

# **Crossing the Language Gap: Investigating Communication Strategies in Home and School Environments in Multilingual Postcolonial Zambia**

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will discuss some methodological aspects of my ongoing doctoral study on language, literacy and learning among children in a rural village environment in Southern Zambia. Having recently returned to my home country Denmark after altogether nine months of field work in Zambia, I am now in the process of reviewing and analysing hundreds of recordings of classroom interaction and ‘everyday speech’, of interviews with parents, teachers, elders and children, of extracts of school books and local texts, and of months of observation and participation in everyday life in a Southern African village. I have chosen here to bring out some of the methodological considerations and challenges related to my recent fieldwork. Working as a White, European social scientist in a rural, impoverished setting in a developing, former colonial country like Zambia, issues and reflections on inequity, discursive hegemony and colonialism are bound to appear. My goal today is to offer a viewpoint on how these reflections might be integrated and used constructively in educational research.

## THE STUDY

This investigation was conducted as a single case study during six months of 2008 and the early months of 2009 of one village and one government primary school situated in a remote rural area in Zambia’s Southern Province. The overall aim was – and continues to be – to investigate possible discrepancies between the learning and socialisation patterns in children’s home and school environments. Through my own background in linguistics, sociology, and education, the emphasis was laid on literacy and language, looking at what I have named very broadly here as ‘communication strategies’, and also on what we could call ‘formal and informal literacies’.

### *The language and educational situation in Zambia in brief*

In order for you to understand part of the background for this particular research focus, I will now sum up briefly what we could call the ‘language situation’ in Zambia – a situation which is similar to many other countries in Southern Africa, and in many former colonized countries all over the world. After gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1964, a long line of political undertakings were initiated by the new Zambian leadership, one of which was the anchoring of English as the continuous national language. This decision was based on a spectrum of political and pragmatic arguments, emphasising the need for a

united Zambian people and a nationally uniform educational system. However, retaining or sometimes even strengthening English as the dominant medium of instruction in all levels of schooling meant that children from both rural and urban homes would receive tuition from the first day of school in a language which they had very little or no mastery of, usually with quite devastating school results. It also meant that the people in power, many holding foreign university degrees and all belonging to the national political elite, could obtain a certain level of hegemony through the official language, systematically excluding all the remaining voices unable to express themselves in English.

This situation prevails to this day, although with minor alterations. Presently, seven Zambian languages are recognized as semi-official regional languages, each predominant in one of the seven Zambian provinces. Estimations of the composition and complexity of the linguistic landscape of Zambia vary; some linguists talk of 77 languages, some say 40, while others reject this as results of an inaccurate blending of languages and mere dialects, many of them being mutually understandable. The fact is that most Zambians, like inhabitants of many other multilingual societies, perceive this 'language situation' more pragmatically than do most policymakers. English, being the *de facto* global language and a major factor in the country due to media and internet influence, is spreading to all parts of the country with all national newspapers now published solely in English, and with access to TV, radio, the internet and mobile phones expanding rapidly. This, however, does not alter the fact that using English on an everyday basis continues to be the privilege of urban, upper middle class families, wanting to secure their children the best possible foundation for succeeding in school. In general, rural children continue to have very little exposure to the English language previous to entering school by the age of seven, and only few urban children are closely familiar with English upon entering school.

#### *Preliminary findings – a few examples*

The data for this investigation, as mentioned above, has consisted mainly of participant-observations in homes and at school, sound recordings of classroom and family interactions, qualitative interviews with parents and teachers, and the collection of texts produced in homes, schools, and by the Zambian Ministry of Education. Working closely with Zambian graduate students has been a great and invaluable help in my initial phase of processing and analysing data.

One obvious challenge or barrier for many of the children I have observed and worked with, when it comes to formal schooling, is the expectation of them to be able to separate and formulate their own individual impression of drawings, pictures, and stories presented to them at school. Among rural families with few material resources and many children, as continues to be a widespread pattern in many developing countries worldwide, children are often regarded first of all as necessary contributors to the sustenance of the family. Through participating in daily activities like cooking, sweeping, fetching water, nursing younger children,

herding cattle, planting, ploughing, and harvesting, children acquire a vast number of skills and insights, which can be very beneficial to other more 'formal' kinds of learning, and certainly crucial to the kind of life they are expected to eventually lead themselves. But as the nature and particular components of these work tasks are rarely put into words or discussed between children and elders, these children fail to acquire some of the most basic linguistic and cognitive tools employed in formal schooling. In this case, the particular *language* used is not the most crucial problem, although it obviously plays an important part in the children's process of acquisition and understanding – or lack thereof. The barrier presented here is part of a much more profound, universally known challenge of breaking children's negative social inheritance in formal schooling.

When it comes to language, the recent national attempts in Zambia to integrate local languages in the early school grades – however praiseworthy this may be – seems to have failed in fully integrating the cognitive and linguistic learning potentials which the children bring with them on the first day of school. Somehow, there is still a widespread conviction of children being 'empty vessels' upon entering school, and of the school's primary task being to fill up the children with 'real' knowledge and skills. By encouraging the teacher to mainly use the children's tongue in the first four years of schooling, while gradually introducing English vocabulary, Zambian schools have come closer to securing a familiar and creative learning environment for rural children. However, the new programs seem to be reproducing the former view of local Zambian languages as having little educational value and potential in themselves, now serving merely as a kind of 'scaffold' for learning English as quickly as possible – often leaving teachers frustrated and children with little gain in neither their first nor their second language.

These are only a few examples of overall observations in my recent fieldwork. Since we have little time here, I will now go on to some methodological reflections which I have made during and after the conduct of this work.

## METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

To begin with, there is something mildly paradoxical about a Danish or European researcher travelling all the way to Zambia to investigate 'local ways' of socialising, speaking and learning – all this almost entirely in a language which she, at least initially, does not understand! Regrettably, very few Zambian researchers – or

African scholars in general – have resources available to conduct longer ethnographies, even within their nearby environments. Qualitative investigations in Southern Africa are mainly carried out by local NGOs with limited resources, by evaluative consultancies on behalf of major stakeholders like the World Bank and the UN with what one could call rather fixed agendas – or by foreign anthropologists and social scientists like me, mostly working in small, rather isolated capsules and with little immediate connection to official public spheres.

Working in Zambia and with a particular focus on language and ‘live communication’ in rural homes and schools, the carrying out of my field work has been completely dependent on using local assistance. In the early stage of fieldwork, I was very lucky to encounter a qualified research assistant at the University of Zambia, 27-year old Khama, who happened to be finishing his bachelor studies in language and education. After having discussed the focus and basic research questions of the project, we decided together to conduct the main fieldwork – and thereby basically the whole study – in Khama’s home village situated in Zambia’s Southern Province, where the dominant language is Tonga. Obviously, working closely with a qualified university student, who was simultaneously a fluent speaker of the local language *and* a former inhabitant and continuous member of the environment we were investigating, was a major advantage both to me personally and to the study in general. As son of the local headman and member of very a reputable family, Khama and I had easy access to basically all members of the village and nearby township, including the local school. Parents and teachers, who were our main informants, had heard about me and my work plans months ahead of my actual arrival in the village, and generally, there was an overwhelming level of interest and excitement about our presence.

When we were walking around from one homestead to another, Khama would often point to certain words and expressions which appeared repeatedly in our interviews and speech recordings, and which might deepen my understanding of norms around communication and the socialisation of children. One example of this is to be ‘talkative’ – a derogatory term used about women and children who gossip about their family members or others, or who object to authorities. Another is the also derogatory expression ‘*kusobana*’, meaning to be ‘playful’. When used about children, this expression indicates that the child is irresponsible and too easily distracted when it comes to working. Through Khama’s combined competencies of translator and university student, I thus became attentive of these and many other important local signifiers which now serve as pivotal points in my ongoing analysis.

All this being said, there are obvious risks of bias connected to engaging a ‘local’, personally involved and – in many villagers’ eyes – elitist research assistant. In spite of all good intentions one might have as a European or North American researcher operating in a former colonialized developing country of becoming an equal, non-discriminatory partner of informants, this approach will often be heavily challenged by local

practices and ideas. There is no doubt that from the day Khama and I arrived in the village, and even long before that, we were perceived as a team of superior and unquestionable experts, together comprising the powerful cocktail of white skin, government approval, and a high level of formal education. Parents would often show signs of nervousness and insecurity when talking to us, even when answering seemingly informal questions about topics very familiar to them. Similarly, teachers and other staff at the local school would be hesitant to offer their own opinions and experiences around teaching, obviously believing that such information would have little value to others than themselves.

After an interview, Khama would sometimes tell me that an informant had stated what he or she thought of as the 'correct opinion' or had failed to express certain frustration or criticism, which Khama knew this person to hold. Usually, we would then go back to the informant later on and in different ways try to make him or her feel protected and confident in our company and 'speak from the heart'. This expression, 'speaking from the heart', can obviously be seen as problematic when it comes to qualitative inquiry, implying the intertextual, hegemonious traces that will be part of any verbal expression, either in text, interviews or ordinary conversations. However, as I began perceiving my research subjects as bearers of several 'voices', depending on the phrasing of questions, on their changing relationship to me and Khama over time, and sometimes also on their mood on that particular day, this actually became and continues to be a valuable – although analytically complex – resource for the study.

Watching me come back to the village again and again and spend several months, often simply 'hanging out' with families and in the teachers' room, clearly strengthened the confidence of informants in relation to me and the project. Also, seeing Khama go work in the field with his family and participating as an 'ordinary villager' clearly helped in demystifying our appearance, toning down the fear that it might initially have caused. After some time, both parents and teachers realised that the nature and focus of this study were not identical with governmental assessments, nor was there – rather disappointingly – the prospect of a soon-to-come financial reward for answering our questions. Informants thus eventually relaxed, sometimes coming up to us with 'insider information' which proved very valuable in our further understanding.

In order to challenge the possible bias connected to working with the same research assistant, I frequently involved other young locals, mostly unemployed school-leavers who spoke sufficient English to help with translation. More than anything, this collaboration helped me understand some of the social and educational problems facing young Zambians, and again I was made aware of expressions and ways of constructing meaning which I had first overlooked. These assistants thus also became important informants *and* researchers in the study, creating their own questions and data samplings along the way.

Generally, I will say that collaborating very closely and personally with local assistants in this study, involving their own viewpoints and expertise in the fieldwork and later analysis, has served as a strong operative tool and as a constant reminder to me, the main researcher, of the risk of reproducing what we could call colonial discourse. I will not go as far as to say that I or we have successfully decolonised the discursive space in which we have worked these past months, but it has definitely been a central part of our inquiry in the attempt of always giving voice or voices to the people involved and to include and emphasise locally used categories of meaning both in the fieldwork and analysis. Realising that research subjects might speak with different 'voices' or draw on various discourses when expressing themselves, can in itself serve as an vital analytical tool, challenging preconceptions and hegemonious discourses in educational research.