# Ethnolinguistic Vitality in KwaZulu-Natal

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## Introduction

In this paper, the framework of *ethnolinguistic vitality* (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor 1977) is applied to the sociolinguistic situation in contemporary KwaZulu-Natal, with the focus on the numerically most dominant ethnolinguistic group in the province, isiZulu mother-tongue $(L_i)$ speakers. Howard Giles, one of the pioneers in research on the social-psychological aspects of language and ethnic identity, attempted with this framework *inter alia* to evaluate and systematize the factors that contribute to language contact phenomena such as *language shift, language maintenance* and *ethnolinguistic group behaviour* in multilingual settings[1]. Essentially it is argued that ethnolinguistic ingroup/outgroup strength has an effect on group cohesion and language maintenance. This strength is called *ethnolinguistic vitality* and has been defined as '... that what makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations' (Giles et al. 1977).

Despite some criticism (Husband & Khan 1982; Williams 1992), the concept found widespread recognition amongst scholars investigating specific aspects of sociolinguistic behaviour amongst ethnolinguistic groups

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[1] It has also been suggested that Giles' (1977) theoretical framework presented a milestone in narrowing and structuring the disparate schools in the Sociology of Language and Sociolinguistics, which is mainly due to the juxtaposition of group and language within the theory (McConnell 1997: 353).

in multilingual settings (cf. Ryan, Giles & Sebastian 1982; Giles & Johnson 1981, 1987; Landry & Allard 1994; Pierson 1994; Yagmur & Akinci 2003). In the South African context the framework has been employed by Louw-Potgieter and Giles (1987) and, more recently, by Barkhuizen and de Klerk (2000) and Bowerman (2000).

Notwithstanding this widespread use of *ethnolinguistic vitality* as a tool of sociolinguistic analysis, constructive criticism has been levelled against it (see most notably, Williams 1992; Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004). It is for this reason then, that one needs to be critical and cautious when employing the theory. A careful consideration of the limitations inherent in the framework will be exposed as I discuss the concept in the context of the sociolinguistic situation in post-apartheid KwaZulu-Natal.

For the purpose of this paper I use the isiZulu and English $L_1$-speaking group as two different collectives. IsiZulu-English bilingualism is currently common only amongst the members of the isiZulu-speaking group. This is because the vast majority of English $L_1$-speakers in KwaZulu-Natal speak Afrikaans as a second language $(L_2)$, which is mostly, but not only[2], due to the history of apartheid. While I am mainly interested in analysing *isiZulu ethnolinguistic vitality,* the role played by English is vital and must enter the discussion. The hegemony of the English language in South Africa is all encompassing and not to refer to the language would fail to acknowledge the multifaceted, flexible and linguistically hybrid character of contemporary South African society. Certain urban isiZulu $L_1$-speakers may identify more strongly with the English language than with their 'original' mother-tongue. In view of the above, the purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, I am aiming to discuss isiZulu ethnolinguistic vitality in an English-dominated state, by the analysis of 'objective' data, as defined below, and, secondly, I intend to explore the extent to which the theoretical framework of ethnolinguistic vitality provides adequate data in order to undertake further investigation into the South African sociolinguistic landscape.

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[2] Although the white minority had little opportunity to learn the indigenous African languages during apartheid, there also seems to exist a general lack of interest and motivation to learn these varieties today.

# Theoretical Background

An operative definition for 'objective ethnolinguistic vitality data' employed for the purpose of this paper is information which excludes the subjective perceptions of individuals who are members of the ethnolinguistic groups on focus here. In terms of Giles et al. (1977) conceptualisation, there are three socio-structural variables pertinent to the framework, which can be employed to circumscribe the potential of the vitality of the group's language. Firstly, there is the *status factor* (including economic, social, prestige and socio-historical aspects.), secondly, *demography* (such as absolute numbers, birth-rate, geographical concentration); and finally, the *institutional support* (such as recognition of the groups' language in the media, education and government).

The above mentioned present vital factors contributing to the vitality of a language and it is claimed, that the more status, the more institutional support and the more favourable demographic factors occur, the more vitality does an ethnolinguistic group have, and the more likely individuals are to behave as a member of a distinctive collective entity in intergroup situations (Giles et al. 1977). In this article it is primarily language that shall be investigated and, accordingly, the more linguistic vitality is embedded within an ethnolinguistic group, the more indications there are for short and long term language maintenance strategies amongst the members of the group.

From the short-term perspective it is likely for members of a 'high ethnolinguistic vitality' group to shift his/her *speech style* away from the other person's style in intergroup situations, a process described as *divergence* (Giles et al. 1977). For members of a 'low vitality group' in contrast, it is likely that a member accommodates the other's speech style. This process is called *convergence* (Giles et al. 1977). With regard to the long-term, high/low ethnolinguistic vitality may, from a macro-sociolinguistic perspective, be an indicator of *language maintenance, language shift,* or even *language death.*

For the purpose of this paper I shall focus on the analysis of 'objective ethnolinguistic vitality data' as defined above. It is, however, highly difficult to evaluate ethnolinguistic vitality exclusively by 'objective' data, as information on, for instance, the status of a language is not readily available and is dependent on subjective factors. It is for this reason that I

employ some of the findings of my own **PhD** research conducted in Umlazi, the largest township of KwaZulu-Natal[3].

The majority of research in the framework of ethnolinguistic vitality provides a combined analysis of 'objective' and 'subjective' data by means of an empirical investigation. It may be added that subjective and objective ethnolinguistic vitality do not always correlate. In order to provide a model to discuss issues such as ethnicity, bilingualism, or intergroup behaviour, a combined approach is desirable. I do not intend to make any major claims about the constitutive elements of ethnolinguistic identities, language shift or maintenance in this short paper. The analysis, however, points to some, albeit preliminary, findings with regards to the general sociolinguistic nature of *ethnolinguistic vitality* in KwaZulu-Natal.

## Status

If a language carries a low status, socially as well as economically, its own speakers are likely, among other things, to abandon it for another 'high' status variety. The African languages in South Africa, for example, are often said to have a low status, but it appears that this low status is almost always economically, not emotionally grounded. I want to argue that the indigenous African languages, in particular isiZulu, carry a wide range of functions in the social and private domains.

The status of the isiZulu in South Africa, and in KwaZulu-Natal in particular, is significantly different to that of the other official African languages. Considering the complex South African linguistic landscape, isiZulu may indeed be regarded as a 'prestige' language in the context that minority language groups, such as Mpondo, Bhaca, Cele or Phuti-speakers are likely to specify isiZulu as home language in an official language census

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[3] The data collected in Umlazi was methodologically based on triangulation: questionnaires, interviews and 'participant observation' and stands in contrast to the conventional methods in this field of enquiry. In the context of *ethnolinguistic vitality* research methodology has generally been based on the *subjective vitality questionnaire (SVQ)*, introduced in order to measure a group's perception of the vitality of its language. Although widely employed, the SVQ has received enlightening criticism (Currie and Hogg 1994: 100).

(Donnelly 2003:35)[4]. IsiZulu furthermore serves as a lingua franca for a large section of the African population (Wood 1995:188). A PanSALB document (1998:4), in fact, states that 'isiZulu functions as a lingua franca for 70% of the country's population' whereas, 'English can, at present, only be used efficiently by 20% of the population'. Approximately three quarters of isiZulu $L_1$ speakers in South Africa live in KwaZulu-Natal and my own research suggests that a large number of Africans whose $L_1$ is one of the other eight official African languages and who reside in the province, have some proficiency in isiZulu. In addition to this, several of my Umlazi respondents explained that isiZulu speakers in KwaZulu-Natal expect and encourage African immigrants from other African countries who live in the province to learn isiZulu. This clearly indicates that the sociolinguistic situation in KwaZulu-Natal is significantly different to other provinces as, for instance Gauteng, where all of the official languages are spoken.

When measured against the other eight official African languages, isiZulu features dominantly. However, when measured against English, the status of isiZulu appears low. As is evident, isiZulu has never been awarded any economic value in the past. In South Africa one needs to be proficient in English in order to succeed professionally and economically. The exclusive knowledge of isiZulu neither gets one admission to any higher institution of learning, nor provides anyone with a job. Although certain job advertisements today call for proficiency in isiZulu, English proficiency still remains a prerequisite. Furthermore, isiZulu has only very little international projection, examples of which are very few universities in the United States and Europe where isiZulu is taught as a subject. Evidently, status is inextricably linked to prestige and power and a language that offers no economic benefits has little societal or global power.

Despite its inferiority in numerical terms, that is, the number of people who speak it as a $L_1$, English is clearly a majority language in terms of power, not only in KwaZulu-Natal, but in all parts of South Africa. Alongside the exclusive use of the language in all higher domains of life, English has remained unchallenged as the medium of instruction at virtually all secondary, and, clearly all tertiary institutions in the province, as is the case in the rest of the country. English in South Africa has been termed the

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[4] For more detail on the Phuti language, for instance, see Donnelly (1999).

'language of liberation', the 'language of unification', the 'language of upward mobility' and, in a recent article in the Mail and Guardian (3 October, 2003), the 'language of creativity in the new South Africa'. Not only local benefits are associated with this language variety. There is another aspect that gives English an exceptionally high status, i.e. the fact that English is the leading language in the world. It is *the* medium of global and international communication, *the* language of academic scholarship and *the* language with the greatest literary production. It is these super national factors that contribute to the extraordinary position of English in South Africa and this evidently has a major influence on isiZulu ethnolinguistic vitality.

The low sociohistorical status of isiZulu determines up until now what Giles and his associates describe as a 'sense of pride or shame' (1977:312). Due to apartheid, isiZulu speakers had an inferior status in the society and only very few had access to any of the higher domains of life. Nevertheless, isiZulu was 'extensively used for the high domains in their tribal communities' (Bowerman 2000:36) and the history of the isiZulu-speaking community has been glorified around a pre-European 'Shakan' past. Historically the use of isiZulu is significantly different from that of the other indigenous African languages in South Africa. While in most provinces African children were taught in English before the imposition of the Bantu Education Act, isiZulu speaking children in Natal were taught in their $L_1$ since 1885 (Hartshorne 1995:308). IsiZulu seems to enjoy a considerable social status as the vast majority of Africans in KwaZulu-Natal, see the language as the dominant medium of the home and culture. It is the most commonly spoken language amongst manual workers in South Africa and used as informal medium of communication in schools, shops and other public places. Notwithstanding this, many isiZulu speakers have ambivalent feeling when it comes to the status and the value of their mother-tongue (Ngcobo 2000). It remains questionable that the overall status factors of isiZulu are potent enough to counteract the slow language shift that has been taking place in urban environments.

## Demography

The second domain of the ethnolinguistic vitality concept includes Demographic factors and, as such, is self-explanatory to a large extent. What

needs to be considered, however, is that Giles et al. (1977) did not take into account that a minority group in terms of numbers can be a majority group in terms of power, with the consequence that its vitality is low and the 'strength' measurement would be turned upside-down. This creates the 'danger of confusing the demographic concept of minority with the conceptualisation of minority in terms of power and dominance' (Williams 1992:210). When investigating into the South African sociolinguistic landscape, the ambiguity of the concept becomes even more evident. IsiZulu mother-tongue speakers blatantly outnumber every other language community in KwaZulu-Natal; the table below clearly testifies this.

| Languages in KZN | Number of speakers |
|---|---|
| Afrikaans | 140833 |
| English | 1285011 |
| IsiNdebele | 18570 |
| IsiXhosa | 219826 |
| IsiZulu | 7624284 |
| Sepedi | 10844 |
| Sesotho | 66925 |
| Setswana | 5195 |
| SiSwati | 12792 |
| Tshivenda | 1215 |
| Xitsonga | 3289 |
| Other | 37232 |

**Source: Census Database 2001: http:www.statssa.gov.za**

According to most recent census data (2001), nearly 80% of the KwaZulu-Natal population speaks isiZulu as a 'home language'. Despite this fact, the language was in the past, a minority language in terms of power. This is not to say, however, that the demographic factors do not contribute to the ethnolinguistic vitality of the group, I merely intend to outline the ambiguity of the concept as originally developed by Giles et al. (1977). It is argued that numerical strength and geographical distribution may indeed play a crucial role with regards to ethnolinguistic vitality (Liebkind 1999).

KwaZulu-Natal has traditionally been the territory of the ethnolinguistic group of isiZulu $L_1$ speakers in South Africa and is thus a reasonably homogenous province from a linguistic perspective. During apartheid Zululand was an independent homeland in which isiZulu was official language next to English. If one wants to believe the recent census data (2001), isiZulu $L_1$-speakers not only represent the greatest language community in South Africa, but the community has also continuously increased in the past few years. Empirical data collected in the course of my PhD research in Umlazi suggest that many young isiZulu speakers use their numeral superiority as an argument in language debates. With respect to the second structural variable of ethnolinguistic vitality, isiZulu appears to be indeed fortunately positioned and may carry a solid potential.

English, in contrast, is only spoken as a first language by approximately 12% of the population in KwaZulu-Natal and is thus clearly a minority language in terms of numbers. With regards to the rest of the country the demographic factors of English $L_1$-speakers are even less promising. English is spoken as a $L_1$ by only 8.2% of the entire population in South Africa (Census 2001). Estimates of English language proficiency in the country range between 32 – 61% of the entire South African population (Gough 1996). In most cases the level of proficiency directly correlates with the amount and quality of education. Recent research (Barkhuizen & De Klerk 2000; Kamwangamalu 2001b, 2003; Reagan 2001), however, indicates that there has been a continuous language shift from the indigenous African languages to English in urban environments. It appears that more and more parents who have the necessary financial means send their children to multiracial schools where the vast majority of teachers are English $L_1$-speakers and sufficient resources are provided in order to facilitate an adequate learning environment. A position most so-called 'Black' schools (ex-Department of Education and Training (DET)) cannot always claim for themselves. Nevertheless, it is the majority of African children who attend ex-DET schools and it remains difficult to estimate what influence the increasing multiracial schooling will have on isiZulu demography in the future.

## Institutional Support

The third factor, *institutional support*, is a very multifaceted one in the

context of this analysis. The factors are supposed to circumscribe what contributes to the public exposure and support one group's language receives in comparison to the high-status language. Giles et al. (1977) refer to domains such as the media, the government, the education system, the religious and cultural domains and industry. The language use in these spheres of life certainly have a major influence on the ethnolinguistic vitality of a language, but one has to keep in mind, however, that the institutional support factors do not adequately take into consideration the link between language and ideology (Williams 1992:210). It may be noted that 'official' institutional support is often at odds with the unofficial language practices. The original conceptualisation (Giles et al. 1977) would suggest that a language that has official status, should provide high ethnolinguistic vitality for the ethnic group that speaks this language as a mother-tongue. This, however, gives a rather simplistic picture of how state institutions influence language use and behaviour as will be seen in the next section of this paper.

IsiZulu has been accorded *official* status in South Africa for nearly ten years now. For an individual, who is predominantly occupied in one of the higher domains of life, however, the fact that South Africa has an eleven-official language policy is barely noticeable. Indeed the South African corporate world seemed to have dismissed the policy as utterly impracticable and further interpreted it as a call for English-only, as opposed to the previous Afrikaans-English bilingualism. Not only does the South African industry seems to lack a commitment to multilingualism, English clearly holds a hegemonic position in the mass media, the educational system and even government services such as Metro Water for instance. Little has happened practically with regards to multilingualism. As several scholars in South Africa (Maartens 1998; Bowerman 2000; Kamwangamalu 2001a) have pointed out: there exists a great mismatch between language policy and language practices. The present sociolinguistic reality in South Africa clearly suggests that isiZulu is not given the economic and instrumental value generally attached to an official language and its institutional support seems indeed questionable.

Notwithstanding this, isiZulu enjoys support by many of its speakers. Data collected in the Umlazi township suggest that the vast majority of Umlazi residents regard isiZulu as a cultural resource and maintain it to be used as the language of the home. Many parents who send

their children to multiracial schools seem to be particularly concerned about maintaining isiZulu for family interaction. With regards to the institutional support that is given to isiZulu at this point of South African history, it remains to be seen, as to whether the contemporary symbolic has any influence on the ethnolinguistic vitality of the language. The Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) attempts to take South Africa's commitment to multilingualism serious and is currently pressuring many higher domain institutions to engage in an approach that promotes multilingualism.

The language of parliament in the new South Africa is English, as opposed to the Afrikaans-English bilingualism that was common during apartheid. For practical reasons, only very few speeches are held in one of the indigenous African languages[5]. With regards to media, similar observations can be made. Although isiZulu has for a long time been catered for in radio broadcasting and the print media (e.g. *Ukhozi FM, Ilanga, Isolezwe)* it is only very marginally represented with regard to television. Kamwangamalu (2000:43) suggests that English takes up over 90% of airtime on the three national South African TV channels.

Religion, it may be argued, has potential to provide a strong basis for the maintenance of a language, and in rural and township areas, isiZulu seems to be the predominant medium in which church services and religious gatherings are conducted. The religious domain is without doubt one of the strongholds of isiZulu in the Umlazi township. In urban areas however, English is slowly entering the religious domain and an urban-rural dichotomy is becoming increasingly evident. Furthermore, extensive English-isiZulu code-switching is taking place in urban environments, such as university campuses (Ramsay-Brijball 2002).

The mismatch between language policy and practice, in education moreover, has become blatantly evident. Despite the fact that the

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[5] A reasonable budget, however, provides the translation of important governmental publications into the other official languages. Hansard, for instance, which is the Parliament's historical record of proceedings, published in both English and Afrikaans before the transition, is now published in English and additionally in one of the other ten official languages on a rotational basis (Kamwangamalu 2000:56).

Constitution proudly stipulates that 'every person shall be entitled to instruction in the language of his or her choice where this is reasonably practicable' (Constitution 1996, Section 32 [c]), English remains unchallenged as a medium of instruction. Most empirical investigations reveal that essentially, little developmental progress has been made with regards to language-in-education policies (Chick & McKay 2000). Multilingualism and/or additive bilingualism seems to remain a vague dream proposed by policy makers. Almost all secondary schools in the province use English as the only 'official' medium of instruction. The sociolinguistic reality, however, is significantly more complex than this. As mentioned, English-isiZulu code-switching appears so extensively in KwaZulu-Natal classrooms that an outsider-observer may not be able to determine whether the medium of instruction is English or isiZulu. Although code-switching can indeed be beneficial to the learning process (Adendorff 1996; Moodley 2001), it is clear that once the school chooses English as the sole medium of instruction, metric exams are supposed to be written in English with no code-switching allowed.

## Conclusion

The analysis in this paper suggests that isiZulu ethnolinguistic vitality is mainly based on demographic factors and is thus vested in high numeric concentration in the province, but little formal institutional support. The status of isiZulu is ambiguous. On the one hand, the language is widely used in domestic settings and as such perceived to have a significant cultural value in the community, on the other hand, isiZulu has, despite its official status, very little economic value. This also conveys an ambiguous picture of isiZulu ethnolinguistic vitality and makes it dangerous to predict any future linguistic developments.

English ethnolinguistic vitality, in contrast, reflects the picture of a minority language in terms of number with high economic, sociohistorical and international status and a large amount of institutional support. Essentially, isiZulu is used extensively in all lower domains of life whereas English is the language of the higher domains. This situation clearly reflects diglossic potential, with isiZulu as the low (L)-variety and English as the high (H)-variety. It cannot be regarded, however, as a 'stable' isiZulu-

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English diglossia, due to the extensive isiZulu-English code-switching patterns (Chick & Wade 1997)[6].

Although Giles et al (1977) did not specify the relative weights of the three domains. i.e. the *status, demography* and *institutional support*, with regards to ethnolinguistic group survival, the framework remains a useful tool of preliminary analysis in any sociolinguistic situation. It provides a solid base in addition to which further empirical research should be conducted. If handled with care and critical engagement the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality proves to be useful while investigating the South African sociolinguistic landscape. The collection of 'subjective' data remains however, imperative if one wants to make any further claims about language shift or ethnolinguistic identity construction.

I do suggest, however, that despite the prevailing hegemony of the English language and a rather diglossic relationship between the two language varieties at hand, isiZulu ethnolinguistic vitality appears robust and carries significantly more potential than the mismatch between language policy and practices may suggest. This is mostly due to the stable demography of the language regionally and nationally and the fact that isiZulu has important functions for a large portion of the KwaZulu-Natal population, most notably the perception that isiZulu is inextricably and profoundly linked to Zulu culture and tradition and represents the essential vehicle to maintain this culture (Rudwick 2004).

Despite the lack of language policy implementation and the fact that recent investigations suggest that language shift occurs in urban environments, the vitality of the language in rural and township communities is noteworthy. Unfortunately sociolinguistic research data in this field is still scarce. The large majority of language in education research, for instance,

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[6] First introduced by Ferguson in 1959, the term *diglossia* referred to a situation where two varieties of a language exist side by side in a community and each one is used for different purposes. The one, H(igh) variety is used in all higher domains of life, whereas the L(ow) variety has less economic status and is used in the lower domains of life. Fishman later (1967) extended this definition in order to include situations, in which not only two varieties of one language, but two different languages co-exist (cf. Schiffman 1997).

has been conducted in (urban) multiracial (ex-Model C) schools which conveys a inadequate and potentially erroneous picture of the sociolinguistic reality as only a fraction of South African learners attend these kinds of schools.

Notwithstanding this potential, there are historical and economically motivated constraints in South Africa's sociolinguistic landscape that prevent the fostering of isiZulu ethnolinguistic vitality if it is measured against English. An example for this is the prevailing stigma resting on mother-tongue instruction as discussed by Kamwangamalu (1997) or more recently by de Klerk (2002). The Bantu Education Act of 1953 enforced the use of the indigenous African languages in the early grades which 'was combined with an impoverished curriculum that was geared toward preparing Black people for subservient positions in South African society' (de Klerk 2002:33). Because of this, many parents today perceive mother-tongue education as a nasty reminder of apartheid policy. In terms of decision-making, parents, of course, choose what is 'best' for their children and at this time of South African history it clearly is a choice for English as a medium of instruction. The South African society is well aware of the economical strength and power that the English language carries, which has serious effects on isiZulu. It remains to be seen whether isiZulu ethnolinguistic vitality will be sufficiently strong for the language to make its mark in South Africa's higher domains of life.

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