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NEARLY EXTINCT AFRICAN LANGUAGES IN THEIR LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE: TJWAO OF ZIMBABWE

Abstract. The present article studies the visibility of a nearly extinct language Tjwao (Khoe-Kwadi) in the linguistic landscape (LL) of the rural district of Tsholotsho – an area historically associated with the Tjwa in Zimbabwe. The analysis of the physical, functional, and multilingual characteristics of the signage reveals the following hierarchy of visibility: English is more conspicuous in the signage than Ndebele and Tjwao, which are, in turn, more prominent than Kalanga and other African languages. Shona is absent in the signage contrary to the LLs of the cities of Harare, Bulawayo, and Masvingo previously examined in literature. The considerable visibility of Tjwao is viewed as 'sustained' stemming from statal and local interventions related to linguistic/cultural activism, education, and health. In contrast, Tjwao is absent from the signage pertaining to daily community life. Overall, the near extinction of a language – such as Tjwao – does not necessarily imply erasure from its LL.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape; language endangerment; multilingualism; Kalahari Basin Area *Sprachbund*; Khoe-Kwadi.

Introduction

This article is dedicated to one of the most under-researched topics in the subfield of linguistic-landscape (LL) scholarship that studies the relationship between the vitality of languages and their public visibility (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024). This topic concerns the presence of languages that are endangered to the point of their near extinction in the LL of the territory in which they have historically been spoken. In the present research, we aim to examine the LL of Tjwao (tshw-1239/hio) – a nearly extinct variety of the Khoe-Kwadi linguistic family, spoken in Zimbabwe – by determining the organization of the LL of the 'Tjwao area'. Accordingly, our paper centers on a member of the phylogenetic group that has been absent in LL scholarship thus far and, no less important, a language of Africa, which as observed by Pütz and Mundt (2019), remains a marginalized geography in LL studies, including their branch dedicated to language-vitality and visibility interface. The general aim formulated above translates into five more specific objectives: the analysis of the (a) physical, (b) functional, and (c) multilingual characteristics of the signage (i.e., the manners in which Tjwao transpires in signs and coexists on them with other languages), as well as (d) the assessment of the LL of the Tjwao area against the trends observed in the broader LL scholarship concerned with a language-vitality and visibility relationship and (e) a comparison with the Zimbabwean LLs described thus far in literature (see section Literature Review).

As mentioned above, Tjwao is a nearly extinct Khoe-Kwadi language. To be exact, Tjwao belongs to the Tshwa cluster of the Kalahari Khoe branch of the Khoe-Kwadi family (Vossen, 1997; Güldemann & Vossen, 2000; Güldemann, 2014; Fehn & Phiri, 2017; Andrason, Phiri & Fehn, 2023). The Khoe-Kwadi family, Tjwao included, forms part of the Kalahari Basin Area *Sprachbund*, which also hosts the Kx'a and Tuu groups of languages (Güldemann & Fehn, 2017) and spans from southern Angola and Zambia to South Africa through Namibia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. Within this *Sprachbund* area, Tjwao has historically occupied a section of western Zimbabwe, roughly coinciding with large parts of the modern administrative unit of the Tsholotsho district in the Matabeleland North region (Phiri &

Andrason, 2022; Andrason et al., 2024, p.186) – the site of our research. Tjwao has been classified as either moribund (Andrason, Phiri, & Fehn, 2023, p. 350; Phiri & Andrason, 2022) or severely endangered (Andrason et al., 2024, p. 186). Currently, Tjwao has seven native speakers aged more than 70 years old, who barely use it in their daily life. Younger generations (whether parents, children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren) do not know the language or know it residually and only passively. They never resort to it in their day-to-day interactions, having fully transitioned to Kalanga and/or Ndebele. Although Tjwao is officially recognized in the 2013 Zimbabwean constitution, it does not enjoy any official administrative function in the local community nor does it feature in (primary and secondary) education, where the above-mentioned Ndebele, Kalanga, as well as English predominate (Andrason, Phiri, & Fehn, 2023; Andrason et al., 2024; Tandi, Zhou, & Mapfumo, 2025). Consequently, Tjwao seems to match class 8.b on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), i.e., 'nearly extinct' rather than 'moribund' 8.a, the categories that are equivalents of 'critically' and 'severely endangered' on the UNESCO scale respectively and together correspond to 'nearly extinct' on the scale developed by Ethnologue (Lewis & Simons, 2010). Overall, Tjwao occupies a stage that immediately precedes language death on all the above-mentioned language endangerment hierarchies.

To accomplish the aim of our research question, we structure the article as follows: first, we review scholarly literature dedicated to language endangerment and LLs and report on publications specifically analyzing the LLs of Zimbabwe; next, we explain our data collection methods and the principles of data analysis; subsequently, we introduce and evaluate our empirical evidence; in the end, we conclude our paper with a summary of findings.

Literature Review

The study of the relationship between language vitality and LLs – and, in particular, the analysis of the visibility of minority languages in their local environments – constitutes one of the major research areas within LL

scholarship (Marten, Van Mensel, & Gorter, 2012; Van Mensel, Marten, & Gorter, 2012; Van Mensel, Vandenbroucke, & Blackwood, 2016; Pütz & Mundt, 2019; Gorter & Cenoz, 2024). The relevance and popularity of this theme stem from the fact that the LL framework – or rather a constellation of the various LL approaches – is "particularly suitable" for examining the dynamics coupling minority languages to their multilingual contexts (Pütz & Mundt, 2019, p. 8). It allows one to study linguistic struggles, conflicts, and contestations; trace language loss, survival, death, and revitalization; and reveal the various social, economic, and political forces and tensions permeating the territory where a minority language is spoken (Van Mensel et al., 2016; Pütz & Mundt, 2019; Gorter & Cenoz, 2024). All of this is possible because LLs are tangible manifestations of the linguistic and extra-linguistic identities, policies, attitudes, and powers embraced and/or exerted by individuals, groups of people, and legal entities. As all minority languages are to some degree endangered (Marten et al., 2012, p. 7; Gorter & Cenoz, 2024, p. 25), studying the LL of minority languages inherently involves the issue of language endangerment too.

Gorter and Cenoz (2024, p. 185) propose the following scale that schematizes a gradual decrease in the presence/visibility of minority languages (of different endangerment degrees) in signage: (1) (almost) always present/visible → (2) frequent → (3) medium → (4) limited → (5) occasional → (6) minimal or none[1]. This presence/visibility in LLs is arguably correlated with different policies and ideologies which apply to languages from those that are non-endangered to those that are nearly extinct and dead: (1) being prescribed or universally implied → (2) (co-)official or supported → (3) recognized or encouraged → (4) approved or permitted → (5) disregarded or contested → (6) excluded or prohibited. The examples of all these categories are: (1) German in Belgium → (2) Basque and Catalan in Spain → (3) Irish in the United Kingdom → (4) Frisian in the Netherlands → (5) Breton in France → (6) Latgalian in

[1] As acknowledged by its authors, this scale is a continuum that schematizes a gradient process. Therefore, the distinguished categories are dynamic, the borders separating them are fuzzy, and the position of specific languages on the scale can only be approximate to the extent that sometimes a language can occupy two adjacent positions (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024, pp. 204–205).

Latvia (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024). Pertinently, the relationship between LLs and the extreme cases of endangerment instantiated by languages classified as 'nearly extinct' on EGIDS or 'critically endangered' on UNESCO's scale has not been researched in depth – especially as far as the African continent is concerned. Indeed, most studies focus on minority languages that, although endangered, are still quite robust – quantitatively (because of the number of their speakers) and qualitatively (for instance, due to institutional and governmental support) – and whose survival is not immediately threatened (see, for example, the languages reviewed in Gorter and Cenoz's 2024 book).

The above is also the case of the Sámi language group, which has enjoyed some of the most compelling LL studies examining the public visibility of (highly) endangered languages, since Sámi languages (even local varieties such Inari discussed below) are "not immediately threatened by extinction" (Rasmussen & Nolan, 2011, p. 37).[2] According to research dedicated to the LL of Sámi languages, three classes of elements can be distinguished in the northern European area where these languages have been spoken: local, national, and global (Pietikäinen et al., 2011). The local component refers to ethnic minority languages (i.e., Sámi varieties), which tend to appear in bilingual signs, usually in a second position after the national/majority language. This order characterizes road signs (place names) and government-run buildings (names of libraries and schools). Sámi signs perform three types of functions: they manifest and protect the minority-language community's rights, destigmatize the language by associating it with media, culture, and prestige, as well as index the idea of ethnic authenticity (Pietikäinen et al., 2011, pp. 295–296). The national component, predominating in the LL, centers a country's majority language, e.g., Finnish (in Finland) or Norwegian (in Norway). The global component, a newcomer to the LL, draws on international languages, primarily English, as well as, although to a lesser extent, French, German, and Spanish (Pietikäinen et al., 2011, p. 295). Within the Sámi group, the Inari variety is one of the most vulnerable. It is spoken by some 300-400 native speakers in the town of Inari in Northern Finland (Rasmussen & Nolan, 2011; Pietikäinen,

[2] As a holistic group, Sami languages are ascribed to stage 3 by Gorter and Cenoz (2024).

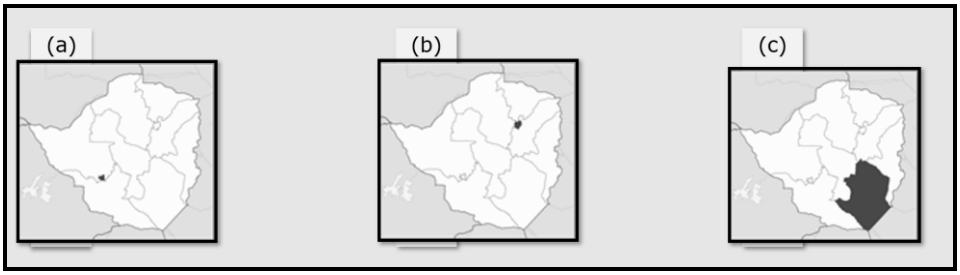
2014) and is classified by UNESCO (2021) as either 'severely endangered' (i.e., 'moribund' on EGIDS) or 'definitely endangered' ('shifting' on EGIDS). Complying with the characteristics typifying Sámi languages in general, the LL of Inari comprises of signs that draw on local (Sámi), national (Finnish), and global (English) elements. The local material can itself be micro-local (Inari Sámi) and macro-local (other Sámi varieties including what could be regarded as the standard(ized) Sámi language). Micro-local elements primarily transpire in official road signs and buildings hosting governmental and cultural institutions, as well as in signs related to advertising and tourism. This latter type of signage (pertaining to publicity and the touristic industry) is highly complex, juxtaposing individual signs written in one or several languages (local, national, and global), arranged in diverse orders, and exhibiting hybridizations and blends (Pietikäinen, 2014).

The above observations related to the presence/visibility of endangered minority languages in their LLs also apply to Africa. For instance, the LL of the areas inhabited by Tigrinya and Gedeo speakers in Ethiopia – two African varieties included on Gorter and Cenoz's (2024) scale and classified as stages 2 and 3, respectively – mix local, national, and global elements in agreement with Pietikäinen et al. (2011) and Pietikäinen's (2014) research on Sámi. In the Tigray region's capital, Tigrinya shares the LL with Amharic (national) and English (global) to a quite comparable extent, although it mostly appears in bilingual signs rather than monolingual ones. In a town in the region where the Geodo predominates, the Geodo language features in signage seldom and invariably with Amharic (national) and/or English (global) languages (Mendisu, Malinowski, & Woldemichael, 2016). Significantly, other more endangered local languages, such as Koreete ('vulnerable'/'threatened'), are absent in signage. These varieties are generally eclipsed by the above-mentioned Amharic and/or English even in localities in which they constitute the main vehicles of oral communication (Lanza & Woldemariam, 2009, 2014; Mendisu, et al., 2016). Overall, in Africa, the three classes of languages in signage (local, national, and global) yield a hierarchy. Global languages, which tend to coincide with colonial languages, e.g., English and French, unquestionably dominate LLs. National languages, i.e., official African languages such as Akan in Ghana, Hausa in

parts of Nigeria, and Swahili in Tanzania, are less visible, yet may feature abundantly in determined areas, for instance, on university campuses and governmental buildings. Local languages, i.e., indigenous ethnic African varieties confined to (more or less) small areas are not present in the LL of the territory on which they are spoken or appear there to a minimal extent (Andrason, 2025; Andrason & Karani, 2025). As far as we know, there are no studies dedicated specifically to the presence of heavily vulnerable languages ('moribund'/'severely endangered' or, as Tjwao, 'nearly extinct'/'critically endangered') in African LLs.

Figure 1

The Zimbabwean LLs Examined thus far



Note. Adapted from
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zimbabwe_adm_location_map.svg

Similar to the lack of research on the relationship between LLs and extremely endangered languages in Africa, studies on Zimbabwean LLs are limited. To the best of our knowledge, three sites have been examined thus far: the city of Bulawayo (Ndlovu, 2016, 2018, 2021; Siziba & Maseko, 2024; see Figure 1.a) and the city of Harare (Ndlovu, 2021; Figure 1.b), as well as Masvingo city and some of its less urbanized surroundings (Jenjekwa, 2022; Figure 1.c). Nevertheless, the situation described in the handful of articles published thus far seems to comply with the language-imbalance patterns explained in the previous paragraphs. That is, English as a global colonial variety is highly visible; Shona and, significantly less so, Ndebele, the two most widely-spoken national languages, are visible marginally; other local (and indigenous ethnic) African languages are invisible. The predominance of English is particularly marked in urban areas (city centers) while in less

urbanized areas (outside city centers), the prevalence of the colonial language over the national African languages is slightly less marked.

The first wave of research on LLs in Zimbabwe was undertaken by Ndlovu (2016, 2018, 2021). While the author of these studies refers to his approach as 'LL research' and the observations reported can certainly be extrapolated to the LLs of the relevant areas, the three publications center onomastics rather than LLs *sensu stricto*. Crucially, they draw on secondary data extracted from "journals, the media, books, [...] atlases, […] maps, and online site[s]" (Ndlovu, 2021, p. 8) instead of introducing evidence collected in fieldwork *in situ*. The onomastic analysis offered in this research initially concerned Zimbabwe's second largest city, Bulawayo – first, the names of streets and buildings (Ndlovu, 2016) and, next, the names of residential areas and shops (Ndlovu, 2018). The evidence presented suggests that "the language of the onomastic linguistic landscape favors English and [although significantly less so] Shona" and marginalizes Ndebele and the remaining varieties (Ndlovu, 2018, p. 111). To be exact, English occupies a dominant position in the onomastic LL of buildings and shops; Shona is quite visible as far as the onomastics of streets is concerned; Ndebele, despite being the most widely spoken language in the city, is visible only minimally, mostly in the names of less affluent residential areas (which contrasts with the dominant presence of English in the names of affluent neighborhoods). The most recent study (Ndlovu, 2021) examines the onomastic landscape of the center, suburbs, and airport areas of Harare in addition to Bulawayo and corroborates the pattern reported above. English occupies a hegemonic position in the LL; Shona and less so Ndebele are somewhat visible; other languages, e.g., Kalanga, Tonga, Tsonga, and Venda, are invisible.

The second wave of research can be regarded as the genuine instantiation of a LL framework. These studies draw on first-hand fieldwork activities and examine signs displayed publicly *in situ*. Continuing Ndlovu's work on Bulawayo, Siziba and Maseko (2024) analyze the bottom-up signage on shop facades in one street in the city's center. The 46 signs that constitute the basis of their analysis largely confirm the tendencies identified in Ndlovu's (2016, 2018, 2021) onomastic evidence. That is, English predominates in

both monolingual and multilingual signage with English monolingual signs generally being the most conspicuous. In contrast, Shona and Ndebele tend to appear only in multilingual signs, with Shona being more visible than Ndebele. As a result, the LL of Bulawayo "do[es] not align with the city's perceived Ndebele-ness" and the Ndebele language's dominant position in the soundscape (Siziba & Maseko, 2024, p. 11). This English-ness of the signage arguably reflects the status of English as the leading language of "education, the media, the judiciary services and legislature" (Siziba & Maseko, 2024, p. 11). In turn, the greater visibility of Shona over Ndebele reveals the higher "sociopolitical, economic and demographic" status of Shona in comparison to any other African languages used in Zimbabwe (Siziba & Maseko, 2024, p. 11). This erasure of African languages in Bulawayo's LL, especially several minority varieties spoken in the area, is the bottom-up manifestation of the top-down "ideology of Zimbabwe as a [Shona-Ndebele] bimodal and bicultural State" that contributes to the marginalization, "devaluation", and endangerment of smaller local languages (Siziba & Maseko, 2024, p. 11). In another genuine LL study, Jenjekwa (2022) examines "billboards, road signs and signs on buildings" found in the city center of Masvingo and the more rural area of surrounding villages (Jenjekwa, 2022, p. 103). This research corroborates the imbalances observed by Ndlovu (2016, 2018, 2021) and Siziba and Maseko (2024) in Bulawayo and Harare, which we summarized above. That is, in the city center, the dominance of English in the LL is "overwhelming" (Jenjekwa, 2022, p. 109) while most local African languages are silenced and displaced, with only Shona featuring rarely. This inequal presence of global (colonial) and African (national and local) languages in the LL is slightly less severe in rural zones, where "the dominance of English is marginally diminished by an increased presence of Shona in the form of indigenous place-names" (Jenjekwa, 2022, p. 109). Similar to Siziba and Maseko (2024), this disparity in the visibility of the different languages is primarily attributed to the role entertained by English in economy, business, and education and its perception as "a symbol of status and modernization" (Jenjekwa, 2022, p. 111).

Overall, while addressing the general issue of the relationship coupling nearly extinct languages and their LLs, our study aims to contribute to the Zimbabwean LL scholarship too. As explained above, this scholarship is (a) often limited to onomastics, (b) centers urban areas and large cities, and (c) either does not quantitatively specify the data underlining the generalizations proposed or, if provided, generalizations proposed draw on a relatively low number of tokens. By contrast, our research is primarily dedicated to rural areas, draws on first-hand empirical *in-situ* fieldwork, and analyzes, to date, the largest sample of signs.

Methodology

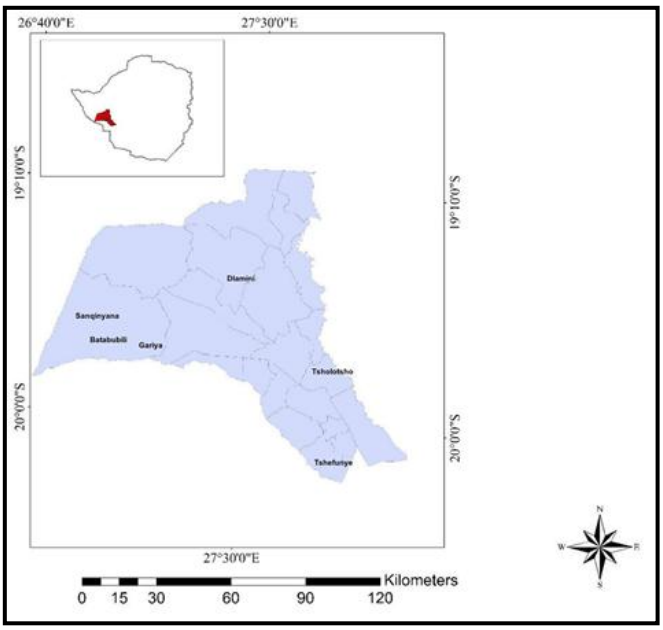
The collection of our data started in September 2024 and continued at intervals till May 2025. In these activities, we were assisted by community members residing in the Tsholotsho district in the region of Matabeleland North in Western Zimbabwe (see Figure 2), especially Davy Ndlovu – the director of the Tsoro-o-tso San Development Trust.[3] Overall, we collected circa 150 pictures and documented 79 signs. We recorded the signage of Tsholotsho, the only locality in the district with town status (granted in 2023), as well as of the villages/settlements of Butabubili, Dlamini, Garia, Sanqinyanya, and Tshefunye, and their vicinities (Figure 2).

Once collected, the data were analyzed according to the physical (material), functional (pragma-semantic), and multilingual (related to language coexistence) properties of the signage. In doing so, we followed the approach embraced by Andrason (2025) and Andrason and Karani (2025) to examine the LL of Cape Town (South Africa) and Arusa (Tanzania), respectively. This internally diverse manner of studying LLs draws, in turn, on the earlier work published by Marten, Van Mensel and Gorter (2012), Gorter and Cenoz (2015, 2024), Van Mensel, Vandenbroucke, and Blackwood (2016), Pütz and Mundt (2019), and Cocq et al. (2020) and the complex quantitative and qualitative as well as linguistic and ethnographic approach(es) to LLs espoused in those studies.

[3] A few pictures come from our earlier visits to Tsholotsho as we have been involved in documenting the Tjwao language for over a decade.

Figure 2

The Sites Documented in the Study



Physicality concerns the analysis of signage in terms of a sign type, space, support, and frame. As signs, we will consider two classes of visual signals: those that contain orthographic texts and, although for Tjwao only, those that are non-orthographic (e.g., shapes, symbols, and emblems) as long as they convey some meaning. Furthermore, again only in the case of Tjwao, we include signs that are not only visible from outside but also those that appear inside buildings. Each such sign is ascribed to a space, i.e., the geographic area in which it features: a specific town, village, or settlement.[4] A support is the material base on which a sign is placed. We categorized it in a fourfold manner: ephemeral or permanent, physical or digital, static or movable, and inorganic (non-somatic) or organic (somatic). Lastly, a frame, which is the spatial limit of a sign, divides signage into two main classes: micro-frames of minimal granularity (a sign exists on its own

[4] This more flexible (and broader) understanding of the concept of 'sign' in the case of Tjwao stems from the vulnerability of this language in the soundscape of the research area (see 'Introduction'). It also concurs with the difficulty we faced in finding Tjwao signs, which contrasted with the ease with which we collected other signs, especially those containing English material.

as an individual inscription) and macro-frames of maximum granularity (signs form discursive constellations composed of multiple inscriptions such as graffiti walls).[5]

Functionality concerns the authorship and readership of signage, the socio-economic domains to which signs pertain, and their purpose. With regard to authorship (i.e., the creators of signs), we distinguish between top-down and bottom-up signage. The former originates from governmental (statal or regional) authorities, while the latter originates from individuals and grass-root communities. With regard to readership (i.e., the recipients of signs), we distinguish between the local (autochthonous) population and visitors (e.g., tourists). Socio-economic domains concern the types of industries to which signs apply, specifically, education, hospitality, transportation, and government administration. Lastly, regarding the purpose of signs, we distinguish between naming (places), directing (to places), informing (e.g., about wellbeing practices and historical facts), and advertising/promoting (events, products and businesses).

Third, multilingualism concerns the ways in which the various languages coexist in signage. A language may be absent or present in a sign. When it is present, it can appear alone or share the sign with other languages. In the latter case, languages can constitute translations of each other – full (the entire message is repeated), partial (part of the message is repeated), or overlapping (all languages convey a similar fragment of the message yet differ in several other parts) – or stand in a complementary relationship (each language conveys a different message; Reh 2004). The linguistic varieties found in a sign may also be mixed attesting to code-switching (insertional, alternational, or congruent) and hybridizations (for a more in-depth explanation of all these physical, functional, and multilingual concepts consult Andrason, 2025; Andrason & Karani, 2025; as well as Reh, 2004; Cenoz & Gorter, 2006; Huebner, 2006; Backhaus, 2007; Marten, et al., 2012; Gorter & Cenoz, 2015, 2024; Van Mensel et al., 2016; Pütz & Mundt, 2019; Shohamy, 2019; Cocq et al., 2020).

[5] Often, the determination of the extent of a frame – and thus the more fine-grained/zoomed-in or coarse-grained/zoomed-out analysis of signs – depends on the observer and the needs of their research.

Evidence

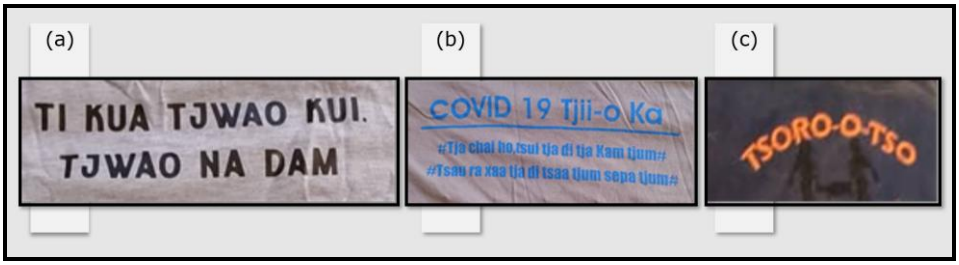
Tjwa(o) Signage

We were able to document 26 signs that to some degree mark the LL as culturally Tjwa. 17 signs are orthographic and include texts written in the Tjwao language. Signs containing bilingual inscriptions are more common (12x) than those with monolingual inscriptions (5x).

Monolingual Tjwao signs exploit two types of supports. Three signs appear on pieces of garments such as t-shirts (Figure 3.a-b) and caps (3.c). As the supports can be worn by people, they are movable. All these clothing-related signs come from the village of Dlamini, where they had been brought by language activists. The text in Figure 3.c is accompanied by the 'logo' of Tsoro-o-Tso San Development Trust (depicting the shapes of two Tjwa people), which itself is a well-recognizable symbol of Tjwa culture in the region (see further below).[6] All the signs discussed in this paragraph are bottom-up originating from a grassroots linguistic and cultural movement. They target the local population as well as potential visitors (national or international).

Figure 3

Monolingual Tjwao Signs – Clothing

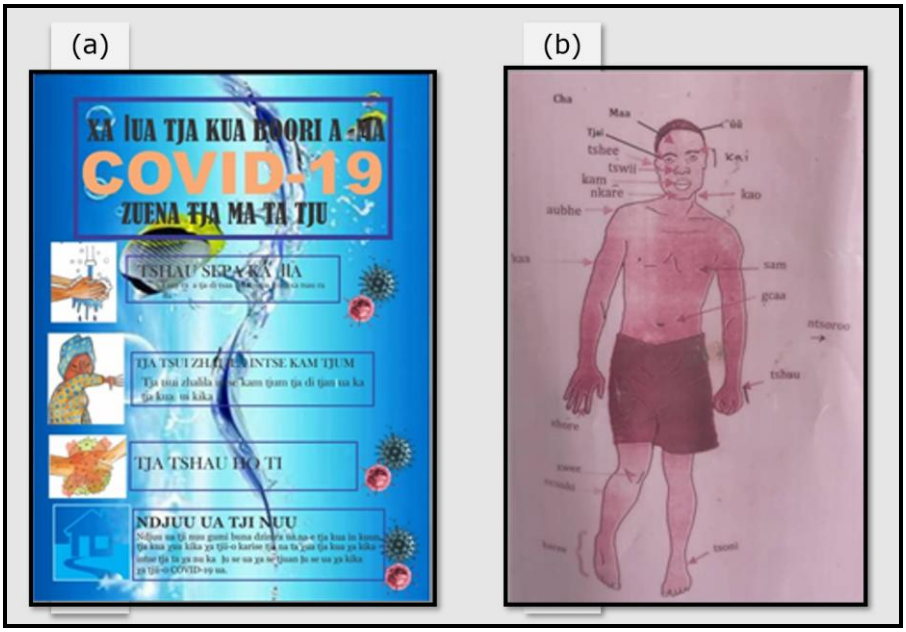


[6] In Zimbabwe, the term 'San' is used to the refer to pre/non-Bantu hunter-gatherers while Khoi/Khoe refers to pastoralists regardless of their linguistic phylogenetic filiation. This reflects the outdated terminology 'Khoisan' currently replaced by the concept 'Kalahari Basin area' (or *Sprachbund*). This Kalahari Basin area includes three language families: Khoe-Kwadi, Kx'a (also referred to as Ju-ǂHoan), and Tuu. It can even (although less often) be expanded by two language-isolate lineages: Hadza and Sandawe (cf. Güldemann, 2014, 2018). Many Khoe-Kwadi, Kx'a, and Tuu speakers and their descendants perceive the term 'San' as derogatory.

The support of the two other monolingual Tjwao signs is paper, which once printed out is fixed to the walls. One token of this type appears inside the hospital in Tsholotsho town and provides medical information related to COVID-19 (4.a). The other token is a teaching aid used at John Landa high school in the village of Bule (some 13 km from Tsholotsho) which names the different parts of the human body (4.b). These two signs are relatively ephemeral (or perishable) and static. The two can be analyzed as semi-bottom-up and semi-top-down. On the one hand, they appear in state-owned buildings and reflect governmental policies pertaining to education and health. On the other hand, they have been placed because of the initiative of individual people (see the teaching aid that was put up by a local teacher) or the translation has been developed in collaboration with non-governmental agencies (see the COVID-19 flyer which was supported by the Tsoro-o-tso San Development Trust). These signs are directed to the local population and, as far as the health instructions are concerned, can only be deciphered by those who are well familiar with the Tjwao language.

Figure 4

Monolingual Tjwao Signs – Paper on Walls



With regard to the lexico-grammatical properties of the Tjwao text present in the monolingual Tjwao signs, the language used in these inscriptions may range from simple to complex. Examples of simple lexico-grammatical material are signs containing individual nominal lexemes such as *Tsoro-o-tso* 'bark used for medicine' (which, according to the Tjwa elders, is the original name of Tsholotsho; Ndlovu, 2017; Phiri, 2021; 3.c) or compositions of single nominal items as *tjai* 'eye', *tshee* 'ear', *kam* 'mouth', *xhore* 'finger' in Figure 4.a. Examples of complex structures are mono-clausal expressions such as *ti kwa Tjwao kui* 'I want to speak Tjwao' (3.a) or multi-clausal expressions such as *Covid 19 tcii-o-ka. Tja chai ho, tsui di dja kam tcum. Tsau ra xaa di tsaa tjum sepa tjum* 'Covid 19 is a disease. Close your mouth when you are coughing. Use water with soap when washing your hands' (3.b). The most complex language use appears in 4.a, which like 3.b specifies prevention measures against COVID-19. The Tjwao text in this sign forms paragraphs with complex sentences and clauses that draw on diverse word classes and specialized vocabulary.

Figure 5

Biligual Tjwao Signs – (Laminated) Paper and Banners

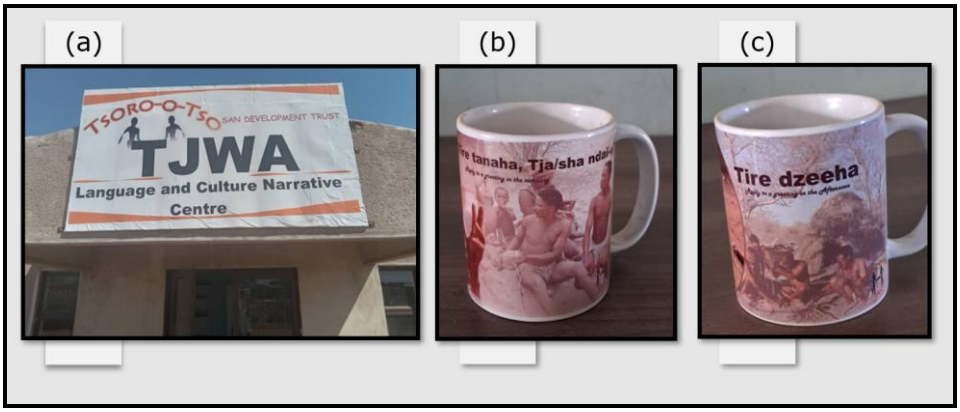
Bilingual signs with Tjwao, which, as explained above, are more numerous than monolingual signs, invariably exploit English as the other linguistic variety. This means that Tjwao never cooccurs in signage with other local African languages present in the LL of the area studied by us: Ndebele and Kalanga. Most bilingual Tjwao signs documented in our research come from the town of Tsholotsho (8x). The other localities with bilingual signage are Butabubili, Bule, Garia, and Sanqinyana, in each of which one bilingual sign was found.

The most common support of bilingual Tjwao signs is ephemeral: (laminated) paper attached to a wall (5.a-c) and banners (5.d-e). The former signs are static, whereas the latter are movable (dismantlable) structures.

Other types of supports are more permanent being made of less perishable material or fragile structures. Like the former signs, these signs can be static, i.e., outdoor billboards (6.a), or movable, i.e., pottery (cups) (6.b-c). In contrast, the most permanent structures found in many LLs, such as metal signposts or painted facades, never host signs containing texts in Tjwao.

Figure 6

Biligual Tjwao Signs – Bilboards and Pottery



Similar to monolingual signs, the bilingual signs pertain to linguistic and cultural activism (5.b, 5.d-e, 6.a-c), health (hospital; 5.c) and education (school; 5.a). They name and identify local organizations, advertise events

promoting Tjwa culture, and inform about Tjwao place names and practices protecting against diseases. They also reveal the same top-down (government), bottom-up (grass-root activism), and top-down/bottom-up (blended authorities-supported activism) origin.

A considerable part of the bilingual Tjwao signs (5x) exhibits a simple lexico-grammatical character. In such cases, the Tjwao text is limited to a single noun *Tsoro-o-tso* – the proper name of the San Development Trust (5.b and 6.a) – or a collection of proper names of places (5.a). Other bilingual signs, however, are more complex as far as Tjwao is concerned and contain full clauses formulated in this language. These Tjwao expressions can be mono-clausal: *tire dzeeha* 'I am well' (6.c) and *Tjware kwa tana te* 'Did you wake up well' (5.e); and pluri-clausal: *Tire tanaha. Tja/sha ndai e?* 'I woke up well. How about you?' (6.b) and *Tire Tjwa. Ti kua kx'ui Tjwao na dam* 'I am Tjwa. I want to speak Tjwao my language' (5.d). The most complex sign is in Figure 5.c which consists of several clauses and phrases in Tjwao. Overall, Tjwao tends to be less visible in bilingual signs than English, which dominates with regard to both the quantity of the text (the majority of a text appears in English; see 5.a-b, 5.d-e, 6.a), its conspicuousness (e.g., the font of the English text is larger and/or somehow profiled; 5.d-e), and order (English appears first being followed by Tjwao; 5.c-d). However, the inscriptions found on the two cups reverse this tendency. The Tjwao text appears first and is written in bold and with a larger font than English (6.c). Furthermore, as far as Figure 6.b is concerned, the Tjwao inscription is longer than the English one. On both cups, the English texts merely explain the Tjwao expressions, which provide the central message of the signs. Lastly, in one example, English and Tjwao constitute full translations and coexist equally on the sign (5.c). These three signs, i.e., 5.c and 6.b-c, attest to alternational code-switching. An exemplary case of insertional code-switching is in Figure 5.a. Other instances of Tjwao insertions into the English matrix appear in Figures 5.b, 5.d, and 6.a, where the word *Tsoro-o-Tso* is used as part of the proper name of the Tjwa organization. This usage is however tokenistic.

As we explained above, a few bilingual signs additionally include the Tjwao logo (5.b and 6.a) or depictions of Tjwa people (5.e and 6.b-c) –

emblems of and references to Tjwa culture and the movement advocating for its protection. The grass hut in Figure 6.c also symbolizes Tjwao culture, particularly their historically nomadic way of life, as suggested by the hut's temporary and mobile design.

Nine signs in our database do not make use of orthographic Tjwao texts but rather draw on other visual cultural Tjwa elements. Nevertheless, their contribution to (the local character of) the LL of the Tsholotsho district is no less important than that of orthographic Tjwao signs. This stems from the fact that Tjwao was not codified orthographically until very recently (Fehn & Phiri, 2017; Andrason & Phiri, 2018; Andrason, Fehn, & Phiri, 2020; Andrason, Phiri, & Fehn, 2023). In the past, the language only had an oral character and, indeed, the remaining Tjwao speakers are not familiar with Tjwao spelling conventions nor have they ever written texts in Tjwao. In any event, non-orthographic Tjwa signs function as critical symbols of authenticity and mark the area as culturally Tjwa, underscoring its indigenous hunter-gathering and Khoe-Kwadi origin. All such signs can be divided into three groups: prehistorical paintings, culturally relevant landmarks, and modern sculptures.

Figure 7

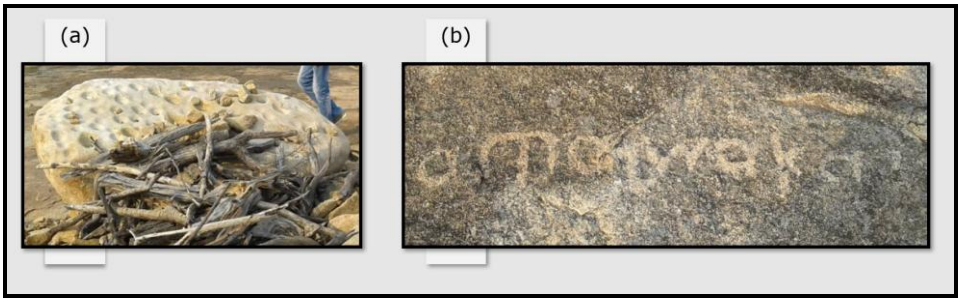
Rock Paintings

The prehistoric drawings that are attested in our database come from Tshefunye and form part of Zimbabwean ancient rock art. All such paintings, including those documented in our study, are attributed to ancestral hunter-gatherers and go some 10,000 years back in time (Walker, 1996; Campbell & Coulson, 2001; Nhamo et al., 2017). Rather than serving mere decorative

(adornment) or representational (narrative) purposes, these artworks manifest the belief systems, epistemology, and cosmology of the early communities and make reference to their social organization, values, and practices – the types of information that are partially inaccessible by analyzing material vestiges unearthed in conventional archaeological excavations (Campbell & Coulson, 2001; Nhamo, 2007; Nhamo et al., 2017). In other words, the rock paintings – both in Tshefunye and the other areas of Zimbabwe – function as cultural archives that reveal how early indigenous communities coexisted with each other and their environment (Phiri & Dande, 2024). The paintings in Tshefunye, which mainly portray human beings and artifacts, constitute the basis for the logo used by the Tsoro-o-tso Developmental San Trust promoting Tjwa culture and the Tjwao language – which, as previously explained, has itself become the recognizable symbol of language activism in the area.

Figure 8

Rock Symbols



Two landmark signs – both documented in Tshefunye too – are rocks which, according to local inhabitants, are associated with the traditional life of indigenous hunter-gatherers. The rock in Figure 8.a was reportedly used by children as part of a game called Tsoro in Shona.[7] According to Tjwa people, the game involved two players and consisted of redistributing small stones into the holes carved in the rock. This activity apparently served

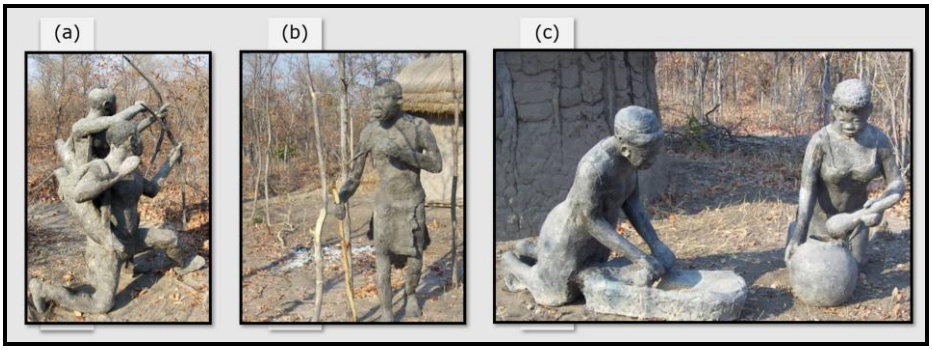
[7] *Tsoro* is a generic Shona term for board games. As far as we know, there is no specific Tjwao name for this game, and members of the Tjwa community currently refer to it as *tsoro*. This *tsoro* is different from the one in *Tsoro-o-tso*, which is a Tjwao lexeme.

an educational purpose and aimed at teaching children basic counting skills. This rock in Figure 8.b indicates a place where hunter-gatherers used to meet. This rock also contains a Ndebele inscription *amatwakazi* which means 'San-women' (a word that coexists with the more common expression *abathwakazi*) engraved after the site ceased to entertain its original communal function (regarding this orthographic sign see the section 'Monolingual signs: English and Ndebele').

The last class of non-orthographic signs includes modern sculptures depicting indigenous hunter-gatherers. All such sculptures are found in the Tsoro-o-tso Museum in the village of Dlamini that was supposed to be launched in 2012 (the time when the sculptures were installed). The figures depict Tjwa men: hunting with bows and arrows (9.a) and walking with a stick (9.b); as well as a Tjwa woman while fetching water and grinding maize meal (9.c).

Figure 9

Modern Tjwa Sculptures



Non-Tjwa(o) Signage

The signs that do not draw on Tjwa(o) elements are more numerous (53x) than those with Tjwao (which, as explained in the section 'Tjwa(o) signage', are 17 or 26 if the non-orthographic signs are included) and exploit three language sources: English, Ndebele, and Kalanga. We were unable to document any signs containing Shona material, whether monolingual or multilingual. No trilingual signs are attested in the signage. Additionally,

there is one sign which explores English and what we refer to as Pan-African linguistic elements.

Monolingual Signs: English and Ndebele

Two languages other than Tjwao can appear in signage on their own, i.e., as monolingual texts: English and Ndebele.

Figure 10

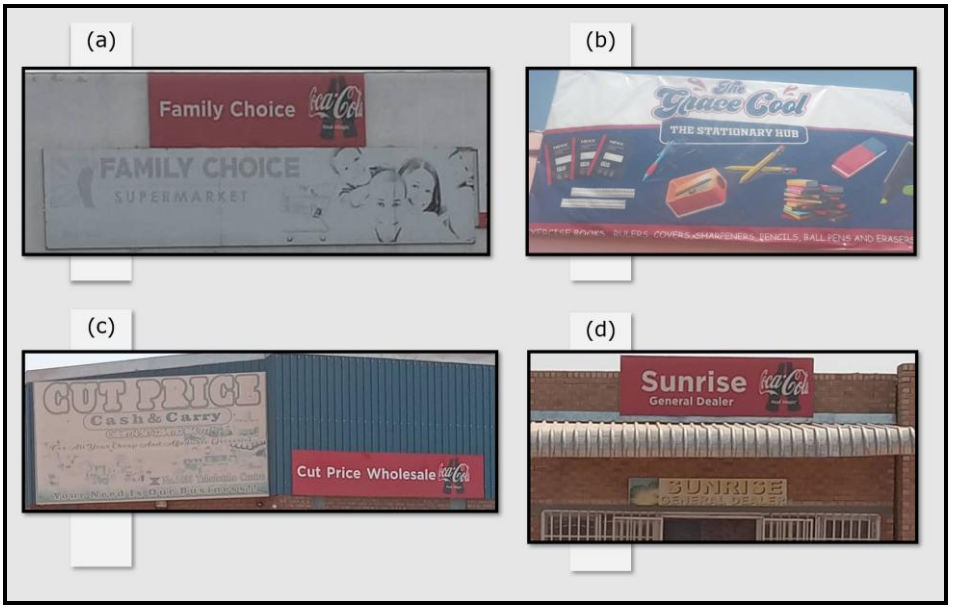
Monolingual English Signs – Signposts

With 32 tokens attested, monolingual English signs constitute the most numerous subclass of monolingual signs (43 in total), non-Tjwao signs (53 in total), and all orthographic signs overall (70 in total). Three types of supports predominate in the signs that contain English texts only. The first type includes signposts which either direct to specific places such as geographic locations (villages and town) and institutions (10.a-b) or name them as such (10.c-d). They mostly pertain to government administration (courts and offices), the health sector (hospitals), and religion (places of

worship). These supports are static and permanent, mostly made of metal. They tend to be top-down having been placed by local, regional, or statal authorities. Some signs, however, originate from local faith communities rather than the government. Often, the signage of this class forms constellations of signs, relatively harmonious and planned (10.b) or chaotic and accidental (10.a).

Figure 11

Monolingual English Signs – Shop Facades



The second, quite common support type are shop facades (11.a-d). These signs are also static and permanent. They are made of either metal (11.c) or fortified plastic (11.b) and fastened to buildings' walls. All of them are bottom-up and generally pertain to the retail industry, having been put up by large companies or the individual owners of small shops to name and promote their businesses and/or advertise selected products. Similar to signposts, these signs often form larger frames composed of smaller individual signs. Usually, signs yielding such constatations are closely related. For instance, they display the same name of the establishment or the same names of products (see 11.a-c).

Figure 12

Monolingual English Signs – Banners

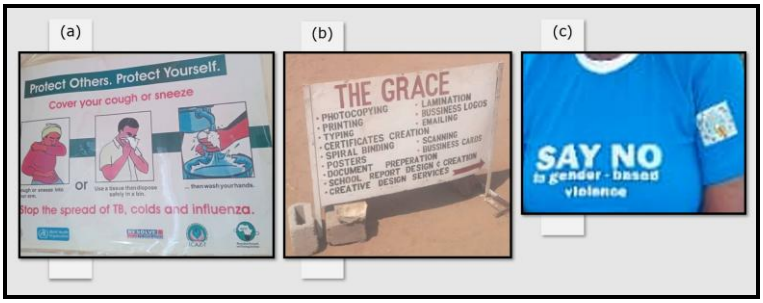
The third type of support carrying monological English texts that is common pertains to banners (12.a-c). These supports are less permanent as they are made of plasticized fabric or carton. Some of them are static i.e., fastened to fences (12.a) and walls (12.c), while others are placed on movable structures (12.b). These signs can be both top-down (being placed by official governmental institutions; 12.b-c) or bottom-up (being placed by individuals, e.g., owners of private businesses; 12.a). They pertain to the service/retail industry, government administration, and public health.

The remaining support types of monolingual English signs are much less frequent. These types involve ephemeral paper sheets fastened to walls (13.a), movable metallic and carton boards (13.b), and cotton t-shirts worn by people (13.c). All such signs can be top-down advertising initiatives promoted by and originating from the government (13.a and 13.c) or bottom-up crafted by individual shop and business owners (13.b).

Overall, the properties of English texts found in monolingual English signs vary significantly across the signage from simple to complex. On the one hand, inscriptions may be limited to nouns and noun phases (often names of places or institutions) presented individually (10.a and 11.d), in clusters (10.b), or as lists (13.b). On the other hand, very frequently, English inscriptions are multi-clausal with all types of word classes and sophisticated vocabulary (10.b, 12.a, and 13.a).

Figure 13

Monolingual English Signs – Other Support Types



Monolingual signs in Ndebele are considerably less common than English signs being attested in 7 instances. They appear on three types of supports. Some signs are movable and ephemeral being written with chalk on small vertical wooden boards. These boards are not fastened to any wall or fence but can be moved freely and their position changes (at least minimally) every day. They are bottom-up: they have been developed by shop or restaurants' owners and thus pertain to the hospitality and retail industry. These signs name and/or advertise private businesses (*izintshantshu zokupheka* 'master chefs' (14.a) and the local products available inside (e.g., *ithanga* 'pumpkin', *umsuzwane* 'a type of infusion'*, umxhanxa* 'a traditional dish made from melon and other ingredients, *uxaku xaku* 'local plant (Thespesia garckeana) used for chewing'*, amabele* 'sorghum', *inyawuthi* 'pearl millet', and *uphoko* 'a type of porridge' (14.b)).

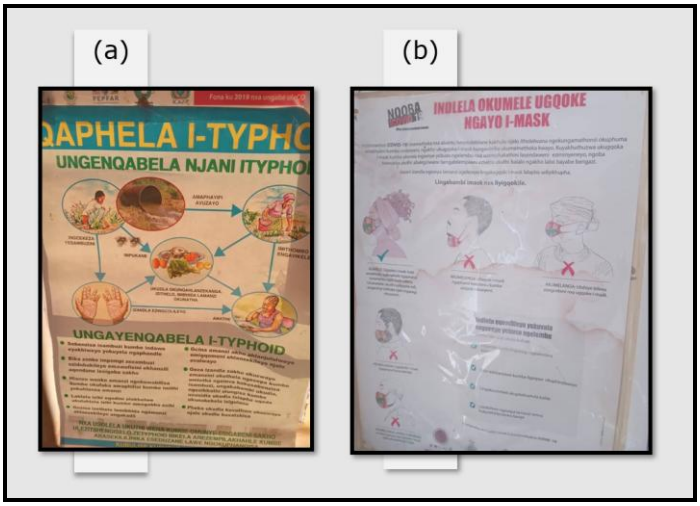
Figure 14

Monolingual Ndebele signs – boards

A few signs are large, plasticized paper sheets glued to the walls of buildings (15.a-b; see also 20). Even though less fragile than the signage discussed above, these signs are also ephemeral and easily removable if necessary. Contrary to the boards mentioned above, they are static. The texts inform about health practices that would protect the local population against typhoid fever (*Qaphela ityphoid. Ungenqabela njani ityphoid* 'Watch out for typhoid. How to prevent typhoid' 15.a), COVID-19 (*Nqoba iCovid-19. Indlele okumele ugqoke ngayo i-mask* 'Defeat Covid. How to wear a mask'; 15.b), and malaria (see 20 further below). All such signs are top-down and reflect activities undertaken by governmental health institutions.

Figure 15

Monolingual Ndebele Signs – Paper



One monolingual Ndebele sign is the inscription painted on the front metal body of a local bus. The sign is permanent yet movable. The text *bafana bafana* lit. 'boys boys' refers to the South African national football team, which is commonly known under this term. *Bafana* is a 'pan-Nguni' word (as it is found in not only Ndebele but also Xhosa and Zulu) and constitutes a common expression conveying encouragement during sport events. In this case, a term that is presumably South African is

reappropriated and adapted to Zimbabwean reality, which is made explicit by the national Zimbabwean flag.

Figure 16

Monolingual Ndebele Signs – Vehicles

Additionally, in a sign which we discussed in the section 'Tjwa(o) signage' (see Figure 8.b), Ndebele donates the orthographic linguistic material. As explained above, this inscription is placed on a rock that itself connotes Tjwao culture. Thus, while monolingual Ndebele, this sign could also be interpreted as of twofold semiotic origin: Tjwa and Bantu. The text consists of a mono-lexical noun *amatwakazi* 'San-women' that was likely engraved to mark the place overtly as related to the Tjwa.

As is evident from the above and similar to English, Ndebele texts range from linguistically simple to complex. The former type includes mono-lexical expressions, mostly nouns – either single (14.b) or repeated (16) – and noun phrases (14.a). The latter types include larger texts composed of clauses and sentences that draw on all word classes and sophisticated terminology (15.a-b). Overall, bottom-up signs tend to be linguistically simple, while top-down signs are complex.

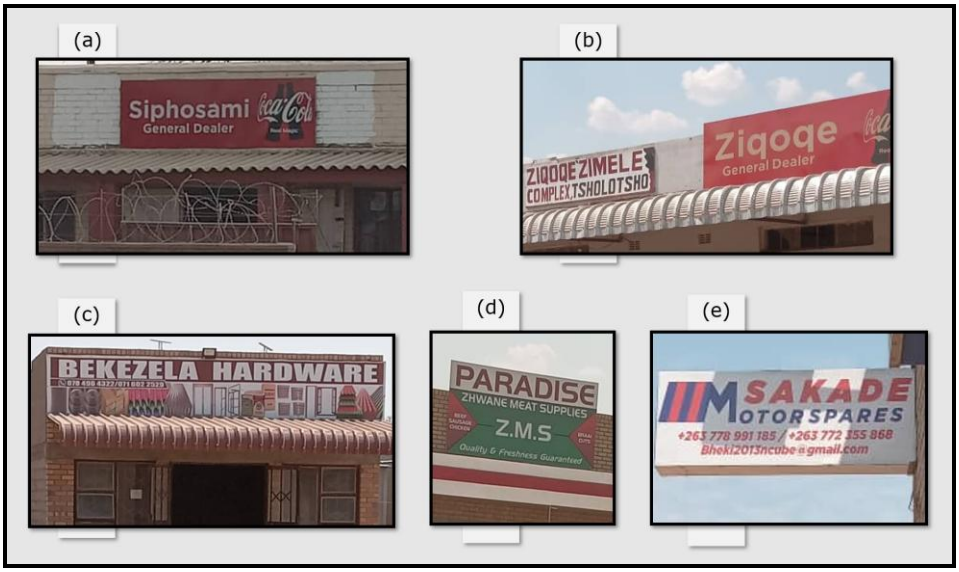
Bilingual Signs

There are 15 bilingual signs other than the Tjwao-English signs discussed in the section 'Tjwa(o) signage'. In nearly all of them, English cooccurs with African languages recognized in the Zimbabwean constitution, either Ndebele or Kalanga.

With 13 tokens attested, Ndebele-English signs constitute the largest subclass of bilingual signage. These signs typically appear on shop facades, thus being permanent (made of metal or fortified plastic) and static. They are of the bottom-up type having been put by owners of small private retail (17.a-d) and service-related businesses (17.e). They name the shops and services and advertise the goods sold or offered.

Figure 17

Bilingual Ndebele-English Signs – Shop Facades



Less often Ndebele-English signs appear on movable banners (18.a) and static signposts (18.b). In both cases, the signage is top-down. It promotes programs and initiatives developed and supported by official authorities and the government (18.a-b). This includes public health campaigns combating the use of drugs (18.a) and promoting communal cleanness (18.b).

In the bottom-up signage, the Ndebele text tends to be limited to mono-lexical insertions within the frame of English syntax, with a Ndebele word modifying the English head (see 17.c-e above). Typical insertions are nouns, mostly proper names of people (*Siphosami* in 17.a, *Bekezela* in 17.c, and *Msakade* in 17.e), names of places (see *Zhwane* which is the nickname of

the Tsholotsho district; 17.d), or names of the businesses derived from local sayings (*Ziqoqe Zimele* 'Gather (i.e., get together) and represent'; 17.b). English may also predominate quantitively. In such cases, the sign contains more words in English than Ndebele (17.a-b, 17.d). However, in many of these bottom-up signs, the Ndebele text is profiled topographically: it is written with a larger font (17.a-b) or in a more striking color (17.e). In top-down signage, the Ndebele text may predominate over English both qualitatively and quantitatively consisting of long complex clauses and drawing on different word classes (18.a). Nevertheless, English can predominate in this type of signage too (18.b). In such cases, Ndebele and English convey different parts of messages – even if coherent and harmonized. This means that there are no clear examples of translations in signage. For instance, in Figure 18.b, *Lahlelani izibi ebhimu* 'Throw the garbage in the bin' complements the English slogans *Zero tolerance to litter* and *Keep Tsholotsho clean* instead of translating them verbatim.

Figure 18

Bilingual Ndebele-English Signs – Banners and Signposts

Figure 19

Bilingual English-Kalanga Sign

There is one example of English-Kalanga bilingualism in signage. This sign – static and permanent – appears on the facade of a privately-owned small shop, thus instantiating a bottom-up, retail-related, naming and advertising signage type. The sign contains the Kalanga proper name *Maviri* (compare with the standard Shona *mavhiri*), accompanied by an explanatory English apposition *General dealer* (compare with a similar sign in 17.a for Ndebele). The text in Kalanga is profiled topographically being significantly larger than the English part.

Figure 20

Bilingual English and Pan-African Sign

Additionally, there is one case of a bilingual sign that draws on English and pan-African (even though globalized) elements. This sign is static and permanent: it appears on the facade of a financial-service franchise. The expression *MojoMula* accompanied by the English *money transfer* | *Send and collect money here* is the name of a company well-known in Zimbabwe that specializes in transferring money within the country and abroad. The name itself draws on two lexemes written together: *Mojo* and *Mula*. *Mojo* is a word known in many African languages, meaning 'magic, spell, charm, luck'. It may have derived from Kikongo (McCurnin, 2010) or Fulani (Merriam-Webster, 2025), although its exact origin remains unknown. *Mula* is a slang term for money also widely used across Africa and of unknown origin. Both *mojo* and *mula* have been incorporated into English – not only its African varieties but also those used in America and Europe (Merriam-Webster, 2025). The term *MojoMula* in the sign in question is topographically profiled: the font is larger and part of it is highlighted in red.

Lastly, in some cases, the bilingualism of signage arises not from the use of several languages within a single sign but rather from signs' coexistence within a shared frame. That is, a frame consists of individual signs which although monolingual (typically, one in Ndebele and the other in English as in 21 below) yield a bilingual Ndebele-English constellation:

Figure 21

Bilingual Frames of Monolingual Signs

Discussion

The evidence presented in the previous section reveals a complex structure of the LL of the area that is historically associated with Tjwa culture and in which Tjwao has been spoken. The following tendencies emerge:

(a) English occupies a dominant position. Monolingual English signs constitute the largest class of signs (44%), and English overall appears in the vast majority of signs (83%). Monolingual English signs tend to be permanent and static (this includes painted metal structured on walls) and less commonly ephemeral and movable. They can be top-down and bottom-up. They direct to and name places and institutions, identify shops and services, and promote health practices and political activities. Lexico-grammatically, they range from simple to complex.

(b) Ndebele is the second most visible language in the LL, appearing in 27% of orthographic signs. Ndebele-English signs constitute 19% of orthographic signs – the second most common category after the English monolingual signs mentioned above. Ndebele-English signs tend to be permanent, usually static and less often movable. They can be bottom-up and top-down and pertain to the retail and service industry (naming/promoting the relevant establishments) and the health sector (informing about healthy behaviors) or provide directions and information to places and administrative institutions. In bottom-up signs, the Ndebele element is simple with English predominating qualitatively and quantitatively. In top-down signs, either Ndebele or English occupies a dominant position. (Additionally, Ndebele-English bilingualism arises due to the coexistence of monolingual English and Ndebele signs within a shared frame.)

(c) The visibility of Tjwao is only slightly less than that of Ndebele in quantitative terms, ascending to 24%. Bilingual Tjwao signs (17%) – always in English – can be non-permanent and permanent, static and movable (although never placed on metal or painted on walls). Lexico-grammatically, they vary from simple (even tokenistic) to complex. With very few exceptions, English tends to dominate quantitively and qualitatively. The two languages can sometimes constitute full translations. Bilingual Tjwao-English signs attest to both alternational and insertional code-switching. They pertain to linguistic and cultural activism, education, and health and are principally developed to name/identify, advertise, and inform.

(d) Monolingual Ndebele and monolingual Tjwao signs are less common being attested in 9% and 7% respectively.

i. Monolingual Ndebele signs can be ephemeral and permanent, movable and static, and both bottom-up and top-down. They pertain to the hospitality and retail industries (naming and advertising) and the health sector (informing), as well as transportation although the exact reference of the sign in question concerns a sport domain. Lexico-grammatically, they vary from simple to complex.

ii. Tjwao monolingual signs can also be permanent and ephemeral, static and movable (garments), and bottom-up and top-down (although, like for bilingual signs in (c), never placed on metal boards and painted on walls). In further similarity to bilingual Tjwao signs, monolingual signs mostly pertain to linguistic and cultural activism, health and education and are used for the sake of information and promotion. Lexico-grammatically they range from simple to complex. Tjwao signs, both monolingual and bilingual, may be accompanied by non-orthographic tokenistic symbols.

iii. Additionally, Tjwao transpires through non-orthographic signs: prehistorical paintings (which form the basis for the symbols accompanying orthographic inscriptions mentioned in (d.ii)), landmarks that were culturally relevant, and modern sculptures in cultural institutions.

iv. While, as we explained above, Ndebele and Tjwao seem equally conspicuous, the visibility of Ndebele is more 'genuine'. That is, as far as bottom-up signage is concerned, Ndebele pertains to various aspects of the daily life of the local population (e.g., it is related to shops, services, eateries). In contrast, Tjwao only transpires in signs developed by local linguistic and cultural activists, rather than the community at large. Its presence is thus *sustained* and to some extent artificially inflated. Nevertheless, Tjwao is quite visible in the LL: 24% of orthographic signs contain some Tjwao elements and some signs

are not tokenistic and addressed to potential (national and international) tourists but provide education and health-related information directed to local people.

(e) Other linguistic varieties are marginal and only attested in bilingual signage. This includes Kalanga-English and pan-African-English signs. These signs are permanent, static, and bottom-up and pertain to the retail and service industry. English predominates quantitatively (the majority of the words used are in English), but the African element is profiled topographically (with the font's size and/or color).

Overall, our data reveal three major hierarchies in the LL of the Tsholotsho district. First, regarding monolingual signage, English signs predominate over Ndebele and (minimally less visible) Tjwao signs (see Figure 22.a). Second, regarding bilingual signage, signs containing English prevail over signs that draw on Ndebele and (although slightly less visible) those that draw on Tjwao, which in turn are much more visible than bilingual signs in Kalanga and a 'pan-African' variety (see Figure 22.b). Third, regarding all specific categories distinguished in our study, the following sequence emerges: monolingual English signs are more visible than Ndebele-English and Tjwao-English signs (with Tjwao-English signs being slightly less visible than Ndebele-English ones), which are in turn more conspicuous than monolingual Ndebele and Tjwao signs (again, with Tjwao signs being slightly less conspicuous than Ndebele ones) and especially Kalanga-English and pan-African-English signs, which are present marginally (see Figure 22.c).

The above results confirm the trends observed across LLs in Zimbabwe, although to some extent only. In agreement with the sites studied by Ndlovu (2016, 2018, 2021), Jenjekwa (2022), and Siziba and Maseko (2024) – mostly urban areas of Harare, Bulawayo, and Masvingo – English is the most visible language in the signage. This visibility is evident both quantitatively and qualitatively and both in monolingual and bilingual signs. However, contrary to other Zimbabwean LLs, Shona – one of the two dominant African languages of the country – is not the second most visible language in the area analyzed in our study. To the contrary, Shona is entirely absent in our signage. This 'second' place is occupied by Ndebele and, to

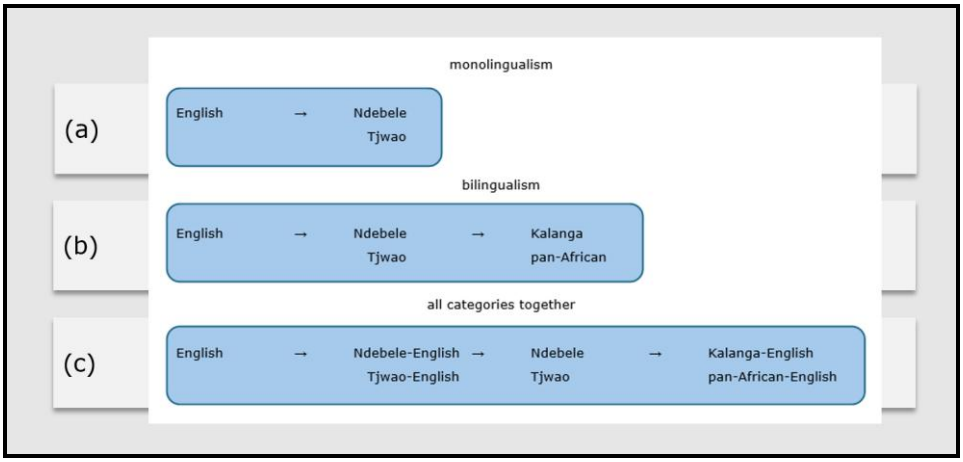
a somewhat lesser degree, Tjwao. As we explained, even though from a quantitative perspective, Tjwao is nearly equal to Ndebele, the position of Ndebele is significantly stronger from a qualitative perspective. Ndebele texts can be more complex – and there is a larger number of such complex texts – and signs containing Ndebele elements pertain to the various aspects of daily life in the community. In contrast, the Tjwao linguistic material tends to be less complex and apart from reflecting governmental policies in education and health, only emerges due to local organizations concerned with linguistic and cultural activism rather than quotidian community life. As mentioned above, the signage of the retail (shops and services) and hospitality industry (eateries) and that of administrative offices is dominated by English and Ndebele. This reflects the lack of the usage of Tjwao by the local population. Lastly, in consonance with the tendency discerned in scholarly literature, other local languages, such as Kalanga, are represented marginally in the signage. The relative visibility of two African languages (Ndebele and even Tjwao) transpiring from our research does nevertheless partially comply with another fact reported in the previous studies on Zimbabwean LLs. Namely, the prevalence of English over the African languages is reportedly less marked in non-urbanized areas (cf. Jenjekwa, 2022) as is the case of our site.

In light of the above, the compliance of the LL of the Tjwa area analyzed in our article with the trends permeating LLs across Africa (see Andrason, 2025; Andrason & Karani, 2025) is also only partial. While the global/colonial language (i.e., English) indeed predominates and one of the national languages (Ndebele), which is also locally spoken, is the second most visible, the nearly extinct local indigenous ethnic language (Tjwao) is almost as visible as the national-local language (Ndebele); in contrast, the other national language (Shona) – the one that is the most visible African variety in the LLs of the country otherwise – is absent in the signage. Overall, as is typical of the LLs of many other endangered languages (Pietikäinen et al., 2011; Pietikäinen, 2014), three contexts coexist in the LL studied by us: global (English), national (Ndebele [although not Shona]), and local (Tjwao and again Ndebele, which as mentioned above can be viewed as both national and local). In further agreement with Pietikäinen's research on

the LL of endangered languages, the local (Tjwao) elements occur more commonly in bilingual signs than monolingual ones and serve three main functions: they manifest and protect the Tjwa community's linguistic and cultural rights, destigmatize the language by associating it with science (health) and culture (education), and index the idea of ethnic authenticity.

Figure 22

The Patterns of Language Visibility in the Signage



With regard to Gorter and Cenoz' (2024) scale of the presence/visibility of endangered languages in signage, the following can be observed: Tjwao may be modelled as spanning across three stages – specifically, stage 4 'limited presence/visibility', stage 5 'occasional', and stage 6 'minimal/none'. Each position pertains to a different context in which the language can be used in the community: cultural heritage activism, health/education, and daily life, respectively. These positions are, in turn, correlated with differences in policies and their implementations: Tjwao being recognized in the country's constitution; although permitted, its use in statal administration is rarely enforced; and due to the lack of the use of Tjwao in the community and the limited budget of local authorities, the language is generally disregarded at a district level. Accordingly, the results of our study corroborate Gorter and Cenoz's (2024, p. 205) observation that the position of a language on the visibility scale can be fluid, i.e., stretching across two or

more stages or segments predicted by the theory, and thus escaping confinement to a single category or a theoretical taxon.

Moreover, in further agreement with Gorter and Cenoz' (2024) work, the radical language endangerment and the near extinction of a language do not necessarily imply the erasure of that variety from signage. On the contrary, even though virtually lost in the community, such a language may be present in its LL because of statal support and local language activism. This, in turn, means that the visibility of a language in its LL cannot be used in an uncritical manner to generalize about that language's vitality status. In an extreme case, languages whose positions are robust in their soundscapes may be entirely absent from signage and, conversely, languages that are (nearly) extinct, may feature in their LLs to a considerable, sometimes even unrealistic, extent.

This last observation leads us to another, perhaps uncomfortable reflection. Increasing the LL visibility of an endangered language does not contribute much to its vitality nor the sustainability (maintenance or expansion) of local multilingualism, if this is not accompanied by a range of more effective revitalizing interventions. Otherwise, the presence of a language in its LL will eventually become tokenistic with little or no implication for the multilingual behaviors of the speakers who inhabit the area.

Conclusion

The present article studied the presence of a nearly extinct language, Tjwao, in its LL. The analysis of the physical, functional, and multilingual characteristics of the signage in the Tjwa area reveals the following hierarchy of visibility: English is more conspicuous than Ndebele and Tjwao, which are in turn more conspicuous than Kalanga and other African languages. As Shona does not feature in the LL of the research site, the results of our study confirm the trends observed across LLs in Zimbabwe and Africa only partially. The marked presence of Tjwao in the signage is 'sustained' rather than 'spontaneous': It is for the most part attributed to statal and local interventions and pertains to linguistic and cultural activism, education, and

health. In contrast, Tjwao is virtually absent from the signage related to daily community life: shops, services, and hospitality. Overall, the near extinction of a language, such as Tjwao, does not necessarily imply its erasure from signage and the visibility of a language in its LL cannot be used as a direct and unequivocal barometer of its vitality.

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BEVEIK IŠNYKUSIOS AFRIKOS KALBOS SAVO LINGVISTINIAME KRAŠTOVAIZDYJE: TJWAO KALBA ZIMBABVĖJE

Anotacija. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamas beveik išnykusios tjwao kalbos (khoe-kwadi grupės) matomumas Tsholotsho kaimiško rajono kalbinėje aplinkoje – teritorijoje, kuri istoriškai siejama su tjwao tauta Zimbabvėje. Informacinių ir reklaminių ženklų fizinių, funkcinių ir daugiakalbių savybių analizė atskleidžia šią matomumo hierarchiją: anglų kalba ženkluose yra labiau pastebima nei ndebele ir tjwao kalbos, kurios, savo ruožtu, yra labiau pastebimos nei kalanga ir kitos Afrikos kalbos. Šona kalbos ženkluose nėra, priešingai nei anksčiau literatūroje nagrinėtose Hararės, Bulavajo ir Masvingo miestų kalbinėse aplinkose. Didelis tjwao kalbos matomumas vertinamas kaip „tvarus", kylantis iš valstybinių ir vietos intervencijų, susijusių su kalbinio / kultūrinio aktyvizmo, švietimo ir sveikatos sritimis. Priešingai, tjwao kalba ženklų, susijusių su kasdieniu bendruomenės gyvenimu, nėra. Apskritai, tai, kad kalba yra beveik išnykusi, pavyzdžiui, kaip tjwao, nebūtinai reiškia, kad ji išnykusi ir iš kalbinio kraštovaizdžio.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: kalbinis kraštovaizdis; kalbos nykimas; daugiakalbystė; Kalahario baseino kalbinis sąjungas; Khoe-Kwadi.

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IZILIMI ZASE-AFRIKA EZISEDUZE UKUPHELA EMFANEKISWENI WAZO WOLIMI: ITJWAO YASEZIMBABWE

Isifinyezo (in Zimbabwean Ndebele). I-athikhili le icwaninga ukubonakala kolimi olusondele ukuphela, iTjwao (Khoe-Kwadi), emfanekisweni wolimi endaweni yasemaphandleni eTsholotsho — indawo ehlotshaniswa ngokomlando labantu beTjwa eZimbabwe. Ukuhlaziywa kwezimpawu ezibonakalayo, umsebenzi wazo, kanye lobunengi bezilimi ezikhona kuzo kuveza lezi zigaba zokubonakala ezilandelayo: isiNgisi sibonakala kakhulu ezimpawini ukwedlula isiNdebele leTjwao, zona ezibonakala kakhulu ukwedlula isiKalanga lezinye izilimi zase-Afrika. IsiShona asibonakali ezimpawini, okuphambene lemifanekiso yolimi emadolobheni afana leHarare, iBulawayo, leMasvingo eyake yahlolwa ezincwadini. Ukubonakala okukhulu kweTjwao kuthathwa njengokuthi "kuyagcinwa" ngenxa yemizamo kahulumende leyezindawo ephathelene lokuvuselelwa kolimi lamasiko, imfundo, lezempilo. Ngokuphambene, iTjwao ayibonakali ezimpawini eziphathelene lempilo yansuku zonke yomphakathi. Sekukonke, ukusondela kokuphela kolimi – olunjengeTjwao – akusho ukuthi lususwa ngokupheleleyo emfanekisweni wolimi wendawo.

Amagama amqoka: Umfanekiso wolimi; ukusengozini kolimi; ubunengi bezilimi; Indawo yase Kalahari Basin Sprachbund; iKhoe-Kwadi.