

Zulu, a dying language?

by Chris Ellis

I CAME out from England to Edendale Hospital over 45 years ago. At Edendale in the late sixties and early seventies almost none of the patients spoke or understood any English. There was a firm hierarchical structure to Zulu society and children tended not to speak unless requested and often remained motionless by the side of their parent, whose authority was paramount. No one spoke English partly because black children had mostly been denied basic education and therefore access to English.

For the last two decades I have noticed that if I address a child in Zulu in my rooms they usually hesitate before replying. This may be because of my poor Zulu, but I suspect that it is because their everyday life is surrounded by English. I then speak in English and immediately we are into a conversation. My practice is in Pietermaritzburg so this may be a phenomenon of the cit-

ies and educated, middle-class Zulu families. Changes have been fewer in the rural areas where modern influences are less although the modern media has deep tentacles via television and smart phones.

Recently, I consulted with a five-year-old Zulu boy with a sore throat. I wanted to examine his throat and I said '*vula umlomo*', which means 'open your mouth', but he did not understand me so I said '*khamisa*', which means the same thing 'open your mouth'. His Zulu mother then said 'he does not understand Zulu, he is going to learn it when he goes to school next year'. I am sure this is an exceptional case but I have been treating Zulu patients now for over two generations and there has been a transition in both language use and inevitably with culture as well. This is both understandable and natural.

I also listen to Zulu spoken in the street and now find that many words that

we take for original Zulu words are in fact adaptations of English or Afrikaans words. Many more English words are daily being inserted or absorbed into everyday Zulu conversation (called loan words). Purists may roll their eyes at this change, but in fact it enriches the Zulu language and means it is dynamic and adaptable.

In 1883 Reverend A.T. Bryant came out from England and spent a lifetime in Natal, becoming fluent in Zulu. He records an uneducated (in the colonial sense) Zulu girl of about 18 years having a Zulu vocabulary of over 18 000 words. I am not sure how he came to this number and it may be a bit of an exaggeration, but whatever the number it was a large vocabulary considering it is estimated that one only needs a vocabulary of 800 words to get by in a language.

The vocabulary of Zulu was well known to be so big because of the different names of cattle, birds, mammals, plants, trees and insects and their different colours, topical configurations and characteristics. For instance, cattle were described by horn shape, and colour and patterns on the hides, whereas grasses were described by types, colours and seasons as were the seasons themselves. In fact, the Zulu lexicon was not necessarily large because of the names of objects but it is also packed with an incredible variety of nuances to many words, which are not found in English, and therefore this expanded the language. This is similar to Inuit people who have twenty or so different words for snow and ice.

We all have a specific vocabulary of words depending mostly on our work environment. Lawyers, cooks, accountants, electricians and medical doctors all have their own lexicons. In

medicine I have noticed over the years how we have struggled to communicate concepts or conditions for which there were no words in the Zulu language. There were old Zulu words for anxiety and sadness which are now expressed as *istress* as well as measurements such as hypertension which is presented as 'pressure' and a disease such as diabetes which is described as *shukela* (sugar). We like direct translations in our ordered minds but often this is not possible. A condition in one culture may not exist in the other (called a culture-bound syndrome). An example is *twasa* of which a very simplistic description is a syndrome of presentations and signs when someone is called to be a traditional healer. There is no direct translation or explanation but we like to search around and find an approximate equivalent such as religious conversion or vocation. There are also conditions where culture influences the expression of a disease and the words with which they are presented. For instance, *indiki*, which is generally understood to be a condition caused by being possessed by a spirit has different expressions and interpretations of the experience depending on the context and belief system in which the individual person lives and was raised. Western science, indoctrinated by Aristotelian classifications, likes to define, delineate and capture into boxes all human emotions and activities. *Indiki* is therefore translated in the medical text book into possession trance and further defined as 'the replacement of the customary sense of self identity by a new identity attributed to the influence of a spirit, deity or other person'. It becomes a sanitised and sterile version of the original expression and experience. Words and idioms are thus subtly

changed to suit Western explanatory models and thought processes. What appears to be happening is that the older generation are still speaking 'correct' or orthodox Zulu whereas the younger generation are incorporating the words and language of the modern media and online technology and losing some of the deeper culture-bound significance of the language.

It is said that when a language goes under 100 000 speakers it is almost unsaveable and you would think that Zulu, with up to eight million people speaking it, was safe. Nevertheless the pressure on it, especially by English, is almost overwhelming. The Zulu now spoken on the street is greatly different from that of fifty years ago. There has been a loss of many of the old Zulu 'A' words or respect (*hlonipha*) words. This does not mean that Zulu is dying but it is, in fact, a living adapting language because in place of the older vocabulary it is incorporating words from English and modern technology to make it more practical and useable. It has become both resilient and vibrant. English itself has sucked in, like a powerful vacuum cleaner, an enormous number of loan words. If you speak English you know parts of at least a hundred different languages.

The sign of irrevocable demise of a language is when it is not spoken in the home, which obviously is the case with the patient with the sore throat, although I am sure this is still an isolated case. Nevertheless, the currently proposed alternative, which is the didactic teaching of a language in schools and universities, will be immensely expensive and mostly ineffective. It is not nearly as effective as speaking it at home up to the age of five or six or more.

We do not know yet what the smart-

phone-earplugs-screen culture, which brings instantaneous games and programmes in English into the ears of the young, will do to African languages. At present, worldwide, one language dies every fourteen days. The three main remaining languages in two generations' time will be English, Mandarin and Spanish. So Goodbye, Zàijìàn, Adios; and, maybe, *Hambani Kahle*.

Response by Adrian Koopman

I WOULD like to pick up on three interconnected aspects of Chris Ellis's discussion document: the issue of loan words (or adoptives), the notion of purity in a language, and the idea that a language may die if it becomes swamped by or subsumed into another language.

First, let me make the point that all languages are dynamic and evolve continuously. Language purists are people who attempt to arrest language change, almost always assuming that an earlier form of a language is more pure than the form spoken today, and that a language is pure if it has no loan words from any other language.¹

My second point is related to my first: all languages that come into contact with other languages are influenced in one way or the other by neighbouring languages. People who talk of pure Zulu as spoken before contact with colonial settlers forget that the Zulu lexicon, indeed the whole Zulu phonological system, had been influenced by centuries of contact with earlier San languages.

Ellis's discussion document gives the impression (perhaps not intentionally) that the influence of colonial languages is a relatively recent thing. It is not – the influence on the Zulu language from Dutch-speaking and English-speaking explorers, travellers, missionaries,

hunters and settlers goes back at least 180 years. He is correct, though, in saying that many words regarded as pure Zulu today are in fact adopted from English and Dutch/Afrikaans: words like *ibhulukwe* (< *broek*), *ibhala* (< barrow), and *ihembe* (< *hemp*).

Evidence of this early adoption of words from colonial languages is seen clearly in the *Vocabulaire de la Langue Zoulouse* (Vocabulary of the Zulu Language) appended to the second volume of Adulphe Delegorgue's *Voyage dans l'Afrique Australe* published in Paris in 1847 and translated into English as *Travels in Southern Africa* in 1990 (vol. I) and 1997 (vol. II).² Delegorgue, a hunter, explorer, naturalist and writer, travelled through what is now KwaZulu-Natal at the time of the reigns of Dingane kaSenzangakhona and his brother Mpande (the 1830s and 1840s) and was accompanied by Dutch-speaking wagon drivers and servants, and Zulu-speaking hunters and guides. He recorded as part of his more than 650-item *vocabulaire* a number of words he considered to be Zulu, but which we can see today were in fact early Dutch and English adoptives. Some he has clearly marked as *du Hollandais* (from Dutch). Examples are *duur makar* for 'a mix-up' (marked as *du Hollandais*), *Ghisman* for an Englishman (regarded as Zulu), *kouatile* for 'angry' (< Du. *kwaad* + Zulu suffix *-ile*), and *nike betaye* for 'pay' (< Zulu *nika* 'give' + Du. *betaal* 'pay'). There are many more such examples in Delegorgue's *vocabulaire*.

Since these early days of language contact, the Zulu language has of course absorbed hundreds upon hundreds of words from other languages, mainly from Dutch/Afrikaans and English, but many from other languages, including Xhosa. Far from destroying the lan-

guage, these adoptives or loan words have shown how resilient and strong the language is, and here I am in entire agreement with Chris Ellis. A language, and English is certainly such an example, can absorb a considerable number of lexical items from other languages and still retain its essential character. An example is the word '*kwatile*' above, where the original adjective *kwaad* from Dutch has been given the verbal perfect tense ending *-ile*, creating a new word that is essentially Zulu in nature.

Whether or not Zulu will die as a language because it is no longer being spoken at home by Zulu children is a question I must leave to other commentators.

Response by Mark Hunter

CHRIS Ellis's timely piece raises important questions about the status of Zulu in post-apartheid society. Is Zulu a dying language, he asks, or is it a dynamic and adapting force?

Before we discuss Zulu's possible decline we might consider its rise, or more accurately institutionalisation. Across the African continent it is now well known that it was missionaries, early settlers, and some African interlocutors, who established the linguistic boundaries that created separate languages.

In other words, linguistic variation was present in the region, shaped by the age, gender, geography, as well as by much-vaunted differences that came to be called ethnicity. But in a colonial setting, as anthropologist Judith Irvine notes, 'Language, ethnicity, and territory were supposed to coincide and to define population units on an administratively manageable scale.' Crucially, the separation of languages depended on a conception of 'tribes'. It was these entities to whom the colonial state

power devolved power in geographical areas called locations, then reserves, and eventually homelands. Of course this never went unchallenged: Zulu was especially contested at the time of the ANC-Inkatha conflicts.

However, despite the tendency to police linguistic boundaries, we don't have to look hard to see that what came to be called Zulu was always a hybrid phenomenon. The first Zulu dictionary was compiled by Bishop Colenso in 1861. Notably, he placed asterisks by the side of words 'corrupted' from other languages, typically English or Dutch. These include some surprising entries such as *isicatulo* (defined as 'any covering for feet', or 'shoe').

Turning to the question of how Zulu is changing in the current milieu. There are perhaps three forces that might be noted. Most obviously, Zulu became one of democratic South Africa's eleven official languages. However, as is widely noted, English's use in business, politics, and the workplace made it the 'first among equals'. And unlike Afrikaans in the apartheid era, the state made few attempts to intellectualise African languages, for instance through developing African-language literature.

This brings us to the second change, which is the fact that many middle-class black South African learners now attend what are colloquially called 'multiracial' schools (formerly white, Indian, or coloured schools). The main attraction, parents will say, is native-English speaking teachers. This is in direct opposition to, and in part reaction to, the policy of Bantu Education which promoted African languages as a medium of school instruction.

The third change is the importance of English in the workplace. English became the language of formal written

agreements after trade unions established themselves in the 1970s, and the language of customer service as manufacturing jobs gave way to service jobs. A young person is today more likely to work in a telephone call centre than a factory. And employers also use English competence and accent to screen multiple candidates when unemployment rates are so tragically high.

But does this mean that there is a demise of African languages? In simple terms – no. Zulu is still the most spoken language in homes, increasing from 23.8% of the national population to 24.6% if we compare the 2001 census and the 2016 community survey. Moreover, the newspaper *Isolezwe*, established in 2002, now has a remarkable one million readers a day. The 7 o'clock SABC News rotates daily from Zulu to Xhosa, blurring the boundaries of these languages, while promoting an alternative to English.

There may be some parents who themselves learnt Zulu at home but now speak English to their children, but the numbers are small. This does not mean that Zulu vocabulary is not changing. But this has to be seen in the context of the multilingualism of black South Africans, especially those living in urban areas.

This contrasts with the situation of native-English speakers. In the apartheid era, this group would have learnt Afrikaans at school as a second language, and crucially needed to speak it to access certain government jobs. But Afrikaans has now lost its special status and monolingual English speakers (albeit still required to learn a second language at school) are not generally disadvantaged in the job market.

Indeed, a major failure of language policy, one attracting surprisingly little

attention, is that native-English speakers are not in general being taught African languages at school.

Response by Debbie Whelan

READING Chris Ellis's provocative article, I was struck by the question as to whether Zulu might be a 'dying language'. It has had me questioning the origins of the coming into existence of Zulu itself, not only as a nation around a specific clan group under Shaka and his brothers, but especially as a written language. I've also been prompted to consider Adrian Koopman's statements as to culture always being dynamic and subject to acculturation, when different groups interact.

Like all languages, what most of us today think of as the Zulu language has itself been constructed over time. Apart from archaic variants of earlier spoken Zulu, separate clan dialects were marginalised; such as what Manson³ refers to as the *tekela* dialect that was spoken in the nineteenth century by the amaHlubi, among others.

My comments are prompted by considering a linear(ish) stream of generally consulted historical texts that present Zulu as an official and sanctioned construct. We understand, for example, that the Zulu fought against the British in the Anglo-Zulu War, despite the fact that Zulu troops were themselves composed of many diverse clan groups subservient to Cetshwayo and the dominant Zulu rule.

Early works, such as John Bird's *Annals of Natal 1495–1845*, describe groups of peoples closely identified through family and political relationship, with specific names, personalities, legends and responsibilities in addition to moving and fluid areas of control and residence.⁴ As happened across the Brit-

ish Empire, it was to facilitate rule and administration that the need was created to count, to order, and to rearrange people so as to 'fix' them under recognised chiefs that led to the detailed mapping of groups in Zululand at the time of the Zululand Lands Delimitation Commission (Colony of Natal, 1905). This followed the already established practice, reflected in the Natal magistrates' *Blue Books*, which enumerated clans and associated individuals, because the collection of colonial taxes relied heavily on the matrix of different tribal groups with different identities and specific areas of residence. Colonial official James Stuart describes stories and quotidian events in his seminal collection of interviews (edited and annotated by Colin Webb and John Wright) published as *The James Stuart Archive*, presenting a variety of clan histories through real people and their stories.⁵ In his well-cited (and for much of the twentieth century, primary) reference work on the Zulu people, Bryant, mentioned by Ellis in his original thread, also heavily emphasises the humanness and individuality of people, the idiosyncrasies of different clan groups (such as the abaThembu, the 'many wived folk'), and their origins and socio-political connections.⁶

On the other hand, the *Natal Code of Native Law*, which was legislated in 1891, provided a guideline for standardising the operations for chiefs within the locations. It also intended to inform the purpose of indirect rule.⁷ It was thus legislated to obliterate the individual considerations of the rule of traditional law between and within clan and family groups, and further, eventually succeeded in grouping large numbers of different people with different identities in the region under the portmanteau term of 'Native', an action

that was reinforced by the promulgation of the Natives' Land Act (27 of 1913).

For a time, old habits prevailed: in 1926 the *Natal Native Tribes Register* continued to identify the people resident in Natal through clan, personality, and adherents, allowing for the understanding of a series of personable relationships across the province. In 1935, Government Ethnographer Nicolaas van Warmelo produced a similar document itemising the then contemporary clan and tribal groups across South Africa.⁸ While this was a mechanism to continue the intentions of separation leading up to the implementation of the Native Trust and Land Act in 1936, African people continued to be associated with a fixed area of residence, and with lineage, clan and tribe. So what happened?

In the same year, Eileen Jensen Krige, an anthropologist based at the University of Natal, produced the next seminal reference volume on 'the Zulu'. Krige's work, *The Social System of the Zulus* was a significant contribution to anthropology at the time, which provided a supposedly definitive outline as to who the Zulu people were, their world view, how they built their homesteads, how they decided succession, and how they viewed the physical and meta-physical worlds.⁹ What this did was nullify specific lifeways and practices of previously distinctive groups who may have resided in KwaZulu-Natal, as being officially described as 'the Zulu'. For example, there were now blurred edges between the northern clans and the Tsonga, who have historically had differing diets, ways of arranging space, and constructing buildings. It also ignored the activities of bordering and imported groups such as the baTlokwa, around Nqutu who kept sheep and rode

horses in contrast to the cattle-keeping Zulu people.

This re-writing of 'the Zulu culture' added a layer of justification to the cultural prescriptions that had been laid down by the *Natal Code of Native Law* in the nineteenth century and which continued to inform the operations of the tribal courts in Natal. The situation was exacerbated by the change – in title and conception – from 'Native Affairs' to 'Bantu Affairs' in 1958, which then in 1978, became the oddly-named Department of Plural Relations and Development. Thus the idea of the family, the clan, the lineage and all relationship had disappeared under a broad-brush conceptualisation of a political perception of the African in South Africa, as a single 'other'.

As usual, the wheel began to turn: revisionist publications such as those by anthropologists Axel-Ivar Berglund,¹⁰ and Johnny Clegg¹¹ began to support more intuitive and subtle understandings of those people living in this region and their specific societal constructs at the clan and family levels. The obliteration of individuality has, however, been perpetuated in even more recent decades by the commodification of 'the Zulu' for the purposes of tourism as well as through the reconstruction of apparently generic Zulu practices; and also a re-nationalisation of identity through a focus on the progenitor, Shaka kaSenzangakhona, in the form of giving his name to an airport (which welcomes visitors to 'The Kingdom of the Zulu') and a theme park.

Contemporary unpacking of the Zulu nation is partly inscribed in the land claims process, and its effects; in addition to applications to the Nhlapo Commission by lineage or tribal heads that claim that they are not Zulu. While

the Thembu in the Eastern Cape is a well-known example, no tribal heads in KwaZulu-Natal have thus far had any success in motivating for recognition as a tribe, with its own king, separate from the Zulu. The Dlamini, amaNkwane and amaHlubi have all striven for an individual recognition, pointing to a strong potential for an internal collapse of the overarching rule of 'Zulu'.

Response by Phindi Dlamini

I WOULD like to pick up on the following line from Chris Ellis's original comment about Zulu being a dying language: 'His Zulu mother then said 'he does not understand Zulu, he is going to learn it when he goes to school next year''.

As a proudly Zulu-speaking woman and mother, I find this utterance by the mother very embarrassing, to say the least. Unfortunately, this is not a once in a lifetime utterance: we hear it all the time – uttered with pride! I find such an utterance shameful on many levels. If I am Zulu-speaking and yet my child cannot speak his or her mother tongue, then what language is she or he speaking? Whose language is he or she speaking and why? Why do I want to relegate the teaching of my child his or her mother-tongue (my own language) to a teacher? What am I saying to my child about my language, my culture – his or her language, his or her culture?

What are we doing to our children? We cannot hide behind the fact that 'English takes you everywhere'. Yes, English can take you everywhere but as what, as who?

When children are young, they cannot tell the difference between good and bad, correct and wrong. They are solely dependent on what the adults around them model or say. Now, this

takes me back to a business conference I attended in 2008 in Pietermaritzburg. The guest speaker was a young woman, a celebrity who had a Sesotho first name and a Zulu surname, although she spoke neither language, having grown up in Johannesburg with a Sotho mother and a Zulu father, both of whom spoke English at home. Since she was a celebrity most the Zulu people greeted her using her *izithakazelo* (clan praises), which is a highly regarded way of greeting among Zulus and Africans at large. Little did people know that this form of address brought 'havoc' and shame to the addressee. When she was called up to the podium to give her speech, there were lots of shouts and applause using different *izithakazelo* of her clan name. The audience was very excited to have a celebrity, their very own Zulu celebrity, in their midst.

She stood there, with a grin, waiting for the applause to subside. With the help of the Programme Director, the audience resettled and she was ready to start. She then burst into a spontaneous emotional outpouring, delivered in the rhythms of oral poetry. The following is my paraphrase, but the lines had such impact that I remember almost every one to this day: 'My father where were you? When my mother was teaching me the little Sesotho that I know, my father where were you? People are calling me Mphemba, Ntuli, Godide ... with such cordiality and excitement. I don't know what they mean and I don't know how to react. My father, from their warmth and smiles, I believe what they are saying is good. I also believe they have an expectation ... an expectation from me to respond in a particular way ... My father, I don't know what to say, I don't know how to react ... My father, what have you done to me?'

‘I stand in my father’s land ... a lost soul ... who am I, I ponder? Where do I belong? I ask myself. This is where I belong, I can feel it in my bones ... This is where my roots are, it’s written in these people’s faces but I can’t utter a single word to show that I belong. My father, when my mother was teaching me Sesotho, where were you? At least I can greet in Sesotho ... that is how far my mother taught me. But I am a Zulu. I should be speaking Zulu ... my father where were you? When parents were teaching their children their language, their culture, their identity ... my parents, where were you? Am I English, obviously not ... the colour of my skin betrays me. Am I Zulu, obviously not, the language I speak betrays me. I am a lost soul in my father’s land’.

The room was silent; you could hear a pin drop. At the end of her ‘poem’, she got a standing ovation and people thought that was her keynote address. This was a business conference and the address was expected to be on business, but this didn’t stop the audience from giving the speaker a standing ovation. Why?

Let’s ask ourselves ‘What are we doing to our children?’ before we proudly say ‘my daughter/son can’t speak Zulu’, a line very popular among certain parents of today, always uttered with a smile, with no shame but pride.

Yes, we have to learn the language of business, as English is known to be, but nobody ever said this should be done at the expense of our own language. And we can easily criss-cross between these two languages and cultures.

The sad reality is that no matter how much advantage we can see in motivating our children to learn English, if this is done at the expense of their own mother tongue, there will come a time

in their lives where they will yearn for their roots, their culture, and they will blame us. Then, we shall be nothing but heartless people who deprived them of their true self.

NOTES

- 1 Koopman, A., *Zulu Language Change* (Howick, Brevitas, 1999).
- 2 Koopman, A. and Davey, A., ‘Adulphé Dele-gorgue’s *Vocabulaire de la Langue Zoulouse*’, *South African Journal of African Languages*, 20(2), 2000, pp.134–47.
- 3 Manson, A., *The Hlubi and Ngwe in a Colonial Society 1848–1877* (MA thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1979).
- 4 Bird, J., *Annals of Natal 1495–1845* (Pietermaritzburg, P. Davis, 1888).
- 5 Webb, C.de B. and Wright, J., *The James Stuart Archive*, volumes 1–6 (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press and University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1976, 1979, 1981, 1983, 1986 and 2014).
- 6 Bryant, A., *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal Containing Earlier Political History of the Eastern-Nguni Clans* (London, Longmans Green, 1929).
- 7 Guy, J. in Healy-Clancy, M. and Hickel, J., *Ekhaya: The Politics of Home in KwaZulu-Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014).
- 8 Van Warmelo, N., *A Preliminary Survey of the Bantu Tribes of South Africa* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1935).
- 9 Krige, E., *The Social System of the Zulus* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter and Shooter, 1962 [1936]).
- 10 Berglund, Axel-Ivar, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1976).
- 11 Clegg, J., ‘Ukubuyisa isiDumbu: bringing back the body’, *Working Papers in Southern African Studies*, 2 (1981), pp. 164–99.