

Xitsonga in Language Shift: A Sociolinguistic Approach

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ABSTRACT The speakers of Xitsonga in Polokwane city are experiencing a language shift from Xitsonga to English and Northern Sotho. This paper reports result of surveys conducted with thirty people, which show that both internal and external factors are contributing to the language shift by the speakers of Xitsonga. This research reveals that language shift by individuals is either temporary or permanent and is caused by linguistic mobility. In a multilingual country such as South Africa, language treatment is not always the same. There are languages perceived to be of 'higher status' while others are perceived even by their own speakers to be of a 'lower status'. South Africa, with its eleven official languages however, the status of English in terms of rights, privileges, prestige, and power is more superior to the rest of the languages and this makes some speakers of other languages to shift from their languages to English, for the purposes of this study on Xitsonga speakers. Data for this research was collected through observation and personal interviews with the aim of understanding the factors influencing the speakers of Xitsonga to shift from their language to English and Northern Sotho.

INTRODUCTION

The historical language shift by the speakers of Xitsonga to other languages such as Isi-Zulu, English and Northern Sotho dates back to the time of the colonial and apartheid regime in South Africa. These speakers shifted and were assimilated to these languages because generally in Johannesburg (where they were dispersed to) many minority languages fall to the dominance of larger or more powerful language groups. This phenomenon is very common in bilingual and multilingual societies (Fishman 1971; Baker-Jones 1998). To these people, language shift was due to interethnic interaction patterns among these different ethnic groups. By then, Xitsonga together with other indigenous African languages were minority languages while Afrikaans and English were official languages. However, the rapidly changing political situation in the country accorded all the eleven languages, Xitsonga included an official status 'in terms of rights, privileges, prestige, and power (South African Constitution 1996, Act 108 of 1996).

In South Africa, language shift is one of the realities and there appears to be an increasing trend in the number of people who are bilingual or multilingual due to various factors, which are of different type and interrelated such as social, educational, political and economical. Due to the bilingual or multilingual nature of various soci-

eties, Jagodic (2011: 195) is of the view that the process of language shift does not end, rather it develops from generation to generation. This study investigated Xitsonga in language shift for two generations. Reporting language shift patterns in the Vatsonga in South Africa, some results show that there is language shift from Xitsonga to Northern Sotho and English in the speech patterns of Vatsonga residing in Polokwane.

Polokwane is a city in the Limpopo Province of South Africa with an estimated population of 628,999, of whom the majority of the speakers speak Northern Sotho at 80.36 percent, followed by Afrikaans at 5.45 percent, English with 3.19 percent and Xitsonga with 2.84 percent (Census 2011). From the statistics provided, Afrikaans has a higher percentage of speakers compared to English, but the shift by Xitsonga speakers is to English instead of Afrikaans. This is so because Afrikaans is loaded with negative connotations after decades of association with the very unpopular apartheid government (de Klerk and Bosch 2009: 353). Before 1994, this area was called Pietersburg. In Polokwane, Vatsonga had to be in constant contact with the speakers of Northern Sotho and English who differ in language, culture and customs from them.

Definition of Language Shift

This section defines the central concept of this study, language shift. Language shift is a

term within the field of linguistics, which continues to gain prominence in sociolinguistics. Within the field of sociolinguistics, scholars did not pay much attention to the shift by speakers of minority language to another language with a high prestige. The concept of 'language shift' is used interchangeably by scholars and researchers with the terms 'language transfer', 'language replacement' or 'language assimilation'. In this paper, only the term language shift will be used to refer to a process whereby speakers of a language gradually shift from their mother tongue language in favor of another language (second language), which is perceived by these speakers to be of a "higher status" at the expense of their own language, which is perceived to be of a "lower status".

According to Baker (1980: 73), "a change from the use of one language to the use of another language is called language shift". This quotation shows that this term refers to a situation where speakers of a language abandon their language and start to use another language, which generally is their second language. The same sentiment was shared by Webb and Sure (2000: 13), who define "language shift as a process in which the speakers of one language begin to use a second language for more and more functions, until they eventually use only the second language, even in personal and intimate contexts". Although the definition by Webb and Sure states a situation where people shift permanently from their language to another language, there are some cases where the shift is only used for certain functions while other functions are conducted through their mother tongue.

Language shift may result in language loss among individuals. Language loss in Xitsonga, however, will not lead to language death because only a certain group of working class is affected by the shift. This means that some degree of language maintenance of Xitsonga still occurs.

Literature Review

Language shift has mostly been studied for cases in developed countries. Among these researchers and scholars who conducted research on language shift include Fishman (1964, 1991), Kahane and Kahane (1979), Huffines (1980), Bastardas-Boada (2007), and Nawaz et al. (2012). However, the literature to be reviewed in this

paper will only focus on studies conducted in Africa including South Africa.

Very little has been reported about language shift in Africa. Michieka (2012) conducted a study on language maintenance and shift in Kenya. Her study found that Kenyans mostly prefer using English (instead of indigenous languages) in most domains, sometimes even at homes for informal interpersonal communications. However, she further indicated that Kiswahili and Sheng are also preferred languages, which are in competition for interpersonal domains. From this study, it is clear that both language shift and language maintenance take place in Kenya.

Nyoka (2014) reported about language shift amongst the Tonga of Mkoka in Zimbabwe. The study revealed that although the Tonga people were the first to settle at Mkoka before the Shona speakers, a shift from Tonga language to Shona language is inevitable. Contrary to other studies, which found that language shift is mainly from African languages to English, this study shows that language shift is from an African language to another African language, which is of higher status.

The disparity between indigenous languages and English is further reported by Bodomo et al. (2009), who reported on language shift in Ghana, which involves the shift from African languages to English. From this study, it is undoubtedly clear that language prejudices further strengthen the status of English over those of African languages. The obvious reason is that the majority of the Ghanaians regard English as the language of upward mobility.

Recent studies have been conducted about language shift in South Africa. Anthonissen (2009) in her study on bilingualism and language shift in Western Cape communities found that the majority of the Afrikaans speakers are shifting to English both in formal and informal domains. Dyers (2008) reported a case of language maintenance among some township youths in South Africa, which involves Afrikaans in the Western Cape. This study shows that even in the presence of a powerful language of wider communication namely, English, people can still continue to maintain their own language, in this case Afrikaans language. De Klerk and Bosch (2009) conducted a study entitled, "*Language Shift in Post-apartheid South Africa: The Appeal of English*". The study was conducted in

the Eastern Cape Province and reports on the language shift from Afrikaans to English.

The literature review above clearly shows that “very little is known and reported about language shift from a demographically dominant language to a minority but economically dominant one (de Klerk 2000). There are no known studies on Xitsonga language shift, and hence the present paper will mainly focus on the shift from this language to English and Northern Sotho in the Polokwane city.

METHODOLOGY

Cohen et al. (2007: 47) define methods within the context of research as “that range of approaches used in educational research to gather data, which are to be used as a basis for interference and interpretation and prediction”. The nature, aims, objectives, and contextual significance of this paper dictates that the qualitative approach to be used as the method for research. Such an approach includes qualitative methods of data collection such as observations and interviews, which are found to be relevant for this paper. According to Creswell (1994: 2), qualitative approach is a research method in which “an inquiry process of understanding a social human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in natural settings”. In this approach, the interviews and observations as data collection techniques were used.

Data Collection

The data for this paper was collected in May and June 2015 using the personal interviews as well as informal observation and guided conversations. The participants were purposively selected for this study. The sample population was drawn from Polokwane city in the Limpopo Province. This city was used because since the democratic election of 1994, 2.84 percent (Census 2011) of the Vatsonga middle-class working group and their families who were working in the former Gazankulu homeland are now working and staying in this city. Therefore, they provided their experience regarding language shift from Xitsonga to both Northern Sotho and English. It is important to note that the subjects in this paper did not represent all the speakers of

Xitsonga in South Africa but only a sub-population of it.

The questions asked during the interview proceedings among others included:

- ♦ What are the causes of language shift?
- ♦ Which language is frequently used in different domains?
- ♦ What language attitudinal manifestations, if any, are evident in features such as language choice, language preference and cultural identity?
- ♦ What are the consequences of language shift?

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of thirty participants who were all speakers of Xitsonga but have now shifted from their language to Northern Sotho and English. Two different generations of participants participated in the study. These participants were selected from teachers, medical doctors, lecturers, students and government officials. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which is based on the judgment of the researchers regarding the characteristics that are of interest to the research (Smith 2003; De Vos et al. 2006). Data for this paper was collected using in-depth individual interviews. In order to capture the provided data, permission to use the tape recorder was obtained from all the participants (De Vos et al. 2006).

The data was later transcribed verbatim. Observation notes were taken during the interviews. Participation in this research was voluntary, and therefore, the participants were not forced to give their views. Furthermore, the participants were assured that the ethical consideration of confidentiality was to be upheld. The interviews schedule included a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. The interview was administered orally to all the participants by the researchers. The subjects were selected with the consideration of age, gender and education level. It is worth mentioning that the sample size made in this study is adequate to draw conclusions about Xitsonga in language shift in the Polokwane city.

Types of Language Shift in Xitsonga

Generally, language shift involves three aspects, namely, daily, temporary and permanent language shift. However, for the purposes of

this paper, only two types are applicable, namely temporary and permanent language shift and are discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

Temporary Language Shift

This aspect of language shift refers to the fact that speakers may shift from their language to other language(s) on temporary basis. Here the shift from his/her language is for a longer period from a week to years but still they consider themselves as the speakers of their original language. On this point, Participant 8 alluded by indicating, *“Although I am far away from home, I am still attached to my language and culture because I visit home regularly”*. This study found that there is increasing evidence to indicate that some Xitsonga speakers have only shifted to Northern Sotho and English on a temporary basis. This is because the speakers are far away from their native language for job and education opportunities. Therefore, while in the place (Polokwane city), the person will shift from Xitsonga to both Northern Sotho and English, which are used in that particular place. Obviously, when these people go back home, they will shift from the foreign language to their original language (in this case Xitsonga).

Permanent Language Shift

Apart from a person shifting temporarily from his/her language, he/she may shift permanently to another language. Generally, this is done by a person who decides to abandon his/her language because of staying far from his native language and culture. In this paper, more than half of the 30 participants from the two generations indicated that they have shifted permanently from Xitsonga to English and Northern Sotho. Participant 22 concurs by indicating, *“It is now easier for me to communicate with my colleagues, friends and members of my family in Northern Sotho or English than Xitsonga”*. It was found during the observation sessions that all the participants who have permanently shifted to their new languages no longer associate themselves with both their language and culture.

Data Analysis

The data for this paper was analyzed within a constructivist-interpretivist framework by us-

ing thematic content analysis. This type of analysis involved the identification of themes in qualitative material usually identified by means of a coding scheme (Manion and Morrison 2000). Data analysis was conducted based on interview transcripts of the descriptive narrative accounts of the thirty participants on their everyday lived experience of Xitsonga in language shift at home, school and work situation. Furthermore, the analysis was conducted based on the observation sessions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this paper are informed by a combination of data collection methods namely, observation and interviews. As stated above, the participants for this study were thirty Xitsonga speakers. The findings revealed that there is language shift from Xitsonga to English and Northern Sotho by Xitsonga speakers in the Polokwane city. Of the two languages, that is, English and Northern Sotho, the shift is mainly to English.

The development of English as a standard language of communication all over the world has made it to be a global language. English has established itself to be the language of politics, economy, education, laws and rights to millions of people (Crystal 1997: 2). In order to be in touch with more people, there is a growing trend of abandoning native languages, and for the purpose of this paper, Xitsonga, in favor of English. This likelihood is more in bilingual or multilingual countries where the survival of the indigenous languages is threatened by the power of English. Related to the findings by the present researchers is the study of language shift of one of Europe's smallest indigenous language community called Manx, which is a Gaelic language spoken in the Isle of Man. In this community there was what Ohlfearnain (2015: 45) refers to as extreme language shift from Manx language towards English because the speaker group lost all the “traditional speakers” of the language but still persisted to survive. In fact, the Manx language was declared as a dead language by other scholars such as Nettle and Romaine (2000: 48).

Similar views on language shift have been expressed by Newman and Parera (2015: 285) who researched about Catalan language, which is spoken by many small communities in Europe

such as in Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands and Arogon. The shift was from Catalan to Spanish because the Catalan speakers were reduced into minority by the domination of the Spanish speakers. However, the findings by Newman and Parera argue for the reversing language shift, meaning that they argued for shifting from Spanish back to Catalan language.

In some of these countries such as the Republic of South Africa, the status of English as an official language is at par with the African languages (ACT 108 of 1996). However, the sovereignty of English compared to the rest of the official languages is very high. Some of the scholars such as Webb (2002) and Alexander (2004) have written about the dominant role of English in South Africa. Furthermore, there is a tendency by some speakers of African languages to shift towards the use of English at the expense of their first languages (De Klerk 2000; Kamwangamalu 2003).

The following paragraphs discuss some of the factors, which the participants deemed as the main causes that led to language shift among Xitsonga speakers.

Some Factors that Led to Language Shift in Xitsonga

This section is devoted to the discussion of factors raised by participants as the main causes of Xitsonga in language shift in the Polokwane city. There are number of factors that play a role in language shift. The reason for these many factors is because people in South Africa and other parts of the world are free to work and stay wherever they feel more comfortable irrespective of the place of their native language. In such cases, some people end up abandoning their native language to a language spoken by a great number of speakers in that particular area. In this section, it will be clear that some factors, which determine Xitsonga in language shift, are non-linguistic but have important structural, linguistic consequences (Weinreich 1953). Xitsonga in language shift is stimulated by interrelated factors such as political, educational, social, linguistic and economical.

Political Factors

The South African changes in the political system that resulted in changes of government

policies, which took place from 1990 with the unbanning of all political organizations have affected language shift in the entire country, but for the purposes of this paper, more in the Polokwane city. Language shift investigated in this study was as a result of geographical displacement to Polokwane city where it was difficult for Xitsonga speakers to maintain their native language. Nkuna (2010: 52) shares the same sentiment when he avers, "Thus, political power or domination over people encourages language shifts through coercion". In order to ease the tensions around issues of administration of the defunct homelands (Lebowa, Gazankulu and Venda), the new democratic South African government felt that their administration should be consolidated and administered in Polokwane. It is not surprising that there has been much immigration by the speakers of Tshivenda and Xitsonga into this city.

Polokwane is the provincial/capital city of Limpopo Province where the mandate of the new democratic South Africa was/is to be delivered. As has been mentioned, change in political power has an influence in language shift. Participant 1 illustrated the reason for his shifting by indicating, *"I am compelled to shift to English and Northern Sotho because all the political gatherings here are conducted through the medium of English or Northern Sotho."* In this connection, Anderson (1977: 32) asserts, "Language shift may be actively encouraged by official government policy, for example, by restricting the number of languages used as a media of instruction". Many participants in this study concur with Anderson that this remark shows that the government can play a pivotal role in encouraging people to shift from one language to another, which ultimately leads to language death, and Xitsonga is no exception. All the families who participated in this study alluded to the fact that political factors played a major role in their shift to Northern Sotho and English.

Educational Factors

This section gives a brief exposition of the educational factor as one of the factors leading to Xitsonga in language shift that was emphasized by participants. According to the participants for this study, language shift is motivated and accelerated by people wanting a better education which is perceived to be embedded in the

knowledge of English, which is regarded as a global language. Therefore, the preferred language of teaching and learning by the Xitsonga speakers in Polokwane city is English. This finding confirms the findings of Mawasha (1992: 23) who mentioned that the majority of Black people in South Africa opted for English not their mother tongue as a language of teaching and learning, even from the earliest years of primary schooling. The same sentiment was echoed by Anthonissen (2009: 70) when indicating that “fluency in English is perceived to be an advantage, an asset that will improve social mobility and employment opportunities”.

Most of the participants in this study perceive that shifting from Xitsonga to English would result in greater access to the educational system, and later to better opportunities both for them and their generations to come. The issue of job opportunities was also echoed by Participant 17 when she avers that *“there are some occupations, which are closely related to the English language and that’s the reason I prefer this language”*. This is so because there is a belief that if children attend a school where English is taught as first language (L1) and being used as the medium of instruction, the better the opportunities. Webb and Sure (2000: 6) concur by indicating that “Black parents in South Africa overwhelmingly prefer English as the language of learning and teaching for their children”.

Economic Factors

Nawaz et al. (2012: 74) are of the view that “economical factors are the basis for overall social patterns”. It is indisputable that the speakers of Xitsonga participate in the economic development of Polokwane city. As immigrants, Vatsonga who come to Polokwane city wishing to improve their economic situation, English is generally a more preferred or attractive language. Participant 22 is of the view that, *“I was faced with many challenges of language barriers that limited my ability to engage effectively and efficiently in the economy to enable me to unlock opportunities for my future. Hence I shifted to English”*. Nawaz et al. (2012: 74), share the same sentiment by indicating, “English language promised and promises financial security. You can get high level jobs only if you know English language”. The quotation above clearly alludes

to the fact that language shift (Xitsonga) to English is mainly because it is the language of financial activities.

Twenty participants in this study indicated that they shift from Xitsonga to English because it provides them with access to more job opportunities not only in the province but also throughout the country. Due to the economic power of English over Xitsonga, the latter end up disappearing to these speakers. On a related note, Romaine (1994: 49) alludes to a situation that “...immigrant languages have disappeared as speakers have adopted the language of the new environment.” Apparently these results are proving and projecting that in future more and more Xitsonga speakers will prefer English instead of Xitsonga because of this economic factor.

Social Factors

Social factor is another major driver of Xitsonga in language shift in the Polokwane city. By social factors, reference is made of places where language of communication plays an important role such as churches, markets, shopping centers, and other public places. This study found that Xitsonga speakers abandon their less prestigious language to both Northern Sotho and English for them to have access to greater social mobility. Most participants have indicated that they feel the need to be accommodated in a new language environment. This was because speakers of either Northern Sotho or English who do not understand Xitsonga sidelined them in many social issues. Participant 4 illustrated by the following statement, *“I have problems communicating with the people around since they do not know my language”*. A related statement was shared by Romaine (1994: 53) who said, “Monolinguals often get annoyed with people who speak another language in their presence”. Obviously, this results in a significant shift to the languages of the majority for better communication to take place.

In order to ease their social problems, the majority of the participants feel that it is no longer possible for them to maintain the usage of their native language, hence a shift to the new linguistic environment that uses a different language(s) from their language. It was noticed during the observation sessions that the degree of linguistic assimilation has gone too far that Xitsonga speakers, unconsciously have started

to disassociate themselves even with their own culture, customs and traditions. Obviously, the likelihood is that once you abandon your language, the culture too is abandoned because the two are inseparable. Nawaz et al. (2012: 75) concur by alluding, "Language is an integral part of a culture. We cannot separate a language from its respective culture and vice versa". The social situation as it is now has reached a stage of linguistic imperialism, which has led to cultural imperialism.

Linguistic Factors

Although the political, educational and economical factors are emphasized as the main causes of Xitsonga in language shift, it could also be indicated that the linguistic factor was cited by most participants as one of the causes of this shift. Linguistically, when tracing back from time immemorial, Northern Sotho and Xitsonga are languages, which are derived from one ancestral language, Proto language. There can be no doubt that the structures of languages in questions are relatively similar. Evidently, this facilitates the speedy process of language shift. In fact, with Xitsonga and English both use disjunctive approach to writing. Furthermore, the fact that Xitsonga speakers learn English at school mostly from Grade R makes it easy for them to adapt to it easily. However, to some participants, it is not easy to learn these languages but these are the languages they prefer and use for various functions. This paradox makes it easy for Xitsonga in language shift to gain momentum day by day. The point to be emphasized here is that because of this shift, there are various language aspects, which are negatively affected. Functional aspects of language, which are affected due to language shift, include among others, lexical, grammatical and phonological resources.

Language Attitudes

The language attitudes displayed by the participants in this study can be located in both, the mentalist theory and behaviorist theory. For the mentalists, attitudes are a state of readiness, an intervening variable between stimulus affecting a person and his/her response (Fasold 1984: 147; Appel and Muysken 1987: 16). This theory believes that a person's attitudes prepare him/

her to react appropriately to different stimuli. The behaviorist theory on the other hand holds that attitudes are found in the responses people make to social situations. For this theory one can observe, tabulate and analyze overt behavior. This paper is heavily depended on the behaviorist theory because it is relevant to the methods used.

The researchers found that the prevalent attitudes among the speakers of Xitsonga are negative, hence a shift to English and Northern Sotho. In fact, the majority of the participants indicated that although this language is official, it cannot function effectively and efficiently across all domains in the Polokwane city. This is the reason they started to neglect its usage in almost all domains. The point was also echoed by Kashoki (1994: 145) by alluding, neglect of the local languages involves the danger of crippling and destroying the pupil's productive powers by forcing him to express himself in a language foreign both to himself and to the genius of his race". It needs to be mentioned that the development of a language lies in the heart of the speakers of that language. Ambrose et al. (n.d.: 18) concur by saying, "If linguistic preservation does not encourage revitalization, if there are strong factors towards language shift, and if the speakers have lost interest in preserving their language and are willing to adopt a language of the immediate community in its place, there is nothing that a linguist, or anyone for that matter, can do..."

This quotation shows that it is up to the speakers of the language themselves, if they have a positive attitude towards their language, its development will follow suit. So the opposite is the case with these speakers of Xitsonga in Polokwane city.

Although the majority of the participants in this study were those who are staying permanently in Polokwane city, this study also found that not all have permanently shifted to the languages and cultures of the new environment. In fact, there are those who frequently go to their respective homes either after two weeks or every month. Hence, the following paragraphs discuss the types of Xitsonga in language shift.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion to be drawn from the presented data is that there is language shift by the

majority of the speaker of Xitsonga to Northern Sotho and English in the Polokwane city. This is fueled by the fact that the opportunities of skilled people are more in the cities than in other areas. It is evident from the language preference by the participants in this study that Xitsonga in Polokwane city is losing ground to English and Northern Sotho. Moreover, given the far-reaching social, economic and political implications that affected most of the Vatsonga professionals, this study concludes that Xitsonga is not the preferred language in most domains as observed and reported by the participants.

The conclusions, which were drawn from this paper led to a number of recommendations, which it is hoped will result in the changing of the existing language shift by the Xitsonga speakers in the Polokwane city.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on both the literature survey and empirical research findings.

- ♦ It is recommended that the Vatsonga use their language when holding routine gatherings/rallies so as to assume the use and maintenance of their language.
- ♦ Xitsonga speakers are also recommended to use their language whenever and wherever they meet as a decipherable group irrespective of what those of eroding languages may say against this act, for example, “*Will you people speak what we can understand!*”
- ♦ Members who occupy leadership positions in the Polokwane city where language shift is taking place are encouraged to recommend and facilitate the erection of strategic language pressure groups and to take part in the implementation/observed teaching of the language in schools where the Vatsonga children obtain their education.
- ♦ Xitsonga speaking parents are encouraged to give enough room to their children to master their mother tongue instead of setting their focus only on English and Northern Sotho as both their educational and spoken languages (that is, both school and home languages).

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