Book Review

Ndhlovu, F. 2009. *The politics of language and nation building in Zimbabwe.* Oxford: Peter Lang. ISBN 978-3-03 911-942-4.

Finex Ndhlovu's *The politics of language and nation building in Zimbabwe* is a product of his doctoral research project. The book, which is a welcome contribution to scholarly debates on nation building in multilingual and multicultural contexts, comprises seven chapters: Chapter one (Introduction), Chapter two (The history of language politics in Zimbabwe), Chapter three (The languages of Zimbabwe), Chapter four (Language and ethnicity in Zimbabwean politics), Chapter five (The politics of language: Nation building or empire building?), Chapter six (Language policy, hegemony and internal colonization) and Chapter seven (The Zimbabwean case study in global perspective). The book is supported by two informative appendices, i.e. Appendix A (list of interviewees arranged by category of participants) and Appendix B (guiding questions for oral interviews).

A significant point emerging from the introductory chapter is the dismantling of the view that in post-colonial Anglophone Africa, English is the 'killer language'. What Ndhlovu has ably demonstrated in the first chapter (and indeed in the whole book) is that some indigenous languages can be turned into monsters that can thwart the development of other indigenous languages. In the case of Zimbabwe, such indigenous killer languages are Shona and Ndebele. What is currently happening in Zimbabwe is not confined to that country alone. In other African countries such as Botswana, Malawi and Tanzania, for example, linguistic assimilation policies and practices have led to the development and promotion of Setswana, Chichewa and Kiswahili respectively, at the expense of other indigenous languages (see Kamwendo & Mooko 2006, for a comparative study of language planning in Botswana and Malawi). To this end, Setswana in Botswana, Chichewa in Malawi and Kiswahili in Tanzania can, in some ways, be called killer languages, which means that indigenous languages are not inherently harmless.

In Chapter two, Ndhlovu presents the historical context from which the current Zimbabwean language politics evolved. Without such a historical context, one cannot fully appreciate the present. Some of the key actors operating in this historical context of language planning are the pioneer Christian missionaries who not only converted Africans to Christianity, but also converted African languages into written forms. The work of missionary linguists is fairly well analysed. The second key actor discussed in the chapter is the well-known linguist, Clement Doke, famously called the father and founder of Zimbabwean linguistics.

Chapter three clearly shows that Zimbabwe is not a two-indigenous-languages country. Due to the country's tribal balancing policy, Shona and Ndebele are promoted by government as if they are the only indigenous languages in that country. Ndhlovu does an excellent job of meticulously documenting the linguistic diversity that characterises Zimbabwe. In the same chapter, and indeed in other chapters, the contentious issue of sociolinguistic terminology comes up again and again. One of the severely contested terms is 'minority language' (see also Makoni et al. 2008). Ndhlovu handles the term well, leaving the reader satisfied that the author is fully aware of the slippery and politically sensitive nature of the term. What Ndhlovu has left undefined, however, is the term 'national language', with specific reference to Shona and Ndebele. But Brann (1992) identifies at least four definitions of 'national language', and one wishes Ndhlovu had problematised the term so that in the end it would be shown not to mean the same thing across all countries. Setswana, for example, is the national language of Botswana, and the same is true of Chichewa in Malawi, but in Namibia they talk of all the indigenous languages of the country as national languages – such is the fluidity in the use of the term. In Chapter four, Ndhlovu discusses the interaction between language and ethnicity in Zimbabwean politics. He observes that in some cases, voting in general elections has proceeded on ethnolinguistic grounds.

Is what is happening in Zimbabwe in the language domain a matter of nation building or empire building? This question runs through Chapter five. Two schools of thought have emerged in response to this question: one such school believes that through the statuses afforded Shona and Ndebele, and by assimilating other language groups into one of the two major languages, Zimbabwe is building a united nation. The rival school of thought believes the promotion of Shona and Ndebele is all about subduing other linguistic groups, thereby resulting in empire-building. Nation building has, therefore, become the altar at which the recognition of linguistic diversity has been sacrificed in the interests of national unity. At this point, I should add that elsewhere in post-colonial Africa, the ex-coloniser's language has been chosen as the language of national unity, and the adoption of Portuguese by Mozambique is one case in point. As Ngunga (1999, 149) notes, Portuguese was adopted as the official language as well as the language of national unity, because it is 'neutral to the majority of Mozambicans, and does not serve as a mark of ethnicity in the country'.

Chapter six discusses the notions of hegemony, linguistic imperialism and internal colonisation. What the author has successfully brought out of the chapter is that both external and internal forces can bring about linguistic hegemony, linguistic imperialism and colonisation. In the Zimbabwean case, although English can be said to lie in the linguistic hegemony, imperialism and colonisation spheres, indigenous languages such as Shona and Ndebele are also involved. As has been noted earlier, the threat to the development of indigenous African languages is not only always external. Chapter seven concludes the book by placing the Zimbabwean case within a global perspective.

Throughout the book, one notices that the government of Zimbabwe is not keen to develop and promote minority languages. If there is any interest, it is cosmetic. The crucial question here is: What are the speakers of the minority languages doing about their marginalised languages? Are they sitting idle, passively watching their languages being thrown onto the periphery of the linguistic landscape? Elsewhere, for example in Malawi (see Kamwendo 2005), Botswana (see Nyati-Ramahobo 2000), and even among the Tonga of Zimbabwe (see Makoni et al. 2008), communities engage in activities that can be termed 'language planning from below'. In Zimbabwe, for example, there is reference to 'how different language activists lobbied for the promotion and development of Tonga to counter the perceived hegemonic effects of other indigenous languages such as Shona and Ndebele' (ibid., 413–414). One wishes Ndhlovu had given ample space to this topic.

Some aspects of the rationalist and romantic models of language policy (Geeraerts 2003) can be detected in Ndhlovu's book. For example, the rationalist model's view that standard national languages or global languages serve as neutral media of wider communication can be noted in arguments in favour of having English as the official language, and Shona and Ndebele as national languages. On the other hand, opponents of this policy echo the romantic model, which regards language as a means of identity. To this end, mother-tongue speakers of languages other than Shona and Ndebele complain that their linguistic identities are made invisible by the state-supported use and promotion of Shona and Ndebele as languages of wider communication. Due to space limitations, however, we cannot go further into the debate between proponents of the rationalist and romantic models of language policy (for a detailled discussion of the two models, see Geeraerts 2003). For now, however, suffice to say that some aspects of the two models can be detected in Ndhlovu's book.

The book is well written, with arguments being supported by evidence from the ground. It is also important to note that the author allows the reader to hear different voices. The book addresses a topic that is of interest not only to language scholars, but also scholars from other disciplines, such as political science, etc. Beyond the academic domain, the book is of interest and relevance to language activists, politicians, language planners and language policy makers.

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