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# Reflections on the Proposed Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele Dictionary\*

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**Abstract:** The master plan of the ALLEX Project includes a Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary in its proposed dictionary projects. Bilingual dictionaries are common in Zimbabwe, especially earlier ones with the language pairs English–Ndebele/Shona and *vice versa*. The proposed Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary, however, raises some interesting challenges. It will be a different kind of bilingual dictionary in which two African languages, Ndebele and Shona form the language pair. In this article, it will be shown how different dictionary types for both Ndebele and Shona reflect the intentions of Zimbabwean language planners from different periods. A Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary, unimaginable to many, raises several questions, among others: Who needs such a dictionary? Who are the target users of such a dictionary? In addressing some of these questions, it will be attempted to show how the proposed Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary reflects the language planning needs of present-day Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** BILINGUAL DICTIONARY, MONOLINGUAL DICTIONARY, NDEBELE, SHONA, NDEBELE–SHONA/SHONA–NDEBELE DICTIONARY, LANGUAGE PLANNING, LANGUAGE POLICY, LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT, SOCIOLINGUISTICS, ATTITUDES, REFERENCE NEEDS, USER NEEDS

**Opsomming: Gedagtes oor die voorgestelde Ndebele–Sjona/Sjona–Ndebele-woordeboek.** Die totaalplan van die ALLEX-projek sluit 'n Ndebele–Sjona/Sjona–Ndebele-woordeboek by sy voorgestelde woordeboekprojekte in. Tweetalige woordeboeke is algemeen in Zimbabwe, veral vroeëres met die taalpare Engels–Ndebele/Sjona en andersom. Die voorgestelde Ndebele–Sjona/Sjona–Ndebelewoordeboek stel egter 'n aantal interessante uitdagings. Dit is 'n andersoortige tweetalige woordeboek waarin twee Afrikatale, Ndebele en Sjona, die taalpaar uitmaak. In hierdie artikel sal aangetoon word hoe verskillende woordeboeksoorte vir sowel Ndebele as Sjona die bedoelings van Zimbabwiese taalbeplanners van verskillende periodes weerspieël. 'n Ndebele–Sjona/Sjona–Ndebelewoordeboek, ondenkbaar vir baie, stel verskeie vrae, onder andere: Wie benodig so 'n woordeboek? Wie is die teikengebruikers van so 'n woordeboek? By die beskouing van sommige van hierdie vrae sal probeer word om aan te toon hoe die voorgestelde Ndebele–Sjona/Sjona–Ndebelewoordeboek die taalbeplanningsbehoefes van die huidige Zimbabwe weerspieël.

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**Sleutelwoorde:** TWEETALIGE WOORDEBOEK, EENTALIGE WOORDEBOEK, NDEBELE, SJONA, NDEBELE–SJONA/SJONA–NDEBELEWOORDEBOEK, TAALBEPLANNING, TAALBELEID, TAALONTWIKKELING, SOSIOLINGUISTIEK, HOUDINGS, NASLAANBEHOEFTE, GEBRUIKERSBEHOEFTE

## 1. Introduction

The proposed Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary raises some interesting challenges, especially to its compilers. The average Zimbabwean is familiar with either monolingual English dictionaries or with bilingual English–Shona/Ndebele dictionaries. The African Languages Lexical Project (ALLEX), a joint University of Zimbabwe–University of Oslo research project, intends to compile a bilingual Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary. The prospect of such a dictionary is unimaginable to many. One question that most people might ask is: Who needs the bilingual Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary? Once the potential users are known and their needs established, it would be relatively easy to produce such a dictionary. In attempting to answer the question on whether the Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary is necessary or not, one should go beyond lexicography into the sphere of language planning. This article wants to show that the proposed Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary reflects the language planning needs of Zimbabwe.

## 2. Background to the project

The master plan of the ALLEX Project includes a Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary as one of its proposed dictionary projects. According to this master plan, the proposed dictionary would be compiled soon after the completion of both the Shona and Ndebele monolingual dictionaries. The two dictionaries, *Duramazwi reChishona* and *Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele*, have since been completed and published in 1996 and 2001 respectively. Work on the proposed bilingual dictionary has not begun yet as the researchers at the African Languages Research Institute (ALRI) have still been working on other projects such as the trilingual dictionary of musical terms, the Shona dictionary of linguistic and literary terms and the advanced Ndebele dictionary.

As perhaps everywhere else, dictionary-making in Zimbabwe more or less reflects the language development needs of the people. For example, the early dictionaries compiled mostly by missionaries were bilingual, that is, English to Ndebele/Shona and *vice versa*. These bilingual dictionaries mainly targeted Ndebele and Shona speakers learning English and Europeans wanting to learn Ndebele and/or Shona. The types of dictionaries compiled could be linked to historical periods. During the colonial period chiefly bilingual dictionaries were produced where English had always been one of the languages. The post-independence period mainly saw the publication of the ALLEX monolingual Ndebele and Shona dictionaries. ALLEX dictionaries target mother-tongue

speakers and attempt to redress the scarcity of reference books in the African languages of Zimbabwe.

When the ALLEX Project initiated monolingual lexicography in African languages, it was applauded as a very important development for nation-building. Although there were sceptics who felt that too much money was being spent on African languages instead of on what they perceived to be more pressing concerns like natural science and technology, the people at large were nevertheless appreciative. The monolingual dictionaries, especially for Ndebele, were felt to be long overdue. The potential users and their reference needs and skills were presumed to be known by both compilers and society in general.

The inclusion of the bilingual dictionary in the ALLEX master plan for dictionaries implies that the importance of the dictionary was already felt at that very early stage of planning. At the time of planning this dictionary which were supposed to be compiled within the next fifteen years or so, its target users and their needs must have been presumed known. For laypeople the target users would simply be Ndebele speakers who want to learn Shona and *vice versa*. Lexicographers and other language specialists would consider this to be too broad a category to be useful for planning purposes. Unfortunately, the ALLEX master plan does not spell out these pertinent issues. In the absence of these, there can only be speculated on the intended objectives and purposes and potential users of the Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary. However, speculation is useful as it may throw light on a project that has great potential for Zimbabwe's language planning.

### 3. The language situation in Zimbabwe

Language matters easily trigger emotions and controversy in Zimbabwe. The publication of the first Shona dictionary by ALLEX was met with fierce criticism from one reviewer, activating a national debate on language, lexicography and dialects. This event and many similar ones demonstrate that dictionaries are taken seriously in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe recognises Ndebele, Shona and English as the three main languages to be used in education, administration and the media. However, as Chimhundu (1997: 132) indicates, "the national and/or official status of Shona and Ndebele is largely theoretical, as very little, if anything, is being done officially to develop and promote them and to diversify their functions". English dominates the two African languages in education, administration, industry, commerce and the media. The preponderance of English at the expense of the African languages in Zimbabwe is not based on the number of speakers, but brought about by historical, political and economic circumstances privileging English.

English is the official medium of instruction in Zimbabwean schools from the fourth grade upwards. Ndebele is only taught as a subject in the two Mata-

beleland provinces and in some schools in the Midlands province. Shona is taught in the rest of the country.

Zimbabwe also has a number of indigenous African languages that have been designated as "minority" languages. Some of these, namely Tonga, Venda, Nambya, Kalanga and Shangani, are taught only up to grade four. Thereafter either Ndebele or Shona takes over, depending on whether the surrounding area is Ndebele- or Shona-speaking. There are also unrecognised indigenous languages, especially the Khoisan languages. Furthermore there are non-Zimbabwean African languages like Chewa and other non-African languages.

The language situation in Zimbabwe can be seen as a hierarchical structure with English at the top as official language, followed by Ndebele and Shona, with the "minority" languages lowest both in prestige and in official recognition. For the same reason, the book industry is by far dominated by English with Shona and Ndebele lagging behind in second and third position respectively. Little is published in the "minority" languages, apart perhaps from some Bible translations and hymn books.

#### 4. Language planning needs

Currently, the Zimbabwean government is working on a new language policy, which might change the status of a number of the languages. Naturally, Ndebele and Shona are aspiring for the same status as English, while the "minority" languages similarly claim recognition as national languages. Language policy refers to a wide range of governmental and non-governmental actions designed to influence language acquisition and language use (Tollefson 2000: 13).

Hopefully the new language policy will reflect the wishes of the majority of ordinary Zimbabweans as well as take some sociolinguistic and historical realities in cognisance. During the outreach of the Constitutional Commission (1999–2000), the people of Zimbabwe expressed the desire to have Ndebele and Shona accorded official language status. Some in Zimbabwe feel the country is lagging behind in promoting African languages considering that neighbouring South Africa has eleven official languages of which nine are African.

Zimbabwe could break with its colonial language policy structure where English plays the pivotal *lingua-franca* role amongst the many African languages. Bilingualism in Zimbabwe is biased in favour of English, English being on one side and an African language on the other. Shona speakers speak and write English and Shona while with Ndebele speakers it is English and Ndebele. This is what Chimhundu (1993: 59) describes as "an example of neglected multilingualism and unbalanced, culturally unhealthy bilingual behaviour by its (Zimbabwe's) citizenry".

This unbalanced bilingualism, although traceable from the language policies of the colonial era, unfortunately persisted after Zimbabwe attained its independence. "Unlike in most countries outside Africa," Wolff (2000: 342) says, "the new African elites prefer to use the foreign language for many functions

which are normally reserved for mother tongues or national languages." The same elites have been unwilling to promote African languages, even in cases where the advantages of doing so are obvious to all. Chimhundu (1997: 130) writes that in Zimbabwe "it would seem that during the first fifteen years of independence, government policy was not to formulate or pronounce a language policy as such". As already stated, this state of affairs is rapidly changing.

Some of the language controversies at issue in Zimbabwe have been on whether Ndebele and Shona should be compulsory subjects to all students. Questions have been asked, for example, whether pupils could write both Ndebele and Shona at Ordinary Level Examinations and have these counted as different subjects. At present, it is either Ndebele or Shona and English. A new language policy sensitive to the challenges of the people should facilitate Ndebele–Shona bilingualism for the whole nation. Such an important language policy initiative could be implemented effectively if there is government support complemented by the consensus of the people.

Starting in 2003, the government of Zimbabwe introduced the National Strategic Studies at tertiary educational level. This subject has been viewed by some as partisan and meant to enhance the electoral advantages of one political party. Unless it is used to address fundamentals like the language question, it would be difficult for this important subject to be taken seriously. In addition to its requirement for all graduates at government colleges, the two national languages, Ndebele and Shona, should be added too. The official justification for this subject is the teaching of the country's history with a view to fostering, among others, patriotism, moral values and national unity. Fostering these in a language barely used and understood by the majority is a recipe for failure. Alienating Ndebele and Shona languages and at the same time attempting to draw national pride from the same cultures and people is self-defeating.

The media, especially the radio and to a lesser extent television have been instrumental in fostering the country's language policies. Actually, in the recruitment of radio announcers, it is usually the case that, apart from the requirement of English, which is mandatory for all government jobs, fluency in either Shona or Ndebele and knowledge of another African language is considered an advantage. The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) has radically changed its language policy in favour of African languages. First, it propounded a 75% local content on radio and television. This had a positive effect in terms of promoting local music, drama, theatre and indigenous languages in general. Then it has gone further by converting the Montrose studio in Bulawayo into a studio 100% broadcasting in indigenous African languages.

Zimbabwe has long discoursed on indigenisation. Language indigenisation should accompany if not preceding economic indigenisation. What ZBC has pronounced and partly effected now need to be spread throughout the civil service. The education language policy should also be changed to suit the new challenges. With these language-planning needs for Zimbabwe, then, the bilin-

gual Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary is not only necessary but long overdue. However, important factors have to be taken into consideration before the dictionary is compiled. At national level, as noted, the conditions are conducive to such a dictionary project but there are specific concerns to be addressed as well.

In compiling a dictionary such as the proposed Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary, both lexicographic and sociolinguistic factors are in play. The question of who the potential users are must be treated more as a sociolinguistic than a lexicographic factor. It has already been mentioned that the potential users are mother-tongue Ndebele and Shona speakers. Lexicographic factors to be considered are the age and educational level of the potential users. Also of interest are the dictionary skills of the potential users as all these factors have a direct and/or indirect bearing on the lemmatisation, defining styles, exemplification and the overall density of the lemma.

##### **5. Some sociolinguistic factors to consider**

Any dictionary project should clearly identify its target users prior to the compilation phase (Mavoungou 2002: 185). What have to be taken into consideration are the attitudes of the potential users. Hartmann (2001: 25) says: "The dictionary maker may well structure the text with the dictionary user in mind, but more often than not lexicographic work proceeds very much within the conventions of a given tradition." While this could be the case with the Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary, it is very important not to ignore the users. Actually, as there has been no prior Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary, there is no tradition to follow. According to Chimhundu (1997: 142), "in such a setting, everything that the ALLEX Project is doing or attempting to do is indeed pioneering work".

The users cannot be treated as a homogenous group. Even if the dictionary were to be targeted at secondary pupils or at young adults at tertiary institutions, these would still have different needs. The cultural and language background are important factors to address. For example, do the Ndebele-speaking users have the same user needs as their fellow Shona-speaking users? If it could be established that the two groups differ significantly on this matter, then this would have implications for the structure of the dictionary.

Another important consideration is the possible attitudes of the users towards the dictionary which will most likely be influenced by the following:

- The users' attitudes towards their mother-tongue;
- The attitudes towards the other language;
- The prevailing socio-political situation; and
- The perceived benefits of learning the other language.

### 5.1 The users' attitudes towards their mother-tongue

The users' attitudes towards their mother-tongue could have an effect on their willingness to learn the other language. If, for instance, a Ndebele speaker has a high esteem for his/her language, that speaker is likely to have a respect for the Shona language, and *vice versa*. Speakers who have a low regard for their mother-tongue and African languages in general, would not be expected to view a Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary positively.

Also those who hold a puristic view towards their mother-tongue might not see the wisdom of having a bilingual dictionary. For example, there are some Ndebele speakers who felt the monolingual Ndebele dictionary *Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele* (ISN) had unnecessarily lemmatised loanwords from Shona when there were equivalent words in Ndebele. The fear that Shona might dominate Ndebele may have a negative influence as the dictionary might be perceived as a means to spread Shona among the Ndebele people. The reverse would conveniently be forgotten.

### 5.2 The attitudes towards the other language

It is often said that one's attitude towards a language usually reflects one's attitude towards speakers of that language. Various non-linguistic factors such as one's education, experience and background, can influence one's attitude towards the other group and its language. As has been mentioned earlier, each historical period creates dictionaries characteristic of it. There were periods in Zimbabwe's history where such a dictionary would have met with resistance on both sides. As the situation has since improved, the ethnic relations are such that the proposed dictionary might win more support now than at any previous time.

### 5.3 The prevailing socio-political situation

The attitudes people hold are partly shaped and reinforced by the social, economic and political environment. Perceived differences are wider when there are visible conflicts and competition for resources by various groups.

The political rhetoric on the ground would actually favour any project that could be perceived as enhancing indigenous cultures and fostering national unity. The indigenisation of the economy has been accompanied, theoretically at least, with the policy of 75% local content on national radio and television. This local content policy favouring the growth of indigenous languages makes the compilation of the Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary timely in Zimbabwe.

### 5.4 The perceived benefits of learning the other language

A language is seldom learnt for its own sake. In most cases, there must be per-

ceived social, economic or political benefits for learning a language. All parents in Zimbabwe want their children to learn English because it is the way to higher education, better jobs and many other opportunities. English seems to be destined to enjoy this state of affairs for a long time to come. This is caused by the official status of English in Zimbabwe and its perceived status worldwide.

It would not be enough to urge bilingualism in Ndebele and Shona for purely national unity and societal coherence. While these are noble causes at national level, there is a need for immediate rewards at individual level. After all, Tollefson (2000: 10) says: "Learning a language is an extraordinarily difficult, complex, and time-consuming task, not to be undertaken lightly." If certain jobs in the civil service like the police, army, teaching, nursing, customs and immigration, for example, were to require a knowledge of the three languages Ndebele, Shona and English, this would be an important reason for people to learn them.

## **6. Some lexicographic factors to consider**

The lexicographic issues to consider are discussed under the following subtitles:

- Bilingual or bilingualised dictionary
- Equivalence of cultural terms
- Corpus-based dictionary
- User-friendliness

### **6.1 Bilingual or bilingualised dictionary**

According to the *Dictionary of Lexicography* (Hartmann and James 1998: 14), a bilingual dictionary "relates the vocabularies of two languages together by means of translation equivalents", whereas a bilingualised dictionary "is based on a monolingual dictionary whose entries have been translated in full or in part into another language".

The compilers of the proposed dictionary should decide from the outset whether their aim is a bilingual or a bilingualised dictionary. This is a crucial decision because the dictionary has of necessity to follow the already published monolingual Ndebele and Shona dictionaries which will naturally form the bases of the proposed bilingual Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary.

### **6.2 Equivalence of cultural terms**

In selecting and in defining entries, it is unlikely that serious problems of equivalence could arise regarding basic words and terms, for instance those

used in teaching grammar and literature. When, however, it comes to cultural terms or those peculiar to certain practices, caution should be exercised.

Although Ndebele and Shona cultures have a lot in common, their differences should be taken into consideration. Although these differences may not be many, they could establish or destroy the reputation of the dictionary depending on how they are handled.

### **6.3 Corpus-based dictionary**

ALLEX dictionaries are corpus-based or corpus-aided. If the proposed dictionary has to follow this tendency, parallel corpora might need to be built to assist in the compilation. At the moment, there are no parallel Ndebele–Shona corpora yet, although building them would not be difficult. Some books which have been translated into both Ndebele and Shona might form the basis of these corpora. Also, the Bible translations of both languages have been scanned and included in the already existing ALLEX corpora.

The editors would have to be careful when using the corpora not to rely entirely on translated language. Similarly, caution has to be taken to avoid cultural controversies as mentioned under 6.2 above.

### **6.4 User-friendliness**

From the planning stage, the users have to be clearly defined and their reference needs and reference skills known. As dictionary skills are rarely taught explicitly in Zimbabwean schools, reference skills are generally low.

In compiling the dictionary, editors must keep in mind that strategies used in previous dictionaries might not be relevant to this one. Similarly, it must not be assumed that potential users of the bilingual dictionary have had access to the monolingual Ndebele and Shona dictionaries. The success of this dictionary partly rests on its attunement to user needs and its accessibility to users. In this sense, user-friendliness refers to a combination of factors perceived to enable users easy access to the dictionary.

## **7. Recommendations to compilers**

From the foregoing, it can be noted that the compilation of the proposed Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary is fraught with lexicographic and non-lexicographic considerations. Although the editors of this dictionary would obviously be experienced lexicographers, serious attention has to be given to every aspect of the dictionary. Unlike the other ALLEX dictionaries whose target users were clearly defined, the proposed dictionary necessitates a study of the actual reference needs and reference skills of the potential users. The compilation of the dictionary cannot be based on assumptions about its potential users.

This background information could prove valuable in determining the size and scope of the dictionary as well as its style of presentation. Perceived as a pedagogical dictionary, the proposed Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary would be more useful as it would assist Ndebele speakers learning Shona and *vice versa*. A pedagogical dictionary is designed "for the practical needs of teachers and learners of a language" (Hartmann and James 1998: 107).

Lastly, sociolinguistic considerations should be constantly kept in mind throughout the compilation stage as this dictionary has a great potential for language planning needs in Zimbabwe. For this reason, controversial words and senses should be avoided as much as possible. The Shona and Ndebele monolingual dictionaries were embraced by their respective language communities as important symbols of community achievement. The bilingual dictionary needs a similar positive attitude from both language communities if it is not only to be viable commercially but also to be utilised by its intended users.

## 8. Conclusion

The proposed Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary poses a number of challenges, some of which were highlighted in this article. The challenges are not insurmountable, although addressing them would call for the consideration of a combination of lexicographic, linguistic and sociolinguistic factors.

From the above reflections, the national significance of the Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary would have become clear. The successful completion of the proposed dictionary would be a landmark in Zimbabwean lexicography and a crucial contribution of lexicography towards language policy and language planning. It would be a turning-point for the African languages in Zimbabwe, as this would mark their reduced dependency on English. It has therefore been demonstrated that Zimbabwean society indeed needs the Ndebele–Shona/Shona–Ndebele dictionary.

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