A Linguistic Reconstruction of Zimbabwe's 'Decade of Crisis': Analyzing Labels on Buildings at the University of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article purveys a linguistic exegesis of the 'decade of crisis' in Zimbabwe. The crisis period spans the years 2000 to 2009. During this period, the Zimbabwean economy reached a nadir while life in general became very precarious. Against this backdrop, this article adopts a panoramic gaze at the universe of names and labels on buildings at the University of Zimbabwe (henceforth UZ). It utilises these linguistic labels or signage as primary data for hypothesising on the 'decade of crisis'. The general observation is that most of the linguistic signs (which are in English) on buildings at Zimbabwe's premier institution of higher learning had undergone imponderable linguistic hemorrhage and abrasion by losing one or more letters. The degradation of the signs reached a point where some of them became completely meaningless by English standards. This occurred during the crisis years. Thus, we marshal the argument that the broken down state of the signage serves as a symbol of the state of the nation during those horrendous years. Because these are supposed to be direction signs as well, ensuring easy movement, identification, functionality and location, they epitomise, at least during that period, a dislocated nation; one incapable of defining its operational and directional agenda. At the endpoint of the crisis, the linguistic labels are fixed, marking a gradual return to normalcy in the nation and its institutions. The UZ is quite ideal for the purposes of our discussion because it is entirely dependent on government for its operations such that any malfunctioning of government quickly reflects on its human and physical infrastructure.

1. Introduction

The onset of the new millennium in Zimbabwe marked the parturition of a bruising, life-threatening and dignity-deforming existential experience. The country witnessed an unprecedented tempestuous political, social and economic situation which set in motion a series of convulsions and reconfigurations at individual, family and national levels. The period 2000-2009 witnessed an unprecedented decline in the country's economy. Economists and historians have termed this period 'the lost decade' or 'the decade of crisis'. So dismal was the country's performance in the socio-economic sphere that the economy almost ground to a halt. According to Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009, p. xxx), 'between 1998 and 2008 Zimbabwean politics witnessed a range of political and economic convulsions in which new social relations emerged, the state was reconfigured in more authoritarian ways'. The authoritarian reconfiguration of the state compounded the already devastating situation in that apart from grappling with a comatose economy, citizens were faced with a hostile state that favoured violence in dealing with putative enemies. Life was made more difficult by 'hyperinflation [which]

reached an official level of 230 million per cent by the end of 2008, devaluing both earnings and savings' (Raftopoulos and Mlambo, ibid: 220), and leading to the impoverishment of the ordinary citizens. However, some 'figures obtained from the Central Statistical office put the figures of inflation in November 2008 at 500 billion per cent and 89.7 sextillion on 14 November 2008' (Nyota & Sibanda, 2012: 131). It is no wonder then that the decade has engendered numerous publications in the fields of literature, history, autobiography, economics, political science, sociology and etcetera. Some of these scholars include Bland (2011), Sachikonye (2011), Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009, 2010), Coltart (2008), Chiumbu and Musemwa (2012) and Nyamunda and Mukwambo (2012). Yet there exists a huge lacuna in discourse specifically engaging the experiences of the decade from a linguistic perspective. This article builds on previous work by Kadenge and Mavunga (2012) and Nyota and Sibanda (2012) and provides a linguistic landscapes (semiotic) perspective in the exegesis of the 'decade of crisis'. It largely operationalises linguistic items (signs) as emblematic of the devastating decade and the subsequent period of recovery following a thawing of political tensions through the inauguration of the Government of National Unity (hereafter GNU) in 2008.

In its broadest sense, communication refers to 'every kind of mutual transmission of information using signs or symbols between living beings, between people and data-processing machines' (Bussman, 1998: 206). In its narrower, linguistic sense, communication is the understanding which occurs between humans through linguistic and non-linguistic means like gestures, mimicry and voice. When people communicate, they use language which also comes in different forms. Language is a 'vehicle for the expression or exchanging of thoughts, concepts, knowledge, and information as well as the fixing and transmission of experience and knowledge' (Bussman, 1998: 627). It is based on cognitive processes, subject to societal factors and to historical change and development.

The need to exchange, share, send and receive information as well as the nature of the information dictates the mode of communication. Suffice to say, there are a lot of modes of communication ranging from writing and speech to signing. All these are employed as the situations demand. However, the signs that are used to convey information may, on top of carrying their connotative meanings, possess information that is not inherent in their linguistic structure. This information becomes extra-linguistic and includes pitch in speech and punctuation in writing. In this article, we propose a third aspect which is reflective. By reflective it is meant that the state of the sign will give information about how it came to be, how it functions as well as its usefulness. At times it can also be a pointer to its age. In other words, it reflects its surroundings in a manner that reveals more about the general state of affairs in which the sign is employed. This becomes sociolinguistic in the sense that the sign (which is visual) reflects the social atmosphere (the society in which it is used). Morris (1938) prefers to call this the pragmatic aspect which takes care of the relationship between the sign and the sign user. Equally, Scollon and Scollon cited in Dowling (2010: 193) refer to this as 'the context dependency of signs'. This article, therefore, focuses on Zimbabwe's 'decade of crisis' through an analysis of linguistic signs on buildings. Such signage forms 'the linguistic landscape of a given territory… [serving] two basic functions: an informational function and a symbolic function' (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 25).

This article is a case study that analyses signs used to label buildings at the UZ. UZ, being the oldest and largest institution of higher learning, is taken as a microcosm of the macrocosm. This means that the findings of what was happening at the UZ during Zimbabwe's decade of crisis can arguably be generalised to refer to the broader national experience. The UZ purveys an appropriate case worth of study due to its cosmopolitan nature. Again, it relies on government for the funding of its operations. The corollary of this is that any shift in government finances and capacity to fund would obviously reflect on the UZ as it would in the rest of the nation. Over the years, it has functioned as a barometer of the general state of affairs in the nation. For instance, in the colonial period when it was called the University College of London, the politics of race and the vicious contestations between blacks and whites would play out at the college. In the early 1980s when the economy was vibrant, student life reflected this while the gradual disenchantment with the ZANU PF government in the late 1980s finds expression at the UZ as was the case in the whole nation. The late 1980s witnessed a birth in violent student demonstrations and this growing frustration with government reaches its apogee with the formation of the opposition party, Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM), led by Edgar Tekere. It is against this background that we interpret the crumbling signage at UZ as symptomatic of the political, economic and social identity of the nation in the decade of crisis. The signs are mostly directional labels on different buildings at UZ. Within semiotics, signs are complete and deemed useful if they signify something in the real world (*signifie*). A sign is useful in its entirety, that is, the combination between the signifier (*signifiant)* and the signified connected to a specific thought (Saussure, 1959). While the signs were either defaced or were missing some letters they still were able to serve their purpose and thus this article looks at the factors influencing such interpretations as well as making a metaphorical parallel with the crisis in Zimbabwe during the same period. That these damaged signs are all directional is a pointer to the fact that the nation was without a clear and identifiable directional agenda and set of priorities for salvaging the multitudes of citizens then faced with real starvation.

2. Data

The data for this discussion consist of two sets of photos with different labels as shot in the years 2010 and 2012. It is important to note that the labels, which are mostly English words, are made of letters that are stuck to the wall as opposed to those in which paint is used to write on the wall. As such, due to lack of maintenance triggered by lack of funding during the 'decade of crisis' the letters would either completely fall down or would be left hanging. It is such labels which were the focus when these photos were shot. As already argued, this signage became metaphorical signalisations of the state of the nation. There were a lot of instances of such defaced labels. However, this article focuses on ten which are representative of the situation across the UZ. Another set of the same labels was shot in 2012 when the economic situation had vastly improved following the official adoption of multiple currencies. The GNU presided over a convalescing economy which engineered a return to normalcy at the country's premier institution of higher education. Figure 1 through to Figure 4 below show a sample of the pictures that constitute the basis for this study.

Figure 1: Two building signs representing different eras in Zimbabwe

Figure 2: Students UNION Instead of Students' UNION

In Figure 2, the picture to the left shows that the possessive punctuation (apostrophe) mark is missing but there is no doubt that it did not have much impact on the interpretation. Very few people might actually have noticed that there is a missing marker as it appears now in the photo on the right.

On the pictures below, more letters are missing within the words in the pictures to the left whereas those to the right exhibit the correct forms.

Figure 3: ST-D--TS' U--O instead of STUDENTS' UNION

It is important to note that the gaps in the label would give away the number of letters that are missing. This is not the

only case of data with a lot of missing letters, similar sets of data are given below, though their original picture occurrences have been listed in the appendix.

    (1) [-ARR SAU-DERS HALL] instead of [CARR SAUNDERS HALL]

    (2) [SOCIAL -TU-IE-] instead of [SOCIAL STUDIES].

    (3) [LLEWELLI- LEC---- --EATR-] instead of [LLEWELLIN LECTURE THEATRE].

These are mostly proper nouns and picking the right sounds to fill the blanks might not be easy. Interestingly, the advanced degradation of the above label also reflects the state of the LLEWELLIN LECTURE THEATRE which was subsequently condemned as unfit as a teaching venue. It posed a serious threat to its users. The pictures below represent data that had only one missing letter.

Figure 4: AGRIC-LTURE instead of AGRICULTURE

Only one letter is missing and many people might not have noticed that there is a letter missing were it not for the gap. The data below show different sets that share the same form as the one above.

    (4) [CHEMI-TRY] instead of [CHEMISTRY].

    (5) [-RTS] instead of [ARTS].

    (6) [MANFRED HODSON HAL-] instead of [MANFRED HODSON HALL].

    (7) [--INTON HALL] instead of [SWINTON HALL].

The words are missing one letter and it would actually be easy to figure out which one, except in the last one that has two missing letters. There are differences between the two sets of photos of the building labels as represented by those above. There are various anomalies that were present in the initial set represented by the photo to the left. Some were missing one to several letters sequentially or interjected by one, two or more letters. This rendered the words meaningless by English standards, that is, if they were still words at all. Even though these labels had lost one or several of their parts they somehow remained useful, which goes on to show how terrible the situation was during the 'decade of crisis' in Zimbabwe. At the same time, it also points to the adaptability/creativity of the people during this horrendous period. The same way people were able to read labels with missing letters is the same way they were making maneuvers in the decade of crisis. It can also go a long way to show how priorities change during times of crisis. Maintenance of labels will be the last thing on a long list of needs, especially when people are grappling with bread and butter issues. The picture to the right in the figure above represents a set of photos shot during the recovery period and is used as the control data.

3. Analysis

From a linguistic point of view, every sign should be complete for it to be assigned meaning. This means that the sign should have the proper structure which conforms to the morphological and phonological rules of that language, in this case English. These labels are not exceptional; they have to conform to the rules of English word formation for them to remain relevant and useful. There are a lot of morphological and phonological rules which we cannot do justice to here but shall be referred to as the article proceeds. Phonologically, a missing segment has the same effect as when a wrong segment is used. A Shona example illustrates this;

    (8) pura *thrash*

    (9) kura *grow*

    (10) ura intestine

The first (8) and the second (9) words' meanings are different due to a change in the first segment, while the last word has a different meaning altogether due to missing such a segment. If the last word misses the vowel *u*, then it

ceases to be a meaningful word in Shona. This shows that there is solidarity between the signifier and the signified, the reason why meaning changes when the signified changes. This also happens in the same way in other languages. Our goal in this article is to try and show that the selected labels did not lose their functional essence when they lost some letters as would have been the case under normal circumstances. It is important to first outline the different labels, highlighting the defects.

3.1 Ways of reading the labels

In this subsection we focus on how people were able to interface with these ill-formed labels. This interface is through interpretation. In any interpretive process there has to be an input which is then processed to have an output. The interpreting we are proffering here is part of the general language processing. This is a concise description of what happens from input until we have output (usually evidenced by understanding the intended meaning). Language processing comes with two distinct modes of input; audio and visual (written and signing). The labels constitute visual input which enters language processing through visual input system (VIS). We are not going to look at the methods for identifying words in this article but the process of reading is very important and needs a rudimentary introduction.

According to Goodman (1976: 497), reading is 'a precise process which involves exact, detailed, sequential perception and identification of letters, words, spelling patterns and large language units.' This shows that reading is a complex skill and it is common knowledge that it has also become a survival skill in the modern society. In reading, thought and language are inseparable and in this article we also add the context dimension as equally important in the reading process. There are different reading models that have been postulated to explain what happens when people are faced with the task of processing visual input, namely, Top-Down models (Goodman, 1976; Smith, 1971; 1982), Bottom-Up models (Gough, 1972; Laberge & Samuels, 1974) and Interactive models (Rumelhart, 1977; Stanovich, 1980; Anderson & Pearson, 1984). According to Davies (1995: 59), 'a reading model is a theory of what is going on in the reader's eyes and mind during reading and comprehending (or miscomprehending) a text'.

Top-down models hold that readers form hypotheses of what they expect based on the context and then go on to confirm or refute them. They would take in just enough cues to test their hypotheses hence these models have referred to reading as a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' (Goodman, 1976: 497). According to these models, readers do not read everything but rather skip some of the letters because they would have got enough context of the word to 'guess' it. Some weaknesses of these models have been noted, including that readers do not show any evidence of forward guesses when they read and also that very few words are predictable. According to Field (2004: 233), 'only 40% of function words and 10% of content words are predictable'. This is the opposite of bottom-up models that stress that reading is a sequential process that begins with letters to words and then larger chunks. This is more plausible than the former but it also fails to account for the role of the reader in terms of previous experiences and knowledge. A combination of the two seems to overcome all the weaknesses by taking into account graphic and contextual information. These models are important for this article since our aim is to show how the ability to decode ill-formed labels reflects the social order, a perverted confirmation of Labov's (1972) argument that linguistic structure reflects social structure.

While the purpose of this article is to show how the crisis period in Zimbabwe can be reconstructed using the different signs that were used as labels at UZ, it is also imperative to outline how people interpreted the labels. The argument here is that while the signs were ill-formed, the users were still able to provide the missing information and reach an understanding of what the signs stood for. Different patterns conforming to different factors can be highlighted as ways in which the labels were interpreted. Some of the labels look like word puzzles that needed to be solved. This becomes quite symbolic as indeed the nation had become a cryptic puzzle begging for a quick solution. Many local, regional and international players such as churches, SADC and the UN attempted to fix the Zimbabwean puzzle.

One of the most important factors that influenced the interpretation of the labels was experience. Experience is twofold; prior and current experience. The prior experience is used by those people who at some point saw the label before it disintegrated. These would actually be in a position to quickly and correctly interpret the ill-formed label. A person who has seen the label 'CARR SAUNDERS' will quickly interpret the deformed version because they have seen it before it was deformed. They may also not even see that the sign is now deformed. The second type of experience is used by those who have either been offered service or directed when they are looking for the specific service housed within the building. Coming out of the Faculty of Arts offices and seeing the label [-RTS] one is quick to relate it to the immediate experience they have just had and conclude that an [A] is missing. Thus experience is a very important factor in aiding the readers to interpret the labels. Within the Top-down models of reading, the reader's experiences are very important (Goodman, 1976). Prior experiences enable the reader to guess correctly since the general theme will be known. From the point of view of Top-down models, experience enables the readers to exploit redundancy in some texts

and to make informed guesses in others.

The second factor that influences the interpretation of these labels is context. Generally, context refers to the relevant constraints of a communicative situation that influences language use. Thus context has many dimensions, one of it being the general setting in which the labels are found. This context is that of an institution of higher learning (UZ). It thus exerts certain constraints in interpretation which include the business, occupation and expectation which the reader would have. There are certain words that become predictable from the context. For example, words like faculty, department, lecture, study and student just to mention a few, are predictable in a learning environment. As such, when these words have some missing letters the reader will be able to make correct guesses and hence the label keeps serving its function in a broken down state. Such words include [SOCIAL -TU-IE-], [LEC----- --EATR-], [AGRI-ULTURE] and [CHEMI-TRY] from our list. The label for 'chemistry' is found in an area of the hard or natural sciences, which gives away the word because of the context in which it is found. In other words, these labels fall within some of the expectations which a reader has when they are at an institution of higher learning.

The other facet of context has to do with the rules governing sound combinations and word formation in English. Most of the words, except proper nouns, are from English. There are rules that govern the permissible sound combinations in English (phonotactics) and anyone who is conversant with the language would also have the ability to identify possible words. The case of [ST-D--TS' U--O-] can clearly illustrate this point. In [ST-D--TS'], the rules of English phonology dictate that the first gap be filled by a vowel so that a proper syllable is formed, one that has a syllable peak (Katamba, 1989; Halle & Reiss; 2008; Kreidler, 2004). The same applies to the second and third gaps where at least one of them should be a vowel. By merely looking at the deformed labels, it is easy to come up with the correct words for most of them because of the phonotactic rules of the English language. Instead of utilising redundancy and prior experiences (as in top-down models) the reader would take in all the input hence is able to use the proper fillers. They would look at every segment thereby analysing its features and coming up with the possible combinations (bottom-up model of reading).

With the above factors in mind, there were two possibilities. Either the label was decoded correctly or there was complete failure to understand what it is labeling. Proper names come with the first possibility. For example, someone who did not know that there is a hall at UZ called 'CARR SAUNDERS' would definitely think there is one called 'ARR SAU DERS' because that is what remains of it on the label. There are no pointers that there could be other letters missing. This is so because there are certain languages in which such letter combinations are found in names, for example in Dutch and German.

Complete failure to interpret the labels is also possible. The first reason for this is that the labels were no longer well-formed words. In other words, they were non-words. For example, 'SOCIAL TU-IE', 'LEC EATR' are non-words in English and it would be very difficult to find a language in which they can be recognised. Such a scenario will call on the reader to recognise the ill-formed word as the label. This means in the case of 'RTS' (which should be ARTS) it was interpreted as probably an abbreviation for something.

3.2   Macro-meaning inferences

This is a case of a sign changing its function or rather attaining an additional one. Labels are normally symbolic. According to O'Grady, Dobrovolsky and Katamba (1996), 'symbolic sings bear no resemblances to their referents but are in an arbitrary relationship.' They go on to note that human language is highly symbolic. The case of the labels at UZ during the decade of crisis can be taken to be indexical. Indexical signs are not arbitrary, neither are they deliberate but they fulfill their function by being a partial or representative sample of the referent (O'Grady et al, 1996). Similarly, Scollon and Scollon in Dowling (2010: 193) provide an instructive position on indexicality:

indexicality is the property of the context dependency of signs, especially language;hence the study of those aspects of meaning which depend on the placement of the sign in the material world. In geosemiotics, as in all branches of semiotics, the word 'sign' means any material object that indicates refers to something other than itself.

In other instances, there is a causal link between the sign and its referent. We are thus arguing that the state of the labels has a link to what was and is happening at UZ and can be a microcosm for the whole country. This scenario is best captured by a specific type of indexical signs called the symptomatic sign. Symptomatic signs spontaneously convey the internal state of the sender. The state of the labels on UZ buildings was conveying the state of affairs at the highest institution of learning and by extension the state of affairs in Zimbabwe during the decade of crisis. They told an indelible story about the economics and politics of the period. Life got so fragmented and dislocated during this period that piecing it together to come up with a meaningful story was very difficult. Unable to withstand such a dislocated and dislocating existence, many young Zimbabweans left the country enmasse to seek refuge in countries such as South Africa,

Botswana, Namibia, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and the USA, just to mention a few. Kadenge and Mavunga (2011:10) capture some of the Shona words and phrases coined by ordinary Zimbabweans to capture dislocation and intensity of the crisis like:

> *zvakadhakwa/zvidhekwe 'drunkenness' for 'I have failed', kukanga waya 'frying or roasting a piece of wire', for purposes of eating it, i.e., an exercise in futility. Similarly, kuwona moto 'seeing fire' and kuwona hutsi 'seeing smoke, i.e. having smoke in the eyes' and by extension, 'being caught in a burning building', all have the connotations of one being in an unsustainably difficult, hopeless and confusing situation.*

The labels became symbolisms, as it were, of the crisis bedeviling the institution and Zimbabwe at large. This is the reflective aspect of a sign that we are arguing for in this paper. The institution was hamstrung by a lack of adequate funding from its main sponsor, government. The entire nation was undergoing a pathologically debilitating political, economic and social crisis.

Whoever said language communicates may not have anticipated that it would do so in this way. A closer look at these pictures/labels tells a harrowing story about a phase in the history of the nation. They reflect a time when a lot of things had gone amiss in the country. Yet the society continued to function. Interestingly, though there were missing letters and words as in our data, people still read the signs/labels in the same manner they would have done if these were symbolising a society that worked with impermissible combinations, uneasy substitutions, for instance, people survived on grain fit for animal feed, soya chunks were substituted for meat. Such dysfunctional pieces would mean nothing to an outsider, yet the Zimbabwean spirit largely epitomised by an unrivalled resilience finds its authorisation in such signage. The missing letters symbolise the dislocation and disintegration of nation. They signalise both the negation and abandonment of standards and other acceptable ways of doings things. The crisis engendered a complete dislocation and derailment of the economy. This in turn transformed the nation into one vast zone of mass vulnerability. As already insinuated, citizens were plunged into desperation necessitating the adoption of unorthodox means of survival. The disappearance of the formal economy and the emergence of black market economy is emblematised by the fractured linguistic signs. Industry ground to a complete halt and all shops and supermarkets were virtually empty. Chinodya (2011: 32) captures life during this period in the novel entitled *Tindo's Quest*:

There were no longer any coins…[Things] like basic goods, soap, flour, sugar, salt, cooking oil, rice, mealie-meal and beans, coins had disappeared years before. All money was in notes now and you needed a brick of them even to buy a loaf of bread.

While reflecting the disintegration of the nation and its institutions, the fractured linguistic signs stand as impeccable avatars of the history of the 'decade of crisis'. By undertaking an intellectual archaeology of the state of language on buildings at the UZ during the years of crisis, it is possible to establish a link with the broader economic and political dynamics of the nation.

The other set of pictures shows the replaced letters, a candid confirmation that the endpoint of the 'decade of crisis' ushered in a new dispensation of hope in which every attempt was made to restore sanity and once again make institutions operational. This followed the dollarisation of the economy. There were significant changes in the economy as evidenced by the filling up of supermarket shelves which had become completely empty in the crisis years. While there were challenges in the GNU, at least dialogue rather than violent confrontation became a favoured way of addressing differences. Remarkably, the restoration to fullness of the once fractured labels becomes a symbol of the reconstruction period. This is why this article has interpreted these labels or signs as symbolic representations of fluctuations in Zimbabwe's evolving history.

4.   Conclusion

The discussion has largely operationalised linguistic signs on buildings at the UZ as emblems of the social, political and economic history of the nation. The fractured and disintegrating linguistic signage tell the story of a nation in turmoil and completely incapable of establishing sanity and balance in its everyday affairs. This scenario is part of the 'decade of crisis' in which the Zimbabwean economy reached a nadir while life in general became so desperate. In the words of Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni (1999:8) life in this period 'can be characterised as [having been] precarious, and nourished by roots that go no deeper than the daily contingencies of living'. Because the 'decade of crisis' has engineered a lot of scholarly discourse in the fields of literature, history, politics, economics and etcetera, the article adds to this growing corpus in a rather innovative manner. It canonises the linguistic perspective as an entry point into the discussions about the crisis years and the subsequent period of recovery.

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Appendix

Decade of crisis photos

Photos of the current state of the labels