

# INTRODUCTION: VENTURING INTO NDEBELE LANGUAGE RESEARCH

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Two linguistic varieties from South Africa are the protagonists of this volume. They have many things in common – even their names, which are (almost) identical. They are called Sindebele and isiNdebele.

Sindebele is listed as S408 in Maho's (2009: 93) classification of the Bantu languages. It has often been referred to as Northern Transvaal Ndebele (Ziervogel 1959), a designation that makes reference to administrative boundaries during the times of apartheid and is therefore to be avoided. It is both offensive to its speakers, and obsolete. The Northern Region within the former Transvaal Province corresponds roughly to the present-day Limpopo Province, with Polokwane as its capital. Indeed, most speakers of this Ndebele variety reside relatively close to Polokwane and Mokopane. In some recent work, such as Wilkes (2001; 2007) and Skhosana (2009), it is referred to simply as "Northern Ndebele"; we avoid this term since it has also been used to refer to an entirely different variety, namely Zimbabwean Ndebele (labelled as S44 in Guthrie 1967/1971 and Maho 2009). The other variety, isiNdebele, is often referred to as "Southern Ndebele" (see, e.g. Wilkes 2001; 2007; Skhosana 2009). Maho (2009) lists this variety under the code S407. It is the dominant language in several local municipalities belonging to the Nkangala District Municipality in the western parts of the Mpumalanga Province.

The articles in this volume are the result of an Academy of Finland project (2014–2020) and an interdisciplinary field excursion in 2016 (described in more detail below). Throughout this volume, we will mostly follow the practice of including noun class prefixes with the language names. This is not an official convention of South African English, but it is the practice preferred by many South Africans. Furthermore, it affords us an easy way to distinguish between the two varieties, because it is in the shape of the noun class prefix that their names differ. Nouns in Sindebele do not have the augment – that is, an initial vowel preceding the noun class prefix – while isiNdebele nouns do carry the augment. In fact, as discussed in Miestamo, Helenius, and Kajala (this volume), they do so much more strictly and in more morphosyntactic contexts than any other of their sister Nguni languages.

*Studia Orientalia* 120 (2019), pp. 1–16

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ISSN: 0039-3282

Not all readers will be familiar with the South African context and may not find the slight difference in terms of the noun class prefix to be very salient. In addition to that, in the literature on the Ndebele varieties, there is a lot of confusion in terms of nomenclature, and in many publications, noun class prefixes are not used with language names. We have therefore also found it helpful at times to use two geographically inspired terms: Limpopo Ndebele for Sindebele, Mpumalanga Ndebele for isiNdebele.

The two Ndebele varieties share close genealogical ties. They belong to the Nguni group of Bantu languages, labelled as S40 by Malcolm Guthrie in his *Comparative Bantu* (1967/1971). In comparison to some neighbouring languages, they are relatively small in terms of speaker numbers. The most significant contact languages include other languages of the Nguni family such as siSwati and isiZulu, but also varieties of the Sotho-Tswana cluster, including Setswana and Northern Sotho dialects.

Notwithstanding the existence of many shared linguistic features and vocabulary, Sindebele and isiNdebele show significant differences, as well. One obvious difference, already noted above, is the use of the augment in isiNdebele, but not in Sindebele. At first sight this may not seem of such fundamental significance, but this feature, together with a few other features, has been used to sub-classify the Nguni language into two separate groups which were often held to represent an early split within the Nguni language family in historical linguistic terms. This separation of the Nguni languages into the Tekela and Zunda sub-groups has a long tradition going back to Grout (1849; 1859) and Bleek (1862), but is not without problems (see the detailed discussion in Ownby 1985). An assumed early binary split into two groups is interesting, because it would imply that the two South African Ndebele varieties are not particularly closely related. Irrespective of the similar names, they would not, under such a historical understanding, be sister languages on a relatively low level of the Nguni family tree. This is, in fact, exactly what Carolan Postma Ownby claims in her work *Early Nguni History* (1985). However, such a view possibly downplays the significance of language contact. Language contact, which may have affected each variety in very different ways, could be responsible for divergent developments. Under such a scenario, Sindebele and isiNdebele would currently appear less similar to one another than their arguably very close position in the family tree might suggest.

Today, the sociolinguistic settings of the two varieties are fundamentally different. Grünthal, Honkasalo, and Juutinen (this volume) have documented these differences between the varieties. We do not know the exact number of speakers of Sindebele. In fact, as early as 1959, Ziervogel insinuated that the language was on the demise. In the 1990s and the early 2000s, Philemon Buti

Skhosana and Arnett Wilkes worked with speakers, so the language had obviously not disappeared altogether. Our project team had its first opportunities to meet speakers of Sindebele in late 2015. We were pleased to find a small but vibrant community of speakers committed to preserving the language as well as the cultural practices and historical knowledge of this particular group.

IsiNdebele has far more speakers than Sindebele. Some sources point out that in addition to the more than one million native speakers, there are probably a significant number of language users who learned isiNdebele as a second language (Webb 2002: 78). IsiNdebele is recognised as one of South Africa's official languages. In areas of the Mpumalanga province where isiNdebele speakers live, it enjoys a significant public presence and is used in a wide range of domains.

The recent settlement history of this area bears the imprint of apartheid. Speakers of isiNdebele used to live in a wider area extending much further east into the province of Mpumalanga, the erstwhile Eastern Transvaal. The creation of the former homeland of KwaNdebele meant that few members of that community stayed in the originally more easterly settlement area – for instance, as farm labourers in the white-owned commercial farmland in the Eastern Transvaal, while most people were relocated to areas further west, onto land that was deemed agriculturally less profitable. In addition to that, there was less land available, which meant an increase in population density. Even before the creation of the homeland of KwaNdebele in 1981, many people depended on labour migration, but the new situation accentuated the need to seek paid employment, often in the city of Pretoria. Busses connect the towns of KwaMhlanga, Siyabuswa, and other places in the western Mpumalanga Province with Pretoria, allowing for a long, but feasible, daily commute. Since apartheid times, the people living in KwaNdebele have represented a labour reservoir for the urban areas of what is now the Gauteng Province.

## **WORK ON LANGUAGE CONTACT AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN NDEBELE VARIETIES**

The small and relatively fragmented communities of Sindebele speakers were subsumed among the residents of the Lebowa homeland, characterised by the use of Northern Sotho as its dominant African language. Apart from mainly academically inspired work such as Ziervogel's short grammar (1959), Sindebele has received little attention. Only starting in 1994 did Wilkes and Skhosana produce additional work, mainly because of their interest in the linguistic difference and distance between the two South African Ndebele varieties. The southern variety isiNdebele fared slightly better in terms of language develop-

ment activities, although even in this case, practical work by language practitioners in public institutions started late. For instance, isiZulu language materials were relied on in the domains of education and teaching in the former homeland of KwaNdebele. Since then, however, matters have improved, and teaching as well as reference materials have been made available, most notably a dictionary (Iziko lesiHlathululi-mezwi sesiNdebele 2006).

With regard to the relationship between the Ndebele varieties, there are two striking points. First, despite close genealogical ties, much shared vocabulary, and many similar or near-identical grammatical categories, speakers often emphasise the importance of keeping different varieties apart and describe their own ability to tell them apart. Apparently, the intense contact situation has not led to an overall levelling of dialects or varieties. Second, there is no unanimous view with regard to how language contact affects two specific areas of linguistic structure: tone and prosody, on the one hand; and on the other hand, the lexical semantics and conceptual patterns underlying the functioning of grammar domains sensitive to lexical semantics, for example, the lexical and grammatical aspect interface for verbs. Our ambitious goal was to explore these areas from a contact linguistics point of view in order to pave the way towards integrating this insight into language historical reasoning. The rationale was approximately the following: prosody and semantics are two under-researched areas in contact linguistics, and the more we learn about how both domains of grammar behave in contact scenarios, the better our chances to derive language-historical insight from comparative work (beyond the reconstruction of proto-vocabularies and historical phonology).

Particularly tricky in this context is the widespread multilingualism prevalent among speakers of Ndebele varieties, along with a kind of pan-Nguni knowledge or sense of language. Practically all speakers of the Ndebele varieties are familiar with other languages of both clusters, Nguni and Sotho-Tswana. One could therefore question the choice of our research area. If the aim is to learn about the “behaviour in contact” of two specific grammatical domains, why choose a complex linguistic setting where one will need to juggle so many variables? One reason is that this kind of situation – multilingualism among related languages – is common and characterises many parts of Africa. Another reason is precisely what was pointed out earlier, namely, that despite similarity, some differences are meticulously upheld.

Summarising the most significant aspects of our Academy of Finland funded project work so far,<sup>1</sup> we can state the following point concerning complexity and

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1 “Stability and Change in Language Contact: The Case of Southern Ndebele (South Africa)”

simplification as possible outcomes of language contact. With regard to both prosody and lexical semantic patterns, the Ndebele contact settings did not lead to simplification and dialect levelling. Given that we are dealing with a situation in which, at least historically, there must have been relatively stable long-term multilingualism, it is not surprising that contact should not lead to simplification. This corresponds to what Trudgill argues in his *Sociolinguistic Typology* (2011). If we were dealing with a contact situation characterised by many (imperfect) adult learners, we would expect to find tendencies towards simplification. Instead, Ndebele varieties are spoken in situations of genuine multilingualism with acquisition of various languages from an early age. Such a scenario, common in the linguistic setting of South Africa, would not have that effect. If anything, it should be expected to render the linguistic varieties involved in contact situations more complex. This, however, is also not necessarily the case. Possibly because the varieties involved in the contact scenarios are quite similar to each other to begin with, the potential for “complexification” of individual varieties is limited. But – arguably – the maintenance of rather fine-grained differences, sometimes hard to detect for outside observers, is due to a high degree of competence in the various varieties. For instance, Crane and Fleisch (this volume) highlight how isiNdebele and Sindebele maintain rather subtle differences in the expression of event structure.

This kind of analysis requires a thorough understanding of the grammar of the linguistic varieties involved, but also a good grasp of the sociological and demographic conditions of the respective communities, ideally including knowledge of their migration and settlement histories. This kind of rich documentation and collection of relevant information reflects an approach to language documentation typical for linguistic research conducted in the Helsinki tradition.

## **COLLABORATIVE WORK: HELSINKI AREA AND LANGUAGE STUDIES**

A long-standing tradition in Finnish linguistics (see, e.g. Hovdhaugen et al. 2000) has matured into an ambitious approach that strives to produce comprehensive descriptions of languages based on the collection of original data in the field. Its theoretical foundation is functional rather than formal. The foremost aim is to yield an understanding of the linguistic varieties under study on their own terms. While the data-driven objective is thorough synchronic language description, the perspective taken in this approach is broader than that. It is informed by (and also, in return, feeds into) historical comparison and linguistic typology. Language ecological underpinnings stress the need for awareness of social condi-

tions surrounding language, linguistic practices, and communication. It is in this spirit that language documentation, preservation, and even revitalisation activities are approached, usually in close collaboration with members of the respective linguistic communities. Especially for students and junior scholars, having such a broad range of phenomena to tackle is interesting, but can also easily be experienced as overwhelming.

Among the Helsinki Area and Language Studies (HALS) research cluster at the University of Helsinki, we have found the format of field excursions particularly promising as a way to overcome this challenge in teaching and research. HALS had organised three such field excursions prior to our trip to South Africa. On each occasion, participants comprised students and researchers at different career stages and with expertise in different regions. For the sake of continuity, some more experienced researchers as well as some students participated on more than one occasion. This afforded the opportunity to transfer methods and data collection techniques that had been developed, tested, refined, and proved successful in specific geographical areas to regions and contexts where – often simply for arbitrary reasons relating to particular research traditions – they had previously not been applied.

The contribution by Heini Arjava and Andrei Dumitrescu in the present volume may serve as an example. In the context of the South African field excursion, Arjava and Dumitrescu worked on spatial conceptualisation among speakers of isiNdebele, relying on a three-dimensional stimuli technique which had already been used on the earlier occasion of a HALS field excursion to Russia, focussing on Erzya (Arjava 2016). How spatial relations are conceptualised is an intriguing question that has long attracted the attention of language philosophers because of its relevance to significant issues around language universals and linguistic relativity (see, e.g. Levinson 2003). Using non-verbal stimuli led Arjava and Dumitrescu to promising results, including a better understanding of the “division of labour” between motion verbs and locatives in isiNdebele. It is important to point out that in their case the familiarity with the method does not mean that it could be run as a routine technique irrespective of local contexts and language-specific conditions. The picture that they come up with for isiNdebele is rich and conveys a broad range of pragmatic factors which have often not received the attention they deserve.

In addition to the opportunity to transfer technical expertise from one geographical area to another, having a degree of familiarity with one another’s work enabled both intellectual support and practical support with specific tasks. This mutual support included, of course, daily discussion of insights during joint activities. But there also were practical synergy effects. Data collection strategies

that required larger numbers of respondents were carried out by a dedicated team, but the data were complemented by teams pursuing other tasks. Riho Grünthal, Sami Honkasalo, and Markus Juutinen conducted research that required broad evidence, based on a considerable amount of data. Practically all other members of the larger team collected survey information relevant to their area of interest. Therefore, the core information on sociological variables and the sociolinguistic profile of both Ndebele varieties has benefitted from the fact that this team worked embedded in a larger network of peers. This benefit was mutual, because the sociolinguistic survey information also fed into other teams' work.

A particularly interesting aspect of our collaborative research program has been that the current language dynamics and the sociolinguistic environment in South Africa were also tackled by another research team, consisting of Isalee Jallow, Maikki Järvi, Mimi Masango, Niina Väisänen, and Axel Fleisch. Their in-depth interviews with many members of the Sindebele speaker community contributed greatly to a better understanding of the current language dynamics in the wider Mokopane area. Relating their qualitative insight to the more quantitatively oriented study of Grünthal, Honkasalo, and Juutinen provided valuable information on the use of Sindebele and the language attitudes towards it. Perhaps one of the most significant insights concerns the fact that, although Sindebele has shrunk in terms of speaker numbers and is used in fewer and fewer contexts, there were still a considerable number second language learners of this variety until recently. This is because women who spoke another language (often of the Sotho-Tswana group) and married into a Sindebele-speaking household were supposed to use the language of the household. This practice must have had a significant effect on subsequent generations of learners – the children of such women without native proficiency of Sindebele. The imprint on the language is considerable: we find Sotho-Tswana substrate effects alongside heavy borrowing, mostly from northern Sesotho into Sindebele. This mix is intricate and difficult to disentangle in terms of historical linguistics.

Our most significant research bases were, on the one hand, small towns and townships in the vicinity of Mokopane in the Limpopo Province and, on the other hand, Siyabuswa, Emthambothini, and neighbouring villages in the Mpumalanga Province. All participants of the field trip visited both sites, but depending on their research questions, spent a different amount of time in either. For isiNdebele, more background knowledge was available, so that study teams investigating more specific questions in grammar and typology could delve into their work more straightforwardly. Matti Miestamo, Kati Helenius, and Jukka Kajala looked into the morphosyntactic environments in which the augment – the initial vowel of the noun class prefix in its default shape – is dropped. From

other Nguni languages we know that referentiality plays into this matter. It is often in the context of negation that the augment does not appear. Miestamo, Helenius, and Kajala focussed on isiNdebele. For Sindebele, which belongs to the so-called Tekela languages that do not have the augment at all, this topic could simply not be addressed meaningfully. In the future, a fuller analysis of Sindebele might reveal that an earlier (High) tone of the augment has left traces, but for now, we have no evidence of that. In fact, it is perhaps not even very likely, since the in-depth description of nominal tone in isiNdebele shows that in those contexts where the augment does not occur, there is no indication of a High tone that would have been retained if the vowel segment is dropped. Lotta Aunio, Stephan Schulz, Nailya Philippova, and Antti Laine dedicated special attention to nominal tone in isiNdebele. Despite the overall better documentation situation for that variety compared to Sindebele in Limpopo, no analyses of the isiNdebele tone system existed prior to this. Interestingly, tone spread rules in isiNdebele resemble those of the Sotho varieties spoken in the area rather than those of the Nguni relatives.

Also in the domain of phonology, Stephan Schulz, Antti Laine, Lotta Aunio, and Nailya Philippova present a contrastive analysis of Sindebele and isiNdebele, with emphasis on the latter. Their work on the variation of click pronunciation is highly relevant to questions of historical language dynamics in the research area. Sindebele has largely abandoned the use of clicks, which are marginal phonemes, if they have phonological status in that variety at all. A reasonable assumption appears to be that clicks have been replaced. The fact that fairly regular correspondences with cognate click-containing words in isiNdebele exist implies that clicks once existed but have been lost in Sindebele.

However, the speaker behaviour of isiNdebele speakers indicates that such a development is not necessarily unidirectional. Schulz et al. observe that younger speakers use extended and diversified click repertoires in ways that are conventionalised yet do not strictly correspond. This pattern of usage differs from that of isiNdebele speakers who were not schooled in that language. Schulz et al. suggest that adherence to normative notions of proper click articulation as stipulated, for example, by the National Lexicography Unit for isiNdebele, is indicative of language attitudes, formal education in isiNdebele, and linguistic awareness. Click variation is not necessarily an effect of language attrition, but appears to suggest rather the contrary in isiNdebele: language maintenance throughout the community.

Phonological work of this kind relies on the availability of sufficient lexical data. Jaakko Helke, another member of our joint field trip, dedicated considerable effort to the lexicography of both South African Ndebele varieties by

compiling available information and collecting data especially with regard to Sindebele in Mokopane, and by making these data available to others electronically. This enabled other participants in our short excursion to draw from this information when venturing into other thematic domains. Among these are colleagues who have not contributed to this special issue, but who collaborated in important ways. Riikka Länsisalmi was interested in colour terminology (in particular that of isiNdebele speakers, famed for their visual artistry). Working in Emthambothini, Länsisalmi followed research techniques used in cognitive linguistics and anthropology – not unlike Arjava and Dumitrescu, albeit in a different semantic domain. Aino Pesonen and Lena Seppinen also used a technique that relies on non-verbal stimuli. They initiated conversations with speakers of isiNdebele by relying on language portraits produced by their interlocutors. These conversations on language biographies yielded insights into the recent history and trajectories of people in Mpumalanga, dismantling some naïve perceptions of the ethnic and cultural belonging of these people.

## STAKEHOLDERS IN SOUTH AFRICA WITH AN INTEREST IN LANGUAGE

Academic questions of theory and method were some of the main drivers behind the linguistically oriented research on the South African Ndebele varieties presented in this volume. Research investigations were carried out mainly by researchers from Helsinki, in collaboration with South African speakers of Ndebele. However, it is very significant that other South African stakeholders were involved, as well. They supported the Helsinki-based research group, and without this support, it would obviously not have been possible to carry out this type of research. As authors of this introduction and coordinators of this volume, we are immensely grateful to the people who helped us bring this initiative to fruition. However, the intention behind writing the following section of this introduction goes beyond acknowledging our gratitude to those who provided practical and intellectual support. We find it important to illustrate the complexity of the South African setting with regard to the research that is presented in the chapters of this special issue, because many people were involved, and they had very different roles and interests in the project.

It is only logical that, given the diversity among the South African stakeholders, there was no unified South African voice with regard to many of the questions addressed in this volume. Many issues around the South African Ndebele varieties are contested. This is true for Sindebele in Limpopo, because of its somewhat precarious status and an unclear future. But it is also true for isiNdebele in

Mpumalanga, even though it enjoys official recognition. Its path of development into a standardised variety based on widely accepted consensus decisions is an arduous one. We are convinced that these are not just political issues that stand apart from “core linguistic” questions. Clearly, language contact and multilingualism have shaped these varieties over long periods of time. Language contact is not just something that happens to speakers and leaves unintended imprints. These situations can also trigger conscious and active agency on the part of the speakers. Reactions and actions can differ substantially, and we need to be aware of this even if our core interest may be “simply” structural description and grammatical analysis.

This is perhaps best illustrated by telling the story of what has been an ambivalent contact situation in the Mandebele community. Trudgill (2011) differentiates between established societal multilingualism with two (or more) varieties being in long-term contact, implying that speakers come close to being L1 learners of both varieties, and contact situations where imperfect adult learning of the contact variety (or varieties) leads to a very different outcome in terms of the structural imprint on any possibly emerging contact varieties. For Sindebele, it seems as though both mechanisms have been operating in parallel for rather many generations. That is, Sindebele is spoken in an extremely interesting long-term, stable situation, with two kinds of contact that have very different predicted outcomes for linguistic structure. In addition, we must consider the fact that in such an environment, speakers are likely to adjust their variety to different communicative and stance requirements (either distancing themselves from or associating themselves with Nguni or Sotho-Tswana speakers, according to the speech situation). The controversies surrounding such complex scenarios, along with possibly contradictory mechanisms of maintenance and adaptive change and the need to keep language structures open enough to remain malleable, will have effects on core areas of language structure: speakers of Sindebele are able to draw on multiple lexical options, sociophonetic variations, and a broad inventory of grammatical constructions and categories. It should be obvious that a plain “mono-dimensional” description of the grammatical features and the lexicon of this language is likely to produce too static an impression.

These are considerations based on and feeding into sociolinguistic theory. They are matched by the concerns of language activists and members of the Mandebele community. MANO, the Mandebele National Organisation, consists of people who are concerned about the future of the cultural heritage, history and language dynamics of those associated with the Ndebele variety in use in the Limpopo province, in particular in Ga-Maraba, Ga-Mashashane, and Mokopane (including various settlements mostly in its northwestern outskirts). Their activism aims

at ensuring a future for this cultural community. Language plays a central role in this activism. The wish of MANO is for Sindebele to be recognised more widely, and for it to be standardised and used in more spheres of communication. In the anticipation of mutual benefits, the researchers whose contributions are part of this volume were welcomed by MANO and received a great deal of practical support from its members. The work on different lexical and grammatical aspects of Sindebele involved members of MANO as the key consultants. One should bear in mind that this cooperation had a significant impact on the external researchers' outlook on Sindebele in different respects. Since we were introduced directly to Sindebele-speaking households when travelling in the area, our impression of the vitality and geographic contiguity of Sindebele may be positively biased. In communicating with us, the speakers of Sindebele were aware of our interest in that variety and, in fact, our visit may have been a special moment during which the significance of Sindebele was emphasised by many. MANO certainly makes continued and persistent efforts to maintain community awareness and promote a positive attitude towards using Sindebele, but in the everyday lives of many speakers, the language is probably not as much at the forefront of most people's concerns as it was during the intensive days dedicated to Sindebele while the group of researchers visited the area.

For isiNdebele, the situation differs fundamentally with regard to political recognition. There are mandated bodies whose task it is to develop the language. This includes researching its grammatical properties, but perhaps even more work is dedicated to lexicography, to work on orthographic norms and conventions, and to the development of school material and other literature that aims to foster the active use of isiNdebele in a wide range of functional domains. The language board for isiNdebele monitors and promotes such activities, in close collaboration with other institutions instrumental in the development of isiNdebele. A fundamental institution in this respect is the National Lexicography Unit (NLU) for isiNdebele, which has its physical headquarters at the University of Pretoria. More recently, the language has also been introduced into the teaching programme of UNISA, bolstering future research on isiNdebele in these institutions.

The tasks of the South African scholars involved in isiNdebele research are daunting. They need to constantly bridge rather different mind-sets and exigencies: these include, on the one hand, a descriptive scholarly approach that needs to take into account variation, contact, and a high degree of fluidity in linguistic practices among speakers of isiNdebele; on the other hand, there are the prescriptive demands that emanate from the needs of teachers, translators, legal practitioners, and many others. It is important to bear in mind that both

perspectives are equally necessary, and that one should be explicit about one's function and position when writing about linguistic varieties like those tackled in this publication.

Many South African stakeholders are academics and language practitioners (especially in the case of isiNdebele) or cultural activists (mostly in the case of Sindebele), but these are not the only important actors. Private entrepreneurs seek to foster cultural activities in a combination of commercial interest and genuine concern about the future of their cultural heritage. This is a noteworthy point, because commercial use of ethnic heritage should not be underestimated. It might seem that the chances of lucrative commercial activity based on cultural heritage would be negligible and therefore not worthy of wider interest, but such an assumption would be incorrect. For one thing, in regions where income-generation remains difficult and many individuals struggle to meet basic needs, even relatively small-scale initiatives may provide income at a low yet significant level. In addition to that, Ndebele material culture and crafts(wo)manship are internationally known and recognized, so that their economic potential cannot be denied. While some people may have ambivalent ideas regarding commercial exploitation of cultural legacies, the interest in culture and language does create opportunities. A significant sign of this is the fact that regional politicians have been welcoming such initiatives. Like language practitioners and (cultural and language) activists, local politicians typically have a preservation and/or development agenda. Because of the potentially divergent interests and motivation behind linguistic research work, it is important to strive for a balanced collaborative setting. Again, this is not simply a matter of fair treatment and meeting the expectations of different research participants. While it is obviously the case that research output – publications like these – should be made available to those involved in the research process, one should ideally aim to go one step beyond and make this kind of material relevant for those involved. While it is of course legitimate to keep intellectual endeavour, practical application, and activism separate, ultimately all three are necessary for the continued support and sustainable language development of any linguistic variety.

This kind of support from a broad range of people, including private entrepreneurs, politicians, and administrators, as well as traditional authorities and individual members of the communities who take a particular personal interest in this kind of research, is paramount to successful academic work.

We also benefitted from the experience of three scholars working in South Africa: Eva-Marie Bloom Ström, at the time based at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, and Matthias Brenzinger and Sheena Shah, then at the University of Cape Town. They spent some time with us during our research activities in

Limpopo and Mpumalanga in 2016. They had earlier initiated linguistic research activities in southern Africa that are similar in essence to those of the HALS research group, also involving stakeholders of different backgrounds and aiming at language documentation and description as well as research into language contact and (micro-)variation.

At the time of the HALS excursion, Matthias Brenzinger and Sheena Shah had begun to conduct research into the sociolinguistic situation, language dynamics, and variation of Siphûthî in south-eastern Lesotho. Siphûthî resembles Sindebele in some striking ways: It is also a (Tekela) Nguni variety that is used in areas where speakers are in very close contact and, in fact, all bilingual with varieties of the Sotho-Tswana-cluster. This particular situation – Nguni minority varieties in fairly long-term contact predominantly with varieties of the Sotho-Tswana-cluster – complicates historical linguistic analysis. This is all the more the case because the Nguni-internal genealogical relations are also anything but clear. IsiZulu and isiXhosa are used by many more people than are the other Nguni languages, but their high significance at present may easily distort language-historical assessments. IsiZulu, with its wide current geographic distribution and demography, is the result of a fairly recent spread. For isiXhosa, it is certainly true that its internal diversity does not always receive due attention, suggesting a longer timespan during which it has consolidated in the southernmost areas inhabited by Nguni speakers. In order to learn about historical layers prior to the expansion and consolidation of these two varieties, in-depth work on languages exactly of the type of Siphûthî and Sindebele is invaluable. The major challenge here is to distinguish inherited features that are possibly retentions of non-typical Nguni features from much more recent, contact-induced features. In addition to that, these languages are endangered and spoken at best in small language islands, but often in even more scattered scenarios where speakers do not have much opportunity to use the language regularly in everyday situations beyond, perhaps, one's own family, if at all. It has been extremely important to bring together the insight from rather different teams – those conducting sociolinguistic work and those carrying out descriptive work and linguistic analysis of particular grammatical features – in order to pave a way towards a better understanding of the language-historical ramifications in the region.

In addition to insights gained through enlightening discussions with Matthias Brenzinger and Sheena Shah, the importance of multidisciplinary approaches became striking when both the survey-style work (Grünthal, Honkasalo, and Juutinen this volume) and the information collected by another team (Jallow et al. this volume) made it clear that Sindebele must have experienced a somewhat contradictory situation in terms of language dynamics. On the one hand, speaker

numbers have decreased for a considerable period of time, and a language shift to Northern Sotho has been underway for a long time now. Yet, throughout that time, women who married into this community were expected to learn and use Sindebele. In other words, we may find “language attrition” effects side by side with language substrate features introduced by these women. The putatively historically similar cases of Siphûti and Sindebele may be very interesting to contrast more systematically in the future.

The experience of a larger research group joining efforts for a short but intensive research excursion is still rather exceptional in linguistic fieldwork. Measuring the non-negligible effort in setting this up against the added value, we are convinced that this is a format to be pursued in future work. We advocate this approach not simply for practical reasons (like benefitting from complementary areas of expertise from different individuals), but also because it has direct implications for the scope and theoretical ramifications of the work itself. There is ample room for accidental small-scale demographic bottle-neck situations at specific points in time, possibly leading to a current linguistic map with seemingly haphazard distributions of linguistic features (including lexicon, which is rather obvious, but also features in a wide range of other areas of language structure, from phonetics, tone, and phonology all the way to morpho-syntactic categories and functions). We therefore hold it to be important that researchers do not just compare results, but that they share at least part of the actual field experience in order to build sufficiently rich descriptions that would allow to compare the sociolinguistic histories of these communities. Collaborative research in such areas is most fruitful if it does more than compiling the information and insight gained by larger teams of specialists in different relevant fields. Comparison of results is considerably more reliable if there is a shared understanding of how these results are arrived at, along with the possibility of intervening in the process of data collection as it unfolds (for an in-depth discussion of epistemological opportunities in trans- and interdisciplinary research, see Möhlig 2010).

Additional valuable work that has received some attention in similar sociolinguistic settings are questions of language acquisition. Surely there are Ndebele speakers whose language competence in their respective variety can be regarded as insufficient, deficient, or imperfect. And their use of that variety might, in that case, show what could be classified as attrition phenomena. We would like, once again, to draw attention to a different phenomenon: the *maintenance* of small distinctive features among otherwise fairly closely related languages. What this means is that young learners must be rather careful and attentive about such features, whether it be the use of tone, fine semantic nuances in the use of related grammatical categories, or any other. A multilingual setting in which everything

just mixes randomly is clearly *not* what we observe among the South African Ndebele varieties. Carefully keeping significant properties apart means cognitive work and effort in acquisition. We know little at this point about the process of acquisition of the relevant features. Investigating, for instance, the error patterns of language learners in multilingual environments involving closely related and similar languages like the Nguni languages of South Africa could lead to significant insights.

These are not simply theoretically driven points on the research agenda. Identity as expressed by or ascribed to individuals often rests on the linguistic markers associated with a particular person. The interplay of agency and languaging mechanisms, on the one hand, and involuntary effects such as accents and speech timbre, on the other, bear meaning for the members of different communities in South Africa, and South Africa at large. Here we see the potential to foster future research that is both theoretically novel and ground-breaking while being significant for the communities whose linguistic practices and languages are investigated. It is here that we also see the significance of reflective meta-research alongside the academically driven endeavours. Ideally, research should benefit communities, but even where there is no immediate socio-economic or cultural benefit, the research should at least matter to those who participate in the research and use the linguistic varieties under study. We hope that the contributions in this collection attest to this mindset and that speakers, scholars, and language practitioners will find it useful.

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