



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Analysis of Polysemy Phrases in IsiXhosa and Isizulu: Homonyms' Semantical Meaning

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Aug 11, 2025 Accepted: Oct 20, 2025	A persistent semantic homonym issue exists between the isiXhosa and isiZulu languages within South African educational settings, resulting in ambiguity for numerous phrases. The restricted nature of interaction concerning homonyms, along with the polysemy of the chosen words that share spelling yet have distinct contextual meanings, is particularly noteworthy. The vocabulary in isiXhosa and isiZulu has a significant impact on linguistic interpretation and analysis. The origin of language can be traced back to its connection with the same linguistic cluster as the indigenous South African Indigenous Languages (SAIL), which are generally classified based on their etymological roots. Employing a PRISMA literature narrative method approach enhancement to the comprehension of the homonymy comparison between isiXhosa and isiZulu. The results and conclusions indicate that isiZulu and isiXhosa share a common linguistic and morphological framework, yet they differ significantly in semantic interpretation. Providing additional support to shape and reinforce the sociolinguistic theory of the article proved advantageous. The dilemma and the ongoing polysemy have been suggested to aid in closely examining and elucidating the linguistic morphemes of these two African languages.
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INTRODUCTION

Hlongwane (2025) explains that in the normal sequence of the communication model, there is often a sender who sends the message to the receiver, who then decodes the message and ultimately provides feedback (Kritzinger et al., 2009). The feedback should be positive, but if it is negative, it can be assumed that a communication breakdown occurred, which in some cases may be caused by misunderstandings arising from the use of words, particularly homonyms and polysemes. These two semantic concepts, homonymy and polysemy, have been extensively studied in linguistics and related fields.

This paper investigates the impact of correlation between homonyms in the isiXhosa and isiZulu languages from a semantic perspective. The isiXhosa and isiZulu languages have traditionally been considered indigenous tongues with the same language repertoire and phonological awareness. This phenomenon is because these languages exhibit noun class concord in their lexicon formation. This paper will adopt fewer phrases and discuss them based on their homonyms and meanings.

The linguistic history of Africa was not well documented, and linkages between African languages have only recently been established using linguistic and anthropological methods. The link between the Ndebele and Zulu languages has been discussed, and implications for sister languages and language-dialect status have been proposed. The language-dialect conclusions, on the other hand, are more convincing, with Zulu as the language and Ndebele as its regional dialect (Ndlovu, 2019).

In the South African language context, it consists of the 9 indigenous languages that were allocated according to their similar noun classes. These languages influence each other and are somewhat

related. The two linguistic groups are part of the Nguni language cluster today. Guthrie (1967) classifies Ndebele in zone 40 of group S, which is the Nguni group; other languages in the Nguni group are Zulu, Xhosa, Southern Ndebele, and Swati, and their specific classifications by Guthrie are S41- Xhosa, S42- Zulu, S43- Swati, and S44- Ndebele. While Guthrie (1967) treats Zimbabwean Ndebele as a separate language from Zulu, Doke (1954) earlier regarded Ndebele as a dialect of Zulu.

South Africa is considered a multilingual country with twelve official languages and other variants, including Nama. Additionally, South Africa is recognized as a diverse and multicultural nation, owing to its multilingualism and rich cultural heritage. These indigenous languages are grouped closely related linguistic features in the following category: Nguni (isiXhosa, isiZulu, siSwati, and isiNdebele). There's a persistent problem with misunderstandings and a dearth of established language standards when communicating with another Nguni speaker. The output message for several words in isiXhosa differs from that in isiZulu. This has had a significant effect on school language management standardization. Relocation, intermarriage, and business relationships, among other factors, have contributed to this issue not being adequately addressed. This essay will examine a few selected terms widely used daily in all settings where people interact.

To address the problem mentioned, this article intends to respond to the following questions:

How are some of the IsiXhosa and isiZulu words different semantically?

What impact does a semantic difference have on language development?

Do these words have an impact on language standardization?

The languages remain highly mutually intelligible, despite being separated by nearly 200 years (Ndlovu, 2016b). Hachipola (1998) asserts that Zulu and Ndebele are mutually intelligible and share over 96% of their lexicon (p. 4); this high mutual intelligibility has motivated the assimilation of Ndebele into Zulu orthography and the use of Zulu materials in teaching Ndebele. Hadebe (2002) notes that teaching the Ndebele language primarily relies on Zulu texts, including poetry, literature, culture, linguistics, and lexicography. Consequently, Ndebele has to some extent adopted some aspects of Zulu orthography and terminology' (p. 27). Similarities between the two languages have also been confirmed by Siziba (2015), who examines how Ndebele migrant workers construct Zulu identity in South Africa through speech and culture.

Ndebele and Zulu are regional dialects because they remain distinct regionally, despite sharing structural similarities, according to Dittmar (1976). Regional varieties are classified as dialects when they are developed areas of settlement and are historically transmitted. Their major role is in oral communication. Sometimes dialects are raised to the level of standard. Dialects can be differentiated according to their geographical diffusion into regional and local dialects.

Figure 1: The isiXhosa and isiZulu homonyms comparison

Homonym phrases	IsiXhosa	IsiZulu
Ukudinwa	Meaning one is physically tired.	Meaning being angry/ sad
Umsindo	Meaning to be angry.	Noise
Ukugeza	Meaning one is naught.	Meaning bathing
Izihlangu	Meaning the shoes you wear.	Meaning a shield
Ukuthetha	Meaning to speak/talk.	Meaning to shout
Ukuphuza	Meaning to kiss your loved one.	Meaning to drink
Indodakazi	Meaning your husband's sister.	Meaning your daughter
Kusasa	Meaning in the morning.	Meaning tomorrow
Ukugqiba	Meaning to finish doing something	Meaning to fill the whole
Ukuqhela	Meaning disrespect	Meaning to shift
Ukucinga	Meaning to think	Meaning to look for something
Ukuncokola	Having a conversation	Meaning to crack jokes

LITERATURE REVIEW

The closing of the gap is done through reading what other scholars have discussed about the subject matter. There, authors have discussed some of the similar themes that they have found relevant to the study.

Language and dialect

Languages are stores of their speech communities' culture, history, heritage, and literature (Crystal, 2000). Language, identity, and culture are intricately intertwined (Sheyholislami, 2010). Languages typically identify a specific group of people. When one interacts with another language, it means that one is also interacting with the culture associated with that language. It can sometimes be difficult to understand one's culture without directly accessing its language (Majola, 2021). Da Costa, Dyers, and Mheta (2014: 340) posit that isiXhosa, isiZulu, isiNdebele, and siSwati are regarded as 'daughter' languages that originated from their 'parent' language, Nguni. IsiZulu and isiXhosa are languages with their own dialects, contributing to a significant difference in the semantic use of homonyms.

Gumbi (2005) investigated the Ingwavuma dialect of isiZulu, focusing on kwa Nyawo kwa Mngomezulu and kwa Mathenjwa areas. The findings showed that the dialect of Ingwavuma has its roots in siSwati. The difference is that some other areas do not "tekela" when they speak their dialect, especially Kwa Nyawo Kwa Mngomezulu (Lundini) and Kwa Qatha areas. Other areas, such as Nkungwini and Manyiseni, are spoken in siSwati, the language of the Swazi people. The Ingwavuma dialect has morphology, phonology, phonetics, syntax, semantics, and lexicon from the Swazi language.

Ndlovu (2022) compares the lexical differences and theories on possible causes, with a focus on the lexical differences between Zulu and Ndebele. The contact between Zulu and Ndebele speakers exposes some disparities in lexis and meanings between the two Nguni languages. Semantic shifts, extensions, efforts at purism, and contact borrowing are the main causes of lexico-semantic differences between Zulu and Ndebele. Languages have high similarity in the lexis of basic vocabulary (insert reference here). However, it is of interest to note that although the two languages are very close to each other, there are instances where they differ in terms of semantics and lexis. Some words have undergone semantic changes in both languages, resulting in situations where the two languages use the same words with different meanings.

Interestingly, Lionel (2017) investigates and accounts for tense marking in the copulatives of isiZulu, with a focus on absolute tenses. The discussion of relative tenses is limited to those instances where the relative tense forms denote absolute tense meaning. In the case of inchoative copulatives, the morphological marking of absolute tenses takes place in the default manner, thus basically in the same way that tense marking takes place in main verbs, except for marking the (near) past tense (Lionel, 2017). The (near) past tense of inchoative copulatives is also marked by the employment of the relative tense form with reference time shortly before utterance time.

Semantic change in the African context

Language is a tool in its use domains, and its speakers transmit cultural knowledge and political and educational ideas through it (Yoshioka, 2010; Finegan, 2008). Every language practiced involves productive activity, encompassing means of production, social relations, social identity, cultural values, and consciousness (Tshotsho, 2006). As such, language plays a key role in defining people and makes them instantly recognizable to other members of their speech community (Dyers, 2008). Thus, Joseph (2006) points out that people read the identities of other people with whom they come into contact through the language they use.

Coulams (2005:168) asserts that "Language shift or maintenance occurs as a result of choices made by individuals in a speech community following their motivations, expectations, and goals which they may or may not share with other members." Similarly, Mojela (1991:78) discusses the change in meaning of the Sotho word *mammae*, which was borrowed from the English name of a Kenyan militant movement in the 1950s – the *'Mau Mau'*. The word *meme* was initially used by Northern Sotho speakers to refer to that resistance group, but now it is used as a synonym for *immune*, which means 'killer.'

Moreover, Koopman (2000) discusses semantic narrowing in isiZulu and notes that it is common for Zulu words to be used for the more general meaning while the borrowed word is used for the specific meaning. An example is *ithanga*, which can be used for 'pumpkin' generally, and *impampini* to name the 'light grey pumpkin of imported strain'. In his discussion, Koopman (2000:40) also includes reference to borrowed words that used to mean one thing, but whose semantic properties have

changed over time, giving the example of *inkantolo*, which used to refer to any 'office' but now only refers to 'magistrate's court', with *ihhovisi* now being used to refer to an office at work (Ibid.:41).

Semantic shifts in South African languages are not restricted to loanwords, as they can also occur in indigenous African language words over time (Koopman, 2000). This means that words in indigenous African languages can undergo semantic broadening or narrowing. For example, we can observe semantic narrowing with the word *umfundisi*, which refers to both a minister and a teacher. However, in contemporary spoken isiXhosa, the word refers to a minister or priest. Semantic narrowing has also occurred to the word *usana* 'infant/baby,' which is usually only used in formal written communications or as a term of endearment, e.g., Ndiyakuthanda sana 'I love you baby.' Most people now use *umntwana* when referring to a baby.

Sometimes, a word is used by both isiXhosa and isiZulu speakers, but there is a semantic difference in how it is used. An example of the semantic shift is the Xhosa word 'intake,' which in isiZulu means 'finch' and does not refer to a bird, unlike the word 'anyone' (Koopman, 2000).

In addition, Madiba (1994: 103) discussed some examples of semantic shifts in Venda, which he believed occurred to accommodate adopted concepts. For Madiba (1994), this automatically results in semantic broadening as the indigenous African language words retain their meaning and extend to accommodate foreign concepts. For example, Madiba (1994) states that the adoptive *geese*, which means 'gas' in English, refers to 'any air-like substance which moves freely to fill any space available irrespective of its quantity' (Madiba, 1994, p. 103).

Further, Madiba (1994) elaborates that in TshiVenda, the word *gese* can also refer to 'electricity' or simply 'light'. The same applies to isiXhosa, where the loanword *ipeyi*, which means 'pay' in English, can be used by Xhosa speakers to refer to 'payday' and 'old age pension.' Another isiXhosa word that could be adopted is 'ifestile', taken from the Afrikaans word 'venster'. This word can be used by isiXhosa speakers to refer to an ATM and pay, as in *ndisayokuvula pestilent*, a statement meaning 'I am going to withdraw cash' or 'it is my payday.' Lifestyle here has a metonymic function, since 'window' not only refers to the larger automated teller machine but also, by extension, figuratively to 'payday.'

Similarly, Thwala and Nkuna (2020:87) note that the word *likhwapha*, meaning 'armpit' in siSwati, is used in its locative form, *makhwapheni*, to refer to a 'lover'. This word is also found in isiXhosa, which refers to a lover. However, it is not recorded as such in any dictionary. Some speakers have suggested that because a lover is often kept secret, the armpit (which is not usually visible) is, by analogy, a good word to use to refer to a person with whom one is conducting a secret affair.

Languages harmonization

All the Nguni languages exhibit both linguistic relatedness and significant differences, particularly between isiZulu and isiXhosa. Accordingly, Alexander (2002) first proposed that the Nguni languages, comprising isiZulu, isiXhosa, siSwati, and isiNdebele, should be harmonized into a single language called Nguni. At times, the idea of language harmonization comes from the speakers of the languages to be harmonized. This is evidenced by the speakers of the Nguni languages, as indicated by Alexander (2002: 67), who avers that "there have been several calls to 'harmonize' the Nguni languages into a single written standard, the most recent by Alexander (1998)".

However, the current study highlights semantic homonym differences between isiXhosa and isiZulu. The same word in isiZulu and isiXhosa, although with different meanings, may have the same pronunciation and spelling. For example, the word "*ukulele*" in isiZulu means "*taking a bath*," while in isiXhosa, it means "*being crazy or mad*." Some isiZulu speakers may not even be aware of the homonyms and semantic differences between isiXhosa and isiZulu and may use those words recklessly without realizing that they may be offensive in another language. This can lead to problems with socialization and communication.

Sociolinguistic theory

Language is utilized by individuals within a society. While individuals communicate using language, they often remain largely unaware of the various linguistic repetitions that occur. Consequently, the theoretical framework of Sociolinguistics has significantly supported the arguments presented in this article. Sociolinguistics is defined as the examination of the interplay between language and society, encompassing language variation and societal attitudes towards language. This article has

revealed the previously obscured dichotomy between the homonyms of isiXhosa and isiZulu. Furthermore, Martin (2014:75) discusses this notion as the exploration of language in connection with social factors, which include variations in regional class, occupational dialects, gender, and bilingualism.

Furthermore, communities and societies possess the ability to regulate the evolution and proliferation of language, as certain homonyms are transliterated and adopted from other dominant languages, including Afrikaans and English. Proficiency in the language is crucial for comprehending societal norms, standards, and values, thereby mitigating miscommunication and facilitating a precise understanding of the language.

Hudson (1980: 4-5) characterizes the field of sociolinguistics as the examination of language in its societal context. This is the origin of linguistics; for example, should foreign nationals become predominant, the isiXhosa and isiZulu languages may face a decline in their linguistic diversity in the future. In conclusion, it can be asserted that sociolinguistics encompasses the exploration of society to acquire extensive insights into language.

METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This article has employed the Preferred Reporting Items for a Systematic Review (PRISMA) to address polysemy phrases in isiXhosa and isiZulu, examining the semantic meaning of homonyms. The conundrum in isiZulu and isiXhosa has been affecting the language repertoire. Gobodwana (2024: 5) explains that PRISMA is used effectively in the literature review methodology, as it allows the author to unravel and unwrap the hidden data. This article has analyzed data using the PRISMA tool and provides a response to the question.

Search strategies

In this study, we adhered to the PRISMA guidelines for data collection. The procedure included a systematic data search, abstract, and full-text screening. We utilized the experience we have as language teachers, and we are familiar with the terms. Those terms we selected were randomized based on their popularity and spoken language.

Selection criteria

The selection procedure adopted in the present review follows the PRISMA guidelines, as reported by Moher et al. (2009). For this article, there was no proper selection, as we conceptualized it. Based on our knowledge of the terms and the consumeristic results they have, and linguistic changes.

Table 1: PRISMA analysis

Aspect	Details
Data collection framework	Homonyms of isiXhosa and isiZulu were collected randomly as the authors speak.
Databases search	No database search was conducted, as the authors are Zulu and Xhosa, and they are familiar with these words since they teach the language.
Search item used	No database search was conducted, as the authors are Zulu and Xhosa, and they are familiar with these words since they teach the language.
Time frames for inclusion	There were no time frames; these words are conversational, and one can only hear them when they speak.
Search strategies	There is no search strategy.
Screening process	Some of the words in the article might be confusing. We decided to examine the phrases commonly found between the Zulus and the Xhosas.
Inclusion criteria	All the identifiable phrases are included due to polysemy.
Exclusion criteria	We didn't broaden the search or the collection of these words, as mentioned, to avoid confusion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The twelve chosen polysemic phrases have been grouped in a thematic analysis to facilitate an in-depth discussion and presentation. They are grouped according to the primary task they perform and the services they provide. Either of the other phrases is humanistic-related, and others are generally termed miscellaneous.

Humanistic homonyms between isiXhosa and isiZulu

The discussion around these humanistic phrases indicates different meanings between isiZulu and isiXhosa. The term “ukudinwa” in isiXhosa literally means that someone is physically tired and wants to rest after a very long day of work. And it doesn’t carry any ambiguous meaning. However, in isiZulu, this term would convey one's emotions as being angry about something. Another term with homonymy in “umsindo” is when one in isiXhosa says “ndino-msindo”, which means to be angry at something. In isiZulu, it conveys the noise one is making. These two psychological concepts might inform the other. Directly and indirectly speaking, if they were used in the classroom, especially in a bilingual classroom that has Xhosa and Zulu, there would be different responses. Children would understand these two terms in their mother tongue.

The phrase “ukugeza” is an adjective in isiXhosa and describes that one “noun” is being naughty. Although isiZulu is the same term, it still conveys a message of taking a bath, albeit as an adjective. And these two descriptions are far from each other in essence. The same applies to the remaining concepts listed above. The polysemy between these two languages influences and introduces the struggle of confidently speaking the language.

Ultimately, Zhadeyko (2010) posits that words are manifested synchronically as a web of meanings, whereas a diachronic examination of polysemy seeks to differentiate secondary meanings from primary ones. In other terms, synchronically, polysemy is perceived as the simultaneous existence of various meanings of the same word at a particular stage in the evolution of any language (Parent 2009). For instance, during a synchronic semantic evaluation of the terms ‘ukuthetha’/ ‘ukuphuza’/ ‘indodakazi’/ ‘ukucinga’ and ‘ukuncokola’, all meanings illustrate their semantic framework, which includes (ukuthetha/speak; ukuphuza/kiss; ukucinga/think; ukuncokola/conversation). These semantic interpretations pertain solely to isiXhosa in an adjectival context; the -uku prefix indicates the noun and its associated action.

A particularly intriguing linguistic aspect is that in isiZulu (ukuthetha), it conveys a semantic implication of shouting at someone, reprimanding, and making sense if the deviant behavior is ongoing and adversely affects the next of kin. Furthermore, indodakazi translates to 'sister-in-law' in isiXhosa. If a female is married to her in-laws, all her husband's sisters are referred to as indodakazi. In contrast, in isiZulu, this term may carry a different interpretation, literally meaning 'daughter'.

The semantic structure pertains to the organized arrangement of meanings in both Nguni languages, isiXhosa and isiZulu. The primary meaning within this structure is associated with the connotation of 'a piece of furniture' in this case referring to 'itafile/itafula'. This meaning emerges as the focal point of the term, while all other interpretations remain secondary. Some of the words used in Nguni are borrowed from other established languages in the context of South Africa. Some words are conceptualised from what they do or are portrayed in society.

Hlongwana (2025:5) notes that other daily uses of homonyms are foreign, as they are not from either isiXhosa or isiZulu. And explains that foreign words are due to the nature of the economic, political, military, and cultural relations between languages. Most Southern African languages have been influenced by English and Afrikaans. As these two languages still carry their linguistic hegemony and are well-resourced and technologically available. When two cultures come into contact, they form the so-called acculturation, that is, the fusion of two or more cultures (Chokoe, 2000). Chokoe further says that during this process, one culture becomes dominant over another, and thus, the dominated one acquires more from the dominant one

Furthermore, the primary meaning can be found in various contexts, whereas the marginal meanings are typically restricted to specific situations. The term 'table', which signifies 'a piece of furniture', is utilized most frequently and constitutes the largest proportion of all instances of this word, suggesting that it has been adopted from multiple languages to convey the intended message. Other interpretations, including tabulation, charts, figures, lists, surfaces, and buffets, represent peripheral meanings that have been semantically derived from 'a piece of furniture' or from the semantic framework of the term 'table'. A 'table' serves the purpose of organizing items systematically; thus, we refer to a dinner table or a collection of figures systematically arranged in columns (Hlongwana, 2025). These identifiable interpretations are classroom-based, across subjects in school.

Miscellaneous homonyms between isiXhosa and isizulu

The term “Kasasa”, in isiXhosa, refers to time, and similarly, in isiZulu, it denotes the same concept. The difference comes in properly indicating the exact time point within the day. Xhosas on this side, their kusasa, speak of the morning hours of that same day, a 12-hour circle time factor before 12 middays. In the Zulu community, this term typically refers to the day after the previous night. As in isiXhosa is today. This time issue would be confusing when included in a conversation.

- I will call you in the morning: Xhosa
- I will call you tomorrow: Zulu

Furthermore, the term “ukugqiba” in isiXhosa signifies the completion of a project or task. You have now finished it. In isiZulu, this notion refers to restoring the soil to its original condition in any undertaking one undertakes. Additionally, Hlongwana (2025) concurs with this article, noting that certain words may share identical meanings and have been adopted from various languages and groups. The transliterated terms, which function as both nouns and adjectives, influence languages and contribute to their development. For example, the term “isitulo” in isiXhosa is borrowed from Afrikaans.

This borrowing may have occurred because, historically, the amaXhosa lacked proper chairs and instead fashioned a chair-like object from clay, referred to as “usoze,” which is a chair made from muddy clay. Finally, from a historical perspective, these lexical items are homonyms as they originate from different sources and backgrounds. However, contemporary speakers, often neglecting etymological considerations, may perceive a connection between them based on psychological factors.

Hlongwana (2025) concludes by encapsulating the principal themes explored in this article. The emergence of homonyms can be attributed to various linguistic influences, particularly phonetic alterations, borrowing, conversion, abbreviation, sound imitation, and split polysemy (Baron, 2005). For example, certain homonyms have their roots in borrowing, which were subsequently adapted to enhance the language. Phonetic alterations refer to changes in sound patterns that lead to modifications in phonemic structures (Bloomfield, 1994). Variations in phonemes arise as words evolve over time. Consequently, because of these shifts, two or more words that were once pronounced distinctly may acquire identical sound forms, thus becoming homonyms. The words 'night' and 'knight', for instance, were not homonymous in Old English, as the 'k' in the latter was articulated and not omitted as it is in contemporary pronunciation (Baron, 2005).

CONCLUSION

This article presents the challenges faced by language speakers of isiZulu and isiXhosa. As they have homonyms in their vocabulary, however, they had to explain when speaking to non-speakers of the languages. These identifiable homonyms are not limited to that listing; however, in this article, we have chosen randomly those that are most used when people converse. There are many phrases that we didn't explore in this discussion; however, they do exist. Even in school, some words confuse the teacher and children, especially if you don't know either language. For instance, in the classroom, Xhosas would term it a “chair”, ‘isitulo’, derived from Afrikaans as “stoel”, which is the transliterated concept into isiXhosa. whereas the Zulu would say “isihlalo”, as they have coined it based on its intended use.

In summary, when communicating in isiXhosa and isiZulu, it is essential to clearly differentiate the phrases employed, as certain expressions may be ambiguous and have synonymous meanings, potentially conveying confusing messages to those who do not speak the language. Consequently, isiXhosa and isiZulu exhibit a rich morphological structure, and this article elucidates their distinctions to illustrate that they are not identical languages. Despite their shared noun classes, a subtle distinction exists between the two

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