

Amelioration and Demelioration of Words and Names: Contemporary Discourse in Zimbabwe

Dr V. Z. Nyawo
History Department
Midlands State University
Email: vznyawo@gmail.com

And

Mr J. Chakawa
History Department
Midlands State University
Email: chakawaj@msu.ac.zw

Abstract

When the second liberation war guns died down in Zimbabwe, a cease fire, and a Lancaster House Agreement and independence followed. Post-colonial Zimbabwe has been another country in terms of what transpired in the dispensation that set in. Of interest has been how the different events strewn in the contemporary era that has seen words changing their meaning. In common use, almost every word has many shades of meaning and, therefore the need to interpret meaning cannot be over emphasized. Meaning has been influenced invariably in the context of gender, generations and historical epochs which are sometimes driven by politics, the economy, socio-cultural and religious happenings. Using different events in contemporary Zimbabwe as its background, this research sets out to identify and trace how meaning of words has been altered over time. Purposive convenience sampling was used to collect data from different parts of Zimbabwe, at each particular time depending on the event that occurred in Zimbabwe, for example, words on diamonds were gotten from informants in Chiadzwa, words on 'Operation Drive Out Dirty' were mostly from informants in Harare and other towns. The research

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discovered that words continue to mutate depending on the events taking place and how people want to use them. Observation was also used to explain the changing of meanings over time and space.

Introduction

As we live, we witness and experience change-our looks, our circumstances, our thoughts and feelings are in constant flux. The same applies to words. Words have lives of their own. During the lifetime of a word, change appears to be the only constant. Change affects the way words look (spelling), the way they sound (pronunciation), and what they mean (semantics). The meaning of words can change so much in a relatively short time that the same word can mean quite different things to speakers separated even by a few decades of language change. According to Pike (2000), language is a total coherent system of sounds, clauses, rules, meaning, universe of discourse, context, behaviour and observer perspectives.

In other words, a sum total of all these variables are responsible for giving meanings to words. In every

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language, words and names appreciate and depreciate in value like money. Amelioration refers to a semantic change in which a word gains increasingly favorable connotation. Amelioration can be brought about by the quest to reform, beautify, embellish, fancify, build, improve, perfect, distill, enrich and many more. The opposite of amelioration is demelioration which refers to a semantic change in which a word gains increasingly negative connotation. Synonyms of demelioration are cessation, decline, descent, downfall, regression, retreat, retrogression, etc.

Epochs influencing word meanings

New words and names have colored the discourse of the city and the country alike in Zimbabwe, as a result of episodes that have extended their invisible hand such as:

- the fast track land reform which started in June 2000;
- Operation Murambatsvina (Drive out Dirty) of 2005;

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- Chiadzwa informal mining phase which peaked as from 2006;
- exploitation of national resources;
- Elections and post-election violence;
- the dollarization of the Zimbabwean currency; and
- The Zimbabwean crisis period (2000-2008).

Conceptual Framework

There is always a relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions of communicative events. Instead of viewing context as a set of variables that statically surround strips of talk, context and talk are now argued to stand in a mutually reflexive relationship with each other, with talk, and the interpretative work it generates shaping context as much as context shapes talk (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992).

Observation is that semantic change, also known as semantic shift or semantic progression describes the evolution of word usage — usually to the point

that the modern meaning is radically different from the original usage. In historical linguistics, semantic shift is a change in one of the meanings of a word. Every word has a variety of senses and connotations, which can be added, removed, or altered over time, often to the extent that cognates across space and time have very different meanings. The study of semantic change can be seen as part of etymology, onomasiology, semasiology and semantics. According to Blank (2000), motivations for semantic change could be linguistic forces, psychological forces, socio-cultural forces, cultural/encyclopedic forces. To this list, Grzega (2004) has added many more. The researchers of this article have singled out a number of historical epochs in the history of Zimbabwe to explain and exemplify appreciation and depreciation of words.

The Fast Track Land Reform

A land reform programme that took Zimbabwe by storm between the years 2000 and 2002 according

to official dates needed new vocabulary or new meaning of words to explain some of its elements. The programme itself came to be popularly known as “jambanja” (violent chaos), a rapid and disorganized land seizure strategy. It was so defined by those who were taking up the land as well as those who were observers or who lost the land. “Jambanja” was not exactly new but it became a buzz word that characterised the manner in which the reform was executed. Third Chimurenga is the other name for this phase which is in essence a continuation of the First and Second Liberation struggles in Zimbabwe. This time around, the revolution was intended to capture freedom and economic sovereignty (Burne: 2011, 167). Others used terms like farm invasions to describe the same process. By 2001, the meaning had changed to refer to the land which the occupiers were residing. More specifically, “jambanja” came to refer to A1 farms. Today, with the formalization of the whole process, the word has reverted back to its original meaning of chaos in the general sense.

Operation Murambatsvina

Operation Murambatsvina whose English version is operation drive out dirty equally shook Zimbabwe with some calling it Operation *Tsunami* after the devastating happening of December 26 2004. “Operation Murambatsvina,” commonly referred to by the people as “Operation Tsunami,” was a demolition exercise to rid the towns and cities of illegal vending sites, structures, informal business premises and homes, which literally displaced hundreds of thousands of people after the 2005 elections. The name Tsunami, a Japanese word describing the Indian Ocean disaster that hit more than ten countries, Indonesia, Sri-lanka, Thailand, Banda Aceh and Sumatra included, was a sudden flooding of these areas killing over 3000 thousand local fishermen, tourists, business people, tour guides and a lot of other categories of people. Naming Operation Murambatsvina (clearing up of rubbish in urban areas) after this disaster was a commentary on the suddenness of the arrival of the

campaign. The Japanese disaster which was still fresh in the Zimbabwean people's minds easily provided a name for something equally devastating, non-discrete, vastly spread and emotionally traumatizing. For most Zimbabweans, Operation "Tsunami" came at a difficult time and against the background of a general deterioration of law and order. It appears as though they were reliving the fast track period, which had set a precedent of violence, and sending a signal that the rule of law could be subject to selective interpretation, paving way to excesses like the disruptive clean-up campaign.

The word "Tsunami" became a metaphor or parallel describing the magnitude and intensity of operation drive out dirty. In the cities, bull-dozers were sent door to door demolishing houses and informal business establishments built not according to council plan (Bourne: 2011,195). Some owners of such places were forced to pull down their own homes. In the process, not a single group of people

was unaffected; it was the whole of Zimbabwe, the poor, business people, vendors and their customers, landlords and tenants. The police were sent by the government to suppress any resistance to the demolitions and to send the homeless out of towns together with their belongings.

The fast track land reform programme of 2000-2002 had been partly responsible for the increase of population traffic into cities. The programme had displaced different categories of people, for example, farm workers and they had headed to cities to get jobs and earn a living. As they got to the cities they established informal settlement and vending structures introducing a disorderly and chaotic arrangement of structures that became an 'eye sore' to the city of Harare. It is this disorder that the government sought to curb through Operation Drive Out Dirty. It should not be forgotten that the word had always been used in the Shona language to refer to one who is always smart or who simply does not want dirt. Those who were vending,

thieving, prostituting and building illegal structures, according to official discourses, came to symbolize that which was ‘dirty’, ‘unsightly’, therefore, deserving to be eliminated. The meaning of the operation has not been lost in the minds of those who experienced the episode and those who build illegal or unplanned structures are often reminded of Murambatsvina by colleagues.

Informal Mining

Informal mining for natural resources is very rampant in Zimbabwe in places such as Chiadzwa, Kwekwe, Shurugwi, Kadoma and Beitbridge. It had always been practiced long before the economic meltdown though diamond mining is a recent occurrence. From this sector, words have shifted for better and for worse and others have been coined afresh. Words such as “syndicate” came to refer to a group of illegal miners working together in extracting and ultimately selling the precious mineral. Mutaka came to mean the unprocessed matter or soil collected from mwena (the hole they

would be digging). Prior to that mutaka was simply clay soil and in Shona speaking areas far from Chiadzwa, the word had the same meaning. Thus, in the diamond mining area, the word had ameliorated because it now carried a valuable meaning in terms of the money it would earn. Dark or greenish alluvial diamonds in Chiadzwa assumed the name ngoda while clear diamonds were called girazi. Ngoda had not existed in the Shona language but today refers not only to diamonds but anything which one considers very precious. Although gold, platinum and copper are precious minerals, they are not ngoda. In mining language, ngoda refers to diamonds. Thus, a rich son-in-law or daughter-in-law can also be referred to as ngoda. Girazi comes from the English word glass. Though the mutaka, ngoda and girazi were initially used by Chiadzwa illegal miners to elude law enforcement agencies, in no time, they were co-opted into the mainline Shona where they now appear as standard Shona.

Girazi



Ngoda



Gweja, syndicate, mwena, mutaka



Elections and post-election violence

Violent actions which sometimes punctuated Zimbabwean politics brought with it new meanings to words and created other in the process. Youths who went for the national youth service where they were trained in the art of safeguarding the country's national interests became known as "Green Bombers" which was a derogatory word. "Green bombers" normally referred to big flies commonly found on decomposing matter, and became the name of youths that were part of election terror. The flies in question are green in colour and because the youths wore green uniforms, they were given such a name. Again, this word had not been used in Standard English to refer to flies but became commonly used in Zimbabwe to differentiate between ordinary flies and these big green ones. Today, these big flies are still referred by the same name and there is no clear alternative to it. Since the demise of the programme, youths are rarely associated with the Green Bombers.

In 2001, the US government passed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Recovery Act which cut off multilateral support from several agencies in which the USA was a bigger shareholder and targeted president Robert Mugabe and key named individuals for human rights abuses (Bourne: 2001, 179). This became the basis for sanctions which the ruling ZANU-PF party attributes to the failure of the economy to perform well to the present day. These sanctions came to be referred to “Tsvangitions” because they were said to have been brought on the people of Zimbabwe by Morgan Tsvangirai who led the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The name was meant to deliver the message that such a person cannot, therefore, be trusted with the country because he brought untold suffering to the people of Zimbabwe by inviting sanctions. Many forms of punishments came to be referred to as “Tsvangitions” including denying one conjugal rights. Because sanctions have not yet been lifted, the noun has retained its meaning.

“Mutengesesi” generally referring to a sell-out now means anyone who is or has MDC or opposition sympathies. By December 2014, vatengesesi (plural) was also used by the ruling ZANU-PF party to refer to those who allegedly secretly planning to remove president Mugabe from power by unconstitutional means.

The Zimbabwean Crisis and its Impact on Names

The Zimbabwean crisis, which can easily subsume all other epochs discussed before, saw serious linguistic changes to meanings of a lot of words. The sanctions (that some call ‘targeted’ and others machinations of the West), polarisation, the failed 2000 Referendum, economic meltdown, agrarian reform, political upheavals and brain drain among others constitute the Zimbabwean crisis. Since 1999, Zimbabwe is a country in turmoil and at the epicentre of political problems (Hondora 2004: 10). The Zimbabwean crisis of the post 2000 era reflects the collapse of the ZANU-PF hegemonic project

which is traceable to the 1980s when the country attained independence. This made an impact in the region as well as the world at large in terms of the generation and coining of new words to describe this loss of an unprecedented degree.

In the period of the Zimbabwean crisis, a concoction of the fast track land reform, drought, sanctions, problematic elections and economic meltdown, Zimbabwe shifted to a multi-currency system in 2008 running away from the near valueless Zimbabwean dollar. People were thankful that the new currency had value more than the Zimbabwean bearers but what was most worrisome was that the foreign currency was very difficult to get, especially for those living in the rural areas. Moreso, the US-dollar, the Rand and the Pula were not exactly understood in terms of their value. The value was distorted and the foreign currency was almost treated at the value of the Zimbabwean bearer cheque in some cases making life very expensive with most basic commodities out of

reach. In one of Zimbabwe's rural district of Hurungwe, there happens to be a natural forest climber called *mudyabveni*. When its green leaves and stem are crushed, they become soapy and that substance was traditionally used as a detergent. In 2008, people in rural areas could not afford to buy soap hence they resorted to this climber for washing. It automatically assumed the name *Mugabewanyara* (literally meaning Mugabe you have been shamed). Mugabe is the President and this was a way of chiding and spiting him by saying if you thought we will not wash by bringing this suffering to us, then sorry, we can go on washing using products derived from our indigenous knowledge systems. Surprisingly, people in Hurungwe have not forgotten this suffering. Generally, the youths seem to be unaware that the climber has traditionally been called *feso*. Today, they continue to call it by this new name which they think is the original.

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At the same time, many people were so impoverished to the extent that only very few could afford to buy new clothes. The rest had to depend on second hand clothes which were largely imported from Mozambique and spread out on dusty pavements in Zimbabwe's high density suburbs. From the 1990s to date, the centre of such clothes was a big market in Harare called Mupedzanhamo denoting that which wipes away poverty. Since Mupedzanhamo and related markets did not have shelves, customers began to change the name to Kotamai Boutique, a name which hid the shabbiness of the whole place. Kotamai is Shona for bent down pointing to the posture that the clients or customers assume while they shift through the heaps and heaps of the pre-used clothes, shoes, bags and what have you. Today, it is called Pedgars which can easily be mistaken for the classic shop Edgars. It is here where the less fortunate bought their clothing and where they still continue to do so.

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The poor are referred to as Razaros from the biblical poor Lazarus. Thus, whenever one is broke, they might say, 'I am Razaros today'. Worse still, those who are broke talk of themselves as teachers, a pejoration of the name *teacher* because teachers have been grossly underpaid since the beginning of the new millennium. The teaching profession used to be holy and respectable in the olden days, but now because of lack of incentives following the Zimbabwean crisis teachers have been paid some very little fixed amount. Their conditions of service started tumbling around 2005 and that state of affairs is yet to improve.

The economic meltdown saw a lot of Zimbabweans moving out of the country in search of a living. Most of the people went to neighbouring countries especially South Africa and Botswana. Some of these people sneaked out of the country illegally or went to the extent of using forged documents. In both countries, those who had no travel documents at all were referred to as Chipadagu in Shona.

Traditionally, the word symbolizes one who travels barefoot. A forged travel document which had no Shona word previously now came to be called Chidhura. Members of the Zimbabwean community in the diaspora called their country kwaSadza. Of course, there is a district in Zimbabwe by the name Sadza but the new name had nothing to do with all that. This time kwaSadza was a strategy to hide the actual name of that country that had sent so many of its citizens over rivers and mountains. The choice of the name sadza was also commentary to the lack of sadza, a staple in Zimbabwe, a basic for survival. So, as Zimbabweans drifted south in search of greener pastures they wanted to be reminded of how their own country could no longer afford them sadza, a very basic commodity. There was no mealie-meal on supermarket shelves in Zimbabwean shops nor was there money to buy it. If at all it got available one would get it at steep prices and after going through very long and winding queues and as such these experiences had to be

kept live in the minds of those that had crossed the Limpopo to bring sadza home.

Words in socio-religious circles

Beer drinkers were not left out in these changing names. A beer for the poor which was brewed in one day and drunk on the same day was called “chi One Day” meaning that which has been prepared in a day. Such a beer was popular on commercial farms before the farm invasions which displaced most farm workers. These workers carried with them the beer brewing skill to the high density suburbs and communal areas where the home-made beer continued to be in vogue. It then got a new name Chikiyahoto which implies that which locks the bird hoto. The bird is associated with poverty hence the transfer of the name to the poor beer drinkers. Those who frequented beer outlets with the obvious intention of begging for beer were called Tsetse and have retained the same pseudo name to the present day.

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A tsetse fly causes a deadly disease called sleeping sickness in human beings. One who thrives on begging beer without buying any in return is deemed to be that dangerous. As such, he must be eradicated in order to clean the environment and protect people. To cushion (tsetse-net/ mosquito-net) themselves, beer drinkers need to have one strong man in their group who should ensure that no ‘tsetse flies’ approach. Normally the tough man is recruited from among the tsetse flies and assumes the name “baygone” a popular household insect killer.

The dollarization of the Zimbabwean economy brought with it a lot of cheap goods on the market. Today, these cheap things are called \$ for 2 and are popular in the second hand clothes markets. The meaning is sometimes extended to cheap prostitutes who accept a little money in exchange for sex. It is also used to denote cheap Chinese commodities sometimes referred to as Zhing Zhong.

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In Zimbabwe, anything which is not original goes by that name.

The end of the crisis brought with it religious revivals. In 2009, a prolific preacher and prophet, Emmanuel Makandiwa set up his own Church, the United Family International. The church attracted huge numbers of people and still does today. Makandiwa followers can fill the whole stadium when he is preaching. Zimbabwe's youthful singers whose beat is called Zim-Dance Hall refer to any other huge gatherings as Makandiwa. The word has now infiltrated to many people who just refer to a crowd in slang as Makandiwa. Originally, the term was coined to refer to contour ridges which were enforced on Africans by the Rhodesian regime in the 1950s as it enforced the Native Land Husbandry Act.

Muteuro is not a new term in Shona. It has been used to refer to the traditional way of praying to the creator. With the popularization of Christianity, it

came to mean the Christian way of praying to God or simply prayer. However, with the spread of the Johanne Masowe Church, it began to refer to various religious items and instruction a follower is given in order to come out of any challenges. The water one is given to sprinkle in the house for cleansing purposes is Muteuro so are other items such as sheep fat, small stones, young guinea fowls, water from a specific river along with red threads and so on. All these have instructions which would enable the Muteuro to produce desired results. The use of muteuro became widespread during the Zimbabwean crisis as people were locked in serious poverty and thus unable to afford drugs from pharmacies. They came to rely on miteuro to rid them of various ailments they were suffering from including HIV and AIDS.

Conclusion

Human language is an endlessly fascinating subject of study, and one where the debates will continue, new ideas emerge, and firm conclusions seem

always far away. Authors of *Main Trends in Historical Semantics*, (Grygiel, C and Kleparski, G) remark that *there exists nothing like a single, generally accepted classificatory scheme of changes in meaning; nor we believe is there any need to pursue the task of establishing one.* Instead there is a need to pursue the many approaches to the variety of factors which can influence and explain how meaning changes. However, tracking how names and words shift meaning over time is always fascinating. Zimbabwe continues to experience events and incidences in the post colonial dispensation that continue to alter meaning. Even as this paper is finalized, the just ended ZANU- PF December 2014 congress with all its political drama ushered in a handful of changes to some lexicon, and life goes on.

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