



## The politics of language and nation building in Zimbabwe

Ken Walibora Waliaula

To cite this article: Ken Walibora Waliaula (2013) The politics of language and nation building in Zimbabwe, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 34:1, 105-106, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2012.709990](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2012.709990)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2012.709990>



Published online: 24 Jul 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 189



View related articles [↗](#)

**The politics of language and nation building in Zimbabwe**, by Finex Ndhlovu, Bern and New York, Peter Lang, 2009, xvi + 227 pp., €37.80/US\$56.95, ISBN 978-3-03911-942-4

The ostensible cultural-nationalist view that English – which, for many of its users, is the language of the former colonial master – is the international killer of other languages is widely held. English tends to dominate the linguistic terrain on a global scale, but particularly in its former colonies, long after they assumed independence and forged their own language policies. That does not always sit well with those who yearn for the absolute erasure of all vestiges of the devastating colonial epoch. Yet it is a fact that former colonies of France, Portugal, Spain, Germany and England continue to use varieties of the colonial language today. Thus, in Zimbabwe – once Southern Rhodesia – English has pride of place as the official language.

It is refreshing to read Finex Ndhlovu's book, with its insistence that English is *not*, in fact, a threat to the minority languages in Zimbabwe. Quite the contrary, the danger to those languages emanates from a homogenising element in language policy that elevates Shona and Ndebele above other indigenous African varieties. In other words, Ndhlovu argues that the threat to linguistic diversity in Zimbabwe is from within and not from without. The political clout of the Shona- and Ndebele-speaking majorities weighs heavily on the marginalised languages, threatening their very existence.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first introduces and defines the terms of the debate, and contextualises the question of language policy in Zimbabwe. One of the most compelling arguments that Ndhlovu makes here involves the differentiation between rights to language and rights of language. The foregrounding of language policy in human-rights parlance accords well with the marginalisation of minority languages by majority ones, the vexed and vexing question that forms the thrust of the book. The second chapter uncovers the overt and covert forces shaping and moulding language policy in Zimbabwe – from the intellectual input of South African-trained linguist Clement Doke, who served as the colonial government adviser on standardisation of language varieties in the 1920s, to the post-independence formulations of Robert Mugabe's era.

Chapter 3 explores the geopolitical and demographic aspects of language, delving into the use of English vis-à-vis indigenous African languages, and the forces that determine or predetermine the language situation. Unsurprisingly, speakers of Mugabe's Shona (75% of the Zimbabwean population) dominate electoral positions. Chapter 4 presents interview data confirming that the Shona–Ndebele nexus poses the greatest risk to other Zimbabwean languages. The author calls for a refashioning of the national language policy, so as to encourage and enhance linguistic diversity. He goes on to highlight the wide array of suggestions from his interviewees about ways to redress the linguistic imbalance in the country. In his concluding chapter, he relates the Zimbabwean case study to broader issues of the politics and poetics of language and nation-building.

Overall, this is a structurally and conceptually solid text. Ndhlovu's analytical rigour is admirable. The central thesis – that Zimbabwe's official stance on language, in both colonial and post-colonial eras, has fostered the internal colonisation of minority languages by the majority Shona and Ndebele varieties – is persuasive and cogent. But, as the author argues, this is not a problem unique to Zimbabwe. He cites the Ethiopian example, where homogenising the linguistic landscape through the promotion of Amharic spells doom for other indigenous languages. The implications of internal linguistic colonisation are as far-reaching as the external type, in Zimbabwe and beyond. In either situation, language rights are needlessly put in serious jeopardy.

The only quibble with the book is that it dismisses or underestimates the propensity of multiple linguistic loyalties to undermine national cohesion. This is often the case in many African countries, where ethnic (and, by extension, linguistic) identity trumps national identity. Generally, however, Ndhlovu's text offers fresh insights into African language-policy

issues. As an important contribution to the literature of the African condition, it should be of interest to a broad spectrum of readers: linguists, policy-makers, students of culture and the general public.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2012.709990>

Ken Walibora Waliaula

*Department of African Languages & Literature  
University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA  
waliaula@wisc.edu*

© 2013, Ken Walibora Waliaula