Zambian English from a sociolinguistic and historical perspective. A necessity in a multilingual and multicultural country

Teodora NOJEA
teea11@yahoo.com
University of Oradea (Romania)

Résumé : Le but de cet article est d'aider le lecteur à découvrir l'espace multilingue et multiculturel de la Zambie, un pays situé au sud du continent africain, soulignant le caractère unificateur de l'anglais, ainsi que les conflits imminents et les inconvénients générés par l'utilisation de cette langue européenne. En Zambie, l'anglais n'est pas seulement langue officielle, mais aussi lingua franca (langue véhiculaire), langue parlée par l'élite, langue étrangère, tout comme langue maternelle. La genèse de ces rôles multiples a été fortement influencée par les communautés locales, étant un résultat de l'interaction du langage des colonisateurs avec la société africaine, ancrée dans la tradition. Au fil du temps, l'utilisation de l'anglais sur le territoire africain est devenu, pour diverses raisons, un fait salutaire.

Mots-clés*: lingua franca, langue vernaculaire, multilingvisme, Afrique subsaharienne, l'anglais en Zambie.*

1. Introduction

We could write hundreds and hundreds of pages about Sub-Saharan Africa, without reaching an exhaustive content, and most of these pages would converge towards the multiple forms of one word: diversity, a diversity that includes: 2000 languages, 3000 ethnic groups (most of them having their own language, traditions and culture), a rich variety of ecosystems, various customs, religiously plural environment and a landscape that combines deserts, forests, amazing waterfalls, the longest rivers, the lowest point on Earth, and mountain ranges.

For a long time, Sub-Saharan Africa was regarded as a cultural tabula rasa, an empty slate available for the European coloniser to write his doctrines on it; as a place that has nothing to say to the rest of the world and which was restricted until its colonisation to a space inhabited by savages and cannibals. But now, as Lovemore Mbigi points out: "a new African consciousness is (…) dawning, in which ordinary Africans, particularly women and the youth [We mention here the post-colonial literature with its abandon of

BDD-A28765 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:49 UTC)

the writing-back ideology and focus on new values, as well as African feminism], who strive to live responsibly and who shun the uncritical emulation of other parts of the world in pursuit of making the continent authentically great, are reinterpreting what it means to be African. A context-relevant African way and a twenty-first century continental Renaissance, which incorporates the rich diversity of the many religions and tribal practices and Franco, Anglo, Latin, Dutch and Belgian, Arabic, Germanic and African perspectives, is forging its head in order to establish the continent's rightful place on the global stage (…)" (Mbigi, 2007: 2).

In this African"melting pot" it is interesting to analyze the changes that European languages brought about and also, had to accept as result of their co-habitation with numerous local languages.

2. Law and context

Zambia, the so-called heart of Africa, a multilingual and multicultural country, is situated in the Southern part of the continent, and takes its name from the Zambezi River, which means the river of God. The territory of nowadays Zambia was inhabited by Khoisan peoples and later on, starting around AD 300, by Bantu. Scottish explorer David Livingstone came to this area in the mid 19th century, more precisely in 1851. Before European colonisation the people governed themselves in kingdoms, chieftaincies and village groups (Holmes – Wong, 2009: 5).

Anglican missionaries opened churches, hospitals and schools and they did not favour the use of English, as they believed that the local languages were more powerful means of communication with the natives, therefore they preferred studying them. Missionaries played an important role in education during the precolonial period. They used indigenous languages as media of instruction in all schools, up to the fourth year of primary education. They not only struggled to study local languages but also to write other materials in these languages, like the *Bible* and Christian Literature. The first school was established in 1883 by such a missionary, which was determined to continue Livingstone's work, namely Frederick Stanley Arnot.

Towards the end of the 19th century, in 1895, the nowadays Zambia turns into the British protectorate of Northern Rhodesia. When the Colonial Office took over the administration of Northern Rhodesia in 1924, it established a commission which recommended to the British Government to make English the official language, but in 1928, four main local languages were chosen as "official languages of African schools": Citonga, Cinyanja, Cibemba, and Silozi.

During the British rule, formal education was neglected. Local languages were supposed to be used as a medium of instruction in the early years of study. In the 5th year of primary education, they were replaced by English.

The period comprised between 1953 and 1963 is known as the federal era because the British brought the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland into being, which included Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi).

In 1959, Kenneth Kaunda, known as the "Black Gandhi", founded the United National Independence Party, the only legal party from 1973 to 1990. Towards the end of 1963, after negotiations in London, the federation of Rhodesia-Nyasaland was dissolved. During the same year, the government of Northern Rhodesia asked UNESCO to study the Zambian education system and find ways to improve it. The Radford Report suggested the adoption of English as the sole language of education in all primary schools. On the 24th

BDD-A28765 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:49 UTC)

of October 1964, the country finally became an independent republic (Sardanis, 2014: 52). Zambia, of which, according to the 1963 Census, 76.6% of all men, and 95.6% of all women, were illiterate, still had no lingua franca. In this extreme situation, the new government was not only forced to find an appropriate language of instruction for all primary schools across the country, but also to start a major investment in education at all levels, literacy turning into a top priority.

Under the Education Act of 1966 and Act no. 312 from November 1966, the Government imposed English as the only language of instruction from the first year of primary education to university studies. While focusing on the recommendations of the Radford Report, Kenneth Kaunda's government didn't gave up completely the idea of teaching local languages. Kaunda's "One Zambia, One Nation" will be, ironically, unified by the only language that was common for the entire country: English (Chanda, 2008: 12). Also, in 1969 the Vice-President of Zambia at that time, Simon Kapwepwe, militates for the use in the educational system of local languages: "(…) we should stop teaching children through English right from the start because it is the surest way of imparting inferiority complex in the children and the society. It is poisonous. It is the surest way of killing African personality and African culture" (Serpell, 2001: 432).

In 1977 the educational reform reaffirmed the use of English as the only language of primary education up to university, with the mention that teachers can use in explanations, one of the seven recognized educational languages. In 1992 the Ministry of Education published a document which replaced the 1977 educational reform and emphasized local languages. In 1994 another document concerning the curriculum of primary schools was issued, in which it was again recommended that the local languages be used as languages of instruction, during the first four years of primary school, but this recommendation has never been implemented.

3. Zambian English, a useful harm?

Whenever it comes to an African country, a simple question often arises: How many languages are there in this country? The answer is never simple.

As far as Zambia goes, this Sub-Saharan African country is the place of at least 73 ethnic groups and, according to some sources, enjoys the same number of spoken languages. The Ethnologue speaks about 46 individual languages: of these, 37 are indigenous and 9 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 10 are institutional, 18 are developing, 12 are vigorous, 4 are in trouble, and 2 are dying.

Pursuant to Mwelwa C. Musambachime's book *One Zambia, One Nation, One Country*, there are only seven main languages, the mother tongues or first languages that are used for educational and administrative purposes, namely: Bemba, Lozi, Lunda, Kaonde, Luvale, Tonga and Nyanja, languages that are used by a population estimated in July 2012 at 14,309,466. Portuguese has been introduced into the school curriculum and French is studied in private and secondary schools (Taylor, 2006: 74).

Zambia has many languages within its borders but also residents who claim to speak several languages. To multilingualism is related a problem that is common to African linguistic space, nominally, that of knowing what one means by language. In *The Language Situation in Zambia*, Mubanga E. Kashoki and Michael Mann bring into discussion the difference between language and dialect. For example, a person speaking Tonga, Lenje and Ila, which are not labeled as being mutually unintelligible and are considered as members of the same language, is considered by linguists as speaker of only one language, while a

BDD-A28765 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:49 UTC)

Zambian using Bemba, Tonga and Lenje is believed to speak two languages (Kashoki, 2017: 22). Another confusion can occur between two other different concepts: language and tribe, as it is the case of Zambia, known to be homeland of, as we have already mentioned, dozens of tribes and just as many languages.

So, in order to resolve the difficulty and to provide a working definition, language and dialect have been defined in terms of the number of people speaking them. (…) Thus, a well-known speech form, spoken by a sizable number of people, is called a language, but that not so well-known and spoken by fewer people is called a dialect. (…) [Furthermore] dialect has been used to mean a language with no literary tradition. In this sense, speech forms with little or no literature have been considered to be dialects of those to which they are related and which have a relatively long-established literature. The second is that dialect has come to connote an inferior or subordinate language (Kashoki, 2017: 49).

In *Language in Zambia*, edited by Sirarpi Ohannessian and Mubanga E. Kashoki, multilingualism, more dominant in rural areas of Zambia, is related to "sex, education, age and geographical mobility" (Kashoki, 2017: 49). Therefore, men are more likely than woman to be able to speak more languages, not only English, but also local languages, most of all due to a longer educational period as well as to the fact that they go to work, and learn to speak new languages or, to improve those they already know. Education has an even more crucial influence as "the more educated the person, the more languages he or she appears to speak". Speakers from this category use apart from their mother tongue and English at least one more other language. When it comes to age, younger people are more likely to use English while the older ones are more likely to be speakers of other Zambian languages. Also, the relationship between multilingualism and geographical mobility is a close and strong one as "the more areas a person has lived in, it seems the more languages he is likely to know" (Kashoki, 2017: 50). Multilingualism has found a fertile soil in Zambia where not only mobility is increasing but also the educational system is improving and developing.

Nowadays, the official language of Zambia is English and is used in education, also in law courts, administration, parliament and commerce. English is the main *lingua franca* of Zambia; this means that the language is used on a wide scale by a considerable number of non-native speakers. Other dominant *linguae francae* are Bemba and Nyanja followed by the other 5 official Zambian languages to which can be added other non-official languages (Tumbuka, Inamwanga or Mambwe): "(…) owing to a variety of factors, English is the principal lingua franca of Zambia in terms of its use throughout the country". But this is not quite the same thing as saying that it is spoken by more people than Bemba.

The pieces of information that could lead to a classification of the use of these as linguae francae are contradictory. If English is not the dominant language in communication among the Zambian majority, it is among the educated inhabitants of Zambia. Its spread as *lingua franca* is influenced by its high status, its use in public administration, in employment and in school system.

English's formal status as the official language with a monopoly of the national press and television, most road signs and public notices, post-primary education and even pronouncements by the Head of State, might seem to justify the decision of Kloss (1967) to call Zambia an "exoglossic state" in which English is said to have "succeeded in ousting the aboriginal tongues" (Serpell, 2001: 144).

Like in many other African countries, things are not simple when it comes to colonizer's imposed language and there are two groups, as we will see further. On one hand, there are those who see and accept the benefits of using English, on the other hand,

BDD-A28765 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:49 UTC)

are those who identify in the employment of this European language a destructive power directed towards Zambia's own identity.

Despite all the encouraging facts favoring English, recent studies as well as researches from previous decades bring to light less positive aspects. Related to this, we mention Mildred Wakumelo Nkolola who states that the census of Population and Housing of 2000 shows that only about 1.7% of the Zambians use English as communication language as opposed to 87.7% locators of Zambian languages. The *International Handbook of English Language Teaching* shows that less than 20% of Africans are competent in using the official languages of their countries.

As seen by Casmir Chanda, Zambia recognized education as the engine for human development, economic growth and a prerequisite to industrialization (Chanda, 2008: 3). Just like other African countries, postcolonial Zambia had to find a link between its many ethnolinguistic groups but, despite the fact that English performed this function, according to Mkandawîle Benson, Zambia remains "a national language handicapped country" and despite the fact that the colonizers' language politically united the Zambians through its neutral character, the language caused a "severe destruction" that prevented the country's development.

> "It has been disempowering and challenging Zambia's slowly since independence from Primary School to higher levels of education, from home to higher institutions of socialization, from junior offices to senior offices, from villages to towns and cities, from children to adults. English has destroyed the realm of freedom and sovereignty among Zambians. It has linguistically disempowered citizens for massive mobilization and active participation in economic, social, political and cultural. English has divided Zambians into classes: Those with the ability to speak and use it fluently. Those who try to utter and understand some words and, finally, those who are unable to speak it" [http://bmsitwe.blogspot.ro/2012/02/, accesed 12.02.2018].

All these are reinforced by other linguists. Therefore, according to Kashoki, in Zambia, the English language exacerbated the high drop out rate from school and illiteracy in both English and mother tongue. As opposed to English, all the local languages bring benefits as promoting the country's culture, peace and development and also assure easy access to information and a higher employment. Losing one's language equals in postcolonial consciousness with loosing one's identity, a common characteristic for African societies. "(…) How can a Zambian claim to be a Chokwe, a Mambwe, a Bisa, a Tonga, a Lozi or a Luvale when he/she cannot speak the language of that ethnic group?" (Nkolola, 2010: 179).

On the other hand, the use of English as the language of the political, economic and social government sectors has elevated it to the position of a prestige language. As a result, it is regarded as one of the essential keys to economic and social advancement. (…) Consequently, a linguistically empowered elite class has arisen which employs English to consolidate its domination of positions of authority in all basic government positions as well as in industry, commerce and education (Nkolola, 2010: 172).

English indeed created social classes, many members of the elitist class using it as their main language or even sole language of communication, like is the case of mixed families. Friday Mulenga, a historian at the University of Zambia defends the use of the European language: "If parents don't teach their children their mother tongue, it is not the fault of English. English is a global language, we need it whether you like it or not!" Despite all these contradictory aspects caused by divergent views, a study conducted by

BDD-A28765 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:49 UTC)

World Linguistic Agency rated Zambia as the Second Best English Speaking Country in Africa, after Uganda (Kashoki, 2017: 8).

This evolution of languages led to the apparition of Zambian slang which can be heard throughout Lusaka and other major cities. In other words, English did not only enforce domination over the various indigenous languages, but also received and accepted chances turning from a standard English into a "local" English that reflects the African "adjustments". Therefore, just as we can speak about Uglish or Ugandan English, Camfranglais or the many pidgin languages derived from English, known as Pidgin English; in Zambia we have Zambian English.

So, in "That girl just released an Album", "album" has the meaning of pregnancy or birth.

"Ati how?" is used for "How are you?".

"Ba'ane" means "good friends" while "book", "leave a location" e.g. "Buta" lets book from here its getting "dry".

In "I've clapped all my homework so we can go play football now", "clap" means to finish.

"What's cutting?" = "What's happening?"

"Damage" - in reference to money spent.

In "How much damage did you do last night?", "damage" is used in reference to money spending. "Dry" is translated with "boring" whille "chow" (chau) with "eat".

"Father" is a man whose name you don't know, an eldery man.

"A remix"is "a lie" and "Stango" refers to "the United States of America" while "Sau Bay" to "South Africa" (*World Heritage Encyclopedia*).

The English spoken in Zambia, obviously has some particular features, like the omission of certain object pronouns ("Did you reach?"), the simplification of some phrasal verbs ("throw" instead of "throw away") and of some vowel sounds ("taste" and "test"), subtle differences in the usage of auxiliary verbs and the incorporation of particles (such as *chi* "big/bad" and *ka* "little").

Broadcasting on Radio Zambia takes place in the seven officially approved Zambian languages but also in English while, when it comes to newspapers, there are no daily newspapers in Zambian languages and just two daily papers published in English, only the fortnightly ones using the officially approved Zambian languages. Although English is the most important official language, Bemba and Nyanja are two Zambian languages that, according to research studies are used more extensively and understood more widely.

Conclusions

What happens to a language, foreign, imposed, labeled as official, in a society where it must cohabit with dozens of other languages which emit by means of every word and phrase, the unmistakable fragrance of their ancestral values and traditions, the core of their identity? This is a question for every Sub-Saharan African country and the answer is: It changes local realities and allows itself to be changed, it enriches and impoverishes, it builds bridges and it breaks ancestral roots.

Despite the delineation of some deprecating ideas related to the effect of using English in Zambia, the language of the British colonisers emerged as a unifying factor among a multitude of tribes and a mixture of local languages and dialects. The world is English, a common saying in Zambia, proves the Zambians' awareness of all the links and perspectives that are created by the use of this language. In a school that brings together pupils speaking

BDD-A28765 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:49 UTC)

various local languages, English cannot but facilitate communication and the learning process. On the other hand, more than half a century after its independence, Zambia has a new generation that can't speak its mother tongue, or have a good command of English.

All in all, in Zambia, English remains a necessity, but, it could also be stated that "no greater injustice can be committed against a people than to deprive them of their language" (Brock-Utne, 2002: 146).

Bibliography

AFOLAYAN, Funso S., (2004), *Culture and Customs of South Africa*, Greenwood Publishing Group.

BENSON, Mkandawile, (2012), *The Effect of English Language in Zambia*, [online], avaible at https://sitwe.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/the-effect-of-english-language-in-zambia-by-mkandawile-benson [accesed 21.09.2017].

BOOYSEN, Lize, (2006), *Managing Cultural Diversity: A South African Perspective*, in Kurt April, Marylou Shockley (ed.), *Diversity in Africa: The Coming of Age of a Continent*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 51-93.

BROCK-UTNE, Birgit, (2002), *Whose Education For All?: The Recolonization of the African Mind*, London: Routledge.

CHANDA, Casmir, (2008), *Teaching and Learning of English in Secondary Schools: A Zambian Case Study in Improving Quality*, London: Commonwealth Secretariat.

FALOLA, Toyin, (2000), *Culture and Customs of Nigeria*, Greenwood Publishing Group.

HOLMES, Timothy; WINNIE, Wong, (2009), *Cultures of the Wolds: Zambia*, New York, Marshall Cavendish.

KASHOKI, Mubanga E., (2017), *The Language Situation in Zambia*, in Sirarpi Ohannessian, Mubanga E. Kashoki (eds.), *Language in Zambia*, London: Routledge, pp. 7-52.

MANCHISI, P. C., (2004), *The Status of the Indigenous Languages in Institutions of Learning in Zambia: Past, Present and Future*, in *The African Symposium: An On Line Journal of African Educational Research Network* 1 (2004), pp. 10-18.

MATHANGWANE, Joyce T., (2016*), Saved by the School Bell: A Reality or a Delusion?*, in Akin Odebunmi, Joyce T. Mathangwane (eds.), *Essays on Language, Communication and Literature in Africa*, London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 2-19.

MBIGI, Lovemore, (2007), *Rethinking Leadership and Wealth Creation in Africa*, in Kurt April, Marylou Shockley (ed.), *Diversity in Africa: The Coming of Age of a Continent*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 3-10.

MWAKIKAGILE, Godfrey, (2010), *Zambia: Life in an African Country*, Dar es Salaam, New Africa Press.

NJOH, Ambe J., (2006), *Tradition, Culture and Development in Africa: Historical Lessons for Modern Development Planning*, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

NKOLOLA, Mildred Wakumelo, (2010), *From a Language of National Unity to the Language of Disempowerment and Cultural Alienation: the Case of English and Zambian Languages in Postcolonial Zambia*, in Kemmonye Collete Monaka, Owen S Seda, Sibonile Edith Ellece (eds.), *Mapping Africa in the English Speaking World: Issues in Language and Literature*, London, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 165-182.

Otiso, Kefa M., (2013), *Culture and Customs of Tanzania*, ABC – CLIO.

RONNAS, Maria, (2009), *Reading Promotion in Zambia Lessons from Three Projects*, [online]. available at http://bada.hb.se/bitstream/2320/5062/1/09-21.pdf [accesed 03.10.2017].

SARDANIS, Andrew, (2014), *Zambia: The First 50 Years*, London, I. B. Tauris.

BDD-A28765 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:49 UTC)

SERPELL, Robert, (2001), *Cultural Dimensions of Literacy Promotion*, in Ludo Verhoeven, Catherine E. Snow (ed.), *Literacy and Motivation: Reading Engagement in Individuals and Groups*, New York, Routledge, pp. 222-251.
SOBANIA, N.W., (2003), *Culture and Customs of Kenya*, Greenwood Publishing Group.
TAYLOR, Scott D., (2006), *Culture and Customs of Zambia*, Greenwood Publishing Group.

BDD-A28765 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:49 UTC)