

The Importance of Indigenous Languages in Health-Care Services: Some Observations from Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT Tackling health issues with the languages which people understand is essential in improving the lives and prospects of millions of people. People in South Africa are vulnerable to Human Immune Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Disease Syndrome (AIDS), malnutrition, measles, diarrhea and other health challenges due in part to the lack of important information provided in their own languages and, in a culturally sensitive way. To link language and democracy, it is important that the leaders ensure accountability and transparency. To achieve this, people should be able to communicate with their leaders in the mother-tongue. English is still the language of power, money and status, and indigenous languages are still at a cognitive disadvantage, even though, all eleven languages are official and carry equal status in terms of the Constitution. It is, therefore, essential to develop these languages so that they can be used beyond their traditional domains.

INTRODUCTION

Like most of the African countries, South Africa is a multilingual country that has eleven official languages. These languages are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, SiSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1994: 4). All these languages have diverse cultures posing a very serious problem to health-care services. English and Afrikaans are, still mostly used in health-care services whereas, the majority of the population speaks one of the nine indigenous official African languages (Crawford 2011; Levin 2005). This results in English and Afrikaans having more scientific terminology than indigenous languages do. The worrisome issue is that the majority of

the health-care providers do not actually speak the languages of the majority of the people they are providing their services to. In this way, the health care professionals have a fair chance to impose their languages and cultural values upon their patients. Some people still believe that anything that is connected to indigenous languages belongs to the old era and people who speak them are uncivilized.

Effective communication flow is a very significant component in the development of health-care circles, but is often overlooked by most of the health-care providers. Mda (2013: 1) insisted that if indigenous people want to benefit from the development, a more appropriate communication system should evolve and he goes on to say that the existing communication system is not conducive to and functional for development. Colonial and oppressive presence has deeply contaminated all the indigenous languages and cultures of South Africa. Hence, indigenous languages and cultures in South Africa became archaic and unacceptable in the public domain. It is in this context that the paper would like to analyze the role that indigenous languages play between health-care providers and their patients.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative method was used in this research. This method is suitable because it helped people with the skills of translation and the de-

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velopment of indigenous languages. It showed that South Africa is a multilingual and multicultural country in the African Continent.

Collection of Data

Primary Research Method

The following people were interviewed about their attitudes towards the use of African languages as media of learning and teaching and their experiences in terms of language usage in health domains and other areas:

Five university students who registered for African languages (Northern Sotho, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, SiSwati and isiNdebele), five student nurses and five students who registered for English; lecturers of the areas mentioned above; and three lexicographers and two translators.

Secondary Research Method

The secondary research method was used in this study. This is the method of enquiry and was used to analyze the information that was already collected by various researchers such as linguists, academics, translators and terminologists. Relevant sources such as books, articles, dissertations/theses and the Internet were used as secondary sources to gather the information.

RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to suggest ways in which indigenous languages can yield positive results in the medical fraternity. The findings of this paper will help the students and scholars about the importance of indigenous languages not only in the medical field, but in other fields such as law, commerce, and science and technology. This will also help the students and academics to improve the standard of interpreting for clients during consultation. Healthcare providers should be acquainted with the cultural usage of the indigenous languages. This will prevent or reduce medical errors caused by incorrect interpreting.

DISCUSSION

Language and Culture

Language is a component of culture and it is definitely valid to say that through language,

culture is transmitted, interpreted and configured. Language is a means by which thought unites itself from the observational and becomes abstract. Arua (1998: 140-141) observed that language is mainly used to express a people's culture. Further, it demonstrated a way of living, of knowing, of appreciating, of speaking and of doing things. Hartshorne (1995: 306) supported Arua (1998) by expressing the significance of language in the following way:

[Language] is the repository and means of articulation of values, beliefs, prejudices, traditions and past achievements ... it is at the heart of the culture of the people. ... it is related to the issues of identity, position and power.

Both scholars argued that language cannot be considered only as an instrument for communication, but it is also of sentimental value to that society where it is spoken. It is obvious that to deny people their language rights is to deny them their identity, history and culture. Language may often help in the reconstruction of a lost cultural heritage or the rebuilding of a lost cultural homeland. Language and culture are used as tools which would lead towards the realization of the communal objectives of both empowerment and development.

It is critical to note that language is a prime contributor to the strengthening of allegiance to a target language group and to the subsequent adoption of its cultural values, beliefs and behaviors by means of active participation in group activities. The culture and identity are concerned with the ways in which people use language to reconstruct their everyday worlds, more especially, their own social responsibilities. The identity of human beings forms a significant part of their sense of who they are. It is true that people are social and usually sustain their lives through indigenous knowledge systems which determine their history, customs, norms, values and cultural practices. This is supplemented by Phaahla (2012: 126) when she commented:

Language is viewed as a repository of the traditions and cultural accomplishments of its speech community as well as being a kind of cultural accomplishment. It is the vehicle through which a community creates a way of life for itself and is intrinsically bound up with that way of life. Hence most people value their language not only instrumentally, as a tool, but also intrinsically,

as a cultural inheritance and as a marker of identity as a participant in the way of life it represents.

It is important to reverse the negative status of African knowledge and its association with tradition and low-status domains. Members of a particular language community identify themselves with that language and take pride of its use. Many Africans struggled to imitate and reproduce the Western models they have acquired. The underlying assumption is that Western culture is superior and intrinsically better and that the knowledge it produced is universally relevant. This was part of colonial ideologies. It is of great significance to allow the integration of African languages and cultural traits in formal education across the board.

Misinterpretation

It is a process in which meaning of terms or expressions in the source language is not properly turned into the meaning of the target language. Yinhua (2011: 170) said that it is a way in which no equivalence of the source text can be attained in the target language. Northern Sotho, as one of the eleven official languages of South Africa and a member of the Sotho language group, has got a very wide range of medical and health-care concepts. It is noted that traditional variants are not provided along with the official Western concepts and it is very important to provide them along to avoid misunderstanding. When teeth of the children protrude and grow out of their gums, for example, the Northern Sotho speakers would say *ba a reka* (they buy). This makes children to have diarrhea. Ignorant doctors who had given young patients sweets did not solve their problem. Doctors thought that children were accompanied by their parents or guardians to buy their goodies in their surgeries. Another instance is when the Northern Sotho speakers say *ba lomilwe ke noga* (they were beaten by a snake) referring to the abdominal pains they had. The doctors treated them with snake bite serum which never helped them with anything.

Health officials, who do not know Northern Sotho, more especially doctors, should give themselves a chance to learn about the culture and tradition of the language mentioned, including those of other African languages. Crawford (2011: 29) described the power relations between

the service providers (the dominant) and clients (the dominated) in health-care facilities in the following way:

The power relations encompass relations between doctors and clients, doctors and nurses, nurses and patients. The doctors are located at the top of the hierarchy. The patients are positioned at the bottom, [they are] largely passive bodies whose own version or narrative of their illnesses is not considered central to the processes of diagnosis and formulation of a realistic treatment strategy. The nurses, who are often used as ... interpreters ... occupy a conflicted and ambivalent position intersecting the space between [the patient and the doctor].

In South Africa, there is a very wide gap of social class, race, language and gender which separates the service providers from a client. The question which many people ask is: What the educational institutions are doing to solve this problem?

Many Northern Sotho words are very strange to foreign speakers of the language. For instance, the English speaking person will absolutely find it very hard to understand Northern Sotho cultural bound words. Translators should always try to use independent term equivalents which have one-to-one relation with the source language concepts. It is important to bear in mind that the new concepts that serve as equivalents should yield to the orthography of the target language.

Someway in which Language Can Help

Reducing Child Mortality and Improving Maternal Health

A lot has to be done to improve the health and life prospects of vulnerable women and children in South Africa. Most of the women die out of complications during childbirth. Many of these are preventable but they die due to insufficient care during pregnancy and delivery. Most children also die from preventable causes. They succumb to Acquired Immune Disease Syndrome (AIDS), Tuberculosis (TB), malaria, measles, pneumonia, diarrhea and malnutrition. Language is important because many lives can be saved if women receive information on, for instance, nutrition, breastfeeding, and how to prevent and treat infections, AIDS, TB, malaria, measles,

pneumonia, diarrhea and other related illnesses. This implied that women should receive health information in the language that they understand and in various ways that engage with their cultural contexts. This step would foster effective communication and people from different cultural background would, thus, understand each other. Many Black South Africans identified language as a principal barrier to accessing health services. Patients and health-care providers should be able to communicate in the way that they can understand each other in order to solve health problems. Any health-care provider who does not speak the same language as the patient may encounter very serious problems in diagnosing and curing a health problem, or in sharing health information (Asian Development Bank 2001). It is difficult for patients to develop a sense of trust if there is no communication. This has negative effects on patients who seek health services.

Public Safety

It is important to take public safety seriously. In many parts of the country, medical waste like needles and syringes are dumped on the open spaces near people's homes. The waste is a problem to the community, because children play in the streets and will, thus, end up being infected by various diseases. For instance, there is an illustration in this regard that took place recently. Lepere (2007: 5) viewed that concerned people in a certain village converged and raised their voices in indigenous languages because they feared that kids would come and play nurse and doctor and prick themselves with the used syringes. They also called a newspaper called *Daily Sun* to come and see for themselves and to show the nation about their state of affairs. Some people used English to get the attention of other people but could not be understood. The undisputable fact is that people can express themselves better in their mother-tongue. That helped them as the municipality ended up collecting the dumped medical waste.

Organization of Health Summits

With the help of the Department of Health in South Africa, health summits can be organized to discuss the improvement of community's health. In such summits, collaboration goes a

long way to improve people's lives. The expression that says "if you want to go fast and cover a very short distance, go alone, but if you want to go far, go with others" indicates what is real in life in that nobody can succeed without the help of other people. What important is that all stakeholders should practice Ubuntu and have passion for their assignments. This can strengthen networking with other relevant partners. This is important because summits can adopt plans that are feasible, basic and that will address the constitutional rights of the health-care users. The negative attitudes of the health-care providers, among other weaknesses, should be solved. The shortage of nursing staff with translation skills is another problem that needs serious attention.

Prevention of Reduplicating Treatment

This type of reduplication is a misuse of health-care services. Some people believed that getting treatment of the same disease at different health-care centers in a day or two would heal them overnight. The importance of local language and culture for that group of people can solve this problem only if local words and concepts are explained to them as far as treatment is concerned. It is, therefore, important to protect and effectively utilize indigenous knowledge that represents a major dimension of the country's cultures and to share this knowledge for the benefit of humankind. Every person's culture has to become a fair game in the business of commoditization (Thomas and Nyamnjoh 2007: 14).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Information and communication technology is regarded as a powerful tool for sharing knowledge and information that is useful to the entire nation. It is quite evident that mobile phones and the Internet facilitate improved efficiencies and capacities across many areas which include health, education, poverty eradication, and clean water and sanitation. If these areas are not addressed in the indigenous languages, many people are prevented from having sufficient information that can help them in life. This really showed that ethnic minority groups or indigenous languages cannot be proportionately rep-

resented among the world's poor and marginalized. In South Africa, one project that utilized ICT and local languages was tested and became a success. It is still used and everybody recommends it. This is the project, whereby, health messages reach population by means of mobile phones. Barron (2002: 45) continued saying that:

Project Masiluleke (Project M) in South Africa sends out important health information in phone text messages in local languages. South Africa has 11 officially recognized languages, and in order to reach as many people as possible, the project has acknowledged that it is crucial for people to be addressed in the language they understand.

This showed that ICT can facilitate learning among traditionally excluded populations like people with disabilities and women. It is true that local languages foster participation and inclusion of minorities. Barron (2002: 45) further commented that:

Since October 2008, Project M has sent out more than 1 billion short message service (SMS) text messages to the general public on HIV and AIDS, resulting in a huge volume of calls to the national AIDS hotline. The project has reported a great increase in calls when messages are received in vernacular languages such as Zulu, compared with when they are sent in English.

The significance of language in local and national health policies and strategies is essential to make sure that all people, including indigenous African women, are reached. There are health successes as a result of focused engagement with indigenous languages. Health education materials should be in the local languages. These health education materials such as videos, story boards, TV, radio, songs and community theatre can be incorporated effectively to introduce health messages where there is a lack of literacy. Some local clinics use local languages to show that covering the mouth when coughing or sneezing greatly helped to protect the spread of respiratory diseases and the way hand washing helped to prevent diarrhea. Other fundamental strategies include recognizing the role of training indigenous health workers who speak to women in the languages that are familiar to them and that promote intercultural strategies to health-care.

People should not be disfranchised of the information that directly affects their lives because of language. The use of local languages

that many people understand is making a real difference to their lives across the world. It also fosters participation in development that achieves lasting results. Effective communication flow is seen as a very important aspect in development, but this is ignored by most agents. Section 32 of *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act No. 108 (1996: 15) stated that everyone has the right of access to any information that is held either by the state or another person. Any person, either fluent in English or not, has got the right to use public, private or any other resources in any of the eleven official languages. This is supported by Sam and Dalvit (2010: 41) when they mention that "... the people, confined by their language proficiency, from the previously disadvantaged communities have the right to access ICTs or any other viable source using their own languages (especially the official languages)".

Language Planning and Identity

Language planning is a way of trying to control all the issues related to the use of language. Eastman (2013: 96) said that "language planning refers to efforts in a socio-political situation to solve language problems, preferably on a long-term basis, by heeding the processes of social change". Language planning is an element for linking language to other strategic plans of a country. There is still a dire need to look at the aspect of language planning from the scientific point of view for the benefit of human as well as communal development. Mercer (2012: 170) concedes that language planning, which goes with the element of culture, does not mean the planning of language, but means taking languages from the margins into the mainstream. A constructive language planning can promote issues of social cohesion and mind transformation.

Languages should not be seen only as a means of communication, but also as a medium of power that grants people strength to realize their interests while showcasing their capabilities. Asante (2013: 120) declared that when the issue of language planning is addressed, all sorts of racist systems should be abandoned and be substituted by African values that untimely address the needs of Africa's peoples. Any Western value system that can be applied can be linked to the rise of foreign modernity (Escobar 1992: 132-145). All previously disadvantaged lan-

guages should be fully developed to be on the same standard as English. Developing these languages is problematic as it implies the need for remedial action and possibly diverting resources away from effective language planning activities. Bokamba (1982: 77) explained that the whole African Continent, including South Africa which has eleven official languages, is characterized by wider multilingual realities.

Presently, the indigenous languages in all the public domains in South Africa, including the Department of Health, are the victims of English hegemony. Language planning should not only benefit the English-speaking African minority, but also the previously disadvantaged masses which speak indigenous languages. It should be formulated in response to the language needs of each and every society for the purpose of cultural identity. Language planning is important because it attempted to control the use, status and structure of a language by means of a National Language Policy developed by the government or any other authority. This can revitalize declining languages and preserve dialects. Language policy also influenced the development of terminology. In fact, this policy determines the number of languages to be developed as functional languages. About language planning and language policy, Wright (2007: 6) expatiated as follows:

Language planning and language policy express particular efforts at official social intervention and control in the sphere of language. Normally the direction and ambitions of language policy and planning embody an economic and social vision. In accord of the vision, certain aspects of current language practice in society are officially challenged or curbed, others are sustained and affirmed. In general, the aim of the language policy is to move language practice in directions deemed desirable by those in power.

Wright goes on indicating that the language practice is, in most cases, directed to various social and political entities like governments departments, provinces, schools, industries, businesses and organized economic alliances, just to mention a few. It is possible to develop all official languages into functional languages in all spheres of life. Language planners must have the best interests of society at heart. The growth of languages should contribute to the overall development of communities. Language devel-

opment is not an exercise that can be done within a short period, but it is a process. Cluver (1996: 2-3; 6) indicated that language development consists of:

- *language selection* → the selection of a specific variety (for example, dialect) for development,
- *language codification* → the development of a writing system, documentation of the existing vocabulary and grammar, development of spelling and orthography (for an unwritten language) or modernizing existing spelling and orthographies and standardizing the language,
- *language elaboration* → the expansion of the functions of the language so that it can operate beyond its traditional domains (home, family, community) as working languages in the public domains (government offices, court of law, etc.),
- *language spread* → the development of the language as a language for teaching and learning (domain of education for primary school level, secondary school level and tertiary level), and a language of communication (for example, media), and
- *language modernization* → general terminology development in all spheres of the working environment, for example, economy, science and technology (that is, the expression of abstract concepts).

The welfare of the language should reflect the welfare of the speech community. English is still dominating at the expense of indigenous languages. Many health students believed that people with good command over English have an advantage when it comes to job opportunities. Sam and Dalvit (2010: 47) once more go on to say that “the use of English as an international language made students to think that their languages are just stumbling blocks. They also did not perceive that their language as the medium would help them to improve their English proficiency”. Indigenous languages can also be used at the higher education level so that they can be included in all public domains, including health. Although, English is perceived as a uniting language and as a language of wider communication, it should be seen as an additional language in South Africa. It must not be regarded as a primary language simply because of its colonial dominant past. There should not only be a shift in practice towards African languages,

but also a transformation of attitude by the African communities.

CONCLUSION

Each language has an important role to play in the community. Better educated black South Africans should have a clear indication of commitment to their own indigenous languages and the conviction that more should be contributed to develop previously disadvantaged languages. It is important to state that translators should harvest the source language concepts and their target language equivalents when they translate. There is still a level of frustration based on linguistic equality among the indigenous languages speakers. One of the main objectives of language development is to elevate the status of the language with its own speakers and with foreign speakers.

English should not be completely wiped out; rather it should be taken as a second language. The government should try to invest funds into language planning and language policies. Most of those who are in power are selfish and do little to help our continent develop and remove the stigma of the Dark Continent. This should come to an end. If there can be no shift in practice towards the indigenous languages and transformation of attitude by those in power, and the common people in African societies, English will continue to be dominant in all the spheres of life. Consequently, indigenous languages will, therefore, rapidly disappear. This is a situation which all of us must try to prevent at all costs.

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