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Mitigating Post-Apartheid Xenophobic Violence Through Language

By Chimaobi Onwukwe

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Both countries should strengthen bilateral dialogue, cooperation and cultural exchanges.**
- **The South African Department of Home Affairs should encourage** potential legal migrants to learn and use South African languages. It should also include language testing (ability to speak any South African language) to the requirements for naturalization with all privileges and rights.
- **The South African Government should enact laws** punishing any form of segregation and discrimination particularly against migrants on the basis of language differences and ensure compliance by South African government law enforcement agencies in the townships and suburbs of all provinces.
- **The Nigeria Government should ensure** that the Nigerian Diaspora Commission regularly organizes enlightenment campaigns for immigrants particularly in multilingual and multicultural societies on the need to integrate into linguistic and host-societies.
- **Civil Society Organizations should launch campaigns** targeting second generation migrants i.e., children of Nigerian families who reside in South Africa through sociocultural organizations such as the 'Association of Nigerian nationals in South Africa,' as well as 'Enyimba group' (a sociocultural organization of Nigerian Igbo migrants who were born and raised in Aba in Southeast Nigeria) to adopt, learn, and use at least one South African language.

This policy brief draws on field-based research on multilingual practices and identity navigation among Nigerian Igbo migrants, their motivations for their language use/choices and how these relate to evading xenophobic violence in South Africa. It also makes recommendations for mitigating the effects of xenophobic violence.

LANGUAGE PRACTICES AND IDENTITY NAVIGATION AMONG NIGERIAN MIGRANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Post-apartheid xenophobic violence is an enduring challenge in South Africa. Following the end of Apartheid rule in 1994, and contrary to expectations, incidents of xenophobia increased. Between 2000 and March 2008, at least 100 people died in xenophobic attacks.¹ Some South Africans blame migrants for social ills; from economic stagnation and disease outbreaks, to crime, human and drug trafficking. Migrants (including the large Nigerian Igbo migrant community) face formidable challenges of navigating economic and social pressures in a society saturated with codes, whilst also trying to avoid identification as 'foreigners' against a backdrop of xenophobic violence.

Nigerian Igbo migrants employ a range of multilingual practices to navigate the social and identity pressures including language learning (primarily South African *isiXhosa* language and to a lesser extent *Afrikaans*), as well as *isiXhosa*-influenced speech stylization. A number of factors motivate and/or facilitate the practices, including attempts at integration, to secure a livelihood and personal safety. This relates to the broader underlying threat (perceived and otherwise) of violent crime and insecurity associated with xenophobia. Jacob (pseudonym), a medical doctor, explains how understanding *isiZulu* helped him evade a possible attack:

"I was in one local town like that in this area and some locals who had come for medical check-up were narrating how another local was killed"

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by a foreigner in Joburg. I was able to pick that cos I could understand a bit of Zulu. So, I quickly finished with them and left. I was told after I had gone that some locals came there looking for me. Hmm!"

The 'othering' of Nigerian and other African migrants in business ventures and formal activities occurs in both the city center and suburbs. Interviews reveal that language is not only central in the identification of potential targets for xenophobic attacks, but also impacts on patronage. Ada (pseudonym) who owns a small shop in Maitland narrates her experiences below:

They will come here and speak their language to you. When you don't respond, they walk away and will not visit your shop again. And your shop becomes a target of their petty crime or looting when there is xenophobic violence.

The use of *isiXhosa* functions as a signifier for the one who is familiar with and savvy about his environment. This is a point made by Emeka, another respondent:

We also suffer from subtle xenophobic attacks often in form of extortion, humiliation, and bullying by some South Africans especially in some townships and this often happens once they can identify you as a foreigner.

Nigerian Igbo migrants employ speech stylization also known as "'marking' or copying a language variety out of context to index a type of person who is different from the speaker and/or intended hearers,"² to mitigate the effect of xenophobic violence. For example, the ability of Nigerian migrants to produce clicks (a consonant sound that is part of sound inventory of South African languages such as *isiXhosa*, *isiZulu*) when they occur in *isiXhosa* words for example is considered a sign of integration. It allows for identification with the larger South African (multilingual) linguistic community and their linguistic markedness may facilitate avoidance of the 'foreigner tag.' This is made explicit in Chidi's response below:

We not only try to speak their language; we also try to speak like them. I don't know what it is called. But when you speak Xhosa and make such sounds, they know you have arrived. Like you are part of the place.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how the language experiences of Nigerian immigrants has become a strategy for mitigating post-apartheid xenophobic violence in South Africa. Though operating largely at the personal and community level, Nigerian immigrants' language practices provide a space for navigating identity dilemmas. Language practices therefore offers some scope for mitigating the impact

and effect of the xenophobic violence and should be taken more seriously by policymakers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Both countries should strengthen bilateral dialogue, cooperation and cultural exchanges**

To government agencies and civil society organizations

The South African Department of Home Affairs should:

- Encourage potential legal migrants to learn and use South African languages.
- Should include language testing (ability to speak any South African language) to the requirements for naturalization with all privileges and rights.

The South African Government should:

- Enact laws punishing any form of segregation and discrimination particularly against migrants on the basis of language differences and ensure compliance by South African government law enforcement agencies in the townships and suburbs of all provinces.

The Nigeria Government should:

- Ensure that the Nigerian Diaspora Commission regularly organizes enlightenment campaigns for immigrants particularly in multilingual and multicultural societies on the need to integrate into linguistic and host-societies.

Civil Society Organizations should:

- Launch campaigns targeting second generation migrants i.e., children of Nigerian families who reside in South Africa through sociocultural organizations such as the 'Association of Nigerian nationals in South Africa,' as well as 'Enyimba group' (a sociocultural organization of Nigerian Igbo migrants who were born and raised in Aba in Southeast Nigeria) to adopt, learn, and use at least one South African language.

¹ Hashi K. Tafira, *Xenophobia in South Africa: A History*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

² M. Morgan, "More than a mood of an attitude: Discourse and Verbal Genres in African American English," in Salikoko Mufwene et al (eds.), *African American English: Structure history and Use*. New York: Routledge, 1998, pp251-281.