

Language Shift and Revitalization among Speakers of Minority Languages of Lusaka Province of Zambia: A Case Study of Soli and Goba Languages

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide context for the subject under investigation; that is language shift and revitalization among speakers of Soli and Goba languages of Lusaka province of Zambia. In this paper, two central questions are being introduced: the first one being what are the factors contributing to language shift among the speakers of minority languages of Lusaka province of Zambia? The second one asks whether Soli and Goba Languages can be saved from total extinction. This paper therefore investigates factors contributing to language shift among the speakers of minority languages in the Lusaka province of Zambia. The study presented a detailed historical and social background of the native speakers of these languages. As a researcher, it was very important to consider what methods would be appropriate to answer the questions I wanted to investigate. A particular research method is considered to be relevant in terms of ability to produce the type of data required for seeking answers to the research questions. Therefore, the data collection method is vital in any research. The qualitative and quantitative methods were both employed in this study. . In this study the target population comprised indigenous language users in the study areas of Lusaka province. These were either residents or visitors as long as they were native speakers of the two languages. The sample for the present study was drawn from the two study areas: Chongwe district in Lusaka province which is native home to Soli speakers. The

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study was also carried out in Chiawa chiefdom of Lusaka province, home to Goba speakers. From each area, a sample of 55 persons of varying ages, education level and social status was selected for the study. A sample of 55 respondents in each area was considered sufficient for the study as it was supplemented by direct observation of language use in both private and public spheres of life. Through careful analysis of language use, language attitude and language status of the two study areas, this study has shown that a number of factors are responsible for language shift among the Goba and Soli speakers of Lusaka province. The study has revealed that among these factors, proximity to the city is the major factor that has rapidly facilitated the decline of the vitality of Goba and Soli languages. It has been revealed that the interaction between the indigenous tribes and migrants who come to the city for work and business has led to the shift from native languages to Nyanja, the dominant language of the city. Language policy is another factor that has contributed to this shift. The government selected and recognizes Nyanja as the regional official language for Lusaka province; hence all natives and residents of Lusaka use Nyanja as official language. This policy has confined the use of Goba and Soli languages to the home domain only. The findings have also revealed that there are some efforts being made by both the Soli and Goba speakers to maintain the vitality of their language. The strong well-developed traditional ceremonies such as “Chakwela makumbi” and “Kailala” have enabled and created a favorable atmosphere in which the two languages can be used. The results of the study suggest that language policy should take into account the historical and sociolinguistic background of the indigenous people on whom the policy is imposed. The government should support institutions that are trying to put measures to maintain the vitality of minority and endangered languages.

Key words: Language shift, Language revitalization, Language maintenance, Language vitality, Minority languages

1. Introduction

Any study looking at Language Shift in any given setting needs to take into account the historical and socio-cultural factors that shaped the sociolinguistic environment being studied. This socio-cultural, historical and linguistic background information forms the context within which the study findings can be logically analyzed and interpreted. This study investigates language shift among speakers of minority languages of Lusaka Province of Zambia, which is historically inhabited by minority groups such as the Soli of Chongwe and Goba of Chiawa, Kafue districts respectively. According to Kashoki (1999), there are about four local or indigenous languages spoken in Lusaka Province of Zambia with Nyanja being used as regional official language. Based on observation, this study assumed that language shift has been taking place from Soli and Goba to Nyanja in Chongwe and Kafue districts respectively. The study also reveals further that no noticeable research on this topic has been done with regards to these two areas.

It is against this backdrop that this study sets to investigate language shift among natives of Lusaka Province of Zambia by looking at contributing factors to this linguistic trend or shift. The study also attempts to establish whether the languages spoken in these areas can be saved from total extinction. According to Kuncha et al (2006), Language Shift is referred to as Language Transfer or Replacement or Assimilation. They define it as the process whereby speakers of a given language shifts and speaks another language. Hornberger (2010), on the other hand, defines Language Shift as a situation whereby a community of speakers of one language becomes bilingual and begins to speak a second language and gradually shifts allegiance to the second language. She also states that when a linguistic community ceases to use their first or maternal language, language death is said to occur (Hornberger, 2010).

As stated by Simwinga (2006:1), "Zambia is a multilingual state in the sense that several languages are spoken within its borders and individuals speak one or more languages in addition to their mother tongues." Kula (2008) reports that it is estimated that Zambia has about 73 languages spoken in various domains within its borders. Therefore, in a multilingual nation like Zambia, there are so many factors that can cause language shift especially from

mother tongue to regional official languages. Bathula (2004) points to various factors that lead to language shift and these include migration, attitude, economic factors, social factors and political factors.

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2. Literature Review

When speakers of a given language stop speaking their mother tongue, the end result is language death. The mother tongue or first language may either die with the remaining speakers or the remaining speakers may shift to another language which replaces the former. This process is known as Language Shift. Brenzinger (1992:287) defines Language Shift as “the extended use of a new language which results in the replacement of the former primary language by the new one.” This perspective is in line with Kuncha et al (2006) who defines Language Shift as “the process whereby a speech community of a language shifts and speaks another language or a speech community of speakers of one language becomes bilinguals in another language and gradually shifts allegiance to the second language.” This means that the community of speakers is in the first instance proficient in terms of oral communication in both languages but due to some factors, speakers of the endangered language begin to lose grip on the fluency of their mother tongue. Though Kuncha et al (2006) does state that speakers of the endangered language shift to a more dominant language, they do not mention the domains in which the dominant language is spoken. In examining features of Irish English which substituted Irish, Hickey (1995) defines Language Shift as a scenario where native Irish speakers abandoning their own language and adopt English as their mother tongue. It is my considered view to suggest that the status of English as an official language in various domains among the native Irish could have rendered Irish language redundant. As started by Hickey (1995), speakers of a native language cannot just shift to another language unless they are influenced by some values in the dominant language.

The study by Hickey (1995) is very essential to the current study as it is related to the field of study where some natives of endangered languages have more or less adopted regional officially supported languages as their first languages at family level.

Aswegen (2008:29) defines language shift in terms of dominant and dominated language. He describes language shift as “a situation in which one language in contact with a more dominant one within a nation over a long period of time is partially or completely replaced by the dominant one.”

However, in some instances, the speakers of the threatened language may as well influence the phonological and morphological structure of the dominant language. This is what Nero (2006) observed when he carried out a survey on Language Shift that occurred in the Caribbean. This shift caused a language called Caribbean English to emanate. This means that other than shifting to a dominant language, speakers of a dying language may create a new language similar to the dominant one.

3. Methodology

The data was collected by using questionnaires and in-depth interviews from a sample of 110 respondents comprising 50 residents and five traditional leaders from each study area (Chongwe and Kafue). The researcher personally administered written questionnaires and conducted interactive interviews with the residents and traditional leaders from both research areas. Qualitative method was used to collect information pertaining to opinions and views of respondents while quantitative was used to collect statistical data. Purposive method was used on traditional leaders in both research areas due to pre-determined nature of information that was required from those who preside over the cultural heritage of the residents in the speech communities (Headmen). The questionnaire was designed in such a manner that it had provisions for both qualitative and quantitative data.

4. Findings and Discussion

The results are divided into two main sections. The first section presents data on respondents' responses on personal data, their linguistic background and degree of language competence. These data established respondents' attributes their degree of bilingualism and linguistic competence in Soli and Goba languages respectively. The second section focuses on respondents' actual knowledge about the historical background, communicative competences in either Soli or Goba languages and their views about the loss of the vitality of their languages.

4.1 Respondents' personal background and language fluency

Most of the respondents (60%) were young between 25 and 40 years, while 40 percent were old aged above 76 years. The young respondents were teachers, students and businessmen born after independence in 1964 while the old were farmers and retirees who settled in the villages. In terms of gender, the sample constituted 80 percent males and 20 percent females. The findings also revealed that 60 percent of the respondents had at least tertiary education while 40 percent had education level lower than grade 12 or form five. In terms of proficiency in Soli or Goba languages, 40 percent of the respondents (the old generation) were able to speak and understand their mother tongues (Soli and Goba) fluently while the other 40 percent (teachers and other adult youths born after independence) could understand but were not very fluent in oral communication in Soli and Goba languages respectively. However, 20 percent of the respondents (students and pupils) expressed lack of knowledge and interest in their mother tongues, Soli and Goba.

These findings showed that the older respondents who were born before 1964 and spent most of their lives in the villages could still communicate proficiently in Soli and Goba languages while the middle aged had moderate knowledge of their mother tongues. The young generation could not speak the languages instead they were responding in Nyanja the regional official language.

4.2 Reasons for the language shift of Soli and Goba languages

All the 110 respondents were asked to give reasons for the the shift of Soli and Goba languages to Nyanja. Generally, factors given as having contributed to the language shift of these two indigenous languages were attributed to attitude, political decisions migration and proximity of the study areas to the city of Lusaka.

4.2.1 The negative attitude by native speakers

Negative attitude triggered by social inferiority complex is the major factor that contributed to the language shift by young speakers of Soli and Goba languages. All the students and pupils pointed out that it was difficult to speak their mother tongue at school and in other social domain because the languages are not popular among the youths, and belong to the old generation. They feel as youths they should speak the language spoken in the city so as to easily interact with their friends from different parts of the country. The study has also revealed that language shift is more rampant among the Soli youths than their Goba counterparts. It was also observed that Goba is still spoken by children in home domain while Soli is mainly spoken by parents in home and in few social domains. Most Soli parents use Nyanja language when speaking to their children.

4.2.2 Lack of literary heritage and absence from official domains

The findings revealed that lack of written literature such as text books, story books, scriptures and hymn books in Soli and Goba languages greatly contributed to the loss of vitality of these two languages. When asked which books they use in churches, both Soli and Goba speakers responded that hymn books and other religious books are in Nyanja or Tonga. In schools children in these two areas read and learn books written in Nyanja and Tonga languages

respectively. Despite these areas being Soli and Goba speech communities, official communication and announcement is done in Nyanja making Nyanja a dominant language. It therefore goes without saying that although Soli and Goba languages are not politically and officially supported by government in terms of being used in schools as medium of instruction and also as medium of official information dissemination. What should be noted and mentioned without fear of being biased is that missionaries strongly supported majority indigenous languages which later shaped and decided the current recognition of indigenous regional official languages in independent Southern African states. This is why immediately after independence the Zambian government followed the same linguistic policy.

4.2.3 Proximity to the Capital City

According to the responses from students from the two research areas, they speak Nyanja language because it is the language spoken by majority of other students who come from the city of Lusaka. The study revealed that a good number of pupils come from Lusaka city and rent boarding houses within Chongwe and Kafue districts consequently influencing the linguistic environment of the two districts.

The study also revealed that there is massive interaction between residents of Chongwe and Kafue districts with Lusaka residents. A lot of Lusaka marketers travel to Chongwe and Chiawa areas to purchase farming produces for sale in the city therefore influencing the language situation in these two areas. During this interaction with the people from the city of Lusaka, residents of Chongwe and Chiawa are compelled to shift to Nyanja as medium of communication.

4.3 Language revitalization and language maintenance

The findings have also revealed that there are some efforts being made by the Soli speakers to maintain the vitality of their language. The strong well-developed traditional ceremonies such as “Chakwela makumbi” has enabled and created a favorable atmosphere in which the Soli

language can be used. On the other hand, there is language maintenance in Chiawa chiefdom in form of promoting their culture and traditions in an atmosphere that promotes the use of Goba language. The Goba speaking people celebrate the Kailala ceremony every year after harvest. Besides promoting their traditions, Goba traditionalists are trying to engage government authorities through their local leaders, to elevate Goba language to the status of medium of instruction in primary schools in Chiawa chiefdom, home of Goba speakers. Another measure being taken by the indigenous Goba speakers is the procurement of Shona literature from Zimbabwe, across the border. Goba language being a close dialect of Shona, this will improve the vitality of Goba language.

5 Conclusion

This study has clearly revealed that language shift among Soli and Goba speakers is triggered by the proximity of Chongwe and Chiawa areas to the city of Lusaka. The interaction of speakers of these minority languages plays a pivotal role in the linguistic dynamics of these speech communities. The study has also revealed that the attitude of speakers of these minority languages and the language status of these languages have facilitated the gradual language shift to Nyanja the regional official language. The study has also revealed that speakers of these minority languages are taking measures to revitalize their languages. Language shift does not only affect the dominated or threatened language but it also influences the vocabulary of the dominant language. The fact that Soli and Goba speakers are shifting from speaking their mother tongue to speaking Nyanja means that Nyanja will be influenced by Soli and Goba vocabularies thereby creating some partial transformation to the language. This study makes recommendations to the government to support and promote tradition ceremonies of minority languages so as to promote the use of these languages. It is also recommended that the status of Soli and Goba languages should be elevated to class subjects so that children in these areas can learn their mother tongue in schools. This is because Soli and Goba languages are not dialects of Nyanja and are not mutually intelligible. Further studies should be carried out to assert the impact of minority languages (dying languages) on the dominant language as well

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