

The Threat Posed by Dominant Languages to Minor Languages or Dialects: The Case of isiZulu and isiBhaca in Umzimkhulu, KwaZulu-Natal

Authors : Yanga Lusanda Praiseworthy Majola

Abstract : The small town of Umzimkhulu is situated in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa and was once the Bantustan of Transkei. Citizens of Umzimkhulu are called amaBhaca because they speak isiBhaca, which is a non-standard language but is mutually intelligible to three standard official languages, isiXhosa, isiZulu, and siSwati. Since Umzimkhulu was under the Eastern Cape Province prior to 2006, isiXhosa is used for official purposes, particularly in schools, then isiZulu is used in other sectors; this is despite the fact that the majority of Umzimkhulu citizens regard themselves as amaBhaca. This poses a threat to both isiBhaca as a language and the identity of amaBhaca because Umzimkhulu is situated in KZN, where isiZulu is the dominant language spoken by the majority in the province. The primary objective of this study is to unveil, using the language dominance theory, how dominant languages pose a threat to minority and developing languages or dialects. The study employed a mixed-methods approach. Data was obtained from key community members and leaders who were identified as amaBhaca, who have lived in Umzimkhulu their whole lives. The main findings of the study are that although isiBhaca is classified as a dialect of isiXhosa, linguistically, it is closer to isiZulu, and thus isiZulu poses much threat to the existence of isiBhaca since it becomes easy for amaBhaca to switch from isiBhaca to isiZulu and end up not having an interest in isiBhaca. Respondents revealed that in their view, isiBhaca is a language of its own, and the continuous use and empowerment of isiZulu in Umzimkhulu, particularly in the professional settings, is detrimental to isiBhaca, and this subsequently has the potential of endangering the existence of isiBhaca and might lead to its attrition.

Keywords : language dominance, dominant languages, minority languages, language attrition

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