

The Birth and Sociolinguistic Features of Sala Language of Zambia. To What Extent is Sala Language Related to Bantu Botatwe Group of Languages?

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ABSTRACT

The central theme of this study is language contact, ethnic and linguistic construction. The purpose of this paper is therefore, two folds: Firstly, to describe the birth and evolution of Sala language of Central Zambia, both at synchronic and diachronic levels. Secondly, to investigate the sociolinguistic aspects of Sala language in terms of language contact and revitalisation, language maintenance, and geographical variations linked to multilingualism within the speech communities. Much of the bulky data was elicited from interviews through semi-structured interview schedules. Library literature, oral tales, and songs were some of the secondary sources that were used to gather vital and relevant information for this study.

Keywords: Bantu botatwe, dialect, language contact, Sala

INTRODUCTION

Background

The main focus of the study is the birth and revitalization of the Sala language, one of the least documented languages in the Bantu Botatwe Group, with the aim of trying to establish the degree of how it is related with Tonga, the language used for initial literacy and as a school subject in the Sala speaking area. Further, the study aimed at trying to determine how closely Sala is related to the contiguous languages namely, Ila, Kaonde-Ila, and Lenje. The study also focused on Sala, to ascertain its degree of evolution.

Generally, “*Bantu botatwe*” literally means “Three People” believed to comprise the Tonga, Lenje and Ila. However, Doke (1954) indicates that there are more languages in the Bantu botatwe Group and has divided them into seven languages namely: Sala, Lenje, Lundwe, Ila, Soli, Tonga and Kaonde-Ila.

Originally three languages comprised the Bantu Botatwe group but the concept has continued even when other linguistic groupings have been included in the group. However, of late there have been some Sala speakers advocating that Sala children should be taught Sala in schools and not Tonga. Their arguments have been that Sala is a distinct language and that Sala is not a dialect of Tonga (Chitebeta, 2019).

Amongst the so called Bantu botatwe Languages (BBL) Sala and Ila are among the least documented. So far, the investigations carried out by the researcher in March 2011 at Shakumbila, Mwembeshi and Lusaka west, the Central Statistics Office and Curriculum Development Center have shown that there is no comprehensive study that has been carried out to determine the status of Sala in this group and the levels of

their inter-relatedness with the other languages in the same group (Chitebeta, 2007). It is therefore, the purpose of this study to fill this gap. Tonga is used for radio broadcasting and television programs in Zambia. It is also used for literacy campaigns and as a school subject in schools within the Sala speaking area of Mumbwa and Shibuyunji Districts. The challenges faced by Sala learners are not known. The determination of the relatedness between Sala and Tonga will help to establish whether there is justification in the use of Tonga as a school subject in the Sala speaking area.

In view of these arguments with regard to the Bantu botatwe Group and the unclear relationship between Sala and the other languages associated with them, such as Kaonde-Ila, Lenje and Tonga, an investigation on the birth and some sociolinguistic aspects of Sala language of Zambia will provide very useful information. Also, preliminary investigations have shown that so far there has been no study carried out on the evolution of Sala language. Therefore, this study provides a valuable contribution to the field of comparative Bantu linguistics.

Historical Background and birth of Sala Language

The Sala language belongs to the Bantu botatwe linguistic group comprising the following similar languages: Tonga, Lenje, Ila, Sala, Soli, Toka-Leya, and Kaonde-Ila languages. The Sala people speak Chisala which is a mixture of Tonga, Lenje and Ila languages and Chief Shakumbila is one and the only Chief of the Sala people. Shakumbila chiefdom stretches from Nampundwe in Lusaka west to Mumbwa Air force base, and from the radius of Landless corner-Mumbwa road in the north, to the Blue lagoon in the Kafue flats bordering Mazabuka district in Southern Province. This chiefdom is estimated to be the same size or bigger than some countries such as Seychelles, Lesotho, Swaziland, Comoros, and Eretria etc. Unlike other Zambian languages which were brought to their current communities by their speakers through historical migration, Sala language was born out of intermarriages and contact of various ethnic groupings in their current speech community.

Sala language, though regarded as a Tonga dialect and variety, it has given linguists and historians a serious challenge as to establish its evolution and genesis. Through Linguistic Anthropology coupled with archaeology, a trace of the origin of the Sala language and its speakers is not farfetched. Who are the Sala and where did they come from? According to the Shakumbila chiefdom Development Strategic Plan document (2013), the roots of the Sala people are traced from about 1800 in Mwembeshi, Lusaka west under the leadership of Loongo Inashamwenda, the mother of the Sala people. However, this information is too insufficient to establish where and how the Sala language and its speakers came into existence. Where were they before settling in Mwembeshi?

The history of the Sala people is very interesting and incredible. According to Sala oral legends and traditions, the movement of the Sala is traced through around the areas we call today Satellite, Westwood police and Kalundu area, Lusaka west from Namayani in Chief Mungule's area. According to Manchishi (1990), the Sala and the Soli were the earliest Bantu to settle in Central Zambia. The Sala, the Lala and the Soli were part of the early pre- Luba-Lunda Bantu to come to Zambia. Manchishi (1990) reports that the Balenge who are called Sala today, and the Soli are believed to have been living in Chisamba area around 1500. It is interesting to learn that the people we call Lenje or Balenge in Chibombo and Chisamba are not the original Lenjes. The original Lenjes are the people we call Sala today. When we say the Lenje and Soli occupied Chisamba around 1500, we are referring to the Sala of Shakumbila not Lenjes of Chibombo.

According to legends and *Kulamba Kubwalo* documents (2016), it is clearly stated that around 1700 Bene Mukuni migrated to Zambia from Kola in Congo. Bene Mukuni belonged to the Bayeke tribe of Luba kingdom in Congo. Mukuni, his family, relatives and other related clans were called Bene Mukuni when they came to Chibombo. When Mukuni arrived in Chibombo, he found the Lenje or Balenge under their leader Nakandanga and the Soli under Mbonshi. Bene Mukuni drove the Lenje out of Chisamba to

Namayani and the Soli fled to Lusaka and settled at Bwinjimfumu in what is known as Northmead today. Mbonshi is the founder of the Soli chiefdom and it is from Mbonshi where the lineage of chief Bundabunda comes from (Manchishi 1990).

After defeating the Lenje, Bene Mukuni inherited the wealth left by the Lenje which included cattle and women. It was the Lenje women married to Bene Mukuni who changed the name Bene Mukuni to Lenje. On the other hand, the Lenje in Namayani moved south wards to Mwembeshi and changed their name from Lenje to Sala. It is not clear where the name Sala came from but some legend has it that the name is derived from the wild root, Busala, which was staple food for the Lenje in that area (Masagoshi & Thoedora, 1996). Another oral version has it that there was a leadership dispute among the Lenje where one faction led by a Princess called Maninga, broke away and settled around Shibuyunji. The action of peacefully separating from others is called 'Kulisala'. Hence the group that left was called Sala.

The Sala tribe and language under Shakumbila dynasty in particular, can be described as having evolved from a multiethnic background. The Shakumbila lineage has its roots from Queen Chiselwa the niece to Chief Chitanda. Chiselwa was succeeded by Chiimbwe who passed on the throne to Namumbwe and Namumbwe was succeeded by her youngest daughter Maninga, the mother of Loongo Inashamwenda, the great Queen. Loongo who led the Sala people to Mwembeshi, got married to Nkanya a Chewa hunter with whom she had four children: Choongo, Shachele, Namungo and Kayoba. After a long time, Nkanya's people from Malawi sent Mulumbwe, Nkanya's brother to go and fetch for Nkanya. When Mulumbwe reached Mwembeshi, he married a beautiful Sala woman and never returned to Malawi. Mulumbwe had a son by the name of Muchabi; he is the ancestor of Senior Headman Muchabi in Shakumbila (Chitebeta, 2019).

During the reign of Loongo Inashamwenda, the Lozi attacked the Sala and Loongo and her elder son Choongo were captured during the battle of *Shimutemambalo*. On their way to Buluzi, Loongo performed a lot of wonders that left the Lozi shocked. Because of such miracles, Loongo was released and sent back home. Meanwhile Choongo, Loongo's son became a very brave warrior who could defeat Lozi enemies alone. Choongo was promoted by Sekeletu the Kololo king to a senior officer. However, throughout his stay in Buluzi, Choongo would ask the king to allow him go back to Mwembeshi to see his people. Every day he would say in Sala, "*Ndakumbila zhokele kumizhesu*" meaning I am requesting to go back home. Because of this frequent request, the Lozi changed his name from Choongo to Shakumbila.

When Shakumbila was finally allowed to go home, he encountered succession disputes among family members. The Chiefdom was later divided into two between Shachele in the east and Shakumbila in the west. However, the colonial office in Mumbwa in 1947 fused the two chiefdoms into Shakumbila chiefdom.

Today, the Sala language and tribe has really undergone through a multiethnic and multicultural transformation with new tribal integration. There are quite a few Sala clans who can trace their origin from Namayani. Most of the Sala of Nangoma area talked to claim that their ancestors were Kaonde, Lozi or Nkoya hunters. A good number of Lozis and Nkoyas were assimilated into Sala ethnic groups and their children today cannot trace their roots in Nkoyaland or Barotseland. Mwanabayeke (2013) reports that at the close of the 19th century, Mumbwa area was invaded by a group of elephant hunters from who traced their origin in Kaonde land in the north western region. These Kaondes were assimilated into Ila and Sala communities and intermarried with host women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literature and other scholarly works related to the Bantu botatwe group of languages and their speakers.

There is a lot of study done by various scholars on Zambian Bantu botatwe languages and to the smaller extent, Sala language in particular.

Numerous scholars have carried out research on some of the languages investigated in this study while only few published works in Lenje have been reviewed such as Madane (1908) who published a book whose title is 'Lenje Handbook,' where he presented Lenje grammar using the English alphabet in accordance with a few necessary rules. He wrote in a plainest guide for Englishmen in getting to speak, write, and understand a Bantu dialect. The book presents extracts from native stories with translation notes with the help of Rev. Father Torrend. Other published works reviewed in Lenje is religious material that includes the Lenje Bible whose translation took place from 1990 and was published in 2003 by the Bible Society of Zambia.

The literature reviewed on Nyanja (also known as Chewa) includes Miti (1988) who undertook a comparative study of the Zambian Chewa (Ce), Chinsenga (Ns) and Chingoni

(Ng). These are the three varieties he referred to collectively as Zambian Chinyanja. He concentrated on the internal classification of these languages to establish how close or how different these varieties are. He put particular emphasis on their tonal relationships. His study also includes a lexicostatistical analysis and an overview of the phonology and morphology of these varieties.

Mambwe (2008) carried out a dialectological study on 'Some Linguistic Variations of Kaonde. He established that there are major dialectal variations at the various levels of linguistic analysis. However, Mumbwa dialect displayed more variations in relation to other dialects investigated due to the long distance between the Mumbwa dialect and the other two, while Lubango-Solwezi dialects displayed minimal linguistic variations between them because of their geographical closeness. Mambwe's study established that there are more lexical differences exhibited among the dialects, syntactical and phonological variations while the three dialects shared more similarities in their morphological structure.

According to Batibo's (1997) study, the researcher undertook a comparative study of seven Zambian languages, in which the percentages of inter-relatedness of these languages were studied using the lexicostatistical approach, which involved the quantitative comparison of lexical cognates.

Mildred (2007) compared the main Indo-European language groups where she used the classical method by considering the actual phonology of two sets of opposite cognates. She states that the facts demand to take notice of the actual phonological similarity of lexico pairs and compare words in a phoneme-by-phoneme, rather than word-by-word fashion. Other scholars have carried out studies of Bantu languages using the lexicostatistical method to analyze data in order to establish the degree of relatedness of a particular group of languages.

Batibo (1997) is one of the scholars who based his studies on the lexicostatistical analysis of nine Botswana Bantu languages namely, Setswana, Setswapong, Sebirwa, Sekgalagati, Ikalanga, Thimbukushu, Shiyeyi, Chisubiya and Otjiherero. In his study, Batibo discovered a very high degree of inter-relatedness between Setswana, Sebirwa, Setswapong and Sekgalagadi which he rated at 81.8 percent. He rated the degree of inter-relatedness between Shiyeyi and Chisubiya at 64 percent while Shiyeyi and Otjiherero are rated at 44 percent. Thimbukushu shares only 51.5 percent with Shiyeyi and Chisubiya. This indicated reasonable high inter comprehension between the selected languages. Batibo went further to confirm the degree to which the languages retained the proto-Bantu and Eastern Bantu vocabulary. He observed that Chisubiya and Shiyeyi have the highest percentages of retained Proto-Bantu/Eastern Bantu vocabulary. This is due to their proximity to the North Eastern Bantu nucleus as implied by Ethret (1998). Batibo (ibid) further observed that the lexicostatistical method is more hierarchically refined than those of the comparative method. He also discovered that lexicostatistics provides more precise information about the degree of inter-relatedness

between dialects. The study used a carefully selected list of 250 basic vocabulary items from common proto-Bantu and Eastern Bantu.

Some scholars have tried to classify African languages, including Bantu languages. For example, Doke (1943) came up with a tentative classification of Bantu languages where he used zones, namely, (1) Central zone, (2) Congo zone, (3) East Central zone, (4) Eastern zone, (5) North-eastern zone, (6) Northern zone, (7) North-western zone, (8) South- Central zone, (9) South-Eastern zone, (10) West-Central zone, and (11) Western zone.

Guthrie (1948) argued that Doke's attempt to classify Bantu languages was inconclusive because he did not make any reference to those Bantu languages that had not been documented at the time. However, Guthrie's argument does not specify which languages and dialects Doke (1943) did not include in his classification due to lack of published materials. Guthrie included some of the languages under study, particularly those in the Bantu botatwe group in his classification as mentioned in the background to this study. Ila is classified in Zone M, Group 60, and Cluster 63. Kaonde: Zone L, Group 40. Lenje: Zone M, Group 60 and Cluster 61. Nyanja: Zone N group 30, cluster 31. Tonga: Zone M, Miti (2006) cites Doke as one of the linguists who have significantly contributed to the study of Bantu languages. Most notable was his classification of the languages. He divided the Bantu languages into zones and groups. He described the zones as being largely geographical.

However, Doke cautioned that individual members of a given zone may today be living among members of a different zone due to tribal migrations. In his classification Doke used figures for zones, for groups, and for individual languages. He used Guthrie's method by assigning small letters to indicate dialects. Nevertheless, he departed from Guthrie's method by not using capital letters for zones. Rather, he used the first two digits to represent the zones, the third digit standing for the language group (or cluster), and the fourth for the language. He placed the languages that share the same phonetic and grammatical features in the same group. Doke claimed that such languages were mutually comprehensible Group 60, and Cluster 64. As shown above, Guthrie used capital letters for assigning zones.

Guthrie's work provides the basis for the classification of Bantu languages. Available research argue that one cannot endeavour to study the genesis and birth of the Sala language without bringing to the fore the northern neighbours referred to as Bene Mukuni and the Lenje speakers. Ngalamika (2022) reported that the Sala speakers or ethnic group were part of the Soli that were displaced from Chisamba area by the Bene Mukuni around 1700. This scholarly work by Ngalamika is clearly evidenced by the fact that Sala and Lenje languages share a lot of similar linguistic features.

In view of these controversies with regard to the Bantu Botatwe Group and the unclear relationship between this group and other languages associated with them, such as Sala, it is important that the birth and revitalization of Sala language be constructed. Also, preliminary investigations have shown that so far there has been no study carried out to determine the evolution and birth of Sala language. Therefore, this study provides a valuable contribution to the field of comparative Bantu linguistics.

Guthrie (1948) classified Ila, Lenje, Sala, Soli and Tonga as belonging to the linguistic group and he used the empirical method such as differences in vocabulary, differences in form and sentence structure, differences in sound units, differences in actual speech sounds and differences in tone systems (Miti, 2006).

However, He did not establish the percentage of the degree of inter-relatedness between these languages and the regional languages used in schools for literacy and as school subjects such as Nyanja which is used in the Soli speaking area and Tonga which is used in Kaonde speaking areas. This study has been carried out in order to bridge this gap in the field of comparative Bantu linguistics.

METHODOLOGY

The research used a qualitative design and the first phase involved Secondary data such as literature, maps and figures which were obtained from various documented sources like the University of Zambia library, Central Statistics Office in Lusaka. Other secondary sources include published sources from various websites for major operators which include books, dissertations and articles. Secondary data was used to supplement primary data and also to enhance analysis credible to the research by providing interpretation of material by scholars and discussion of findings. It was also needed to provide a historical perspective of the study based on other events that took place. The second phase involved primary data from the National Archives of Zambia (NAZ) and University of Zambia repository which includes letters, newspapers, Magazines, recorded messages and unpublished sources. These refer to the original events, documents that utilized documentary sources of secondary data. The sources were useful to explore both the past and present. In the last phase of data collection involved oral interviews from key informants who were linked to the topic and this yielded the results of the study.

The history of the Sala people was compiled from the Ikubi Iya Loongo ceremony speeches and historical narratives. Sample for interviews was purposively selected as the subjects with rich history of the Sala were well known.

DISCUSSION

The status of Sala language

Generally, many people fail to differentiate Sala language from Ila or Lenje language, which belong to the same linguistic group. Depending on which part of Shakumbila chiefdom one is, Sala language has different lexical and phonological variations. The eastern and north-eastern Sala has a lot of Lenje influence, especially in Nampundwe, Munyati and areas around Situmbeko. Those around Shibuyunji going to the west up the Palace and Nangoma area speak Sala with a bit of Tonga influence while those in the South-western part in Nalubanda, Kezwa, Muchabi speak Sala with a lot of Ila language influence.

Being found in the multilingual environments, Sala language is faced with challenges of dominance from other languages. As stated by Kuka and Mortern (2007), Zambia has seven local regional official languages recognized by the government which are used for administrative and commercial transactions. However, each region or province has many minority languages or dialects whose speakers are obliged to speak the regional official languages in order to participate fully in community activities. In this vein, Sala language happens to be one of the minority languages in the region, and as a result, Sala speakers are compelled by policy to use the regional official language, Tonga for official transactions. This is what Kashoki (1998) observes when he stated that these speakers of minority languages have been placed in a disadvantageous position as a result of being dominated either numerically or politically (in situations where some policies favour dominant languages in the same region).

Sala as a Bantu botatwe linguistic group dialect

There is a thin line between Sala language and other Bantu botatwe languages in terms of lexical and phonological characteristics. In Salaland of Mumbwa and Shibuyunji districts, there are other related languages that played a significant role in the birth of Sala language. There is Tonga in the south, Soli in the east, Ila in the south-west and Kaonde-Ila in the west.

A total stranger or a “traveller” would find it difficult to notice the difference between Sala and these other related languages. For example, these are some of the differences one would notice from speakers of these

languages.

1. English- *Good evening*

Sala– *Mwalibizha buti?*

Tonga– *Mwalibizya buti?*

Lenje– *Mwalibisha buyani?*

2. English- *Where are you going?*

Sala- *Mutekuya kuli?*

Tonga- *Muunka kuli?*

Lenje- *Mutoya kuli?*

3. English-*Have drawn water?*

Sala-*Sa mwateka menzhi?*

Tonga– *Sena mwateka meenda?*

Lenje– *Sa mwateka manshi?*

As already mentioned, Sala language is regarded and classified as a dialect of Tonga, the regional official language. A dialect denotes a regional variety of a language with differences in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Although there are grammatical, phonological and lexical features that tend to differ from one dialect to another, speakers of these dialects understand each other without major difficulties. Moreover, one speaker of a dialect can speak two different dialects or varieties of one language. For instance a Sala speaker can understand other dialects of Bantu botatwe group such as Toka-Leya, Ila, Soli and Lenje. These speakers do not need to code switch or interpret during their social interaction.

This multilingualism and language contact within the Sala speech community has given rise to some language shift of some kind. Due to social interaction especially among the young generation, the language of communication in most domains in Mumbwa district has gradually shifted from native Sala to Nyanja the language of the city.

CONCLUSION

As discussed and revealed by this paper, Sala language was born out of intermarriages and contacts between Sala speakers and speakers of other Bantu botatwe languages. It has been observed as well that Sala language is under threat from other dominant languages within Sala speech communities. There is need for the owners of the language and interest groups to come up with social measures to maintain the vitality of Sala language. Although it is a policy that Tonga is the regional local official language in Shakumbila chiefdom, Sala speakers should use their local and community networks to promote the use of Sala language.

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