



Workplace Multilingualism in South African Coastal Ports

Assessing Linguistic Sustainability through Situational Analysis

Anele Gobodwana

College of Human Sciences, Department of African Languages,
University of South Africa, Preller Street, Pretoria 0801, South Africa
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6579-7044>

Abstract

This exploratory study investigates the roles of languages, communication, and cultural heritage in South African ports, particularly through a reflection on a recent visit to the Port of Ngqura in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, South Africa. It highlights that artisans and students within the academic environment utilize language for interaction. Such dialogues and tasks are predominantly conducted in English, the language of business and commerce. Nevertheless, South Africa's linguistic landscape is characterized by its multilingual and multicultural nature, featuring 12 official languages alongside numerous dialects, many of which are underrepresented and spoken by minority communities. As a result, this article identifies the language barrier as a significant concern that warrants thorough investigation, given that port personnel often lack a shared linguistic foundation. The primary methodology and theoretical framework guiding this article's development are rooted in exploratory research, which employs an interpretivist epistemological stance. This narrative approach involves assessing the site's feasibility and engaging relevant personnel to evaluate existing gaps in the phenomenon. Moreover, the anticipated and potential outcomes include the varied use of local languages within harbors, as well as the development of localized harbor languages that evolve over time through the interactions of local residents and migrant workers in their daily activities. Additionally, English may act as a barrier to student enrolment in academic institutions. Ultimately, the dominance of English may have impeded both students and staff from fully engaging in the maritime business sector; thus, this article proposes short learning programmes (SLPs) to enhance comprehension.

Keywords

lingua franca, creole, language-heritage, academy, workers, harbors, exploratory research, situational analysis

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

South Africa is one of the most linguistically varied countries in the world. Twelve of the official languages are widely spoken across the country by people who claim them as their home language. However, this does not indicate that these are the only languages spoken in the country, as there are other dialects that are not gazetted by the government. English and Afrikaans, predominantly spoken by white people, and nine African/Bantu languages, mostly spoken by black people, are among these languages. These Bantu languages have been spatially split based on precolonial speaker distribution (Hurst & Mona, 2017). Although most of them are very mutually intelligible, the Apartheid administration actively segregated them and codified them by various missions (Sefotho & Makalela, 2017).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The personnel at the Ports engage in daily communication to exchange skills and knowledge. They represent a collective of individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and heritages, uniting in a multilingual, multicultural workplace. Similar to students in residential academic environments, they uphold shared values; however, the dominance of English has led many to adopt practices that inadvertently exclude certain groups of students from enrollment, as they may perceive language as an obstacle to accessing knowledge. Moreover, some of these humanitarian workers exhibit a high degree of fluency in one of the local South African languages. This initiative seeks to explore the language barrier among employees, especially given that even local staff may not be proficient in isiXhosa or other official languages recognized at the provincial level.

This article examines exploratory research, which, as noted by Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, and Bezuidenhout (2014), is performed in unfamiliar settings and seeks to investigate the feasibility of fully executing the research. Considering that circumstances evolve over time and that there is considerable fluctuation across locations and experiences. Furthermore, Du Plooy (2006:48) contributes by emphasizing how one can conduct exploratory research and recognize the following attributes:

- To gain new insights as part of a pretest or pilot study.
- To identify essential concepts related to language usage among workers and students in ports.
- To pinpoint key stakeholders, with Transnet being the primary site integrated into this study.
- To prioritize social needs.
- To ascertain the implications of the previously mentioned research issues.
- To formulate a hypothesis.
- To validate assumptions.
- To familiarize oneself with unfamiliar situations, conditions, policies, and behaviors.

In conclusion, exploratory studies often do not adhere to scientific standards of data replication (reliability) and accuracy (validity), as the research design must remain adaptable to comprehend an uncharted research domain. The methodologies employed in exploratory studies generally encompass qualitative approaches such as personal interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, and case studies.

This article adopts the following objectives to drive this project swiftly.

- To investigate the effective usage of the South African vernacular languages.
- To explore communication barriers within the port's community.
- To evaluate the common language or new variant development by workers and students.

In any given location, one can expect to encounter language, whether it is the native language that individuals have created and developed, a creole, or a lingua franca. Therefore, my focus will be on the languages developed or created by workers in selected ports in South Africa. Gobodwana (2023) suggests that in South Africa, particularly in the townships of Pretoria, Gauteng, children have established and cultivated a well-articulated informal language known as isiPitori. This language incorporates all the indigenous languages that are commonly spoken in the region.

The development and establishment of this language are advantageous, as they recognize the diversity present in South Africa, as expressed through linguistic means. Moreover, the project is driven by the recognition that South Africa is home to individuals from diverse backgrounds. The significance of languages is paramount in the contexts where people interact. For example, South Africa officially recognizes eleven languages, as established by the South African Constitution 108 of 1996. Furthermore, this research aims to explore the living spoken languages, identifying both dominant and recessive forms. This is particularly relevant as ports accommodate foreign visitors for business purposes. The main aim of this article is to thoroughly examine the language use and value policies in South African Coastal Ports.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At this juncture, I have scrutinized the existing literature and secondary sources concerning language usage and values in coastal ports. There remains a significant lack of literature to adequately develop this section, as limited research has been conducted in maritime contexts pertaining to language, communication, and cultural or heritage aspects. Nevertheless, I have undertaken a review and comparison of the literature on locations where new languages have emerged. For example, language development has occurred in mines, local communities, and other environments. I have established frameworks and participated in discussions on several critical topics, thereby fostering a thorough academic dialogue that provides relevant insights and addresses both significant and overlooked knowledge pertinent to the themes of this article. This approach has enabled this article to underscore the existing knowledge gap and other relatively underexplored domains.

Sampson & Zhao (2003) indicate that, in ancient times, the role of language was not a significant concern within maritime studies. The vessel's captain communicated using the local languages of the countries to which they were delivering goods. The crew members were encouraged and trained to be multilingual, with an emphasis on understanding English as the "lingua franca." I have observed that in several predominantly European and Australian nations, the dominance of English is not a prevailing issue. Some labourers are found to be illiterate in both spoken and written English. These countries are recognized for their linguistic diversity as they strive to maintain their native languages across various contexts. In contrast to South Africa, many African nations experienced English dominance and were compelled to marginalize their indigenous languages.

Language Use and coined in Mines in South Africa

The potential of language emerges from all environments where individuals congregate and engage with one another. As people interact, they bring a rich native language with them. Mesthrie (2019) explains that fanakalo originated in South African mines and was developed by multilingual, multicultural workers. This pidgin language gained significance when it was adopted as the lingua franca in the highly diverse mining communities of South Africa. Although it serves as a lingua franca, it is not recognized as the nation's official language; nonetheless, it remains the primary means of communication in certain regions. Consequently, in South Africa's coastal ports, various languages are used for communication and engagement.

This language, fanakalo, has existed for at least two centuries (Mesthrie 1989, 1998). During its initial phase, it served as a relatively straightforward contact system that facilitated communication among European missionaries, traders, adventurers, colonists, and indigenous South Africans, particularly those of Xhosa and Zulu descent, in the eastern regions of the Cape Colony and Natal.

Moreover, in the Cape Colony, Afrikaans was the established lingua franca, as it was the language of the minority at the time, and later gained widespread recognition within the country. Ultimately, in Natal, then, now KwaZulu-Natal, with the influx of a significant number of indentured Indians, some dialects, creole, and lingua franca became stabilized, as these individuals constituted the primary labour force on the newly created sugar cane plantations. The onset of modern or industrial South African history is marked by the discovery of diamonds in the Northern Cape, which led to the establishment of Kimberley in 1867. This was followed by the discovery of gold in the Transvaal, specifically in the Witwatersrand region, around what would later become Johannesburg, in 1886. These mines attracted numerous individuals, including capitalists and fortune-seekers from Britain, the United States, Australia, and Eastern Europe (Grundlingh, 1986, p. 186), and the workforce from Southern Africa was even more varied.

South African Language Use and Value in Public Entities

South Africa, akin to many nations globally, is characterized by a multitude of languages, which has led to its recognition as a multilingual, multicultural, and diverse society. According to Gobodwana (2023:69), South Africa exemplifies a nation that has enshrined multilingualism within its Constitution and has facilitated access to multilingual education (Du Plessis, 2009). The foundational provisions of the Constitution accord official status to twelve languages: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, SiSwati, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, English, Afrikaans, and sign language and other variants. Furthermore, the Constitution of South Africa 108 of (1996) stipulates that all governmental bodies and entities, as well as venues where individuals gather in labour relations, must use an appropriate language as outlined in the country's linguistic framework.

Ultimately, the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) has designated these languages based on their prevalence within each of the nine provinces. This implies that in the Eastern Cape, the languages provided and allocated would include isiXhosa, English, Afrikaans, and Sesotho. The linguistic repertoire of a humanistic nature specific to that province influences the determination of these language allocations. The dissemination of languages in South Africa, as outlined by PanSALB:

Table 1 Provincial Languages of South Africa

South Africa (9 Provinces)	Provincial Languages
Eastern Cape	English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa, Sesotho, & others.
Western Cape	English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa, Sesotho, & others.
Northern Cape	English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa, Setswana, & others.
KwaZulu Natal	English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, Sesotho, & others.
Mpumalanga	English, Afrikaans, Siswati, Xitsonga, & others.
Limpopo	English, Afrikaans, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, & others.
Northwest	English, Afrikaans, Setswana, & others.
Gauteng	English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, Sepedi, & others.

The "others" category will encompass all variants associated with the primary or official language. This includes African Indigenous languages that have been documented or are not part of formal language in/for education, yet are spoken informally by various groups (Gobodwana, 2025). The nine provincial languages, as designated by PanSALB and other relevant stakeholders, have been established, introduced, and made official in their respective provinces.

Moreover, in this article, I have conducted an exploratory research at the Port of Ngqura, examining the use and significance of language, particularly in relation to its values within the port. Policy development and implementation by the Pan South African Language Board Act (No. 12 of 2012) highlights that:

“provisions for PanSALB to be the principal champion of multilingualism by adhering to all the language legislative prescripts of the country, and, in doing so, led by example; the promotion of the effective use of multilingualism within the institution; constitutional provisions for equitable use of all the 12 official languages of the country, as well as the Khoi and San languages; the creation of conditions for the use and development of all 12 official languages as well as the Khoi and San languages.”

Fundamentally, the dominant belief among the South African population is that individuals should possess multilingual skills to improve their employability. This notion is especially pertinent given the distribution of these languages across South Africa's provinces. Ports are increasingly adopting English as the primary language of communication. However, it is noteworthy that some students and workers in these environments perceive the English language as a barrier to completing additional projects and assigned tasks.

Language Use and Coined in Townships in South Africa

Gobodwana (2023) argues that, in many South African townships, there is always a local variant. This variant is predominantly shaped by the area's residents, who interact daily. According to Gobodwana (2023), he submits that in South Africa, specifically in the Gauteng province and other provinces, such as the Western Cape. Locals in Gauteng

townships have developed *isiPitori*, while those in the Western Cape have developed *Kaapse*, particularly in coloured localities (Van Rooi, 2022).

In the current discussion, it has been established that *isiPitori* was created by children during both school hours and their recreational time in the community after school. Supporting this assertion, Hurst (2016) notes that children often experience a lack of confidence when they struggle to communicate fluently in their second language. Additionally, these children are increasingly distressed by the need to forsake their first language (home language) and by the perception that their native language is inferior. I concur with Hurst's perspective and assert that, given Gauteng's status as one of South Africa's diverse provinces, the emergence of new languages is inevitable and serves as a means of communication. In contrast, in the Western Cape, particularly at the University of the Western Cape, *Kaapse* has been developed and holds significant importance for many multilingual students.

Ultimately, Hurst also indicates that the use of local *tsotsitaal* variants in the streets has promoted linguistic inclusivity. Meaning, people speak freely without regard for semantic adherence to what they say. For as long as one can understand the message from the speaker as they are informally conversing. Therefore, coastal workers should have developed a language variant specific to their work. All spaces and entities, whether public or private, have a specific jargon or register they use for communication.

METHODS AND DESIGN

This exploratory research adopts an interpretivist epistemological framework (Gattone, 2020). Maritime knowledge encompasses all activities occurring in oceans. This methodological approach is conceptualized as a self-evident aspect of daily life, consistently integrated within social practices, specifically, the actions, expressions, and interactions of individuals (Kemmis et al., 2014; Löw & Marguin, 2022). As a result, the knowledge held by study participants, in the form of managerial personnel, regarding these maritime concepts is predominantly pre-reflective, as the project will embark into (Löw & Marguin, 2022; Thierbach, 2024), as the individuals I interacted with demonstrated understanding of these concepts and recognized the linguistic and communicative challenges in the maritime industry. An exploratory research design was employed to gain an understanding of the phenomenon at hand, focusing on language use and value in marine spaces. Plooy-Celliers, Davis, and Bezuidenhout (2014:75) explain the purpose of conducting exploratory research where the researcher is not familiar with the site, topic, social, or economic environment, etc. As a result, I have conducted an exploratory study in the maritime sector to gain insight into language adherence within the community. In addition, this choice was driven by the scarcity of literature on language use in coastal ports.

Secondly, Myburgh (2015) defines the qualitative approach as a crucial method across various academic disciplines and professional fields, as it endeavours to comprehend and interpret the meanings, experiences, and social realities of individuals within their natural environments. This research type employs a variety of qualitative techniques to collect and analyse non-numerical data, including words, images, and behaviours, with the goal of producing in-depth and contextual insights into the phenomena being examined.

Thirdly, I have opted to use desk research, employing an exploratory design, to examine the language use and its significance and value within South Africa's coastal ports (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Initially, the desk research methodology, as articulated by Bryman & Bell (2007), is described as a technique for gathering and examining information from existing secondary sources, including documents, reports, academic publications, and various materials accessible online or in libraries. In developing this article, I have utilized various sources (and conducted physical research through the involvement of senior managerial personnel in Transnet) for data collection and synthesis, ensuring the article's relevance to the field of knowledge. This is a unique situational analysis article that seeks to leverage secondary knowledge to address the existing problem.

Data collection

No physical data were collected during the exploratory research phase, as this investigation has not yet obtained approval to involve human subjects. This study serves as exploratory research to evaluate the site's suitability for advancing the project. The research has delved into subjects that have not been previously examined, uncovering that inquiries into language, communication, heritage, and culture are limited by the studies conducted at that site. Furthermore, since this was a secondary data collection, no data tools were developed to explore the phenomenon. In this research methodology, the lead researcher has engaged with Transnet management concerning a potential data-collection site for when the project commences. Consequently, no sample was prepared for this topic, which centers on the interactions.

Sample

Five managerial personnel from the maritime industry, including human resources personnel, participated in this exploratory qualitative study through presentations and discussions on research prospects. These were personnel who were prepared by the managerial department within the Transnet National Port Authorities. Their aim was to listen and share inputs with the study that will soon start.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Given that the study employed an exploratory research design, no data were gathered for analysis; instead, the findings were discussed and presented in relation to the objectives of this article. Initially, an inductive thematic analysis was used

to illustrate the data I collected for this article, which aligns with the objectives through various themes. The analysis, facilitated by desk research methods, has enabled this article to gather and evaluate information from existing secondary sources, including documents, reports, academic publications, and other resources accessible online or in libraries, in addition to a situational visit to the Port of Ngqura, Gqeberha, South Africa (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The rationale for adopting a desk approach rather than a secondary design was clearly to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the issue being investigated, as well as to enhance or validate existing knowledge on the subject.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

I have examined three themes that have emerged from the articles' objectives. These themes have become the central focus of discussion and are clearly articulated in response to the article's main challenge. Consequently, these themes represent the compilation and presentation of knowledge gathered and showcased in this article. The following discussions of the three themes are guided by the objectives of this article and constitute the core emphasis of this work.

Theme 1: The effective usage of the South African vernacular languages

Research undertaken by academics emphasizes the cultural and coastal domains, highlighting their significance, while neglecting the relationship between language and heritage. Consequently, this project acknowledges the contributions of other researchers in oceanography and water science. A primary advantage of this project is its ability to enhance understanding of the relationship between naming nature in a specific language and the rationale for using that language to name objects. Additionally, it explores what distinguishes a unique language for communication from the official language as defined by constitutions and the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) Act of 1995.

In any given location, one can expect to encounter language, whether it is the native language that individuals have created and developed, a creole, or a lingua franca. Therefore, my focus will be on the languages developed or created by workers in selected ports of South Africa. Gobodwana (2023) suggests that, particularly in the townships of Pretoria, Gauteng, children have established and cultivated a well-articulated informal language known as isiPitori. This language incorporates all the Indigenous languages that are commonly spoken in the region. The development and establishment of this language are advantageous, as they recognize the diversity present in South Africa, as expressed through linguistic means. Currently, vernacular languages are not accessible in every port region; nonetheless, there is a need for linguistic diversity. Language is utilized within academic settings, among labourers, and in various associated environments within the coastal port.

The coastal ports of South Africa have facilities and faculties focusing on training and development, including skills development. The existence of these units clearly indicates that Transnet offers competitive educational opportunities and spaces for both students and workers. Hence, I am listing their operations rather than descriptions and functions to indicate the importance they play within the TNPA, as well as the languages used in those units.

Table 2 Faculty Responsibilities and Language Use

Faculties	Descriptions
Faculty of Port Terminal and Marine	As the vessel approaches the harbour, personnel are needed to assist with docking and securing the vessel. The pilot at this stage might not be fluent in the language, but they can still be fluent in English for communication purposes.
Faculty of Leadership and Functional Development	This would represent the largest faculty, incorporating most of the ports' communication and skills enhancement for both workers and students. It has been observed and highlighted that a language barrier exists. Students undergoing training are facing difficulties and encountering language obstacles during their oral presentations. Consequently, I would like to introduce the Short Learning Program (SLP) in Multilingual Pedagogies, which is offered at numerous local universities. The implementation of SLP holds significant academic promise for improving comprehension and appreciation of South Africa's diversity.
Faculty of Engineering	The mechanical components and operations of the vessels should be prioritized to ensure safety and to identify and address any potential hazards that could threaten the workstation. Additionally, it is worth exploring the onomastics of the components used daily in the workstations. Furthermore, signage and safety protocols should be accessible in all provincial languages to facilitate easy access and enhance communication during emergencies.
Faculty of Pipelines	This department is exclusively responsible for all pipe manufacturing and maintenance operations located in the coastal port. The pipes facilitate the transportation of oil from the vessels to the surrounding areas. A specialized team of staff is tasked with ensuring compliance with established processes. Furthermore, effective communication is paramount, as a clear, straightforward understanding between offshore and onshore employees is crucial to the efficient delivery of oil services. Field research will be conducted to ensure that there are no inconsistencies in language between the sender and the recipient in the TPT, particularly among staff members.

Theme 2: The exploration of communication barriers

Generally, observation and, as the language experts, people who gather in one place have a duty and a mandate to communicate. As people meet across various walks of life, they engage linguistically, some of them aware of it and some not. Either communicating through words, phrases, or signs, etc. But people communicate to share their ideas and understanding. This article examines communication among port workers. South Africa is a diverse country with a rich tapestry of 12 official languages and numerous other variants spoken within its borders. When Transnet appoints and employs people, it does not specifically consider the language; however, it assesses the skills the individual will bring to the sector. TNPA is an English-language-dominant organization operating in an international realm and offering services worldwide; however, it attracts people from diverse backgrounds.

Theme 3: The development of the new languages coined by workers

I have examined three variants that have emerged within the South African linguistic landscape. These are fanakalo, isiPitori, and Kaapse, which I have examined in relation to the subjects addressed in this article. Firstly, each of these languages holds considerable significance for language development, serving as a lingua franca; however, they are not included in formal educational settings in South Africa, encompassing both primary and tertiary education.

The fanakalo is the variant of the lingua franca coined by workers in South African mines. Mesthrie (1989) notes that fanakalo has been the lingua franca for almost a century, serving as a neutral language between missionaries and the local population. These language attributes are isiZulu-dominant and other local South African languages. As it was developed in the mines, it has been the official language there. Just as in Pretoria townships, the isiPitori lingua franca is developed by children both outside and inside the school (Gobodwana, 2023).

Furthermore, individuals employed in coastal ports may not share a common linguistic heritage. Whether they are local or international, the Constitution of South Africa 108 of 1996 supports multilingualism in South Africa, particularly in areas and entities where trade occurs. Additionally, it recognizes the newly established language, PanSALB, which promotes and validates the presence of various forms within the nation's official languages.

CONCLUSIONS

Linguistic maintenance and liberty present a considerable challenge in contexts marked by multilingualism and multiculturalism, especially as new languages emerge in response to linguistic rights. South Africa serves as a prime example of this diversity, boasting 12 official languages and a variety of dialects. Language is dynamic; it transforms over time, mirroring the interactions individuals engage in with one another. For example, individuals from Zimbabwe may arrive in South Africa proficient in Shona. However, after spending a significant amount of time in South Africa, their command of the language appears to decline. This indicates that without consistent usage, a language risks extinction and may eventually be lost due to inadequate practice. Foreign nationals frequently modify their languages to improve accessibility and relevance in professional settings, thereby facilitating more effective communication. Nevertheless, in environments such as ports, the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) contends that employing provincial languages can alleviate language confusion. This, however, does not impede individuals' mobility within the nation, particularly in port regions. Furthermore, the dominance of English has emerged as a challenge, obstructing students' access to knowledge. English is increasingly becoming the exclusive medium for communication, interaction, cultural heritage education, and assessment. This trend has the potential to silence students' voices during evaluations, particularly for those whose indigenous mother tongue is not English. While no definitive solution exists, this article advocates developing short learning programmes to assist students and the broader maritime community in overcoming language-related obstacles.

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