

SPEAKING LIKE A NATIVE: VERNACULAR  
LANGUAGES AND THE STATE IN SOUTHERN  
RHODESIA, 1890–1935\*

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**ABSTRACT:** During the early years of white administration in Southern Rhodesia, few whites spoke the local vernaculars. The state used those few, largely traders and farmers, to translate and interpret. Members of the Native Affairs Department were expected to learn ‘on the job’. However, by the early 1920s, poor language abilities in the civil services, combined with growing segregationist tendencies in the face of African competition, prompted the state to reconsider whites’ knowledge of the vernaculars. The issue raised important questions about defining the boundary between ‘natives’ and ‘civilized peoples’, interactions between white and African communities, and the long-term project for the state.

**KEY WORDS:** Zimbabwe, linguistics, colonial, education, missions.

WHEN a friend of mine was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, he was forbidden to speak chiShona, his mother tongue, at school. Violations were punished by severe beatings from the teachers. Yet, bizarrely, these same white teachers would come to the boys discreetly out of school hours, and humbly ask to converse with them in chiShona, to help them to learn the language.<sup>1</sup> This experience was not unusual. Whites were supposed to learn the vernaculars from books and from white linguistic experts. The spoken vernacular had become a kind of hidden secret, and learning it from its native speakers a private and clandestine activity.<sup>2</sup> This essay investigates the processes that drove the spoken vernaculars underground in Southern Rhodesia, and demonstrates how language became a symbol of the state’s struggles to limit African autonomy.

ChiShona is itself a colonial invention, a text-based synthesis of various closely related regional vernaculars. These regional variations had been fixed as distinct written dialects, each with its own orthography and systems of word-division, by white missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, as this essay will explore, they were united into a single written language, dubbed chiShona, in the early 1930s.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Moses Bikishoni for the clarity with which he expressed the irony of this situation.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘native’ here in its purely technical sense, as one would refer to a native English speaker.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Chimundu, ‘Early missionaries and the ethnolinguistic factor during the “invention of tribalism” in Zimbabwe’, *Journal of African History*, 33 (1992), 87–109; G. Fortune, ‘Shona lexicography’, *Zambezia*, 7 (1979), 21–47.

The cumbersome orthography that was invented for this new written language quickly fell into disuse, and written chiShona, as it exists today, uses only the Roman alphabet.

The other large language-block in the territory was made up of siZulu-based languages. These were brought in by offshoots from the Zulu expansion: Mzilikazi in the west, whose people had developed a new vernacular known as siNdebele, and Gungunyana in the east, whose people's language was called Shangaan by the whites. Missionaries working in these areas used existing Zulu textbooks, despite differences in vocabulary and idiom. SiNdebele-speakers formed the larger group in Southern Rhodesia, since most Shangaan-speakers were beyond the eastern border in Portuguese East Africa. The orthography of written SiNdebele followed that already established for siZulu. In many areas, people had some knowledge of both chiShona variants and siZulu variants.

In addition to these two large language blocks, there were several smaller language groups. Like chiShona and siNdebele, they were part of larger language communities, which extended beyond the Southern Rhodesia region occupied by the British South Africa Company in the 1890s. Most notable of these were the Tonga, who lived in the Zambezi valley and the north-west of the territory claimed by the BSAC.

Language expertise among whites was very limited at the time of the BSAC invasion. Sign language was widely used, as were variants of Zulu, often translated via a third-party interpreter. There was also, of course, the traditional fall-back of talking loudly and waving one's arms about. Llewellyn C. Meredith, a trader who took up work with the Native Affairs Department in 1894, recounted an absurd situation where it seemed to him that the whites understood Zulu better than the Africans to whom they were trying to speak it:

we were provided with a guide, one of the BSA Police named Fred Payne who was a good Zulu speaker but not much use at Chishona. I could understand most of his Zulu talk but the Mashonas could not, though by loud talk and signs he made them, in a way, comprehend.<sup>5</sup>

Language expertise in whites was valued by the British South Africa Company administration, being a useful tool in the exercise of power. It was

<sup>4</sup> Similar processes of standardization affected other language groups, although much of the academic literature addresses contemporary language policy issues, rather than expressing a detailed interest in the history. The outstanding exception is Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo, 1880–1938* (Cambridge, 1986). P. Akujooobi Nwachuku, *Towards an Igbo Literary Standard* (London, 1983), is largely a set of policy recommendations, but it contains helpful historical data on pp. 3–15, including a comparison with the Doke Report's 1931 recommendations for standardizing chiShona; Rajmund Ohly, *The Destabilization of the Herero Language* (Windhoek, 1987), while primarily a polemic rather than a history, includes an interesting analysis of standardization policy and 'language engineering' 1881–1917 on pp. 10–17; Norbert Cyffer *et al.*, *Language Standardization in Africa* (Hamburg, 1991) is, like Nwachuku, primarily a set of policy recommendations, but contains some useful linguistic and historical analyses; Tore Janson and Joseph Tsonope, *Birth of a National Language: The History of Setswana* (Gaborone, 1991) is also primarily a work of linguistics and policy, but has an account of colonial influences on language standardization on pp. 36–50.

<sup>5</sup> L. C. Meredith, *Memoirs*, folio ms, c. 1941, 100. ME4/1/1.

more direct than the use of interpreters, and prevented a plea of ignorance or misunderstanding when orders were not obeyed. It could be important in controlling crime, as Walter Hughes-Hall, who joined the BSA Police in 1907, recalled in 1969:

Unless you can talk the person's language how can you tell him what to do, and interpret the law to him? There were more linguists in the police in our time than there are today<sup>6</sup>

It inhibited openly subversive talk, and intruded on the privacy of conversations between Africans.<sup>7</sup> It was also useful for making enquiries about civil 'native law and custom', which, in so far as it was not 'repugnant to natural justice or morality',<sup>8</sup> the state was supposed to understand and uphold.

Initially, the state simply made opportunistic use of what little language expertise was available. Meredith ruefully noted this in his memoirs, to explain how his trading partner, a man of little ability, returned one day from delivering goods to Salisbury with a horse and new riding outfit, including top boots, to announce that he had been appointed a 'Hut tax collector'.<sup>9</sup> Traders were a good source of language expertise. All across the continent, they used local languages, or at least local trading pidgins, well enough to carry out their business. Unlike occupying forces, they were often the weaker parties in their dealings with Africans, in no position to dictate the language in which bargaining was conducted.<sup>10</sup> Many of them had few qualifications, and found that their language abilities were their most marketable skill. They provided a ready pool of labour for Cecil Rhodes' company. Douglas C. MacAndrew's application for a Native Commissioner's post offered as his qualifications simply that 'I understand a little Zulu, & would try to give satisfaction'.<sup>11</sup> E. G. Howman, one of the most outstanding early members of the Native Affairs Department, began his career as a trader and was recruited for his knowledge of the vernacular.<sup>12</sup> J. S. Brabant began his service for the BSAC as an interpreter to the Magistrate at Victoria, but was used 'more as a "trouble shooter" in African affairs due to his linguistic

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Walter Hughes Hall, 28 Mar. 1969. Oral history collection, ZNA, Oral/HA1.

<sup>7</sup> And still does. 'Note the discomfort sometimes experienced by speakers of African languages when whites learn to understand and speak what was a "secret" (and therefore empowered) form of communication'. Sinfree Makoni and Carli Coetzee, review of Robert K. Herbert (ed.), *Language and Society in Africa: The Theory and Practice of Sociolinguistics*; and Rajend Mesthrie (ed.), *Language and Social History: Studies in South African Sociolinguistics*, in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23 (1997), 392.

<sup>8</sup> Section 50 of the Order of Council of Southern Rhodesia, 1898.

<sup>9</sup> Meredith, *Memoirs*. As a result of this contact with the NAD, Meredith himself was shortly thereafter offered a post, and became one of the more successful of the early NCs.

<sup>10</sup> Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*, 4, notes that in the Belgian Congo in 1917 only the trading interests among the white communities felt that Europeans should know the language of the area in which they lived, so as to facilitate trade.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas C. MacAndrew to District Magistrate, Melsetter, 22 Nov. 1895. DM2/9/1. However, the job was given to Meredith, because he also spoke Dutch.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Roger Howman, E. G. Howman's son, conducted by Murray C. Steele, 10 and 26 Aug. 1971. Oral/HO3.

abilities' and by 1894 had risen to be Chief Native Commissioner for Mashonaland.<sup>13</sup> The NAD readily soaked up anyone who could communicate with Africans enough to demand tax from them.

Linguists were usually posted where their skills would be most valuable. Meredith claims that the Administrator told him that he was to be transferred, against his will, from Makoni District to Melsetter 'because the majority of the settlers are Dutch and you are the only Native Commissioner who, I am told, can speak Dutch'.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, in 1895, his predecessor, who had failed to raise the number of African labourers expected of him, was dismissed from his post on the grounds that 'the Native Commissioner for Gazaland should have a thorough knowledge of the Shangaan language'.<sup>15</sup> After the Chimurenga war of 1896–7, concerted efforts to improve the service stimulated the recruitment of experienced men from the Natal Native Affairs Department and police. They spoke Zulu, and could be posted in any district where siNdebele or Shangaan were widely understood.<sup>16</sup>

However, not all of the state's linguists were employed within the NAD. The administration also needed people to interpret in the police and the criminal courts. It was not easy to find suitable candidates. There was not enough work in many districts to justify appointing someone to a full-time post, so the work was less attractive than a salaried job in the NAD. Moreover, white settlers were characterized more by their spirit of adventure than by a high level of educational qualification or an interest in dusty law courts.

Once again, the state made opportunistic use of the available linguistic expertise. In Melsetter District, a 'colonial native' was initially employed as court interpreter, which made the Law Department uncomfortable, but was accepted 'as it appears impossible to get anybody else and an interpreter is a necessity'.<sup>17</sup> The Department's qualms were well-founded, as Meredith realised soon after taking up the post of NC in January 1896. The interpreter and the 'native police' were blatantly abusing their positions and fraudulently translating, notably in a case where a policeman engineered the false imprisonment of a man in order to secure access to the man's wife.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> J. J. Taylor, 'The emergence and development of the native department in Southern Rhodesia, 1894–1914' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1974), 54.

<sup>14</sup> Meredith, *Memoirs*, 163.

<sup>15</sup> Secretary, Native Dept, to A. Newnham, NC Melsetter, 30 July 1895. NUE 1/1/1. Ironically, in view of these demands from the state, the majority of people in the district spoke chiNdau as their first language, one of the vernaculars that later came under the umbrella of written chiShona.

<sup>16</sup> For example, F. G. Elliott was appointed in 1897 to work in siNdebele-speaking districts, having previously worked for the Natal Mounted Police and the Zululand Civil Service. His daughter, interviewed in 1969, remembered, 'my father became an expert Zulu linguist ... This knowledge was an important factor in his appointment as Native Commissioner in Matabeleland during a recruitment drive for these posts'. Interview with Mrs Madge Condy, conducted by D. Hartridge, Feb. 1969. Oral/CO1.

<sup>17</sup> Secretary, Law Dept, to Resident Magistrate (RM), Melsetter, 22 Aug. 1898. DM2/4/1.

<sup>18</sup> NC Melsetter to R. M. and C. C. Melsetter, 29 Feb. 1896. DM2/9/1. See also Meredith's account in his memoirs, ME 4/1/4 126, and his comment to Longden, 'I am sorry the Interpreter is a fraud', in a letter dated 12 May 1897, DM2/9/1.

Meredith managed, by January 1899, to ensure the removal of these men, but then found himself saddled with the irksome task of interpreting in the magistrate's court.<sup>19</sup> In a rather ill-tempered letter to the Chief Native Commissioner in November 1900, he pointed out that, 'The Magistrate has been trying to get a good interpreter for many months past but up to the present has not succeeded and is at present without one'.<sup>20</sup>

In March 1901, William Webster, a semi-literate orphan from one of the original Afrikaans-speaking trekking families, was given the job. Young William Webster had lost his father in a shooting accident soon after the family had arrived in the district from South Africa. Their farm was subsequently deemed to be in Portuguese territory, and the family became very isolated. There was no access to schooling for the widow's children, who spent their time out on the farm with the African workers, picking up language skills in the process. Despite being described as 'comparatively illiterate', Webster was able to make a living as an interpreter in the magistrate's courts in Melssetter and Chipinga until he was able to acquire a farm of his own.<sup>21</sup> From 1901, the position effectively circulated between three of the prominent farming families: the Steyns, Ferreiras and Odendaals (Webster was even married to an Odendaal).

There was, at first, no training or qualification for the post of court interpreter. The applicants to replace Webster, J. T. Ferreira and J. J. Steyn, were simply 'examined ... as to their knowledge of the language' by Meredith, who pronounced that the result was 'as satisfactory as can be expected'.<sup>22</sup> In 1905, a schoolboy, Louis Ferreira, was also interviewed by Meredith and deemed satisfactory 'for interpreting the local Native Language'.<sup>23</sup> However, moves were afoot to ensure that civil servants were better qualified. In early 1905, the Chief Native Commissioner's office circulated information about the Civil Service Interpreter's Examination, which was optional, but could enhance promotion prospects.<sup>24</sup> Army and police officers, as well as employees in the NAD, were eligible to sit the exam, and a board to hear them was established in Melssetter by March 1906.<sup>25</sup> It was not aimed specifically at court interpreters, but would have covered them in the many districts where interpreters were clerks in the NC's office.

Although a police corporal applied and passed the examination at the first sitting of the board in Melssetter district, the qualification was generally feared to be too demanding for police officers. Instead, in 1913, an Examination in Chiswina<sup>26</sup> and Sindebele 'of a lower standard than that of the present examination and for which only Police candidates will be eligible'

<sup>19</sup> Native Commissioner's out-letters, 1897-9. NUE 2/1/2-4.

<sup>20</sup> NC, Melssetter, to CNC, 15 Nov. 1900. NUE2/1/3 p472.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Mrs Susanna Catrina Johanna Webster, Apr. 1973. Oral/WE3; Resident Magistrate to Secretary, Law Dept., 17 Oct. 1905, DM1/6/2.

<sup>22</sup> Resident Magistrate, Melssetter, to Legal Department, 'Resignation of court interpreter', 5 June 1903. DM1/6/2. (Steyn got the job.)

<sup>23</sup> Resident Magistrate, Melssetter, to Secretary, Law Dept, 17 Oct. 1905. DM1/6/2.

<sup>24</sup> NC, Melssetter, to CNC. 21 Feb. 1905, 25 Apr. 1905. NUE 2/1/4 722; 802.

<sup>25</sup> NC, Melssetter to CNC, 13 Mar. 1906; 20 Mar. 1906. NUE 2/1/5.

<sup>26</sup> ChiSwina was an alternative term for chiShona. The origin of both these names is obscure, but chiSwina, at least, is generally considered to be offensive, having been applied to its speakers by their enemies.

was proposed. The aim of the *viva voce* test was ‘ascertaining whether the candidate is possessed of a colloquial knowledge of the language which he offers adequate for the purpose of conducting the less important everyday transactions with natives’.<sup>27</sup>

It was emphasised that there should be no ‘obscure native idioms’ in the statement to be simultaneously translated, as these would constitute ‘catch questions’. (How the officers were expected in real life to deal with such idioms – which are fundamental to Bantu languages – was not addressed.) The company was indicating that it wanted those employees who worked with Africans to at least attempt to acquire some basic spoken language skills. It was not, however, a requirement nor a precondition for promotion. There was no system of training, nor syllabus to be covered; language abilities continued to be based on what could be learned from speaking with Africans.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the new exam, standards of translation continued to be lamentably poor. In a 1912 rape case heard against a white policeman in Melsetter district, the defendant’s lawyer was not confident that the court interpreter, P. J. Odendaal, had got at ‘the exact meaning of the witness’, and demanded that an extra interpreter, M. L. Ferreira, be sworn in. The entire case was a linguistic farce. A policeman who had been present at the time of the alleged assault claimed that it all arose from a simple misunderstanding, since ‘The accused spoke to the woman in a language I did not understand, but I understood he was telling them I wanted to buy a mat’. The African witnesses denied this, and remained convinced that the accused had demanded sexual intercourse – not least because they had seen bruises and semen on the woman afterwards. The defendant admitted that his conversation with the woman might not have been as clear as he had hoped, because ‘I have a fair knowledge of the Chiswina language but not of Chindouw’. The putative mat-buyer, when called to stop the alleged assault, ‘just made a sound of assent, but did not speak’, leading the African witness to comment, ‘I spoke in “Chindauw” ... and I do not know whether he understood me’. The police corporal to whom the case was later reported admitted, ‘I do not know exactly what the woman said to me, I am not a linguist’. The Justice of the Peace who took the original statement seemed unconvinced that Odendaal had interpreted it correctly, and the Assistant NC, E. G. Lenthall, who had witnessed it being taken, was not prepared to commit himself to its accuracy either (which casts doubt on how much he understood of chiNdau himself). The alleged rapist was acquitted, but as no-one seemed to have been sure what anyone else was saying to them, and even the interpretation in the courtroom was suspect, it is hard to see any justification for this verdict.<sup>29</sup> It is no wonder that the Company was keen to employ anyone who seemed to offer a modicum of language competence.

<sup>27</sup> Acting Secretary, Dept of the Administrator, to CNC, 26 Aug. 1913 (dated 1910 in error on original). N3/2/3.

<sup>28</sup> The principle of ‘on the job’ language acquisition was also typical of the British Government’s Tropical Africa Service at this period. Systematic training in local languages was not part of the preparation for overseas postings within the Tropical Africa Service until 1926. Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Britain’s Imperial Administrators, 1858–1966* (Basingstoke, 2000), 133.

<sup>29</sup> *R v Arnold Trimbleby Price*, 28 Nov. to 5 Dec. 1912, PE 142/12. D3/3/4.

The Civil Service examinations were expected to test candidates' ability to *talk with* Africans, although a written test was included in the 1910 regulations. As most whites learned local languages directly from Africans, they were anyway unlikely to have much grasp of written versions of the vernaculars. However, alongside the acquisition of oral skills, there was a development in the territory of *textual* skills. This work was concentrated in the missions, which had a much greater interest in the written word than had the Civil Service.

It was not surprising that the missions monopolized text versions of the local languages. Language acquisition was often the first task of a mission, before any other work began.<sup>30</sup> Like traders, missionaries were likely to be dependent on the goodwill of their hosts, and needed to be able to speak their languages. When the American Board Mission expanded its work into Portuguese East Africa, it resolved that 'For at least one year the attention of the missionaries in Beira should be devoted to the acquisition of the Portuguese and native languages and no evangelistic, school or other work should be undertaken which would interfere with the mastery of these languages'.<sup>31</sup> From 1909, the policy of the ABM, for all its missions worldwide, was that every new missionary, 'wives included', should not be allowed voting rights in the decisions of their mission until they had passed a detailed examination in the local vernacular.<sup>32</sup>

However, in contrast to the *viva voce* Civil Service examination, the exams set by the ABM's Mount Selinda mission in Melsetter district included a very large textual and grammatical component.<sup>33</sup> Texts were important for missionaries. In their schools for Africans, literacy was taught in mother-tongues, for which books were needed. Books were also used to teach English to Africans. In the period from 1893 to 1931, all the major missions published vocabularies and dictionaries in their local vernaculars, as well as an array of teaching materials.<sup>34</sup> New missionaries were issued with textbooks to help them learn the local languages, which were aimed at a general white audience, and found a ready market elsewhere.<sup>35</sup>

However, there was another reason why missions placed a much greater emphasis on the written word than did the government. The act of translating sacred texts was itself a vital part of their ministry. This was not simply so that the gospels could be read by local people. Indeed, in Melsetter district, evangelism was conducted exclusively in Zulu, even while enormous

<sup>30</sup> Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*, 14, notes that the White Fathers working in the Congo in 1880 were forbidden by their cardinal to speak French together, 'so as to force them to speak only the language of the Blacks'.

<sup>31</sup> Report of the Joint Committee of Natal and Rhodesian Branches of ABM in South Africa on opening work at Beira, 3–5 Nov. 1913. UN3/20/2/5/9. See also UN3/20/1/11/5.

<sup>32</sup> Boston Headquarters of the United American Board of Missions, Letter to all Missions, 27 Aug. 1909. UN3/2/1.

<sup>33</sup> Report of Committee on Exams in Chindau, Temporary Syllabus for Examinations in Chindau, June 1913. UN3/20/2/5/5.

<sup>34</sup> Clement M. Doke, 'Report on the unification of the Shona dialects' (Hertford, 1931), Appendix: Chimundu, 'Early missionaries'.

<sup>35</sup> Doke, *Report*, Appendix; Fortune, *Shona Lexicography*; Diana Jeater, 'The way you tell them: language, ideology and development policy in Southern Rhodesia', *African Studies*, 54 (1995), 1–15.

efforts were being put into translating sacred texts into chiNdau.<sup>36</sup> The value of translating sacred texts lay in the process of translation itself. It required the translator to engage directly with the question of how indigenous ideas about spiritual matters might be mapped onto Christian theology:

the more we can enter into the habit of thought of natives, the more perfectly we shall speak their language ... The more exactly, then, we can represent to ourselves the ideas of the natives, the greater will be the precision with which we shall express our thoughts in their language.<sup>37</sup>

To find a word for 'God' or 'sin' or 'spirit' in a local vernacular that did not do damage to the concept as understood by Christians was a powerful method of forcing missionaries to think deeply about the spiritual ideas of those they hoped to convert, and so to identify points of connection – 'entry points' – between the two cosmologies. The missionaries were not just recreating the languages in textual form, making decisions about phonetics, orthography and word-division based on the European language traditions. They were also bending the vernaculars to their will and making them do new things. Their language projects were important not because they helped missionaries to converse with Africans, but because they enabled them to appropriate African languages, and to reinvent them within the Christian tradition.

Because of the central importance of translation to their evangelical project, plenty of time was allocated by the missions to the study of grammar and translation. This was in contrast to the expectation that NCs and their clerks would acquire language and ethnographic skills 'on the job' and write down what they had learned in their spare time. In 1905, the BSAC administration had attempted to produce its own Dictionary of the Mashona Language, and circulated an outline to 'some of the best linguists in the Native Department' to fill in the words.<sup>38</sup> However, the task was not paid, and NCs had other priorities. As Meredith pointed out, 'I ... cannot expect to have it completed this year as I shall have most of my spare time taken up in preparing for the Law examination'.<sup>39</sup> The following year, E. Biehler of the Jesuit Mission in Chishawasha produced his *English-Chiswina Dictionary with an outline Chiswina Grammar*, a Zezuru primer,<sup>40</sup> which became the standard textbook for the Native Affairs Department (to the detriment of other dialects of chiShona).<sup>41</sup> While the NAD and the criminal justice system

<sup>36</sup> ABM Rhodesia Branch, Mt Selinda, *Translation Report*, 1908. UN3/20/1/3/8. The introduction to the mission's 1915 vocabulary of ChiNdau, the local vernacular, stated, 'Until recently ... the Mission employed, almost exclusively, the Zulu language, which had been imposed upon all the tribes of this District, in the first half of last century by their Zulu conquerors'. American Board Mission in South Africa, Rhodesia Branch, *Chidau-English and English-Chidau Vocabulary with Grammatical Notes* (ABM, 1915), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Revd. A. M. Hartmann S. J., *An Outline of the Grammar of the Mashona Language* (Cape Town, 1893), 1.

<sup>38</sup> Acting CNC to various NCs, letter no. 19/532/05, 23 July 1905. NUE 1/1/1.

<sup>39</sup> NC, Melsetter to CNC, 8 Aug. 1905. NUE 2/1/4, 898.

<sup>40</sup> Zezuru, like chiNdau, is one of the mission-defined vernaculars that came under the umbrella of written chiShona.

<sup>41</sup> E. Biehler S.J., *English-Chiswina Dictionary with an Outline Grammar* (Chishawasha, 1905). See also Fortune, 'Shona Lexicography', for an account of Biehler's influence on the NAD.



cultivated verbal skills, the missions were building up a body of grammatical and literary skills in the local vernaculars. The government effectively handed responsibility for written versions of the local languages over to the missionaries.

By the early 1920s, many of the linguists who had been absorbed by the Native Affairs Department in its early days were reaching retirement age. Enquiries by the administration during 1923 revealed that few of the young men employed as clerks and Assistant Native Commissioners in NCs' offices were competent linguists, capable of interpreting in court. New recruits, who were required to have at least South African matriculation, rarely arrived with a good knowledge of the vernacular, having spent their formative years in school, rather than mixing with Africans. 'Under our system of selection of candidates where we gain in a higher standard of education we lose in an imperfect knowledge of Native languages, even where Rhodesian-born candidates are appointed.'<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, unlike their predecessors, clerks and ANCs were spending less and less time in direct contact with Africans. With the increase in African literacy, much of the face-to-face work was being done by African employees. 'Natives are being increasingly used for clerical work where the official comes into direct touch with natives. This gives less opportunity for European Clerks to learn native languages.'<sup>43</sup> Given this decreasing direct contact with Africans, new recruits were no longer learning 'on the job'.

By the early 1920s, NCs in rural districts, who had additional work as Assistant Magistrates, were pressing for funds to employ interpreters in the courts, leaving them free to concentrate on judging the cases.<sup>44</sup> The 1923 survey in response to this proposal exposed the paucity of white linguists in the NAD. It seemed that most NCs either interpreted for themselves in court or used Africans on their staff to help them. African interpreters were especially needed in cases involving 'alien natives', that is, migrant workers whose language the NC did not speak.<sup>45</sup> A heavy reliance on Africans in the judicial process was deplored by NCs and the administration alike. The Law Department in particular felt that justice was safer if interpreting was 'in the hands of Europeans of reliable character', presumably because Europeans were believed to have a better understanding of the judicial process.<sup>46</sup> However, the Treasury would not countenance the use of professional white interpreters in small rural courts,<sup>47</sup> and, prompted by the administrator,<sup>48</sup> even refused an incentive payment to NAD clerks for them to do the job. It was argued that court work should be part of the clerks' normal duties, and

<sup>42</sup> SN Bulawayo to CNC, 5 Mar. 1923. N3/28/7.

<sup>43</sup> Marginal note for the Premier (also Ministry of Native Affairs) by his Secretary, written on a letter from CNC to Sec to Minister of Native Affairs, 4 Oct. 1923. N3/28/7.

<sup>44</sup> Secretary, Dept of Administrator [SDA] to His Honour the Administrator [HH], 5 Jan. 1923. N3/2/7.

<sup>45</sup> Responses to CNC's circular to all Superintendents of Natives [SNs], 28 Feb. 1923. N3/28/7.

<sup>46</sup> SDA to HH, 5 Jan. 1923; CNC to SDA, 16 Jan. 1923; resolution of the SNs' Conference, copied by CNC to HH the Acting Administrator, 10 Sept. 1923. N3/28/7. See also Diana Jeater, 'Their idea of justice is so peculiar: Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1910', in Peter Coss (ed.), *The Moral World of Law*, (Cambridge, 2000), 178-95.

<sup>47</sup> Treasurer to HH, 10 Jan. 1923. N3/28/7.

<sup>48</sup> SDA to CNC, 27 Sept. 1923. N3/28/7.

might help them to acquire the language and legal skills they so badly seemed to lack.<sup>49</sup>

Good translation, as the missionaries had long recognized, involved critical engagement with another culture. It was not just about being able to speak two languages. It required an ability to reformulate and transfer ideas from one culture to another. As the Attorney-General put it, 'An interpreter is not necessarily one who can talk the native language; he has got to be able to interpret'.<sup>50</sup> An effective interpreter would straddle African and white communities, having insight into both, with the vocabulary to explain shades of meaning. Few white people fulfilled this requirement. In 1926, the senior NAD official, H. M. G. Jackson pointed out:

[A European] fails quite commonly to convey to the witness the full purport of the question, and to the Court the full purport of the reply. A native interpreter, on the other hand, fails quite commonly and quite obviously in his knowledge of English.<sup>51</sup>

In an attempt to improve the quality of interpreters, a two-tier salary scale was introduced in 1922. Junior Interpreters could 'talk the native language', but did not have the verbal skills and cultural insight to be able to interpret regularly in the larger and busier courts. To become Senior Interpreters they had to pass the Native Language Examination. In addition, they were required to pass another examination, also developed in 1922. This was the Native Customs examination.<sup>52</sup>

The inclusion of the Native Customs examination in the requirements for a Senior Interpreter demonstrates the importance of world view as well as words in the process of translation. This was recognized in a Legislative Assembly debate in 1925, which addressed the injustices caused by poor interpretation. L. K. Robinson, the Junior MLA for Victoria, worrying about a case that he felt had resulted in wrongful execution, asked:

Had the judge in this case been assisted by experienced assessors, well versed in *the mysteries of native evidence*, is it too much to assume that they might have probed the matter to the bottom and discovered what was in the mind of the native?<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, J. P. Richardson, who had claimed that cases of injustice 'always come back to the interpreter', provided an anecdote about a man admitting in court that he had taken a white man's ploughshare:

his answer was taken to be an equivalent of pleading guilty. *Had that question been put by a man who understood the natives the effect of the answer would have been different.* He would have understood that the native's master owed the man money and that the native did not look upon the taking of the plough-share as theft.<sup>54</sup>

Another Assembly member, Major Boggie, also felt that language competence had some link with cultural understanding, and added: 'It is

<sup>49</sup> Acting Secretary to the Treasury, to CNC. 17 Oct. 1923. N3/28/7.

<sup>50</sup> Debates of the Legislative Assembly of Southern Rhodesia, 13 June 1927, col. 1361.

<sup>51</sup> H.M.G.J. (sic), 'On interpretation and mendacity', *Native Affairs Department Annual (NADA)* 4, (1926), 121.

<sup>52</sup> SDA to HH, 5 Jan. 1923. N3/28/7

<sup>53</sup> Debates, 13 May 1925, col. 418. My emphasis.

<sup>54</sup> Debates, 13 May 1925, col. 422. My emphasis.

only through long experience of the native that you are able to grasp what he is really thinking of'.<sup>55</sup> Language competence and what we might now call ethnological insight were seen as a single package of esoteric skills, which the NAD was rather good at, but with which ordinary men need not bother themselves too much.<sup>56</sup>

The MLAs saw this perceived 'otherness' of African modes of thought as a linguistic problem, posing specific challenges to interpreters. Even as they debated, however, African 'otherness' was shifting from being a difficulty (to be overcome) to being a policy (to be upheld). By the 1920s, Africans had moved significantly into the semi-skilled employment sector, and were making inroads into the skilled sector.<sup>57</sup> Their evangelists were also establishing independent churches.<sup>58</sup> The more that Africans challenged white domination of the labour and production markets, the more it was insisted that African and white societies were different, and should be kept separate.

In the face of autonomous and effective advancement by Africans, the Native Affairs Department entered a period of uncertainty and instability. In the resonant words of H. M. G. Jackson, writing in 1925, 'We have lost our sureness of touch – a sequel of loss of conviction. The half-gods are going before the gods arrive'.<sup>59</sup> He feared that the firm hand of NAD tutelage would be lifted from Africans before they were fully ready to control themselves or to join the civil society of whites. Reflecting this crisis of conviction, the government's Native Affairs Department Annual protested, perhaps too much, that 'the depths of the Bantu mind' were unfathomable to whites,<sup>60</sup> and that comprehension was difficult 'in view of the great difference in mentality existing between the white and black races'.<sup>61</sup> Its editorials consistently described changes in African society as a necessary evil, insisting that Africans were fundamentally different from whites and had little chance of flourishing in a white-dominated culture.

The new thrust of 'native policy' was to govern Africans within the existing institutions rather than attempting to move their social systems towards industrial proletarianization. Instead of being 'civilized', which meant learning English and acquiring the skills taught in British primary schools (the 'three Rs' of reading, writing and arithmetic), Africans were to be 'developed'. They were to continue their lives as agriculturalists, speaking their own languages but adopting farming methods which better suited the economic and land policies of the government.<sup>62</sup> 'Civilization', it was argued, was not appropriate for Africans, and should not be forced upon them:

<sup>55</sup> Debates, 13 May 1925, col. 419.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Debates, 13 May 1925, Mr. Gilfillan, col. 419; Charles Eickhoff, col. 420, 423.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Debates, 27 May 1929, in the discussions on the Land Apportionment Bill.

<sup>58</sup> David Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe: A Social History of the Hwesa People, c. 1870s-1990s* (Edinburgh, 1999).

<sup>59</sup> H. M. G. Jackson, 'Indirect rule in Southern Rhodesia', *NADA*, 3 (1925), 57.

<sup>60</sup> 'Mtwazi', 'The bandit's psychology', *NADA*, 3 (1925), 43.

<sup>61</sup> Rev Neville Jones, LMS, on 'Sindebele Proverbs', *NADA*, 3 (1925), 65.

<sup>62</sup> A training centre for African instructors was set up in June 1920 at Domboshawa in the Chinamora native reserve, and the first Native Agricultural Demonstrator started work in July 1927. E. D. Alvord, 'Agricultural demonstration work on native reserves', Department of Native Development, Southern Rhodesia, Occasional Paper 3, 1930.

It has taken many centuries for the white races of today to arrive at their present state of civilisation, and we cannot expect to bring the native to the same standard in a generation or two ... there is danger in a too rapid transition from a state of barbarism to one of civilisation.<sup>63</sup>

The converse of this was that African culture was not appropriate for whites. Not only African society but also *white* society had to be moulded to suit the state's project. Many NCs disagreed with this analysis, but government policies created an atmosphere in which it became the orthodoxy.<sup>64</sup>

The *laissez-faire* attitude towards language acquisition that had characterized the early years of white occupation was now in crisis. If there was a need for more white translators and if translation required a deep understanding of African culture, then the state needed to allow whites and Africans to mix together and share cultural experiences. But this was precisely what its new 'native policy' was designed to prevent. The readiness with which the administration had once recruited anyone who had a reasonable grasp of local languages was now overshadowed by a suspicion about how they had acquired the skill, and questions about whether they had become too close to 'the natives'. The flurry of activity around vernacular languages, which characterizes the period from 1925–35, reveals deep concerns about white relationships with Africans, as the state tried to reconcile its conflicting needs.

Traditionally, the administration had depended on orally acquired language expertise. Employees in NCs' offices were expected to learn on the job; others presented themselves as already fluent. There was growing unease with this method of recruiting interpreters. The 'already-fluent' were predominantly Afrikaans-speaking. They came from a farming tradition in which children routinely spent large amounts of time with Africans, thereby acquiring fluency in the vernacular but not South African matriculation. This fast-growing section of the community had long been regarded as suspect by the administration, especially during the 1914–18 war,<sup>65</sup> and in the run-up to Responsible Government in 1923, when it was feared that they would prefer union with South Africa. 'According to Mrs. Boddington, an advocate of responsible government speaking in 1922, poor whites were "neither black nor white" but "mentally deficient" and "really worse than animals"'.<sup>66</sup> Officials began to disparage the poor whites who made up the majority of the 'already-fluent' speakers: 'A youth who is able, when he begins life, to speak Dutch and a native language may, possibly, not be otherwise mentally well equipped.'<sup>67</sup> These 'mentally deficient' speakers were not experts in linguistics or interpretation. They had not thought about the boundaries between Dutch, English and vernaculars, and they peppered

<sup>63</sup> NC, Hartley to CNC, 28 Feb. 1924. S138:150.

<sup>64</sup> Murray Cairns Steele, 'The foundations of a "native" policy: Southern Rhodesia, 1923–1933' (PhD. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1972).

<sup>65</sup> F. G. Elliott was transferred to be NC, Melssetter District in 1915, to keep an eye on the large 'Dutch' community there. Interview with Mrs Madge Condy, conducted by D. Hartridge, Feb. 1969. Oral/CO1.

<sup>66</sup> Donal Lowry, "'White woman's country'". Ethel Tawse Jollie and the making of white Rhodesia', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23 (1997), 269.

<sup>67</sup> SDA to HH, 5 Jan. 1923. N3/28/7. I think we may safely assume that 'life' here is intended to imply 'working life'.

their speech with elements of all of them. They did not seem to reflect the administration's belief in a yawning gap between African and white mentalities (which essentially was Mrs Boddington's point). If anything, they possibly understood Africans a little too well.

Moreover, like the Boer-dominated Apostolic Faith Mission, which also came in for state attack at this time, the self/African-taught speakers had no direct stake in the administration's project for the territory.<sup>68</sup> There was no utility in the language acquisition of these whites. They had not learned vernaculars in order to further state policy, nor to educate the 'natives'. They had not even learned them in order to be able to translate them into another language. (Indeed, as we have seen, they were not very good at this.) They had learned them simply to converse with the Africans around them.<sup>69</sup> Given the growing membership of autonomous 'native political organizations',<sup>70</sup> free conversation between Africans and whites of suspect loyalty was not what the state needed. Moreover, these 'already-fluent' whites had acquired their language skills in mutual interaction with African speakers, acting both as teachers of Afrikaans and as students of the local languages, and treating their teachers/pupils as individuals with whom they had personal relationships. This disquietingly inverted the view of Africans as in tutelage, and *en masse*, which underpinned official thinking.<sup>71</sup>

By 1925, the uncontrolled, unsanctioned and unstructured acquisition of vernacular languages no longer seemed appropriate to the administration's 'development' project for the territory. More systematic control over language learning was required. The state wanted to move away from *ad hoc* use of Africans as language teachers, and poor whites as interpreters. The question now arose as to whether the vernaculars should be taught in the white schools.

To those who favoured the idea of putting vernacular languages on the school curriculum, the advantages seemed obvious. It could greatly enhance the potential pool of NAD employees. When, in 1926, the Headmaster of Plumtree School in Matabeleland asked whether his pupils might sit the Civil Service Native Languages Examination, the local NC agreed that 'every encouragement should be given to Rhodesian scholars, the majority of whom are Rhodesian born, to thus fit themselves for an opening in the Civil Service of Rhodesia'.<sup>72</sup> The principle of schoolboys learning the vernacular was endorsed by both the NAD and the Director of Education, although the latter's enthusiasm waned over subsequent years in the face of logistical difficulties, and amounted to the comment that 'It won't lead to any broken heads (or hearts, anyhow)'.<sup>73</sup> Apart from the potential recruitment benefits to the NAD, teaching vernaculars in the schools was thought likely to

<sup>68</sup> David Maxwell, 'Historicizing Christian independency: the Southern African Pentecostal Movement, c. 1908–60', *Journal of African History*, 40 (1999), 255.

<sup>69</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1992), 399, notes how translation entails expropriation and a desire to possess another's language, in a way that simply understanding it does not.

<sup>70</sup> CNC's Annual Report, 1923.

<sup>71</sup> cf. Paul S. Landau, 'Explaining surgical evangelism in colonial Southern Africa: teeth, pain and faith', *Journal of African History*, 37 (1996), 279.

<sup>72</sup> NC Plumtree to SN Bulawayo, 3 Feb. 1926. S138/26.

<sup>73</sup> L. M. Foggin, Director of Education, to CNC Jackson, 1 Mar. 1928. S138/26.

improve labour relations. H. M. G. Jackson, the Chief Native Commissioner in 1928, declared, 'In my opinion the idea is excellent. If a practical and practicable method of teaching our Native languages could be evolved the benefit to "young Rhodesia" would be undoubted, if only through eliminating misunderstandings which commonly attend intercourse with Natives'.<sup>74</sup>

However, the Civil Services exam, with its important oral component, was thought inappropriate for schoolboys. Jackson's predecessor, Herbert Taylor, wary of the 'already-fluent', emphasized that tests should only be open to those who had actually been taught the subject in school,

as otherwise it would simply mean that lads who had acquired a knowledge of the languages in their homes, from tenants, from servants and so forth would use the Government examination as a vehicle to obtain a certificate.<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, he suspected that the exam, although not beyond a schoolboy's scope in depth of language knowledge, might be too broad in 'range'.<sup>76</sup> Presumably he meant by this that it might require a detailed knowledge of African society, which was precisely what teaching in schools was expected to prevent. By 1930, Jackson was setting a Junior Certificate Exam for Plumtree School. It was to have *no* oral component and to follow the heavily-grammatical pattern set by South Africa's school exams in Xhosa, Zulu, SeSotho and SeTswana.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the NAD's enthusiasm, the proposal that schools should teach the vernacular was far from universally accepted. There were simple logistical difficulties, including the basic question of which languages should be taught. Moreover, the putative benefits to labour relations were dismissed, on the one hand because employees were likely to be migrant workers speaking a 'non-Rhodesian' vernacular,<sup>78</sup> and on the other because employers were likely to be new settlers, coming 'from outside the borders of this Colony'.<sup>79</sup>

However, the largest practical difficulty was the lack of acceptable teachers or teacher trainers. At Plumtree, a local missionary taught the boys SiNdebele; but traditionally it had been Africans who taught whites to speak the vernaculars. In 1928, T. G. Standing of the Rhodesian Teachers Association canvassed the NAD about whether any of its officials might be prepared to teach in the High Schools.<sup>80</sup> L. M. Foggin, the Director of Education, was dismissive of this idea,<sup>81</sup> and even C. N. C. Jackson, though

<sup>74</sup> CNC to T.G. Standing, Rhodesian Teachers Association, 9 Mar. 1928. Taylor had expressed a similar hope in 1926: CNC to Secretary, Department of Colonial Secretary, 9 Feb. 1926. S138/26.

<sup>75</sup> CNC to Sec, Dept of Colonial Secretary, 9 Feb. 1926. S138/26.

<sup>76</sup> CNC to Sec, Dept of Colonial Secretary, 9 Feb. 1926. S138/26.

<sup>77</sup> Director of Education [L. M. Foggin] to H. M. G. Jackson, 1 Apr. 1930; Jackson to Foggin, 4 Apr. 1930. S138/26. (I do not have any evidence that the required script was ever actually delivered by Jackson.)

<sup>78</sup> Revd. Bertram B. Barnes, 'A campaign against Babel: unification of the dialects of Mashonaland', *NADA*, 6 (1928), 46; CNC to Director of Education, 30 May 1933. S138/26.

<sup>79</sup> CNC to Director of Education, 30 May 1933. S138/26.

<sup>80</sup> T. G. Standing, Acting General Secretary, Rhodesian Teachers Association, to CNC. 27 Feb. 1928. S138/26.

<sup>81</sup> Director of Education to CNC, 1 Mar. 1928. Foggin had also pointed out to Standing that 'proficiency in Native languages does not necessarily connote a taste for teaching them'. Standing to CNC, 27 Feb. 1928. S138/26.

keen on the principle, pointed out that NAD officials were frequently reposted, and there would be no guarantee of continuity of tuition. He suggested that Standing should try to find someone within the RTA, with the NAD taking on a kind of consultative role.<sup>82</sup> However, beyond the Plumtree experiment, nothing came of the proposal. Nowhere offered suitable linguistic training to white teachers. The nearest universities were in the Union of South Africa, and they had their own vernaculars to study.

These logistical difficulties were closely related to the political problems that had given rise to the issue in the first place. They went to the heart of the question of what kind of interactions there should be between whites and Africans. In 1933, the Legislative Assembly member, L. Cripps, praised a book for its 'understanding of the native mind, of which there is not too much known by the public at large'.<sup>83</sup> If the entire white population were to be taught vernacular languages, then the boundary between 'native experts' and the 'public at large' would become blurred, as would the boundary between Africans and whites.

The NAD's claim to authority derived largely from its monopoly on insight into the 'native mind', acquired on the job. This authority was already under pressure from the South, where ethnographers and social scientists were being given a growing role in formulating 'native policy'.<sup>84</sup> Missionaries, too, were flaunting their expertise in the pages of the Native Affairs Department Annual, while themselves struggling to contain the African teachers and evangelists whom they had nurtured, and who displayed both textual and oral language expertise.<sup>85</sup> The department needed to protect its monopoly from foreign academics and local missionaries, as well as from poor whites and mission-educated Africans. Boundaries of containment were crumbling all around it.

Jackson's successor, C. L. Carbutt, would have no truck with the idea of High School teaching. He set out his reasons in a letter to the Director of Education in 1933.<sup>86</sup> While he conceded that early tuition might be advantageous for NAD recruitment purposes, he did not see that this justified the appointment of an entire staff of teachers. His recruits, he insisted, 'are generally men of superior education with a special bent for Native work', or alternatively, had a special gift for languages, which work in the NAD seemed ready to utilize. In either event, no case could be made for school tuition.

However, the crux of the CNC's argument comes at the end of his letter.

<sup>82</sup> CNC to T. G. Standing, Esq, 9 Mar. 1928. S138/26.

<sup>83</sup> L. Cripps to CNC Library, 24 Apr. 1933. S138/26.

<sup>84</sup> Charles T. Loram, 'The claim of the native question upon scientists', *South African Journal of Science*, 18 (1921-2), 99-109; Brahm David Fleisch, 'Social scientists as policy makers: E. G. Malherbe and the National Bureau for Educational and Social Research, 1929-1943', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21 (1995), 349-72; Sue Krige, 'Segregation, science and Commissions of Enquiry: the contestation over native education policy in South Africa, 1930-36', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 3 (1997), 491-506. Some missionaries shared the disquiet. In a letter to Charles Bullock of 24 Mar. 1929, the Jesuit A. Burbridge warned that, 'We shall have to watch closely this meddlesomeness of Professors ... in "native policy"'. BU1/1/1.

<sup>85</sup> Terence Ranger, *Are We Not Also Men? The Samkange Family and African Politics in Zimbabwe, 1920-64* (London, 1995), 24-31, documents one such struggle.

<sup>86</sup> CNC to Director of Education, 30 May 1933. S138/26.

He observed at the outset that learning a foreign language ‘opens the door to the culture of another Nation’. It was this that had made such study valuable to his department. However, it was also *precisely* why it should not be taught irresponsibly to all and sundry as ‘a knowledge of Native culture has a sociological value to those concerned with Native policy etc. It is not otherwise edifying’. The very act of learning an African vernacular was thus presented as a potentially polluting experience: ‘I deprecate the introduction of any innovation which may tend towards increasing association between the Natives in their present state and our young children’. Moreover, the additional threat of introducing such study as a *school* subject was that it would encourage young people to take undesirable steps to improve their school performance. ‘A boy (or girl) studying to pass an examination in a Native language would, I think be tempted to perfect his knowledge by association with Natives.’

This, in a nutshell, was the entire problem with language acquisition. It was best learned from Africans, which reversed the acceptable power relationship between tutor and taught, and in the process exposed white children to the African world view. To deny that this was a threat was to undermine the principle of vernacular education for Africans ‘in an atmosphere of English’,<sup>87</sup> which was supposed to transform the whole African into a person ready to join white society.<sup>88</sup> What could work one way might, logically, work the other way too. If vernaculars were taught in Southern Rhodesian schools, the problems of the ‘already-fluent’ might not be circumvented, but exacerbated. The boundaries of ‘difference’ might become blurred. Too many whites would gain insights into African society, to the detriment of the NAD and to the detriment of ‘civilization’. The CNC’s fears betray the insecurity that had developed in his department over the preceding decade.

The principle of High School teaching was abandoned and no further attempts were made to teach white settlers local vernaculars. Instead, steps were being taken to gain control over the vernaculars, and to contain them as the exclusive possession of those for whom the knowledge would be ‘edifying’. There was a kind of laager mentality within the NAD, which addressed its insecurity by trying to erect boundaries around ‘native culture’, and to impose its own systems of order on what it corralled.

A first step in this process was linguistic standardization. This involved an imposition of spatial order: the mapping of languages into definable places and on to defined people. There was a symbolic link, from a white viewpoint, between disorderly peoples, ethnographically defined, and the language that mapped onto the ethnographic group. For example, ‘the Shona’, as an ill-defined people, mapped onto ‘chiShona’, a language of many variations, and both mapped onto a set of social systems which were changing even as NADA, Charles Bullock and F. W. T. Posselt tried to describe them. Tidying up the language was a means of homogenizing the people, placing symbolic boundaries on them and their behaviour, and signalling the limits of order. Whereas the ‘already-fluent’, whether white or African, acquired language in a disorderly and unbounded way, slipping between tongues, the

<sup>87</sup> H. A. Cripwell, ANC, ‘SiNtu Sounds and Symbols’, *NADA*, 6 (1928), 52.

<sup>88</sup> cf. Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*, 80.



classification of these languages represented symbolic and contained order. Real life may have been messy, but it was possible to open Posselt's 1927 *Survey of the Native Tribes of Southern Rhodesia* and find a nice neat map, with clear boundary lines, setting out the 'approximate distribution of tribes and languages in Southern Rhodesia'. The map gained canonical status, and was distributed in NADA and to all NCs.

Standardizing the languages was a ruthless procedure. It was designed to exclude as much as to include. It set boundaries to knowledge, by limiting what were accepted into the fold as 'true' versions of the vernacular. In 1934, for example, a clerk in Chipinga pointed out that 'After a careful study of the Native Language papers sent to me ... I find that there are many material differences between the language known as Chishona and the language, Chindau, in which I wish to be examined'.<sup>89</sup> His NC, Peter Nielsen, supported his case that chiNdau was in many respects 'entirely different' from the language defined as chiShona.<sup>90</sup> This evidence from those who actually spoke the language was dismissed by the Director of Education, who replied crisply that 'examinations are held in the Sindebele and Chishona languages only'.<sup>91</sup> If the local Africans spoke something that was not covered in the exam, then that was their problem, not the administration's. The state was only concerned that its NCs should have proficiency in the 'approved' vernaculars.

Linguistic standardization also required language rules: a 'correct' grammar and orthography. The NAD lacked the necessary textual and grammatical expertise for this and had to turn to the missions and the academics to supply it. A request was made in 1928 to C. M. Doke, erstwhile missionary and Professor of Phonetics and Philology at Witwatersrand University, to unify the 'Shona dialects'. Professor Doke's work, which over the next four years addressed both orthography and language examinations, concentrated on the standardization of the written symbols to represent regional phonetic variations. His project was a textual rather than an oral exercise, and concerned with form and pronunciation rather than with meaning and culture.

Doke's involvement in standardizing a written version of chiShona was symptomatic of a shift in linguistic influence between the orally based NAD and the text-based missions. As 'Wiri' Edwards, the long-standing NC of Mrewa District, wrote, rather huffily, in 1925, responding to criticism of a translation he had provided for the agricultural training school in Domboshawa,

The translation is quite clear to the natives here, I have given it to several to translate ... I see no reason why the Principal should not make his own translation ... *He may put it in the schoolmaster's way, I have put it in the native.*<sup>92</sup>

Written versions followed different rules from those of everyday

<sup>89</sup> Clerk to NC, Chipinga to CNC, 29 Mar. 1934. S1542/E8.

<sup>90</sup> NC, Chipinga to CNC, 29 Mar. 1934. S1542/E8.

<sup>91</sup> Director of Education to J. R. Duncan Esq., Nat. Dept., Chipinga, 11 Apr. 1934. S1542/E8.

<sup>92</sup> NC Mrewa to CNC, 2 Mar. 1925. Private Correspondence, W. Edwards. ED6/2/1/1, folio 260. (My emphasis; missing apostrophe in original).

speech; they belonged to the white teachers rather than the African speakers. The view that language expertise was good if it aided effective communication with Africans was beginning to give way to the idea that language expertise was good if it was grammatically and orthographically correct. Mission texts and academic learning set the standards. Both Africans and the remaining members of the old guard of NCs were squeezed out of the inner circle of 'language experts' by this process. Africans were no longer the authorities on their own languages.

The system whereby whites gained access to these 'approved' versions of the vernaculars also had to be tightened up. The reliance on the 'already fluent' and on-the-job learning had allowed too many 'unapproved' versions of the vernaculars to flourish. Moreover, there was no means of ensuring that NAD employees were proficient in the 'approved' vernaculars. The Civil Services Native Languages Examination, while it enhanced promotion prospects, had not been compulsory.<sup>93</sup> So, from 1926, pay and promotion became dependent upon having passed the Languages exam, as well as the Native Customs and Administration exam and the Civil Service Law Examination. The standardization of language was part of generalized move towards a more rule-bound Native Affairs Department, relying less and less on the initiative of its officers, and more on its strict definitions of 'development' policy and 'native law and custom'.<sup>94</sup> With a new generation of NCs, overwhelmed by paperwork and frequently reposted to new districts, came the pressure for standardization in all fields – judicial, administrative and linguistic.<sup>95</sup> After 1926, there was:

an initial probationary period of two years, which can be extended to five years, during which an officer is compelled to qualify for appointment to the Fixed Establishment by passing the necessary examinations; if he fails to qualify he has to leave the Service. Moreover, after his first two years of probationary period he receives no increments of salary.<sup>96</sup>

The language exams were only to be in chiShona and siNdebele, as defined by the examiners. As one MLA commented:

If you are appointed to a certain district and study the language of that district and become proficient, then you may be disqualified because you are examined in a language of some other district, and cannot become a Native Commissioner.<sup>97</sup>

We can see why the Chipinga clerk was dismayed that he was not to be examined in chiNdau.

It quickly became clear that, with careers dependent upon success in the exams, there was a need for a clear syllabus and a system of training. Although certain dictionaries and grammars were recommended, there was no actual syllabus or course of study for the Native Languages exam until 1934.<sup>98</sup> In that year, the written part of the examination was handed over the University of South Africa (Unisa), which conducted correspondence

<sup>93</sup> Failure to pass the examination had no effect on an employee until their salary reached £400 per annum, after which the only effect was reduced increments.

<sup>94</sup> NC, Goromonzi (E. G. Howman) to CNC, 8 Mar. 1928. S138/26.

<sup>95</sup> Steele, *Foundations of a 'Native' Policy*, 53–65.

<sup>96</sup> Secretary to Treasury, to Secretary Department of Internal Affairs, 22 Dec. 1934. S1542/E8/1.

<sup>97</sup> Mr Robinson, Debates, 29 June 1927, col. 2160.

<sup>98</sup> CNC to E. C. Gutridge, BSA Police, Salisbury, 22 July 1930. S138/26.

courses.<sup>99</sup> The written exam was no longer a Southern Rhodesian Civil Service exam, but a public exam of Unisa, for the Lower Diploma in Bantu Studies, Course 1, and was recognized by the government of Southern Rhodesia as one of the qualifying exams for the Civil Service.

The syllabus was set by the university, and half the paper dealt with grammatical – phonological issues. Candidates had to achieve a minimum of 40 per cent in this half of the paper. The rest of the exam involved free translation and composition, based on set texts decided upon by the university. The set texts were all mission texts, including, for the first chiShona exams, translations of the New Testament. ‘Wiri’ Edwards, who had been approved as an examiner for the University, resigned in disgust when he saw the reading list, stating ‘I do not feel that papers set on any of these books would be a fair test for candidates in Chishona’.<sup>100</sup> He was replaced by a missionary, Bertram Barnes, of St Augustine’s, Penhalonga. Proficiency in this written exam could be earned without any direct contact with Africans, and with no need to engage with African modes of thought. In later years, this Christianized, text-based vernacular, which developed apart from the spoken language, came to be known as ‘ChiBaba’, or ‘Shona spoken by missionaries’, and could ‘be discounted by native Shona speakers’.<sup>101</sup>

While the written exam passed into the hands of the missionaries and academics, the oral exam remained as a Civil Service exam in the hands of the NAD. Unlike the written test, the oral test had nothing to do with Christianity, but continued to reflect the legal and administrative issues that mattered to the department.<sup>102</sup> However, these, too, were undergoing a process of standardization and homogenization, which reinforced the ‘rule bound’ nature of the test. The combined effect of the homogenizing of the languages, the development of a standardized grammar and orthography, the requirement of a language qualification, and the introduction of a set syllabus for the written language tests, was to turn official language expertise into a rule-bound, book-learned skill. The days of the enterprising trader or farmer’s son who made a career for himself on the basis of his language skills and his ease in African society had been eradicated. Africans had been entirely excluded from the process of creating an ‘approved’ vernacular. Systems had been put in place to stop those with ‘unsanctioned’ knowledge from being able to make use of it. The NAD had created a firewall between itself, and the fluid, chaotic, unbounded world of real language use, over which it had no control.

During a difficult period for the Native Affairs Department between 1925–1935, language provided a metaphor to express a range of insecurities about African autonomy and white dependency on Africans. It came to stand for the entire ‘unedifying’ culture of African society, from which whites

<sup>99</sup> Extensive correspondence on this new arrangement is in files S1542/E8/1 and S1542/E8/2.

<sup>100</sup> Acting Registrar, Unisa to Director of Education, Exams Branch, Salisbury, 3 Aug. 1934. S1542/E8/1.

<sup>101</sup> J. C. Kumbirai, ‘Shona bible translation: the work of the Revd. Michael Hannan S. J.’, *Zambezia*, 7 (1979), 61.

<sup>102</sup> CNC to W. Edwards Esq., 16 Nov. 1934; CNC to W. Edwards Esq., 26 Nov. 1934. S1542/E8/1.

should be kept apart. This, in turn, was an inversion of a deeper insecurity, which was that Africans were too easily absorbing and appropriating elements of white culture – labour skills, Christianity, literacy and language – and using them in autonomous, unsanctioned ways.

Language also provided a focus for action. It was possible to create the illusion of control and containment of African culture, by rationalizing and categorizing the languages, turning them into Christian text and fencing them in with examinations. The NAD decided that white citizens should not be taught to converse with Africans. Instead, it created languages that were for talking *at* Africans, not *with* them.<sup>103</sup> This was language for organizational not inspirational purposes; it was language to control people, rather than language in which they could express their wisdom and their fears.<sup>104</sup> In the mouths of living speakers, however, language is not bounded. By trying to claim the local vernaculars as government property, the administration simply cut itself off from the people it would rule. As events over the next thirty years would demonstrate, it had made itself even more vulnerable than before.

<sup>103</sup> As late as 1979, Fortune could note that the standard Shona dictionary had not been produced from 'within the Shona world view'. Fortune, *Shona Lexicography*, 41.

<sup>104</sup> cf. Ali A. Mazrui, *The Political Sociology of the English Language: An African Perspective* (The Hague, 1975), 128–46.