

# How Come Ikalanga has Maintained its Vitality Despite its Marginalization?

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## **Abstract**

According to Batibo (2005:51), more than 81% of the African languages are minority languages in that they are used only within their local confines. Apart from their relatively small number of speakers, they neither have official status nor national public functions in the countries where they are spoken. However, one may recognize two types of minority languages, namely the ones which are conspicuously vibrant in their community use and the ones which are in danger of extinction, as their speakers are progressively shifting to other languages.

This article examines the case of Ikalanga, a Bantu language spoken in the north eastern part of Botswana (in southern Africa), which, although a marginalized minority language in view of its being confined to family and community use, has maintained its vitality. The study investigates the factors which have favoured this state of language vitality. It discusses extensively the role of each of these factors. The main argument of the study is that language vitality does not occur alone, but involves also other elements, such as cultural, autonymic and ethnonymic identities. The Lamy-Pool Identity Loss Model is invoked, so as to determine the extent to which Ikalanga has maintained all its identity features. The study is based on findings from a set of data collected from north-eastern Botswana. The study important, as demonstrates how a minority language can resist language marginalization, endangerment or shift, when certain factors are present.

**Keywords:** language vitality, language marginalization, multilingualism, language attitudes, identity features

## **1. Introduction**

Many linguists in the world today are gravely concerned that some of the world languages are marginalized and even facing extinction due to domination from the major languages (Crystal, 2000). In Africa alone, where 31% of the world languages are found, many of the languages, that are spoken by groups which are demographically small or socio-politically weak, are highly endangered. According to Batibo (2005:51), more than 81% of the African languages are minority languages, in that they are used only within their local confines. Apart from their relatively small number of speakers, they neither have official status nor national public functions in the countries where they are spoken. Given the state of multilingualism in most of the African countries, many speakers of the minority languages are progressively shifting to the dominant and more prestigious languages for both social and economic reasons, abandoning their original ethnic languages. However, one may recognize two types of minority languages, namely the ones which are still conspicuously vibrant in their community use and the ones which are in danger of extinction, as their speakers are shifting to other languages.

This article examines the case of Ikalanga, a Bantu language spoken in the north eastern part of Botswana. Although Ikalanga has more than 200,000 speakers (Mathangwane, 1999), it is considered a marginalized minority language in view of its being confined to family and community use. However, in spite of having no any officially recognized public functions, it is considered as one of the few vibrant languages of Botswana. The study investigates the factors which have favoured the circumstances of language vitality. The role of each of these factors is discussed extensively. The main argument of the study is that language vitality does not occur alone, but involves also other elements, such as cultural, autonymic and ethnonymic identities. The Lamy-Pool Identity Loss Model is invoked so as to determine the extent to which Ikalanga has maintained all its identity features. The study is based on findings from a set of data collected from north-eastern Botswana.

## 2. Multilingualism in Botswana

As a general background to the study, it is important to mention that, like most African countries, Botswana is a multilingual and multicultural country. According to Batibo (2005: 52), a total of 30 languages are spoken in the country. These languages are repartitioned in five categories, namely, ex-colonial language, nationally dominant, areally dominant, minority languages and Botswana Sign Language, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1 *The status and role of Botswana languages (based on Batibo 2005: 52)*

	<b>Status</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Number</b>
1	Ex-colonial language (official medium)	English	1
2	Nationally dominant language (used as national medium)	Setswana	1
3	Areally dominant languages (predominating in some areas, but having no public function)	Ikalanga, Shekgalagari, Naro	3
4	Minority languages (used in specific locations, but having no public function)	Afrikaans, Chikuhane (Sesubiya), //Gana, /Gwi, =Hua, Ju/'hoan, Khwedam, Kx'au//ein, Kua, Nambya (Najwa), Nama, Otjiherero, Rucgirikuru (Rumanyo), Sasi, Sebirwa, Setswapong, Shua, Silozi, Sindebele, Thimbukushu, Tshwa, !Xóǀ, Zezuru	24
5	Special Language	Botswana Sign Language	1

The five categories of language reflect not only their socio-political status but also the extent of their dominance, range of domains of use and levels of prestige. English is accorded the highest status, as official language and language of high prestige. It is used mainly as second language. Setswana, which is nationally dominant, is the national language and the country's main lingua franca. It also commands high prestige. On the other hand, Ikalanga, Shekgalagari and Naro are regarded as areally dominant, in that they predominate in the areas where they are spoken, dominating the smaller languages around them. However, they do not have any officially recognised public functions. The fourth category comprises 24 languages which are regarded as minority languages, not only because of their small number of speakers, but also because of their marginalization and lack of any public functions. The last category is that of Botswana Sign Language, which is considered a special language. Out of

the 30 languages spoken in Botswana, 14 are of Bantu origin, 13 of Khoesan or non-Bantu Click languages) origin, two are of Indo-European origin and one a special language.

### **3. The scope of the study**

The main focus of the study was to investigate the levels of vitality of Ikalanga language which is spoken in the north-eastern parts of Botswana in the Central District and the North-East District. The villages' which were covered by the study include Tutume, Maitenngwe, Nkange and Dugwi in the Central District and Nswazwi, Masunga, Mapoka, and Jakalas in the North-East District. Although there are now a number of immigrant languages in the area, traditionally there were three languages, namely Setswana, Ikalanga and Tshwa. Setswana and Ikalanga are languages of Bantu origin; while Tshwa is a language of Khoesan origin.

Historically, the area was inhabited by languages of Khoesan origin only, which covered most of Southern Africa (Barnard, 1992). Then, about 1000 years ago, the first Bantu speaking populations arrived in the area. These were the Ikalanga speakers who started dominating the original inhabitants, in view of their socio-economic and demographic strength (Anderson and Janson, 1997). Later, the Setswana speaking group arrived in what is now Botswana more than 500 years ago. They spread into most parts of the territory, occupying what is now the Central District about 200 years ago, through their sub group known as Bangwato. This community became the most dominant in the area both politically and culturally (Janson and Tsonope, 1991). After the arrival of the two Bantu communities, most Khoesan languages were displaced or their speakers absorbed into the Bantu speaking communities. In some cases, the Khoesan speakers adopted the Bantu languages. Only Tshwa remained in a scattered form. Thus, a three-level dominance hierarchy developed in which Setswana was at the top, as the most dominant and prestigious language; Ikalanga was in the middle as an areally dominant language; then Tshwa was at the bottom as a minority and marginalized language. This hierarchy of dominance, which has existed for many decades, has had a bearing on the patterns of language use, transgenerational language transmission and attitudes of the speakers of the three languages.

This study investigated the levels of language vitality, looking at the factors which have favoured language maintenance and vitality of Ikalanga. The study also considered the level of vitality of the other identity features, such as culture, personal and locality names and ethnicity.

### **4. Data collection**

Data were collected between June and July 2016 by the two authors in north-eastern Botswana. A 5-page structured questionnaire was used in which the respondents were expected to provide information on the patterns of language use, transgenerational language transmission, language attitudes as well as the nature of cultural, autonymic and ethnonymic identities.

The study also sought if the results from the Central District, where Setswana was highly dominant, would be different from those of the North East District, where the predominance of Setswana was historically less pronounced. A sample of 52 respondents was selected from the Central District and 63 respondents from the North-East District. The researchers used random sampling methods to select their informants. The age of the respondents ranged between 18 and 81 years. The interviewees comprised 72 women and 43 men. Most of them had only attained primary education and only a few had reached secondary school education level. The age range of the information is given in Table 2 below.

Table 2 *Age range of the respondents in %*

	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Central District</b>	<b>North East District</b>
1	18-29	30.8	36.5
2	30-44	36.5	30.2
3	45-59	19.2	22.2
4	60-79	11.6	7.9
5	75 and above	1.9	3.2
	Total	100	100

From Table 2 above, it could be stated that most respondents were relatively young people between the ages of 18 and 44. This is because older people were relatively fewer in the villages which were visited.

### 5. Theoretical framework

The study was guided by the assumption that languages are vital or vibrant only if their level of resistance to the dominance of other languages is greater than the amount of pressure or attraction of the dominant languages with which they are in contact. Where the amount of pressure from the dominant languages is greater, the language would progressively shift to the dominant community by adopting its language, culture and finally ethnic name. As a result of this process, the language in question would no longer exist once all the features of identity have disappeared, as the speakers of the language will abandon their language in favour of the dominant one. This situation is expounded in a model known as Marked Bilingualism Model. The Marked Bilingualism Model is based on the following assumptions (Batibo, 2004: 9)

- Language shift can only take place in a state of bilingualism, as no community can afford to abandon its language and become mute;
- In order for the speakers of one language to be attracted to another language, there must be differences of prestige and status between the two languages, hence a marked situation;
- The rate of language shift will depend, to a large extent, on the amount of pressure (or attraction) from the dominant language, on the one hand, and the degree of resistance from the minority language, on the other.

A language will therefore remain vital or vibrant if its degree of resistance is strong, but will shift to the dominant language if its degree of resistance is weak. The main indicators of levels of vitality include the extent to which all language domains are used, the rigour in which transgenerational language transmission is still taking place, the prevailing language attitudes and whether or not the number of speakers is diminishing (Auburger, 1990).

The study will also make use of the Lamy-Pool Model of patterns of ethnic identity loss. According to Lamy (1979) and Pool (1979), language shift does not occur alone. It is always accompanied by the loss of other ethnic identity features. Ethnic identity comprises four distinct features, namely linguistic identity, cultural (including socio-economic) identity, autonymic identity (involving personal and locality names) and ethnonymic identity (involving the name of the ethnic group itself). When an ethnic group is losing its identity because of pressure or attraction from a major or a dominant ethnic group in a marked bilingual situation, the loss is usually progressive, involving, first, loss of linguistic identity, then cultural identity, followed by autonymic identity. Finally, the loss of ethnonymic identity will complete the absorption of the affected community into the dominant one. The study, therefore, wanted to investigate whether this hierarchy of identity loss is being followed among the Ikalanga speakers.

## 6. Data analysis and research findings

The data were analysed by sorting them out according to specific categories and sub-topics. One of these categories was the distinction between Central and North-East districts. One of the assumptions of the study was that Ikalanga language in the Central District was under more intense pressure from the dominant Setswana language than the form of Ikalanga spoken in the North East District. Hence, it was decided that the two sets of data be analysed separately.

After the interpretation of the data, some remarkable findings emerged with regard to not only the levels of vitality of Ikalanga, but also the status of its identity loss. These results are presented below:

### a) Domains of language use

Generally, the study showed that Ikalanga is still used in practically all domains, including family interaction, village communication, cultural activities, *kgotla* (Ward) meetings, church gatherings, and informal government business and in the written mode, particular in Church activities. This pattern of language use is shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 *The domains of use of Ikalanga in north-eastern Botswana*

Domains of language use	Ikalanga (in Centr. Dist.)	Ikalanga (in North East)
a) % of L <sub>1</sub> use in family	71.0	88.5
b) % of L <sub>1</sub> use with local friends	85.7	82.2
c) % of L <sub>1</sub> , use in shops	76.4	95.9
d) % of L <sub>1</sub> , use in church	71.4	91.3
e) % of L <sub>1</sub> use in cultural activities	100	100
f) % of L <sub>1</sub> use in <i>kgotla</i> (ward) meetings	42.9	81.8
g) % of L <sub>1</sub> use in government offices	25.6	58.0
h) % of L <sub>1</sub> , use in reading mode	28.6	83.0

From the results in Table 3, the following observations could be made:

- (i) Ikalanga speakers use their language in practically all domains, including *Kgotla* (Ward) meetings, government offices and many in reading texts;
- (ii) Generally, Ikalanga is less used in the Central District compared to the North East District. This is presumably because of the impact of Sengwato (the Setswana variety spoken in the Central District).
- (iii) All respondents mentioned that they used Ikalanga actively in their cultural activities.
- (iv) The respondents from Nswazwi indicated that they used Ikalanga actively in government offices and in reading texts. This could be explained by the fact that the place is still predominantly rural. Many informants were not fluent in Setswana
- (v) Many Ikalanga speakers also used the language in the written mode, especially in reading the Bible and singing church hymns.
- (vi) Ikalanga was also the language which was used all the time, especially in the North-East District.

### b) Transgenerational language transmission

The study also revealed that the transmission of Ikalanga to the younger generation was still very active. This is evidenced by the results shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4 *The degree of transgenerational language transmission of Ikalanga*

<b>Transgenerational language transmission</b>	<b>Ikalanga (in Centr. Dist.)</b>	<b>Ikalanga (in North East)</b>
a) % of parent's use of L <sub>1</sub> to talk to children	71.4	56.0
b) % of children able to speak L <sub>1</sub> fluently	85.7	56.8
c) % of children using L <sub>1</sub> at home	57.1	51.6

From the results in Table 4, the following observations could be made.

- (i) Generally, parents who are Ikalanga speakers talk to their children in Ikalanga even when they are able to use other languages.
- (ii) As a whole, Ikalanga children spoke their language fluently, even among themselves.
- (iii) Surprisingly, the rate of language transmission to younger generations was higher in the Central District, compared to that of the North East District. This could be explained by the current move towards self-identity in the Central District among the Ikalanga speakers, as hinted by one young man in Nswazwi.

### c) Language attitudes

The study also revealed that most Ikalanga speakers had very positive attitudes towards their language. They were assertive and proud of their language and culture, as they were ready to speak the language and to display their daily life. This preference for the use of their mother tongue is shown in Table 5, in which the informants indicated their attitude to the use of Ikalanga in various domains.

Table 5 *Language attitudes among the Ikalanga speakers*

<b>Language attitudes</b>	<b>Ikalanga (in Centr. Dist.)</b>	<b>Ikalanga (in North East)</b>
a) % of respondents who preferred L <sub>1</sub> to be used by children at home	42.9	47.4
b) % of respondents who preferred L <sub>1</sub> to be used as medium at school	71.4	60.7
c) % of respondents who would not like L <sub>1</sub> to cease or disappear	85.7	73.5
% of respondents who would like to be identified by L <sub>1</sub> name	85.2	87.0

From the results in Table 5, the following observations were made:

- (i) The fact that less than half of the respondents preferred Ikalanga to be used at home (42.9% for Central District and 47.4% for North-East District) could be explained by the fact that some of them wanted also other languages to be introduced to the children, such as Setswana and English, which are crucial for education, socio-economic opportunities and wider communication. Also a number of respondents did not respond to the questionnaire due to the fact that they were not parents.
- (ii) The majority of Ikalanga speakers wanted to see Ikalanga used as medium of instruction in schools. In fact, many older people recalled the pre-independence

days when Ikalanga was used as medium of instruction in primary and middle schools, as mother-tongue, particularly in mission schools. In fact, many elderly people were still able to read and write in Ikalanga.

- (iii) Most respondents' wanted to be indentified as Bakalanga (Ikalanga speaking people). This assertion was not a surprise as minority language speakers tend to adhere the most to their ethnic identity, as it has also been observed by other scholars, such as Chebanne and Nthapelelang (2000) in the case of Eastern Khoe languages, Molowiwa (2000) in the case of Herero in Southern Botswana and Mesthrie (2002) in the case of Durban Indian community.

#### **d) Cultural identity**

The Ikalanga speaking people are still very active in cultural practices, particularly in songs, music, dance, rituals and storytelling. They have several names for dance performances and types of songs. Many of them are performed at special occasions. According to Mathangwane (2003, 2010) and Kealotswe (2010), there are four major types of musical performances in Ikalanga. The first type is that of music and dance which is performed for entertainment purposes and sometimes to convey special messages to the audience. This type of music includes *Woso*, *Nkomoto*, *Thazula/Ndazula* and *Iperu*. The second type is that of musical performance which is done to accompany rituals, such as healing. This performance is known as *Sangoma*, a practice which appears to have originated in South Africa. The third type of musical performance is that which is done during special rain praying or thanksgiving occasions. This type includes *Wosana* and *Mayike*. The fourth type of dance performance is associated with choral singing. Such music includes *Marabi*. Most respondents were conversant with these types of dance performances.

A number of respondents, including young people, were able to cite common proverbs used in Ikalanga, Some also gave popular songs and riddles. Examples of common proverbs which were cited are given in Table 6 below.

Table 6 *Common proverbs in Ikalanga*

<p><b><u>Proverb 1:</u></b> <i>Bukamu igaswa go zhazisiwa ngo ja.</i> <b><u>Literal meaning:</u></b> Relation is half-full, it is filled up by eating. <b><u>Free meaning:</u></b> By helping each other, relationships with relatives grow stronger.</p>
<p><b><u>Proverb 2:</u></b> <i>Ng'ombe ya tshamba dope yang'wa.</i> <b><u>Literal meaning:</u></b> The cow that stepped in the mud. <b><u>Free meaning:</u></b> Even a short visit or small amount of food shows that one cares.</p>
<p><b><u>Proverb 3:</u></b> <i>Shoko dzo sekana bukoro.</i> <b><u>Literal meaning:</u></b> Monkeys laugh at each other's forehead. <b><u>Free meaning:</u></b> It is easy to see someone's bad deeds, but ignore your own.</p>
<p><b><u>Proverb 4:</u></b> <i>Ndilo ino yenda kwa dwa ing'we.</i> <b><u>Literal meaning:</u></b> A dish goes where another one came from. <b><u>Free meaning:</u></b> Help come from those you have helped.</p>

Equally, many Ikalanga speakers, including young people, were able to cite common riddles and puzzles in the language. Table 7 lists down some of the common riddles that the respondents gave in Ikalanga.

Table 7 *Some common riddles in Ikalanga*

<p><b>Riddle 1:</b>  <i>Swimbgwana dza mposela kule</i>  <u>Literal translation:</u> Little knobkerries that one can throw very far.  <u>Answer:</u> Eyes!</p> <p><b>Riddle 2:</b>  <i>Zwitsha zwaka komba zila.</i>  <u>Literal translation:</u> Tree stumps that surround the road.  <u>Answer:</u> Breasts!</p> <p><b>Riddle 3:</b>  <i>Zwilume zwaka poteleka dombo zwika sitongo no shangana.</i>  <u>Literal Translation:</u> The men who surround a mountain but never meet  <u>Answer:</u> Ears!</p>
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Moreover, many of the respondents were able to mention their own totems as well as the most common ones. The most common totems included *Khupe* (rabbit), *Shoko* (monkey). However, some totems, especially those prevalent in the North-East, appeared to have SiNdebele origin, such as *Moyo* (heart) and *Dube* (hare).

The fact that most Ikalanga speakers were so conversant with the customs and cultural practices in the language, even having a repertoire of specific genres like proverbs, riddles and traditional stories, was clear evidence that cultural practices are still very vibrant in the Ikalanga community.

#### e) Autonymic identity

The study also revealed that Ikalanga speakers still used their personal Ikalanga names extensively. Many of them were also proud to give Ikalanga names to their children. This is shown in Table 8 below.

Table 8 *The use of personal names among Ikalanga and Tshwa speakers*

<b>Autonymic identity</b>	<b>Ikalanga (in C.D)</b>	<b>Ikalanga (in N.E.)</b>
a) % of respondents with L <sub>1</sub> as their 1 <sup>st</sup> name	57.1	74.3
b) % of respondents with L <sub>1</sub> as their 2 <sup>nd</sup> name	42.9	75.2
c) % of respondents who would readily give L <sub>1</sub> names to their children	71.4	78.4

From the results in Table 8, the following observations can be made:

- (i) A large number of Ikalanga speaking respondents had Ikalanga names, especially those in Nswazwi, who ironically were mainly young people. This could mean that there is a conscious effort among Ikalanga speakers to return to their “roots” by adopting Ikalanga names, instead of Setswana names.



- (ii) In most cases, the two names of the respondents contained at least one Ikalanga name. The other name (either first or second) would be Christian or Setswana. Examples of these names were: *Neo Ndzinge*, *Peter Daka*, *Lopang Malikongwa*, *Budzani Itumeleng*, *Dinah Mathangwane*, *Patrick Chilisa*, *Taboka Selolwane*, *Mpho Mzwinila*, and *Dambe Tshepiso*. Some informants reported that the use of Setswana names was a crucial strategy to be accepted in the wider Botswana community, especially in education and work-place.
- (iii) The researchers found out that many location names in the Ikalanga speaking area are of Ikalanga origin. These location names included *Maitengwe*, *Tutume*, *Masunga*, *Mapoka*, *Nkange*, *Nswazwi*, *Jakalas*, *Mathangwane* and *Dugwi*. There were hardly any locations with typical Setswana names in the North-East District.

#### **f) Ethnic identity**

Most Ikalanga respondents wanted to be ethnically known as Bakalanga (ethnic Ikalanga people). The figure was 90% in the Central District and 100% in the North East District. These findings were in line with what has been remarked by other scholars such as Chebanne and Nthapelelang (2000), Mesthrie (2002), Molosiwa (2000), Vossen (1988) and Winter, (1979, 1992), who confirmed the claims made in Lamy-Pool theory that ethnic identity is usually the last identity feature to disappear.

#### **6. Conclusion**

It is clear from the study that Ikalanga is still a highly vibrant language, given that it is still spoken in most of the domains and it is transmitted regularly to the younger generations. Moreover, the language attitudes of the Ikalanga speakers are still very positive.

One important question that may be asked is what factors have made Ikalanga speakers so proactive in preserving their language, culture and ethnic identity. There could be a number of possible factors. First, although the Ikalanga speaking people were subjugated by the dominant Batswana (Bangwato group), the subjugation did not kill their self-determination spirit, unlike other groups like the Wayeyi, Babirwa and Batswapong (Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2000) and most Khoesan groups (Visser, 2000). Second, the Ikalanga speaking people have kept a tradition of assertiveness and competitive way of life. This is seen in the way they have excelled in education, jobs and developmental activities. Third, their spirit of collegiality has helped them to share resources, collaborate and encourage each other, thus enhancing their linguistic and cultural identity. Fourth, the fact that the language has a written mode and also used in neighbouring Zimbabwe are reinforcing agents. The factors mentioned above coincide with Auburger's (1990) five vitality maintenance conditions, namely stable diglossic situation, strong attachment to mother tongue, active intergenerational transmission of the language, constant use of written mode and reinforcement of language from a larger pool of speakers. Ikalanga has responded well to these conditions.

Although some minority ethnic groups in Botswana are shy to speak their languages in public, especially in urban settings, Ikalanga people speak their language openly and with pride, in spite of their relatively small number of speakers, as they constitute only about 11% of Botswana population (Mathangwane, 1999). Although Ikalanga speakers have maintained their linguistic, cultural, autonymic and ethnic identities, there are some factors which may mitigate this situation. These factors include the extensive practice of inter-marriage between Ikalanga and Setswana speakers and the widespread inter-cultural inter-mingling between the different ethnic groups in Botswana. Hence the traditional Ikalanga identity uniqueness may not remain intact. One could remark, therefore, that the pattern of identity loss has, to a large

extent, followed Lamy-Pool model. The only odd trend is the adoption of Setswana names by some Ikalanga speakers, as an integrative strategy, a trend which is being reversed.

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