

COVER INTERVIEW

opening communications

Nhlanhla Thwala, director at the Wits Language School, advocates multilingualism as a critical tool for economic growth in Africa. By KERRY DIMMER

Up to 3 000 languages and dialects are spoken in Africa. This makes the continent one of the most linguistically complex environments in which to drive business. Some five decades after the settlers left, the continent is still divided according to the colonial language spheres: francophone (French); lusophone (Portuguese); anglophone (English); and Arabic Africa. In East Africa, Swahili has evolved into a power language equal to the colonial ones. It transcends national boundaries and serves as a regional lingo that aids trade and complex social relations. Similarly, in West Africa Hausa has power status as it also dominates trade, religious and social interactions.

Some see the language tapestry and heritage of the continent as a problem that impedes economic development and business growth, but Nhlanhla Thwala of the Wits Language School has a very different perspective.

'Businesses can complain about the African environment ad nauseam or they can work within the language parameters of the continent. It is all a question of attitude and pragmatism. The businesses that will benefit from the projected economic growth of the continent in the coming years will adapt to the language terrain. They will ensure that their products and services are linguistically

accessible to different language speakers and the markets they represent.'

Thwala says although the African language terrain may be daunting to businesses because of its numbers and the markets each represent, there is a way of reducing the complexity to a more manageable level.

'There are three layers of languages that are important to business in Africa. The first is the language of government interactions and international business trade in a region or country. This is usually one of the power languages – French, English, Portuguese, Arabic, Swahili and Hausa. The second is the language of regional/country trade. The third is the language of each locale – that of the customer or end user.

'Smart businesses ensure they are fully aware of all three language layers and tailor their business and communication strategies to suit the environment. Each language layer has a strategic role to play,' Thwala says. 'The power languages enable basic connections with government, business partners and the locals, including those employed by businesses as local representatives. The regional language enables access to a broader network of clients, suppliers, media outlets, service providers and partners. The language of the locale enables sales of

products and services to consumers who otherwise generally cannot speak a power language or the regional language.'

Successful trade ultimately depends on understanding customers' needs and offering them services in a language they understand. Enterprises who want to succeed and be economically viable on the continent need to communicate in their customers' languages.

'Language barriers may limit the way in which we relate and operate and businesses should always be alert to that,' says Thwala. 'In South Africa, for instance, it has been recognised that communication skills are vital to business success. Mining houses Gold Fields and Amplats have committed to phasing out the use of Fanakalo after finding that, far from facilitating communication, Fanakalo was retarding effective communication of key concepts like workplace rights and responsibilities, collegial relations and empathy,' he says.

It is becoming increasingly evident that speaking a local language or one language of power may not be adequate. The key is multilingualism as it increases the ability to communicate with a larger pool of people. Outside Africa, language tuition is a multi-billion dollar industry, with the main languages being English, Spanish, Portuguese and French. However, Africa is

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yet to appreciate the value of language, for example, the way teaching and learning to communicate impacts on economic growth. Language can transcend cultural differences and motivates career development.

Communication skills are not only advantageous to international business opportunities. Facilitating communication among Africans is a major communication task, especially in cross-border trade. The centrality of language in Africa has resulted in an increasing need for services specialising in languages, communication, translation and interpreting. This is the niche in which Wits Language School specialises.

Run as a separate entrepreneurial entity to its host, the University of the Witwatersrand, (better known as Wits), the Wits Language School focuses not only on the promotion of learning various languages (African, Asian, and European, and South African sign language), but also concentrates on courses that improve proficiency in English for professionals and tertiary students. It trains language teachers and offers courses that enhance the academic English skills of under- and postgraduate students. Courses in translation and interpreting are also on offer.

Overall communication is highlighted, which is why Thwala highly recommends that African businesses wishing to expand and take advantage of the growth trend

predicted for the next 10–20 years develop a communication strategy. Elements of that strategy must ensure that management and employees speak the languages of power, region and locale. Where this is impossible, the strategy must make use of experts, such as translators and interpreters.

‘The field of translation and interpreting may appear to be somewhat invisible on the continent,’ says Thwala, ‘but there is a great deal of it going on, particularly in retail, mining, construction, telecoms and in governments. For those who do not have the luxury of time to learn a new language, for instance within diplomatic circles where understanding is crucial, having a proficient translator or interpreter at hand is the next best solution.’

This is where WITStranlate excels. WITStranlate is the school’s professional services agency. Its network of highly-trained and skilled translators and interpreters offers a wide range of services that include translation, interpreting, voice-overs, transcriptions, proficiency testing, proof-reading, editing and copywriting. All these services are provided in more than 26 international languages including French, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Swahili, Shona and Bengali.

Specialised fields such as translation and interpreting are developing rapidly across the continent. Popular careers such as doctor, engineer or lawyer are perhaps considered

the most honourable but Thwala insists that even less prominent careers, such as those in translation and interpreting, have enormous value in the economy and should not be underestimated.

Wits Language School also provides translation and interpreting courses to an international student base. The school has world-class trainers who not only teach the essential skills but provide important professional networks.

‘The Wits Language School has a global attraction so our strategy is to have a presence in the entire SADC region within the next eight years,’ says Thwala.

‘Currently, the school is versatile and flexible enough to respond to any clients’ needs for language tuition or translation and interpreting services, wherever in the world they may be,’ he adds.

‘The Wits Language School provides a platform for continuous education, be it for part- or full-time study. Our language courses are taught interactively by mother-tongue speakers. In all our courses, our highly professional teams specialise in reducing obscure theoretical concepts to the practical.’

Investing in language and communication skills may just be a huge catalyst for competitive advantage, especially when considering the long-term growth of Africa and the inherent desire to maximise returns for all businesses. **AD**