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Mozambican languages in the public sphere: An opportunity to be seized

Abstract

Mozambique is characterised by a considerably high ethno-linguistic diversity. In addition to the African languages of Bantu origin, the country also hosts many other languages of European and Asian origin, representing a rich tapestry of cultures and identities. However, a significant proportion of these languages do not play any role in the public sphere, facing a variety of challenges in the context of public administration, governance, and service delivery. Drawing on a review of existing literature and empirical data from the Mozambican society, this study delves into the multifaceted issues related to the use of Mozambican languages in the public sphere. The study analyses the historical, socio-political, and economic factors that have contributed to the marginalisation of these languages and their exclusion from official government functions and service delivery, and it looks at the implications of language policies, as well as the role of language, in fostering inclusive governance and sustainable development. Key themes explored in this study include the impact of language ideologies and attitudes on the question of language choice, the implications of language use on access to public services, the judicial system, and the need to promote a more positive stance to existing languages, majority and minority alike, as a way of embracing the country's linguistic diversity, and building tolerance and social cohesion. In addition, the study looks at the best practices in countries in the region, aimed at addressing the challenges faced by African languages in the public sector. The findings of this study point to the intricate relationship between language, ideology, and governance in Africa, shedding light on the experiences of Mozambican language users and their interactions with the public sector. The ultimate goal of the study is to enrich the discourse on language, ideology and governance in Mozambique, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities and dynamics surrounding linguistic diversity in the country, and offering insights into potential language policy interventions aimed at promoting lin-

guistic inclusivity, language maintenance, cultural preservation and equitable public service delivery in the country.

Keywords: Language diversity, ideology, attitudes, public sphere, inclusivity, governance

Introduction

The subordinated, subaltern, and minoritised status of African languages, as well as their exclusion from most formal and high-status domains, such as governance, public administration, and education, in many post-independent and post-colonial states, has been widely debated (Mathe 2025; Jonhera/Nyoni 2023). At times, the issue has been discussed in terms of the dichotomy between majority and minority languages (Wildsmith-Cromarty et al. 2023; Pedley/Viaut 2018), and/or languages of economic progress, internationalisation, and globalisation versus languages of culture and identity (Negash 2005; Marlina 2013).

In this regard, several scholars, among them, Kamwangamalu (2004), argue that the provision of mother tongue education in African languages appears as important as any other issues, political and economic planning among them, underlining the need to look at the interface between language policy and language economics, because education plays an important role in fostering employment, creating sustainable livelihoods, fighting poverty, promoting participation, and gaining access to power. Kamwendo (2006), on the other hand, defends the need to build ownership and gather support from the grassroots to ensure the success of policies aimed at promoting and officially recognising the so-called minority languages. In other words, while top-down policies may be well-intentioned, they are more likely to succeed if they are informed by the wishes and desires of the people in the relevant communities and societies, who are the primary beneficiaries of such policies.

This study is a review of existing linguistic diversity and the multilingual situation of Mozambique, and it briefly discusses the hegemonic role that the Portuguese language has been playing as the country's exclusive official language. In addition, the study presents instances in

which Mozambican Bantu languages begin to gain terrain and become increasingly more visible. The study also revisits the language practices in a number of other countries in the Southern Africa region, with a particular focus on Zimbabwe. Finally, it highlights that it appears the time has now come to press for the use of Mozambican languages beyond the family and informal domains and bring them to the fore in a number of areas in the public sphere. The forces claiming for the expansion and/or promotion of the use of Mozambican languages in domains once exclusively reserved for the Portuguese language seem to come both from the masses (through the everyday use of such languages in conversations, in informal and family settings), but equally in the arts and cultures, religious service, in radio broadcasting, and most particularly community radio, the internet, and advertisement, just to mention a few.

Methodological considerations

The primary data for this study were mainly collected from a thorough ethnographic observation of everyday language practices in Maputo city, with a focus on the presence of Mozambican Bantu languages in the public sphere. Before moving further, a review of the concept of the public sphere appears appropriate. As such, Habermas' (1991) view of the public sphere as the area of social life where public opinion emerges seems to apply. For this study, the public sphere comprises a variety of platforms that are accessible and used by members of a polity, including in both formal and informal settings. Among them, we should highlight the school system, public administration services, streets, roads, and their respective toponymy, as well as a multiplicity of social media arenas, ranging from television channels, radio broadcasting, print media, including newspapers, and the internet. The public sphere also includes out-of-home media, such as billboards and the urban linguistic landscape.

The study also relies on a literature review of sources in the Southern African region and elsewhere, which discuss the use of African languages in formal and/or high-status domains. It should be said that African languages are often seen as minority or minoritised varieties, as compared with European languages, which are widely classified as

majority languages. In this regard, the study by Mathe and Motsaathebe (2023), on the use of Zimbabwean languages in radio broadcasting, is rather elucidating.

Linguistic diversity and multilingualism in Mozambique

Mozambique, which is geographically located in Southern Africa, is bordered by the Indian Ocean to the East, the Republic of Tanzania to the North, Malawi and Zambia to the Northwest, Zimbabwe to the West, and the Republic of South Africa and the Kingdom of Eswatini to the Southwest. The country is characterised by a high ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity, hence by the co-existence of a multiplicity of languages, most of which belong to the Bantu language family. Despite the lack of consensus regarding the number of languages spoken in the country, several scholars, among them Siteo/Ngunga (2000) and Firmino (2000), refer to the existence of at least 20 African languages. While Chimbutane (2022) indicates that 18 languages of the Bantu language family are spoken in the country, other authors, such as Lewis (2009), refer to the existence of 43 Mozambican languages.

Henriksen (2022) argues that this discrepancy and imprecision regarding the exact number of languages spoken in the country most likely result from a lack of a major and thorough dialectological study conducted in the whole extension of the Mozambican territory. Such a study would have, primarily, allowed the mapping and identification of the language varieties spoken in the country, and informed on whether they are distinct languages, or dialects of the same language. In addition, it would have highlighted the existence of a linguistic continuum of Bantu languages, where instances of mutual intelligibility, linguistic interference and influence are noticeable, particularly in relation to those varieties which display a geographical proximity and have been in contact with each other throughout the centuries. Examples of language varieties which are mutually intelligible are the cases of XiChangana, XiRonga, Xitswa, XiChopi and Bitonga, spoken in the south of Mozambique, in the provinces of Maputo, Gaza, and Inhambane. A note should be made at this stage to highlight that in the neighbouring South Africa,

Changana is also spoken, being classified as a dialect of Tsonga, and it is a cross-border language, shared with Mozambique.

Regarding the question of the number of African languages and/or dialects spoken on the continent, it is not by chance that Makoni and Pennycook (2007) call for the need to deconstruct and reconstitute languages. The authors, in García (2007), argue that the enumerability of languages appears to be an invention, which acts as a measure to contain and control. On his turn, Extra (2008: 7) points to the importance of carrying out language surveys, claiming that they “offer valuable insights into both the distribution and vitality of languages across different population groups”. Extra and Yagmur (2004), on the other hand, claim that these kinds of data are also crucial for devising comprehensive educational policies that consider the teaching of both the national majority and home minority languages.

As already indicated above, the languages spoken in Mozambique include, first and foremost, African languages, the majority of which belong to the Bantu language family. In the official discourse, and in the Constitution of the Republic (*República de Moçambique* 2004), these languages are all referred to as national languages (Boletim da República 2004), although none of them is spoken or understood by the majority of Mozambicans. As a matter of fact, there is not, in the country, a nationwide *Lingua Franca*, a common language understood or spoken by the majority of Mozambicans. However, it would certainly be possible to identify languages that could be successful candidates for the role of regional *Lingua Franca*. These are the cases of Emackwa, which is widely spoken in the northern provinces of Mozambique, by approximately 26% of the population, CiNyanja and/or CiSena, spoken by approximately 8% and 7%, respectively, in the central provinces of the country, and XiChangana, spoken by around 8.6% of the populations, in the southern part of Mozambique. In addition, other languages spoken in the country include Arabic, which is used mainly for religious purposes (Lopes 1998), as well as languages of Asian origin, such as Konkani (Maciel 2018). Dialects of Chinese, namely Mandarin and Cantonese, are also spoken in Mozambique, brought about by the new wave of Chinese immigrants into the country, resulting from Chinese investment in Mozambique (Feijó 2012).

The Portuguese language was adopted in 1975, the time of the country's independence, as the only official language, regardless of the multilingual nature of the country and the very small number of Portuguese language speakers at the time. The percentage of Portuguese first language (L1) speakers in Mozambique at independence was only 1.2% (Chimbutane 2012). The adoption of Portuguese as the country's only official language was justified by the fact that it was seen as being neutral in the sense that it did not belong to any of the ethnic indigenous groups, and as such it was perceived as coming to serve well the role of nation building and language of national unity (Ganhão 1979; Stroud 1999).

One could contend that, following independence, the government had little choice but to designate Portuguese as the sole official language. This was largely because no Bantu language was spoken or understood by most Mozambicans (Henriksen 2010; 2023), coupled with the absence of a standardised and unified orthography across Bantu languages, and, in some instances, a complete lack of a written form. Furthermore, the scarcity of educational materials in Mozambican Bantu languages and the shortage of qualified teachers to instruct in these languages made Portuguese the most practical and preferred option for the country's exclusive official language in 1975.

There is no doubt that the post-independence language policy was inspired by an ideology of assimilation, that is, the view that everyone, regardless of their first language (L1), should communicate in the official and dominant language. It could also be argued that the language policy of the post-independence period was equally oriented by an ideology of internationalisation, that is, the adoption of a language that would allow us, Mozambicans, to communicate with the outer world. In this particular case, by adopting the Portuguese language in 1975, Mozambicans would be in a position to use a Language of Wider Communication (LWC) to communicate with Portuguese-language speakers from all the PALOP (*Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa*, or, in English, Portuguese-speaking African countries), which include Angola, Cape Verde, Guiné Bissau and São Tomé e Príncipe. The use of Portuguese would also allow us to reach out to the CPLP (*Comunidade dos Países de Língua Oficial Portuguesa*, or, in English, the Community of Countries which have Portuguese as Official Language), which, in addition to the

four above-mentioned PALOP countries, also includes Portugal, Brazil, East Timor and Equatorial Guinea.

As already mentioned, Mozambique is considered to be one of the most linguistically heterogeneous countries in the world, as illustrated by Table 1 below. Lopes (1998: 446) claims that the country is “among the 15 most linguistically diverse countries in Africa,” meaning that, in numerical terms, no language “can claim majority language status at a national level.” Lopes (1998) draws on Robinson (1993: 52-55), who argues that high linguistic diversity refers to “a situation where no more than fifty percent of the population speak the same language,” and that “a ranking of degree of linguistic diversity should not be based on the absolute number of languages in a country, but rather on the percentage of the population speaking any single language”. Lopes also refers to Grimes (1992: 91), whose data on countries of Africa where no single language group exceeds 50 % of the population show that 25 of the total number of African countries fall into this category. Therefore, the country’s high linguistic diversity or superdiversity (Blommaert and Rampton 2011), and the lack of a common language shared by at least half of the approximately 30 million Mozambicans would make it difficult to single out one Mozambican Bantu language to serve all Mozambicans.

A closer examination of the linguistic profile of Mozambique, as earlier mentioned and as shown below, indicates that the Mozambican language with the highest number of speakers is Emachuwa, with 26 % of speakers, followed by XiChangana, with 8.6 % of speakers (*Instituto Nacional de Estatística* (INE) 2022; Firmino 2000), corroborating with Lopes’ argument that less than 50 % of the population speaks the same language.

No.	Languages	Speakers	%	Provinces spoken
1	EMACHUWA	5.813.083	26	Cabo Delgado, Nampula, Niassa, Zambézia, Sofala
2	PORTUGUESE	3.686.890	16	All provinces
3	XICHANGANA	1.919.217	8,6	Gaza, Maputo, Maputo City, Inhambane, Niassa
4	ELOMWE	1.574.237	7	Nampula, Niassa, Zambézia
5	CINYANJA	1.790.831	8	Niassa, Tete, Zambézia

No.	Languages	Speakers	%	Provinces spoken
6	CISENA	1.578.164	7	Manica, Sofala, Tete, Zambézia
7	ECHUWABO	1.050.696	4,7	Sofala, Zambézia
8	CINDAU	836.038	3,7	Manica, Sofala
9	XITSWA	836.644	3,7	Gaza, Inhambane, Maputo, Sofala
10	SIGN LANGUAGES	4.173	0,018	All provinces
11	OTHER MOZAMBICAN LANGUAGES	2.633.088	11,8	All provinces
12	OTHER FOREIGN LANGUAGES	112.385	0,5	All provinces
13	UNKNOWN	407.927	1,8	All provinces
Total		22.243.373	100	All provinces

Tab. 1: Languages spoken in Mozambique and percentage of L1 speakers (Source: Adapted from INE (*Quadro 22 & 24*), Census 2017)

It is important to highlight that the category *Other Mozambican languages*, under item 11 on the Table, may also include cross border languages shared with neighbouring countries in the region, such as Xichangana, spoken in both Mozambique and South Africa, Shona and Cindau shared with Zimbabwe, Cinyanja, spoken in Malawi and Shima-konde and Kiswahili, shared with Tanzania (Henriksen 2023). Furthermore, within the scope of intra-continental migrations in Africa, one should assume the existence of immigrant languages, probably categorised under items 12 and 13, respectively, brought from countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, and others, as reported by Henriksen (2023).

Adding to the already existing linguistic mosaic of the country, it is important to highlight the key role played by English, as the main foreign language taught and learned in the Mozambican school system, and widely used by academic and business sector stakeholders and politi-

cians in society at large, as the main international language. It is a language in high demand by Mozambicans due to the perceived academic, professional, and economic opportunities associated with speaking it and it is seen as an instrument of upward social mobility. After all, except Mozambique, which is a Portuguese-speaking country, all neighbouring countries have English as their main or co-official language. The French language is also present in Mozambican society, and most particularly in the school system, and is taught in public schools, from grades 8–12, as the second main foreign language. Other European languages spoken in Mozambique, although in specific settings such as language centres and/or institutes, higher education institutions and universities and other restricted sectors, are Spanish and German. The increasing demand for language courses in both Spanish and German derives from the fact that the two countries (Spain and Germany) have been offering scholarships for post-graduate studies through the Spanish Cooperation (MAEC-AECID), and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

A brief note on the unassailable position of the Portuguese language

The fact that the Portuguese language is the country's only official language, and that it is linked to the job market, the public administration, and the school system, has been determinant in contributing to its power, prestige, its unrivalled position, and the perception that it is irreplaceable in Mozambique. Attitudes to Portuguese are highly positive. It is a language valued by the elites, but equally by the masses. In fact, the Portuguese language appears to have been appropriated, transformed, manipulated, and seasoned by Mozambican language users, by the contact with the Bantu languages and cultures and the English language as well. Several studies refer to an emerging variety of Mozambican Portuguese (Gonçalves 2004), mixed and influenced by the Bantu languages spoken in the country, characterised by neologisms (Machungo 2016; Ferrete 2021; 2024), malapropisms that seem to be embedded in Mozambican Portuguese, accepting borrowings from both the national languages and English, among other creative and innovative features resulting from this sociolinguistic diglossia situation of languages in contact.

It should be indicated that the number of Portuguese L1 speakers has been increasing over the years; from 1.2% Portuguese L1 speakers in 1975 (Firmino 2000), to 10.7% in 2018 (Timbane 2022). Abdula (2018: 83) claims that the number of speakers of the official language in the post-independence period appears to have exceeded the number of speakers in the entire colonial period (which lasted almost 500 years). According to Gonçalves (2004), this increase is explained by the post-independence educational policy and the willingness of the Mozambicans to adopt Portuguese as a language of communication to the detriment of the Bantu languages. Data from the 2007 general population census shows an increase in both mother tongue and second language Portuguese speakers. At the time, out of a population of 20 million, 10% spoke Portuguese as their L1, an increase of 8.8%, and the percentage of those who spoke Portuguese as L2 had risen to 55.5%, a significant increase since it rose by 31.5% in urban areas. Table 2, below, presents the significant change in scenario and growth in the number of Portuguese L1 and L2 speakers in the period 1980–2020.

Year	Portuguese L1 Speakers	Portuguese L2 Speakers	Portuguese L1 & L2 Speakers
1980	1,2 %	23,2 %	24,4 %
1997	6,5 %	33 %	39,5 %
2007	10,5 %	39,5 %	50,4 %
2020 (projection)	18,1 %	49,8 %	67,9 %

Tab. 2: *Percentage of Portuguese L1 and L2 speakers in Mozambique* (Source: Adapted from INE (Chimbutane 2012))

A concluding remark on the unassailable position of the Portuguese language in Mozambican society is the fact that Mozambican Portuguese is being intrinsically transformed by contact with Mozambican Bantu languages. The following session focuses briefly on the reciprocal influence between Mozambican Portuguese and the Bantu languages of Mozambique.

This figure, extracted from Ferrete (2024: 146), presents several examples of the two-way, reciprocal influence between Mozambican Portuguese and Bantu languages, showing how Mozambican Portuguese has adopted and incorporated words from the Bantu languages and how the Bantu languages have incorporated words from Portuguese. In other words, Mozambican Portuguese and the Bantu languages, which are indeed languages that co-exist with each other daily, influence and transform each other, giving rise to new words that enrich both Portuguese and the Bantu languages. The centre of the picture, highlighted by the dark blue background, shows that Mozambican Portuguese incorporates quite many words that originate from the Bantu languages. Such words include, for instance, *molwene* (borrowed from XiRhonga, a Bantu language from the South), which means street boy, or *mucunha* (borrowed from Emakhuwa, a Bantu language from the South), which means both white man and boss, and *matequenha* (borrowed from Yao, a Bantu language from the North), meaning a flea that penetrates areas of the body (mainly between the toes). The figure also presents a considerable number of words borrowed from Portuguese and incorporated in the Bantu languages, such as *gereja* (Ndaou, a Bantu language from the North), from the Portuguese word *Igreja* (church), and *simenti* (Nyungwe, a Bantu language also from the North), from the Portuguese word *semente* (cement), or *butawu*, from the Portuguese word *butão* (button) (in Sena, a Bantu language from the Sena). A close observation of the linguistic practices of Mozambicans reveals numerous instances of translanguaging (Rafi 2025; MacSwan 2017), code-mixing and code-switching (Ahmad et al. 2025; Baixane 2023).

Studies have also reported the influence of address terms in Bantu languages on Portuguese, considering that Portuguese has the informal form (*tu*), and the more formal form (*você*), and +formal (*senhor/senhora*), which, according to Lemos (2017), is not the case in most Bantu languages. This leads many Portuguese speakers in Mozambique to mix the “two forms” when addressing the same person. Mozambican Portuguese also witnesses the introduction of new semantic nuances replacing existing lexical elements, such as the words *papá* (father) and *mamá* (mother), and *tio* (uncle) and *tia* (aunt), used to refer, not only to the biological father, mother, uncle or aunt but also to any adult man or woman, as a symbol of respect.

Firmino (1995: 39) presents quite a number of examples of the endogenization of the Portuguese language in Mozambique, including, among others, the elimination of the *tu/vous* distinction, as indicated by Lemos (2017), lexical innovations and transformations, just to mention a few. As argued by Firmino (1995), the symbolic meaning of Portuguese has indeed been redefined. Both in the official and public discourse, it has largely lost its colonial connotations. The Portuguese language has been ideologically constructed as a national liaison language, at the same time that it is developing new discursive patterns, thus calling for a review of the current language policy of the country.

Having briefly reviewed the mutual and reciprocal influence between Mozambican Portuguese and Bantu languages, what follows is a discussion of the marginalisation that Mozambican Bantu languages have endured, their exclusion from mainstream domains of society, the question of attitudes, and the increasing opportunities that seem to be emerging to change the *status quo*.

National Mozambican languages: subalternity and marginalisation

As already indicated elsewhere in this study, the national languages of Mozambique have historically and systematically been excluded from playing an important and pivotal role in the more formal domains of Mozambican society, such as education, the judiciary, and public administration at large; their role has been, at least up until recently, seen as being solely reserved to the informal and family domains. Attitudes to these languages, both in the colonial and post-independence periods, were often quite negative, as they were all considered dialects, with all the related connotations; that is, inferior, subaltern, and unimportant. At times, though, over the years, attitudes have also been somewhat ambivalent, a mixture of negative and positive.

From an initial prohibition of the use of Mozambican Bantu languages in schools and other official and formal domains in the period immediately after independence, due to the perception that they would hinder national unity and cohesion, the Mozambican Bantu languages have also been seen as symbols of the Mozambican cultures and identity. As a mat-

ter of fact, this is what is enshrined in Article 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique, which stipulates that the national languages should be valued and promoted as symbols of culture and identity. In essence, this is how it reads on page 3:

O Estado valoriza as línguas nacionais como património cultural e educacional e promove o seu desenvolvimento e utilização crescente como línguas veiculares da nossa identidade.

Or, in English,

The State values national languages as cultural and educational heritage and promotes their development and increasing use as languages that convey our identity.

For a critical discussion of the rather vague nature of the above statement, as there is no reference to how such promotion should be done, as well as for a thorough review of the question of attitudes to the national languages of Mozambique, see Henriksen (2010).

The map shows that, while the Portuguese language is a common denominator, that is, it is present and spoken in all provinces, and particularly in capital cities, the same cannot be said of the national languages. In other words, not all Mozambican languages are present in all provinces of the country. However, a closer look at the map shows that a few Mozambican Bantu languages are spoken beyond the borders of a single province. For example, if we look at the north region, it is visible that Emakhuwua is spoken in the three northern provinces. The same happens to Cisena, which is widely spoken in the centre of the country, and finally XiChangana, which crosses the borders of the three southern provinces. This constitutes evidence that it would be possible to identify one *Lingua Franca* for each of the three main regions of the country, corroborating Firmino's (1995) arguments that because the indigenous languages have transcended their traditional roles, and have adapted to the contemporary social conditions in which they are used, and while they are still indexing ethnic and /or regional identities, they have also acquired the capacity to invoke national realities, hence the need to review the current language policy. Thus, although being aware of the existence of relevant success stories and best practices from other geographies in the world, when it comes to the management of linguistic diversity vis-à-vis national cohesion (Extra 2008), in what follows, the

study looks at possible lessons that could be learnt from neighbouring countries, in Southern Africa, in relation to language policy interventions aimed at bringing African languages to the fore.



Fig. 2: Map of the most spoken Mozambican Bantu languages by province (Source: Chimbutane 2012)

African languages in the public space in Southern Africa: lessons to be learnt

The Southern African region presents useful examples of the use of African languages in the public sphere (Alexander 2000; Kamwangamalu 2001; 2004; Massombuka 2018; Beukes 2004; Kamwendo 2006), which could be a learning experience for Mozambique. One of the most far-

reaching lessons is undoubtedly the South African case, where the South African Language Bill has been passed, not only awarding an official language status to twelve (12) languages, so far, including the South Africa Sign Language, but also with the main goals of seeking “to promote equitable use of the official languages of South Africa and taking practical and positive measures to regulate and monitor the use of official languages”. In addition, the Bill aims to “promote parity of esteem and equitable treatment of official languages, facilitate equitable access to services and information and promote good language management by national departments, national public entities and national public enterprises to meet the needs of the public; and seek to provide for the adoption of language policies” (Republic of South Africa 2011: 7).

Additional lessons could be extracted from the Zimbabwean and Malawian cases as well (Jongore 2020; Sibanda 2019; Hungwe 2007; Kamwendo 2005), whereby, despite the obvious and manifest dominance of English, and the visible preference for it at the expense of the indigenous Zimbabwean languages, the latter have always been used in formal domains such as education. For instance, while Hungwe (2007: 146) indicates that both Shona and Ndebele have undergone a process of orthography development, and that literature and dictionaries are published in both languages, there is, however, an indication that “curriculum policy in Zimbabwe has progressively served to provide avenues for engaging and locking into networks of opportunity that are mostly located outside national borders, which is a manifestation of a global dynamic” (Hungwe 2007: 147). This is seconded by Jongore (2020), who concludes that replacing English as the medium of instruction and paralleling it with indigenous languages will require addressing the issue directly.

Discussing language policy in Malawi, Kamwendo (2005: 65) highlights the revival of linguistic and cultural identity-seeking behaviour as well as the politics of recognition in this multilingual and multi-ethnic country, characterised by the demand for official language status for languages that had been marginalised. The language practices and approaches used in these countries, to claim official language recognition, would certainly be a takeaway for Mozambique.

Having briefly argued that Mozambique has a lot to learn from the neighbouring countries’ language policies, the following session turns

to the opportunities that appear to emerge for the Mozambican national languages.

Is there a space and opportunities for Mozambican National languages? – Concluding remarks

Following from Firmino's (1995: 40) claim that "a language policy for Mozambique must create the conditions conducive to a more widespread use of Portuguese, and also the possibility of using Mozambican national languages in institutional contexts, such as formal education, courts, the administrative apparatus or mass communication", this study contends that a close observation of the language practices of individuals and groups in Mozambican society, in the private and public domains, already point to an increasing presence and visibility of Mozambican Bantu languages in the public sphere.

An attentive observation of language practices in Mozambican society certainly indicates a widespread use of the Portuguese language, but equally the use of Mozambican languages in different contexts, as presented below:

1. by state institutions, such as the National Meteorologic Institute (INAM) or the National Institute for Disaster Management (INGD), in events of dissemination of early warning and disaster alert messages, targeting a variety of speech communities in the rural areas, in the face of the occurrence of emergencies;
2. on community radio, which has a countrywide coverage. According to CAICC (2023), a total of twenty (20) national languages are used by community radio stations to disseminate content to their target audience;
3. in popular music, by older and younger generations of Mozambican musicians alike;
4. during electoral campaigns, not by the presidential candidates themselves, even though they are native speakers of such languages, but by resorting to interpretation;
5. in formal schooling, through the mother tongue-based bilingual education programme, so far involving 16 Mozambican languages and Portuguese.

The above instances of the use of Mozambican languages certainly signify an awareness of the existing linguistic diversity in the country and offer insights into the directions of potential language policy interventions aimed at promoting linguistic inclusivity, cultural preservation, and equitable public service delivery in the country. These developments indicate the opportunity for a change in the language policy of Mozambique, corroborating with Mathe and Motsaathebe (2023: 1) who argue that “the African multilingual public sphere should reflect participation by all ethnolinguistic groups in their indigenous languages, in which both majority language speakers and minority language speakers should be accommodated in the public sphere and multilingualism should occur without switching to the language of the majority”.

Acknowledging and valuing diversity is indeed a mechanism for implementing linguistic human rights. By respecting and promoting all the languages spoken in Mozambique, and bringing them to the public sphere, we will be recognising the dignity and rights of all our fellow citizens, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic origin. This mutual respect is essential for building an inclusive and harmonious society.

It is important to exercise caution, however, as managing linguistic diversity and formulating multilingual language policies for both society and the education sector may present significant challenges. Notably, there are substantial financial implications associated with producing educational and reading materials in over 20 languages for use in schools, as well as complexities related to the training of teachers (Henriksen 2010). Furthermore, in a nation already marked by political divisions stemming from the arbitrary partitioning of Africa in the nineteenth century, it is crucial to ensure that the needs of all ethnolinguistic groups are addressed. Failing to do so could risk deepening existing divisions and jeopardising national unity.

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