

# Multilingualism in incarnational ministry: A quest to reach the neglected

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Language is a critical tool for communication. This article uses the autoethnographic methodology to describe the author's experience of language acquisition, which has influenced his understanding of multilingualism in incarnational ministry. He belongs to a missional order, InnerCHANGE, that uses an incarnational approach to ministry. InnerCHANGE understands incarnational ministry as a mission to meaningfully identify with people its members live among. InnerCHANGE's membership is of diverse backgrounds culturally. Multilingualism within the order and in ministry contexts in a way that makes communication smooth is still an ideal rather than a reality. This article asks how multilingualism could positively contribute to InnerCHANGE's quest for a meaningful incarnational approach. It found out that multilingualism could be a tangible act of equity and justice. It could also be a way to affirm diversity in a world that is constantly on a quest for a lingua franca, a contradiction to the event of Pentecost found in Acts 2. Finally, it could be an act of solidarity towards the valorisation of languages that some people see as inferior. It concludes by stressing that black Africans should be at the forefront of valorising their native languages in proudly using them and producing knowledge that could be shared with fellow Africans and non-Africans.

**Contribution:** This article intends to contribute to the ongoing debate on the relation of the gospel to culture. Its focus is on language, which is one of the components of a culture.

**Keywords:** diversity; justice; incarnational ministry; learn; multilingualism; solidarity.

## Introduction

Language is a critical tool of communication. It can be 'used either to limit or extend access, participation and opportunities' (Modise 2016:2). It is a catalyst of smooth communication, collaboration and interaction within an organisation, whether local, national or international. This article uses the autoethnographic methodology to describe the author's personal experience of language acquisition as a black African that has influenced his understanding of the importance of multilingualism in the missional team he belongs to in South Africa with a look to other teams around the world. He belongs to a missional order called InnerCHANGE. The latter has three teams in Africa and 16 other teams in other continents worldwide. In South Africa, it is based in the township of Soshanguve. InnerCHANGE membership is of diverse backgrounds culturally.

Autoethnography 'seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2010:1). It will allow the author to use 'tenets of autobiography and ethnography' to make his arguments about multilingualism (Ellis et al. 2010:1). He will reflect 'retroactively and selectively about past experiences' of language learning (Couser 1997:1). He will also reflect on his 'culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences' to help his readers understand his perspective (Maso 2001:1).

This article aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation on the relation of the gospel to culture in the field of missiology. It stresses that one of the ways the gospel could be meaningful to cultures is by making sure that it is relatable to them. Language is an important aspect of that relatability. Culture could be understood as 'the learned, shared behaviour of members of society' (Nicholls 2003:17). Language is one of the 'important aspects of a culture' along with aspects such as 'values, norms, roles and status' (Nicholls 2003:19). Language could foster a sense of unity, cohesion and connection to a common purpose in an organisation such as InnerCHANGE.

Challenges of communication among InnerCHANGE members occur regularly. InnerCHANGE also has members who serve in foreign countries. These members are expected to learn the language spoken in the context they serve in. In many instances, InnerCHANGE members are challenged to be multilingual to function well within their organisation and their ministry

contexts. Multilingualism is seen as an essential tool in incarnational ministry. The latter is InnerCHANGE approach to ministry. However, multilingual proficiency within the order and in contexts of ministry is still an ideal than a reality. Many InnerCHANGE members are still struggling to communicate with one another and others cannot speak the language of the context they serve in. This article is asking how multilingualism could positively contribute to InnerCHANGE quest for a meaningful incarnational approach? The InnerCHANGE founder defines incarnational ministry as 'a mission that envisions becoming like the people we are praying to reach' (Hayes 2006:16). This article argues that multilingualism could be a way to reach fellow members within an international organisation such as InnerCHANGE as well as residents of a context someone is called to serve in. This argument is influenced by the author's personal experience of language acquisition.

## Personal journey

The author was born in a multilingual context in the Congo (DR). As a child, he learned French and Kiswahili simultaneously. Kiswahili was the trade language in that context that the majority of the residents spoke and understood. French was the administrative language used in schools and offices. Congolese professionals (such as the author's parents) preferred to communicate with their children in French. Many other languages were spoken around the author, starting from his family home. His parents came from different ethnic groups and sometimes spoke their mother tongues with their relatives and friends. The author's ears got used to several of these languages that he could understand few words although he could only speak French and Kiswahili fluently. As a teenager, he learned Lingala for survival. Lingala was the language of the military. The latter was known for its abusive behaviour towards fellow citizens. Not knowing Lingala was almost a guarantee to be regularly abused by soldiers who only spoke that language to fellow citizens. The author also learned different languages in order to survive in some Congolese rural areas he worked in, in a few African countries he served in as a student minister and in South Africa where he lives. Currently, the author speaks nine languages, and he is still learning other languages to reach out to the people he serves. Language learning has had two meanings for the author: belonging and surviving. Some languages he learned made him belong to a certain family, class, society or organisation. He learned other languages to avoid abuse from people in power and adapt to living in foreign countries. His language learning and acquisition have led him to see multilingualism as a tangible act of equity and justice.

## Multilingualism as a tangible act of equity and justice

In the context the author grew up in as well as the townships where he serves, multilingualism is common and normal. In the township of Soshanguve, every resident is expected to be multilingual. Therefore, for someone to be seen as a resident

of Soshanguve, the ability to speak and understand several languages is expected. There is also a survival aspect to this expectation. The majority of the township workforce is required to know English and/or Afrikaans to secure and maintain jobs. Therefore, one could argue that English and Afrikaans are sometimes languages used for survival, whereas the mastering of vernacular languages has a belonging connotation.

Multilingualism is sometimes connected to the story of the Tower of Babel, which led to the 'diversity' of languages as a sign of punishment or curse from God (Mathews 1996:427). It is argued that through the tower of Babel, God orchestrated multiple languages so that humans 'can't communicate with one and finish the tower' (Bolinger 2019:1). In many ways, the tower of Babel has come to mean, 'confusion of languages' (Griffin 2021). This meaning has given a positive outlook to monolingualism. Such an outlook might have inspired the quest for a common language the whole world could communicate in. The use of *Latin* was such in the Roman Catholic Church. *Latin* 'has remained the official language of the church since the 4th century. In that century, Christians living in Rome adopted Latin and it became the church's language' (Reuters.com 2007). It is also during that century that Jerome published the Latin version of the Bible. Hence, he named 'his version Vulgate, meaning common' (Reuters.com 2007). Even during the Roman Catholic evangelisation of Africa, Latin remained the language used to conduct a mass (church service). The author was raised in a Roman Catholic family. He remembers hearing his grandparents and parents make comments about attending mass that was entirely conducted in Latin while they had very little understanding of Latin as a language. He grew up hearing his grandparents and parents sing Latin songs. They could not explain the meaning of all of them when asked. It is only in 'the last half of the 20th century that church services in the Roman Catholic Church began to be conducted in the vernacular' (Britannica.com 2021). In the west:

[T]he knowledge of Latin has remained the mark of an educated person. Latin borrowings are to be found in virtually all European languages as well as in the Berber languages of North Africa. (n.p.)

The officialisation of Latin by the Roman Catholic church highlights the reality of the superiority of some languages and the inferiority of others, which is unfair.

Another attempt at monolingualism could be seen with the creation of Esperanto (literarily meaning, one who hopes) as the world lingua franca. The dictionary defines Esperanto as 'an artificial language devised in 1887 as an international medium of communication, based on roots from the chief European languages' (Dictionary.com 2021). Esperanto 'was created by the Polish Zamenhof to be a universal second language after people's mother tongues for international communication' (Dean 2015). Zamenhof 'claimed that the grammar of the language could be learned in one hour, though this estimate assumed a learner with a background in European languages' (Dean 2015). The creation of this

so-called universal language did not take into consideration any African indigenous language.

Another attempt at monolingualism has to do with the view of English as the world lingua franca. English has 'emerged as the world "*lingua franca*" since the second world war' (Li 2003:33). It is currently 'the most widely used language in the world in international trade, diplomacy, mass entertainment, international telecommunications and scientific publications as well as publishing newspapers and other books' (Rao 2019:65). It:

[H]as become the fastest increasing language in the modern world and it occupies the status of a commercial language by connecting the east and the west and the north and the south. (p. 69)

It 'is spread all over the world into almost all the fields' of knowledge (Rao 2019:69). In trade, for example, 'common languages promote bilateral trade between countries' (Melitz 2016:583). Having a common trade language such as English is a boost towards smooth multilateral relationships. However, the prominence of one language over the others could have the danger of creating 'linguistic imperialism' (Phillipson 1992). It implicitly devalues other languages. In contrast to the spirit of linguistic imperialism, the event of Pentecost could be seen 'as a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel' (Stott 1990:68). Soal and Henry (2018:1) pointed out that the deliverance from that curse led to healing that started 'with the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church. Such a deliverance affirms the equality of all languages because they are all vehicles of communication with one another'. They affirm the importance of 'vernacular' languages alongside other languages (Archibugi 2005:537).

It seems like all African countries are multilingual, yet one could argue that all the languages do not have equal value like the event of Pentecost shows. The formal coloniser languages seem to be considered superior. The general public opinion is that they offer better prospects for jobs and opportunities for a good lifestyle. The researcher's parents certainly thought so; hence they spoke to him in French from as early as he can remember. Colonisation affirmed the 'superiority and inferiority' of some languages (Mohler 2015:1). Learning and mastering the superior ones was a pathway towards success in life. Such a mindset undermines indigenous languages. The superiority of some languages at the expense of others could be a catalyst of 'ethnocentrism and racism' (Davis 2003:104). For example, as English is perceived as the world's lingua franca, some people whose English is the first language may feel exonerated from learning another language even when they live in a context that is not primarily English speaking. This may be a challenge in an organisation such as InnerCHANGE in which the majority of its membership has English as their first language.

Multilingualism, especially establishing equity between African indigenous and western languages, remains a challenge even when policies are in place. Such is the case of

South Africa where the government promotes multilingualism. So far, these efforts have promoted 'English and Afrikaans at the expense of other languages and the dominating language becoming the standard of other languages' (Brand 2013:67). This sentiment is evident in the unfair:

[D]istribution of airtime on the television and radio stations...; equitable language use in the state organs such as parliament, government department and the courts; and the interaction between different language communities in the country. (p. 67)

Many South Africans still see 'language and confidence barriers' as an impediment to the reconciled society they desire (Potgieter 2017:8). This stresses the need for South Africans of different cultures to learn each other's languages to speed up the reconciliation they all desire. Learning 'a new language' could be a way to accept each other as fellow citizens (Marumo 2019:9). It would promote 'inclusion rather than exclusion' of others, especially the poor and the powerless (Marumo 2019:9).

International missional orders such as InnerCHANGE may also face the challenge of treating some languages of its members as superior to the others. It would be critical for it to treat the diverse languages within its ranks as equal so that some of its 'members don't feel excluded' from their organisation (Modise 2016:4). As part of the body of Christ, it needs to be seen treating all its members equally. The challenge is evident because all the team leaders are strongly encouraged to be fluent in English for smooth communication and exchange of resources between peers. Therefore, a requirement for multilingualism among its members could be a way for InnerCHANGE to affirm diversity. A solution could be for each member or team to commit to learning a language western or not, to reach out to their fellow members from a different background or the people they feel called to living among. As a missional order that is committed to live out the good news of the gospel, an effort to learn a new language could communicate honour to people from a certain context or consideration of fellow members. 'Honour and consideration' are some of the fundamental ways the gospel should always relate to culture (Nicholls 2003:203). Honour and consideration should also be encouraged in the fostering of organisational culture. The effort of learning a new language could encapsulate someone's desire to be considerate and honouring of others. Rohall, Milkie and Lucas (2021:167) stated that 'we use language to give meaning to everything in our lives and to the world around us'. An effort to learn a new language could communicate someone's desire to see an equitable world around them. Language in itself is related to 'human action, thought and culture' (Stainton 1996:15). It could also be a tangible communicator of 'the heart' of an organisation in seeking justice and equity within its membership (Stainton 1996:15).

Inspired by the world history of language hierarchy, the InnerCHANGE South Africa team decided to use Sotho as its

main language of communication. Sotho is the majority of its members and residents' first language. This has meant that the author and those from outside South Africa who want to join the team have to learn Sotho in order to function smoothly. A personal sacrifice and regret the author has about this decision is that he chose to teach Sotho to his children rather than teach them French or Kiswahili, his native languages. His children have been raised in Soshanguve and are fluent in Sotho. They have been some of the author's language teachers.

InnerCHANGE South Africa is constantly challenged to grow, network and tap into resources beyond the township of Soshanguve. Knowing English is critical for that to happen. Therefore, it stresses the learning of English as a tool to be connected to a world bigger than our township. As an incarnational team, InnerCHANGE South Africa must be rooted in the world around it. *Sotho* is a critical tool to allow that to happen. It is equally critical for InnerCHANGE South Africa to be rooted in the world beyond the township it serves in. English is a critical tool to catalyse it. In order to live out the value of being rooted in the world around it, InnerCHANGE South Africa members do some writings and readings in *Sotho*. InnerCHANGE South Africa strives to become a 'knowledge-maker' in vernacular in small, yet significant ways through the drama group, tutoring clubs and mentoring groups it runs (Jansen 2007:129). The team believes in 'an open South African society' where there is no superior or inferior language, just languages used to communicate among human beings (Jansen 2007:129). The use of diverse languages is a way to affirm such an open society.

## Multilingualism as an affirmation of diversity

The event of Pentecost in Acts 2:1–12 shows that one of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit is multilingualism. At Pentecost, the holy spirit 'enabled various languages to be spoken by the disciples and understood by the hearers in their mother tongue' (Davis 2003:5). The event affirmed diversity. Every Christian community is expected to affirm the diversity within its ranks. Nowadays, 'diversity is a fact that cannot be denied' (Mohler 2015:1). It seems like 'we are living in an age of increasing diversity; not just the world at large but even in our nation and communities' (Mohler 2015:1). The incarnational ministry work InnerCHANGE is committed to in South Africa and elsewhere around the world does 'not exclude anyone because of their skin colour, language, culture or continent of origin' (Kabongo 2018:4). The exclusion can unintentionally come from the language barrier when it comes to live out its foundational biblical passage of Micah 6:8 'to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God'. The resources connected to this passage are mainly in English. There is an effort to translate some of these resources into Spanish because InnerCHANGE has teams in three Latin American

countries. Some of its teams based in the USA work primarily with Latino immigrants. However, a growing number of local leaders have come out of Africa who are not fluent in English and do not know Spanish. They are excluded from accessing the resources that could enable them to thrive. Such a challenge could affect their understanding of what it means to be aligned to the organisation, and the outcome of their efforts could be inadequate in terms of what is expected of them. As mentioned in Latin and Esperanto, African indigenous languages seem to be overlooked in InnerCHANGE.

Such a realisation has challenged InnerCHANGE South Africa to start translating these InnerCHANGE resources in Sotho. So far, the translating has only been done orally. The team would like to translate in writing for the wider dissemination of these resources. The team is also learning to practically affirm the diversity of languages found in the township of Soshanguve. The latter is an acronym of four groups of languages: Sotho (so), Shangani (sha), Nguni (ngu) and Venda (ve). Although Sotho is its main language, other languages are allowed on its team of staff and volunteers. Interpretation is always provided when someone cannot understand a certain language. Language learning in itself has cognitive benefits. It improves someone's 'cognitive and sensory' procession of information (Marian & Shook 2012:1). It also improves someone's 'attention to details' (Marian & Shook 2012:1). Also, individual InnerCHANGE South Africa team members are learning new languages in order to reach out to as many people as possible. They see this effort as an act of solidarity.

## Multilingualism as an act of solidarity

Solidarity is usually associated with social activism. However, intentionality to learn as many languages as possible to smoothly communicate with others could also be seen as an act of solidarity. The latter can be understood as an intentional act of rallying 'together with fellows around' a cause (Biko 2007:156). The cause to rally behind, in this case, is that of establishing an equal value to all languages. Soal and Henry (2018:2) pointed out Genesis 1–3 as the foundation of 'intercultural communication and fellowship' because they pointed out how God created human beings to build relationships of equity and solidarity with their fellows. Language could be a tangible tool to live out this foundation. In a context such as South Africa, it could 'develop the critical solidarity' to build a reconciled nation (Ramphele 2017:129).

For an organisation such as InnerCHANGE, it could be a prophetic stance of affirming every human being as a beloved child of God in a world that has normalised the alienation of other people's cultures and languages. In this world, the powerful often makes the narcissist decision about which language is the best to learn. A desire to learn a new language could be connected to a desire to build a

humane society where communication among fellow human beings is smooth. In this era characterised by nationalism, tribalism and ethnocentrism, 'the fruit of the Spirit should surely be desired to bridge all the linguistic divides' and uphold each other's languages with respect (Keener 2007:7). The church could lead the way in challenging itself 'to be an inclusive institution without any unfair discrimination' (Modise 2016:3).

## Conclusion

This autoethnographic article stressed the importance of multilingualism in the relationship between culture and gospel. Its focus was InnerCHANGE, an international missional order. It saw multilingualism as an act of equity and justice. This act of equity and justice could be strongly expressed if black Africans prioritise the oral and written use of their heart languages. It would also be shown through learning any language for the sake of smooth communication between people. InnerCHANGE South Africa is learning to emulate such acts of justice and equity. However, its efforts are still a work in progress. It hopes that its efforts affirm the cultural diversity found in the world around it. This article challenged InnerCHANGE as an international missional order to develop a language policy that would affirm its diversity and challenge members to consider learning new languages as an act of solidarity towards their fellow members or neighbours.

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K.T.L.K. is the sole author of this article.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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