

Language as a form of violence and assimilation: stakeholder views of Silozi as a medium of instruction and learning in the Zambezi region of Namibia



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Abstract

Namibia's Language-in-Education Policy promotes inclusivity by encouraging the use of learners' mother tongues or the most spoken local language in junior primary education. This study examines the Zambezi region, where Silozi was chosen as the medium of instruction both before and after independence in 1990, despite the presence of other significant languages. Drawing on the perspectives of policymakers, teachers, school stakeholders, and former learners, the research explores the implementation and impact of the policy and the prioritisation of Silozi over other mother tongues. It argues that the continued use of Silozi reflects colonial legacies and post-independence compromises, potentially reinforcing the marginalisation of other linguistic communities. Rather than offering relief, the policy may have entrenched historical inequalities. The study highlights the need to critically assess language policy decisions and their socio-political implications in postcolonial contexts.

Key Words

Language of instruction, colonial legacies, inequalities, Namibia.

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Introduction

Education is a crucial vehicle by which to foster inclusiveness and equity across nations. Inclusivity is secured through the chosen approaches to how learners are taught and also through the preferred language mediums, particularly in the junior primary phase (OSISA, 2018). Adequate schools, qualified teachers, a good curriculum, or sufficient pedagogical materials are not enough to foster good learning or inclusivity (Mokaleng and Möwes, 2020). For example, it has been found that when the medium of instruction is not the mother tongue of junior primary schoolers, the language used often reinforces and reproduces conflict within marginalised spaces (Poudel and Choi, 2021).

After Namibian independence in 1990, one of the ways in which the government pursued inclusivity was through the Language-in-Education Policy for Namibian schools. The proclaimed aim was to guide the role of language in ways that brought communities together and respected their different cultural contributions and backgrounds. As such, it was decided that the medium of instruction in Grades 1-3 of the Namibian education system would be through learners' mother tongues and/or the most spoken language in a specific locality (MBESC, 2003; Shikalepo, 2020). Grade 4 is a transitional year, where there is a shift to English as a medium of instruction. In Grades 5-7 English is the formal medium of instruction, but supported by mother tongue instruction. From grades 8 to 12, English is the only medium of instruction, while mother-tongue languages continue to be offered as individual subjects (MBESC, 2003).

Some scholars have been critical of this policy, arguing that it reproduces linguistic hierarchies and perpetuates linguistic injustice, particularly for the Indigenous and ethnic minority communities whose mother tongues are different from the official language. Buschfeld and Kautzsch (2014) caution that the Namibian National Language Policy (NNLP) and the status of English as the sole official language fail to properly reflect the diversity of the Namibian people. Of further or even greater concern, however, is the regulation that the medium of instruction in an area can be based on the most spoken language in a particular locality. These two processes can generate conflict where reverence is given to English and specific African languages at the expense of

other Namibian local languages, especially linguistic minorities. This paper explores such an instance in the Zambezi region, where the use of a regionally recognised medium of instruction, namely Silozi, is potentially causing significant hardship for learners in schools.

The paper explores the challenges tied to Silozi being a medium of instruction in the Zambezi region, using the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the history and rationale behind the governmental policy of language imposition for schooling in Namibia?
- RQ2: What are the perceptions of major stakeholders on the decision to make Silozi the sole language of instruction in junior primary school in the Zambezi region of Namibia?
- RQ3: What alternative measures could be implemented as a plausible solution to the community's identified needs?
- RQ4: What are the primary stakeholders' views about the Namibian Language in Education Policy and its implementation?

In post-independence Namibia, language competition has led to a hierarchy that shows the supremacy of English and certain Namibian local languages at the expense of other Namibian languages, especially linguistic minorities. While there is a clear representation of some Namibian local languages in print, broadcast media as well as in the education domain, there is very little scholarly work, if any, illuminating the monolingual ideology, and the underlying reasons for choosing Silozi as a medium of instruction in the Zambezi region. Tötemeyer (2010) identifies the use of Silozi as a contentious issue, claiming that 'the majority of people in the region resent the way in which Silozi has been favoured by politicians both before and after independence' (p. 13).

Silozi is the officially recognised language of the Zambezi region due to the history and politics of the region and the fact that Silozi is well-developed orthographically, as evidenced in dictionaries, prose, poetry, drama, and newspapers (Limbali, 2016). It is perceived as a unifying language and a language of wider communication among the different tribes of the region. Together with English, it is the language of local administration, education, trade, liturgy, radio and mass meetings. However, while Silozi is deemed the lingua franca other local languages include

Subia, Yeyi, Fwe, Totela, Mbukushu, Barakwena, and Mbalangwe (Harris, 2018; Nzwala, 2015). The region also has a small population of Khwe and !Xun-speaking people (Jones and Dieckmann, 2014). According to Harris (2018), Subia seems to be the most widely spoken language in the region.

Thus, Silozi is not a mother tongue to the majority of the region's population (Chisao, 2009; Harris, 2018; Nzwala, 2015). Many children learn Silozi for the first time when they start their schooling (Harris, 2018), and then are later exposed to English as the main medium of instruction. This leads to a situation where many learners encounter two (medium of instruction) languages at school that are not their mother tongue. Mashinja and Mwanza (2020) and Mukwambo *et al.* (2020) note that this regional language preference has a significant impact on learner academic performance in the region. They argue that this is something that runs contrary to the original intentions of the national language policy where all learners in grades 1-3 were meant to be supported in their schooling by being taught in their mother tongue.

As such, Silozi as a medium of instruction in the Zambezi region is deemed by many as disempowering and marginalises a significant number of learners (Mkhize and Balfour, 2017). Fricker (2007) describes this as a form of 'epistemic injustice'. Studies in several multilingual settings have shown similar deficit ideologies towards multilingual learners and their home languages (see, for example, Makoe and McKinney, 2014; Kiramba, 2018; Katukula *et al.*, 2023). In examining reasons for the preference for certain languages, studies of the actual articulated ideologies and manifestations of these ideologies in Kenyan rural classrooms afford an area for research to develop an understanding of this ongoing denigration of local languages. Moreover, Nuñez and Espinoza (2027) have noted that teachers' decisions are influenced by ideologies.

The research design and methods

The study followed the qualitative-interpretive paradigm (Creswell and Poth, 2018), to focus on participant groups that could offer insight into how and why Silozi was adopted as a medium of instruction in schools in the Zambezi region, namely: policy makers, university lecturers, principals and heads, teachers, and past learners. The goal was

to explore the usage of Silozi and its implications for junior school learners.

In choosing a qualitative methodology the study sought to collect both empirical data and interview data (Creswell, 2015). For the empirical data, the study used an online survey of 84 former learners to collect demographic data as well as participants' trends, attitudes, and opinions (Mathers *et al.*, 2009). For interview data, the study used a semi-structured interview with a range of stakeholders including 27 teachers (grade 1-4 teachers), five school managers (four Heads of Departments and one Principal), five schoolboard chairpersons, and four lecturers in the language department of the University of Namibia. A total of about 124 participants took part in the study.

The study applied a traditional socio-cultural discourse analysis given that language is a cultural and psychological tool that has an important influence on the development of reasoning of speakers (Mercer, 2010). Particular attention was paid to what participants said (Mercer, 2010) which was then reduced, organised, and indexed via a chosen linguistic ethnographic procedure. This opened up opportunities to engage with how individuals and institutions communicate, how policies and political messages are received, and how local actions get situated in relation to wider social, political and historical concerns (Costley and Reilly, 2021). This approach was applied to both sets of collected data (40 individual interviews and 84 online participant questionnaires), with orthographic transcription of the interviews deemed appropriate for the thematic analysis (Clarke *et al.*, 2019).

Results and discussion of the study

Three findings and insights from the study are explored below. These emerged from the fuller dataset. They highlight the complex nature and form of language debates in African countries emerging from colonial rule and other state oppression. The findings suggest that the choice of language in post-independence countries was not a simple policy decision tied to the aims and goals of newly instituted democratic processes, that the choice of language sometimes generated conflict in different localities and served as a particular and insidious form of violence and assimilation, and that the commitment to mother tongue instruction was often more complex than expected.

Recognition of Silozi as a medium of instruction in schools as also as the recognised regional language

From the explanations and insights that participants provided, the choice of Silozi as the lingua franca of the Zambezi region and the chosen medium of instruction in schools was a core sticking point for local communities and was tied to historical developments and contestations in the region dating back to the late nineteenth century.

They noted that during discussions on the partitioning of Africa amongst Western countries prior to the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, the whole Zambezi region (Zambezi Strip) was part of the then Barotseland, a British Protectorate of which the greater part was in modern Zambia. Germany however wanted access to the Zambezi River for German South West Africa (now Namibia), and started negotiating with Great Britain for greater control over the Zambezi region. This led to the Zambezi Strip (later called the Caprivi Strip) being ceded to Germany. In exchange, Germany discontinued its claim to the Zanzibar protectorate and the eastern African coast between Witu and the Juba River (Pöllath, 2021).

The Zambezi or Caprivi Strip was now German South West Africa's gateway to the Zambezi River and allowed for the greater movement of people living in that area. Participants noted that it was this agreement that created the initial conditions for Silozi, the language of the Barotse people, to become the lingua franca of the region. Given the long history of conquest and contestation in the area, the Silozi language also had more formal and readily available teaching and learning materials.

Importantly, the Zambezi region shared communities and languages with neighbouring Zambia and Botswana for a long time before independence in 1990 and was a hotbed of conflict during the period of South African apartheid occupation. This meant that after 1990, with the return of exiled Namibians from neighbouring Zambia, the new democratic state seemed to be keen to recognise the contribution of the area to Namibia's independence. Participants noted that this seemed to lie at the heart of the decision to make Silozi the medium of instruction in Namibia's public schools in that region.

The challenge with this decision, however, was that in

acknowledging the role of the area in helping Namibia gain independence and recognising the large number of inhabitants that supported the new government electorally, policymakers had not anticipated the longer-term implications for the education system. For example, arrangements needed to be put in place in Namibia's higher education institutes to train teachers both in the Silozi language and in how to teach it. After 1990 this was not adequately addressed, leading to a situation from 2000 where teachers had to be recruited from Zambia. Participants further noted that a key challenge tied to the use of Silozi as a medium of instruction was that Silozi literature contained Zambian content that was often unfamiliar to learners of the Zambezi region. Thus, one of the fundamental aims of mother tongue instruction was compromised by learners not recognising themselves in the language used or the examples provided.

This choice of Silozi as a medium of instruction may have contributed to the underestimation of other native languages spoken in the region and the reduction of their use. Such ideologies were common in the history of colonial societies, where the language of the colonisers became the language of prestige. According to my informants, the majority of the participants felt that a language also determines the ethnic identity of its users and that recognising national languages was also one of the main goals of attaining independence, as, before that, Afrikaans and English were imposed on the Namibians. Therefore, the development and adoption of national languages was one way the government of the day was redressing the past injustices of the Apartheid regime.

History and rationale behind the governmental policy of language imposition for schooling in Namibia

In their responses to why they thought government policy had chosen to make Silozi the medium of instruction in the Zambezi region, participants observed that this was in line with the national language policy, which promoted equality of national languages and languages serving as carriers and preservers of core cultural values (Eyoh, 1985; Smolicz, 1980). They noted that Namibians had previously been forced to learn in English and Afrikaans (the two languages of apartheid rulers) and

that, as such, the new ruling government after 1990 had to formally 'recognise all national languages as part of its independence goals and ideals' (FC2, a teacher participants from Fwe speaking community). They remarked that 'the development and adoption of many national languages was one way that the government of the day could redress past injustices of the Apartheid regime' (UC10, a teacher participant from an urban school), in that way also recognising the cultural identities of the speakers of the different languages.

The principal of a school in the Zambezi region noted that 'after independence discussions were held to adopt policies that could improve the education system and also adopt policies that other countries had also followed.' Many felt that the language policies adopted in Namibia post-1990 were tied to two processes, namely ridding the country of its old apartheid language bias, and sharing progressive policies adopted across the Southern African post-independence region that sought to improve systems of education. Adopting mother tongue (or most spoken) languages as a key mechanism for improving teaching and learning in Namibia was thus both a political response and an attempt to improve opportunities for learners in all public schools.

Stakeholders' perceptions on the imposition of Silozi as the sole language of instruction and learning in the junior primary schools in the Zambezi region

Interestingly, most participants who were interviewed (teachers) and 77% of the 84 participants who participated in the online survey (former learners) seemed to believe that Silozi had already been adopted as a regional language before independence. They suggested that missionaries from Zambia had introduced the language to the region and also provided books and dictionaries written in Zambia. As such, many felt that Silozi was both a colonial remnant and a foreign language. They believed that using Silozi as a medium of instruction could be seen as constituting a constitutional infringement by depriving Namibian children in the Zambezi region of learning in the languages that they regularly speak and in languages they utilise in their homes. They argued that this 'transgression' was amplified in junior primary schools where learners were not learning key

educational fundamentals because of being taught in a new language for the first time.

Participants further noted that there was no evidence available that Silozi was the majority-spoken language of the region. They felt that the government had also not explained why they thought teaching learners in a language that they encountered for the first time when they started formal schooling was a pedagogically defensible policy. In highlighting some of the main classroom challenges tied to using Silozi as a medium of instruction, participants pointed to learners struggling to understand questions during tests and examinations and how this immediately disadvantaged them in their junior phase of schooling. Participants questioned the value of having learners taught in Silozi at school, while they never spoke it at home and would not speak it in the higher grades at school with English becoming their medium of instruction.

Participants further noted that continuing to use Silozi as a medium of instruction in schools in the Zambezi region diminished and destroyed the values and traditions accompanying the other seven regional languages and that Silozi was undermining the goals of the national language policy. While they acknowledged that the adoption of Silozi as a medium of instruction was probably driven by factors outside of education and schools, they worried that implementing the dictates of what was regarded as the most spoken language in the region was creating unintended regional and ethnic tension. This, they argued, was imposing a regional language on learners, much like Afrikaans was imposed on Namibian learners during the apartheid period. Thus participants demonstrated awareness of the importance of Indigenous languages to their speakers as cultural reservoirs and markers of cultural identity.

Conclusions

From the study findings presented above, the choice of Silozi as the medium of instruction in the Zambezi region at the expense of the local languages spoken within the region continues to promote a particular linguistic hierarchy. This indicates how postcolonial language-in-education policies have continued to stifle the growth and development of Namibian indigenous languages, particularly the previously marginalised languages.

The stakeholders' views indicate that the status of indigenous languages in post-independence Namibia's public domain has been a constant concern. Even though the Namibian Constitution accords all Namibian languages national status and the right to development and promotion, the English language and some African languages are prioritised as the language of education and international business. While political power has shifted within post-colonial Namibia, supremacy attached to white rule is still entrenched, specifically concerning how Namibian local languages are treated. A lot needs to be done to harmonise and address ignorance about the social and educational value of Indigenous African languages in Namibia.

Most literature on the decolonisation of education focuses on decolonising higher education (America and Le Grange, 2019; Heleta and Chasi, 2024), with little attention to junior primary school learners. Participants in the study claimed that discussions about the language of education did not consider the issue of decolonisation or the effects of not teaching learners in their mother tongue. Crucially, however, the question how to determine a mother tongue (or most often spoken language) needed to be considered. The case study of the Zambezi region in Namibia provided an insight into some of the deeper historical legacies and agreements made over more than 100 years, along with political alliances made during political struggle, that seemed to shape and frame language in education policy decisions post-1990. The case study highlights how hegemony, ideology, and power operate in certain contexts and how many curriculum goals or ideals can be sidelined (Apple, 2019), leading to learners not being adequately assisted in their personal learning and in the shaping of their individual worldviews.

A key challenge is how to reverse this trend of relying on languages that have developed and recognised orthographies. How do other languages with less established orthographies get to become mediums of instruction as ways of properly supporting learners in those regions where they are spoken? Mashinja and Mwanza (2020) note that the development of orthographies for the languages of Sisubia and Siyeyi offers pathways that other less established languages could follow. They note that for the national language in education policy to properly fulfil its purpose in assisting learning, government support is needed to develop materials and teaching aids in

Sifwe, Sitotela, Simbalangwe/Silinyanti, Simbukushu, and Barakwena. In the absence of that kind of support equal opportunities for quality learning in Namibia will remain elusive.

It remains a massive irony that a seemingly progressive language in education policy in Namibia can create a situation where learners are subjected to two languages of instruction at school, neither of which they speak in their homes (Mlay, 2010, p. 95). At a time when debates about mother tongue instruction have become prominent, the Zambezi case study reminds us about the deeper level engagements that need to be pursued if the conflicts and challenges characteristic of that region are to be avoided.

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