

Ethnolinguistic vitality in Thulamela Local Municipality: A case of Xitsonga



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The use and status of a language in a given speech community can reveal the prospects of its elevation or lack thereof. Furthermore, one can determine whether a language will be elevated or undermined in a community by exploring the perceptions of its speakers towards its status and use. Hence, this article investigated the status and use of Xitsonga at the Thulamela Local Municipality (TLM) in the Limpopo province of South Africa, with particular interest in the Vatsonga's perceptions of the ethnolinguistic vitality of Xitsonga in the TLM. Guided by the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory, this article probed the demographics of Xitsonga in the TLM, explored the role played by the TLM authorities in promoting Xitsonga as a language, and highlighted the implications of the perceived ethnolinguistic vitality of Xitsonga in the TLM. The study employed a qualitative method to collect data through face-to-face semi-structured interviews from 13 Xitsonga L1 speakers who participated in the study. It was found that Xitsonga speakers preferred to be addressed in their language during the municipality's formal gatherings – a courtesy they believe is both effective in and necessary for the preservation and promotion of Xitsonga at the TLM. Also noteworthy, despite Xitsonga being dominated by Tshivenda in the TLM, Xitsonga speakers nevertheless maintained positive perceptions towards their language. This is commendable, considering that the TLM is located in Thohoyandou, the economic hub of Vhembe District, where there is a university, malls and shopping complexes – spheres that encourage acculturation and language shift.

Contribution: The findings of this study may contribute to the ongoing discourse on the equal use, preservation, and promotion of indigenous languages in South Africa.

Keywords: language shift; Xitsonga; minority languages; language perceptions; vitality.

Introduction

This article aimed at determining the perceptions of Xitsonga first language (L1) speakers towards the ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) of Xitsonga in the Thulamela Local Municipality (TLM). The TLM is one of the four local municipalities located in the Vhembe District Municipality of the Limpopo province, South Africa (Moloto & Khalo 2017). Other municipalities in this region are the Makhado Local Municipality (MaLM), Collins Chabane Local Municipality (CCLM), and Musina Local Municipality (MLM) (Dau 2010). The TLM is located in the Thohoyandou township, one of the major economic hubs of the Vhembe District, which is situated near the University of Venda. Both the township and the University of Venda attract diverse people from different contexts (Ladzani & Sengani 2021). As a result, the TLM is a multilingual and multicultural municipality, housing a number of languages, such as Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, English, Afrikaans, and some languages from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Eswatini (Ladzani & Sengani 2021).

Background

Although both Tshivenda and Xitsonga are recognised as official languages in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996b), Tshivenda is perceived as an indigenous language of the Vhavela who reside in Thohoyandou and other parts of the Vhembe District. An indigenous language in this regard is a language that is spoken by the indigenous people of a region. There are also Xitsonga, Sepedi, Afrikaans, and English speakers in the TLM and the CCLM. English, Afrikaans, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga were the languages of the defunct Bantustan Venda and Gazankulu Administrations before South Africa attained its democracy in 1994 (Phaswana 2005). These languages continue to be spoken as official languages in democratic South Africa. Xitsonga is a language of the minority in TLM. An official language is essentially the language that is used by the government for official purposes. Despite the TLM being a multilingual and multicultural area and Tshivenda being spoken by a majority of the residents at TLM, English is still used as the

main *lingua franca* of this municipality (Mashele 2022). The hegemony of English and other languages such as French and Portuguese is notable in most parts of the African continent (Kangira 2016). However, in the TLM, it is not only the English language with a superior status, Tshivenda being the language of the majority also has prestige over other languages such as Xitsonga and Sepedi. This ultimately results in the other languages being marginalised and to some extent even facing prospects of endangerment and extinction in the near future. Other factors such as globalisation, L1 speakers' negative attitudes towards their mother tongue, economic factors, a lack of will by state officials to promote indigenous languages, colonial language policies, and linguistic neo-colonialism contribute to the marginalisation of indigenous languages (Maqadzhe 2019; Makamu 2009; Prah 2006, 2009; Sibanda 2019). This marginalisation often results in these languages being identified as minority languages (Hang'ombe & Mupande 2020). Minority languages are essentially 'characterised by weak or non-dominant positions compared to other languages, and low status and limited use in public and official spaces' (Maseko 2021:187). Xitsonga is a minority language in the TLM and this encouraged the current researchers to investigate the perceptions of the Vatsonga towards the EV of Xitsonga in the TLM. The objectives of the investigation were to, (1) explore the perceptions of Xitsonga EV in the TLM; and (2) explore the implications of the perceived EV of Xitsonga in the TLM. However, prior to that, it was important to reflect on the term 'EV'.

Literature review

Towards an understanding of ethnolinguistic vitality

In a setting such as the TLM, it may be relatively easy or convenient for the speakers of minority languages such as Xitsonga to shift from speaking their languages and adopt the language(s) spoken by the majority, that is Tshivenda and English, owing to these languages' 'relative demographic and functional subservience' (Maseko 2021). Language shift occurs when a community increasingly uses more of a particular language at the expense of another language (Maseko 2021). This shift may result in the endangerment or even extinction of a language, especially if such a language is not used for official purposes, as its speakers may view it as either inferior or worthless because of its functional limitations (Ditselê 2014:1). Implied here is that, for a language to survive in any context, its speakers must strive towards its preservation and elevation by using it unashamedly across the various spheres of society. This essentially typifies an EV (Karan 2011). Such a vitality can be ascertained in a context such as the TLM, with particular focus on a language such as Xitsonga. Karan (2011) proffers that surveying ethnolinguistic vitality is an intrinsically complicated task. EV may be directly tied to language shift or to the absence of a language shift. This is perhaps why Karan (2011) further posits that language shift and EV ought to be addressed from the micro- and macro-societal view, with personal inspirations considered as keys while language shift

entails the compilation of individuals' daily decisions concerning language use. The values behind individual motivations are best understood, and even perhaps influenced, when they are treated as belonging to the society, and not an individual. Yagmur (2011) pointed out that EV and its relationship to language maintenance as well as the shift of minority languages have been researched in different multilingual contexts.

Yagmur (2011) and Ehala (2011) conducted their studies on EV and its relationship to the language maintenance and shift of minority languages. Yagmur (2011) notes that the year 2011 marked the 50th anniversary of Turkish migration to Western Europe, and that, despite half a century of being in European countries, Turkey's integration remains dominant in the social and political agenda of the host society. The signature of work agreements with various Western countries in the 1960s was the first step towards linguistic preservation for the Turks. Yagmur further avers that, unlike many other European guest workers, the migration of workers to Turkey was planned. The Government of Western Europe and the Government of Turkey reached a bilateral agreement that these workers would be temporarily hired. Recruitment contracts were made in 1961 in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Austria in 1964, France, Australia and Sweden in 1965 and 1967. The immigrants were perceived as merely 'guest workers', with the Western European government taking no serious consideration of them. As such, most Turkish immigrants were left alone, relying on each other for any form of help required. However, during this time, language issues played a serious role, both in the payment and integration process, resulting in the Turkish immigrants devising strategies of language preservation and maintenance even amid threats of language endangerment, shift, and death.

Ehala (2011) studied language vitality and observed that in a context where one, two, or more linguistic groups co-exist, there is the likelihood of one group's language gaining more prestige over the other group or groups. With this increase in prestige comes a secured linguistic vitality whereas for the group whose language has a lesser 'social premium', the vitality of its language is largely weakened. Ultimately, such a group would have to decide on whether it proactively promotes and preserves its language or to abandon its language in favour of the dominant one. Therefore, the vitality or weakness of a language is determined by several factors, such as constitutional, governmental, political, and economic support; however, the responsibility lies mainly with its speakers' willingness to use it across various spheres of society.

In the African context, manifestations of language shift, endangerment and death are also notable. In Kenya, for instance, 'over eight languages are endangered among them [being]: Terik, El Molo, Ogiek, Omotik, Bong'om, Sogoo, Suba and Yaaku. Some of these languages have already been classified as being extinct by UNESCO' (Wamalwa & Oluoch 2013:258). In Ghana, a highly multilingual community on the

west coast of Africa, the number of languages that are spoken in the country has been put between 45 and 80 (Bodomo, Anderson & Quartshie 2009). However, different scholars have provided varying numbers because it is sometimes quite difficult to draw a clear distinction between what should count as a language, and what should count as dialects of other languages (Mafela 2010). Ghana's indigenous languages can be categorised into 10 major language groups or, more language subgroups, but these groups do not conform to a one-to-one matching with the 10 regions of the country. In addition to these indigenous languages, Bodomo et al. (2009) state that there are other West African languages spoken in Ghana, such as the Chadic language, Hausa, and some Mande languages, whose status as indigenous languages seems to be debatable. While it is true that some of the more acceptable indigenous languages spread continuously into Ghana's immediate neighbouring countries where they are also regarded as indigenous, the geographical distribution of Hausa within West Africa, for instance, shows that it is completely cut off from major Hausa speaking areas such as northern Nigeria and Niger. This is suggestive of a migration from a clearly identifiable distance that most speakers of the language regard as their traditional homeland. Further evidence that Hausa may not be indigenous to Ghana lies in the fact that the language is mainly popular in the migrant quarters known as 'zongos', where many immigrants shift from their own languages to speaking Hausa mainly, and English, if they have been to school.

In Botswana, Letsholo (2009) investigated the likelihood of a language shift (or loss) from Ikalanga (a minority language spoken in Botswana) to either Setswana or English. The population of the study was 17–25 year olds. It was found that Ikalanga (as opposed to indigenous languages such as Khoe and Shekgalagadi) was not threatened by imminent loss, although there were clear signs of a gradual shift to Setswana. This conclusion was drawn based on the language used by the informants. The results also showed that the informants often use Setswana, even in areas where they must use Ikalanga. Although the study area was characterised by language diversity (Ikalanga, Setswana, English), it was evident that there was not as much enthusiasm in teaching children Ikalanga, compared with Setswana and English. Some respondents also expressed negative feelings about their use of their native language when interacting with non-native speakers of the language (Letsholo 2009). In Zimbabwe, the status of languages spoken in the country, particularly Tshivenda, Xitsonga and Pfumbi is characterised by discrepancies and inequalities, much of which is attributable to the hegemony of English, Shona and Ndebele (Madlome 2018).

The attainment of democracy in South Africa, and consequently the adoption of the Constitution in 1996, gave Xitsonga, alongside other South African indigenous languages, a national official status (Maqadzhe 2019; South African Constitution 1996a). Among the provisions of the Constitution of South Africa (1996a) is that all South African languages should be expressed equally and should receive

equal respect and fair treatment, especially at the local level such as in local governments. Hence, the Constitution mandates local municipalities to identify local languages and use them in the provision of municipal services and should take the necessary steps to develop and promote these languages (Davhana 2015; Mwaniki 2004; *Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000*). In addition, Section 6 (4) of the Constitution (RSA 1996a) requires national and local governments to coordinate and track the use of official languages to ensure equal treatment and fair expression. The two terms 'equality' and 'fairness' refer to the equivalent status and level of language use. The fact that ministries and other public authorities have to develop their own language policies seems like a loophole to avoid liability. Nevertheless, Section 6 of the Constitution provides an important legal framework for multilingualism, the recognition of official languages, and the promotion of respect and acceptance of South Africa's linguistic diversity (RSA 1996b). It explains the linguistic rights of residents that must be respected through the national language policy.

To ensure linguistic equality and democracy, South Africa's Constitution further recognises the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) (1995), which consists of three structures that fulfil different responsibilities; namely, 9 Provincial Language Committees (investigating language rights violation complaints lodged with the Head Office of PanSALB); 13 National Language Bodies (which are responsible for the standardisation of rules, spelling, and orthography of each South African official language); and 13 National Lexicography Units (that deal with the compilation of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries). The National Department of Arts and Culture allocates funds to PanSALB, which reports directly to Parliament and provides services across the country. Thus, one of PanSALB's responsibilities is to encourage multilingualism. The Board's functions, as defined in *PanSALB Act No. 59 of 1995* and its Amendment *Act No. 10 of 1999*, are:

'[T]o provide for the recognition, implementation and furtherance of multilingualism in the Republic of South Africa; and the development of previously marginalised languages; to establish a PanSALB; and to provide for matters connected therewith.'

The South African National Language Policy Framework (NLPF) is closely related to the functions of PanSALB.

The South African Government through National Department of Arts and Culture on 12 February 2003 adopted the NLPF whose aims are to:

Promote the equitable use of the 11 official languages; facilitate equitable access to government services, knowledge and information; ensure redress for the previously marginalised official indigenous languages; initiate and sustain a vibrant discourse on multilingualism with all language communities; encourage the learning of the official indigenous languages to promote national unity, and linguistic and cultural diversity; and promote good language management for efficient public service administration to meet client expectations and needs.

In addition to the foregoing aims, the principles that undergird the NPLF's operation include: (1) commitment to the promotion of language equity and language rights as required by a democratic dispensation; (2) recognising that languages are resources to maximise knowledge, expertise, and full participation in the political and socio-economic domains; (3) working in collaborative partnerships to promote constitutional multilingualism; (4) preventing the use of any language for the purposes of exploitation, domination, and discrimination; and (5) enhancing people-centredness in addressing the interests, needs and aspirations of a wide range of language communities through ongoing dialogue and debate. Furthermore, the *Use of Official Languages Act No.12 of 2012* in Section 2 states that the objectives of the Act are to:

- Regulate and monitor the use of official languages for government purposes by national department.
- Promote parity of esteem and equitable treatment of official languages of the republic.
- Facilitate equitable access to services and information of national government.
- Promote good language management by national government for efficient public service administration and to meet needs of the public.

Use of Official Languages Act No.12 of 2012 Section 5 mandates the minister to: (1) establish a National Language Unit (NLU) in the Department, and (2) to ensure that the NLU is provided with human resources, administrative resources, and other resources necessary for its effective functioning. *Sections 6, 7 and 8 of the Use of Official Languages Act No 12* lists the functions of NLU, namely to:

Section 6:

- Advise the minister on policy and strategy.
- Regulate and monitor the use of official languages by national government for government purposes.
- Promote parity of the Republic and facilitate equitable access to the services and information of national departments, national public entities and national public enterprises.

Section 7:

- Liaise with and promote the general coordination of language units contemplated in Section 7.

Section 8:

- Promote good language management within national departments, national public entities and national public enterprises on the functions of language units contemplated in Section 8.
- Perform the functions provided for in Section 8 for the department.
- Perform any other function that the minister may prescribe.

Needless to say, if citizens were aware of their linguistic rights, they would agentively demand services from their local municipalities in the languages of their choice. Hence,

Madonsela (2012) is not impressed by how language issues are handled in the new democratic dispensation of South Africa. He argues that the main purpose of formalising 11 languages is to promote and develop the historically marginalised ethnic languages of South Africa, as opposed to the apartheid policy, which marginalised and repressed all ethnic languages. Furthermore, Madonsela (2012) contends that establishing language units in various institutions and giving PanSALB the authority to intervene in the design and execution of language policy might result in considerable advances in the inclusion of African languages. Therefore, if such measures are implemented, language professionals such as translators, interpreters, editors, and terminologists, will be in high demand to develop and promote previously marginalised languages such as Xitsonga.

Theoretical framework

This article is underpinned by the ethnolinguistic vitality theory (EVT), which emphasises, among other aspects, status variables, demographic variables, and institutional support factors, pertaining to the vitality of language or lack thereof. In Giles, Bourhis and Taylor's (1977) framework, such status variables involve the economic, social, socio-historical, and language status of the group within or outside the mainstream community. Demographic variables are aspects related to the number and distribution patterns of ethnolinguistic group members throughout a particular region or national territory. Demographic variables also include the birth rate, the group's rate of mixed marriages, and the patterns of immigration and emigration. Institutional support factors refer to the extent to which a language group enjoys a formal and informal representation in the various institutions of a community, such as mass-media, education, government services, industry, religion, culture, and politics. The model argues that these variables that shape a language's vitality, provide an 'objective' picture of the group as a collective unit. Furthermore, Bourhis, Giles and Rosenthal (1981) propose that group members' subjective vitality perceptions may be as important as the group's 'objective' vitality.

To take into account the individuals' perceptions of the societal conditions influencing them, Bourhis et al. (1981) constructed the subjective ethnolinguistic vitality questionnaire (SEVQ) to measure how group members actually perceive their own group and outgroups along important vitality dimensions. The key prediction of EVT is that community languages with a high EV will be retained, while those with a low EV will tend to be replaced by the mainstream language. Compared with other models, EVT and its accompanying instruments provide a broader and more inclusive framework for the investigation of language maintenance and shift.

Fishman (1972) proffers that the more the speakers of a language, the more the value and the status of the language rise, and that, the more crucial the language is to the group, the more likely it is to survive. Giles et al. (1977) believe that ethnolinguistic minorities with less or no group vitality will eventually cease to exist as distinct groupings. The best way

to maintain the language of the community is for parents to tell their children about it, including teaching them to embrace their language and be proud of being a mother tongue speaker of Xitsonga (see Maseko 2021). In other words, when parents and other community members teach and show children the importance of the promotion and development of African languages, children will be motivated to study them. One of the ways through which people can be motivated to value and celebrate their indigenous languages is by surveying the language's vitality amid factors that threaten its existence. The application of EVT to such a survey is one of the effective ways through which perceptions of a language's vitality can be determined. Hence, EVT became relevant to this study because it helped the researchers to assess the EV of Xitsonga in TLM. The theory also helped the researchers to determine whether or not the institutional support provided to Xitsonga in TLM guaranteed both its current and future vitality in the area.

Methodology

To determine the EV of Xitsonga in TLM, a purposive sampling technique was adopted to identify individuals who would be helpful in providing answers to the researchers (De Vos et al. 2013). Qualitative in approach, the study used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to collect the data. Thirteen ($n = 13$) Xitsonga L1 speakers (six females and seven males) aged 18 years and above from the TLM participated in the semi-structured interviews. The participants were divided into different age groups, that is 18–29 years, 30–40 years, 41–50 years, 51 years and above. Table 1 shows the coding system for interview participants' demographic profile.

Data were analysed using the thematic analysis technique; common patterns, themes, and categories helped the researchers to generate insights from the data for discussion and analysis as well as drawing conclusions and making recommendations (Trichom 2006).

Findings

This section presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews held with the participants and the analysis of the findings. The section comprises the interview questions, the

TABLE 1: Coding system for the profile of the interview participants from the Thulamela Local Municipality.

| Interviewee codes | Gender | Age range | Home language |
|-------------------|--------|-------------|---------------|
| RF1 | Female | 19–29 years | Xitsonga |
| RF2 | Female | 19–29 years | Xitsonga |
| RF3 | Female | 19–29 years | Xitsonga |
| RF4 | Female | 30–40 years | Xitsonga |
| RF5 | Female | 41–50 years | Xitsonga |
| RF6 | Female | 30–40 years | Xitsonga |
| RM1 | Male | 19–29 years | Xitsonga |
| RM2 | Male | 19–29 years | Xitsonga |
| RM3 | Male | 19–29 years | Xitsonga |
| RM4 | Male | 30–40 years | Xitsonga |
| RM5 | Male | 19–29 years | Xitsonga |
| RM6 | Male | 19–29 years | Xitsonga |
| RM7 | Male | 19–29 years | Xitsonga |

participants' responses, and a discussion of their responses as the findings of the study. The participants' responses were categorised into major themes that emanated from this study. The first question of the interviews was, 'Would you advise someone to study Xitsonga as a language at a university?' All the participants (RF1, RF2, RF3, RF4, RF5, RF6, RM1, RM2, RM3, RM4, RM5, RM6 and RM7) answered 'yes'. To elaborate on this answer, one respondent explained:

'I would advise him/her to choose it out of love and put more time and effort, pursue it as any other course. I would advise him/her to never take it for granted because it is an African Language, and lastly, I would also advise him/her to ask for mentorship from those who have studied it before.' (RF1, Xitonga, Female)

One of the objectives of this study was to explore the perceptions of EV of Xitsonga in TLM and the implications thereof. The given responses reveal that Xitsonga L1 speakers from the TLM had positive perceptions towards Xitsonga as their mother tongue, as confirmed by the qualitative data presented here. The respondents agreed that they would unambiguously advise someone to study Xitsonga at university. This is in consonance with the findings of studies conducted by Mphaphuli (2019), Ditselê (2014), and Dyers (1999), who reported that students hold positive attitudes towards their home languages. Such students were in favour of the use and development of African languages at a tertiary level. They also believed that studying African languages at institutions of higher learning would assist them in getting jobs (Moodley 2000). In the case of this study, the participants believed that studying Xitsonga at university, for instance, would sustain their language at TLM because they are minority speakers. This finding reveals that the participants had an intrinsic motivation to learn, preserve, and promote Xitsonga to avoid language loss or language death.

The findings further indicated that the survival of Xitsonga did not depend on the support of the municipality but on the users and speakers of the language themselves. Implicit here is that the speakers perceived themselves as possessing the power to either build or kill Xitsonga as a language in the TLM. These findings concur with the submissions of EVT pertaining to the three magnitudes of socio-structural variables, which might influence EV in a community; specifically: demography, status, and institutional support (Giles et al. 1977). The findings are also consistent with those of Makuwa (2017), whose study also reported that people would feel more comfortable communicating in their own preferred language as this assists one to make better choices. After responding to the first question, the participants were asked, 'How often do you speak your language when you are out of your home town/village?' Most participants (RF1, RF2, RF3, RF6, RM1, RM2, RM4, RM6 and RM7) said that they always used their home language whenever they were out of their hometown or village. However, RF4, RF5, and RM5 said that they did not use their language when they were outside their hometown or village. To this effect, RM3 said: 'I always speak Tshivenda because I spend much more

time with Tshivenda speaking communities than Xitsonga speaking communities.'

The findings revealed that a majority group (nine) of the participants preferred to use their first language when they were out of their hometown or village. On the contrary, a minority group (three) of the participants indicated that they did not spend much of their time using their first language when they were out of their hometown or village. To this end, one participant reported that, 'I always speak Tshivenda because I spend much more time with Tshivenda speaking communities than Xitsonga speaking communities.' Furthermore, the findings revealed that Xitsonga L1 speakers believed that Xitsonga is an important language in the TLM, and that regardless of the separation of the two municipalities, CCLM and TLM, Xitsonga-speaking people will always be available in this municipality. Therefore, their language should be accorded the recognition and promotion it deserves as an official language in South Africa. In view of this, the participants were further asked, 'Do you think that Xitsonga is an important language here at Thulamela Local Municipality? Why is it so? Explain.' Most of the participants (RF2, RF3, RF4, RF5, RF6, RM1, RM2, RM3, RM4, RM5, and RM6), answered: 'Yes' and further stated that:

RM1: 'Xitsonga will always be important in this municipality because some of us were born and raised in Venda. We have never stayed in the [Vatsonga] part or area. So, Xitsonga will always be important here in TLM.'

RM2: 'Because we are also residents in this municipality.'

RM3: 'Regardless of the separation of the two municipalities, Collins Chabani Local Municipality and TLM, Xitsonga-speaking people will always be available in this municipality.'

RM4: 'Because as a native speaker of Xitsonga I can only express myself well using my language.'

RM6: 'Xitsonga is a language of [the] minority, but it is needed in this municipality.'

RF1: 'No. Because I do not think Xitsonga is an important language in TLM although it is important to those who use it as a home language and also to those who are willing to learn it.'

RF2: 'Because I am a resident under this municipality so I deserve to be addressed by my L1.'

RF3: 'Even though we understand Tshivenda, there are particular terms and sayings that we do not understand. So, our language is also important in this municipality.'

RF4: 'As long as there are Xitsonga L1 speakers in this municipality our language will always be important.'

RF6: 'Because we were born in this place and it is going to be hard for us to be separated with this municipality that has the Tshivenda tribe as a majority group.'

RF7: 'No, because it is not used more frequently.'

The researchers wanted to find out if the Xitsonga speaking community thought the TLM treats Xitsonga as an important language. The study revealed that Xitsonga L1 speakers at the

TLM not only had a positive attitude towards their language, but also saw it as a valuable language. This shows an emotional attachment to the Xitsonga ethnic group at TLM, similar to the findings by Ehala (2011), who asserts that emotional attachment gives a language a high vitality among the in-group ethnic group. The next interview question was, 'What are your most important Xitsonga programmes on television or radio that you do not want to miss?' The majority of the participants (RF1, RF3, RF4, RF5, RF6, RM2, RM4, RM5 and RM6) said that their most important Xitsonga programmes are *Ngula ya vutivi*, *Phaphama* and *Giyani Land of Blood*. On the other hand, RF2 and RM7 said that their most important Xitsonga programmes are *Vusaseki* and Xitsonga news:

RM1 said that 'Dzumba na mina it is a programme of my choice at Munghana Lonene' whereas RM3 said: 'I always listen to Phalaphala FM.'

Vatsonga found that TLM still listens to their favorite programmes on radio stations like Mungana Lonene. A radio station represents an institution for the vitality of a language and its maintenance (Giles et al. 1977). Institutional support is pivotal in helping language maintenance as also to change the attitude towards its use in different spheres. This finding shows that Vatsonga from TLM perceive Xitsonga in a positive light, as they continue to listen even to a South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) radio station. The following interview question posed to participants was, 'Do you think the local municipality is doing enough to promote local languages, such as Xitsonga?' Six participants (RF1, RF5, RM1, RM2, RM3, and RM7) answered 'Yes', agreeing that the municipality was doing everything in its power to promote Xitsonga. However, seven respondents (RF2, RF3, RF4, RF6, RM4, RM5 and RM6) answered 'No', indicating that language discrimination was taking place in the TLM. This was because the municipality is located in Venda, where Tshivenda is spoken by the majority of residents. The dominance of Tshivenda is further aided by the availability of community radio stations such as Vhembe FM, Energy FM and one SABC radio station that broadcast in Tshivenda.

The interview moved from language and media to the local municipality and language application by asking, 'How important it is to have documents from Thulamela Local Municipality available in your home language, that is Xitsonga? Elaborate.' All the participants said that it is crucial to have documents from TLM written in Xitsonga because it would be a sign of linguistic recognition. In this instance, RF1 stated:

It is very important because people who cannot understand English or other languages will be able to read and understand because the message will be delivered in their language. It is very important.

In consensus with RF1, RM5 said that:

It is vitally important to have documents from TLM written in Xitsonga because the fact that someone can understand Tshivenda from a verbal point of view does not necessarily mean that one can read and understand Tshivenda.

In addition, RM3 averred that:

Every language contains those difficult terms that are not easy to translate without proper guidance or education; financial terms and political terms, for example.

The participants stated that it was vital to have documents from the TLM written in Xitsonga because this would be a sign of recognition and linguistic equality. To this effect, RF1 mentioned that:

It is very important because people who cannot understand English or other languages will be able to read and understand because the message will be delivered in their language. It is very important.

Moreover, the findings revealed that having documents from the TLM written in Xitsonga would contribute immensely to the promotion and preservation of both Tshivenḁa and Xitsonga in the municipality. It was also stated that, just because someone could understand Tshivenḁa from a verbal point of view, it did not necessarily mean that they could read or write Tshivenḁa. Therefore, it was imperative that each speech community in the TLM be addressed in its own mother tongue.

The interview then inquired about participants' viewpoint regarding municipality support in the sense that, 'Do you think Xitsonga can die when it is not getting enough support from the municipality? Explain.' Eight participants (RF1, RF2, RF3, RF6, RM3, RM4, RM6, and RM7) said 'No'. RF2 added that, 'The maintenance of Xitsonga does not depend on the municipality but depends on the users of the language; they have the power to kill or to build their language'. On the other hand, (RF4, RF5, RM1, RM2 and RM5) said 'Yes'. RM5 went on to say that, 'Xitsonga can die because other languages will be dominating more than Xitsonga. This may make Xitsonga L1 switch to speaking the dominating language(s)'. The speakers of Xitsonga in TLM believe that the survival of a language depends of the attitude of its speakers. Giles et al. (1977) and Ehala (2011) support this statement with their outlook that the vitality of a language does not necessarily depend on the number of its speakers, but emotional attachment also play an important role. If speakers benefit from the existence of a language, that is benefit the speakers economically, the language stands a chance to survive (Ehala 2011). Finally the interview inquired, 'When Thulamela Local Municipality officials host campaigns/rallies, which language(s) would you like to be addressed in? Explain.' Most of the participants (10), said that they would like to be addressed in Xitsonga as their L1. On the other hand, RF1 and RM2 said that they would prefer to be addressed in English as a language that accommodate everyone. However, RF2 said that:

This will depend on where these campaigns and rallies are hosted. Since TLM includes both Xitsonga speakers and Tshivenḁa speakers, they should consider both languages, Xitsonga and Tshivenḁa, depending on the location.

In accord with RF2, RM5 said:

Regardless of the number of Xitsonga speaking community attending the rallies and campaigns, the municipality should always bear in mind that Xitsonga speaking people will always

be there and it might happen that it is only one attending. In that case, that one person deserves to be addressed in his or her L1.

Xitsonga L1 speakers preferred to be addressed in their first language in formal gatherings. The findings further revealed that the usage or non-usage of Xitsonga depended on where the formal gathering were hosted. However, the participants were adamant that because the TLM includes both Xitsonga speakers and Tshivenḁa speakers, the TLM officials should consider using both Xitsonga and Tshivenḁa. Some participants added that, regardless of the number of Xitsonga L1 speakers who attend the rallies and campaigns, the municipality should always accommodate Xitsonga-speaking people linguistically, even if only one Xitsonga L1 speaker is in attendance.

Recommendations

Emanating from the literature review and interviews with the Xitsonga L1 speakers in the TLM on the EV of Xitsonga, the following recommendations are made:

- The South African national, provincial, and local governments should consider developing an all-inclusive bottom-up approach, instead of an exclusive top-down approach to the promotion and preservation of autochthonous languages (Maseko 2021; Maseko & Mutasa 2019; Ndhlovu 2008). The approach should be an open and all-encompassing consultation with various concerned parties (parents, teachers, learners, civil society, policy analysts, researchers, etcetera) of Xitsonga in TLM. A more people-oriented language policy grounded in people's experiences and desires will result in successful language maintenance.
- Thulamela Local Municipality must do away with the pecking order of languages to create an equitable and fair linguistic landscape. This can be performed by actively, not just prescriptively, using all indigenous official languages as media of communication in the study area (Sithole 2019). This will ensure that no language is used and promoted at the expense of another official language in TLM.
- The necessity of active advocacy work and crusades for linguistic equality cannot be overstated. Cooperative efforts should be exerted with bodies, that is PanSALB, NLU, among others, involved with similar or related work of cultural and linguistic kind to elevate minoritised or marginalised languages in TLM.
- Motivated by the political will to promote marginalised and minoritised languages, budgetary support and resource mobilisation, precisely from South Africa's Ministry of Sports, Arts and Culture, should also be reflective of the state's intent and commitment to eradicate linguistic minoritisation and marginalisation.
- There should be in-depth and broad research on the pros of using indigenous languages as media of communication across all the social spheres of influence in TLM. The findings and recommendations of such research could help TLM to develop a fair and equitable approach to language use, one that practically celebrates and promotes its unique linguistic heritage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the objectives of the article have been accomplished. Xitsonga L1 speakers at TLM positively perceive their language, as they regard it as a tool for their identity formation. It is language that can make them survive economically, that is they have an emotional attachment to it. They desire that their language be preserved and promoted in the TLM, and as far as it depends on them, they are perpetually striving to have their language recognised and used even in a linguistic landscape that is not necessarily conducive to their language. Xitsonga L1 speakers are unlikely to let their language perish at the TLM since they have a strong emotional bond with their language. Their desire to preserve and promote their language was evinced by their pleas to be addressed in their language in the formal gatherings, campaigns, and rallies hosted by the municipality. For the Vatsonga, the valuation of their linguistic heritage is evidently clear in that they prod the municipality officials to consider linguistically even that one Mutsonga person in their audience. Although the Xitsonga L1 speakers recognise the role of the municipality as an institution in as far as linguistic equality is concerned, the speakers however, do not solely rely on the municipality to preserve and promote their language. On the contrary, they believe that they, as the users and speakers of the language, possess the power to preserve or vanquish Xitsonga as a language in TLM. In this way, the participants embrace the tenets of the EVT, which, among other things, accords power to a speech community as being capable of preserving and promoting its own language. Institutions such as families were observed as indispensable in the preservation and promotion of Xitsonga at TLM because they possess the power and privilege of intergenerational transmissions of the Xitsonga language.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

R.S.M., I.P.M., and M.S. had proportional roles in the research design, implementation, analysis, and article writing. R.S.M. guided the process.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Tshwane University of Technology Faculty Committee for Research Ethics: Humanities [FCRE-HUM] and ethics consent was received on 30 November 2020. The ethics approval number is FCRE/APL/STD/2020/06.

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Data availability

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, I.P.M., on reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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