

FINANCIAL TRANSLATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR THE AFRICAN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

In terms of the Census 2011 in South Africa, the majority of the South African population use indigenous African languages as mother tongue, compared to the minority that use English, Afrikaans and other languages. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996) declared Sepedi (N. Sotho), Sesotho, Setswana, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu as official languages of the Republic of South Africa. Even though in 1996 eleven languages were declared official by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996), English and Afrikaans have maintained their pre-1994 status as de facto languages in the technical and scientific field. The anomaly of the dominance of English and Afrikaans, particular in the financial industry, has implication for the development of the majority of the citizens in the country, especially in poverty-alleviation and national development interventions. Without paying a special focus on the dynamics in languages, it could be extremely difficult to understand how issues of power, identity, conflict and resistance are established and maintained within organisations and even governments. The purpose of this paper is to investigate reasons for the persistence of the status quo in the positioning of languages in South Africa in particular regarding financial documents. This paper also looks at some of the challenges the African languages are faced with in making inroads in fields such as the finance, as well as implications for the speakers of the African languages over the two decades after the new dispensation was ushered in. The polysystem theory championed by Even-Zohar assists in putting the role translation can play in the effort of developing African languages and putting African languages into perspective. It is also hoped that this paper will contribute towards the debate on intellectualisation of the African languages in South Africa.

Keywords: African languages, financial translation, multilingualism, poverty, South Africa

1.0. INTRODUCTION

According to Du Toit and Van Tonder (2009, p.15), the new dispensation in South Africa which came into power in 1994, 'inherited an economy that was characterised by high levels of public debt, high inflation and poverty rates as well as little social security protection for the most vulnerable'. The most vulnerable in South Africa are generally the Blacks, who were racially discriminated in all aspects of their lives before 1994, resulting in unfortunate aftermaths such as poverty, loss of human dignity, and so forth. According to the Final Report of the Language Plan task Group (LANGTAG) presented by the then South African Minister of

Arts, Culture, Science and Technology Dr Ben Ngubane, language is seen as an economic resource, and amongst other things, must take macro-economic strategy issues aboard. (DACST, 1996, 23). By language here, the argument was, laying a stress on the previously disadvantaged languages in South Africa, which are the indigenous African languages.

Du Toit and Van Tonder (2009, p.15) further argue that with the new dispensation in place, the gap between the first and second economies in South Africa, with their opposing and unstable fundamentals, widened even further. When the then President Thabo Mbeki opened his parliament in February 2001, he acknowledged the ravage of poverty on the masses, and went on to say that it was worse than it was before 1994. In South Africa two Economies thus existed, the First Economy which could be associated with the speakers of English and Afrikaans, while the Second Economy, with the speakers of the indigenous African languages or often referred to as 'Bantu languages', such as Sesotho, isiXhosa, Sepedi (Northern Sesotho), isiNdebele, Siswati, Setswana, Xitsonga, Tshivenda and isiZulu. Molefe and Marais (2013, p. 73) allude to this when they argue that, 'these poor people are speakers of the Bantu languages....'

In South Africa English and to a lesser extent Afrikaans, still play a dominant role in high-status functions such as education, finance industry, and so forth. Conversely, the then chairperson of Pan South African Language Board, Mr Mpiyakhe Kumalo argued that South Africa was faced with responsibility of finding linguistic solutions to social issues such as economic upliftment of the people, and eradication of unemployment and poverty, the combating of crime and alleviation of social and health problems (PanSALB News, 2002, p.3). PanSALB further made a clarion call to business and industry when they acknowledged that skills development, capacity and empowerment are crucial themes in understanding today's workplace environment where divisions along racial and cultural lines often coincide with linguistic segregation (PanSALB News, 2002, p.10). No wonder than that since 2002, most financial texts in South Africa are still available in English and to a lesser extent Afrikaans and the likely solution to address this challenge for the majority of the speakers of the indigenous African languages is by using the translation process.

Madhu (2005, p.101) contends that most people, including translators often see translation as a literary pastime. Madhu (2005, p.101) goes on to emphasize that examining many major translation sites these days, there is proof that major translations works are in the fields of Information Technology, medicine, financial documents of all sorts, and so forth. While this is the case internationally, in South Africa the only available translation training, for example, in the African indigenous languages is for general translation only – no specialisation in fields such as financial texts is available. Globalisation is reality, and demands translation to carry message in business, financial and any context across linguistics and geographic boundaries. This in essence means that making translation available in the financial sector amongst the indigenous African languages, is not optional. It is reality, and unless addressed most of those historically disadvantaged in South Africa would forever be deprived of a voice in the financial sector in South Africa, and also in the whole world.

Some examples of the financial texts that need translation are loan agreements, account application forms, financial reports, financial industry training texts, banking forms, financial books, study guides, financial pamphlets, communication between institutions, and so forth. Without these texts translated into the African languages, many speakers of the indigenous African languages are denied the right to access crucial information that will equip them to participate maximally in the economy of the country. Bassnett and Trivedi (2002, p.5) in their introduction to the book *Translation Studies*, argue that, 'European norms have dominated literary production, and those norms have ensured that only certain kinds of text, those that will not prove alien to the receiving culture, come to be translated.' It could be said with certainty that financial texts are crucial for the economic viability of any nation, but the fact that they are not regarded highly in the training and practice of South African indigenous languages, is indicative of a well-orchestrated design by those in power in South Africa before 1996.

2.0. RESEARCH PARADIGM

The research paradigm that was followed in this study is critical race theory. According to Babbie (2007, p.39) critical race is based on race awareness and commitment to social justice. Babbie (2007, p.39) further argues that this paradigm has to do with the role of race in politics and government, often undertaken by legal scholars as well as social scientists. An important aspect of this paradigm is interest convergence, by which majority citizens will support the interest of the minorities if an only if those interest support those of the majority group.

In the case of the South African context, the majority of the citizens are Black, but their influence is not strong because of their financial situation. However, the matter under discussion is about the awareness on

issues of race and matters of social justice, as the Blacks need to be catered for from the side of those in power. If the financial texts are translated into the indigenous African languages, the speakers who are mostly Black will benefit, and be economically viable as a result. Also, if those on power realise that if the speakers of the indigenous languages are going to benefit, they will equally benefit in that there will be a better understanding between owners of businesses and clients and customers, for example regarding loan contract, and they will therefore support this agenda.

3.0. RESEARCH PROBLEM

The purpose of this research is to find out why more than two decades since the new dispensation in South Africa, financial texts are still available mainly in English and also Afrikaans. Also, how is this situation affecting the speakers of the indigenous African languages in South Africa, and finally how can it be turned around using Even-Zohar's theory on polysystem.

4.0. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Section 6 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996) there are 11 official languages, viz. Sepedi (Northern Sotho), Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. In terms of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996), amongst other things, these languages should be developed and be used in all aspects of public life in South Africa. While this is a case in principle, in reality two of these languages, English and Afrikaans, who were the former official languages before 1994 still dominate the scene. The other nine official languages seems to play a second fiddle to these two languages, although all eleven are supposed to be treated equally. Deprez, Du Plessis and Henrard (2000, p.2) strengthen this argument further when they say that although South Africa is seen as espousing multilingualism, she is evolving as a predominantly English-speaking state where Afrikaans has lost much blood and African languages are not receiving the help they desperately need from government. In the light of this state of affairs, the African languages remain in a deplorable position worse than they were during the apartheid era (Maphalala, 2000, p.154).

Listyo (2005:227) argues that international business contracts, for example, are drawn up in dominant languages such as English. He further adds that there are usually clauses that would declare English, for example, as the official language in the event of any dispute that may arise in interpreting the content of the contract. This shows that indigenous African languages are not yet considered as equals with English and other languages of similar influence in the world of business even though officially they are on the same level in South Africa. Williams (2011, p. 41) cites UNESCO Report that laments the fact that Africa is the only continent where the majority of the children start school using a foreign language. If they start schooling in a foreign language, it is no wonder that the foreign language will always be seen as crucial over and above the indigenous African language. The 2011 Census report in South Africa shown below, will assist in clarifying this challenge:

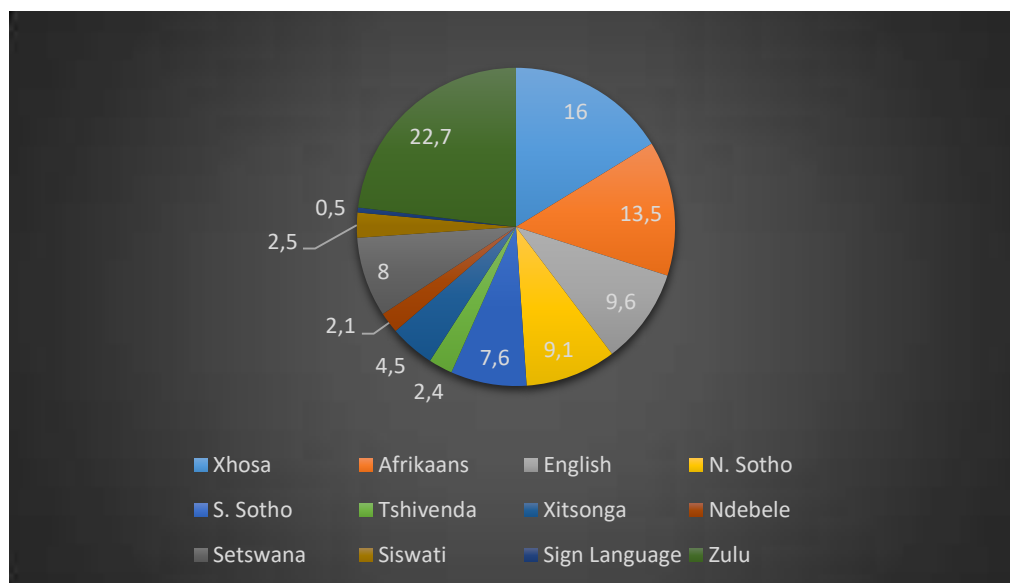


Fig. 1. 2011 Language Statistics in South Africa

In terms of the 2011 Census, the majority of the citizens in South Africa speak an African indigenous language (74.9%), and yet they have to learn in a foreign language which they possibly do not master compared to their mother tongue. Kennedy, C (2011, p.29) alludes to this argument when he says, 'The danger arises where the emphasis on English is misplaced and where other priorities such as poverty alleviation or mother tongue literacy would be more appropriate.' Since only about 9.6% speak English and 13.5% speak Afrikaans, it is therefore important to view this in perspective, considering that these two languages are still seen as important in the financial communication in South Africa.

According Bassnet and Trivedi (2002, p.2), the issue of the original and the translation of the original is a problem that translators have been debating about for a long time. Previously it was always accepted that the translation is inferior to the original. In other words, any translation will always be lower in terms of status to the original. Bassnet and Trivedi (2002, p.2) further contend that recent researches have confirmed that the issue of the higher-status original or source text and lower-status translation or target text is an issue that developed late with the invention of printing. In other words before the invention of printing, this thinking did not exist. This is important so that the translation of the financial texts is not condemned to the lower status but be seen as contribution to make the readers understand the message as intended.

Even-Zohar an Israeli scholar came out with the idea of polysystem theory, which according to Zhang (2014, p. 138) advocates 'that all literary relational phenomena should not be regarded as isolated, but should be put into a network.' In other words, although this theory initially was not meant for translation, nevertheless it came to display the position of translations as well as their function within the context of receptor language. The polysystem also lays an emphasis on the influence of other systems such as culture, politics, language, finance, and so forth that may have on the national as well as translated literature. Hence the importance of the theory in the case of financial translation in the face of marginalisation and the political development particular with regards to the speakers of the indigenous African languages in South Africa.

Munday (2016, p. 171) mentions two translations positions identified by Even- Zohar as not stable but keeps on changing, and comprises primary as well as secondary positions depended on the larger system it is part of (polysystem). It is primary or central when, implying that some translation can be regarded as 'high' at one point, and may be accepted as 'low' at some point and this hangs on the larger system of the polysystem. This fits in well with the thinking that previously translations in the financial field were not conceivable as a result of the existing ideology which aimed at disempowering and limiting the financial viability of the speakers of the indigenous African languages. With the new dispensation in South Africa which wanted to reverse the effects of the past, financial translation should therefore be central. If it is primary, Munday (2016, p.171) explains it as participating in actively shaping the centre of the polysystem, and secondary when it represents a peripheral system within the polysystem.

When the translation assumes the primary position, Munday (2001, p. 171) argues that it is when important translations are produced; it is innovatory and linking to major events of literary history. This can be linked to the current history in South Africa where there is a need for such translations, and as the result of the need of this translation, it should take the central position, bring in new ways of dealing with customers and clients, new thinking regarding financial development, new financial terminology in the field, training from international perspective that the masses was not exposed to in the past or getting exposure from other languages such as the English language. According to Munday (2016, p. 172), there are three ways suggested by Even-Zohar, in which the translated literature can take the central position, viz:

4.1. When a young literature is being established

Literature in terms of this aspect is not yet established and will be looking for solutions and ready-made models from established literatures. In South African situation, the South African indigenous languages will greatly benefit from languages such as English that could enrich these languages with aspects such as financial terminology, approaches and so forth in the financial industry. Thus financial translation will benefit the young literature that needs to develop.

4.2. When a literature is peripheral or 'weak'

The South African indigenous languages are still not yet well developed compared to languages such as English. These languages and culture in essence still dominate. It would therefore be necessary to import financial terminology, writing styles, and so forth from those literatures that are stronger. Translation is therefore important.

4.3. When there is crisis facing literature or a vacuum

While the African languages do exist, there is vacuum that is created in the use of such languages in high-status function like in financial translations. The better developed literatures could come in to assist through translations as no books are currently available in the indigenous African languages.

5.0. DISCUSSION

Globalisation has resulted in companies having offices and branches all over the world. While in most cases the English language is used, it is nevertheless necessary that languages spoken by the masses be used to communicate maximally with the masses, for example, in the Republic of South Africa where the majority speak the indigenous African languages. In such cases translation plays a crucial role to ensure that people understand, and also ensure that in cases where languages are still grappling with issues of growth, and unable to adequately express a wide range of experiences that take place in this day and age, translation process could greatly assist.

Regarding financial translation in South Africa, the first important task will be the training of financial translators in the indigenous African languages so that they are fully versed with all aspects of financial translation. Properly trained financial translators will be able to rewrite appropriately literature from other languages in the way that will benefit the speakers of the indigenous languages. Without understanding the literature and issues surrounding it in the financial field, translation will be a complete failure. Aspects of training should therefore prioritise accuracy, promptness, and so forth, which make or break the work of a financial translator.

The development of terminology is important amongst the indigenous African languages. Terminologists that work in the field of finances amongst other fields, should be trained, and be allowed to modernise the indigenous African languages. Terminology cannot be developed in the vacuum, but the actual use of terms will create the need to coining, transliteration, loaning, and so forth, of terms that could be used, and in so doing increase the corpus of the indigenous African languages. Exactness in the use of terminology is important for financial translators in order to avoid confusions and financial disasters.

Also, linked to training of financial translators is the aspect of confidentiality. Many financial translators need to be trained because in many instances companies do not want to rely on freelancers on account of the confidentiality of their documents. Many companies prefer using in-house translators for documents such as annual reports, to make sure that there are no leaks of information to the media or to the competitors. Competitor A for example, could be upstaged by competitor B, by launching a product first, before Competitor A could launch a similar product, and thus killing that particular launch. Therefore confidentiality is crucial amongst financial translators. The fact that there are few financial translators practising without adequate training amongst the indigenous African languages, is a blow to the financial growth of the African communities.

6.0. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In the light of the above discussions concerning Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, the role of literature from the other languages is crucial in putting the indigenous African languages on the map in as far as financial translation is concerned. Institutions in the country need to start specialised training for financial translators, and government must channel resources into the modernisation of African languages in aspects such as financial terminologies, training of financial translators, availability of relevant texts and translations, and so forth. The translation of the financial documents need to be central so as to transform the financial fortunes of the indigenous African language speakers, who see their languages as official languages in the Republic of South Africa. While in terms of the polysystem theory it is understandable that the position of translated documents may not remain central for ever, but currently it is fitting to have the financial literature translated from dominant languages such as English, with an aim of enriching the South African indigenous languages in order to express a wide range of experiences in the contemporary world.

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