

# (Dis)Engaging Monolingualism from the Tower of Babel: Church and National Inclusivity in Zimbabwe



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## ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe recognises 16 indigenous languages that are spoken across the country. While much has been published about linguistics in Zimbabwe, the interface of bibliology and ecclesiology with dialectology and inclusivity is minimal. Employing a qualitative literature review, decoloniality theory and reflecting on the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, this paper engages the Church with languages. It finds that Zimbabwe uses English as its language of instruction in schools and keeps Shona and Ndebele as ordinary subjects that are taught in areas where these languages are the mother languages of the majority of residents. This approach has maintained the hegemony of English and Shona because, even though about 70% of the Zimbabwean population speaks Shona, 17% speak Ndebele, and 10% speak other languages, all are forced to learn English. Citizens who speak English and Shona are only exposed to the need for Ndebele and other languages when they relocate to provinces where minority languages are commonly used. Yet, those speaking Ndebele and other languages are forced to learn Shona and English in order to fit in living, working and developmental spaces beyond their locations of birth. This paper concludes that the positive political talk and stagnant walk of developing all constitutionally recognised languages in Zimbabwe is abortive and regressive. It recommends that the Church becomes the voice for the voiceless ethnicities and promote multilingualism and national inclusivity. This paper contributes to the subject of multilingualism, which is an integral part of decoloniality and inclusivity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe recognises 16 official languages that are spoken around its constituencies, namely Chewa, ChiBarwe, English, Kalanga, Khoisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sign Language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda, and Xhosa.<sup>1</sup> The country is divided into 10 provinces: Harare, Masvingo, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West (which is home to the majority of Shona speakers), Bulawayo, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Midlands (where people speak mostly Ndebele, Tonga, Nambya and Kalanga) and Manicaland (home of Ndau speakers). Shona-speaking Zimbabweans are in the majority across the country. Considering that speakers of Ndebele and other languages are the minority, they are forced to learn Shona and English in order to fit in living, working and

<sup>1</sup> Constitution of Zimbabwe: Final Draft (2013). [zimbabwe\\_constitution\\_final\\_draft\\_25\\_january\\_2013.docx\\_.pdf](#).

developmental spaces beyond their home localities.<sup>2</sup> Yet, commendably, Section 6 subsection 1 of Zimbabwe's 2013 constitution affirms that,

*(3) The State and all institutions and agencies of the government at every level must (a) ensure that all officially recognized languages are treated equitably; and (b) take into account the language preferences of people affected by governmental measures or communications. (4) The State must promote and advance the use of all languages used in Zimbabwe, including sign language, and must create conditions for the development of those languages.*<sup>3</sup>

It is evident and troublesome that English, which was introduced by colonialists, is still used as the main language in schools, and is the language that bestows power and prestige in Zimbabwe.<sup>4</sup> Shona and Ndebele are taught as subjects in areas where the majority of residents use these languages as their mother languages. The regionalised way Shona and Ndebele are taught in schools maintains the domination of Shona, because about 70% of the Zimbabwean population speaks Shona, 20% speak Ndebele, and 10% speak other languages.<sup>5</sup> This means that the majority of the Zimbabwean population, that is, the Shona-speaking citizens, are only exposed to the need to learn Ndebele and other languages when they relocate to Matabeleland and Manicaland provinces. Minority language speakers are forced to learn Shona and English in order to manoeuvre the linguistic spaces of work and marketplaces beyond their places of birth.

Considering that the Church has a diaconal role to serve as a voice for the voiceless, this paper calls for ecclesiastic engagement with the state to advance multilingualism. The paper starts by overviewing decoloniality theory, which is the bedrock of this submission. Subsequent subsections overview the linguistic context of Zimbabwe, review Church and national inclusivity and identify multilingualism and lessons relating to monolingualism from the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. It ends with the conclusion that multilingualism fosters unity and inclusivity in the midst of diversity. It calls on the Church to be a voice for the inclusion of voiceless minorities to achieve multilingualism in Zimbabwe.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Decoloniality Theory

The theory of decoloniality challenges continuing colonial power structures in the Global South. It critiques Eurocentric Western narratives and seeks to decolonise knowledge, being and power. It calls for the decolonisation of the political, environmental and socio-economic systems in which colonial aspects of exclusivity are still entrenched. According to Carvalhaes, 'when we speak of decoloniality, we speak of ways to detach and unlearn from the imperialist-colonizing movement that is still alive today, the civilizing and conquering forms of European renaissance and modernity'.<sup>6</sup> In this light, decoloniality theory reviews the way colonialism continues to shape modern political, economic, cultural, social and environmental life. It advocates for individuals and institutions to conduct themselves and their engagements in ways that suit their contextual identities, realities and needs. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, decolonial movements assumed

<sup>2</sup> Lulu Brenda Harris, "Emakhandeni-Luveve Legislator Calls for Amendment of Education Act to Promote Marginalised Languages," News, CITE, June 5, 2024, <https://cite.org.zw/emakhandeni-luveve-legislator-calls-for-amendment-of-education-act-to-promote-marginalised-languages/>; Raphael Nhongo and Baba Primrose Tshotsho, "The Problematics of Language-in-Education Policies in Post-Independence in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56, no. 6 (2021): 1304–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909620962529>; Lawton Hikwa, "Resituating Indigenous Languages and Identities as Outlined in the New Constitution of Zimbabwe: A Historical Analysis," *Journal of the South African Society of Archivists* 48 (2015): 90–104.

<sup>3</sup> Constitution of Zimbabwe: Final Draft.

<sup>4</sup> Wiseman Magwa, "Revisiting the Language Question in Zimbabwe: A Multilingual Approach to the Language in Education Policy," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 5, no. 2 (2010): 157–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2010.491915>; Khama Mashuro and Leonie Gysbertha Higgs, "Perceptions of English Language Learning and Teaching: Implications for Social Justice in Chivi District Primary Schools, Zimbabwe," *South African Journal of Education* 45, no. 1 (2025): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v45n1a2487>; Tendai Chirimaunga, "Language-in-Education Policies and Minority Language Resuscitation Efforts in Zimbabwe," in *Resuscitation of African Languages: Theorising the Battle Against Sociocultural Genocide*, ed. Isaac Mhute et al. (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-81716-8\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-81716-8_9).

<sup>5</sup> Sinfree B. Makoni et al., "Zimbabwe Colonial and Post-Colonial Language Policy and Planning Practices," *Current Issues in Language Planning* 7, no. 4 (2006): 377–414, <https://doi.org/10.2167/cilp108.0>; Maradze Viriri and Eunitah Viriri, "The Use of Shona as Medium of Instruction in Zimbabwean Primary Schools: A Case Study of Buhera South District," *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 4, no. 12 (2014): 2472–76, <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.4.12.2472-2476>.

<sup>6</sup> Claudio Carvalhaes, "Decoloniality: Theory and Methodology," *International Academy of Practical Theology. Conference Series, The Bible and its reception*, 6, vol. 2 (April 2021): 14, <https://doi.org/10.25785/iapt.cs.v2i0.206>.

various forms and terms, such as Ethiopianism, Garveyism, Negritude, Pan-Africanism, African socialism, African humanism, Black Consciousness Movement, and African renaissance.<sup>7</sup> Thus, unlike simple anti-colonialism, decoloniality was and is aimed at setting a new humanity free from racial hierarchies and asymmetrical power relations that have been in place since conquest. Similarly, Maldonado-Torres views decoloniality as the dismantling of power, knowledge and engagements that foster the reproduction of racial, gender, and geopolitical hierarchies that came into being through colonialism.<sup>8</sup> By understanding that the hegemonic promotion of particular languages in a multilingual context is a legacy of colonialism in Zimbabwe, this paper applies decoloniality theory to challenge monolingualism and bilingualism and calls for multilingualism.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a qualitative research design and a literature review methodology. A literature review is a critical exploration of published literature in view of a topic under study. In this case, academic and non-academic articles, books and related publications were engaged. A literature review is very important to any scientific research because it involves an in-depth analysis and synthesis of literature related to the research topic. A literature review will also ‘identify research gaps, engage in theory development, and map the development of a particular research field over time’.<sup>9</sup>

When used in multidisciplinary research such as this one, which interconnects dialectology with ecclesiology and bibliology, a literature review yields innovative engagements. This is supported by Mukherjee, who argues that “multidisciplinary literature reviews are essential for fostering innovation and addressing real-world problems. By integrating insights from multiple disciplines, researchers can identify new theoretical linkages, bridge knowledge gaps, and propose more comprehensive frameworks.”<sup>10</sup> In interfacing dialectology with ecclesiology and bibliology, this paper engaged with literature on linguistics in view of the theory of decoloniality as explained above. In order to draw biblical lessons for multilingualism, this paper interprets the story of the Tower of Babel and contextualises it to the case of Zimbabwe.

## DISCUSSION

### Locating the Languages of Zimbabwe

According to the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term linguistics refers to ‘the study of human speech, including the units, nature, structure, and modification of language’.<sup>11</sup> In this submission, linguistics is used with reference to the understanding and use of languages in Zimbabwe.

For contextualisation, this subsection locates languages in Zimbabwe. Kazunga,<sup>12</sup> Mpfu and Salawu<sup>13</sup> and Magwa<sup>14</sup> affirm that Zimbabwe is predominantly a multilingual and multicultural nation. This is why, as explained in the introduction of this submission, Zimbabwe recognises 16 official languages that are spoken in its different regions. Table 1 lists the official languages spoken in Zimbabwe.

<sup>7</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa,” *History Compass* 13, no. 10 (2015): 488, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12264>.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 240–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548>.

<sup>9</sup> Lawani-Luwaji Ebidor and Ilegbedion Godwin Ikhide, ‘Literature Review in Scientific Research: An Overview’, *East African Journal of Education Studies* 7, no. 2 (2024): 211–18, <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.7.2.1909>.

<sup>10</sup> Ujjal Mukherjee, ‘The Future of Literature Reviews: Enhancing Literature Reviews with Multidisciplinary Perspectives’, *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal* 29, no. 3 (2025): 8.

<sup>11</sup> “Definition of Linguistics,” Merriam-Webster, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/linguistics>.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver Kazunga, “Take Pride in Mother Languages,” *The Herald*, February 27, 2025, <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/take-pride-in-mother-languages/>.

<sup>13</sup> Phillip Mpfu and Abiodun Salawu, “Linguistic Disenfranchisement, Minority Resistance and Language Revitalisation: The Contributions of Ethnolinguistic Online Communities in Zimbabwe,” *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2018): 1551764, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2018.1551764>.

<sup>14</sup> Magwa, “Revisiting the Language Question in Zimbabwe.”

**Table 1: Official languages spoken in Zimbabwe**

Languages	Speakers and location	Approximate speaker percentage and status
English	English is the sole national official language of Zimbabwe. It is spoken by the majority of Zimbabweans. <sup>15</sup>	70%. Majority
Shona	Spoken by the Shona people in Mashonaland and all areas of Zimbabwe. <sup>16</sup> Shona is commonly used across Zimbabwe. <sup>17</sup>	70%. Majority
Ndebele	Matebeleland and Midlands. <sup>18</sup>	17%. Minority
Tonga	Matebeleland North and Midlands areas of Hwange, Binga, Gokwe North, Gokwe South, Nkayi, Lupane and Nyaminyami, <sup>19</sup> and some areas of Midlands. <sup>20</sup>	5%. Minority
Chewa	Spoken by descendants of Malawi. <sup>21</sup> Chewa speakers are scattered across Zimbabwe. <sup>22</sup> However, a number of Chewa speakers are located in Harare and Bulawayo townships, <sup>23</sup> and others in Mashonaland Central province. <sup>24</sup>	2%. Minority
ChiBarwe	Spoken by the Barwe people, who were originally from Mozambique. ChiBarwe is popularly known in Zimbabwe as Hwesa. Chiefly used in the north-eastern areas of Nyanga in Manicaland province, Mukwewa, Mukatsa, Mashumba, Sangoma and Mbiriya villages. <sup>25</sup>	0.5%. Minority
Kalanga	Kalanga is spoken by the Kalanga people in Matabeleland South and North Provinces. <sup>26</sup>	0.5%. Minority
Khoisan	Spoken by the Khoisan, who were the first Bantu people to settle in present-day Zimbabwe. <sup>27</sup> Most live in Tsholotsho. <sup>28</sup>	0.5%. Minority

<sup>15</sup> Maxwell Kadenge and Dion Nkomo, "The Politics of the English Language in Zimbabwe," *Language Matters* 42, no. 2 (2011): 248.

<sup>16</sup> Nesbeth Grand and Michael Mazuru, "The Interface of Language and History: The Case of Shona in Zimbabwe," *Greener Journal of Arts and Humanities* 3, no. 1 (n.d.): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.15580/GJAH.2013.1.011213368>.

<sup>17</sup> Trust Mavura, "Origins of the Shona. Untold History of the Shona," *History*, n.d., accessed June 16, 2025, <https://vocal.media/history/origins-of-the-shona>.

<sup>18</sup> "Ndebele in Zimbabwe," *Minority Rights Group*, n.d., accessed June 16, 2025, <https://minorityrights.org/communities/ndebele/>.

<sup>19</sup> Burzil Dube, "Tonga Language Is Not in Zambezi Valley Only," *News, The Standard*, July 18, 2021, <https://www.newsday.co.zw/thestandard/news/article/13713/tonga-language-is-not-in-zambezi-valley-only>.

<sup>20</sup> Dube, "Tonga Language Is Not in Zambezi Valley Only."

<sup>21</sup> Anusa Daimon, "Migrant Chewa Identities and Their Construction through Gule Wamkulu/Nyau Dances in Zimbabwe," Paper presented at the "Society, State & Identity in African History" 4th Congress of the Association of African Historians, Addis Ababa, May 22, 2007, [https://ir.uz.ac.zw/bitstream/handle/10646/555/Daimon\\_migrant\\_chewa\\_identities.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=](https://ir.uz.ac.zw/bitstream/handle/10646/555/Daimon_migrant_chewa_identities.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=).

<sup>22</sup> "Chichewa Language," *Ethnologue (Free All)*, n.d., accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/nya/>.

<sup>23</sup> Believe Mubonderi, "Prospects and Challenges of Revitalising a Cross-Border Language: A Study of Chichewa in Zimbabwe" (Doctor of Philosophy, University of South Africa, 2021), 15, <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/471e549a-cb5f-438a-91cc-c6e4e3464a69/content>.

<sup>24</sup> Mubonderi, "Prospects and Challenges of Revitalising a Cross-Border Language: A Study of Chichewa in Zimbabwe," 15.

<sup>25</sup> "Barwe in Zimbabwe," *UNESCO WAL*, n.d., accessed June 16, 2025, <https://en.wal.unesco.org/en/countries/zimbabwe/languages/barwe>.

<sup>26</sup> "Kalanga in Zimbabwe," *UNESCO WAL*, n.d., accessed June 16, 2025, <https://en.wal.unesco.org/en/countries/zimbabwe/languages/kalanga>.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Moyo, "Khoisans Are Zimbabwe's Forgotten Tribe," *Life, Africa, Anadolu Agency*, August 14, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/khoisans-are-zimbabwe-s-forgotten-tribe/2328025>.

<sup>28</sup> Thulani Dube et al., "Marginal Communities and Livelihoods: San Communities' Failed Transition to a Modern Economy in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe," *Development Southern Africa* 38, no. 6 (2021): 1031–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2021.1955660>.

<b>Languages</b>	<b>Speakers and location</b>	<b>Approximate speaker percentage and status</b>
Nambya	Used by people in the north-western areas of Zimbabwe. <sup>29</sup> Nambya speakers are originally from Hwange. <sup>30</sup>	0.5%. Minority
Ndao	Generally used by people in south-eastern Zimbabwe, in Chipinge and Chimanimani, as well as Bikita and the Zambezi valley. <sup>31</sup>	0.5%. Minority
Shangani	Spoken by Shangani people in the southern areas of the country, such as Chakalaka, Tshovani, Sengwe, Mpapa, Chilanga, Gezani, Ngwenyeni, Masivamele and Samu in Chiredzi district, Magodo, Nyajena, in Masvingo district, some pockets of Zaka district, and Chisanga, Maranda, Neshuro, Negari, Murove, and Fourmile in the Mwenezi district of Masvingo province. <sup>32</sup>	0.5%. Minority
Sign Language	Used by people with hearing impairments throughout Zimbabwe. <sup>33</sup>	0.1%. Minority
Sotho	Matabeleland and Masvingo provinces. <sup>34</sup>	0.3%. Minority
Tswana	Spoken by the Tswana people in Bulilima-Mangwe in Matabeleland South province, between the Zimbabwe–Botswana border. <sup>35</sup>	0.02%. Minority
Venda	Spoken by the Venda people in Matabeleland South. <sup>36</sup> The majority of Venda speakers are common in Beitbridge, Gwanda South, Mwenezi and Mberengwa districts. <sup>37</sup>	0.5%. Minority
Xhosa	Spoken in Bulawayo and some Matabeleland South areas. <sup>38</sup>	0.1%. Minority

All in all, I agree with Mpofo and Salawu that the majority of Zimbabwe’s minority groups, except for the Shona and Ndebele, contest for representation in public spaces such as the media, education and politics. ‘However, language use patterns and cultural representations in these domains demonstrate the supremacy of English, Shona and Ndebele and the marginalization and exclusion of ethnolinguistic minorities’.<sup>39</sup> The hegemonic use of English as the main language of instruction in primary and secondary schools and state working institutions, and the teaching of Shona and Ndebele in the areas where they are

<sup>29</sup>“Language,” Nambya, n.d., accessed June 16, 2025, <https://nambya.org/language/>; “San in Zimbabwe,” UNESCO WAL, n.d., accessed June 16, 2025, <https://en.wal.unesco.org/en/countries/zimbabwe/languages/san>.

<sup>30</sup> Vincent Nyoni and Godfrey Kazembe Tambulukani, “Identification, Description and Classification of Consonants and Vowel Phonemes in Nambya Language of Hwange District in Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe,” *International Journal of Science and Research Archive* 11, no. 1 (2024): 1029–41, <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2024.11.1.0019>.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Sibanda-Mzala, “The Ndao People of Zimbabwe,” *News, CITE*, November 8, 2024, <https://cite.org.zw/the-ndau-people-of-zimbabwe/>, <https://cite.org.zw/the-ndau-people-of-zimbabwe/>.

<sup>32</sup> Paddy Pacey, “Official Languages of Zimbabwe,” *Whole Earth Education*, March 9, 2022, <https://wholeeartheducation.com/official-languages-of-zimbabwe/>.

<sup>33</sup> Kimion Tagwirei, “Speaking in Signs: Communicating the Gospel with Deaf People in Zimbabwe,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42, no. 1 (2021): 1, Deaf people, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2322>.

<sup>34</sup> “Southern Sotho in Zimbabwe,” UNESCO WAL, n.d., accessed June 16, 2025, <https://en.wal.unesco.org/en/countries/zimbabwe/languages/southern-sotho-0>.

<sup>35</sup> “Tswana in Zimbabwe,” UNESCO WAL, n.d., accessed June 16, 2025, <https://ar.wal.unesco.org/en/countries/zimbabwe/languages/tswana>.

<sup>36</sup> Pacey, “Official Languages of Zimbabwe.”

<sup>37</sup> “Venda in Zimbabwe,” UNESCO WAL, n.d., accessed June 16, 2025, <https://ar.wal.unesco.org/en/countries/zimbabwe/languages/venda>.

<sup>38</sup> Pacey, “Official Languages of Zimbabwe.”

<sup>39</sup> Dumisani Dlodlo, “Mnangagwa Issues Veiled Threat against ‘Meddling’ Catholic Bishops,” *CITE*, August 19, 2020, <https://cite.org.zw/mnangagwa-issues-veiled-threat-against-meddling-catholic-bishops/>.

mostly used, in a multilingual context, is self-defeating. Furthermore, it contradicts section 6 subsection 1 point 3 to 4 of Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution, which stipulates that the state and all agencies and institutions of the government must ensure official recognition, treatment and promotion of all 16 languages that are recognised as official and used in Zimbabwe. The exclusion of minority languages from teaching, learning and working engagements in Zimbabwe fosters exclusion, discrimination and underdevelopment of Zimbabweans. Promoting all the languages spoken by citizens plays a significant role in achieving national inclusivity, which will be discussed next.

### **Significance of Multilingualism for National Inclusivity**

Languages are critical components of identity, culture, communication, knowledge, belonging, diversity, inclusion, mental health, social cohesion and development. Indigenous languages form the basis of national identity construction and preservation.<sup>40</sup> According to UNESCO, mother languages determine sustainable development.<sup>41</sup> In the Zimbabwean context, this study agrees with Dziva and Dube that fostering multilingualism is one of the missing links of the country's development.<sup>42</sup> In order to encourage and enhance inclusive participation by citizens in national development, Zimbabwe is propelled to move beyond mere ratification and take concrete steps towards implementation through translating national documents into minority tongues, revamping the education curriculum, public awareness campaigns on the Declaration [the 1992 UN Minorities Declaration], training lexicographers, minority sensitive budgeting and constitutionalism if they are to fulfil their obligations under the Declaration.<sup>43</sup>

Dziva and Dube assert, furthermore, that multilingualism embraces culture, language, religion, traditions, customs, and promotes unity, democracy, equality and state building.<sup>44</sup> Tshili reports that languages must be treated equally and promoted by being taught in schools, because languages transmit and preserve cultural heritage, knowledge, a vibrant multicultural society and involvement in national development.<sup>45</sup> Netsianda reports that indigenous languages are an integral resource for inclusive transformation, human capital development and sustainability: "the nation has been implored to harness indigenous languages as a resource to facilitate social transformation, human capital development and wealth creation. President Mnangagwa said this while officiating at the ongoing National Languages Conference in Victoria Falls yesterday."<sup>46</sup> This study concurs with Nhongo that multilingualism also sustains national independence, sovereignty, citizens' voices, cultural, educational, political, environmental and economic inclusion, literacy, recognition and development. Sadly, the likelihood of "coming up with a language policy in Zimbabwe is a myth because after all the declarations, suggestions, acts, and recommendations have been made, nothing has so far taken place regarding coming up with an official language policy."<sup>47</sup>

Yet, if multilingualism could be enacted, it would preserve marginalised languages from extinction and promote national inclusivity and development. It is retrogressive that the ruling powers that can develop policies for multilingualism 'find no urgent need to come up with such a policy because they do not see the necessity and because of the feeling that the English language acts as a unifying force in a multilingual country like Zimbabwe'.<sup>48</sup> It is undeniable that it is important for everyone in Zimbabwe to learn English, because they have to use it in today's globalised world. However, Zimbabwean citizens cannot be united by a foreign language at the expense of their own languages. This is why multilingualism matters. As Zimbabwe's constitution stipulates, all languages that are recognised in the country should be

<sup>40</sup> Dlodlo, "Mnangagwa Issues Veiled Threat against 'Meddling' Catholic Bishops."

<sup>41</sup> UNESCO, Languages Matter: Global Guidance on Multilingual Education (2025), <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/languages-matter-global-guidance-multilingual-education>.

<sup>42</sup> Cowen Dziva and Brian Dube, "Promoting and Protecting Minority Languages in Zimbabwe: Use of the 1992 UN Minorities Declaration," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 21, no. 3 (2014): 395–413, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-02103004>.

<sup>43</sup> Dziva and Dube, "Promoting and Protecting Minority Languages in Zimbabwe," 395.

<sup>44</sup> Dziva and Dube, "Promoting and Protecting Minority Languages in Zimbabwe."

<sup>45</sup> Nqobile Tshili, "Zimbabwe Achieves Indigenous Language Education Milestone - Herald," *Chronicle*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/zimbabwe-achieves-indigenous-language-education-milestone/>.

<sup>46</sup> Mashudu Netsianda, "Harness Indigenous Languages for Development," *The Herald*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/harness-indigenous-languages-for-development/>.

<sup>47</sup> Raphael Nhongo, "A National Language Policy for Zimbabwe in the Twenty-First Century: Myth or Reality?," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 4, no. 6 (2013): 1208–15, <https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.4.6.1208-1215>.

<sup>48</sup> Nhongo, "A National Language Policy for Zimbabwe in the Twenty-First Century," 1215.

treated, promoted and used the same way for the sake of inclusivity and development. The challenging situation is that the marginalised minorities whose languages are being neglected are poor, defenceless and helpless. They cannot speak out and stand for themselves. It is, therefore, crucial for the Church – the voice of the voiceless – to advocate for multilingualism and inclusivity in Zimbabwe. The problem of monolingualism and multilingualism is also reflected in the Bible, in the story about the Tower of Babel. The following subsection reviews it in order to draw lessons that can be applied in the Zimbabwean context.

### **Disengaging Monolingualism and Engaging Multilingualism from the Tower of Babel**

The Bible, in Genesis 11:1–9, recounts a thought-provoking story about the uniting and developmental power of language:

*<sup>1</sup> Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. <sup>2</sup> As people moved eastward, <sup>[a]</sup> they found a plain in Shinar<sup>[b]</sup> and settled there. <sup>3</sup> They said to each other, ‘Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’ <sup>5</sup> But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the people were building. <sup>6</sup> The Lord said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.’ <sup>8</sup> So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup> That is why it was called Babel<sup>[c]</sup> – because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there, the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.’<sup>49</sup>*

This case of the Tower of Babel suggests that monolingualism begets understanding, unity and unstoppable development. This researcher is aware that the Babel episode has been interpreted differently in different contexts. Nevertheless, he agrees with scholars such as Osselaer, who interprets it as a demonstration of the self-destructive pursuit of human grandeur that should be overtaken by submission to Jesus Christ, who is the gracious gift of God,<sup>50</sup> and de Bruin, who interprets it as ‘an etiology for linguistic and national diversity and as a warning against human arrogant audacity’.<sup>51</sup> These scholars agree that the Babel story relates the significance of language for unifying people; language should be used with humility for good, to promote inclusivity, and not for selfish purposes.

Using a single language to communicate indeed enhances communication, understanding, coordination and cooperation. God’s dispersion of the people away from the Tower of Babel was not punitive, but a gracious correction of human arrogance and an endowment of diversity through multilingualism. It is undeniable that English is accepted by many countries as a globalised language that the majority of humanity can use within and beyond their cultural and national boundaries. However, the fact that some people do not understand and cannot use English weakens the rationality of neglecting and destroying native languages. Promoting monolingualism, or bilingualism in a multicultural context, is exclusionary and self-defeating. There is more unity, power and developmental potential in multilingualism than in monolingualism or bilingualism.

Appreciating the diversity of ethnicities and languages by promoting multilingualism can unite people and promote inclusive development. Dragging people away from their cultures to embrace foreign languages cannot unite them. Instead, it defaces their identity and dehumanises them. Monolingualism and bilingualism have proved to be regnant in Zimbabwe, in the same way that led to the building of the Tower of Babel, which could not please God because it was inspired by pride and selfishness and a desire to make a name (Gen. 11:4–5). As indicated, it is clear that God did not disengage monolingualism to end linguistic unity, or the promising building, but to demonstrate His opposition to selfishness and pride.

<sup>49</sup> “Genesis 11:1-9 (New International Version),” Bible Gateway, accessed August 4, 2025, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%2011%3A1-9&version=NIV>.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas Osselaer, “Context for Confusion: Understanding Babel in the Book of Beginnings,” *Fidei et Veritatis: The Liberty University Journal of Graduate Research* 2, no. 1 (2018), [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/fidei\\_et\\_veritatis/vol2/iss1/3](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/fidei_et_veritatis/vol2/iss1/3).

<sup>51</sup> Tom De Bruin, “The Tower of Babel,” in *The Bible and Its Reception. Biblical Themes in Science Fiction*, ed. Nicole L Tilford and Kelly J Murphy (Society of Biblical Literature, 2023), 35.

Considering that multilingualism promotes selflessness and humility, this paper calls God's holistic missionary agent, the Church, to advocate for the disengagement of monolingualism and bilingualism in Zimbabwe. According to Tagwirei, 'the Church should be reminded and encouraged continuously to live out the word of God as His agent of an all-embracing mission to save the soul, the body, and everything that affects lives on earth'.<sup>52</sup> In this case, the Church should pressure the state and all government institutions to implement the nation's 2013 constitutional provisions (section 6) by ensuring the equal recognition, treatment, use and promotion of all the languages of Zimbabwe. By applying the diaconal dimension of *missio ecclesiae* about prophetically being the voice of the voiceless, ecumenical, denominational and para-church organisations, and all Church leaders and representatives can, and should, advocate for multilingualism, which advances inclusive development through unity in cultural diversity.

## CONCLUSION

The positive political talk of developing all constitutionally recognised languages in Zimbabwe, accompanied by a stagnant walk, is abortive and regressive. The issue of language in Zimbabwe is not just about communication, but also power, identity, belonging and justice. Continued privileging of the English and Shona languages in a multilingual and multiethnic context reflects arrogance and exclusivity. Yet, any country that really respects all its people should regard all their languages as equally important. There is a need for the Church to foster a theology of multilingualism that incorporates acceptance of diversity by promoting all languages in educational, social, ecclesiastic and all other sectors of the nation. Being the holistic missionary agent of God's transforming salvation, the conscience of society and having strong connections to communities, the Church can, and should serve as a voice for the voiceless, in this case by confronting prevailing linguistic exclusivity, influencing national policies on linguistics and fostering inclusivity in communities. In light of decoloniality theory, multilingualism can foster decolonisation for all in Zimbabwe. Thus, multilingualism is the delayed justice for all minority ethnicities whose languages are still respected in word while being disregarded in Zimbabwean identity and worldview. It is believed that the intervention of the Church can serve the linguistic heritage and bring about a more open society. The Church can use its networks, resources and moral voice to engage with the state and all other stakeholders, to serve as a voice for all and to foster linguistic inclusivity in Zimbabwe. Just like the old and public adage that silence in the face of evil is itself evil, not to speak is to speak and not to act is to act. The biblical Tower of Babel scenario is telling about the current language problem in Zimbabwe. Although the story can be seen as a mere description of how language diversity emerged, the overall message of the Tower of Babel relates to the way linguistic imperialism and cultural arrogance are a menace.

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<sup>52</sup> Kimion Tagwirei, "Doing the Word: Reawakening the Church to Save Society in Southern Africa," *Religions* 15, no. 5 (2024): 7, 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050608>.

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