they treat each other as aliens in the land of their ancestors. This is what triggers the researcher to discuss the possibility of the harmonisation of Xitsonga varieties across borders.

Historical background of the current orthographies

This section highlights background information on the languages and orthographies used in Xitsonga speaking countries mentioned above. These are the writing systems being employed currently.

South African situation

Xitsonga speakers are predominantly found in the Limpopo Province where they share a linguistic space with Tshivenda and Northern Sotho. Xitsonga are also scattered in the other eight provinces of the country (Babane and Chauke, 2015). According to Statistics South Africa (1996), Xitsonga speakers constitute 4.4% of South Africa's total population.

In South Africa, Xitsonga language uses a disjunctive way of writing as used in English and other European languages. The reason for the adoption of this writing system could be the fact that the orthography was first developed by missionaries in the Southern region, e.g. the Swiss Mission (Masiya, 2010). The South African Tsonga orthography was developed mainly from dialects such as Xinkuna, Xiluleke, Xigwamba, Xihlengwe, Xihlave, Xibila and Xihlanganu. Xidzonga and Xin`walungu also form part of the dialects. Xitsonga also borrows a lot from Afrikaans and English. It also borrows from other African languages in contact such as Nguni languages, Venda and Sotho.

Mozambican situation

The Tsonga population in Mozambique is estimated to be 3.1 million (Tsonga Joshua Project, 2015). In Mozambique Xitsonga is known as Xichangana and is grouped together with Xitshwa and Xirhonga under the umbrella Tsonga language (Siteo, 2006). Speakers of Xitsonga are

predominantly found in Southern Mozambique. Mozambican Tsonga now seems to be adopting the conjunctive way of writing. According to Siteo (2006), this language has chosen to conform with some other African languages in that country which uses this system. The language borrows a lot from Portuguese as compared to its Zimbabwean and South African counterparts.

Zimbabwean situation

In Zimbabwe, Xitsonga speakers are predominantly found in Chiredzi and Mwenezi (N'wanedzi) districts in Masvingo Province. Hachipola (1998: 22) highlights that Chiredzi district has a population of 160,192 of which Xitsonga speakers are said to be 121,787. In other districts such as Beitbridge and Chipinge the estimates are not known, but there is a significant number of speakers there. No actual census was conducted to determine the exact number of Xitsonga speakers in Zimbabwe.

In terms of orthography, Zimbabwe once used the old South African Xitsonga orthography during the colonial and post-colonial era. At some point when Zimbabwe declared two African languages to be national, viz a viz, Shona and Ndebele, all learners in the country were forced to learn either Shona or Ndebele depending on their region. Xitsonga speakers were forced to learn Shona and as a result their orthography had to conform to Shona orthography (Hachipola, 1998). The orthography was heavily influenced by Shona and this led to the Xitsonga speakers rejecting the orthography completely. They resorted to a neutral orthography which could be seen having some South African influence. Currently the Zimbabwean orthography has got some resemblances to both Mozambican and South African orthographies. It also has some features which are peculiar to Zimbabwe only. Zimbabwean Tsonga adopted what they called Hakamela declaration (2014) where they have agreed that their language shall be called Xitsonga. They also agreed that they would not differ for the sake of differing without any tangible reasons of being unique (Hakamela Orthography conference, 2014).

An overview on Language Harmonization and its challenges

Kurgat (2014) writes on challenges facing the harmonisation and standardisation of the Kalenjin

language which is spoken in Kenya. He argues that the harmonisation and standardisation processes which were undertaken by missionaries during colonial period and after independence have caused misconceptions that Kalenjin dialects cannot be standardised to have one common writing system which can be used for educational purposes. Kurgat goes on arguing that mutual intelligibility of the Kalenjin dialects can be made possible through a harmonised orthography for the purposes of literacy. He finally shows that the differences are minor and recommends that the language be harmonised urgently for the development of the society. This current study is only discusses about harmonisation of Xitsonga varieties whose orthographies just have minor differences unlike the Kalenjin which needs to be harmonised first for mutual intelligibility.

Mesthrie (2002) explains how South African languages were to be harmonised taking into consideration the issue of mutual intelligibility as it was first proposed by a South African politician, Jacob Nhlapo (1944). This was later revisited by Neville Alexander. The proposal was to come up with one Nguni language from Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele and Swati and also one Sotho language from North Sotho, South Sotho and Tswana. However this proposal did not bear fruits as speakers seem to have resisted the move. In relation to this, there could be a possibility of unifying Xitsonga cross-border varieties.

Babane and Chauke (2015)'s paper on harmonisation of Zimbabwean and South African Xitsonga languages examined the possibilities of harmonizing these two varieties. They give examples which prove that these languages can be harmonised. They also argue that these varieties cannot be treated as different languages since they show that they come from one parent language. Babane and Chauke highlight that harmonising these varieties can help in the development of language in terms of orthography since in both countries they are regarded as minority languages. They also argue that some authors such as Mesthrie (1995) regard Xichangana "spoken in Southern Mozambique and Shangani as dialects of Xitsonga". Mesthrie (1995: 45), supports this argument by saying "this group as a whole shares more phonological and grammatical features...

Babane and Chauke (2015) give a list of words which look similar in both South African and

Zimbabwean Xitsonga varieties. They found that in most of the words there is Shona influence and this is attributed to the fact that most speakers were forced to learn Shona from grade 3 up to secondary level. Their comparison shows some variation in the phonological aspect rather than the orthographic one. For instance; *byala* > *bwala*, *byongo* > *bongo* as cited in Madlome and Hlungwani (2014). The above words are pronounced in that way, but they are written differently in the current Zimbabwean orthography as discussed later in this study. This current study is explores the possibility of harmonising three language varieties rather than two only.

Sitoe et al (2003) in their endeavour of harmonising Xitsonga varieties in Mozambique and South African make a comparison of these two languages. In their comparison, they consider similarities and differences in these varieties. In their study they have shown that:

In South Africa, Xitsonga use a bilabial explosive consonant [b] whereas in Mozambique they use a bilabial implosive [b`] in words such as *banga*, *bava* and *b'anga*, *b'ava* respectively. Sitoe et al also argue that this also applies to the alveolar consonant [d] in South Africa which is written as [d'] showing that it has got an implosive sound in Mozambique. For instance, in words like *dingo*, and *d'ingo* respectively. Differences were also shown in this way:

Mozambique: /ps/, /ps/, /psh/, /bz/, /lh/, /nlh/, /sv/
South Africa: /tsw/, /py/, /phy/, /by/, /dhl/, /ndhl/, /sw/.

Sitoe et al also show that there is a difference in a way palatal and lateral sounds are pronounced in these two countries. Even in locatives there is a minor difference where e- and a- are used as prefixes respectively, for example: *exikolweni* and *axikolweni*. These differences are minor as compared to similarities. However, their comparison did not consider Zimbabwe as a country in which Xitsonga is spoken. Hence this current study is covering this gap.

Banda (2008), discusses challenges faced in the harmonisation of cross-border orthographies in Southern Africa. He cites impediments such as leaders in the political sphere who become suspicious of this noble adventure and they end up being reluctant to support the process. Other challenges are the educational policies in

countries such as Kenya, though they may differ slightly from other countries. Banda argues that Kenya's political system also suffers the problem of suspecting that promoting indigenous languages is a threat to national cohesion. Those in power would rather see English language being used for economic growth rather than promoting African languages. Another challenge cited by Banda emanates from ethnic and identity issues where various dialects clamour for different bible and literature because of the fear that a standard orthography will marginalize other dialects.

Maddieson and Hinnesbusch (1998:293) support what Banda says about identities when they aver that: *“the Nhlapo-Alexander proposal has been consistently rejected by Africans on the ground that the speakers of the mentioned languages regard themselves as separate identities”*. This is what happened with the Sotho-Nguni groups. This shows that the speakers of the mentioned languages did not understand that their varieties fall under one main language. In relation to this paper, this tells us that speakers of languages to be involved in the harmonisation process should first of all be in an informed position so that they may understand what will be really taking place.

Banda concludes that the Kenyan policies on language education, especially indigenous language education are found wanting. This current study also makes a follow on challenges that stems from harmonization of Xitsonga language varieties in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was employed in this study. Data collection was done through the use of interviews and secondary data sources. Fifteen participants were selected amongst speakers, lecturers and students through a purposive sampling technique. This helped to approach the most appropriate people who could help with necessary information pertaining to the issues of harmonisation of Xitsonga languages. De Vos et al (2007:328) support this method when they say: *“In qualitative studies non-probability sampling methods are utilized, in particular, theoretical or purposive sampling techniques are used rather than random sampling”*. This means purposive sampling will give the researcher most suitable people to deal with rather than a random

sample. Secondary sources helped with some examples of words which are found in different varieties of Xitsonga.

Possibility of harmonisation of Xitsonga cross-border languages

Harmonisation is a process which needs agreement of the speakers of the languages concerned. It has been tried with Nguni and Sotho languages. Nhlapo tried to harmonise Zulu, Xhosa, Swati and Ndebele to form the Nguni language, whereas Alexander did the same with Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho and Tswana to have one common Sotho language. Maddieson and Hinnebusch (1998: 292) supports this by saying: *“reclassification proposal for harmonisation of the Nguni languages, on the other hand, and the Sotho languages on the other hand, was offered by Nhlapo and Alexander as a solidarity measure to empower the African languages by reducing their numbers”*. This means harmonisation unifies people of a common origin and promotes African languages despite other challenges it may offer.

Speakers of Xitsonga from Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe generally understand each other's variety when they speak. Differences may be heard here and there. Below are examples of how words are written in three Xitsonga varieties:

English	Mozambique	South Africa	Zimbabwe
Give birth	Psala	Tswala	Tswala
Plant	Bzala	Byala	Byala
Intoxicate	Popsa	Pyopya	Pyopya(pop a)
Grass	Bzanyi	Byanyi	Byasi/byanyi
-	Lhiwa	Dhliwa	Dhliwa / dhliwa
Dry up	Psha	Phya	Phya
Father	B`ava/ papaya	tatana/ Bava	tatani/ B`ava
Cook	Musveki	Muswe ki	Musweki
Strangle	B`indza/vind za	Vindza	B`indza

The examples given in the table above show that there are more similarities than there are differences in these three language varieties. The differences could be attributed to borrowing from other languages which share or once shared linguistic space with languages in question or a long time of separation.

Challenges of harmonisation of Xitsonga varieties

Most of Xitsonga speakers in Zimbabwe feel that they are always treated as underdogs when it comes to the discussion of language issues. This causes some to reject orthographies from South Africa and Mozambique respectively as they feel their variety is under threat. This might have been caused by the fact that for quite a long time speakers in Zimbabwe have been subjected to harsh conditions whether politically, socially or linguistically. They have been on the receiving end most of the time. Their daily spoken language was heavily influenced by Shona and some have considered it to be part and parcel of their variety. As a result it becomes difficult to accept something coming from outside since they may think they are being treated as second class citizens.

Another challenge emanates from the issue of identity. Xitsonga speakers in Zimbabwe were isolated from their counterparts by man-made boundaries and political systems which are not comfortable with Zimbabweans being labelled Tsonga. There has been some historical distortions and nothing is written about Zimbabwean Tsonga in History books. It might seem as if they are delineating themselves from being patriotic Zimbabweans if they insist that they are Tsonga. Some of Vatsonga themselves have been made to believe that they are a separate entity even if the languages are similar in many respects. They think Xitsonga is a South African creation which does not include them. Very little is known about Xitsonga language in other parts of the country. This study also found that South African Xitsonga speakers have a “big brother mentality” since they will always be puzzled if they hear certain words which they are not familiar with. They may think that these words come from other languages which are in contact with Zimbabwean or Mozambican Tsonga.

Another challenge which needs to be tackled is the issue of change in life styles and technology. This has caused a lot of borrowing from languages such as English, Afrikaans and Portuguese by speakers of Xitsonga from Zimbabwe, South Africa and Mozambique respectively. Most of Mozambicans’ Tsonga is heavily influenced by Portuguese, whereas South African is influenced by Afrikaans and Zimbabwean is influenced by English. It might seem as if there are differences, yet speakers will be using borrowed terms.

The Mozambican policies seem to be reluctant about promoting African languages. Hence they are not pushed by anything to speed up the issue of language harmonisation. Zimbabwe even supported by the constitution amendment no. 20 Of 2013, do not have a language policy which stand alone on its own. Reference is only made to that act, but there are no methods of implementation explained explicitly.

Conclusion

This study shows that Xitsonga varieties spoken in Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe have a lot in common in terms of vocabulary. The speakers can understand these languages without any difficulty at all. The differences found in these variant forms of Xitsonga are negligible, implying that there is a great possibility of harmonising them. These differences are also useful in expanding the vocabulary in these three language varieties. This harmonisation will create a strong regional language which will be useful for economic activities which take place in the Great Limpopo trans-frontier conservation area. We can also safely say that there is one common language called Xitsonga in Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe without looking at these man-made boundaries. The slow progress towards harmonisation of Xitsonga varieties is evidence of lack of support from the governments in this region.

Recommendations

This study recommends the harmonisation of the three main Xitsonga language varieties in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa as a way of developing the language so that it can be used as a unifying force among the speakers despite being located across these artificial boundaries. This unified language will go a long

way in partaking in economic growth and trade in the region. Respective countries should not see this noble idea of harmonisation as a threat to their territorial integrity and social cohesion. The similarities in these languages should also be taken as an advantage in developing common materials such as dictionaries, terminology, literature and grammatical texts which can help citizens in these three countries. We also recommend that linguists, historians and governments departments responsible for naming to use the correct ethnonym for Xitsonga to avoid confusion and an impression that there are three distinct languages in these three countries. The language group is Xitsonga not Shangani.

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