Languages in Mozambique

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Introduction

Various suggestions have been put forward as to the number of languages spoken in Mozambique. Marinis (1981), cited in Lopes (1999:87), tries to collapse Mozambican languages into four “super-families”, namely:

- Emákuwa (spoken by 41% of the population)
- Nyanja-Sena (10%)
- Shona (8%)
- Tsonga (19%)

There are of course various problems with such an approach, one being that languages differ notably within families, another that several languages are omitted in this classification, e.g. Shimakonde, Ciyao, Kimwani, Cicopi, and Gitonga.

NELIMO (1989) lists 20 languages in their linguistic map of Mozambique:

- Kiswahili, Kimwani
- Shimakonde, Ciyao
- Emákuwa, Ekoti, Elomwè, Echuwabo
- Cinyanja
- Cinsenga, Cinyungwè, Cisena
- Cishona
- Xitshwa, Xichangana, Xironga
- Gitonga, Cicopi
- Isiswati, Isizulu
Ethnologue (1996) enumerates 32 languages (and the 2000 edition will probably have more), namely:

- Kimwani, Kimakwe, Kiswahili
- Shimakonde, Ciyao
- Makhuluwa-Maca, Makhuluwa-Makhuwana, Makhuluwa-Metto, Makhuluwa-Shirima, Emarendje, Esakaji, Elomwè, Echuwabo, Ekoti
- Cingoni
- Cinyanja, Mazaro
- Cinyungwè, Cisena, Cipodzo, Cinsenga, Cikunda
- Cindau, Cimanyika, Cishona
- Gitonga, Cicopi
- Xichangana, Xironga, Xitshwa
- Isiswati, Isizulu

The latter suggestions are probably more accurate but run two risks: (a) to regard regionally big languages which are extremely small in Mozambique as Mozambican languages (e.g. Isiswati and Isizulu), and (b) to classify dialects (e.g. in the Mákhuwa and Shona clusters) as separate languages (although this is often appropriate from the speakers’ points of view).

The national census of 1997

The documentation of the National Census held in 1997 (II Recenseamento Geral da População e Habitação 1997) mechanically lists the five largest Bantu languages + Portuguese per province. This amounts to 21 languages, but the additional column “other Mozambican languages” often comprises several tens of thousands of speakers. The statistics also include columns called “other foreign languages” (excluding Portuguese), “none” and “unknown”:

- Kimwani
- Shimakonde, Ciyao
- Emákhuluwa, Elomwe, Echuwabo, Malolo, Ekoti
- Cingoni
- Cinyanja
- Cinyungwè, Cisena
- Cindau, Cimanyika, Cishona
- Cicopi, Gitonga
- Xichangana, Xironga, Xitshwa
The Census of 1997 contained five questions on language, which is unusual when it comes to general censuses. The questions were:

P14. Indicate in which language you can (i) read and write (ii) only read (iii) neither read nor write. (Diga se em qualquer língua (i) sabe ler e escrever (ii) só sabe ler (iii) não sabe ler nem e escrever.)

(It could be commented (i) that it is crucial in which language is the question phrased, (ii) “indicate in which language…” presupposes one single language, and (iii) the last alternative is strange.)

P15. Can you speak Portuguese? Yes ~ No. (Sabe falar português? Sim ~ Não.)

(Comment: Who would answer no to that question, in particular if it is formulated in Portuguese?)

P16. In which language did you learn to speak? (Em que língua aprendeu a falar?)

(See comment in P14.)

P17a. Which language do you speak most often at home? (Que língua fala com mais frequência em casa?)

(Comment: “…most often…” is a nice formulation in that it allows for use of several languages at home, but presupposes that one single language is used more than others.)

P17b. Except those previously mentioned, which other language do you use in communication? (Alem das anteriores que outra língua usa na comunicação?)

(Comments as above.)

In spite of this criticism, it is clear that the census authors have tried to cover various aspects of language use. P14 obviously aims at finding out about people’s literacy in various languages, P15 is concerned with the mastering of Portuguese, P16 treats mother tongues (“the language you learned to speak in”), P17a languages used in the home, and P17b languages presumably used outside the home. It is possible that one has tried to capture some kind of “three-level” system sometimes suggested for multilingual situations in Africa, but the distinction mother tongue vs. “home language” is somewhat problematic and one would expect an overlap here (except in ethnically mixed households). P17 could cover a wide variety of situations from the neighbourhood and the market
to national-level communication. Maybe local communication outside the home should have been singled out as a separate parameter. In the presentation of the answers, one has selected three issues:

1. Mother tongue (língua materna) (cf. P16)
2. Language most often spoken at home (língua falada com mais frequência em casa) (cf. P17a)

The answers in each of these cases have been partitioned into age groups by five, the first one constituting 5–9 year olds and the last one 80+. (This can be criticized since also children below five presumably speak a language). Furthermore, the answers have been subsorted according to sex and domicile (rural vs. urban). One can thus get quite detailed information about e.g. how many women aged 35–39 that speak Shimakonde most frequently at home in the Cabo Delgado province.

It is interesting to ask oneself what kind of information can be provided by these three questions and how it can be used by politicians, administrators, linguists and others. Question # 3 is quite straightforward but as just noticed, hides the fact that “can speak” is a vague formulation which could cover anything between native competence to delivering a dozen formulaic expressions. Still, it will give interesting information about the overall knowledge of Portuguese, since it does not distinguish between Portuguese as a first and second language. The answers to (2) will indicate which languages are used as lingua francas, i.e. presumably larger Bantu languages as well as Portuguese. It could also give a picture of how people have been moving around in the country and which new patterns of language use this has given rise to. Languages which have high figures in (1) but considerably lower in (2) can be supposed to be endangered languages, i.e. only used as mother tongues.

One could further reflect on what the division of answers into age groups, sex and domicile tells us. The data to be presented confirm the suspicion that language use in cities vs. in the countryside differs greatly in Moçambique. (“Urban” dweller is here defined as a person living in one of the 23 cities or 68 villages in Moçambique (which remain to be listed)).

For example, the percentage of Portuguese L1 speakers in the Tete province in general is 25,533 (3%), 18,142 of which are urban dwellers (71%) and 7,391 (29%) rural. Looking at a major Bantu language in this area, Cinyanja, we find 446,787 (48 %) L1 users in all, split up into 19,553 (4%) in urban areas and 96%, 427,254, in rural milieus. Taking a smaller Bantu
language in Tete, e.g. Echuwabo, it is spoken natively by 25,562 (3%), 1,327 of whom (5%) live in urban centres and 24,235 (95%) in rural areas. It is thus clear that the parameter town vs. country is important when it comes to mother tongues.

I am not quite as sure that the difference between the sexes is important when it comes to mother tongues in general, although it has been speculated that boys tend to be more multilingual than girls due to their larger mobility, which in particular means that they tend to master lingua francas better, especially Portuguese in the case of Mozambique. There is some such tendency in the statistics, but the differences are not great.

Age is often thought to be relevant to the extent that small children first learn the local language and then expand their linguistic repertoire, but one also find cases where parents force the post-colonial language on children in the home, whereafter they learn the local Bantu language in the street. It is also often commonly believed that older people tend to speak the local language more. This is to some extent shown in the statistics, 4 per thousand of 70-year old women speak Portuguese as opposed to 2 percent of 5-9 year olds, if it is possible to calculate in such a way.

We will certainly find further interesting correlations if we match sex with age and domicile in different ways.

As for languages used most frequently in the home, we get the following figures for Portuguese: 33,121 in total (4%, i.e. a slight increase), 28,021 (85%) of whom live in cities and 5,100 (15%) in the countryside, as we would expect. The corresponding figures for Cinyanja are 448,467 (49%), of whom urban dwellers constitute 17,870 persons (4%) and rural 430,597 (96%). That is, the use of Cinyanja as mother tongue vs. home language is more or less the same, whereas Portuguese exhibits a larger contrast between L1 use and home language use. (It should just be noted in this context that the language of Tete City is Cinyungwè, which ranks far higher than Portuguese in urban settings (79,499 as opposed to 28,021).) Turning to Echuwabo, it is the language used most frequently in the home by 24,381 (2%) 1,181 less than the number of native speakers). Of these, 399 (2%) live in urban settings and 23,982 (98%) in the countryside. Thus Echuwabo is less used as a lingua franca than as L1, which is expected. Similarly to Cinyanja, it is also less used in the capacity of lingua franca in cities than in the countryside.

The figures reported on so far can be summarized in the following way: Portuguese is still very little spoken in a representative Mozambican province such as Tete, both as L1 (3%) and as a lingua franca (4%). Tete is further characteristic of Moçambique to the extent that the province hosts a few fairly large Bantu languages, none of which is however totally dominant. The
languages of small minorities, such as Echuwabo (although important in the neighbouring Zambêzia province), tend to be underprivileged when compared to Portuguese as well as to larger Bantu languages.

Now since only 4% of the population in Tete claimed to speak Portuguese at home, one wonders what they responded to the question “Can speak Portuguese”. As it turns out, 208,942 of 922,331 people said they could (23%), whereas 691,618 (75%) said they could not (2% remain unknown). This is quite an increase, but the fact remains that 75% of the population of Tete do not speak Portuguese at all, which must be considered a high figure in an investigation of this kind.

Discussion

The data collected in the 1997 National Census in Mozambique gives interesting information on language use in the country. It shows that Portuguese remains very weak as an L1 and even as the language most frequently spoken in the home at the national level. However, a considerably higher percentage of Mozambicans responded positively to “Can speak Portuguese”. This may include some overreporting, but it illustrates that many Mozambicans have some kind of competence in Portuguese. Still, since Bantu languages are so important in Mozambique, they should somehow be recognized at an official level. In the province of Tete, here used for illustration, Cinyanja is the largest language and could be proclaimed official language at the provincial level. However, it is not majoritary, and there are other languages such as Cinynungwè and Cisena which are also important. It is thus not an easy task to make decisions on linguistic policy in Mozambique. But the 1997 Mozambican National Census with its carefully compiled information constitutes an important starting point in such an endeavour.

REFERENCES


