Babel’s Tower

South Africa’s Wikipedias
“New SA” since 1994; 11 constitutionally equal languages:

- English: colonial/global
- Afrikaans: creole
- 9 Bantu languages*, most also used elsewhere:
  - Nguni language group (4)
  - Sotho/Tswana group (3)
  - TshiVenda
  - XiTsonga

*Having various degrees of KhoiSan influence e.g. clicks
Historical Trajectories:

- Afrikaans: First written in Arabic script in early 1800s; Bible translated 1923; official status 1925.
- Bantu languages transcribed by missionaries from mid-1800s – rival denominations/nationalities; quasi-official status under apartheid; official status 1994.
Historical Trajectories:

- Neville Alexander’s 1991 proposal for standardisation of Nguni & Sotho/Tswana groups would have meant 6 national languages instead of 11.
- The only KhoiSan language extant in SA (Nama) has about 300,000 native speakers straddling SA/Namibia/Botswana borders; perhaps 60,000 in SA itself. It has official status in Namibia.
The actual Wikipedias...

- Afrikaans 50,000
- SePedi 8,050
- IsiZulu: 959
- IsiXhosa: 738
- SeTswana: 641
- XiTsonga: 562
- SeSotho: 539
- SiSwati: 439
- TshiVenda: 256
The potential Wikipedias...

- IsiNdebele: Incubator
- KhoiSan: Discuss!
Contributors (cumulative)
Contributors (B. lang. only)
Ways Forward...
Technical

- Machine-assisted translation
- Wikidata-derived article placeholders etc.
- Accessibility/Affordability:
  * Zero-rating?
  * Kiwix etc.
Ways Forward...

2. Policy/marketing/outreach

- Events: transport, refreshments
- Educational & cultural authorities: lobby them!
The Struggle of Small and Non-Western Wikipedia Editions

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Abstract  The online encyclopedia Wikipedia has become one of the most influential Internet platforms on the World Wide Web and is currently the sixth-most visited website overall. For smaller languages, creating their own Wikipedia editions can constitute a tremendous boost to their general online presence. This paper investigates whether Wikipedia’s internal structure and culture is really inclusive in its treatment and representation of minority, endangered, regional, and non-Western languages. The paper argues that Wikipedia and, indeed, the Internet itself favor Western, mainstream languages and content and thus make it almost impossible for smaller languages to achieve a meaningful online presence.
Thanks,
Enkosi, Dankie!