



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Language activists and linguists in pursuit of the siPhuthi cause

Sheena Shah, Ph.D.<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Letzadzo Kometsi, LL.D.<sup>3</sup> and Matthias Brenzinger, Ph.D.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Hamburg, <sup>2</sup>University of the Free State and <sup>3</sup>National University of Lesotho

\*Corresponding author. Email: [sheena.shah@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:sheena.shah@uni-hamburg.de)

## Sifinyeto [siPhuthi]

Ipampiri lhe inyatshella buhlogwa be kuhlaganela musebeti gekuphidza tiyato le tifikelwe yhitikhulumi lhetiyati-mukhulumo emusebetini whekutleketa mukhulumo whesiPhuthi lheku sivusuluta. Ekubeni kusjyeyiye te tikhulumi letitigidi letimbalwa temukhulumo, siPhuthi sikegotini lesabekako yhekucimela; futshi mukhulumo lho lhetikhulumi tawo tiya swayiwa kabhe tiya khetshullwa emayemweni hhemaphasi hhakeLesotho lakeSouth Africa. Titleketi letitshatfhu talhe ipampiri, sikhulumi sesiPhuthi (L1) lhetiyati-mukhulumo letibini takeMusjiya, isali bahlaganele lho musebeti kudlula minyaka lemunyuka ledluliye. Ebayemedi bemukhulumo labachaphatelekako lhetiyati-mukhulumo banka ematiphedvullelo laphabhene kusebetana lhetidzaba letigesihlokweni kulho musebeti, kutjho kutshi, kutinwa emadla kwebaPhuthi lhekuvusulutwa kwemukhulumo whesiPhuthi.

## Kakaretso [Sesotho]

Pampiri ena e tiisa bohlokoa ba kopanelo ea mosebetsi ka ho arorelana boiphihlelo bo fumanoeng ke libui le litsebi tsa lipuo mosebetsing oa ho ngola le ho tsosolotsa Sephuthi. Ho setse batho ba likete tse 'maloa feela ba buang Sephuthi, kahoo puo ena e tlokotsing e kholo ea ho timela; ho feta moo, naha ea Lesotho le ea Afrika Boroa li khettholla batho ba buang puo ena hammoho le puo ka boeona. Lingoli tse tharo tsa pampiri, sebui sa puo ea Sephuthi (L1) le litsibi tsa lipuo, tse peli ho tsoa mose, esale ba sebetsa 'moho mosebetsing ona ho tloha lilemong tse fetang tse tšeletseng tse fetileng. Baemeli ba lipuo ba amehang le litsebi tsa lipuo ba nka boikarabelo bo fapaneng ho sheba lintlha tse kaholimo mosebetsing ona, e leng, ho matlafatsoa ha sechaba sa Baphuthi le tsosolotso ea puo ea Sephuthi.

## Isishwankathelo [isiXhosa]

Eliphepha ligxininisa kakhulu ekubalulekeni kokusebenzisana, nokwabelana ngembali nangamava obomi abiwa ngabantu abathetha olulwimi neezazi zeelwimi jikelele, malungana nephulo lo kugcina nokuvuselela ulwimi lwesiPhuthi. Ngamawaka ambalwa kuphela aseleyo abantu abantetha isiPhuthi, kwaye loonto ibonisa ukuba olulwimi lusesichengeni sokulityalwa okanye okuchwethelwa ecaleni xasijonga imo yombumi eLusutho

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naseMzantsi Afrika. Ababhali beliphepha abathathu; omnye wabo ukwinqanaba le L1 lolwimi, bathe basebenzisana nezazi zeelwimi zaphesheya kuleminyaka emithandathu egqithile. Abayintetho yesiPhuthi kunye nezazi zeelwimi bebasebenzisana kunye ekushukuxeni imiba emayelana nolwimi lwesiPhuthi. Umzekelo: Kujongwe indlela yokuphakamisa ulwimi lwesiPhuthi ukuba lwaziwe, kunye nokubhalwa phantsi kwalo.

### Abstract [English]

The paper stresses the importance of collaboration by referring to experiences made by speakers and linguists in the siPhuthi documentation and revitalization project. With only a few thousand speakers remaining, siPhuthi is severely endangered; furthermore, the language and its speakers are neglected and marginalized in the national contexts of Lesotho and South Africa. The three authors of the paper, an L1 siPhuthi speaker and two linguists from abroad, have been collaborating on this project over the past six years. The involved language activists and linguists assume different responsibilities in addressing the key issues in this project, that is, the empowerment of the ebaPhuthi people, as well as the documentation and uplifting of the siPhuthi language.

The four abstracts above appear in: (1) siPhuthi, the community language under discussion; (2) Sesotho, the dominant language in the national context of Lesotho; (3) isiXhosa, the most important contact language on the local level; and (4) English, the international language in which the article is written.

The ebaPhuthi (Phuthi people) were among the first Bantu-speaking people to arrive in present-day Lesotho, where they came in contact and intermarried with the autochthonous hunter-gatherer communities of southern Africa, commonly referred to as San. The Phuthi nation was formed in the early nineteenth century and consolidated under the leadership of their king, Murena Moorosi. November 19, 1879 is the decisive date in Phuthi history; on that date, the British—supported by the Basotho (Sotho people), who still constitute the ruling majority in Lesotho today—ended an eight-month siege by storming the fortress at Tshaba Moorosi (King, 2019). Murena Moorosi lost his life at the battlefield and his subjects were subsequently dispersed and deprived of their leadership. Since this historic date, the ebaPhuthi have been colonized by the Basotho, who continue to this day to designate chiefs from their own ranks to head the ebaPhuthi in their settlements.

SiPhuthi (Phuthi language) is a highly endangered language spoken by a few thousand ebaPhuthi primarily in southern Lesotho and by far fewer ebaPhuthi in adjacent areas of South Africa. At present, children growing up and speaking siPhuthi as their first language are confined to settlements in two river valleys only, namely Daliwe and Sinxondo, both in the Quthing district of southern Lesotho. Doke (1954) classified siPhuthi as a Tekela language of the Nguni branch and siSwati spoken in eSwatini and South Africa is its closest relative. Being in contact with Sesotho speakers for two hundred years, siPhuthi also shares many features with this language of the Sotho-Tswana branch. In fact, siPhuthi is often considered to be a “Sotho-Nguni hybrid” (Donnelly, 2007, p. 3) of “Nguni/Sotho mixed parentage” (Donnelly, 2007, p. 373).

SiPhuthi is widely ignored by the government of Lesotho, and, even though it is spoken by only a few thousand people, it is nevertheless the sole language of which the majority of speakers lives in Lesotho; all other languages in the country, such as

isiXhosa, isiNdebele, isiZulu, and even Sesotho, are spoken by far more people in neighboring South Africa. Despite this fact, siPhuthi does not appear in the constitution of Lesotho (where only the official languages, English and Sesotho, are mentioned) nor in any other official document (Kometsi, 2014). SiPhuthi speakers are neglected in the national context and the exclusive use of Sesotho and English by governmental institutions hampers access to critical social services such as education, employment, health-care, justice, and welfare. Pillar points out that “education is a key mechanism both for individual development but also for the distribution of socioeconomic opportunities. Where language barriers exist in this domain, they constitute an injustice” (2020, p. 4). Such barriers exist for the Phuthi children, as many of them, when entering schools, speak neither Sesotho nor English, the media of instruction. The resulting communication problems between teachers and students lead to low performance of Phuthi students and high dropout rates among them. However, many Phuthi children, especially in remote areas, do not enroll in schools at all, as boys are expected to herd livestock and girls to engage in domestic work and childcare.

Having assimilated to the dominant Basotho culture, ebaPhuthi have lost most of their other cultural heritage but their language siPhuthi. The establishment of siPhuthi as a key marker of a distinct Phuthi identity has been gaining momentum during the last decade thanks to *Libadla le Baphuthi*, a cultural association that is the driving force behind many siPhuthi-related initiatives and activities. This association was initially formed around political issues, namely claims for land and chieftainship titles of the Phuthi nation. While these topics remain of critical concern to the association, siPhuthi-related matters were added to the agenda under the leadership of its current chairperson, Letzadzo Kometsi, one of the authors of this paper. With him, the official recognition of siPhuthi and its implementation as a medium of instruction in the education system became central demands. *Libadla le Baphuthi* is fostering the revitalization of siPhuthi in those settlement areas where it is losing ground and its resuscitation in areas where it is already lost (Shah, 2019).

The authors of this paper have collaborated on siPhuthi since 2016. Letzadzo is an L1 speaker of siPhuthi from A’s Kop, a village in southern Lesotho. He received his doctorate in Law from North West University (South Africa) in 2017 and is currently a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Law at the National University of Lesotho in Roma. Since 2007, he presides over *Libadla le Baphuthi* and is one of the leading siPhuthi activists. Sheena and Matthias are linguists who have together been collaborating with speakers of endangered, minority, and heritage languages in southern Africa for almost a decade. Sheena is an L1 speaker of Gujarati of East African and Indian descent who grew up in London, while Matthias lived almost half of his adult life with former hunter-gatherers and other marginalized communities in various African countries (Brenzinger, 2018).

The siPhuthi project started off as one of the language documentation activities of the Centre for African Language Diversity, a center at the University of Cape Town that was founded and directed by Matthias. Right from the beginning of the siPhuthi project, Letzadzo as chairperson of *Libadla le Baphuthi* and its members supported this language documentation project and made the two linguists a part of the Phuthi family.

The article has been conceptualized and written by the three authors in close consultation with other siPhuthi speakers. In the following two sections, however, the authors take turns reflecting on each other’s role and involvement in the project. In this way, we hope to better present the different agendas of the community members and the linguists in the siPhuthi documentation and revitalization project. We alternate the points of view, but instead of expressing our own views on and expectations of the

ongoing collaboration (e.g., Cruz & Woodbury, 2014), we describe the responsibilities and aspirations we observe and assume for the other(s).

### Sheena and Matthias about Letzadzo

Letzadzo is a devoted siPhuthi language activist and the driving force behind the siPhuthi cause. He is supported in his language work by his wife, LaboPhilani, who acquired siPhuthi only after marriage. Inspired by Nelson Mandela's example, Letzadzo studied law with the intention of acquiring the skills required to represent the cause of his people. As a lawyer and cultural activist, Letzadzo is committed to the struggle for the preservation of his language siPhuthi and the promotion of linguistic diversity in Lesotho more generally. At home, Letzadzo insists on the use of siPhuthi, including with his Sotho mother and his Ndebele wife, who both had to switch from Sesotho to siPhuthi when communicating with him.

From a young age, Letzadzo strongly identified with siPhuthi, the language of his father. Taught in the foreign languages Sesotho and English, he felt belittled and alienated. However, Matloko Mafantiri, a Sotho teacher, was sympathetic to the aspirations of young Letzadzo and encouraged him to pursue his agenda regarding siPhuthi. Letzadzo was a language rebel already at high school, where he, for example, wrote LE TO BOYA LEPHASE LAMWOROSI, "The land of Moorosi shall return," on a horizontal roof tie beam in his classroom. He also changed his Sesotho birth name *Lerato* in his ID and all other official documents to the siPhuthi name, *Letzadzo*. Separated for decades from his father, who worked in South Africa's mines, Letzadzo began writing letters in siPhuthi to him when he was only thirteen years old. In doing so, he attempted to develop writing conventions for siPhuthi and to expand his knowledge of the language by consulting Phuthi elders.

In 2007, Letzadzo became chairperson of *Libadla le Baphuthi* and was then instrumental in the rechanneling of the association's foci from land titles and claims for political recognition to language matters. He also suggested replacing the former Sesotho name of the association *Moifo oa Baphuthi* ("Phuthi delegates") with the siPhuthi name in use today. Letzadzo insisted that siPhuthi should be used in meetings and in newsletters, not Sesotho, which was the practice before. He drafted the association's constitution and was the driving force behind the official registration of *Libadla le Baphuthi*. This constitution details the following aims: (1) the promotion of the use of siPhuthi and the safeguarding of the Phuthi culture and traditions; (2) the attainment of paramount chieftainship for the descendants of Murena Moorosi; and (3) the repossession of the former Phuthi land by the ebaPhuthi. The recognition of siPhuthi by the government of Lesotho is still pending while the reinstatement of the Phuthi chieftainships and of their land are not yet in sight; all three are considered vital demands of the members of *Libadla le Baphuthi* who campaign for the full restoration of the Phuthi nation.

Letzadzo organizes and executes outreach activities such as the Motsapi Moorosi Annual Diversity Race. This race commemorates the community member Motsapi Moorosi, who was the first citizen of Lesotho to qualify for the Olympics. Motsapi competed in the men's 100- and 200-metre races at the Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany in 1972.

Another activity is the annual shoe charity event at the Masitise Primary School in the Quthing district, at which the students receive shoes that are donated by alumni. Letzadzo initiates these donations and facilitates the event, where he talks to the

students about the plight of the ebaPhuthi and the importance of maintaining siPhuthi as well as other indigenous languages.

Just before the annual commemoration of Murena Moorosi's death in November, Letzadzo organizes and participates in an awareness-raising hike that lasts several days. The "Baphuthi Lamentations Walk" starts in South Africa at the former fortress of Moorosi Mokuoane, Murena Moorosi's father, and ends in Lesotho at Tshaba Moorosi, the Phuthi mountain of fate ("Schicksalberg") at which the Phuthi nation was overthrown by the alliance of the British and Sotho forces. On their way, the group of hikers passes other historically significant sites of the Phuthi past.

Letzadzo composes poems in siPhuthi in which he expresses the sufferings and deprivations experienced by him and other ebaPhuthi as well as his and their hopes for a better future. Letzadzo performs his poems at public events, such as the annual celebrations of the International Mother Language Day on February 21. The siPhuthi poem we consider to be among his most powerful is a fictive letter from a young girl to her dead mother, lamenting about not having grown up with siPhuthi as her "mother tongue." This poem has been published in English and Catalan (Junyent, 2020; Shah, 2019). He also translates poems of injustice and struggle by other authors into siPhuthi, such as "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou, which his oldest daughter, Kutshalani, recites at public events. His siPhuthi version of the national anthem of Lesotho is performed by choirs at various high schools in the Quthing district.

The official recognition of siPhuthi by the government is considered by most ebaPhuthi as a key issue in overcoming their discrimination within the national context, and Letzadzo is spearheading the struggle for this cause. Due to his familiarity with the legal system of the country and the key role he plays in *Libadla le Baphuthi*, many ebaPhuthi see him as a *muhlaganisi* ("unifier") of the siPhuthi movement. The Phuthi elders in Lesotho and the South African ebaPhuthi likewise endorse his leadership and authority on language matters. The ebaPhuthi of South Africa, who claim to originate from Moorosi's people in Lesotho, have their own chief for several generations and are recognized by the South African government. They appreciate the beauty and eloquence of the siPhuthi as spoken in Lesotho and acknowledge Letzadzo's outstanding role in the siPhuthi movement, which can be seen in the following example.

In 2010, the South African Phuthi chief asked Letzadzo to be honored with a praise poem and for a siPhuthi name to be bestowed upon him. Letzadzo hesitated at first by questioning the appropriateness of being chosen for such a culturally critical task, as this would commonly be expected to be carried out by Phuthi elders. After he agreed to accept this honorable assignment, he prompted his spiritual ancestral wisdom by chanting the names of the South African chief's lineages. In doing so, he recited the siPhuthi names of distinguished Phuthi leaders of the past, such as *Nyawoledlovu*, *Dlamini*, *Langa*, and *Thukuthuku*. For the actual naming ceremony of the chief, Letzadzo composed a praise poem in which rain featured prominently. Much later, while lying in the sand at the chief's feet and reciting this praise poem, heavy rain happened to pour down on him. Only after repeated requests from the chief, Letzadzo reluctantly stood up by repeatedly uttering *Vutshemalagabi* "burning flames." This name came as a surprise to Letzadzo himself, who had not known or thought about this name before. Since then, *Vutshemalagabi* is the name used by the South African Phuthi chief and his subjects.

Our collaborative project would not have the standing it has without Letzadzo's trust in us and without his exceptional role in, and authority within, the siPhuthi-speaking community. In our linguistic analyses, we benefit greatly from Letzadzo's thorough

knowledge of the meanings of—often no longer used—siPhuthi terms that we would otherwise fail to notice. We as linguists have access to in-depth studies of Bantu languages, which allow a comparative historical perspective on the reconstruction of terms and their etymologies. However, it is only through Letzadzo that we comprehend the *contexts* in which siPhuthi terms are used and understand their precise meanings more fully. The frequent back-and-forth with Letzadzo allows us to negotiate the meanings of siPhuthi terms and capture them in English translations by referring to cultural practices and inherent knowledge systems.

### Letzadzo about Sheena and Matthias

Supporting marginalized communities in documenting and revitalizing their threatened languages is the passion of Sheena and Matthias. They came to Lesotho six years ago and soon became close friends of mine; since then, they continue to return to stay with us, often for several months. During their stays, they produce siPhuthi audio and video recordings on a wide range of topics and various genres in different contexts. In doing so, they compile a multimodal corpus of siPhuthi (<https://www.elararchive.org/dk05060651>) as it is spoken by us in our daily lives. Sheena and Matthias strongly feel that they, as researchers, have responsibilities toward community members beyond their academic assignments; for them, this means taking our wishes and aspirations into account and being supportive of our ambitions for bettering our lives and those of our children. They involve us in choosing topics in the documentation of our language, and we select those that are meaningful to our people and that we hope will support our empowerment as a marginalized group. The text, audio, and video documentation offer a forum in which we can share experiences and challenges in our lives, such as finding suitable spouses, frustrations about the lack of job opportunities, problems caused by the long absence of spouses who work in neighboring South Africa, etc. Several video recordings feature meetings of women's empowerment groups in the Daliwe river valley at which young women talk about the challenges they face in building up small-scale businesses. We can also share with them more generally our thoughts and frustrations on vital issues, such as the poor infrastructure in our areas, the neglected education facilities, and the inadequate healthcare services.

Sheena and Matthias support the production of materials in siPhuthi, such as Covid health awareness materials. Together with them, we are producing a quadrilingual siPhuthi-Sesotho-isiXhosa-English dictionary, which will be crucial in the development of siPhuthi educational materials. By accepting our authority to decide on how and by whom our language is being documented, they counter the usual top-down North-South dominance. They also regularly provide training to young siPhuthi speakers in which the trainees acquire skills to carry out language documentation activities. Just this month (November of 2021), in a Covid-19 safe environment, six siPhuthi speakers from Daliwe and Sinxondo (three small-scale businesswomen, a shepherd, a farmer, and an unemployed male) were familiarized with recording techniques, meta-data creation, and archiving standards. Our newly trained siPhuthi documentation team applied their acquired skills to visually and auditorily capture the most important annual event in our calendar, namely the commemoration of the tragic death of our king Murena Moorosi.

Due to their long-term commitment to the siPhuthi cause, their active involvement in *Libadla le Baphuthi*, and their efforts to secure funding for the siPhuthi documentation and revitalization project, we call them *Litshebha* “hope” (Matthias) and

*Labolitshebha* “mother of hope” (Sheena). We see them as our *titfahunywa* (“messengers”), who open up communication channels through which we can share information on language and cultural matters; in this way, they disseminate news to siPhuthi speakers even in the most secluded areas. Through them, siPhuthi speakers who are dispersed all over southern Lesotho learn of and from each other. Sheena and Matthias make our cause known within Lesotho and abroad, and because of that, we consider them as important members of our siPhuthi movement.

### Contextualising Collaborative Language Documentation

We now continue with one voice, reflecting on and contextualizing our collaborative approach in the siPhuthi project. In “traditional” linguistic fieldwork, speakers of the languages under investigation are commonly referred to as “language informants” or “language consultants” whose task is to provide language examples for linguists. The more recent emphasis on corpora-based language data in language documentation has altered the role of speakers. Natural speech as the main source for linguistic analysis requires a participatory approach in the collection of language data, in which speakers have a more active role in the recording process and the linguistic analysis (Brenzinger, 2018; Good, 2012). However, even this latter research model remains “linguist-focused,” in that the research is predominantly “conducted *by* linguists, *for* linguists” (Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009, p. 15, emphasis in the original).

Akumbu objects that the outcomes of this kind of “linguist-focused” research is mainly “useful to the authors and the scientific world but of little or no impact to the ... community itself” (2018, p. 269). He elaborates that there are structural constraints in the academic context, which determine the focus of research activities and demand certain outcomes in order to “obtain academic qualifications, satisfy funding agencies, or produce original publications and advance science” (p. 269).

In research with marginalized communities, the training and empowerment of the speakers is a crucial prerequisite for truly collaborative research. Czaykowska-Higgins proposes a community-based collaborative model of language research that “allows for the production of knowledge *on* a language that is constructed *for*, *with*, and *by* community members, and that is therefore not primarily *for* or *by* linguists” (2009, p. 15, emphasis in the original). In this kind of research, linguists and community members are partners in which speakers hold agency on how, what, and by whom their language is being documented. For community members to be able to make informed decisions on research activities and to carry them out, they must be trained and granted access to the required resources.

While all research approaches mentioned thus far are centered around linguistics—some in a narrow, others in a wider sense—Dobrin and Berson (2011, p. 187) emphasize that documentation work on endangered languages has contributed to breaking down the limitations of “diminishing data for the science of language.” They mention that “social justice and human flourishing” are increasingly considered also in linguistic research, in which linguists are “committed to the social good” of the speakers (2011, p. 187).

In assuming this position, the two linguist authors fully engage with the Phuthi community and support their revitalization and development efforts of the siPhuthi language by being active members of *Libadla le Baphuthi*. The siPhuthi-related demands of the association include: (1) the translation of all relevant policy and legal documents into siPhuthi; (2) the dissemination of official health information in

siPhuthi; (3) the provision of financial and logistical resources for the development of educational materials that will then allow for the introduction of siPhuthi as medium of instruction; and (4) the establishment of siPhuthi programs on national radio and TV.

The siPhuthi activists assume that the fulfillment of these demands would lead to a re-birth and uplifting of siPhuthi after more than 140 years of neglect. The recognition of siPhuthi is seen as a first necessary step toward the emancipation of the ebaPhuthi, who are today still marginalized in all respects. Severe poverty, absence of job opportunities, and lack of formal education make the ebaPhuthi especially vulnerable and prone to exploitation in local and national contexts. Most of them survive as subsistence farmers while others, if at all, receive piecemeal jobs, such as in road construction, in which they work for very little money. Living in the poorest provinces of Lesotho, many ebaPhuthi opt to leave for South Africa, where they work as seasonal farm workers, mostly as fruit-pickers and sheep shearers. In these jobs, they usually have no social security, no health insurance, and work without visas, receiving very low wages. Men often have no choice but to work in the South African mines, where many spend decades away from their families and often return with serious health issues, such as blindness, lung diseases, etc. Many ebaPhuthi hope that the revalidation of siPhuthi will result in their Phuthi identity being reassessed, in the raising of their self-esteem, and in their receiving more respect from their fellow citizens.

While linguists can assist in community-driven language documentation efforts, the revitalization of languages must be led and carried out by language communities. When the natural transmission of languages is interrupted, which is the case for siPhuthi in all geographic areas except Daliwe and Sinxondo, only concerted action can bring a threatened language back to the homes. For that to happen, highly motivated, charismatic language champions (Shah & Brenzinger, 2018), such as Letzadzo, play a key role. Linguists can support such language champions and the language movements more generally. By joining forces, the scientific output in terms of language documentation is enhanced. At the same time, the research outcomes are more accessible to, and useful for, the communities. Crucially, a collaborative approach supports the community's pursuit of their goals: in the case of the ebaPhuthi, the re-establishment of siPhuthi as the uniting language of a Phuthi nation.

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