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Power Dynamics as Reflected in Tshivenḓa Heritage Forms of Address: A Study From Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract: This sociolinguistic study explores the power dynamics reflected in Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Power dynamics refer to the ways in which power is distributed, exercised, and negotiated within social relationships, organisations, and broader societal structures. They encompass how authority is allocated, how individuals or groups assert influence, and how power shifts or is balanced in different contexts, often shaped by social roles, cultural norms, and institutional frameworks. The study employed face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to collect and analyse data from 24 native Tshivenḓa (L1) speakers, comprising 10 youths and 14 elders. The theoretical framework combined Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Ethnography of Communication (EoC), enabling a deeper understanding of heritage forms of address within Tshivenḓa cultural scripts, including norms, values, and communicative practices. Findings reveal that Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address are deeply intertwined with social structures and age-based hierarchies in the Vhavenḓa community. These forms not only signify respect for elders but also reinforce their authority within familial and community settings. The study recommends empowering youth through cultural education programs to ensure they understand the significance of Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address, both as a symbol of respect and as a mechanism for maintaining social cohesion, while also adapting to contemporary shifts in societal values.

1. Introduction

In the context of Tshivenḓa, the heritage language spoken in the Vhembe District of South Africa, communicants, those engaged in communication, play a central role in shaping and interpreting heritage forms of address. This study explores how power dynamics are reflected in Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. *Power dynamics* refer to the ways in which power is distributed, exercised, and negotiated within social relationships and structures. This concept encompasses the influence that individuals or groups hold over one another and how such interactions shape behaviours, decisions, and societal norms (Mudau, Mandende, & Mushaathoni, 2022).

Heritage forms of address refer to culturally specific ways of addressing individuals within heritage communities. These forms often reflect social hierarchies, kinship ties, and cultural values, and may include terms of respect, kinship titles, and other expressions that signal relationships and social status (Mudau, 2022). For instance, Dada (2022) investigates nuanced heritage forms of address in Xhosa and Zulu, highlighting how these choices reflect deep-rooted social hierarchies and the importance of respect for elders. Dada (2022) illustrates how specific honorifics reinforce traditional norms of deference, with particular emphasis on the role of age and gender in shaping linguistic practices.

Similarly, Smith (2021) examines kinship terms in Māori addresses, demonstrating that these forms not only mark respect but also delineate familial and community relationships. Smith (2021) underscores their significance in maintaining social order and cultural identity, particularly by affirming connections to ancestry. Pérez (2022) analyses formal and informal address forms across Spanish-speaking countries, showing how linguistic choices are shaped by social class and regional norms, and how context determines appropriate communication strategies.

Johnson (2023) explores heritage forms of address in the Navajo language, focusing on how these expressions signify respect and reflect cultural values. Johnson (2023) emphasises the role of language in preserving cultural heritage and social cohesion, illustrating how address terms help navigate complex social dynamics within Native American communities. Likewise, Al-Mansoori (2023) investigates address forms in

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various Arabic dialects, showing how these choices mirror social stratification and generational respect. His analysis highlights linguistic practices as mechanisms for asserting authority and maintaining social order in Middle Eastern societies.

Lehtonen (2021) explores nuanced forms of address in Finnish, revealing how the interplay between formality and intimacy influences social interactions. Lehtonen (2021) shows how variations in address reflect respect, familiarity, or authority, and emphasises the context-dependent nature of linguistic choices in shaping interpersonal dynamics.

The Vhavenḓa community, like many cultural groups, employs specific address forms to navigate social hierarchies based on age, gender, status, and kinship (Mudau, 2024; Mudau, 2025). Elders, leaders, and peers are addressed differently, with each form of address conveying a particular social relationship and level of respect. These interactions provide insight into the power dynamics and social structures that define Tshivenḓaḓ culture.

Despite extensive research on heritage forms of address and power dynamics in other cultural contexts, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the specific dynamics of Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address within the Vhavenḓa speech community. While previous studies have explored address forms in broader heritage languages and contexts (Maseko, 2021), limited research has focused on the nuanced practices in Tshivenḓa and their implications for understanding social hierarchies and power relations. This study aims to fill that gap by offering an in-depth analysis of how Tshivenḓa address forms reflect and sustain power dynamics in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of the relationship between language and power, and how heritage languages articulate and reinforce cultural and social structures.

Researching power dynamics as reflected in Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address is essential for understanding the intricate social structures within the Vhavenḓa speech community. These heritage forms are not merely linguistic conventions, they embody cultural values, hierarchies, and relational dynamics that shape interpersonal interactions. Analysing these forms enables researchers to better understand how respect, authority, and social norms are communicated and maintained, thereby contributing to cultural preservation. Moreover, the study enriches sociolinguistic scholarship by offering empirical insights into the intersection of language and power, which can inform educational practices and foster intergenerational understanding.

Conversely, neglecting this area of study could have significant consequences. The erosion of traditional linguistic practices may result in a diminished sense of cultural identity among younger generations and the potential loss of social cohesion. Without academic engagement, misunderstandings and conflict may arise, particularly in increasingly multicultural environments. A lack of representation of heritage voices in sociolinguistic discourse further limits a comprehensive understanding of diverse cultural practices and their influence on social relationships. Ultimately, ignoring these dynamics risks perpetuating inequalities and undermining the depth of indigenous knowledge systems.

To address these concerns, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do heritage forms of address in Tshivenḓa reflect social hierarchies and power relations within familial and community contexts in the Vhembe District?

- In what ways do age and gender influence the use of heritage forms of address in Tshivenḓa?

- How do these power dynamics shape interpersonal relationships and cultural identity within the Tshivenḓa speech community?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a methodological framework that investigates how various forms of discourse, whether written, spoken, or otherwise communicated, reflect, reinforce, and challenge existing power structures and social inequalities (Gee, 2014; Fairclough, 2013). This approach emphasises the relationship between language and social power, illustrating how discourse practices contribute to the formation and perpetuation of power relations within a society. By scrutinising discourse, researchers can reveal the underlying ideologies and power dynamics that shape communication practices and societal norms (Van Dijk, 1998).

In the context of Tshivenḓa, a heritage language spoken in the Vhembe District of South Africa, heritage forms of address are deeply embedded in the community's cultural and social fabric. These forms frequently signify hierarchical relationships and reflect the inherent power dynamics of Vhavenḓa society (Mahlangu, 2018). Specific terms are used to express respect toward elders, authority figures, or individuals of higher social status, while more familiar terms are reserved for interactions among peers or younger individuals (Nhlapo, 2020).

Applying CDA to the study of Tshivenḓa address forms allows researchers to uncover how these linguistic practices mirror and uphold power dynamics within the Vhavenḓa community. This approach facilitates an examination of how address terms operate across various social contexts, how they sustain traditional power structures, and how they may be contested in light of social change (Maseko, 2021). Additionally, CDA sheds light on the role these address forms play in preserving cultural norms and values while also adapting to

modernisation and external influences (Mphahlele, 2023). Ultimately, integrating CDA into the analysis of Tshivenḓa heritage address forms offers a robust framework for understanding how language reflects, reproduces, and potentially transforms social structures.

2.2. Ethnography of Communication

The Ethnography of Communication (EoC), developed by Dell Hymes, underscores the importance of contextualising language use within its cultural and social environments. This theoretical framework involves analysing communication practices across diverse cultures to understand how they reflect and reinforce social norms and structures (Hymes, 1972). EoC focuses on the rules and conventions governing language use in specific contexts, emphasising the interaction between language and social practice. It examines components such as speech events, communicative competence, and the social functions of language, providing a lens through which to interpret language as a culturally embedded practice.

In the case of Tshivenḓa, heritage forms of address are essential for reflecting and maintaining power dynamics within the community. These address forms are closely associated with social hierarchies, age, status, and respect (Mahlangu, 2018). Specific terms signal hierarchical relationships, distinguishing between elders, leaders, and peers. Integrating EoC theory with the analysis of Tshivenḓa address forms enables researchers to explore how these linguistic practices are used to navigate social roles and reinforce power relations. This perspective highlights how communication not only mirrors power structures but actively contributes to the maintenance of social order and cultural continuity (Maseko, 2021).

Moreover, EoC offers valuable insights into how these address practices shape social interaction and identity construction. It illustrates the role of language in negotiating power within different communicative contexts and how such practices are passed down to reinforce community norms and expectations (Mphahlele, 2023).

2.3. Integrating Critical Discourse Analysis and Ethnography of Communication

In examining power dynamics as reflected in Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, the integration of CDA and EoC offers a comprehensive and complementary framework. CDA uncovers the implicit power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse, enabling researchers to analyse how heritage address forms signify respect, authority, and control within the Vhavenḓa community. EoC, meanwhile, situates these forms within their broader cultural and communicative context, focusing on the rules and conventions that govern language use in social interaction.

By linking these two approaches, the study not only reveals how Tshivenḓa address forms reinforce power dynamics but also how they function within the larger cultural system. This combined framework provides deeper insights into the interplay between language, identity, and social structure, highlighting the critical role of linguistic practices in both reflecting and shaping community life.

3.   Literature review

Research consistently shows that power dynamics are embedded in everyday communication through linguistic choices. In the Vhembe District, traditional practices require younger individuals to address elders using titles that denote respect. According to Mudau, Mandende, and Mushaathoni (2024) and Ramabulana (2022), this practice not only preserves cultural heritage but also instils in the youth a sense of duty to acknowledge the wisdom and authority of their elders.

Gender also plays a significant role in the power dynamics observed in Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address. Male and female speakers often adopt different linguistic strategies based on social expectations. As Mphahlele (2023) notes, men tend to employ more formal and authoritative address forms, whereas women may use more flexible or deferential language that reflects their socially constructed roles and relationships.

The effects of modernisation and globalisation on heritage forms of address have become increasingly concerning. Scholars such as Tshivhase (2023) argue that the influence of Western communication norms threatens the survival of traditional linguistic practices. This cultural shift raises important questions about the sustainability of heritage address systems and their role in maintaining cultural identity amid evolving social dynamics.

Within the broader Southern African context, Dada (2022) explores address forms in the Xhosa and Zulu languages, illustrating how linguistic choices are deeply rooted in cultural values and social hierarchies. The study demonstrates that address terms are not simply matters of grammar, but tools that reflect and reinforce respect, especially toward elders. Dada (2022) highlights how age plays a crucial role in shaping these linguistic practices, with younger individuals expected to use honorifics and formal titles when addressing seniors. Furthermore, the study underscores the intersectionality of age and gender, noting that men may use more assertive forms with peers, while women are often expected to adopt more respectful and restrained language when addressing authority figures. This gendered linguistic dimension complicates social interactions, revealing how language serves both to maintain and negotiate social structures. Overall, Dada (2022)'s research offers valuable insights into the sociolinguistic dynamics of Xhosa and Zulu-speaking communities and reinforces the centrality of language in shaping cultural identity and social relations.

In a different cultural context, Smith (2021) examines kinship terms in Māori address forms, highlighting their critical role in conveying power dynamics within familial and community structures in New Zealand. Smith (2021) illustrates how specific linguistic choices affirm ancestral connections and uphold cultural identity. These address terms also play a key role in delineating roles and responsibilities, particularly in interactions involving elders and leaders. The study concludes that language is a vital tool in navigating social hierarchies and sustaining Māori cultural traditions.

The broader theoretical framework of *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)* offers a powerful lens through which to interpret the role of language in power relations. Van Dijk (2018) emphasises how power is enacted and reproduced through discourse, thereby shaping interactions and reinforcing social structures. This is particularly pertinent in the context of heritage address forms, where linguistic choices mirror and sustain societal norms (Wodak & Meyer, 2021).

Heritage forms of address, such as honorifics, kinship terms, and respectful titles, function as linguistic markers of solidarity, deference, and power. Pan and Kádár (2021) illustrate that these forms are historically and politically situated, often shaping both interpersonal and intercultural communication. CDA enables scholars to uncover the ideological underpinnings of these address forms, revealing how they encode cultural expectations and societal values.

Importantly, CDA operates as both a theoretical perspective and a methodological tool. As a theory, it explores how discourse constructs and is constructed by power and ideology. As a method, it facilitates systematic linguistic analysis to uncover hidden meanings, biases, and implications (Fairclough, 2019; Wodak & Meyer, 2021). This dual function makes CDA particularly well-suited for analysing the power dynamics embedded in heritage forms of address, especially within intercultural and multilingual contexts.

By integrating power dynamics, heritage forms of address, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within a unified analytical framework, researchers can gain deeper insights into how language both reflects and reinforces social hierarchies. This intersection offers a valuable lens for exploring the relationship between linguistic practices and cultural authority. Future research may extend this approach to diverse linguistic and cultural settings, demonstrating how CDA's methodological rigor can illuminate discourse as a site of negotiation, resistance, and the reproduction of power (Blommaert, 2020).

Johnson (2023) investigates heritage forms of address in the Navajo language, focusing on how these linguistic choices convey respect and power relations within the community. The study reveals that specific address terms are closely tied to cultural values and reflect longstanding traditions of honouring elders and community leaders. Through contextual analysis, Johnson (2023) demonstrates that language functions not merely as a communicative tool but as a mechanism for preserving cultural heritage. These address forms are shown to be integral in strengthening social bonds and affirming identity among Navajo speakers. Ultimately, the study highlights the pivotal role of language in managing and sustaining complex social dynamics within Native American communities.

Similarly, Pérez (2022) examines formal and informal address patterns across Spanish-speaking countries, revealing how linguistic choices reflect and perpetuate power dynamics shaped by social class and regional norms. The research illustrates that address forms vary considerably depending on the social context, with many communities maintaining traditional hierarchies that prescribe respectful forms of communication, particularly in familial and professional domains. By analysing these variations, Pérez (2022) underscores how language both mirrors and reinforces societal structures, revealing embedded tensions and power relations. The study contributes to a broader understanding of how address forms influence social interactions and cultural identities across Latin America.

Al-Mansoori (2023) explores the use of heritage address forms in various Arabic dialects, emphasising how these linguistic practices reflect social stratification and generational respect in Middle Eastern societies. Far from being neutral communicative devices, these address forms are shown to be deeply enmeshed in cultural norms that prescribe appropriate interactions based on age, status, and social roles. Al-Mansoori (2023)'s analysis demonstrates how such forms assert authority and uphold social order, reinforcing hierarchical relationships. The study ultimately illustrates the role of language in sustaining cultural identity and cohesion in Arab communities, providing valuable insight into the interplay between language, power, and tradition.

Lehtonen (2021) provides a nuanced examination of address forms in the Finnish language, focusing on the tension between formality and intimacy in social exchanges. The study finds that address choices are highly context-dependent and signal varying degrees of respect, familiarity, or authority across both personal and professional relationships. Lehtonen (2021) highlights how these linguistic choices serve as subtle indicators of social positioning and are instrumental in negotiating interpersonal dynamics. The research reinforces the importance of contextual awareness in communication and adds to the broader understanding of how linguistic forms shape and reflect societal relationships within Finnish culture.

Culture and language are inextricably linked, with language functioning as a repository and transmitter of cultural values, norms, and social behaviours (Mudau, Mandende, & Mushaathoni, 2024). In the Vhavenḓa

community, Tshivenḓa operates not only as a means of communication but also as a medium for expressing cultural identity and organising social life. Its heritage forms of address embody deeply held cultural practices related to status, hierarchy, and interpersonal respect (Dlamini, 2020). Analysing these forms provides critical insight into how cultural values and power relations are encoded, negotiated, and preserved through language.

Communication within the Vhavenḓa community is governed by well-established linguistic and cultural norms that dictate how address forms should be used in different social settings. These norms are essential to maintaining social cohesion and guiding interpersonal interactions, as they reflect the community's values and hierarchical structures (Nhlapo, 2020). A clear understanding of both formal and informal communication patterns is necessary to grasp how power is exercised and maintained in this context. The interaction between language and communication practices thus reveals the mechanisms through which authority, respect, and social order are continuously reinforced within the community.

4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore participants' experiences within a specific sociocultural context, enabling an in-depth understanding of their perspectives. Data were collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews, allowing for rich, contextual analysis of lived experiences. The case study approach was selected for its capacity to provide detailed insights into real-world social interactions within their natural settings.

According to Brynard et al. (2015, p. 30), qualitative research "links conceptual research issues to relevant empirical research." In this study, a qualitative design was deemed most appropriate as it facilitates a comprehensive exploration of participants' subjective experiences, rather than imposing external interpretations. This approach emphasises narrative, meaning-making, and the depth of personal stories, offering valuable insight into a relatively small but diverse group of individuals. As defined by Bless et al. (2006), case study methodology involves a structured examination of the relationships between variables within a specific context in this instance, the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province.

A convenience sampling technique was employed to select 24 native Tshivenḓa speakers (L1), grouped as follows: 10 youths (six females and four males, aged 18–34) and 14 elders (six females and eight males, aged 59–79). According to Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) and Williman (2011), sampling involves selecting a representative subset from a broader population to investigate a particular phenomenon. The sample was purposefully varied by age and gender to ensure a balanced and inclusive perspective on the subject under study.

Data cleaning followed a systematic process. First, the researcher verified the completeness and consistency of the data, addressing any discrepancies or gaps. Transcripts were cross-checked against audio recordings to correct transcription errors. Redundant data were removed, and all personal identifiers were anonymised to maintain participant confidentiality. Terminology was standardised to ensure consistency, and inconsistencies were resolved through triangulation with supplementary materials. Participant selection criteria were strictly aligned with the study's objectives, and recruitment was guided by the aim of including individuals with relevant experiential knowledge. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, i.e., when no new significant themes emerged from the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants, who provided both written and verbal consent prior to participation. Verbal consent was specifically obtained from older participants who were illiterate. Following the guidance of Williman (2011), this method was chosen to ensure the depth and reliability of responses. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to probe deeper into specific themes while maintaining flexibility in participant interaction, thereby enhancing the richness of the data.

Data analysis, a pivotal phase in qualitative research, involved organising and interpreting the collected data to answer the research questions (Kumar, 2005). The analysis began with the formulation of broad analytical goals and the development of thematic categories. Participant responses were transcribed verbatim and coded inductively, following a bottom-up approach. These codes were then grouped into overarching themes to facilitate meaningful interpretation (Creswell, 2007). The study employed thematic analysis, as defined by Kumar (2005), to identify, organise, and interpret patterns of meaning across the dataset. This rigorous, multi-step approach, which included repeated rounds of coding, enabled the researcher to extract the key themes emerging from the data and develop deeper insights into the sociolinguistic phenomenon under investigation.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis, intercoder reliability procedures were implemented. Multiple researchers independently coded a subset of the data and then compared their findings. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, thereby increasing consistency and reducing potential researcher bias. Furthermore, triangulation with supplementary data sources was employed to validate interpretations and enhance the credibility of the findings.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study, which explore the intricate power dynamics embedded in Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address, as observed in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South

Africa. Through thematic analysis, the discussion highlights how language serves as a tool for negotiating social hierarchy, respect, and authority within the community. The findings reveal that various heritage forms of address, ranging from formal to informal, not only reflect but also reinforce power relations across age, gender, and social status. By examining these linguistic practices, the study provides insight into how language both shapes and is shaped by cultural norms, offering a broader understanding of the region's sociopolitical landscape.

Theme 1: Hierarchical structure and respect for elders

The findings indicate that Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address are deeply rooted in a hierarchical social structure that places high value on age, authority, and wisdom. Elders are afforded significant respect, and their roles within families and communities are reinforced through culturally specific linguistic expressions. One prominent example is the prefix **"vho,"** commonly used when addressing elders.

One youth participant explained:

> *"These heritage forms of address mark a clear social division between younger and older generations. In the Vhembe district, the prefix vho is a significant term that establishes power relations, especially in family and community gatherings. You do not just address your seniors the way you want. For instance, you must greet your father as nndaa! if you are a female, or aa! if you are a male. Younger family members are expected to address parents, grandparents, and community leaders with formal terms, which reinforces elders' roles as decision-makers, guides, and conflict mediators, such as khotsi a Tsiko or mme a Tsiko, rather than using their first names."*

Similarly, one male elder noted:

> *"The use of formal heritage forms of address like makhadzi (father's sister), malume (mother's brother), makhulu (grandparent), mmane (mother's younger sister or father's second wife), mme muhulu (mother's elder sister), and muzwala (cousin), among others, serves as both a linguistic marker and a cultural mechanism for reinforcing respect and power in familial and community settings."*

This hierarchy, as further explained by the elder, extends beyond age alone. It reflects a broader cultural expectation that younger individuals defer to elders in matters of wisdom and authority. Heritage forms of address help maintain order within family structures and community interactions by making power relations explicit and culturally sanctioned.

The study highlights that specific address terms, such as *mazwale*, *muhalivho*, and *khotsi muhulu* are not merely terms of respect; they are mechanisms through which social roles and power are communicated and reinforced. These forms maintain clear generational distinctions and reinforce elders' positions as guides and mediators. Thus, the hierarchical use of language supports cultural continuity and reinforces a value system that centres on deference, respect, and order.

These findings closely align with Mphahlele (2023), who similarly argues that Tshivenḓa address forms play a pivotal role in reinforcing a cultural hierarchy that prioritises age, authority, and wisdom. Mphahlele (2023) emphasises that terms like *vho*, *khotsi*, and *makhulu* are not merely polite expressions but powerful cultural tools that institutionalise generational roles and norms. Both this study and Mphahlele (2023)'s findings show that such forms serve as instruments of social control, promoting order and mutual respect while preserving the collective cultural identity of the Vhavenḓa community.

Furthermore, both studies affirm that these linguistic practices are instrumental in shaping interpersonal interactions in ways that foster social cohesion. By consistently using formal address forms, members of the community reaffirm shared cultural values and reinforce the social fabric that binds generations together.

Theme 2: Power relations and social control in the community

The findings indicate that power relations and social control within the Vhavenḓa community are closely tied to heritage forms of address, which function both as markers of respect and as mechanisms for maintaining social order. Elders and leaders are typically addressed with formal and respectful titles such as *makhulu*, *malume*, and *makhadzi*, among others, terms that signal authority and reinforce individuals' dominant positions within the community's social hierarchy. These address forms create clear distinctions between social roles and help regulate behaviour, ensuring that younger individuals or those of lower status adhere to community norms.

One elder participant explained:

> *"Heritage forms of address in Tshivenḓa also reflect power dynamics within broader community settings. Terms such as mukomana (brother) and mufumakadzi (wife or woman) are used differently depending on an individual's position in the community. When addressing a chief or community leader, formal titles like vhane vha shango, muhali, musanda wanga, iwe une wa ri i fai nda fa, vhakoma, and vhavenḓa (chief, leader) are employed to acknowledge their authority and governance roles. Power relations are mirrored in language as community members recognise leadership through respectful titles."*

A female elder added:

"While these linguistic practices help preserve traditional social structures, they can also contribute to a rigid system that limits mobility and perpetuates inequalities. The formality of these titles may inadvertently reinforce divisions and hierarchies, which can suppress open dialogue or discourage challenges to authority. On the positive side, these forms help maintain respect and order, but they may also hinder social change by maintaining strict boundaries between groups."

The study further revealed that heritage terms such as *vhafunzi*, *vhaingameli*, *vhamusanda*, *vhakoma*, *vhavenḓa*, *maine*, and *nyamatei*, typically used for leaders, demonstrate how language institutionalises authority. In this context, language is not merely a tool for communication; it actively enforces social stratification by distinguishing leaders from ordinary community members. These address forms function as instruments of social control, shaping interpersonal interactions in public, religious, and communal decision-making spaces.

The findings align with Tshivhase (2023), who similarly observes that Tshivenḓa address forms reflect and reinforce power relations in the Vhavenḓa community. Both studies highlight how formal titles such as *makhulu*, *malume*, and *vhakoma* establish authority and maintain clearly defined social roles. Tshivhase (2023) also notes that while such practices foster order and respect, they may simultaneously uphold rigid hierarchies that restrict upward mobility and limit openness to social transformation. This supports the notion that heritage address forms, while essential in preserving cultural values, can also perpetuate inequalities and social divisions.

Theme 3: Age-based heritage forms of address and intergenerational respect

The study found that age plays a critical role in shaping the use of heritage forms of address in Tshivenḓa. Younger individuals are expected to use formal and respectful language when addressing their elders. One elder participant remarked:

"Children and young adults, regardless of gender, are expected to use honorifics such as vho, and kinship titles like mmane, mme muhulu, and mokomana, which reflect their respect for elders."

Youth participants echoed this sentiment, stating:

"In family settings, this age-based differentiation is especially evident. Younger people are expected to show deference to elders in all interactions. This reinforces the importance of age in Tshivenḓa society, where older individuals are seen as authority figures. In other words, young ones must show respect through how they address their seniors."

Overall, the prominence of age-based heritage forms of address underscores the deeply embedded cultural value placed on respect for elders in the Tshivenḓa community. The use of formal terms for older individuals is not merely a matter of politeness, it is an expression of moral responsibility. This practice reflects a broader social contract in which age is associated with wisdom, experience, and authority. The consistent use of respectful address forms by younger individuals helps preserve intergenerational respect and reinforces social hierarchies.

However, the findings of this study contrast with the conclusions of Dada (2022), who argues that age-based forms of address are becoming less significant in contemporary societies due to shifting generational attitudes and increased social mobility. While this study emphasises the persistence of age-based respect, with formal titles such as *vho* and *mmane* remaining common, Dada (2022) suggests that younger generations are increasingly challenging traditional norms. According to Dada (2022), respect is no longer strictly tied to age, but also influenced by personal relationships and individual merit.

This contrast highlights a broader evolution in social dynamics, where cultural expectations around deference and hierarchy are being redefined. While some communities continue to uphold traditional forms of address, others are witnessing a transformation in which younger individuals question or reinterpret the authority associated with age-based linguistic practices.

Theme 4: Gendered power dynamics in heritage forms of address

Gender plays a significant role in shaping the use of heritage forms of address in Tshivenḓa, particularly in how men and women are addressed differently based on age, status, and marital roles. The findings reveal that husbands often continue to address their wives by their first names, even after marriage and having children. This practice is rooted in traditional gender norms that assign greater authority and respect to men within the household.

One elder participant shared:

"I still address my wife as Mukonḓeleli even though we have grandchildren, because I am the head of the family and she is the wife. But she does not address me by my first name, because that would be considered an insult in Tshivenḓa."

Another elder woman explained:

"I have been married to my husband for thirty-five years, and I am used to being addressed by my first name. Ever since we got married, I have never addressed him by his first name because I know it is a sign of disrespect. Even when I serve him food, I must bow down to maintain his dignity and show respect."

Interestingly, a younger participant reflected on similar patterns in their own household:

> *"My father always calls my mother by her first name, Julia, but I have never heard my mother calling my father by his name. My father always tells us that when we meet an elder, we must greet them first as a sign of respect and politeness. That's how we were raised as Vhavenḓa children."*

These examples illustrate how gendered forms of address reinforce power asymmetries between men and women in Tshivenḓa-speaking communities. While both genders are expected to show respect for elders, the expectations around marital address practices are not reciprocal. Men often maintain authority by addressing women informally, whereas women are required to use more formal or deferential language toward their husbands. This linguistic asymmetry reflects broader cultural expectations about gender roles, where women, particularly wives, are subject to greater constraints in how they express themselves linguistically.

Such practices not only reflect but also perpetuate gendered power dynamics, with women positioned lower in the social hierarchy relative to men. Young women, in particular, may experience heightened pressure to conform to traditional forms of respect and modesty, while men retain more linguistic flexibility.

However, the findings of this study contrast with those of Smith (2021), who argues that gendered power dynamics in language are becoming increasingly fluid, especially in more modern and egalitarian relationships. While this study highlights the persistence of traditional gendered norms in Tshivenḓa, where husbands address wives by name and wives defer through formal language and actions.Smith (2021) observes a shift in contemporary relationships, where couples often use first names mutually, without reinforcing hierarchical roles.

Smith (2021) suggests that younger generations are beginning to challenge these traditional practices, fostering more egalitarian language use within relationships. This contrast highlights the evolving nature of gendered communication: while traditional communities like the Vhavenḓa may still uphold patriarchal norms, broader societal changes are gradually influencing linguistic behaviour, particularly among youth and urban populations.

Theme 5: Language as a tool for social boundaries

Power dynamics encoded in Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address function as mechanisms for maintaining clearly defined social boundaries within the community. The use of different address forms based on age, gender, and social status visibly distinguishes individuals' positions within the social hierarchy. These linguistic practices are transmitted across generations, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others within their cultural context.

The study found that respectful use of heritage forms of address contributes to maintaining order and unity in both familial and communal relationships. Such practices provide a framework for understanding one's role within the social structure. As one youth participant stated:

> *"Language serves as a powerful mechanism for socialising individuals into their respective roles within the community. By reinforcing power relations through specific heritage forms of address, the Tshivenḓa speech community ensures that individuals understand their social position relative to others."*

Elder participants also shared similar sentiments:

> *"This practice of addressing others according to age and gender shapes interpersonal relationships by creating social boundaries that dictate how people interact with one another, ensuring harmony and mutual respect. Over time, these practices help to strengthen the collective cultural identity of the community by emphasising the importance of social order and unity."*

The findings emphasise the pivotal role of Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address in reinforcing power dynamics and maintaining social boundaries. The distinctions in address terms based on age and gender serve as tools for establishing and preserving one's position within the social hierarchy. These forms of address not only guide interpersonal interactions but also uphold social order and foster respect across generations. They are instrumental in the transmission of cultural values, shaping both individual identity and collective cultural cohesion. By encoding power relations in everyday language, the Tshivenḓa community cultivates a sense of unity and mutual respect, while also reinforcing traditional structures that govern familial and communal life. Ultimately, these linguistic practices are essential to the preservation and strengthening of the community's cultural identity.

These findings are consistent with those of Johnson (2023), who argues that language plays a critical role in establishing and maintaining social boundaries within communities. Both studies highlight how heritage forms of address based on age, gender, and status serve as tools for reinforcing social hierarchies and shaping individual roles. Johnson (2023) notes that these practices not only reflect but also reinforce cultural values, mirroring the results of this study, where specific address terms preserve respect, unity, and social order. In both cases, these linguistic norms are passed down through generations, ensuring the continuity of cultural identity and reinforcing the community's internal cohesion.

These findings can also be examined through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which investigates how language reflects, perpetuates, and legitimises power structures. In Tshivenḓa, heritage forms of

address such as *vho*, *khotsi*, and *makhulu* do more than indicate respect, they function as linguistic tools that uphold and reproduce hierarchical social relations. CDA posits that language is not neutral but is embedded with ideological functions. Thus, the repeated use of these titles conditions individuals to accept and operate within established power structures, contributing to the stability of the social order. This analysis highlights how language serves not only as a mirror of social norms but also as a mechanism for their reproduction and enforcement.

From the perspective of Ethnography of Communication, these findings underscore the culturally embedded nature of linguistic practices. This approach focuses on how language reflects social structures and cultural norms within specific communities. In the Tshivenḓa context, heritage forms of address are more than linguistic conventions, they are social practices that communicate and reinforce roles based on age and gender. Ethnographers would argue that these forms are integral to the socialisation process, teaching individuals how to behave and relate to others in culturally appropriate ways. Their continuity across generations ensures that expectations around hierarchy, deference, and social roles remain deeply embedded in everyday interactions, further illustrating how language use reflects and supports broader social systems..

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the use of Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address is deeply embedded in the social fabric of the Vhavenḓa community, particularly in relation to age-based hierarchies and power dynamics. The hierarchical nature of Tshivenḓa, expressed through specific linguistic forms, emphasises respect for elders and reinforces their authority within both familial and communal settings. These forms of address serve not only as markers of deference but also as cultural mechanisms that reflect and sustain the expectation that younger individuals must recognise the wisdom and authority of their elders.

Furthermore, the study illustrates how power relations often institutionalised through heritage address forms play a crucial role in maintaining social order and regulating behaviour. While these practices foster social cohesion and cultural identity, they also reinforce gendered boundaries and inequalities, reflecting the enduring influence of traditional roles. The contrast between longstanding linguistic traditions and shifting generational attitudes highlights the tension between preserving cultural heritage and embracing contemporary social values.

The distinction in how men and women are addressed, and the institutionalised power structures embedded in language, can sometimes limit social mobility and perpetuate inequities, particularly along gender lines. These findings underscore the importance of critically examining linguistic norms in light of evolving social expectations. As younger generations increasingly advocate for egalitarian values, there is a growing need to balance respect for tradition with the realities of modern, inclusive communication practices.

7. Recommendations

It is recommended that, to ensure the continued relevance and evolution of Tshivenḓa cultural practices, intergenerational dialogue should be actively promoted, encouraging youth to engage with elders on equal terms to foster mutual understanding while preserving respect for traditional values. Gender sensitivity training can help challenge traditional gender roles, particularly within marital relationships, fostering more egalitarian dynamics while maintaining cultural integrity. Additionally, there is a need to critically examine and evolve the social boundaries reinforced by language, ensuring that respect for tradition coexists with opportunities for social mobility. Language use should adapt to reflect both cultural identity and the fluid nature of modern relationships, allowing for greater inclusivity. Lastly, empowering youth through cultural education programs will help them understand the significance of Tshivenḓa heritage forms of address, both as a symbol of respect and as a means of maintaining social cohesion, while also adapting to contemporary shifts in societal values.

8. Limitations

A key limitation of this study, "Power Dynamics as Reflected in Tshivenḓa Heritage Forms of Address: A Study from Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa" is its focus on a single linguistic and geographic context. By concentrating exclusively on the Tshivenḓa-speaking population within the Vhembe District, the study's findings may not be readily generalisable to other cultural or linguistic communities in South Africa.

Moreover, the study does not include the perspectives of non-Tshivenḓa speakers or individuals residing outside the research site, potentially omitting important variations in how heritage forms of address function across different regions or cultural settings. Future studies could broaden the scope to include comparative analysis with other language groups or regions to enhance the applicability and depth of understanding regarding linguistic power dynamics.

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