



# Factors that Contributed to the Death of Chi Lapalapa Language of Southern Africa: A Lost Opportunity for Adopting an Indigenous Official Language For Southern Africa

Elliot Machinyise\*

Head of Literature and Languages Department, Kwame Nkrumah University, Kabwe, Zambia

*\*Corresponding Author: Elliot Machinyise, Head of Literature and Languages Department, Kwame Nkrumah University, Kabwe, Zambia*

**Abstract:** This article reports on results of a sociolinguistic investigation on factors that contributed to the death of Chilapalapa language, a former pidgin of Southern Africa. The investigation which was limited to three research areas (Kabwe, Lusaka and Mumbwa districts), revealed that four factors led to the extinction of this language. The main factor was the negative attachment tied to Chilapalapa language. This language was considered by newly independent states as a language of brutality as it was the language used by colonial masters to brutalise and oppress Africans. The other reason that led to the death of Chilapalapa was its lack of literary heritage and its non of adoption by Missionaries as medium of preaching and instruction in schools. The findings also revealed that no single book was written in Chilapalapa that time. Its absence in official domains and lack of cultural attachment to the language are other factors that facilitated its death. The results generally showed that Chilapalapa became obsolescent immediately after African countries became independent. However, some young African teachers feel the independent African countries lost an opportunity to have an indigenous language to be used as an international official language side by side with English. Based on the findings, the article attempts to argue that newly independent states should have ignored the negative tag attached to the language and officially supported Chilapalapa so as to have an indigenous international official language.death

**Keywords:** Language death, Language shift. Language attitude, literary heritage, Derogatory, Pidgin, Chilapalapa.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Any study involving language death or obsolescence in any given setting needs to take into account the historical and socio-cultural factors out of which the sociolinguistic environment being studied has been shaped. In this article two issues are being addressed; what are the factors that contributed to the death of Chilapalapa language, the pidgin of Southern Africa? A further purpose of this article is to establish whether Chilapalapa could have served as an indigenous official language of Southern Africa. This study was carried out within the socio-cultural, historical and sociolinguistic background of the language's former setting.

When we talk of language death, we refer to a situation where a language loses its native speaker. Thomeson, S (2007) reports, "A language must be dead when it no longer has any speaker." It is important to understand that the death of a language comes in many forms. Hornberger (2010) points out that when a linguistic community ceases to use its original language, language death is said to occur. Kuncha and Bathula (2006), also state that migration plays a vital role in the process of language shift leading to language death. However in case of pidgin languages, migration in fact facilitates their creation. According to the Collins English dictionary 12 th edition (2014), pidgins are languages that develop when people with no common languages come into contact with each other. It should be noted that nobody speaks pidgin as their mother tongue. Usually a pidgin language is created through the blending of some lexical and morphological elements of one major language with the grammar of one or more languages. The major or primary dialects are usually the languages of the former colonial masters such as English, French and Portuguese. A good example of such pidgins is

those found in the Caribbean which were created through the establishment of plantations with the large groups of slaves from West Africa. However, there are also pidgin languages spoken in Africa with a blending of English, French and some African languages. Among these African based pidgins, we talk of Chilapalapa. Chilapalapa as a pidgin language, was heavily influenced by Southern African native languages such as Ndebele, Shona, Nyanja, English and Afrikaans. About 60 percent of Chilapalapa vocabulary comes from Ndebele, 20 percent from English, 10 percent from Shona, 5 percent from Nyanja and another 5 percent from Afrikaans. Chilapalapa was widely used in towns, mines and on white owned farms.

The question which begs answers is where this language came from and how it came about. According to Magirosa (2014), Chilapalapa language was created by Southern African colonial masters (Boers) in order to oppress and humiliate Africans. For instance, a native black was not allowed to use English when speaking to a Whiteman or white woman, as doing so suggested that a black man was claiming to be socially equal to a white man. Chilapalapa was a racist language designed by whites (Boers) to demean and humiliate blacks. It was quite common in Northern and Southern Rhodesia especially in the mines and on farms to use Chilapalapa to refer to an African as a monkey. This goes without saying that this language was imposed on Africans hence instilling a negative attitude towards Chilapalapa in Africans. Ngidi (2007) defines language attitude as strong positive or negative emotions experienced by people when they are faced with a choice between languages in a variety of situations or are learning a language. The above explanations point out that people always want to identify themselves with a language that would either give them social status in society or a language that would provide social integration. The identity imposed by one's group membership is a crucial factor for language choice. Africans did not take pride in a language that demeaned them or made them less humans. Tsunoda, (2005) notes that as people aspire to learn a language spoken by the majority in the region, they become bilinguals and they eventually begin to lose their ability to use their mother tongue. Suffice to mention that teenagers feel more prestigious when using a language they learn in schools than using their unpopular languages. Due to the fact that young people never learnt this derogatory language in schools, it began to lose its vitality.

However Chilapalapa language died and became obsolescent in Zambia after independence and completely became extinct in Zimbabwe in 1980 immediately after independence. The most cardinal question which no one has bothered to ask is what led to the abrupt death of Chilapalapa. Interestingly, some young Africans born after independence feel the language should have been supported by newly independent states and used along side with English as official languages.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The data was collected by using questionnaires and in-depth interviews from a sample of 60 respondents comprising 20 former colonial farm and mine workers (who worked in Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively before independence), 5 white farm owners, 5 Asian shop owners and 30 young teachers born after independence. The teachers were chosen randomly in different schools across the country while white farm owners and Asian shop owners were selected using purposive (judgemental) method. I personally administered written questionnaires and conducted interactive interviews among farm and shop owners in order to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data on the use and knowledge of Chilapalapa language. Qualitative method was used to collect information pertaining to opinions and views of respondents while quantitative was used to collect statistical data. Purposive method was used on white farm owners and Asian shop owners due to pre-determined nature of information that was required from those who employed Africans and used Chilapalapa for communication during the colonial time. The questionnaire was designed in such a manner that it had provisions for both qualitative and quantitative data.

## **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The results are divided into two main sections. The first section presents data on respondents' responses on personal data, their linguistic background and degree of Chilapalapa competence. These data established respondents' attributes their degree of bilingualism and linguistic competence in Chilapalapa. The second section focuses on respondents' actual knowledge about the historical background of Chilapalapa and their views about the loss of its vitality.

### **3.1. Respondents' Personal Background**

Most of the respondents (60%) were young between 25 and 40 years, while 40 percent were old aged above 76 years. The young respondents were teachers born after independence while the old were workers and employers during the colonial time in Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively. In terms of gender, the sample constituted 80 percent males and 20 percent females. The findings also showed that 70 percent of the respondents had at least tertiary education while 30 percent had education level lower than grade 12 or form five. In terms of proficiency in Chilapalapa, 50 percent of the respondents (former workers and employers in the colonial time) were able to speak and understand Chilapalapa fluently while 50 percent (teachers born after independence) could neither understand nor speak the language.

These findings showed that the older respondents who worked in farms, mines and shops during the colonial era could still communicate proficiently in Chilapalapa language while young teachers born after independence heard about the language but could not speak it. The findings also revealed all those former mine, farm and shop workers had humble or no school education qualification at all. This reveals that quality of education during the colonial era was not accessible to the majority of Africans

### **3.2. Reasons for the Death Chilapalapa Language**

All the sixty respondents were asked to give reasons for the death and extinction of Chilapalapa language. Generally, factors given as having contributed to the death of Chilapalapa language were attributed to attitude, political decisions and cultural values attached to the language.

#### **3.2.1. The Language's Negative Historical Background**

Negative attitude triggered by hostile historical background is the major factor that contributed to the extinction of Chilapalapa language. All the former workers on farms, in the mines and in shops did admit that Chilapalapa language was a language of racial and colonial brutality. They submitted that Chilapalapa was created by "Mabbunu" (whites) to demean and humiliate African workers during the colonial era. They recalled instances when an African would visit a Whiteman's farm to look for employment, a white farm owner would not only tell a job seeker that there was no vacancy but would use derogatory words such as, "Aziko musebenzi bobojani" meaning there is no job you baboon. These former workers strongly supported the death and extinction of this language as continuing using it reminded them of the brutality they went through at the hands of racist colonial employers. However, shop owners of Asian origin had a different view. They believed Chilapalapa was the best lingua franca in Southern Africa as it facilitated communication between Asians and the majority of African workers and clients who had no opportunity of going to school to learn English. In the same vein white farm owners felt Chilapalapa was the easiest language to learn, they said it took few weeks for a European who visited Africa to learn it. When asked about the racial derogatory remarks associated with the language, they said it was not about the language but the era the language was used that triggered those racial remarks and after independence the language would have adapted the type of governance prevailing. These white farmers argued that the negative racial attachment to the language remained in the heads of Africans which could have faded with passage of time. According to the white farmers, Chilapalapa had more advantages than negative memories as it would have united Africans who divided on ethnic lines.

As revealed by the study, the Chilapalapa language was meant to demean Africans and confine them to a socially lower class making them unequal to whites. Indeed as revealed by the findings most of Chilapalapa words and phrases are derogatory targeted on Africans. However, it cannot be gainsaid as revealed by shop owners of Asian origins that the majority of Africans don't have access to school education where English is learnt. Chilapalapa would have played the communicative role as lingua Franca between Africans with no English proficiency and Asians who equally incapable of speaking English fluently. As stated by respondents, language in Africa is linked to tribe, therefore any selection of one language as national language at the expense of others can raise displeasure in speakers of other languages

### **3.2.2. Lack of Literary Heritage and Absence from Official Domains**

The findings revealed that lack of written literature in Chilapalapa, such as text books, story books, scriptures and hymn books greatly contributed to the death of Chilapalapa languages. White farmers attributed the failure to approve Chilapalapa as a language of instruction in schools to the refusal by missionaries to use a language of racial discrimination in their missionary institutions; they rather selected and supported majority native language a long side English as medium of evangelism and instruction in schools. Supporting such a derogatory language such as Chilapalapa would be an infringement to Christian values and principles of equal before Christ.

As a matter of fact Chilapalapa language as a combination of various languages was medium of communication for Master-Servant discourse and also used as lingua franca among nationals from other countries within the sub region (Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland and Mozambique. Most of the former mine workers who interacted with their counterparts from other countries, did mention Chilapalapa was not used in official domains such as school assemblies, public notices and announcements and media.

It therefore goes without saying that although Chilapalapa was imposed on Africans by colonial governments it was not officially supported in terms of being used in schools as medium of instruction and also as medium of official information dissemination. What should be noted without fear of being biased is that missionaries strongly supported majority indigenous languages which later shaped and decided the current recognition of indigenous regional official languages in independent Southern African states. This is why immediately after independence the Chilapalapa language went into extinction due to lack of institutional support.

### **3.2.3. Lack of Socio-Cultural Attachment to the Language**

When asked whether there were some cultural and traditional values attached to the language, former colonial mine and farm workers responded that Chilapalapa was not attached to any ethnic group therefore it did not have any cultural values attached to it. They stated that most of the songs, dances, riddles, myths and proverbs were in indigenous languages such as Zulu, Shona and Nyanja. They mentioned some of the popular songs sang those days were in Zulu, Shona and Nyanja. Some of the popular musicians those days were Soul brothers, Intombi zesimanjemanje, Steve Kekana, Thomas Mapfumo, Nation Pitchen Kazembe etc. None of these musicians sang in Chilapalapa though they could speak it.

As it is said language and culture are related, tribe and language in African context is one and the same thing. A language without tribal link cannot survive in a linguistic environment where tribal traditions are so strong.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study has clearly revealed that the death of Chilapalapa, the pidgin language of Southern Africa was triggered by the liberation of African states from the British rule between 1960s and early 1980s. As discussed above, Chilapalapa language became threatened when Africans attained self rule. As a language used to demean Africans, Chilapalapa was viewed as a tool of racial discrimination hence its abandonment after independence. It has also been revealed that the language's lack of institutional support, lack of literary heritage and its lack of attachment to cultural ethnicity is another factor that must have caused its poor language vitality. It was generally felt however, by the younger generation and shop owners of Asian origin that Chilapalapa language should have been maintained and supported by the newly independent African governments so as to make it an indigenous official language in the sub-region.

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### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



**Elliot Machinyise** was born in 1970 in Mumbwa district of Zambia. He holds a Master of Education in Applied Linguistics, a Bachelor of Arts with Education (English and French) degrees and a Diploma in Education obtained at the University of Zambia. He lectures English and French and is currently Head of Literature and Languages Department at Kwame Nkrumah University. He is also a PhD student in Linguistics General at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Elliot Machinyise has written and presented papers at local and international fora. He has published two Primary School text books in Chitonga language which are currently being used in Zambian Primary Schools. Machinyise is also a setter and marker of grade twelve Literature examinations.

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