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Zulu and the media: a success story in Africa

This research paper examines the prevalence and expansion, in the media, of Zulu, one of South Africa's eleven official languages. Zulu is an indigenous African language spoken mainly in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. There are 10,677,000 Zulu speakers in South Africa. This community represents 23.8% of South Africa's total population of 44,820,000 (2001 census). This is the biggest language group in the country and is followed by the Xhosa language group of 7,907,000 persons comprising 17,6% of the population. The third biggest linguistic group is Afrikaans with 5,983,000 people accounting for 13,3% of the population. In the KwaZulu- Natal province of South Africa 80% of the population is Zulu speaking.

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Zulu is one amongst very few indigenous African languages used as a language medium for a daily paper on the African continent. The daily paper referred to is 'Isolezwe' meaning 'the eye of the country'. This newspaper was first printed relatively recently in 2002. Zulu is also used as the language medium for two Sunday newspapers, 'Isolezwe ngeSonto' meaning 'The eye of the country on Sunday' and 'Ilanga Langesonto' meaning 'The Sun on Sunday'. Another Zulu language newspaper, 'Ilanga', meaning 'Sun' or 'Day', is produced twice a week. 'Ilanga' was first produced in 1903 by Dr John Dube, the founder of the African National Congress, the political movement which won the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994 and formed the first democratic government of South Africa under President Nelson Mandela. Dr Dube held a strong belief in the importance of education. 'Ilanga' is probably the longest surviving African language paper on the African continent. It was bought by the Inkatha Freedom Party, a political party with strong support amongst the Zulu speaking community, in 1997.

There is a weekly Zulu medium paper previously linked to the Catholic Church. This is called 'UMaAfrika' and is produced weekly on a Friday.

'Echo' is a part Zulu, part English language supplement to the Pietermaritzburg based, English language newspaper, the 'Witness', which is produced weekly on a Thursday. This supplement targets Zulu speaking communities in and around Pietermaritzburg. It was started in 1979, has a readership of 400,000 according to Dumisani Zondi a reporter at the 'Witness'.

The daily newspaper 'Isolezwe' has enjoyed increased readership whereas readership of Isolezwe's sister papers published in English in KwaZulu-Natal has fallen in recent years. According to the AMPS survey (2009) the average issue readership of Isolezwe averages 771,000 per edition. In comparison the circulation of sister publications in the same region, KwaZulu-Natal is as follows: The Mercury has a readership of 259,000 and the average issue readership of the Daily News was 563,000 in 2009. (AMPS 2009AB)

The launching of 'Isolezwe' in 2002, has ensured continued profitability for newspaper publishing in the region. Regarding weekly newspapers, Isolezwe Ngesonto, a Sunday paper, has a readership of 645,000. Ilanga laseSonto, which is also a Sunday newspaper, has an average issue readership of 837,000. Yet another Zulu medium weekly paper, UMaAfrika has an average issue readership of 258,000. None of the other official indigenous African languages in South Africa have either a daily or a Sunday newspaper published in their language. The English medium paper

in KwaZulu Natal, the Sunday Tribune, has an average issue readership of 739,000. (AMPS 2009)

An on-line internet version of the daily newspaper 'Isolezwe' is also available - an indication that the newspaper is moving with the times.

It is interesting to note that Isolezwe was only started in 2002 and has grown from strength to strength in a very short period of time.

The latest audited circulation figures show that Isolezwe grew its core sales by five percent over the past year. The Sunday edition Isolezwe ngeSonto grew a massive 24 percent year on year. (www.bizcommunity.com 22 April 2010)

To what can one attribute this amazing growth? Thulani Mbatha who has been the editor of the paper for the past five years attributes its success to the 'human interest angle to 'people stories' "*Our stories are less predictable and we always try to get an exclusive 'isolezwe' angle on what we're reporting.*"

With the controversy ranging around President Zuma's lifestyle and morals, we wanted to speak to one of his wives, again trying to be different. Our objective is not to be issue driven - rather we focus on what people want to talk about.

(www.bizcommunity.com 22 April 2010 11.15)

Mr Mbatha maintains that Isolezwe's lead story is very seldom the same as the English titles in the independent News stable. An example of this is on the 24th June 2010 when the Mercury led with the news of the engagement of Prince Albert of Monaco to a South African girl from Benoni with big pictures of the engaged couple the Isolezwe made no mention in any part of the paper of this event and focused on the front page on events surrounding the death of well known Zulu singer Busi Mhlongo.

Mr Mbatha also feels that part of the success of Isolezwe is due to the pride Zulu speakers have in their language and the enjoyment they get from reading a Zulu medium paper. (Telephonic interview)

The success of Isolezwe has not gone unnoticed by commentators of the use of African languages in the media on the continent. Abiodun Salawu, a lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Lagos in Nigeria, laments the fact that today's media in Africa does not, in his opinion promote the use of African languages as much as they could... "Another success story is the publication of a daily Zulu newspaper in South Africa. The report has it that Isolezwe launched in 2002 has

even lured readers away from established English newspapers.” (‘Rich history, uncertain future’ Rhodes Journalism review 26 September 2006.)

One has to ponder on further reasons for the success of newsprint in the Zulu medium. If one looks back at history, the language policy of the previous apartheid government was that junior primary education in South Africa would be in the child’s mother tongue. This meant that all children were taught for the first three years of their schooling in their mother tongue. The majority of school goers during the apartheid era did not progress to grade 12 and thus there are many Zulu speakers with only a primary education. The implication of this is that there are many Zulu speakers with limited fluency in languages other than Zulu. In addition to this, as part of the legacy of apartheid, millions of adults in South Africa did not receive a basic education or received only a very limited basic education. 45 % of all adults have received less than 9 years of formal schooling, 28 % have received less than 7 years and 11% have received no schooling at all. (Figures from the 1995 October Household Survey)

Thus reading for many Zulu speakers in their mother tongue is easier than in English or Afrikaans. This does not explain however why it is only Zulu that has a daily paper with such extensive readership. Xhosa speakers according to the 2001 census number 7,907, 000 and form 17.6 % of the South African population. It has to be noted that although Xhosa speakers are a smaller proportion of the total South African population, 7,907,000 persons is nevertheless a sizeable population. There is however no daily paper in Xhosa. Northern Sotho speakers form 9.4% of the total population and yet there is no daily paper in Northern Sotho.

A big factor in the success of Isolezwe has to be the use of the distribution network of the Independent Newspaper group. The paper is available at most outlets in the Durban and surrounding areas and all towns in KwaZulu-Natal. There are a large number of Zulu speakers in the Johannesburg area but they are not concentrated in one area and although Isolezwe is available in South Africa’s largest city, sales of the paper are not substantial in Johannesburg - approximately 10,000 a day according to the editor, Thulani Mbatha. (Telephonic interview)

Isolezwe has moved with the times and has also introduced a motoring supplement. This involves a lot of work and substantial financial outlay. Mr Mbatha says that the supplement is not a translation from the English language sister paper ‘The Mercury’ but is written from scratch in Zulu. Mr Mbatha says that there has been a positive response from the motor trade to the motoring supplement.

Another very interesting point to note is that the introduction of Isolezwe has had little impact on the sales of ILanga. Sales of Ilanga have been maintained. Circulation figures for the period January to June 2002 for Ilanga were 95,817 per edition. For the period January to March 2010 sales figures rose to 104,182 per edition. (Audit Bureau of Circulation) Thus Ilanga sales have increased in spite of competition from Isolezwe.

One cannot underestimate the importance for the Zulu language of the Zulu medium newspapers under discussion. Were it not for the newspapers very few Zulu speakers would read Zulu and would thereby maintain and extend their reading skills in Zulu. There are very few Zulu speakers who are exposed to the written word apart from the newspapers and the Zulu version of the Bible. Purchase of books to be read for pleasure is minimal. During the years since the advent of democracy, the purchase of text books by the government for educational purposes has reduced substantially.

“The collapse of the textbook market in the 1990’s in South Africa, where education departments lacked both the funds to purchase textbooks and the capacity to distribute them, was disastrous for publishers.” (Seeber, 2000 p 279). The South African publishing industry shrank by 40% between 1990 and 2000, with 1997 being a particularly bad year (Inglis, 2001). Spending on textbooks declined by approximately 84% from around R900 million in 1994 to about R150 million in 1998 (Easy Reading for Adults Initiative, 1999) (Land Sandra 2003 p95).

Sandra Land points out how the shrinkage in the publishing industry as a result of the reduction of money spent on school books by the government affected the feasibility of producing books in indigenous languages such as Zulu in South Africa in the 1990’s.

As a result of the massive shrinkage and rationalization in the publishing industry noted above, projects that by their nature require cross-subsidisation, such as the production of material for adult basic education, and contributing to the development of a reading culture in African languages, were curtailed. (Sandra Land 2003 p 107)

In addition to Zulu print media, there are several radio stations broadcasting in Zulu and two more broadcasting in a mixture of Zulu and English. ‘Ukhozi FM’ has the largest listenership share in the country at 17.9% (AMPS 2009BA). Several South African magazines publish Zulu language versions such as ‘Bona’ magazine. Television programmes especially news broadcasts are produced in Zulu and daily ‘soap operas’ on television incorporate Zulu.

Zulu is the only African language in which an opera has been written. This being 'Princess Magogo' for which Themba Msimang, a distinguished academic, was commissioned to write the libretto. (Programme information for the Zulu Mass performed by the KZN philharmonic orchestra 27th June 2010.)

A large listenership of indigenous language radio stations is not unusual in Africa. Abiodun Salawu, remarks "Generally however the fact remains that indigenous languages fare better in the broadcast media than in the print media. (Salawu Abiodun p55 2006) Abiodun gives as an example of the lack of success of the print media in indigenous languages the fact that there used to be newspapers in 15 Ghanaian languages as recently as 1990 and yet today none of them is in existence. (Abiodun Salawu p55 2006)

In conclusion one has to note and applaud the great success of 'Ilanga' and 'Isolezwe' in sustaining and expanding readership of Zulu medium papers. They have succeeded where dozens of other indigenous language newspapers on the continent have failed. The importance of all the Zulu medium papers mentioned in this paper in supporting and expanding reading and writing skills in the Zulu language cannot be underestimated.

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