

Exploring reading in an African language

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Abstract

Like slash and burn agriculture obliterating rain forests, the inexorable advance of hegemonic languages is wreaking havoc with the world's wealth in terms of language diversity. The development of a reading culture among indigenous speakers of any language can fortify that language against onslaught from hegemonic others.

With about 12 million first language speakers, *isiZulu* is an African language that has developed a reading culture that is relatively strong, but the language is under threat by English, and needs affirmation as a language of reading and learning. With increased recognition of the value of mother tongue instruction, there is policy support for the promotion and protection of *isiZulu* as an indigenous Southern African language, but very little about reading in this, or any other indigenous Southern African language, has been documented.

This paper gives an account of a study that set out to discover whether, because of its structure and orthography, *isiZulu* requires readers to use reading skills that are different from those needed to read English, and it explores attitudes to reading among Zulu people. In order to do this, eye movements of first language speakers of Zulu were mechanically tracked and recorded as they read text in English and *isiZulu*, and the records compared. The study also drew on discussions with Zulu people who consider themselves to be good readers about the place of reading within Zulu culture.

1. Title page:

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2. **dead tree**

At the point of greatest language diversity, thought to be in the 1400s, the world had between ten and fifteen thousand languages. After the spread of hegemonic languages in the last three centuries we have less than half of these left (about 6 ½ thousand), and the mortality rate is increasing. Projections are that we will lose 90% of the remaining 6 ½ thousand by the end of this century and end up in the year 2100 with only about 600 languages in the world. Part of the projected pattern is that Africa's languages will dwindle from 2000 to 200.

Languages do change all the time, so it might be silly to mourn their loss, especially if they have naturally metamorphosed and gained new names. But people who have been lucky enough to develop communicative competence in more than one language, especially when those languages belong to completely different language groups would probably agree with me that the loss of any language (especially if it has no direct descendants) is a shrinking of diversity of thought and therefore to be profoundly regretted.

Many of the languages that have disappeared have had a written form, so appearing in print does not necessarily provide an armour against extinction. But the development of a reading culture in threatened languages might be a source of vigour.(.....little bird on the dead tree.)

3. **Isolezwe**

Zulu or, *isiZulu*, is the "biggest" indigenous language in South African language in that it has more native speakers than any other indigenous S African language (than 10 million) and it has developed a reading culture that is comparatively strong. To illustrate this strength there are three main Zulu newspapers - this is one is Isolezwe. The most seriously analytic one, UMafrica, saw its circulation go from 15 000 copies a week to 49 000 a week when its journalists flew to joburg to give full coverage to Jacob Zuma's rape trial. It dropped back to 22 000 after the trial.

4. **Mk piece**

Two Adult B E initiatives that the CAE at UKZN is involved in with the aim of stimulating reading in Zulu include an Adult Basic Education newspaper that we put out every week
[describe]

5. **NRP covers**

CAE staff are also the development of easy to read books for adults in all 11 official languages. The books are popular among learners but some of our adult learners say they hide them in plastic bags if they go on kombis – so that people will not see the colourful covers and see that they are not educated and reading basic books in Zulu.

6. **policies and support**

In SA we have very strong policy support for the protection of *isiZulu* as an indigenous Southern African language, and its promotion as a language of reading - examples of this are:

- the constitution guarantees its status as an official language
- the Pan South African language board was established to protect and promote indigenous languages

- the Book Development Council of South Africa has among its aims:

To stimulate the development of local authorship

To ensure an adequate, affordable and accessible supply of books for all segments of the population

To facilitate nationwide distribution and international circulation of books

To facilitate and coordinate reading promotion activities

To ensure that book publishing mirrors the rich cultural heritage and diversity of South Africa

To ensure the participation of previously marginalised individuals, with particular emphasis on black women, the youth and the disabled

People who work in these bodies are very busy but I get the impression that they operate in their own sphere, with a lot of high level workshops and meetings, and there has not been much trickle down effect so far

In spite of this policy support, (SA great policies) Zulu is under threat from English. English has high status, and signals high levels of education, sophistication and – most importantly - earning power. Competence in English doesn't guarantee employment, but successful people tend to be highly competent in English, and the inability to speak English limits options drastically, with only low earning labouring jobs open to people who cannot speak English. So parents are willing to make all kinds of sacrifices to ensure that their children gain competence in English. They send their children to English medium schools, where education is seen to be superior, and sometimes even abandon speaking their own language at home, and speak English instead. Although UKZN is moving towards offering courses in the medium of Zulu, among students it's cool to sprinkle indigenous languages with English words, and as people shift to a more urban lifestyle, borrowed English words tend to naturally form a large part of their vocabulary.

In the context of this pressure, and the need to affirm Zulu as a language of reading and learning, it's worthwhile to note that several centuries ago, scholars of Europe were certain that Latin and Greek were the only languages with the capacity for theoretical complexity, and thought it was laughable to promote English as a language of learning.

7. paragraph of Zulu text

In terms of its orthography, Zulu text uses exactly the same alphabet as English, (except that c, q and x represent consonants that do not occur in English), and it has near perfect letter-sound correlation

In a paragraph, written Zulu looks like this

Abafundi bangakubuza ukuthi bazoyithola yini imisebenzi uma sebekwazi ukufunda nokubhala. Iqiniso elimsulwa elokuthi ukufunda nokubhala ngeke kubatholise umsebenzi kodwa kungabalekelela ekutholeni umsebenzi. Lokhu kusho ukuthi bangangena esikhundleni somsebenzi esidinga ikhono lokufunda nokubhala, futhi umuntu ongakwazi ukubona umsebenzi nasephephandabeni ungafaka isicelo. Kepha kunabantu abaningi kabi abaqedile ukufunda kodwa abangasebenzi.

IsiZulu (and ...etc) are examples of languages that are agglutinative, so that root words are combined into compounds.

8. 2 min - slides – They have not yet been employed Abakaqashwi --

As an example to illustrate the difference between these languages and English, you can read the English sentence “They have not yet been employed” by looking very briefly at the whole words without looking at each morpheme.

9. and Akakaqashwi

In contrast, to read the Zulu equivalent “Abakaqashwi”, a reader has to be aware of the same elements of meaning, but as syllables of the same word rather than as separate visually separated words.

This means that in order to get the meaning of a Zulu text, a reader must be aware of each morpheme, and I suspected that competent reading of Zulu text would possibly involve a pattern of more fixations and a smaller span of recognition than does competent reading of English text.

10. Table

Wanting to test this idea, I persuaded a number of colleagues who were mainly Zulu first language speakers to submit themselves to having their reading of English and Zulu texts scrutinised.

I asked these colleagues to read aloud short texts in Zulu and English, and immediately afterwards analysed their reading with them, and also used a computerised reading testing programme to track and record their eye movements as they read silently in both languages, and recorded as measures of competence the number and duration of fixations made, the number of regressions, and the span of recognition. In the texts they read silently there was one sentence that contradicted information that preceded it, with the aim of recording what people do when they come across contradictory information in text that they are reading.

An enormously significant limitation on the study is of course the effect of observation on reading behaviour, especially since the observation involved wearing a sort of mask that enabled eye movements to be tracked. However, in spite of this, I discovered interesting patterns that contradicted not only my own hypothesis but also what most of my participants were expecting.

I had anticipated that in oral reading my participants would show equal competence across Zulu and English, but that tracking of their silent reading would show that readers would respond to Zulu text by exhibiting more fixations and a smaller span of recognition, in other words that they would process the text in smaller chunks than English text.

With regards to the silent reading, my expectations were shown, for this small sample at least, to be completely wrong - only 1 of the people tested (a second language Z reader) showed the pattern I expected.

Also, most of my participants’ beliefs about their own reading were at odds with what the recordings showed. I hesitate to assume that the recordings are more valid than what readers themselves perceive about their reading, but nevertheless, the pattern is interesting.

Only two of the participants believed that they read more competently in Zulu; the rest felt strongly that reading is easier, and that they read more smoothly and fluently when they read English, and they said they think that this is because their studies and work require them to read much more in English than Zulu. Yet the measures of competence recorded (number and duration of fixations, number of regressions, and span of recognition) indicated greater competence in reading isiZulu for 9 of the 11 first language Zulu speakers. Of the 4 whose recordings indicated better competence in English, one is a first language English speaker and one is a first language Pedi speaker.

I don't expect anyone to actually read all the information on this table (unless you're very keen), but to illustrate the pattern that appeared I've given background colour to the table. Scores that show greater competence in isiZulu have a blue background, scores that show greater competence in English have a dark yellow background, and scores that don't show much difference have a lighter yellow background. So of the Zulu first language readers, only the scores of "Emm" and "Skhu" showed more competence in reading English than Zulu text.

With regard to the reading aloud in Zulu and English, my participants had expected to read better in English, and most thought they had, saying things like (Sim) "in Zulu one struggles reading smoothly as one would reading English..." (Mag) "I think I'm better in terms of speed fluency, the eye runs more fast in E than in Z."

In fact, in their oral performance there was not much difference between my participants' reading of Zulu and English texts, but they tended to read Zulu with slightly more confidence and fluency and fewer miscues than English. This was less surprising to me than them.

If anyone has been really reading this table, you will have been struck by something alarming – that most of these readers read very poorly in both languages. This is a sensitive issue since most are staff at a tertiary institution, and I suspect it is one of the results of poor initial reading instruction that South Africans received under Bantu education.

11. Duma family

With regard to the place of reading within Zulu culture and attitudes to reading among Zulu people.

Like many people across the world, people on the east coast of SA were introduced to reading by missionaries, who performed amazing feats in the extent to which they worked out and described the rules of functioning of indigenous languages which completely different from any they knew, and developed writing systems for them. However their legacy is that reading continues for many people to be strongly associated with perfect performance and we still see the effects of this – as in this picture taken in the Qanda area.

In preparation for this paper I discussed the place of reading within the Z culture with a range of people who consider themselves insiders of current Zulu communities in KZN

12. mother and child in library

I've chosen 3 aspects from these discussions to talk about here – a shift from old perceptions about reading to new ones, gender differences and a predictable new divide that this opening up among SA people.

First, a shift that is happening presently – from the idea that reading is something that is done at school and not at home, to an acceptance and encouragement of reading at home.

Until very recently, something that has been taken for granted in Zulu families is that children have chores. A great many chores. Particularly girls. This meant that in the eyes of a great number of parents, children who were reading were wasting time, and if children did read at home, older family members would stop them and send them to do chores.

Some parents don't see why they should have anything to do with children's homework when teachers are paid to teach kids – but this may be because of feelings of inadequacy. This has changed for many families particularly in the post apartheid era of education, and many parents who were themselves schooled under Bantu education send their children to ex white schools –

what we call ex Model C schools. Here the homework demands are much greater than ever was the case under Bantu ed, and the parents in my research group loudly lamented the situation in their homes where their children claim that they have so much homework that they can't do chores. They give in to this claim but parents in this research group felt strongly that this had a seriously bad effect on the family where children are absolved from responsibility and as a result are less integrated into the family. ((As a result parents do all the work, including strictly non traditional tasks like cleaning the pool)).

13. woman with newspaper

Something that there was a generally agreed by the women in the group was that if you are a Zulu woman, there is time to read if you are not married, but not if you are. Part of being a wife and a mother, they all said, is that there is just no time to read, no time at any point where the work is done and you can read. So although children's literacy practices are breaking traditional Zulu cultural patterns, the literacy practices of their mothers are defined by these traditional patterns.

Interestingly most of the men in the group said that their wives didn't like to read – but they all said that they (the men) read newspapers – lots of newspapers, both Zulu and English, mainly for the political analysis and to know what's going on. Two of the group mentioned (separately) that the banning of political books in the apartheid era had actually stimulated reading and that political freedom has resulted in less reading of serious political texts.

An idea that many of the participants mentioned that I had not expected was the idea that people who read a lot go mad. I am told that this is a belief common among the generation of today's grannies, and that the madness blamed on reading too much is characterised by being anti social, staying away from people and not talking. My group assures me that they don't believe this and think it's quite funny – but one or two mentioned cases they knew of where educated people have gone bit crazy. I can't help wondering whether it's not the other way around, and maybe that people who are not at ease in the company of others retreat into reading.

14. A new great South African divide: Hlela family reading and Richmond granny

The most striking thing that this research highlighted was a new big divide that is opening up in SA's people.

It is a divide that is beginning to separate black African people and it is between those who have crossed what I will call the privilege line, got education, acquired professional status and, to a large extent, adopted Western attitudes and expectations, and become technologically sophisticated, and those who remain on the other side of the "privilege line". People who have crossed this line are discerning consumers and are very willing to go to great lengths to get the best for themselves and their children. Their children go to English medium schools, speak English very well, sprinkle their Zulu with English words, and many of them are enthusiastic readers – usually of English only. These families are seen as role models by some who perceive them as successful, and criticised by others who accuse them of abandoning African culture (and sometimes are labelled -or label themselves - "coconuts"). However they are seen in SA society, what is extremely clear is that they are going to have a huge impact on SA Society – these children are a generation completely different from all previous generations, their numbers are growing and their impact will be anything but negligible.

However a negative consequence of the high visibility of this generation is that it eclipses the plight of people on the other side of this new divide – those who remain on the poor side of the privilege line – usually the rural poor.

15. school feeding scheme

On this side of the line, there have not been many improvements in life since the end of apartheid. Some have got housing, but many have lost their jobs; Schools have got governing bodies and some have better facilities but since teacher training colleges were closed (and supposedly absorbed into university) it is more difficult to find teachers trained to teach in the foundation phase. AIDS and our poor attempts to deal with it continue to take their toll, and often grannies like the one in the previous pic (who attends a basic adult literacy class I'm involved with) have lost their children (whose education they made so many sacrifices for) and are bringing up their orphaned grandchildren alone. The home language of this section of the population remains firmly Zulu. Some of the people in my research group expressed the concern that because of this divide Zulu becoming associated by some of its own native speakers with poverty and seen as a backward language.

16. Last Richmond granny and child

So in answer to the questions I was asking at the beginning of all this, I am left with uncomfortable complexity:

People think they read better in English than Zulu but recordings of their reading behaviour don't support their perceptions

People express a strong belief in retaining Zulu but they think that it might be seen as a "backward" language and send their children to E schools and allow them to abandon patterns of interaction that characterise traditional Z families

There is less political reading now than during apartheid. But Zulu newspapers survive, particularly the more sensational ones.

And, in the age old pattern of languages after conquest, the use of Zulu is strongest in the most marginalised groups of its native speakers, who value literacy but whose literacy practices are not sophisticated.

The jury is still out on whether the Zulu language will survive Western prosperity.

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