SWiP project to champion SA's indigenous languages online

By Birgit Ottermann , issued by North-West University (NWU)　　　　　　　　　　26 Oct 2023

"The dislocation of our languages is perpetuated by not having pride to speak one's own mother tongue. We can only say a language is developed when it has doctors, professors, writers and artists who write down their work, poems and songs in isiNdebele. I am grateful for the support and efforts to develop our language to be an equal to others."

These were the words of His Majesty iNgwenyama Makhosonke II, King of the Ndebele Kingdom, who joined other dignitaries at the launch of a new collaborative initiative by the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR), Wikipedia, and Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), aimed at promoting indigenous South African languages on Wikipedia.

IsiNdebele has been selected as the pilot language for the SWiP project (as it is known in short), since it is currently one of the indigenous African languages that seriously lack content representation on the free encyclopaedia platform.

In his address at the launch event, which took place on 20 September 2023 at the University of South Africa's (Unisa) Muckleneuk Campus in Pretoria, the king gave a brief history on amaNdebele in his mother tongue and highlighted the Ndebele Kingdom's contribution to the SWiP project.

The launch event programme, directed by Vusi Mtsweno, Gauteng Province Language committee member – isiNdebele, and Mmasibidi Setaka, SADiLaR's digital humanities researcher – Sesotho, was interspersed with items of traditional dancing, and a beautiful poetry performance by praise poet Audrey Skhosana.

'Create the content you want the world to see'

In her welcome, Prof Zodwa Motsa Madikane, Unisa's vice principal of teaching, learning, community engagement and student support, expressed her delight at the project: "We are a diverse people in South Africa. I am delighted about this project that brings forth one of my oldest dreams to see African languages marry technology," she said. "As the University of South Africa, we pride ourselves in all the official languages of the land, and I am overjoyed to see technology give space to our languages."

Prof Langa Khumalo, executive director of SADiLaR, said in his address that it was very symbolic to have the entire Royal House of the Ndebele Kingdom at the launch to celebrate the elevation of a language that has been missing from the global community of languages.

"Today we are celebrating the elevation of isiNdebele into the community of languages that sits in the cyber infrastructure. And, we are challenging the speakers of the language to be the creators of the content that they want the world to see in isiNdebele," he said. "It is up to us to start thinking about our languages first: how they communicate our world view; how they represent our culture; and how they advance our human progress. We can never innovate anything as long as we use European languages as additional languages."

Advancing all of SA's indigenous languages online

While the SWiP launch event shone a spotlight specifically on isiNdebele to encourage the Ndebele people to actively participate in contributing content to Wikipedia, the SWiP project is aimed at promoting all of South Africa's indigenous languages online. It does so by bringing together communities of indigenous language users and giving them the skills to create and review content on Wikipedia. In doing so, they collectively increase their respective languages' digital footprint.

"We have to reimagine the way we are teaching African languages, and the way we are training graduates for the future," Khumalo remarked. "Our country has excellent language policy frameworks. But these legislative pieces haven't yet enabled real transformation. Let us unlock the knowledge in our languages and share it, so that the world can be better. You yourself have to stop and say: I think in my mother tongue; I dream in my mother tongue; I teach in my mother tongue, and I innovate in my mother tongue. During Heritage Month, let us be reminded that our culture is not only something from the past: it is a lived culture in the present, and it should continue to be so in the future."

'Just start writing'

Bobby Shabangu, president of Wikimedia ZA (which is responsible for the South African chapter of Wikimedia), lamented that the digital footprint of South Africa's indigenous languages, and indeed African languages as a whole, is almost non-existent.

"There is a dearth of content from the African continent. Why? Because Africans are not contributing any content online. Yes, we are consuming content, but we are not writing any. People have forgotten how to write, especially young people; and words are getting lost. My advice is to just start writing. Other people can improve on it.

He revealed that there currently is a very small number of people in South Africa who contribute to Wikipedia. "With SWiP, we want to change that by building an active community of Wikipedia contributors that also includes members from the underrepresented communities e.g. women, and the LGBTQI+. We will be going to a number of universities across South Africa where we will be running training workshops of two to three days. This will involve registering for a Wikipedia account, learning about creating and editing content on Wikipedia and its rules, and enabling the Wikipedia translation tool where participants can proofread and correct translations.

SADiLaR researcher selected for Open Seeds OLS-8 cohort
Birgit Ottermann, North-West University (NWU) 6 Oct 2023

ChatGPT in your mother language requires data

"Our indigenous languages are under immense pressure," says Dr Friedel Wolff, technical manager at SADiLaR. "When you take out your cell phone from your pocket, it doesn't speak your own language to you. Instead, it speaks English, and we build our whole lives around it. Open science is great but it doesn't appear out of thin air. We need to accumulate data first. For example, there are some amazing artificial intelligence tools out there, like ChatGPT, but it cannot train in your language if there is no data available. And, the more data we can create, the better it will become."

Wolff explains that SWiP's objective is to provide the building blocks and train indigenous language speakers to contribute content to Wikipedia: as writers, editors and also as trainers. "We cannot take our languages into our future, if we don't have enough accessible data."

'For a language to flourish, it must be actively used'

In his speech, the chief executive officer of PanSALB, Lance Schultz, emphasised the importance of being intentional in preserving South Africa's indigenous languages and developing a digital footprint for them. "The fourth industrial revolution (4IR) has been with us for a while already. We have to be very intentional about 4IR so that children all over the country can understand what it means for them.

"The regression that we have with languages is in our own hands – it goes back to our communities and the importance of mother tongue education. For a language to flourish, it must be actively used. One cannot separate the development of a language from its usage. Since younger people primarily access media digital, creating an online presence is crucial for the survival of our languages."

"Today marks a momentous occasion as we launch this flagship project in partnership with SADiLaR and Wikipedia," Schultz continued. "The SWiP project is dedicated to digitising indigenous languages, fostering community participation and promoting active citizenry in our country. Our ultimate goal is to build a robust repository of all our indigenous languages and achieve our goals, as set out in the global action plan for Unesco's International Decade of Indigenous Languages, to raise global awareness of the critical situation facing our indigenous languages, and to mobilise stakeholders and resources for their preservation.

'The loss of any language, is a loss of humanity'

"What an appropriate time to launch this project, during Heritage Month where South Africans are celebrating their distinct culture, heritage and languages," Dr Hatu Machaba, director of the terminology coordination section at the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, remarked. "Languages must be preserved. Because apart from them being a medium of communication, they embody unique cultural wisdom of a people. Languages are also crucial in marking one's identity.

"Once a language disappears or is extinct, we lose much of the culture, history and heritage of the people who spoke it. Unesco sums it up very nicely by saying: the loss of any language is a loss of humanity. It's a reality that languages go extinct if measures are not put in place to preserve them," she says.

According to Machaba, government has made a concerted effort to develop and preserve technical terminology in all of the official languages in order to empower these languages to be functional in technical domains, such as the economy, education, and science and technology. These multilingual technologies are preserved and easily accessible to the public via the department website, as well as SADiLaR's Language Resource Repository.

"Government has already achieved some milestones in developing, promoting and preserving the official languages of the country, however, a lot still needs to be done. And, working together with institutions of higher learning, language and cultural institutions, and all formations that champion the development and preservation of indigenous languages, we can do more."

The SWiP project launch was livestreamed on YouTube. Watch the recording here.

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