



## **The impact of Chilapalapa language of Northern Rhodesia on Zambian local languages**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examined the impact of Chilapalapa, the pidgin language of Southern Africa on some Zambian local languages. The paper also discussed how the language came about. The study, which was limited to two research areas (Kabwe and Lusaka districts), revealed that the Chilapalapa language was created and designed by colonial masters to demean, brutalise and oppress Africans. The other reason for the introduction of Chilapalapa was to classify Africans to a lower social class as allowing Africans to use English was viewed by Whites as putting an African on an equal social standing with Whites. The study also revealed that Chilapalapa, though obsolete, left a great impact on the lexical and morphological characteristics of many Zambian languages. A good number of Chilapalapa words are being used in most of Zambian local languages today. Consequently, these familiar Chilapalapa words have to some extent created some near intelligibility among Zambian local languages.

**Key words:** Language death, native languages, Language attitude, Derogatory, Pidgin, Chilapalapa.

## 1. Background

Chilapalapa language was a pidgin (simplified language) based primarily on Zulu/Ndebele with English and a small input of Afrikaans and other Southern African native languages. Chilapalapa was used as a common language (lingua franca) mainly on plantations and in the mines in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia during the colonial days. In this article two issues are being addressed; what are the origin and genesis of Chilapalapa language, the pidgin of Southern Africa? A further purpose of this article is to establish the impact this language has made on Zambian local languages. This investigation was carried out within the socio-cultural, historical and sociolinguistic environment of the language's former setting.

According to Kanyenze (2004), the Witwatersrand National Labour Association (WNLA), more popularly known as WENELA, was set up by the gold mines in South Africa as a recruiting agency for migrant workers from Congo, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, Tanganyika and Angola. WNLA employed local permanent agents who penetrated the interior regions to recruit workers to go and work in the mines in South Africa. In order to encourage Africans to go and work in the mines, colonial governments introduced what was called hut tax of quite a small amount payable annually for each hut. This compelled every young man to go down south to work in the mines in order to bring back enough money for hut taxes in the village.

In order to orient these migrant workers to communicative competences in the new environment, WNLA set up barracks to house these recruits before starting work. During their stay in these barracks, the recruits underwent fifteen hours of learning basics of Chilapalapa, a lingua franca of Southern Africa.

A cardinal issue that should be addressed is how this Chilapalapa language came about and why it died. When we talk of language death, we refer to a situation where a language loses its native speakers. Thomason, S (2007) reports, "A language must be dead when it no longer has any speaker." It is important to understand that the death of a language comes in many forms. Hornberger (2010) points out that when a linguistic community ceases to use its original language, language death is said to occur. Kuncha and Bathula (2006), also state that migration plays a vital role in the process of language shift leading to language death. However in case of pidgin languages, migration in fact facilitates their creation. According to the Collins English dictionary 12<sup>th</sup> edition (2014), pidgins are languages that develop when people with no common languages come into contact with each other. It should be noted that nobody speaks pidgin as their mother tongue. Usually a pidgin language is created through the blending of some lexical and morphological elements of one major language with the

grammar of one or more languages. The major or primary dialects are usually the languages of the former colonial masters such as English, French and Portuguese. A good example of such pidgins is those found in the Caribbean which were created through the establishment of plantations with the large groups of slaves from West Africa. However, there are also pidgin languages spoken in Africa with a blending of English, French and some African languages. Among these African based pidgins, we talk of Chilapalapa. Chilapalapa as a pidgin language, was heavily influenced by Southern African native languages such as Ndebele, Shona, Nyanja, English and Afrikaans. About 60 percent of Chilapalapa vocabulary comes from Ndebele, 20 percent from English, 10 percent from Shona, 5 percent from Nyanja and another 5 percent from Afrikaans. Chilapalapa was widely used in towns, mines and on white owned farms.

Now let us understand how this language was brought about. According to Magirosa (2014), Chilapalapa language was created by Southern African colonial masters (Boers/Mabbunu) in order to oppress and humiliate Africans. For instance, a native black was not allowed to use English when speaking to a Whiteman or white woman, as doing so suggested that a black man was claiming to be socially equal to a white man. Chilapalapa was a racist language designed by whites (Boers) to demean and humiliate blacks. It was quite common in Northern and Southern Rhodesia especially in the mines and on farms to use Chilapalapa to refer to an African as a monkey. This goes without saying that this language was imposed on Africans hence instilling a negative attitude towards Chilapalapa in Africans. Ngidi (2007) defines language attitude as strong positive or negative emotions experienced by people when they are faced with a choice between languages in a variety of situations or are learning a language. The above explanations point out that people always want to identify themselves with a language that would either give them social status in society or a language that would provide social integration. The identity imposed by one's group membership is a crucial factor for language choice. Africans did not take pride in a language that demeaned them or made them less humans. Due to the fact that young people never learnt this derogatory language in schools, it began to lose its vitality.

The Chilapalapa language was created by both borrowing some vocabulary from African familiar languages such as Zulu and Ndebele and transforming some English and Afrikaans words and fused them into Chilapalapa.

Some of the derogatory Chilapalapa remarks which were used by Boers on Blacks were:

*Wena puza fanika bobojani.* You eat like a monkey.

*Muntu munyama aziko sikopo. An African has no brains*

When the British colonial government was recruiting Africans to go and fight the Germans they used this propaganda: *Lapa Jarimani muntu munyama yena lima fanika nkomo, kabanga Jarimani yena chaya tina zonke muntu munyama yena yazi bopiwa fanika nkomo*. Meaning in Germany Africans plough like oxen, if Germany defeats us, then all the blacks will be ploughing like oxen here.

This motivates Africans to join the British army to stop Germans from using Blacks like animals of labour.

## **2. Methodology**

The data was collected by using questionnaires and in-depth interviews from a sample of 40 respondents comprising 10 former colonial farm and mine workers (who worked in Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia respectively before independence), 5 Asian shop owners and 25 young Zambian youths born after independence. These young Zambians were chosen randomly in different schools and streets in the two districts in the study area. The researcher personally observed and listened to the patterns of speech and language use in order to identify the extent to which Chilapalapa words are used in Zambian local languages. Qualitative method was used to collect information pertaining to opinions and views of respondents while quantitative was used to collect statistical data. Purposive method was used on Asian shop owners due to pre-determined nature of information that was required from those who employed Africans and used Chilapalapa for communication during the colonial time. The questionnaire was designed in such a manner that there was a list of Chilapalapa words and respondents were asked to just translate the words to English and then to state to which language those words belonged.

## **3. Findings and Discussion**

The results are divided into two main sections. The first section presents data on respondents' responses on personal data, their linguistic background and degree of Chilapalapa competence. These data established respondents' attitudes, their degree of bilingualism and linguistic competence in Chilapalapa. The second section focuses on respondents' actual knowledge of Chilapalapa words and their origin

### 3.1 Respondents' personal background

Most of the respondents (35%) were very old between 75 and 90 years, while 65 percent were young aged below 40 years. The young respondents were teachers and businessmen and women born after independence while the old were workers and employers during the colonial time in Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively. In terms of gender consideration, the sample constituted 70 percent males and 30 percent were females. The findings also revealed that 30 percent of the subjects had at least tertiary level education while 70 percent had education level lower than grade twelve or GCE. In terms of proficiency in Chilalalapa language, 30 percent of the respondents (former workers and employers in the colonial time) were able to communicate in Chilalalapa fluently while 70 percent (youths born after independence) could hardly communicate in Chilalalapa.

These responses given by former colonial workers and shop owners indicated that Chilalalapa was introduced and designed to demean and humiliate Africans during the colonial time. According to the responses from both old and young respondents, most of the Chilalalapa words originated from Ndebele and Zulu.

### 3.2 Impact of Chilalalapa on Zambian local languages

The study has revealed that Chilalalapa language began to lose its vitality immediately after independence of Southern African states. This loss of vitality was to the larger extent attributed to the negative attitude attached to the language.

However, this language did not just die completely; rather it left some impact on almost all the local languages spoken in present states of Southern Africa. It cannot be disputed or gainsaid that Chilalalapa has had some effects on lexical and morphological characteristics of African languages spoken in Southern Africa. In Zambia for instance, most languages maintained a Chilalalapa word “**bululu**” to mean kinsman which is derived from Afrikaans word “**broer**” meaning brother. In Nyanja, a commonly used Chilalalapa word “**Mufana**” is now one of the most common Nyanja words used to mean young man. Another common word used in almost all the Southern African countries is “**Mainini**” which means second or junior wife. We have other common words like “**manje**” to mean now, “**futi**” to mean again “**Sitima**” meaning a train is another common Chilalalapa word used in most Zambian languages. Today, most Zambians do not know the origin of certain popular words used in popular registers especially among the youths. It is very ironic for Africans to have wilfully abandoned Chilalalapa on the premises of it having been a language of colonial brutality yet they have maintained the same offensive words and fused them into their native languages. Such offensive words returned from Chilalalapa are words like “**fuseki**” originally “*pfutseki*” which meant “get out” or get lost, Another common offensive Chilalalapa word used almost

in languages in Zambia is “**Musatanyoko**” which means the genital of the referent’s mother. Not only did Chilapalapa influence the vocabulary of African languages but has also to a less extent loaned some words to English. Southern Africa official English dialect uses words like “**Indaba**” meaning dialogue or meeting, “**impi**” to mean warriors, “**a fundi**” meaning an expert or a learned person, **Nduna** meaning member of cabinet

#### **4. Recommendations**

Language does not only affect the dominated or threatened language but it also influences the vocabulary of the dominant language. Chilapalapa might have died many years ago but its effect on indigenous languages is still immense. Linguists and researchers should put more effort in research to ascertain whether or not Chilapalapa language can be revived and revitalised. As revealed by this study Chilapalapa was a language with wider communication and flexibility making it easily learnt and understood not only by Africans but by Asians and Europeans as well. The Government is encouraged to support efforts towards research in this area so as to come up with an international indigenous official language which would promote unity in the nation and across the sub region. This will also minimise ethnic conflicts instigated by language choice.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This study has clearly revealed that Chilapalapa was created by borrowing words from African native languages and by transforming some English and Afrikaans words and fusing them into Chilapalapa.. As discussed above, Chilapalapa’ main purpose and objective was to demean Africans by the minority whites. Consequently, Chilapalapa was viewed as a tool of racial discrimination hence its death. The study has also revealed that the vocabulary of most indigenous languages of Zambia have greatly been influenced by the Chilapalapa language. It was generally felt however, by the younger generation and shop owners of Asian origin that Chilapalapa language should be revived and supported so as to minimise the current tribal animosity which is to some extent linked to language use.

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