

## REGIONAL VARIATION IN XHOSA

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### 1. Background

The main Nguni languages are Xhosa, Swati and Zulu. These languages have a number of distinct variants. The most easily recognisable Xhosa variants are Mpondo, Bhaca and Hlubi. While Xhosa is the mainstream indigenous language in the Cape Province (including Ciskei and Transkei), the aforementioned variants are found in restricted areas in the Eastern Cape. The Xhosa dialect that came to be written when the missionaries started printing Xhosa was the Ngqika dialect, which is quite close to its Thembu (or Gcaleka) variant. These variants appeared in print and were used in schools as standard Xhosa.

The fact that the Ngqika and Thembu variants have equal prestige needs to be explained. Phalo, who lived around 1700, is said to be the main line descendant of Xhosa (who lived around 1530), the founder leader of the Xhosa people. Phalo's own descendants are Thembu (Gcaleka) and Rharhabe (who lived around 1786). Rharhabe and his section of the Xhosa people crossed the Kei River to settle on the west side, and his descendants are the brothers Ngqika and Ndlambe (Jabavu, 1953:17-20).

The first missionary to settle among the Xhosa was Theodorus van der Kemp of the London Missionary society, in 1799, and he stayed with Ngqika and his people along the Tyume River. In this way the Ngqika dialect was learnt, written down and taught at school by all the missionaries who succeeded van der Kemp, some of whom, like Bennie, were

linguists. The first complete translation of the Bible into Xhosa was accomplished by John Whittle Appleyard in 1859. As part of the criticism was due to the fact that the Appleyard translation was in the Ngqika dialect, a committee was formed to work out a new and more acceptable translation in standardised Xhosa. Tiyo Soga, one of the strongest critics of the Appleyard translation who was also one of the first products of missionary education among the Xhosa, and Appleyard were members of this committee (Andrzejewski, 1985:544-546). One expects, therefore, that the standardised version would blend the Ngqika, Ndlambe and Thembu variants which were, in fact, of equal status. The new translations of the Bible, published in 1875 and 1889 represent such a blend. The Xhosa Bible therefore pioneered the process of promoting the Ngqika, Ndlambe and Thembu variants as the standard Xhosa variants.

The Mpondo, Bhaca and Hlubi variants as well as the Mpondomise, Xesibe, Cele and Ntlangwini variants could have been regarded as independent languages of the Nguni cluster, but, perhaps due to the missionary influence which now carried the Ngqika, Ndlambe and Thembu variants, the converted speakers of the aforementioned variants were then subjected to the use of standard Xhosa at the mission stations and seminary schools.

The Mpondo occupy the stretch of land from Southern Natal to central Transkei in the north and along the coast to Port St John's. Their main districts are Lusikisiki, Libode, Flagstaff, Port St John's, Bizana and Tabankulu. The Bhaca people occupy land in the districts of Mount Frere, Mount Ayliff and Umzimkulu; while the Hlubi are found in the North-Eastern Cape in the Herschell, Sterkspruit, Matatiele, Mount Fletcher and Maclear districts. Many groups are also found among the Mpondomise in the districts of Qumbu and Tsolo. The mixed but dominantly Hlubi groups in the Butterworth, Ngqamakhwe, Tsomo and Peddie districts are generally known as the Mfengu, and they have lost most of

their original variants in preference for standard Xhosa. History, therefore, shows that the Hlubi variant as well as the other variants that are now regarded as Xhosa variants with Ngqika, Ndlambe and Thembu as the standard variants, were originally of equal status as and formed a cluster with Xhosa (in its three variants) as sister dialects under the all-embracing Nguni language family. At present the Ngqika dialect and its variants, Ndlambe and Thembu enjoy a higher status among the Xhosa speakers than the other variants (Mpondo, Bhaca, Hlubi, Mpondomise, Xesibe, Cele and Ntlangwini), but the speakers of the other variants still regard Ngqika, Ndlambe and Thembu as dialects of the Xhosa language which to them has the same status as their variants.

## 2. The Xhosa variants

### 2.1. The Bhaca variant

Bhaca is actually closer to Swati in that they both have the dominant /s/, /dz/, /t/, /tf/ and /ths/ variables (Soga, 1930:396). When one speaks Bhaca it is normally said 'Uvathsefula'. 'Ukuthsefula' is a term that is commonly used by ordinary speakers to suggest the dominant /ths/ and /dz/ sounds in this variant. The other striking feature in this variant is a group of words that are typically Bhaca and are almost only found in the Bhaca dialect.

According to Louw (1963) and Ziervogel (1959) the Bhaca variant belongs to the Tekela group. The Tekela-Nguni variant is spoken in the areas in which the standard group is either Zulu or Xhosa, perhaps as a result of the speakers settling among the Zulu and the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape. Msimang (1989) classifies the Bhaca under the Tekela-Nguni group. He observes that

Bhaca shares all the typically Tekela phenomena directly with Swazi.

The following are some of the words that set off Bhaca from Xhosa:

XHOSA	BHACA
<u>utywala</u> 'beer'	<u>ijiki</u>
<u>ukhuko</u> 'mat'	<u>isicamba</u>
<u>umvundla</u> 'hare'	<u>unoqwaja</u>
<u>ukuthetha</u> 'to speak'	<u>ukubhobha</u>
<u>ukubetha</u> 'to beat'	<u>ukukshiksha</u>
<u>umnqwazi</u> 'hat'	<u>isiqgoko</u> .

(Pahl, 1983:267)

## 2.2. The Mpondo variant

According to Msimang (1989:124) and Jackson (1975:23) the peculiar linguistic usage in the Mpondo group is the addition of /r/ to nasal compounds. This is known as 'ukundrondroza'. This term is derived from the dominant /ndr/ sound of the variant in place of the Xhosa /nd/

Examples:

	XHOSA	MPONDO
nd > ndr	<u>ndiyahamba</u> 'I am going'	<u>ndriyahamba</u>
	<u>indoda endala</u> 'an old man'	<u>indroda endrala</u>
nt > ntr	<u>intombi</u> 'a girl'	<u>intrombi</u>
	<u>umntu</u> 'a person'	<u>umntru</u>
nk > nkr	<u>inkosi</u> 'a chief'	<u>inkrosi</u>
	<u>inkwenkwe</u> 'a boy'	<u>inkrwenkrwe</u>

Like the Mpondomise variant the Mpondo variant uses the variable [tʃh] more extensively than Xhosa. This aspirated alveolar affricate [tʃh] corresponds to both [t h] and [ʃ] as they occur in Xhosa.

Examples:

XHOSA	MPONDO
<u>ishumi</u> 'ten'	<u>itshumi</u>
<u>iqusha</u> 'sheep'	<u>iqutsha</u>
<u>shushu</u> 'hot'	<u>tshutshu</u>
<u>ukushumayela</u> 'to preach'	<u>ukutshumayela</u>

(Pahl, 1983:359)

Other differences include the appearance of the Xhosa /kr/ as /k/ in Mpondo, e.g.

<u>ukukrazula</u> 'to tear'	> <u>ukukazula</u>
<u>ukukroba</u> 'to peep'	> <u>ukukoba</u>

Jordan further observes that the Xhosa /ku/ before the pronominal stems becomes /kwi/ in Mpondo, e.g.

XHOSA	MPONDO
<u>kuthi</u> 'at my home'	<u>kwithi</u>

(1956:101)

Further changes:

<u>ngabantu</u> 'it is the people'	<u>babantu</u>
<u>ngoomama</u> 'it is the mothers'	<u>boomama</u>

(1956:596)

<u>lowa mntu</u> 'that person'	<u>owa mntu</u>
<u>leva mizi</u> 'those homesteads'	<u>eya mizi</u>
<u>umntwana wam</u> (my child)	<u>umntram</u>
<u>umntwana wakhe</u> (his/her child)	<u>umtrakhe</u>

(Pahl, 1983:260)

<u>umnqxuma</u> 'a hole'	<u>umlindi</u>
<u>ukukhwela</u> 'to ride'	<u>ukuqibela</u>
<u>ukunqumla</u> 'to cut'	<u>ukuqamla</u>
<u>ukukhangela</u> 'to look'	<u>ukubheka</u>

(Pahl, 1983:261)

### 2.3. The Hlubi variant

Soga (1930:396) states that the Hlubi people are of Makalanga origin. The Makalanga were a large language group (now disintegrated) comprising of the Cele, Hlubi and Lala, and traced from the north. Hlubi substitutes /d/ for /g/ in the 1st person prefix,

e.g. ndithi 'I say' > ngithi.

The Hlubi /ng'/ is slightly different from the Zulu /ng/, which is vocalised while the Hlubi sound is fully nasalised with the pulmonary air stream completely occluded in the mouth cavity. Pahl (1983:263) correctly refers to this manner of speech formation as 'ukung'anq'aza', a term also used by ordinary speakers stressing the use of /ng'/, the 1st person prefix.

Some distinct grammatical features include the following:

XHOSA	HLUBI
the absence of Class /ulu-/ (Class 11)	
<u>olu donqwe</u> 'this clay'	<u>eli donqwe</u>
<u>unyawo lwam</u> 'my foot'	<u>inyawo lam</u>
the prefix of the /ubu-/ Class (14) replaced by that of the /uku-/ Class (17):	

<u>ebuhlanti</u> 'in the kraal'	<u>ekuhlanti</u>
<u>ebusweni</u> 'on the face'	<u>ekusweni</u>
<u>ebusuku</u> 'at night'	<u>ekusuku</u>

(Jordan, 1956:192)

and also wayethetha 'he was speaking'      wakethetha

(Jordan, 1956:442)

The Xhosa /ty/ becomes /tsh/

<u>ityhefu</u> 'poison'	<u>itshefu</u>
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Through retrogressive assimilation:

<u>kum[i]</u> 'to me'	<u>kimi</u>
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Hlubi has the following distinct vocabulary:

<u>ingconqconi</u> 'mosquito'	<u>umniyane</u>
<u>izibonda</u> 'poles'	<u>iziqonga</u>
<u>umngxuma</u> 'a hole'	<u>isigodi</u>
<u>umsi</u> 'smoke'	<u>intuthu</u>

(Pahl, 1983:265)

#### 2.4. The Mpondomise variant

Pahl (1983:257) argues that the languages of the Bomvana, Tembu and Mpondomise speakers are closely related to the standard variant of Xhosa. Mbadi (1956:1) states that the close relationship between these people is due to intermarriages and common lineal descent. For example, the Xhosa and Mpondomise trace their descent from Njanya, Sikhomo and Malangana, the earliest Xhosa chiefs. Mpondomise can be distinguished from standard Xhosa by the following variables:

XHOSA	MPONDOMISE	FUNCTION
<u>ukwaphula</u> 'to break'	<u>ukwephula</u>	variation in vowel coalescence
<u>ukwaneka</u> 'to hang in the sun'	<u>ukweneka</u>	retrogressive assimilation
<u>ukakayi</u> 'skull'	<u>ukhakhayi</u>	influence of aspirates
<u>ukukhokela</u> 'to lead'	<u>ukukhokhela</u>	aspiration
(Pahl, 1983:258)		
<u>ihashe</u> 'horse'	<u>ihatshi</u>	fricative to affricate
<u>ixesha</u> 'time'	<u>ixetsha</u>	
(Mbadi, 1956:4)		
<u>nanguya</u> 'there he is'	<u>nankuya</u>	voice to ejection
<u>nangaya</u> 'there they are'	<u>nankaya</u>	(Mbadi, 1956:99)

## 2.5. Other Xhosa variants

Other Xhosa variants still in existence include Xesibe, Cele and Ntlangwini. The Xesibe people occupy land in the Mount Ayliff District in Transkei, while the Cele are found in the Mzimkulu district. The Xesibe variant possesses the /ndr/, /ntr/, /nkr/ nasal combinations similar to Mpondo (Pahl, 1983:262).

The Cele variant is distinct with its affricate /tz/ sound in place of the Xhosa voiced fricative /z/, e.g.

XHOSA	CELE
<u>umfazi</u> 'woman'	<u>umfatzi</u>
<u>zam</u> 'mine'	<u>tzam</u>
	(Pahl, 1983:270)

This is the feature sound of the Lala groups of whom a few remain in Southern Africa, and it is called 'ukutekedza', a term used by ordinary speakers denoting the characteristic lisp of this variant (Soga, 1930:395-6).

Ntlangwini is a variant of Tekela-Nguni, spoken in the areas in which the standard language is Zulu or Xhosa. A large group of these people is found in the Mzimkulu area and others are in the Matatiele district. Zungu (1989:8) explains that there may be a strong influence of standard Zulu and standard Xhosa and a gradual differentiation from Swati to which it is genetically closely related. The manner of speaking is 'ukutekeza', a term used by ordinary speakers denoting the characteristic lisp of this variant (Zungu, 1989:1).  
Examples:

XHOSA	NTLANGWINI
<u>inkomo</u> 'cattle'	<u>itinkomo</u>
<u>inkomo</u> 'a cow'	<u>inkhomo</u>

iziziba 'pools'

ititiba

(Zungu, 1989:4)

nasekhava 'also at home'

nakekhava

isendlwini 'it is in the hut'

ikendlini

(Zungu, 1989:81)

From the above illustrations it can be observed that the variants being discussed can in one way or another still be distinguished from each other in spite of some overlaps. The linguists cited in this work seem certain about some of the distinguishing factors in spite of the gradual fusion with standard Xhosa. In 1922 Jabavu learns about how one of his grandfather's sisters left Qumbu for Umzinkulu where she found the core of the Ntlangwini people, the Jili clan who belong to a common ancestry with the Jabavus, still knowing nothing about Christianity (Jabavu, 1953:60-1). Thereupon, she started preaching and working among them for three years. Evidently, such a process would not be completed without a degree of standard Xhosa influence among even this group of the Ntlangwini people more than 200km away from the standard Xhosa speaking people.

### 3. The demise of some of the Xhosa variants

The introduction of the printing press to the Xhosa people in 1823 by the Rev. John Ross of the Glasgow Missionary Society represents a major contribution to the development of Ngqika, Ndlambe and Thembu as the standard Xhosa dialect (Andrzejewski, 1985:546). Objections raised by people like Tiyo Soga against the printing of the Ngqika dialect (discussed earlier on) are a clear indication of the early concern by the missionaries and early converts to determine a standard Xhosa dialect. The committee that was formed up produced a new translation in standard Xhosa which then embraced the Ngqika-Ndlambe and Thembu variants. This

largely excluded the Mpondo, Bhaca, Hlubi, Xesibe, Cele and Ntlangwini variants. Standard Xhosa therefore became the core cluster of variants with a higher prestige level than the variants already mentioned.

Since the only printed language variant was Ngqika-Ndlambe-Thembu, children had to learn in this variant how to read and write. The Bible was also translated into this variant, and so preaching was also influenced by some form of standard Xhosa. As more and more people were converted school life and experience became a desired goal among the Xhosa communities. Children who went to school, however, encountered standard Xhosa, while those who remained illiterate continued using their home variants. School children could use the standard variant in conversations with 'outsiders' while they would continue using their own variants at home and at informal situations. It, therefore, became a familiar practice by the converts and school people to identify the illiterate members of the community not only by dress and habits but also by their use of non-standard Xhosa variants even in formal situations. The church and the seminary school produced a new class of students who used mainly standard Xhosa and English for communication, something that can be viewed as the beginnings of a class division.

On the other hand the non-literate people provided easy references and therefore stereotypes for preaching and teaching. Such stereotypes still exist today. For example, there is a common joke among school people concerning the manner a Mpondo speaker addressed a prosecutor at a trial, '*Zewuphi wena, Mtshutshisi xa kusenzek'onto?*' (Where were you, Mr Prosecutor, when that happened?); the standard variety being, '*Wawuphi wena, Mtshutshisi, xa kusenzeka loo nto?*' The idea of this joke is to portray the Mpondo speaker as illiterate. Here use of the Mpondo variant is intended to suggest that it is because the speaker is a Mpondo that he reasons as he does, questioning the court procedure with

which he, as an unschooled person, is not familiar. While standard Xhosa was generally associated by the school people with a positive intellect, wisdom, uprightness and a good, cultured upbringing (these being some of the virtues with which the school syllabi and Christian teachings were loaded), a variant has always been used to illustrate narrow-mindedness, ignorance and backwardness (because it would inevitably be used by non-converts for communication in all circumstances). The English Readers, like the Royal Readers, Longman's English Readers and Chambers's Twentieth Century Readers, were themselves not innocent in creating this idea of the general ignorance of those who fell outside the schoolroom influence, a situation well-demonstrated by this extract from a Nelson's Reader prescribed for South African schools in the 1940s:

Mr Williams, a missionary, who was building a house for himself, had gone to work one morning without his square; so he took up a chip, and with a piece of charcoal wrote upon it a request that Mrs Williams would send him that article. He called a chief, who was looking after a portion of the work, and said to him, "Friend, take this; go to our house, and give it to Mrs. Williams."

The chief was a strange-looking man. He had been a great warrior, and in one of his many battles he had lost an eye. Giving the missionary a look of wonder with the other, he said, "Take that! She will call me foolish, and scold me, if I carry a chip to her."

"No." was the reply, "she will not. Take it and go at once; I am in haste."

Seeing that Mr Williams was in earnest, he took it, and asked, "What must I say?"

Had the above conversation appeared in Xhosa, the stereotype would normally have been made to express himself in a non-standard variant of Xhosa. This endeavour to cast the variant in the negative light soon had an effect of not only enabling children coming from these dialect clusters to speak standard Xhosa fluently after their school education but also of letting them drift away from their own variants, thereby losing their competence in them. The tendency for these school products to refrain from the use of their variants when communicating to or in the presence of non-speakers of their own variant is quite common.

Most of the children from the affected communities speak pure Xhosa both away from the home environment and sometimes at home, especially a home in an urban environment or where some of the family members are standard Xhosa speakers. The home variant is used mainly by grown ups who have not had any or little schooling. Young school people often use their home variants playfully and in imitating certain members of the communities. Mbadi's account of his collection of material of the Mpondomise variant confirms this observation when he says:

The material for ... [my] dissertation was collected mostly from elderly people who never attended school and were not church-going. I attended tribal activities such as "Umngqungqo", "imigidi" and tribal meetings, and recorded as much as I could of what I considered to be Mpondomise. Most information was, however, collected from migrant labourers from the Districts of Qumbu and Tsolo, who work in Cape Town.

(1956:ii)

Not only are Xhosa variants denigrated today, but even Xhosa, the standard dialect, as a school subject or university course, is looked down upon by school people as a

subject for the simple-minded and for rustics. It is certainly not regarded as a language of empowerment. Most school people prefer English to show off their 'infinite wisdom'. Pahl (1983:256) says,

Ngenxa yokuba amaXhosa esebenzisa isiLungu ezindaweni aphantela kuzo, ezifundweni zawo nasekuseleni, naxa athetha nabaMhlophe, abaninzi kuwo abasenakratshi lanto ngesiXhosa esisulungekileyo, baye besixuba namagama esiNgesi nawesiBhulu.

(Since the Xhosa people use English at their places of work, in their education as well as in reading, or when they talk to white people, many of them have lost pride in pure Xhosa, whereupon they mix it with English and Afrikaans.)

#### 4. Variant usage in publications

Not much has been written and published in the non-standard variants. There are, however, a few thriving works based on oral literature that are still available. D.Z.Makaula's UMadzikane is a historical account of the Bhaca leader Madzikane and his times. Indirectly, and as the title also demonstrates, this work makes use of the Bhaca variant here and there. The history is itself mainly based on oral information where the informants are mainly Bhaca speaking.

H.M.Ndawo's book, Izibongo Zenkosi zama-Hlubi nezama-Baca (1928) has these praises in the original Hlubi and Bhaca variants. J.V. Cantrel's collection of Mpondo folktales, Folktales from Mpondoland/Iintsomi ZasemaMpondweni provides one of the best examples of variant

usage in literature, namely, the Mpondo variant. This storybook represents a faithful attempt by Cantrel to convey the stories as presented by the storyteller in the original language variant.

It is quite clear that Xhosa will continue to be regarded as a standard variant, but one hopes that in the areas where these other variants are dominant they will exist as informal language of communication and perhaps even in formal domains. The Bible does not appear in any of these variants. Standard Xhosa may also absorb some of the expressions and vocabulary from the non-standard variants. In fact, it would be beneficial to the standard Xhosa language as a whole, if the situation where teachers used to discourage use of variant at school, could be reversed and useful regional expressions were encouraged to enrich formal written Xhosa. The Xhosa language could be made as rich as other international written languages, and in many cases it could expand its range of synonymy if it could relax its rigidity in accepting terms from the other variants. Some terms like /ukudla/ (Hlubi and Bhaca) are already used in Xhosa (where the standard noun is /ukutya/) for added meaning, e.g. to mean 'harvest', 'habitual behaviour', 'to charge', 'cost'. Another interesting borrowing is the idiom, 'Indaba yotyelo ayikholi' - "You have to see to believe." (Mesatywa, 1954:202-3), from Bhaca/Hlubi 'Indaba yokutshela ayikholi'. 'Ukutshela' is a Bhaca/Hlubi verb (also Zulu) meaning 'to inform', and the alveolar affricate [tʃh] becomes [ty], a reversal of the [ty] > [tʃh] change from Xhosa to Hlubi. The potential for further enrichment has still to be tapped.

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