



## The Language of Peace

by Karen K. Lewis

**T**he Republic of South Africa is a collage of cultures and languages. In 1994, the new government recognized 11 official languages spoken by more than 40 million people. Each language has something special to contribute to this emerging democracy.

For thousands of years, South Africa's many groups existed on the land without formal borders or barriers. A variety of languages evolved. Around 1820, the most powerful Zulu king, Shaka, built an empire based on conquest of other peoples. Many people migrated away from KooZulu (place of the Zulu) during this war-filled time. People settled in new places and their languages evolved separately from Zulu (language of the Zulu people). Today, speakers of Ndebele (en-EDH-bei-eh), Xhosa (KHOD-say), and Swati usually understand Zulu. The word *izulu* (ee-ZOH-loh) means "yesterday" in all three languages.

One lasting impact of Shaka's rule is that Zulu, with about 9 million native speakers, is now the most commonly used African language in South Africa. About 7 million people, including current president Thabo Mbeki and former president Nelson Mandela, speak Xhosa. (See the sidebar list on page 17 for other home languages used.)

Tswana, Sotho, and Pedi are closely related. The word *thumelo* (thoo-MAY-la) means "good morning" or "hello" in all three languages. Tswana and Venda are considered minority languages and are not used in the media.

All of the African languages enjoy a rich oral tradition of storytelling and praise poetry. The new National Language Service has adopted a Tswana word, *hagiselo* (hoy-oh-ZAM-la), as the motto for language awareness campaigns. This is a traditional greeting word meaning "warmth."

Teenagers sing the new South African national anthem, *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika*, "God Bless Africa."



Daughters of Africa, a Cape Town choir, perform in Zulu.

## South Africanisms

Ever wonder what separates South Africa from the rest of the world? Well, here is a list of typical South Africanisms:

- yo* — yuck, how disgusting, oh sick
- lekker* — good, nice, fun, cool, hip
- houst* — hi, hello, hey, how are you?
- servis* — napkin
- lif* — elevator
- flat* — apartment
- motor* — traffic light
- sakkies* — sneakers
- kuif* — cell phone
- sharp* — cool, okay, good-bye, thank you
- psia/psia* — papers

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People speaking the same language tend to live in distinct regions of this large nation. For example, most Zulu speakers live in the area known as KwaZulu-Natal. Tswana speakers tend to live near the border with Botswana. Sotho speakers live near the independent nation of Lesotho. Swati speakers live in the area around Swaziland.

Tensions increased with the arrival first of Dutch traders in 1652 and then the English. The Dutch language evolved into Afrikaans, which includes elements of French and German. Because white people ruled South Africa until recently, English and Afrikaans were the official languages of government. More than 75 percent of South Africa's population spoke other languages at home.

In 1954, thousands of black African residents of Johannesburg were relocated to a new suburb called South West Township. Soweto — as this township came to be called — became the center of violence in 1976 when students protested school courses taught only in Afrikaans.

The new constitution guarantees that all students will be taught in their mother tongue or language of choice. In reality, this is not always possible due to geographic distances. People migrate to cities in search of better schools and jobs. When this happens, they tend to become multilingual.

Most black South Africans speak several languages — the language of their family, plus English and sometimes even a third language of their neighbors or friends. In public places, people will switch quietly and easily from one language to another in

order to be polite and to make strangers or neighbors feel at ease.

Cultures also invent new words that mix more than one language. An example is the Kape-taal dialect in certain townships of Cape Town. It combines elements of Xhosa, English, and Afrikaans. A Kape-taal form of good-bye is *ek sal jou sooth*, meaning "I will see you." This compares with the Xhosa farewell, *amkele kule*, which means "Go in peace."

Language is always in evolution. *Fly and cool* (cool language) is similar to youth slang in America, where "fly" also means cool. *Tsotsi taal*, once known as bad-boy or gangster talk, is now becoming common slang among township youth. If you call a person a *slomp njer*, it translates as "Someone is asleep at the zoo," meaning they are not very smart. *Kusido* is a style of music emerging in the townships. It gets its name from "hot and kicking" dance.

In the words of current South African president Thabo Mbeki:

"Our country is in that period of time which the Setswana speaking people of South Africa graphically describe as 'mahube a naka tsa kgomo,' the dawning of the dawn, when only the tips of the horns of the cattle can be seen etched against the morning sky. As the sun continues to rise to banish the long years of colonialism and apartheid, what the new light over our land must show is a nation diligently at work to create a better life for itself... We have to keep pace with the rising sun, progressing from despair to hope."

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A monument at Cape Agulhas is written in both English and Afrikaans.

## South Africa Home Language by Population

(1996 census)

Zulu	9.2 million
Xhosa	7.2 million
Afrikaans	5.8 million
Pedi (also called Northern Sotho)	3.7 million
English	2.5 million
Tswana	2.3 million
Sotho	2.1 million
Tsvan'a	1.8 million
Swati	1.0 million
Venda	0.9 million
Ndebele	0.6 million
Xhosa*	2,000 (newly estimated)
Unspecified	0.6 million