

Promoting the Use of Indigenous Languages on Social Media

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Abstract: This article aimed to analyse the use of indigenous languages on social media in South Africa. The objective was to establish if the use of indigenous languages is promoted on social media. A qualitative approach was used, and a survey was employed for data collection purposes. A sample size of 150 respondents was purposively selected and the respondents were from KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, and Limpopo provinces of South Africa. Five indigenous languages were targeted for the study: isiZulu, siSwati, Sepedi, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga.

The findings revealed that people's interaction on social media has contributed to the promotion of indigenous languages as more and more people use these languages. It was also found that while most of the respondents prefer using the English language on social media, they code-mix or code-switch between English and their indigenous language. Interestingly, this has resulted in new meanings being assigned to some existing words, and some 'new' words being created which are a result of the interface between English and indigenous languages. Another finding was that access to websites that support indigenous languages is limited due to irrelevant and insufficient content on these websites.

Keywords: Social media, indigenous languages, code-switching, code-mixing, language promotion

I. INTRODUCTION

After the first democratic elections, South Africa increased the number of official languages to eleven (11) by elevating the status of nine (9) indigenous languages (isiZulu, isiXhosa, siSwati, isiNdebele, Xitsonga, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi and Tshivenda) into official status in 1996. This was an attempt on the democratic government to correct the imbalances of the past in which only English and Afrikaans were the only official languages in a country with an estimated population of over fifty (50) million people. As Beukes (2014) observes, a variety of languages are used on a daily basis by the population of South Africa. 'Most indigenous Africans still speak their first languages and feel their languages have a role to play in the development of their country' (Mncwango & Sithole, 2017:89). Some of these languages have a small distribution, like Xitsonga, Tshivenda and Sepedi, but their significance cannot be downplayed, especially in the regions and provinces where they are dominant. Besides, no matter how small the distribution, language carries with it the identity of speakers it represents.

Since the elevation of the nine indigenous languages to official status in 1996, there has been an outcry regarding the lack of development of these languages to compete with English and Afrikaans, which continued their dominance until recently, when some dual medium institutions of learning decided to drop Afrikaans as a medium of instruction (MOI) in favour of English only MOI. Calls have been made for government to ensure that all the official languages have parity of esteem and are treated equitably through all the spheres of national government.

This article focuses on the role of the social media in the development of indigenous languages in South Africa. It focuses on isiZulu, siSwati, Sepedi, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga. Comparison results of the Census 2001 and 2011 show that the targeted languages experienced either a positive or negative language growth. Tshivenda and Xitsonga each had a growth of +0.1%. Sepedi, isiZulu, and siSwati experienced a negative language growth of -0.3%, -1.1%, and -0.2%, respectively (StatsSA). The decline in the number of speakers of the languages is of concern, as it indicates some level of neglect from their speakers in favour of languages of power, like English in South Africa. Perez-Baez (2011: 10) opines that 'For many social and political reasons, languages become endangered as their domains of use – the social spaces such as the family, the community, the work sphere, and education, in which a language is spoken – become fewer and more restricted, with dominant languages taking over those domains.'

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is premised on the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), a theory that owes its development to Blumler and Elihu from the Functionalist Theory in the 20th century. Karimi et al. (2014: 54) observe that "one of the successful theoretical frameworks to examine questions of 'how' and 'why' individuals use media to satisfy particular needs has been the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory". This theory intends to understand why people seek the media as they do and what they use it for. It explores how people deliberately choose the media to fulfil their needs, for example, entertainment, relaxation, or socialising. It claims that when the audience is gratified, it is a reward for them. Gan (2017) has claimed that the UGT is a well-utilised theoretical

framework for explaining the different motives and reasons behind the use of any given medium.

Uses and Gratification theorists are disposed to overstate the active and conscious choice of media. According to McQuail (1987) people's perception can lead to an exaggeration of openness of interpretation, suggesting that audiences, regardless of the content they receive, may obtain any kind of gratification. This notion is conservative because if we continue insinuating that people are always satisfied with any use of media, we might completely adopt a naïve attitude towards what the mass media offer. The emphasis is mostly on the content and social contexts found in the media. That is why Hobson (1982) claims that this is a reception theory because it focuses on what people see in the media and the meanings they gather from the media context.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

a. *Description and a brief history of social networks*

Social networks are a generic term for sites that are used to connect users with similar backgrounds and interests through creating profiles containing pictures and digital audio files (Weinberg, 2009; Weber 2007). According to Cranston and Davies (2009), social networking is communication between groups of people mediated at some point by internet technologies. This mediation often takes place through social network sites that are accessed through mobile phones and computers. These are sites found on the internet where profiles are created, and people connect to create a personal network (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Therefore, this kind of communication requires one to have a social media profile, internet, computer, or cellular telephone. Social networks are a concept that has various descriptions. The concept is linked with social structure made of different factors, or communication using the internet. This study focuses on communication using the internet.

Characteristics of social networks, according to Mayfield (2008), include participation, communication, connectedness, community, and openness. Social networks offer interested parties a chance to take part in interactions. Since conversations on social networks are bidirectional, the transmission of information to the audience has a character of communication. According to Stafford et al. (1999), physical presence is ideal in social relations, however, communication technologies have created ties that do not need face-to-face communication maintenance. Connectedness is offered to the users through web-links that allow media users to move from one cyberspace to the other.

b. *Social Network Theory*

“Social networking websites are virtual communities which allow people to connect and interact with each other on a particular subject or to just ‘hang out’ together online” (Murray & Waller, 2007: 1337). The Social Network Theory (SNT) was introduced by Brown (1940) after noticing that social relations are shallow and are defined only by

referencing the reciprocal behaviour of society. The theory claims that as much as the social world could influence one's behaviour, one's persona can also have an influence. SNT is relevant in various disciplines of studies, from mathematics to anthropology. Centrality is one elementary, but important measure in social network analysis. Furthermore, degree, closeness, betweenness, and interaction with the flow of information are suggested measures to control direct structural centrality (Freeman, 1979). Li and Liu (2017) suggest that these structural centralities aid in choosing opinionated leaders because of their social ties.

Humanity has used social networks since time immemorial. Apicella et al. (2012) report that primitive nomadic groups of hunters and gatherers that obtained their food by hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plants were connected by their relationship and dependence on one another and that is what created social networks. Additionally, telephones and automobiles started a revolution and became popular in rural areas where there was a great distance between households. The introduction of internet-based media has only supplemented social networks (Kadushin, 2012).

c. *Social networks and language promotion*

Social media have become popular constituents of humans' daily lives, especially today. They have become significant to human lives because of the provision of interconnectedness and interdependence of culture. In other words, an environment is created wherein people communicate freely regardless of the distance separating them (Sawyer, 2011). Culture and language preserve each other, meaning that they are interdependent. According to Sallabank (2010), social networks may not be enough in maintaining indigenous languages, however, may be necessary for revitalising them.

The emergence of social networks saw a change in language use and its rules, enriching the experience of the speakers and those willing to learn the language. Blattener and Fiori (2011) reiterate that little is known about these networks and how they can be beneficial in language development and the performance of the people learning the language. However, Blattener and Fiori (ibid) observe that social networks offer authentic language interaction and the development of socio-pragmatic awareness which is an aspect of language acquisition. This awareness is vital for language programmes that would want to teach their languages to the world. Placencia and Reiter (2005) share the sentiments by stating that socio-pragmatic awareness via Facebook and other social media platforms may be as important to the students' success in the Trans-Atlantic Project as their linguist preparation.

As digital technology advances and as people have better access and education to use it, it becomes easier to maintain and contribute to the survival of the indigenous languages. Derakhshan and Hasanabbasi (2015) claim that these online tools can be used to improve students' language skills, especially the writing skill. Patra (2015) discovered that social networks can work as an educational resource and platform to

promote indigenous languages, however; social networks that do not have a specific language can restrict the speakers to use one language more often.

Most social media networks have over 1.39 billion monthly active users and approximately 890 million daily active users (He, 2016). This emphasises that new ways of presenting information through communication technologies have been established. According to Kennedy et al. (2008), these technologies are accessible on most of the cell phones that people use daily. Consequently, the new inventions assist in conserving the languages on the web, especially with the ever-growing demand for social networking that took the world and South Africa by storm (Singh, 2010).

Places and spaces of learning influence learning experiences and are understood as a social construct (Benson & Reinders, 2011). Spaces evolve, but new technology such as the internet widens the scope of communication. It allows interactions, collaboration, and support irrespective of distance or location. The new media create online narratives and spaces that sanction opportunities to practice language spelling and fluency (Lamy & Zourou, 2013). Places is a site or network where language, technology, and people are entangled together. It is an interactional site or language practice place.

According to Maseko et al. (2010), it is alleged that English and other languages from the West make it easy for people around the world to access ICT resources. Social network spaces have English as a dominant language, serving approximately 80% of users who do not speak English as their first language (Christison & Murray, 2014). This shows that the varieties of English spoken throughout the world are no longer exclusive to native speakers only, as social networks provide opportunities for practicing and preparing people for everyday communication. Due to the diversity of social networks and their various purposes of participating, distinction to the language's use is allowed. Lantz-Andersson (2016) reiterated that social networks allow people to play with self-representation and manipulate images and text in an uncontrolled and dynamically situated vernacular writing, therefore, an environment in which people can develop their socio-pragmatic competence by creative communication and self-expression before a broader audience.

Omojola (2009) emphasises that the need to integrate indigenous languages with ICT should be a process that is started by the society's initiatives in developing their languages. His view is shared by Dalvit (2010) who affirms that this integration will be the main segment in addressing linguistic inequality between speakers or users of the languages and the majority of dominating languages. This would also assist in the creation of technical words that promote indigenous languages, alienating the past linguistic and social prejudices that weaken them (indigenous languages). According to Bamuturaki (2008), language development occurs through linguistic and cultural diversity. However, many in the population of the African continent do not access the internet using their indigenous languages, but a

language imposed on them by colonialism. This, according to Bamuturaki (ibid), deteriorates their languages while enhancing the colonialists' languages. However, as Nzimande (2014) observes, social networking creates a friendship between people of diverse cultures and heritage, although in most cases people use English when posting on social networks. Due to the dominance of English on these sites, many users communicate through the languages, including those who cannot express themselves freely in it. Using indigenous languages on social networks can assist in having a clear conversation in the people's languages of choice and obviate a situation whereby the use of social networks in dominant languages inhibits the promotion of indigenous African languages on these platforms.

The dominance of English has continued to marginalise the use of indigenous languages and inadvertently resulted in language shift. Language shift has seen the majority of speakers of indigenous languages use dominant languages like English. This has led to speakers of majority languages, like isiZulu and isiXhosa using a dominant language like English more in their everyday communication or code-mixing and/or code-switching between English and their indigenous languages. However, Wei (2000) is of the view that social networks are recognised as an essential key for language norms development, especially in conflict with the standard or majority norms. Therefore, according to this view, language shift boosts bilingualism, with people using the majority language on social networks and the minority language in their everyday interactions. According to de Bot and Stoessel (2002), social networks have a role to play in language shift. This usually occurs when speakers of indigenous languages abandon their language to a language that can be understood nationally and even beyond. However, speakers of indigenous languages should foster social networks to maintain fluency and provide opportunities to pass on the language to others (Sallabank, 2010). Milroy (2001) affirms that the strong ties of social networks might assist indigenous languages to resist the pressure towards language shift.

IV. RESEARCH METHODS

The study was conducted qualitatively, and the research instrument used was a survey. Check and Schutt (2012: 160) define survey research as 'the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions'. A survey suited this study because it sought to establish if the use of indigenous languages is promoted on social media. A sample size of one hundred and fifty (150) respondents was purposively selected from speakers of isiZulu, siSwati, Sepedi, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga who were registered on various social networks. According to Leedy and Ormond (2005), survey research is used for acquiring information from about one or more groups of people, perhaps about their characteristics, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences, by asking respondents questions and tabulating their answers. To determine the sample size, this article used Krejcie and Morgan's 1970 method. The population of this study was from

KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga provinces of South Africa. The sample comprised 50.8% females and 49.2% males, and the respondents were between the ages of 19 and 50 years.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical considerations were taken care of throughout the study. Sources that were consulted were acknowledged fully to avoid plagiarism; an informed consent form was signed by every respondent to ensure that they understood what they were participating in, including their right to choose to not participate in the study, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Also, the participants were assured of confidentiality of the information they shared, and that they would remain anonymous.

V. FINDINGS

Based on the statistical analysis of the sample, most of the respondents were between the ages of 19 and 50 and the majority of them were females, as stated above (Research Methods). Post-matric education respondents were the majority in the study – they used the social networks for academic and business purposes, maintaining relationships, and being generally sociable. Those below matriculation were in minority but were social network users like others. It was found that WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter were mostly used. For some of the respondents, joining social networks was mainly for academic and business purposes. However, for the majority, it was mainly for maintaining friendships. The different social networks used by respondents allowed the users to exchange views using a language. Although many of the respondents use English on social networks, they agreed that a speaker of any language can use these platforms. Interestingly, social network users do not solely use their indigenous languages, but code-mix and/or code-switch between English and their first languages.

Chapter 1, section 3 6(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, recognises eleven official languages, however, many of the respondents prefer using English over their indigenous languages on social networks and browsing the internet because of the detailed information they can access. Therefore, websites that support indigenous languages like <https://nso.oxforddictionaries.com> may be set to doom unless used by speakers of these languages. Insufficient and irrelevant information on these websites pushes the speakers of indigenous languages to use English - based websites.

Ndebele (2014) observes that English and other Western languages are the primary languages by which people globally access information and communication. So, speakers of indigenous languages should consider blogging and using their mother tongues on social networks. Once people become familiar with websites that have well-researched content they will be encouraged to use them and also to contribute content that is in indigenous languages. As was found, in terms of benefits and challenges, respondents chose a language they knew to avoid humiliation when it comes to wrong spellings,

miscommunication, and mispronunciations of words. Furthermore, respondents felt that their language choice must accommodate the people they chat with. Their choice of language, therefore, helps in language promotion because the more it is used, the more they become familiar with and fluent in the language.

Social networks have redefined English and indigenous languages. In fact, social media applications have developed new collaborative dimensions where information is shared, created, remixed, constantly updated and improved by the users. As observed by Candilio (2015), words are created or redefined on social networks and have a new meaning altogether. For example, the study found that a word like *'bitch'* is now associated with *'friendship'*. This also applies to indigenous languages – a Tshivenda word *'sita'* (*rot*), for instance, can now be associated with *'difficulty'*. Respondents attested that the shorter the word, the quicker the conversation, which is the main purpose of social networks. This is confirmed by Thobejane (2017) who found that social media do not develop indigenous languages as short handwriting is preferred by students due to limited characters and space. Eminent people's characters also form part of redefining languages. This happens by merely constructing a sentence using a name instead of following the sentence construction rule. For instance, the name *'Agrizzi'* may be associated with name-dropping on these sites.

Another finding was that the respondents showed diversity in language choice when browsing social networks. Most of them either code-mixed or code-switched between English and their indigenous languages or used English only. One of the respondents responded: *'code-mixing helps to make a conversation clearer when talking to a person who does not understand one of the languages'*. The speakers always try by all means to accommodate one another since South Africa is a multilingual country.

VI. CONCLUSION

The aim of the article was to establish if the use of indigenous languages is promoted on social media. It was found that indigenous languages are used daily on social media although some users code-mix and/or code-switch between English and their indigenous languages, which is not uncommon in multilingual contexts. Social media are platforms where registered users communicate beyond their primary language. The continued use of indigenous languages on websites and the contribution of speakers of these languages would result in richer content that would encourage users, for, if speakers of these languages complain about lack of adequate content on the websites, then who should upload it? Social networks proved to be an environment wherein people are free to express themselves, making it easy for language learning that will result in the promotion of indigenous languages.

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