

NDEBO MBUYA AND ITS READERSHIP: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

One cannot think of religion without bringing in language use. From time immemorial, language has played a very vital role as a vehicle of communication in matters of religion. Hence missionaries always strove to teach the native languages of the communities in which they work so as to effectively spread the word of God. Often-times the starting point has been with the translation of the Bible into these vernacular languages, a practice which continues to this day. The Kalanga Bible Translation Project started the translation of the New Testament into Ikalanga in the mid 1980s. The work stretched over a period of 12 years and the result was the publication of Nedbo Mbuya in 1999 by the Botswana Bible Society. The publication of Ndebo Mbuya was perceived as a major milestone in the promotion of Ikalanga. This paper therefore considers Ndebo Mbuya, the New Testament, and the role it has played in promoting the use of the Ikalanga language. Secondly, the paper looks at whether this Bible has played any significant role in changing the native speaker's attitudes towards the language, given the marginal use of the language in the country. The paper further highlights some of the sociolinguistic and linguistic problems which surrounded the use of this Bible. However, lack of use of Ikalanga in some of the main domains in the country may have negative effects on the use of this Bible. It is hoped that an analysis of this nature will help understand some of the problems associated with the production and distribution of the later versions of this Bible.

Keywords: Bible translation, Ikalanga, Sociolinguistic problems

Introduction

Botswana is both a multi-ethnic and multilingual country with more than twenty-five languages spoken within the country. These languages divide into three groups according to their linguistic affiliation. The largest of these groups is the Bantu family which covers 96% of the population. The second group is that of the Khoesan family, which makes up about 3% of the population, and lastly, the Indo-European family said to be very small, constituting about 0.2% of the population (see Batibo, 1997; Batibo, Mathangwane & Tsonope, 2003).

The dominant language in the country is Setswana which is spoken by at least 78% of the population (Batibo, 1997; Chebanne & Nyati-Ramahobo, 2003; among others). Setswana is also said to be spoken by at least 15% of the population as its second language in the country (Batibo, 1997), Ikalanga is the second Bantu language spoken by a significant number of the population. There are, however, several other Bantu languages spoken in the country (see Batibo, Mathangwane & Tsonope, 2003). However, since these lan-

guages are not relevant to this study, no further mention of them is necessary in this paper. Different studies cite different numbers of Ikalanga speakers in the country, ranging from 11% to 20% of the population (see Andersson & Janson, 1997; Mathangwane, 1996, 1999; Chebanne & Nyati, 2003). Of these two Bantu languages mentioned above, Setswana is the national language in the country (Government, 1985) while Ikalanga is one of the minority languages. Unlike Setswana, Ikalanga does not have any official status in the country and as such its use is limited to family and ethnic interaction and cultural activities. Furthermore, just like other minority languages in the country, it is not taught in schools nor is it used for official purposes.

Historically Ikalanga is said to have been used in schools in the Tati (now the North East District) and part of the Bamangwato (now the Tutume sub-district) before Botswana achieved its independence in 1, apart from the old people who were lucky to receive their education in those schools where Ikalanga was taught during the pre-independence period and can read and write the language, most speakers have had to teach themselves how to read and write the language and in most cases using the Setswana orthography which is taught in schools.

Ndebo Mbuya – its History and Development

The first publication of the New Testament in Ikalanga came out in 1921 with the title *Ndebo Mbuya Yobuhe Gwe Ndzimu*. It was published by the London Missionary Society (LMS) at Dombodema which had been established at the end of the 19th century, some 40km from the Plumtree Railway Station (Chebanne & Mathangwane – to appear in the CASAS Series). This publication comprised the four Gospels and the book of Acts (Chebanne, Rodewald & Pahlen, 1995). While the publication of *Ndebo Mbuya* then was a necessary tool for the missionaries whose main aim was to preach and spread the word of God, the Bible also made a significant contribution to the use of the Ikalanga language in the sense that it provided the language with a common orthography. The creation of this orthography made it possible for the language to move away from the earlier writing system which had leant more towards main Shona as used in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). The following is the *Ndebo Mbuya* Orthography (1910) reproduced from Chebanne and Mathangwane (forthcoming):

The *Ndebo Mbuya* Orthography¹

b		d			k	kh
bh		dl				
p		t	th	c	ch	g
f						h
v				j		
m	mh	n	nh	n		ng
w		r		y		
		l				

¹ Around the 1940s after the linguistic discussion of Doke (1930) the “b” came to be written as [&]; bh as [b] and “ch” as [tj]. However, in the current orthography, “b” and “bh” were reinstated.

Secondly, this orthography proved useful as it was then used to produce school literacy materials such as *Tjipeletana the Bana* (Children's Primer) and *Maswiswina Gon*, both of which were also published by the LMS.

Ndebo Mbuya – The New Testament of the Bible

However, in the early 1980s the Kalanga Bible Translation Project (KBTP), operated by the Lutheran Bible Translators under the auspices of the Botswana Bible Society, came into being and was based in Francistown. Its main objective was to start translating the New Testament into the Ikalanga language. The KBTP started to translate the New Testament into the Botswana Ikalanga language using the historical orthography of *Ndebo Mbuya Yobuhe Gwe Ndzimu* given above.

The KBTP soon realized that there were some problems and difficulties in using the historical orthography of Ikalanga. Using this historical orthography for a major project made people realize its shortcomings. This necessitated holding a conference in 1989 where a new orthography was debated and a draft was produced. The new orthography was immediately put to use by the KBTP and also by SPIL in their periodic publication *Tjedza* (Chebanne & Mathangwane [forthcoming]). The Botswana Bible Society published *Ndebo Mbuya – the New Testament in Ikalanga* –in 1999, using the Ngatikwaleni Ikalanga Orthography of 1995 (see Chebanne *et al.*, 1995).

On the assumption that the Ikalanga speaking community would be eager to have copies of their long awaited Bible written in their own language, the Botswana Bible Society had altogether 4974 copies printed, presuming a greater demand among Bakalanga. However, its distribution was found to be slower than had been anticipated. By the end of 2003 though, all the copies of *Ndebo Mbuya* had been distributed (p.c. Rev. Kareng). The community is now asking for a revised version, an indication that the speakers must be using the Bible. With all the copies of *Ndebo Mbuya* distributed, reprinting additional copies is now in the pipeline (p.c. Rev. Kareng).

The slow distribution of *Ndebo Mbuya* in the beginning could be attributed to different reasons, including the following:

- (a) Not many Bakalanga were comfortable with reading their mother tongue language because they were not taught to read and write the language. Apart from the older generation who may have gone to schools which taught the language in the pre-independence period, the majority has had to teach themselves by reading the limited literature they could lay their hands on. Thus in the beginning they may not have been so eager to get copies as they were not comfortable reading the language.
- (b) Secondly, for many years now the languages of religion in Botswana have been Setswana and English. In cases where the priest or reverend is a local person, even when their mother tongue is not Setswana, service is conducted in Setswana using the Setswana Bible. In cases where the priest or reverend is someone from outside the country, service is normally in English and depending on the composition of the congregation, an interpreter may be used to translate into Setswana. Likewise, the hymnbooks used would be in Setswana and English respectively. However, for dominantly Ikalanga speaking communities the Ikalanga hymn book is used alongside the Setswana hymn book.
- (c) A large number of priests whose native language is Ikalanga are more used to preaching in Setswana resulting in them being more comfortable reading the sermon and preaching in Setswana than in Ikalanga.

- (d) People's attitudes do not change overnight. For many years Setswana, as the dominant language, has always been viewed as the language of a higher status and prestige over the so-called 'minority' languages of Botswana (Batibo, 1997).
- (e) Finally, linguistic factors make it difficult to use even in communities where Ikalanga is the dominant language. These factors include matters of orthography, punctuation, grammar and meaning, to mention but a few (a detailed study of these factors is by Schmidt [1999, ms.]). A few of these can be summarized as follows:
- (i) Throughout the Bible word division has not been consistent. For instance, a formative may be written disjunctively in some cases while in others it is written conjunctively, thus creating confusion to the reader who may give the wrong interpretation to the word or the whole sentence... A typical example cited by Schmidt (1999) is the negative formative **ha** 'if, when' and **a** 'a negative particle' as used in Rom 13:1 and Corinthians 15:9 respectively.
 - (ii) Often some words may be mistakenly given the wrong meanings because of being written similar. A typical example is the word **akuna** which could mean either 'there is none' or 'if there is' depending on the tone, that is **akúna** 'there is none' and **akúná** 'if there is'.
 - (iii) Ikalanga, like many Bantu languages, has minimal pairs which are distinguished by tone alone (Mathangwane, 1999), e.g. **lima** 'cultivate' and **líma** 'darkness'; **zwím bá** 'swell' and **zwím ba** 'hide' (n). In such cases speakers often rely on context for the correct meaning. Throughout *Ndebo Mbuya* tones are unmarked even in minimal pairs such as the above, the assumption being that readers will rely on context as is the case with spoken language. However, this often proves a problem for readers especially in the case of second and third person pronouns which are only distinguished by tone as indicated: **u** = second person singular pronoun; **ú** = third person singular pronoun. Thus, throughout *Ndebo Mbuya* the two pronouns pose some problems for the readers. As noted in Schmidt (1999:14) this is contrary to Chebanne *et al* (1995), *A Manual for Writing Kalanga*, according to which tones may be marked where necessary, to determine meaning. Schmidt goes on to mention that the Setswana Bible, a combination of tone marks and additional pronouns, has been used to lessen the confusion.
 - (iv) Consistency in the use of capital letters should have been observed and maintained throughout the *Ndebo Mbuya*. A word or phrase one would expect to begin with a capital letter – that is not the case and where one expects a capital letter that may not be the case. For example, Matthew 3:11 (p.5) or Luke 1:35 (p. 116): "...Meya yakaengemala..." which translates 'Holy Spirit' the second word normally written with an initial capital letter in Bibles is in some cases capitalized and in other cases not.
- (f) There are not supportive publications in the language that foster reading in Ikalanga.
- (g) Furthermore, the publication of the New Testament in the Botswana dialect further limited its distribution scope.
- (h) Generally in this materialistic world religion is not the most read about in any language.
- (i) The relatively small population of Ikalanga speakers in the country further diminishes the chances of reading the language.

All these must have contributed to some extent to the slow distribution of *Ndebo Mbuya* in the beginning. The good news is that lately, many churches in predominantly Ikalanga speaking communities use the Bible to some extent in their church services – an indication

that they are developing ways around some of the linguistic and societal problems highlighted above.

Summary

In summary, *Ndebo Mbuya* made a significant contribution to the use of the Ikalanga language. When there was no Ikalanga orthography in the early 1900s, it provided people with an alphabet to use when writing their language. As noted above, this alphabet was then used by the London Missionary Society to produce some school literacy materials. Secondly, when in the 1980s the historical orthography was used in the translation of the New Testament into Ikalanga, the difficulties encountered brought the realization that it was time to produce a thorough and debated orthography of Ikalanga which will be easy to use in the translation, as well as for other things.

Awareness of *Ndebo Mbuya*

This section considers the level of awareness of the Bakalanga of the *Ndebo Mbuya* Bible. The analysis is restricted to a survey that was done countrywide with teachers at both Junior Secondary and Primary Schools selected randomly for purposes of finding if there are teachers out there willing to teach in their mother tongue languages, local languages of Botswana other than Setswana and English. One of these local languages is Ikalanga, which is the focus of this paper. Some of the questions asked in the questionnaire were whether they were aware of any books written in their languages; whether they would be willing to teach their mother tongue language; where they learnt the language; and whether they used the language in writing. These questions form the basis of this analysis.

Methodology

Altogether 1 500 questionnaires were sent to different schools, both Community Junior Secondary Schools (CJSS) and Primary Schools. Seventy (70) percent primary schools and eighty (80) percent junior secondary schools were chosen randomly from around the country. The reason behind the random sampling was necessitated by the fact that in Botswana teachers are posted to any school in the country, irrespective of their mother tongue language or where it is spoken. Thus, teachers whose mother tongue is Ikalanga can be found in all parts of Botswana.

Of the three hundred and fifty-six (356) questionnaires returned and filled in correctly, two hundred and ten (210) were mother tongue speakers of Ikalanga. It is this group of respondents alone whose responses form the basis of the analysis in this analysis.

Level of Awareness of the Bible by Bakalanga

Out of 210 teachers at Primary Schools and Junior Secondary Schools, 72 respondents said they were aware of the *Ndebo Mbuya* Bible. Of these a good number were aware of both the Bible and the Ikalanga hymnbook. One hundred and twenty-nine respondents answered that they were not aware of any book written in Ikalanga, hence also of the existence of the *Ndebo Mbuya* Bible. Only nine (9) respondents did not answer this question.

Of the 210 teachers who are mother tongue speakers of the language, 151 said that they learnt to read and write the language informally, i.e. not in school, while eleven had learnt to read and write the language at school. One can only assume that the latter eleven belong

to the older generation who went to primary school in the pre-independent days when Ikalanga was taught in schools in the North East District. Respondents gave the following sources for their ability to read and write the language:

Table 1: Sources of ability to read and write Ikalanga

Source	No. of Respondents
At home/parents	106
At school	11
From the Bible	11
Newspapers, books an letters	9
Self-taught the language	25
Did not answer the question	48
TOTAL	210

It is evident that the Bible has played a role in people learning to read and write in Ikalanga in informal situations. While the actual number of respondents who cited the Bible as the primary source is eleven, it is probable that the number would be even higher if the actual material was known which was used by the 25 respondents who answered that they taught themselves to read and write and the 106 who had learnt at home or through their parents. Given that the number of those aware of the existence of the Bible is high at 72, it goes without saying that some respondents may have learnt to read and write the language using the Bible.

Altogether 154 respondents said they do write the language. Commonly written in this language are letters and messages to members of their families and friends, messages of condolence during times of bereavement, funeral programmes as well as cell phone short message system (SMS) messages. One or two said they had written newspaper articles (in the *Mmegi* newspaper) and done some translation work. Even with all this knowledge and use of the language, the majority of the respondents said they wanted to learn the language. This clearly positive attitude toward the language is supported by responses to the question of whether they would be willing to teach the Ikalanga language. Out of a total of 210, 154 respondents said they would be happy to teach the language, with 50 respondents answering negatively and the rest not answering the question. The reasons given by those who were unwilling to teach the language were that they had not been trained in teaching languages, while a few said that was because they are in administration.

From the sociolinguistic point, it is often the case that the speakers of marginalized languages may find it difficult to break their reading or writing habits just because the Bible has been translated into their language. Ikalanga is no exception in this regard in the sense that like other minority languages in the country, it has been marginalized in almost all the community domains. Table 2 below demonstrates the levels to which Ikalanga is used in some of the key domains in society in relation to Setswana and English, that is, the national and official languages in Botswana.

Table 2: Languages use and domains

Domains	Ikalanga	Setswana	English
Education	Not used	Widely used	Widely used
Church	Limited to hymns in Ikalanga speaking communities	Dominantly used throughout the country	Fairly used with translation in established churches
Public Health messages	Not used	Fairly used	Dominantly used
Radio	Not used	Fairly used	Fairly used in certain programmes
Newspapers	Limited to insignificant use	Fairly used	Widely used
Magazines	Not used	Limited use	Dominantly used

From the above table it is obvious that Ikalanga has none or very limited use in most domains. Much as mother tongue speakers of the language may have positive attitudes towards developing their language and seeing it written, the lack of usage in most domains of their everyday lives makes it difficult for them to change their reading habits overnight. As a result, not many people may have religious inclination even for a Bible that they concede makes them proud. Furthermore, the lack of publications or reading materials on the language or even dictionaries to help those willing to learn does not help the situation.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the Bible *Ndebo Mbuya* has played a significant role in promoting and preserving the Ikalanga language. Even as early as the beginning of the 20th century when it was first published, it did not only prove a necessary tool in spreading the word of God, but it helped provide the language with an orthography used in producing, besides literacy materials, also materials for teaching the language. Even though this orthography later proved problematic when in the early 1980s the Kalanga Bible Translation (KBTP) started work translating the New Testament into Ikalanga, it provided a base from which to start when work on a new orthography began at the 1989 conference. Secondly, the availability of the *Ndebo Mbuya* Bible provided the necessary material by which mother tongue speakers of Ikalanga could teach themselves, or learn how to read and write the language which has not been taught in schools ever since Botswana achieved its independence. Where there were very few written materials in Ikalanga, *Ndebo Mbuya* became the most reliable written form of the language that people could rely on and be able to find.

Secondly, *Ndebo Mbuya* brought a sense of pride to mother tongue speakers of Ikalanga and fueled their desire to learn their language. And in many cases, this was driven by their wish to be able to read the Bible in their own language. Thus, religion not only helped promote and preserve Ikalanga, it is also slowly contributed towards changing the overall attitudes of people towards their language. Where in the past some mother tongue speakers have thought their language difficult because they could not write it, the translation of the bible into Ikalanga has made them realize that, just like other languages such as Setswana and English, Ikalanga can be read and written just as easily. All this is a clear indication of the need for the formal teaching and community based use of this language so that this sense of pride can be fully achieved.

However, that notwithstanding, people's reading habits may not have changed with the publication of *Ndebo Mbuya*. The fact that Ikalanga is still not used in many domains within the country is in itself a major problem that should be faced. People may buy the Bible for reasons other than just wishing to have some written material of their language, because reading it poses problems as they were never taught in schools nor can they find it in their favourite magazine or newspapers.

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