Everyday Forms of Language-based Marginalization in Zimbabwe

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This article examines the micro-social forms of language-based marginalization among the diverse ethnolinguistic polities of Zimbabwe. Based on the findings of field research carried out in Zimbabwe from November 2005 to May 2006, the paper highlights the more specific and salient everyday effects of linguistic inequalities on individual members of speech communities. The major forms of language-based marginalization that emerged from the data included negative perceptions and stereotypes about minority languages; forced assimilation of minority language speakers into majority language groups; linguistic imperial tendencies of majority language speakers; as well as internalized domination and inferiority among minority language speakers. This paper comes to the conclusion that these forms of everyday language-based marginalization are not easily discernible as they lie hidden in the fissures and faultlines of insincere ethnolinguistic tolerance that is often accompanied by an admixture of patrimonial and paternalistic tendencies.

1   Introduction

Marginalization refers to the overt acts and trends within societies whereby those perceived as lacking function or desirable traits are excluded from existing systems of protectionism, thereby limiting their means of survival. Marshall defines marginalization as, "A process by which a group or individual is denied access to important positions and symbols of economic, religious or political power within society." (304). Therefore, to be marginalized is to be limited in scope and space, which also involves exclusion, discrimination as well as rejection, omission and isolation

When a language is not recognized for a certain function in which space is accorded to other languages within the same linguistic ecology, it is marginalized. Language-based marginalization would therefore be conceived as a situation in which some members of society are individually or collectively discriminated against or oppressed on the basis of the language(s) they speak. The process of language marginalization may include "any action or attitude, conscious or unconscious that subordinates an individual or group based on language" (Ford 11). Subordination, which normally consists of being placed in or occupying a lower class, rank or position, can be enacted individually or institutionally (Stoutzenberger). More often than not, it is the socio-politically weak

ethnolinguistic collectivities that are denied access to certain services or facilities on the basis of language.

The following have been identified as the African languages spoken in Zimbabwe: Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, Nambya, Kalanga, Nyanja/Chewa, Tonga of Mudzi, Barwe, Chikunda, Doma, Hwesa, Shangaan, Venda, Sotho, Xhosa, Tswana and Tshwawo (Hachipola). Of these, only Shona and Ndebele have been accorded national language status. This means that apart from English, which is the de jure official language of Zimbabwe, Shona and Ndebele are also recognized as languages of wider communication; languages of the media; languages of education; and, by extension, languages of upward socio-political and economic mobility. All the other African languages listed above are classified as minority languages.

According to the 1982[1] National Census figures (Government of Zimbabwe) Shona is the biggest ethnic group constituting 75% of the total national population followed by Ndebele (16.5%). African indigenous minorities constitute 7.5% while non-African minorities (including English) account for 1% of the total national population. However, considering that the 1982 statistics are close to three decades old, numerous changes have undoubtedly taken place in the language ecology of Zimbabwe. This renders current decisions on language status a product of impressionistic rather than scientific evidence.

Since Zimbabwe's attainment of independence in 1980 negative perceptions and stereotypes about speakers of these languages have been constructed by members of dominant ethnolinguistic groups. There have also been institutions created to which access is contingent upon ability to communicate in the country's national languages, that is, access to education, corridors of political power and general upward social mobility, depend on one's competence in Shona and Ndebele. The fortunes of minority languages have come to be indexically linked to those of their speakers. This means that the symbolic and communicative statuses attached to languages often have a significant impact on the socio-economic and political prospects of those who speak them (Tollefson; Pennycook). In other words, the rise and/or fall of language speakers is dependent on the political power-play surrounding the use of their languages in different domains. Also, the status that a language enjoys or suffers from cannot be fully understood outside the specific political conditions of those who speak it. As posited in Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the spread of a dominant language is not pushed by overt government or state coercion through military or police action.

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[1] Since 1982, there has never been a systematic count of the Zimbabwean population in terms of its linguistic and ethnic complexion. The 1992 and 2002 National Population Census questionnaires were both conspicuous for their exclusion of questions on language and ethnicity.

Instead, it is spread by existential and ideological realities that force marginal language speakers to accept the prestige and utility of the new language (Ives).

This paper argues that languages without high status are variously denigrated as languages of the backward, the uncivilized, and the uneducated while national languages have become the languages of the economy, power and politics. These language-based power differentials, which pervade everyday social interactions among the different ethnolinguistic groups of Zimbabwe, constitute an important topic worthy of study.

2   Methods and Procedures

The subsequent analysis of the everyday forms of language-based marginalization is premised on oral interview data collected in Zimbabwe from November 2005 to May 2006. A total of 50 people were interviewed from the following target groups: minority language speakers (35); language policy makers (5); media practitioners (5) and language experts (5). Minority languages speakers constituted the greatest proportion of the target population and they were distributed throughout Zimbabwe, mainly in the country's border districts of Binga, Hwange, Kariba, Chirundu, Nyanga, Chipinge, Chiredzi, Beitbridge, Gwanda, Bulilima and Mangwe where the country's minority languages are widely spoken. Participants were also interviewed in the major cities of Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru and Masvingo.

The important variables for inclusion in the sample included being a mother tongue speaker of any one of the selected marginalized language groups; being a practicing language expert (language and linguistics lecturers; education officers and high school teachers); being a practicing print and/or electronic media personality; and being actively involved in language policy making in Zimbabwe. The age-group of the participants also constituted another important criterion in the sense that selection was limited to the following age groups: 18-25 years; 26-40 years and 41-60 years. Participants within these age groups were considered as capable of providing useful information on language use and language treatment in Zimbabwe. Level of education was also an essential variable taken into consideration during the recruitment process. Because the topic under investigation required an understanding of language use in relation to the specialized field of language policy and planning, the minimum level of education for inclusion in the sample was set at Advanced Level (Form 6). This requirement was relaxed for marginalized language speakers since most of the information required from them specifically focused on their views regarding the use of their mother tongues in different social domains.

All interviews were personally conducted by the researcher in the participants' chosen language(s). 98.2% of the interviewees were comfortable with being interviewed in English while

1.8% would code-mix English and any African language(s) of their choice. The researcher had no problems with the language question as he could speak and understand all the languages chosen by the different categories of participants. Each category of participants was asked a series of semi-structured and unstructured questions on the topic of language use, language maintenance, language marginalization and language futures in Zimbabwe. A Sanyo micro-cassette Dictaphone and a Digital Voice Recorder were used to capture the data.

In order to establish the patterns of everyday modes of language-based discrimination, two approaches were used namely, *constant comparative analysis* and *content analysis* taken after Pope and Mays. In constant comparative analysis, some data were transcribed and examined for content immediately after collection. One advantage of the constant comparative approach is that it allowed ideas which emerged from earlier interviews to be included in forthcoming interviews. As a result, the researcher was able to recognize new ideas and themes as they emerged from the collected data. Hypotheses about the relationship between various ideas and themes were tested out and constructs leading to new concepts and understandings were formed using the constant comparative method.

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Exclusion versus promotion of linguistic diversity	Opening a can of worms Stereotyped perceptions Inferiority complexes Resource limitations
2. Language, politics and the nation building metaphor	Nation building or empire building? National unity and cultural integration Marginalization and geo-political frontiers
3. Linguistic imperialism and cultural hegemony	Hegemony and language hierarchies Languages of wider communication thesis
4. Institutions and language marginalization	Education and language use Media and language use Academic book publishing and language use
5. Language, identity and economics	Languages as markers of ethnicity and nationality Language, social status and economics
6. Interrogating the notion of minority language	Minority and socio-political power Social construction of minority Reconceptualizing the notion of minority
7. Interrogating language policy making in Zimbabwe	Representation in policy making Policy pronouncements and implementation
8. The future of marginalized languages of Zimbabwe	Pessimistic perceptions Optimistic perceptions
9. What is the way forward?	Community publishing and broadcasting Attitude change – from xenophobia to tolerance Pragmatic policies Political commitment to language issues

Figure 1.   Identified Themes and Sub-themes

The technique of content analysis was employed in categorizing oral data for purposes of classification, summarization and tabulation. There were two levels at which the content was analyzed:

- The manifest level: this entailed a descriptive account of the data stating what was actually said by the participants.
- The interpretative level: in this case, attention was mainly focused on what was meant by the response, or what was inferred or implied. The main goal of interpretative analysis was to tease out the underlying meanings and implications of the participants' responses.

Following these procedures, a total of nine themes were identified from oral interview data. See Figure 1 above.

Oral Interview data were further presented in terms of pattern of response by category of participants for purposes of comparing submissions by interviewees within the same category and across different categories. A breakdown of responses by category of participants is presented in Figure 2.

Research theme	Response by category of participants:							
	LE		LPM		MP		MLS	
	%	N= 5	%	N= 5	%	N= 5	%	N=35
1.Exclusion versus promotion of linguistic diversity	80	4	40	2	80	4	80	28
2.Language, politics and nation building metaphor	80	4	60	3	100	5	86	30
3. Linguistic imperialism and cultural hegemony	80	4	40	2	60	3	89	31
4. Institutions and language marginalization	80	4	60	3	100	5	100	35
5. Language, identity and economics	80	4	80	4	60	3	66	23
6. Interrogating the notion of minority language	60	3	80	4	40	2	71	25
7. Interrogating the policy making enterprise in Zimbabwe	60	3	40	2	60	3	63	22
8. The future of marginalized languages of Zimbabwe	80	4	60	3	40	2	69	24
9. What is the way forward?	60	3	40	2	100	5	97	34

Figure 2.   Pattern of Response by Category of Participants

A detailed interpretation of oral interview results is undertaken in the subsequent sections of this paper.

3   Interpretation of Results

The research findings summarized in Figure 2 show that the frequency or popularity of themes varied from one category of participants to another. For the participant category of language experts (LE), themes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8 were the most popular with 80% response rate each. Two themes were most favoured by language policy makers (LPM), namely themes 5 and 6, with a response rate of 80%

each. As for the category of media practitioners and academic book publishers (MP), the most popular themes were 2, 4 and 9 with 100% response rate each followed by theme 1 with 80%. Among the marginalized language speakers (MLS), five themes had high frequency rates. These are theme 4 (100%); theme 9 (97%); theme 3 (89%); theme 2 (86%) and theme 1 (80%).

The data presented in Figure 2 show that everyday forms of language marginalization were seen as mainly linked to sub-themes that fall under themes one up to seven. Therefore, the discussion in the next sections of this paper will focus mainly on issues to do with language hierarchies and linguistic imperialism, stereotyped perceptions about minority language speakers, feelings of internalized negative self-consciousness, low self-awareness and self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, poor self-definition and affirmation, lack of pro-activeness as well as identity crisis.

3.1 Language hierarchies and cultural imperialism

> The imperial tendencies of Shona and Ndebele, which seem to be orchestrated by policy makers who are either Shona or Ndebele, have constituted a deliberate effort to kill minority languages in Zimbabwe. There also seems to be a latent belief in central government and in the policy making machine that everyone in Zimbabwe either understands Shona or Ndebele or both. Because of that, the production of material on nationally important events is always in Shona and Ndebele. For example, you look at the jingles popularizing the agrarian reform programme. They were produced largely in Shona and partly in Ndebele. There was not even a single one produced in any one of the minority languages.
>
> (MP 1)

The above extract from an interview transcript aptly sums up the participants' overall opinion on everyday forms of language-based marginalization that are legitimized and institutionalized through the policy making process in Zimbabwe. While the questions that sought information on the politics of language marginalization in Zimbabwe mainly focused on the struggle for power and supremacy among African languages, the elicited responses also indicated that this issue cannot be exhaustively debated outside the context of English hegemony. Because Zimbabwe was a British colony for nearly a century, colonial policies ensured that English was entrenched as the language of records and documentation. These developments gave rise to a "language situation that is characterized by a diglossia with multiple levels where English is a high (H), Shona and Ndebele as low (L) but these two are high at some level vis-à-vis minority languages" (LE 5).

Zimbabwe's language situation as described above is often interpreted in terms of Abdulaziz-Mkilifi's concept of triglossia. Abdulaziz-Mkilifi introduced the concept of triglossia to capture a sociolinguistic situation in Tanzania where local languages (the equivalent of minority languages in this case) were used in oral intergroup communication, while a local standardized lingua franca (the

equivalent of Shona or Ndebele) was used for some of the high functions and a world language (English) was used in all high functions such as in official documents and international communications. In Zimbabwe, the colonially inherited high status language, English, continues to be the de jure official language. The popular view among language policy makers was that:

> There is no document that tells you English is the official language of Zimbabwe. It is a de facto arrangement, which came with the creation of Rhodesia as a settler colony. English is so entrenched because Zimbabwe was intended to be a settler colony, as opposed to an exploitation colony such as Botswana. Because of that you get from the very beginning just marginalization of all African languages, with some being used for elementary education or as subjects later on up to higher levels for administrative convenience and also for evangelization. So, literacy in African languages has that purpose: evangelization and administrative convenience.
>
> (LPM 1)

Two observations can be made about issues raised in the above excerpt. Firstly, any argument that blames colonialism for the current marginalized status of African languages is congruent with the discourses of those in Zimbabwe's policy making machinery, schooled in nationalist philosophy, who continue to see the ghosts of former British colonial masters as haunting the country almost 30 years after independence. While it is true that English is the dominant language in all spheres of public life in Zimbabwe, the question is does this still have anything to do with the British any more? The answer to this question was well articulated by LE 2 who argued "We should desist from lamenting on what colonialists did because colonialism went away a long time ago. What is left for us is to look at ourselves as a people who have been empowered by our own legislative instruments. Colonialism is no longer an issue here." The legislature, which has the responsibility of formulating and enunciating statutes, should take positive measures that seek to uplift the status of local languages.

The second observation is that although they do not specifically use the term hegemony, a general view exists among language policy makers that all African languages of Zimbabwe are actually suffering from English hegemony. This view was reiterated by another language policy maker who noted that:

> English domination came with military defeat. English became powerful only after the Ndebele kingdom had been defeated militarily. Secondly, there was the creation of institutions access to which is contingent or dependant upon ability to communicate in English – going to school, the economy, commerce, etc it's all English. So the language of commerce and industry is English, which has empowered itself to the detriment of all African languages.
>
> (LPM 3)

Lumping together all African languages and presenting them as equal victims of English hegemony, without getting into the finer details of counter-hegemonic and sub-hegemonic behaviours among

African languages themselves is a very dangerous generalization, which has led to the continued marginalization of local languages other than Shona and Ndebele. For mother tongue speakers of minority languages, access to industry, commerce and the corridors of power and decision making is actually dependent upon competence in written and spoken Shona and Ndebele. Among minority language speakers, the realities of English hegemony are far more remote than the everyday forms of linguistic and cultural assimilation posed by Shona and Ndebele. Minority language speakers' views about the domination of their languages by fellow African languages are well captured in the following extract from MLS 22:

> This issue of colonization is in our bones. There are people who believe that inasmuch as the whites colonized the blacks, Ndebele and Shona should also colonize other languages. And as I said, imperialism knows no colour. It's about power relationships and economic relationships between two people. So you will find that the tendency therefore is if some people had their way, they would impose languages of their choice. The whole of Matabeleland North and South would be Ndebele and everywhere else would be Shona.

The sentiments expressed in the above quotation clearly capture the way in which other language speakers in Zimbabwe have been subordinated to the hegemonic and imperialist aspirations of Shona and Ndebele language speakers. Due to the postcolonial policies of assimilation, one would find that all languages in Matabeleland have lost ground to Ndebele and those in Mashonaland have yielded to Shona hegemony. This form of language marginalization, which often translates into economic deprivation and socio-political discrimination, has been interpreted as a form of internal colonization based on language rather than race or skin colour.

The participants also brought another dimension to the issue of language marginalization, which has to do with the unequal power relations between the two national languages, Shona and Ndebele. On average, 67% of all the participants were of the view that while official government pronouncements present Shona and Ndebele as equal, the situation is actually more complex. Responding to questions on the popular belief that Shona and Ndebele are always accorded equal functional and institutional status in Zimbabwe, MP 4 quipped: "Yeah, on paper Shona and Ndebele are equal but practically they are not." He went on to cite the electronic media in Zimbabwe where priority is given to Shona on radio and television programming, with Ndebele always coming last. This view was further reinforced by LE 4 who observed that:

> Although Ndebele is not officially considered to be a minority language, in relation to Shona, it is a minority. So all of these languages found in south western Zimbabwe are minority languages although Ndebele may pretend not to be one. Nationally and in terms of function, Ndebele is indeed a minority language.

Language experts, media practitioners and minority language speakers also presented the situation in which Shona enjoys a much higher and superior status to that of Ndebele and all other Zimbabwean languages as something that "is sort of propaganda which depends on the politics of the day; something that depends on who is ruling and how much political power they wield" (MP 2). In Zimbabwe, the landscape of political leadership is dominated by the Shona ethnic group and all influential positions in society that have to do with public policy making are occupied by Shona language speakers. This suggests that other than the question of numerical supremacy, Shona has emerged as the second most powerful language (after English) in Zimbabwe because "it is the language of the capital and it is the language spoken by the president himself" (LE 5). The position of Shona in Zimbabwe can be typified as counter-hegemonic in the sense that the Shona language seeks to replace English as the country's official language (Ndhlovu). All this is linked to issues of rulership and the postcolonial political project of imposing Shona as the rallying point for constructing uniform and monolithic national culture. In the words of LE 1:

> Those that are Shona speaking have a belief that in order for us to be seen to be united; in order for us to be a people, everybody must speak Shona. They must speak Shona because the belief is that once the leader at the top is Shona, we must show that we follow the leader and express our solidarity by speaking his language. And the leaders also feel proud that everybody is now speaking our language.

An illustration to the above argument was given by one marginalized language speaker who cited Minister without Portfolio, Elliot Manyika's tour of Matabeleland North province. On 19 March 2006, Minister Manyika is said to have spoken in Shona at rallies held in Nkayi and Lupane despite the fact that the people residing in these districts are largely Ndebele and Kalanga speaking. In her critique of what she considered to be an intolerant attitude displayed by Shona speaking national leaders, MLS 14 observed:

> You see this other minister, Elliot Manyika, who goes into Matabeleland blasting and blasting in Shona! What's the hell; who tells him everybody in Zimbabwe knows and must know Shona? In their minds, some of these leaders can't understand why some people cannot understand Shona. This is the attitude. The tragedy in this country is that when a person resides in a particular area, he/she doesn't think that there are other people who are different from him/her. We are not saying they must not speak in Shona. No! All I am saying is they need to have interpreters for the benefit of those who do not understand the language.

Ndebele has also been presented as suppressing all minority languages in western and south western Zimbabwe. Because it is the only officially recognized African language of wider communication in the whole of Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South, other language speakers in these provinces have been forced to assimilate into Ndebele linguistic and cultural norms. MLS 10, a

Kalanga speaking author and oral historian gave a detailed description of how the Kalanga people have lost ground to Ndebele, both in linguistic and physical terms. In the words of MLS 10:

> Following the settlement of the Ndebele in Kalanga speaking areas, many of them have assimilated into Ndebele to the point that over the years they have completely changed their identity to become Ndebele. The Kalanga people have somewhat been sidelined in the sense that if you want to study the languages of Matabeleland or southern Zimbabwe, the tendency is to rush for Ndebele. When you move into Botswana, the tendency is to rush for Setswana. So, this leaves the Kalanga language somewhat marginalized. It's marginalization in language terms and, it is also marginalization in physical terms, that is, in geographical terms. If you look at the history of Zimbabwe you will find that Kalanga was spoken as far as Hwange, Gwanda and Nkayi. However, progressively, the Kalanga people were pushed to the south western corner of Zimbabwe. As a result, you find few studies being carried out on a marginalized group. So we find their language being bottled up between south western Zimbabwe and north western Botswana. Therefore, the marginalized status of Kalanga is more historical.

This description of Kalanga marginalization epitomizes the situation of all other minority languages in the Matabeleland region. Submissions from mother tongue speakers of Venda, Nambya, Tonga, Sotho and Xhosa show that the fortunes of these languages continue to be marginalized by Ndebele domination. The kind of relationship that exists between Ndebele and all other languages in the Matabeleland region can best be described as sub-hegemonic. In other words, within the confines of the linguistic ecology of Matabeleland, Ndebele is the dominating and oppressor language while all other languages remain marginalized. However, the level and extent of non-recognition among the minority languages themselves varies between officially recognized and officially unrecognized languages. Those that are officially recognized enjoy a modicum of presence in the education system and on radio. Officially unrecognized marginal languages are talked about but absent from the media and education system of Zimbabwe.

Contrary to the popular view in the existing body of literature that Zimbabwe's language situation is less complex than those found elsewhere (see for example, the *National Language Policy Advisory Panel Report,* Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, and the *Nziramasanga Commission Report on Education and Training in Zimbabwe,* Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture), the foregoing analysis reveals a multi-layered and complicated linguistic ecology for Zimbabwe. The hierarchical organization of Zimbabwean languages is more complex than Abdulaziz-Mkilifi's triglossia referred to earlier. For Zimbabwe, this study proposes a polyglossic hierarchical arrangement of languages with five tiers as shown in Figure 3 below.

English (Hegemonic level)
|
Shona (Counter-hegemonic level)
|
Ndebele (Sub-hegemonic level)
|
Officially Recognized Minority (Semblance of recognition)
|
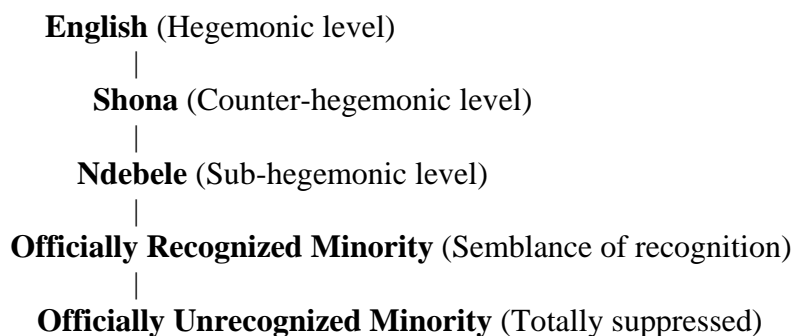**Officially Unrecognized Minority** (Totally suppressed)

Figure 3.   Hierarchies in the Zimbabwean linguistic ecology

Figure 3 shows that the Shona language occupies a counter-hegemonic position in the Zimbabwean linguistic ecology with Ndebele following immediately below it, and behaving in a sub-hegemonic manner with respect to minority languages. Overall, what emerges is a situation in which the two Zimbabwean national languages, namely, Shona and Ndebele, have been successfully imposed on speakers of marginal languages as an intrinsic part of 'modernization', 'nation-building' and 'progress'. This enterprise of fashioning new mental structures based on Shona/Ndebele linguistic norms has consequently ushered sentiments of stigmatizing, downgrading and invisibilizing other language speakers on a day-to-day basis. The preponderant view among the interviewed media practitioners, language experts and speakers of minority languages was that an amalgam of politically and culturally based domineering attitudes has confounded the whole question of language marginalization in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

3.2   Stereotyped perceptions about minority groups

Speakers of African languages other than Shona and Ndebele have been variously labelled using derogatory terminology that caricatures them as people whose linguistic and cultural identities are inherently substandard, inferior and backward. The following sample of submissions from minority language speakers illustrates this observation:

1) We feel like we are stereotyped on tribal grounds. We are looked down upon because of our language and not our skin colour (MLS 1).
2) Our marginalization has more to do with the attitude of our national leaders, if at all we can term them national leaders. They believe that all minor language speakers are illiterate and therefore do not have a voice. Quite a number of them come from Shona and Ndebele and they do not want to recognize the feelings of other people. They are so much afraid of recognizing the otherness of other languages. They just want to trample on our languages and simply say these are other languages, with a sarcastic tone. If you identify yourself and say I am Tonga, people begin to say, "Oh! you are from Binga; so you smoke mbanje [marijuana] as if mbanje is only found in Binga and yet there are a number of districts that grow the plant (MLS 11).

3) There are a lot of stereotypes and misconstrued views about the Tonga. People believe Tongas smoke mbanje, have got tails and live in their own way. As a result, and due to fear of this negative stereotyping Tonga people hide themselves and do not want to be identified as speakers of the Tonga language. They are now ashamed of themselves (MLS 3).

4) All this [problem of language marginalization] has to do with the attitude of majority groups who believe we are inferior. Our status can only be uplifted through a deliberate policy that recognizes the uniqueness of Nambya speakers (MLS 7).

The four illustrations bring to relief the multiple and complex ways in which linguistically- and culturally-based forms of exclusion have come to be constructed in the lives of marginalized polities of Zimbabwe. Socially unacceptable and degrading practices such as drug abuse have been essentialized as identity markers of minority language speakers. Minority language speakers are further discriminated against on the basis of their perceived literacy. This negative stereotyping is ironic in that while it is government responsibility to ensure that adequate educational provisions are accessible to all citizens, it is the same holders of key positions in government, who deride marginalized language groups for their inadequate reading and writing competences.

These negative stereotypes are an important factor that exposes the complicity of influential members of society, mainly speakers of major languages, to the construction and institutionalization of language-based marginalization in Zimbabwe. The general feeling among minority language speakers was that using their mother tongues in public is not well received by dominant language groups. As a result, marginalized language groups find themselves shying away and retreating into their cocoons due to fear of public stigmatization. This further engenders feelings of inferiority, mental colonization, and internalized subordination, which are discussed in the next sub-section.

3.3 Feelings of inferiority and internalized subordination

Comments from the participants indicate that some Zimbabwean languages are currently marginalized because their mother tongue speakers suffer from feelings of inferiority and subordination. On this issue, 76% of the participants (across all the four categories) concurred that part of the explanation to the low status of minority languages of Zimbabwe can be located within the attitude of the speakers themselves. As one language expert (LE 4) observed, indigenous African language speakers, especially marginalized language groups, are not serious about their languages. He further noted that "these are kaffir languages and people don't want to be kaffirs" and so they do all they can to abandon their own languages in preference for prestigious language varieties namely English, Shona and Ndebele. In the words of LE 4:

> It's all a mental process. To be is to be like a white man. So when you are talking about language you are talking about mental domination. The black man wants to be like a white man and the white man comes with a specific language and that's 'the' language. Yes, we might talk about all these other things but no one is serious about them. These fellows want their children to rush to elite English medium schools such as Petra High School and Girls College. So, those who remain patriotic to these [marginalized] languages are ordinary people without resources and this is the tragedy. The patriotic fellows do not have the resources to develop their languages.

The impression one gets from the above excerpt is that the marginalized status of some Zimbabwean languages is linked to processes of inferiority complex and mental domination. However, there is need for a more critical analysis of the factors giving rise to such a situation. People remain loyal to their languages or adopt other languages on the basis of utility, power or prestige (Tonkin). In other words, speakers remain loyal to a particular language when they have the strength and resources to do so. They may also give up their languages when the benefits of adopting another language exceed the advantages of remaining with the ones they have. This convoluted nature of shift in language loyalty complicates the problem of language marginalization in Zimbabwe such that one would find it too simplistic to explain the whole issue in terms inferiority and internalized subordination. As already pointed out in the preceding sub-section, language maintenance efforts are always intricately intertwined with the exigencies of political and economic demands. This observation is also evident from the following sentiments raised by one Sotho language speaker:

> Sometimes people are not forced to learn or speak Ndebele. They are reluctant to speak their own languages and prefer Ndebele instead. Sotho speakers are comfortable with Ndebele because they have accepted that. People undermine themselves. There is no one who tells us that Sotho is a minority language. We just subordinate ourselves to Ndebele because we have told ourselves so. But where it comes from, I don't know.
>
> (MLS 19)

In a similar manner, 80% of the interviewed media practitioners and academic book publishers suggested that the problem of language marginalization in Zimbabwe lies squarely in the mother tongue speakers' disregard of what is their own in preference of borrowed tongues. The following quotations illustrate this point:

> These minority language speakers need to be accommodated but the problem is if you want to accommodate someone who feels inferior about himself, where do you start? Yes, this inferiority complex might have been imposed but it has been internalized just like what the Ndebele town boys are doing. When they are here in Bulawayo, they always want to speak in English and not in their mother tongue.
>
> (MP 6)

> The problem with minority language groups is that they have an inferiority complex. The educated among them do not have an interest in speaking and

> developing their languages. … Minority language groups are very shy and do not want to speak their languages in public or when they are among majority language groups.
>
> (MP 2)

On face value, speaking and learning major languages appears to be a voluntary decision taken by marginalized language groups because they undermine themselves. However, a deeper analysis would reveal that the seemingly voluntary decision is actually a result of the way in which hegemonic forces operate. As Ives observes:

> One common element of hegemony is that it helps explain why large groups of people continue to acquiesce to, accept and sometimes actively support governments and their entire social and political systems that continually work against their interests. In other words, can we say a society is free of domination if the government or state is not using overt coercion and physical force to dominate its subjects?
>
> (6)

It is notable from the above quotation that when minority language speakers find themselves abandoning their mother tongues in preference for other language varieties, without any physical force exerted upon them, it does not necessarily mean that they are doing so out of choice. The point is that the seemingly voluntary decision to shift from Sotho to Ndebele for example, is underpinned and mediated by the workings of hegemony. This brings to relief the idea that minority language speakers of Zimbabwe have free choice over the language(s) they use. While inferiority complexes and internalized subordination constitute an important variable to the understanding of language-based marginalization, it is equally important to dig deeper into the causes of such feelings. This exercise of further analysis reveals that the phenomena of inferiority complex and internalized subordination are in fact manifestations of major language groups' suppressive and discriminatory practices that lie hidden in the fissures and fault lines of seemingly stable ethnolinguistic relations in Zimbabwe. The fortunes of minority languages are inexorably bound up with and indexically linked to those of their speakers since the symbolic and communicative statuses attached to languages often have a significant impact on the socio-economic and political prospects of those who speak them (Tollefson).

4 Conclusion

The subject of language marginalization presents evolving and changing patterns of contestations over social domination, political control and manipulation, cultural hegemony and the legitimation of dominant ideologies in postcolonial Zimbabwe. This paper has argued that language-based marginalization in Zimbabwe has been manifested in various forms including stereotyped perceptions

of minority language speakers, imposition of dominant linguistic and cultural norms onto minority polities and the mental colonization of socio-politically weak language groups. With the aid of oral data drawn from a cross section of minority language speakers, language policy makers, language experts as well as media practitioners and book publishers, this article has shown that the imperial and assimilationist tendencies of Shona and Ndebele have contributed to the erosion of cultural identities of minority language speakers in present day Zimbabwe. This has wider implications for future socio-economic and political prospects of minority ethnolinguistic polities. The paper has proposed a paradigm shift in the interpretation and understanding of language-based power imbalances in the postcolonial world. Contrary to mainstream nationalist discourses that tend to exclusively focus their attention on colonialism as the only historical period characterized by linguistic domination, this paper has argued that marginalization has to be seen as firmly resident in unequal power relations between speakers of dominant African languages on the one hand, and speakers of minority African languages on the other. The panacea for uplifting the status of marginalized African languages does not, therefore, necessarily lie in the nauseating rhetoric about the ills of colonially inherited English preponderance. Rather, the solution lies in a rigorous re-imagination and reconfiguration of the problem of language-based marginalization in broad terms that relate it to postcolonial political power-plays operating at the micro-social levels of society.

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MP 6, *Umthunywa* Community Newspaper, Gwanda, 05 April 2006

MLS 1, Binga Museum, Binga, 13 January 2006

MLS 3, Tonga Online, Binga, 13 January 2006

MLS 7, Great Zimbabwe National University, Masvingo, 19 April 2006

MLS 10, Great Zimbabwe National University, Masvingo, 19 April 2006

MLS 11, Midlands State University, Gweru, 06 December 2005

MLS 14, Midlands State University, Gweru, 08 December 2005

MLS 19, Hillside Teachers College, Bulawayo, 20 February 2006

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