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Taking pride in learning how to write a language for the first time

The majority of Africa's 2,000 languages are spoken only in remote communities where words have yet to be written down. Retired Cardiff University lecturer Dr Paul Tench is heading a project to help locals develop alphabets. Having returned from Zambia, he tells Education Wales about his progress.

"WE can read English. We can read siLozi. But we can't read our own language – because it has never been written down."

This is the testimony of five Shanjo farmers from the remote south-western corner of the remote Western Province of Zambia.

English is Zambia's official language. SiLozi is the main regional language of the Western Province, spoken by over 600,000 Lozi people as their mother tongue and by thousands of others as their second language.

But who are these others? They are small, local, but distinct, language communities scattered across this vast, sparsely populated province. Like the 20,000 or so Shanjo people, they have their local language spoken at home, in the villages, out in their fields – the language of ordinary everyday life.

If they are in touch with someone from another community, they can switch to siLozi, which they learnt in primary school, or for those who managed to pursue secondary school, they could use English. Imagine a pyramid with the lowest section representing monolingual Shanjo speakers, a middle section for bilingual speakers with siLozi, and a small, pointed top section of trilingual people with English.

That is, in fact, something of a simplification however, as many Shanjo people speak other local languages, even if they cannot communicate in English. The five farmers all speak at least three languages; it is not uncommon even for those who have received no education beyond primary to be able to speak four or five languages if their livelihood involves travel.

Back to the five Shanjo farmers. Do they really need to read in their own language? I imagine that is what many an English speaker asked when the demand for education in Welsh became insistent.

A person from a dominant monolingual culture may find it difficult to comprehend the feel-

ings of people from a minority language group when a dominant language is available. But a language is part of a person's identity; it is an expression of the way they think and talk; it is bound up with their upbringing and their experience of family and society.

A person's first language, their 'mother tongue', is what they often feel most comfortable in; it is how they communicate with the greatest ease and confidence. They feel it right to use that language in most domestic and ordinary social situations in life; this is no different, of course, from what a monolingual English speaker would feel. There is usually a strong psychological, intellectual and emotional bond with the mother tongue. And that is true for the small Shanjo community too.

A few years ago, a Zambian policeman and a young South African couple with a missionary society travelled around that remote south western corner of the Western Province to find out about the languages of the area; they discovered an immense desire to have their languages written down and to become literate in them.

They reported on one occasion: "We learned that the people had been waiting months for our visit. The indunas (chiefs), school headmaster and clinic officer organised a community meeting, which more than 70 village elders attended. They were extremely happy and grateful to God and chose six translators to send to a training workshop. They called this work a fulfilment of their people's dreams."

Something similar happened in the Shanjo community earlier this year, and so I was invited to help, as a linguist, with the development of their alphabet.

I met the five farmers at the beginning of July.

Four of them were in their 50s, I would say, with one younger man of 25, who was the only person with secondary education. Two of the older men



■ The Shanjo team in Zambia, which is being helped by Dr Paul Tench to write down their native language for the first time

had received some training as church leaders, in English, and the other two struggled a bit at first in English, but quickly grew in confidence as the weeks passed by.

They were all subsistence farmers; that is, they grew enough maize, millet and sorghum for their domestic use; they all kept a herd of cattle and they all managed a smallholding with chickens and vegetable gardens to supply their family and neighbours.

And now here they were, seated at a table ready to do 'academic' work on their language. And how they worked. These were men with a mission, appointed by their communities. Their neighbours in the area were a step ahead of them, with their little booklets on how to write and read their languages, and these Shanjo farmers did not want their own community to be left behind.

I marvelled at all this; these men were hardy men, used to a daily outdoor life, physical hard labour, skilled in their various farming tasks – and now they were ready to confine themselves to a table indoors and for study.

I explained to them how we

would proceed. They chose one man, a church pastor, to give a short explanation, in the Shanjo language, of the importance of training oxen for effective farming. And then each man wrote it down the best way they could. They did it individually, and then compared their efforts. There was, surprisingly, a great deal of agreement. How did they manage it?

Well, language is all in the mind, including spelling and pronunciation. They knew the spelling of English and siLozi, and they applied this as best as they could to the sounds of the words in their own language. Then they discussed things together in their mother tongue, and came up with agreed solutions to any problems that arose.

After two weeks, I was able to put together a 27-page booklet on how to write and read ciShanjo, with the tiny bit of grammar we had investigated, three pieces we had studied – now in their final, approved, form – and a mini dictionary.

The five men were full of enthusiasm, and then full of excitement, as the written form of their very own language began to take firm shape. A

young Shanjo woman was able to read everything without much difficulty, which gave us confidence that the spelling proposals would succeed with the rest of the community.

It would be good for the Shanjo people's sense of self-worth, their dignity, pride in their distinctive culture, their standing in the region, not only to be literate in their own language, but also to develop their own literature and to give visual expression in public signs, at school and in all their institutions. Just like Welsh in Wales.

Primary education in the mother tongue is a 'commodity' that Wales can be proud of, and can export. The mother tongue in early education enhances cognitive development, because it is the language of a child's thinking, understanding, knowing and learning. It has a psychological advantage in that it is the language that children are at ease in; there is no extra, special, effort in attention as there is when a less familiar language is used.

It has social advantages too; it is the language of informal education in the family, of communication in ordinary daily

life, the language of learning social relationships and responsibilities. Similarly in cultural terms, as the language of identity, of personal and family belonging to a community; it is the language of stories, poetry, entertainment, with distinctive styles and forms; it acts as a safeguard against increasing urbanisation and global electronic communication.

There is also a national dimension to this: there is no reason why primary education should not reflect a nation's multilingual heritage; language policies can promote minority languages, as well as introduce the languages of wider communication, and all this will help to integrate minority communities into the national consciousness – otherwise resentment might set in. You could even argue for a kind of philosophical reason for maintaining minority languages, because they represent a way of observing the world with a distinctive perspective.

■ Dr Paul Tench is a retired lecturer and associate researcher at Cardiff University's Centre for Language and Communication Research.



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