



# Indigenous Language Preservation: A Study Of The Tshivenda Speech Community In South Africa

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**Abstract:** This sociolinguistic study explored the significance of language preservation through the use of indigenous forms of address by the Vhavenḁa in South Africa. Indigenous forms of address are integral to the language and cultural identity of a society. Furthermore, they are indispensable in the preservation of the language and culture of any society. Ignoring the use of these forms of address can lead to language shift or even extinction. This study utilised face-to-face semi-structured interviews to gather and analyse data. The researchers sampled 22 Tshivenda L1 participants, 14 youths, and eight elders. The study used the ethnopragmatic theory as its framework. This theory helped the researchers to understand the use of forms of address within the Tshivenda cultural scripts, such as cultural norms and values. The findings revealed that using forms of address is pivotal in preserving the Tshivenda language. The language will be preserved if lexical items, such as *aa*, *nndaa*, and *mboloma*, are used for greeting. The Vhavenḁa speech community is found in the Limpopo Province in South Africa; the term “*Vhavenḁa*” refers to people who speak Tshivenda, while Tshivenda refers to the language and culture of these people. The study recommends that indigenous Tshivenda forms of address should be included in school syllabuses and aired on television and radio programmes. In this way, the Tshivenda language can be prevented from shifting or dying, as its disappearance may have dire consequences for its development as a language.

**Keywords:** Culture, Indigenous, Forms of Address, Sociolinguistics, Tshivenda, South Africa

## 1. Introduction

The use of indigenous forms of address as a means of preserving a language is extremely common and natural for interlocutors in their daily communication (Wardhaugh, 1992). Significantly, Grenoble and Whaley (2006) regard language preservation as the efforts and practices aimed at preserving and sustaining languages at risk of falling out of use. They further assert that this process is critical for safeguarding linguistic diversity and cultural heritage, especially for languages that face threats from dominant languages, globalisation, and socio-economic changes. Language is demarcated as a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves (Yule, 2017). The current study sought to explore the preservation of indigenous languages, that is, Tshivenda, spoken in the Limpopo Province in South Africa. In this speech community, traditional leadership remains a cornerstone, and many families continue to enrol their children in customary educational institutions such as *murundu* (initiation school for boys) and *vhukumba* (initiation school for girls). These traditional schools, which play a crucial role in instilling good morals, a cultural understanding, and a strong sense of identity in children, contribute significantly to fostering a love for the language and its preservation, mitigating the risk of language shift or loss (Mudau, 2022).

The practice of traditional dances, such as *tshigombela*, *malende*, and *tshikona*, persists among the youths, serving as a vital expression of cultural pride and a marker of the Vhavenḁa's unique identity. These unique cultural practices, along with the role of traditional schools, are crucial for the preservation of the Tshivenda language. In addition to Ladzani (2014), Netswera and Nealer (2020), and Masote, Phatudi, and Joubert (2017), Mashile (2020) assert that initiation schools play a crucial role in instilling good morals, a cultural understanding, and a strong sense of identity in children. These institutions contribute significantly to fostering a love for the language and its preservation, mitigating the risk of language shift or loss (Mudau, 2022). Indigenous forms of address, encompassing terms such as words, phrases, names, or titles, are vital for the preservation of the Tshivenda language and culture (Wardhaugh, 1992). According to Wardhaugh (1992), these forms of address, which are integral to any language, reflect cultural contexts and relationships. Formal address terms, like “Mr,” “Mrs,” “Dr,” and “Professor,” denote an individual's status or role, while familial term such as “Mom,” “Dad,” “Uncle,” and “Aunt” signify close family ties. Honor-

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-ifics like “Your Honour” and “Sir/Madam” express respect and social hierarchy, whereas professional titles such as “*Doctor*” or “*Engineer*” highlight specific roles. Terms of endearment, including “*honey*” and “*sweetie*,” convey affection and emotional closeness. The proper use of these forms is crucial for preserving cultural continuity and ensuring the preservation of language.

Forms of address act as icebreakers in any communication act, and failure to apply them appropriately may lead to a communication breakdown between the interlocutors, irrespective of their cultural differences (Mushaathoni, 2023). Mushaathoni further explains that cultural differences might result in miscommunication and misconceptions. Upon meeting, interlocutors are expected to greet and get to know each other first. Inappropriate use of the terms may disrupt the social relationship among the interlocutors and simultaneously affect the preservation of the language as a whole because the language can be preserved through its usage. Indigenous forms of address can be used among family members and by people in a public setting. However, indigenous forms of address are also used by people from different cultural backgrounds as a means of preserving language as a whole. Yang (2010) expounds on this, stating that forms of address are essential for effective and successful communication and have long been considered salient indicators of the status of social relationships. Yang (2010) further states that one can use different forms of address to show respect or fondness, praise, love, insult, or depreciate other people, among other functions. In this way, forms of address, which form part of a language, can be preserved. Furthermore, through the use of indigenous forms of address, language can be preserved for the coming generations (Yang, 2010). According to Wierzbicka (2003), addressing a person is essential for humans as social creatures worldwide. Likewise, this is applicable in environments such as family, society, and the workplace. Interlocutors cannot function without addressing activities at various points during a meeting with others, as they form part of any language (Yule, 2017).

Overlooking the study of Tshivenda forms of address in the context of indigenous language preservation could lead to several significant repercussions, such as traditional greetings and honorifics that signify respect and social hierarchy becoming obsolete, leading to a decline in the cultural practices associated with these forms. Moreover, neglecting these forms of address may defeat the objectives of preserving indigenous languages. Forms of address embody crucial aspects of cultural identity and heritage, encompassing vital social and cultural functions that support the preservation of cultural norms and values. The omission of the use of Indigenous forms of address may result in a diminished understanding and appreciation of Tshivenda cultural practices, undermining effective indigenous language preservation efforts. Comprehensive language preservation strategies must encompass all facets of language use, including indigenous forms of address; failure to do so risks the incomplete preservation and loss of essential elements critical for maintaining the language’s vitality. Additionally, without examining the role of these indigenous forms of address in engaging younger generations, preservation initiatives may be less effective in transmitting cultural values and linguistic practices. The lack of focus on integrating traditional forms of address into contemporary communication platforms and educational programs could also result in missed opportunities for leveraging modern tools to support the preservation of Indigenous Tshivenda. Consequently, a study that excludes these forms of address may offer a distorted view of the Tshivenda language dynamics, overlooking the intricate social structures and relationships they represent.

Recent studies on language preservation have increasingly focused on broad strategies such as educational programmes, community initiatives, and digital tools for revitalising endangered languages (Hinton, 2011; Krauss, 2007). Other studies have also focused on the importance of Indigenous forms of address as a means of showing respect and identifying each other, as these forms of address form an integral part of language, culture, and customs (Etaywe, 2018; Msimango, 2003; Makgopa & Ragwiji, 2021). Studies investigating the significance of preserving the Tshivenda language through indigenous forms of address are scarce, particularly in the South African context. Against this backdrop, the authors saw it necessary to conduct this study to add to the existing knowledge on the interface between forms of address and language and culture. Accordingly, the current study seeks to bridge this gap. The findings of the study may help make Tshivenda speakers aware of the importance of keeping forms of address alive because their loss may have dire consequences for preserving and developing Tshivenda in a democratic South Africa. To achieve this goal, the current study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What is the significance of preserving the indigenous Tshivenda language through the use of indigenous forms of address?
- What should be done to preserve the indigenous Tshivenda language in contemporary South Africa?

### 1.1. The Vhavenda of South Africa

The Vhavenda people began settling in the Limpopo Province of South Africa over several centuries ago. Their migration into the region is generally thought to have occurred from around the 16th century onwards, although the exact timeline has not been documented precisely (Schoeman, 1983). According to the latest data from Statistics South Africa (RSA, 2022), the estimated population of Tshivenda speakers is around 1.6 million people. Tshivenda is predominantly spoken in the northern part of the Limpopo Province, where the Vhavenda speech community is concentrated. This group’s cultural and linguistic identity is intricately linked to their language, Tshivenda. Tshivenda, an indigenous language within the Niger-Congo family, serves both as a medium of daily communication and a repository of cultural expression for the Vhavenda people. The term “Tshivenda” not only

denotes the language but also encapsulates the cultural practices, traditions, and social norms of the Vhavaṇḍa (Kriel, 2000). Thus, Tshivenda functions as a key component in preserving and transmitting the Vhavaṇḍa cultural heritage, influencing various aspects of their societal interactions and traditional practices (Msimango, 2003).

## 2. Literature review

Oscan (2016) reasons that the choice of forms of address signals the relationship between language and society and how people imagine their relationships with addressees in society. Oscan (2016) further illustrates that the use of forms of address should be aligned with the habits of the local culture, politeness habits, and conversational situations. Each group within a community, as well as each family, has its own culture in terms of applying forms of address (Zwane, 2024).

In a study conducted in the United Kingdom, Hudson (2001) claims that when people talk to each other, multiple options for how they are called, named, and described emerge. He suggests that speakers' choices of words and their meaning concerning others who interpret them are systematic rather than arbitrary in such instances. Hence, although the content of the personal addresses differs across contexts, such systematic language behaviour, whether in terms of usage or interpretation, is universal.

Young, Bell, and Giles (1988) concur with Yang (2007) in their research conducted in Qingdao, China, about using English forms of address; they claim that these forms of address can be found in both oral and written communication. Moreover, they argue that forms of address serve other vital social purposes, such as expressing respect, intimacy, honour, or humiliation. Likewise, Young, Bell, and Giles (1988) also assert that English or American individuals could be addressed by their name, title, or name and title—for instance, the first name “John,” the title and name “Doctor Smith,” or the title “Pastor.”

Similarly, in a study conducted in Jordan, Etaywe (2018) contends that a man can address a woman or girl in various relationships and settings using distinct forms of address. The feminine first name (for example, Rabab), title (madam), occupational term (Doctor), kinship term (*zaujati*, “my wife”), polite, affectionate, or pet name (*azizti*, “my beloved”), and flora terminology (*wardah*, “rose”) are all examples of this.

Social media platforms, like Facebook, have increasingly been recognised for their potential in language preservation efforts. Miller and Slater (2000) highlight how digital spaces can facilitate the preservation of traditional forms of address by enabling users to create and share content that reflects cultural norms and linguistic practices. Social media offers a dynamic platform for the younger generations to engage with and perpetuate traditional language practices in a contemporary context.

In turn, Krauss (2007) emphasises digital media's dual role in challenging and supporting language preservation. On the one hand, the dominance of global languages online can overshadow indigenous languages; on the other hand, digital platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for the active promotion and practice of traditional linguistic forms.

Television and radio have long been instrumental in preserving and promoting linguistic and cultural practices. According to Higgins (2012), television programmes and radio broadcasts often incorporate traditional forms of address as part of their content, thereby reinforcing cultural norms and practices within a broader audience. These media serve as a means to showcase and sustain Indigenous languages by embedding traditional addressing practices into everyday viewing and listening experiences.

In Africa, Oyetade's (1995) study of the Yorubas from Nigeria reveals that their forms of address share a certain universality with those in other languages like French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, Nuer, and Hindi. However, certain unique features reflect the rich Yoruba socio-cultural milieu. For instance, it has been noted that age supersedes rank in dyadic relationships, and being colleagues in Yoruba does not necessarily imply equality unless there is an agreement between the interlocutors regarding the use of reciprocal first names or non-deferential pronouns. Oyetade (1995) avers that, against the background of the complex pattern of interactions of the factors of age, intimacy, situation, and different terms, a Yoruba speaker is faced with a problem of choice. Similarly, in his study on the use of address forms at a university's staff club, Mensah (2021), found that address forms perform different functions. Through the use of these forms of address, interlocutors may use humour, clipping, language lengthening, and other linguistic devices. Mensah (2021) posits that address forms provide an opportunity for interlocutors to bond socially and adapt to the socio-academic environment of the club, adding an intriguing layer to the study of forms of address.

Interlocutors use forms of address to address one another or third persons. By misusing or ignoring forms of address, two parties may misunderstand each other and get into trouble. Wardhaugh (2006) states that many social factors influence the use of forms of address. In addition, a person may misuse and/or misinterpret a form of address due to a lack of familiarity with the addressee's culture. If this happens, communication will not proceed smoothly. Therefore, the speaker's familiarity with the addressee's culture is an important factor in keeping the verbal interaction running well and politely (Wardhaugh, 2006). Yu and Ren (2013) argue that language and culture are intertwined; in a broad sense, culture permeates every aspect of society, and language is shaped and conditioned by culture. They underscore that every culture or society has its own rules or norms governing the choice

of appropriate forms of address. The larger the cultural differences between interlocutors, the more significant the differences in forms of address.

Thus, as an important part of language, forms of address are influenced by and reflect the cultures in which they are used. In a study on Vhavenda by Tshimbupfhe, Mudau, Mandende, and Mushaathoni (2022), reveal that Indigenous Tshivenda forms of address differentiate Vhavenda from other cultures; in short, they can identify each other through these indigenous Tshivenda forms of address. Their findings further illustrate that Indigenous Tshivenda forms of address form part of their culture and tradition; therefore, they should use these forms of address freely and proudly because no other people can use them. A people's failure to practise its cultural norms properly may retard community development because poor communication may stifle negotiations for societal development because of a poor understanding of its cultural norms. In this way, people who speak different languages may fail to cooperate.

Mandende's (2009) findings concerning Tshivenda personal names among the Vhavenda of South Africa indicate that the title *Vho*, equivalent to the English Mr or Mrs, is used to address parents before their child is born. He argues that this title, which does not denote gender, is used to address people of either sex and is the most common indication of respect in Tshivenda as it is used before the first name or surname. In addition, Mandende (2009) illustrates that there are kinship terms in the Tshivenda language that are used to show respect, such as *mmane* (maternal aunt), *khotsimunene* (paternal uncle), *makhadzi* (paternal aunt) and *makhulu* (grandfather/mother or parents or the parents of one's wife). In line with the above views, the use of teknonymy as a form of address is also apparent among the Vhavenda, Vatsonga, Bapedi, and Basotho of Southern Africa (Guma 2001; Mandende, Chaka, & Makgato 2017; Makgopa & Ragwiji 2021). In the Tshivenda culture, young boys show respect by kneeling on one knee (*u losha*) when greeting their seniors, followed by a greeting with palms together, without squatting. Young women may kneel on both knees or lie on their side (*u losha*) to greet traditional leaders or present food, signifying deep respect. A slight bow with palms together (*u khotsha*) is also used as a respectful greeting. In these interactions, direct eye contact with seniors is avoided to honour their status (Msimango, 2003). The studies reviewed above focus on the forms of address without reference to the preservation of the languages they represent. This current study concentrates on the relationship between these forms of address and the preservation of the indigenous Tshivenda language. A language should be preserved and protected because if it is not preserved, together with its forms of address, there will be no communication, in terms of the expression of one's thoughts and feelings, between its speakers in any given situation of interaction.

### 3. Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by the ethnopragmatic theory that is a framework that examines how cultural and social contexts influence the way language is used and understood in communication (Mamvura, 2021). He states further that it combines elements of pragmatics, the study of language use in context and ethnography, which focuses on understanding cultural practices and social interactions. According to Goddard (2006), the ethnopragmatic theory designates an approach to language use that sees culture and context as playing a central explanatory role and simultaneously opens the way for links to be drawn between languages and other cultural phenomena. This approach involves a threefold alignment of objectives, methodological tools, and evidence base (Wierzbicka, 1996). Furthermore, the ethnopragmatic theory aims to articulate internal cultural perspectives on how and why speech is practised in the diverse languages of the world (Wierzbicka, 1996). However, its aim is to describe and explain people's ways of speaking in terms that make sense to the people concerned, that is, in terms of indigenous values, beliefs, attitudes, social categories and emotions, for example (Wierzbicka, 1996).

Similarly, Mamvura (2021) posits that ethnopragmatics emerged to appreciate culture's internal account of speech practices. Analysing linguistic behaviour based on culturally specific meanings that are intelligible to the members of a particular linguistic group, ethnopragmatics considers the belief system, cultural practices, cultural tastes, social categories, and emotions of its members. Therefore, it advocates for the internal cultural perspective as the best method for understanding linguistic behaviour (Mamvura, 2021). The ethnopragmatic theory is relevant to this study because it focuses on sociocultural communication. Interlocutors can understand each other better if they understand each other's culture and language. Additionally, users of forms of address may understand each other and use forms of address more effectively in their cultural contexts. This study focuses on preserving the indigenous Tshivenda language through the use of indigenous forms of address. Therefore, the appropriate use of these forms of address depends on someone's competence and understanding of the Tshivenda culture and language for effective communication. As such, the ethnopragmatic theory accounts for this communication. The theory also explores how cultural practices adapt over time while retaining core values. Adapting Indigenous forms of address in contemporary contexts, such as on social media platforms, illustrates how traditional practices could be preserved and adapted to new environments. Furthermore, the ethnopragmatic theory helps understand these adaptations within cultural contexts and their impact on language preservation efforts.

### 4. Methodology

This study used a qualitative method since it allowed participants' experiences to be interpreted pragmatically and was based on participants' perspectives rather than on those of the researchers (Brynard, Hanekom & Brynard,

2015). It offers an in-depth analysis of a limited demographic and caters to a preference for narrative-driven content. The rationale for adopting qualitative research lies in its ability to explore complex phenomena through detailed, context-rich data, providing deep insights into participants' perspectives and experiences. It is particularly useful for understanding meanings, motivations, and social processes. The work fits within a phenomenological design, which is the intensive study of a phenomenon over time within its natural setting in one or few sites (Bhattacharjee, 2012). A case study was also employed to help the researchers gain greater insight into and understanding of the dynamics of a specific situation (Creswell 2007). In this case, the aim was to get a clear understanding of language preservation through the use of Tshivenda Indigenous forms of address among the Tshivenda speech community in South Africa.

**Table 1:** Youth participants codes and variables (Table 1: n=14)

Codes (Youth)	Gender and Age range (18-34)	Number(s)
FY1	Female youth	1
FY2	Female youth	2
FY3	Female youth	3
FY4	Female youth	4
FY5	Female youth	5
FY6	Female youth	6
FY7	Female youth	7
MY8	Male youth	8
MY9	Male youth	9
MY10	Male youth	10
MY11	Male youth	11
MY12	Male youth	12
MY13	Male youth	13
MY14	Male youth	14

Source: Calculated by the author

Table 1 illustrates the coding system employed to label the participants. Coding the qualitative data facilitated the interpretation by categorising words, phrases, and numbers in each response, thereby aiding the researchers in effectively analysing and summarising. Furthermore, the qualitative data facilitated interpretation by categorising the words, phrases, and numbers of each response, thereby aiding the researchers in analysing and summarising the data effectively.

**Table 2:** The elderly participants' codes and variables (Table 2: n=8)

Codes (Elderly)	Participants and age range (60+)	Numbers(s)
EM1	Elderly male	1
EF2	Elderly female	2
EEF3	Elderly educator female	3
EEF4	Elderly educator female	4
EF5	Elderly female	5
EF6	Elderly female	6
EM7	Elderly male	7
EM8	Elderly male	8

Source: Calculated by the author

Table 2 shows the coding system used to label older people in the interview. The researchers collected data from 22 Tshivenda L1 participants: 14 youths and eight elders. Significantly, the youths were more willing to participate in the study than older people. While the elderly persons represented the viewpoints of the community's senior inhabitants, the youth group represented the views of young people. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were utilised to collect data for this work because they allowed the researchers to ask questions about human experiences that could not be quantified (Kumar, 2005). To analyse the data, the participants' responses were recorded, and transcriptions were made for a better interpretation of the data. The researchers were both Tshivenda speakers and qualified linguists; thus, they translated the conversation themselves. The researchers implemented several strategies to ensure accurate transcriptions and avoid mistranslations when working collaboratively. Firstly, they established and adhered to a standardised transcription protocol to maintain consistency when formatting and interpreting the transcriptions (Saldaña, 2021). Secondly, regular coordination meetings were held to discuss and resolve any ambiguities or discrepancies in the data. Finally, conducting a collaborative review process, during which each researcher cross-checked and verified the transcriptions and translations, helped the researchers identify and correct potential errors and ensured that the final transcripts were accurate and reliable. The collected data were coded accordingly and sorted into categories and themes (Saldaña, 2021). Use was made of the thematic data analysis method (Patton, 2001). The findings, which only pertained to the Tshivenda speech community, cannot be generalised broadly due to the limited number of participants. The interview sessions were initially scheduled for 45 minutes; however, the sessions with the youths lasted approximately 35 minutes, while those with the elders extended beyond an hour. This discrepancy was due to the necessity of providing detailed explanations for each

question posed to the elders, which prolonged the interviews. In total, the researchers transcribed 3,965 words from these sessions.

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) and Walliman (2011) explain that a sample is a selection of a group from the population from whom the researcher collects data. The researchers used a purposive sampling technique because it allowed them to include only individuals of interest, who gave primary information since they were familiar with the phenomenon of interest (Nieuwenhuis, 2011). Data cleaning involved several key steps: first, the researchers reviewed all the collected data for completeness and consistency and addressed any missing or inconsistent information. The accuracy was verified by cross-referencing transcripts with original recordings to correct transcription errors. Redundancies were removed, and personal identifiers were anonymised to protect participants' confidentiality. Furthermore, the data were standardised to ensure uniformity in format and terminology, and any inconsistencies were resolved through validation with additional sources. The researchers established clear criteria for the sample selection aligned with the study's objective, employing purposeful or criterion sampling to identify participants with relevant experience or knowledge. The recruitment was conducted according to these criteria, ensuring that the sample reflected the diversity of the research subject. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, meaning that no new significant themes emerged. All the participants were selected purposively for semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews. Lastly, the participants gave their approval in writing and verbally before the interview procedures began. In this way, verbal consent was obtained from the older participants who were illiterate. To validate the data, the researchers tested the responses by comparing answers from different participants about the same phenomenon.

## 5. Findings and discussion

Before delving into the findings and discussion of the study, it is essential to provide a foundational understanding of the research context and objectives. This study aimed to explore the indigenous language preservation of the Tshivenda speech community in South Africa Limpopo province. By analysing the data collected from the Tshivenda speech community in South Africa, this research endeavoured to shed light on indigenous language preservation. The subsequent sections presented the findings derived from the data, followed by a discussion of these results, the study's objective, and the existing literature. This approach examined the research questions comprehensively and contributed valuable insights to the field. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the collected data.

### 5.1. Preservation of the Indigenous Tshivenda language

The findings of the current study showed that these indigenous Tshivenda forms of address among Vhavenda speakers are used as a means of preserving Tshivenda as a language for the sake of future generations. Indigenous Tshivenda forms of address include *nndaa!* ("Hello!" by men), *aa!* ("Hello!" by women), as well as kinship terms to reflect their status among Vhavenda speakers, such as *makhadzi* (aunt) and *malume* (uncle). In addition, there are praising names: when Vhavenda meet traditional leaders, they bow down and start praising, saying "*iwe une wa ri i fai nda fa*" (*You who says die and I die*), to mention a few forms of Tshivenda greetings.

Unfortunately, some youth participants no longer value these forms of address. This is confirmed by a participant among the youths who stated that:

*"ndila ya kudavhidzanele kwao na malumelisele a Tshivenda zwi do nthusa nga mini? Musi muthu a tshi ya inthaviyu u shumilisa Luisimani ngauralo ndi vhone zwi na ndeme u divha Luisimane u fhirisa Tshivenda naho hu luambo Lwanga lwa damuni."*

("How does the proper way of greeting and speaking Tshivenda assist me? When a candidate goes to an interview, they interview the person using English. Thus, I see the importance of learning English, rather than my mother tongue").

To support this view, one of the youths stated that:

*"Ndi khou bva yunivesithi nahone ndo fhedza tshikolo, a thi humbuli ndi tshi iwala mulingo kana thesite nga Tshivenda, ho shuma Luisimane hothe ngauralo Luisimani lu bva phanda."*

("I come from a university, and I have completed my studies. I do not remember writing a test or examination using my mother tongue; all the assessments were written in English. Therefore, English is the only way").

This study discovered that no one can do that on their behalf if Tshivenda speakers do not use indigenous forms of address to preserve Tshivenda as a language. Thus, it is their duty as Vhavenda to preserve, protect, and practise these forms of address in their daily interactions so that their language can be preserved. In support of this point, the findings emphasised that some participants even used the Tshivenda idiom "*u nala tshau ndi u lafa*," which simply means that "to give up on what is yours is throwing it away." As stated by one of the elderly participants:

*"U nala tshau ndi u lafa. Honeha, ndi a tenda uri ndila ya kudavhidzanele kwa Tshivenda ndi ya ndeme ngauri ndi tshipida tsha luambo, mvelele na sialala. Ri wanana nga kha kudavhidzanele kwao kwa"*

*Tshivenḁa, nahone zwi ri vhulungela luambo na mvelele yashu sa Vhavenḁa U sa davhidzana nga ḁdila kwao zwi nga ita uri luambo lu sudzuluwe ngauri hu ḁo vha na u dzhenelela ha dziḁwe nyambo. Nga u tou angaredza, ḁdila kwao ya kudavhidzanele kwa Tshivenḁa i tea u vhulungwa na uri ḁi ya ndeme nga kha matshilo ashu nga maanḁesa kha u vhulungu luambo uri lu si sudzuluwe kana u fa.”*

(“To give up on what is yours is throwing it away; therefore, I agree that indigenous Tshivenḁa forms of address are useful because they form part of Tshivenḁa as a language, culture, and tradition, and it is through their usage that the language can be preserved. We identify each other through the use of forms of address, so failure to maintain them can lead to a language shift, as we may adopt different ways of addressing each other. All in all, indigenous Tshivenḁa forms of address should be used as a means of preserving the Tshivenḁa language, and they are important in our daily lives”).

Similarly, another elderly participant averred that:

*“ḁdila kwao ya kudavhidzanele ya Tshivenḁa ḁi ya ndeme saizwi i tshipiḁa tsha Tshivenḁa sa luambo, lune arali hu sa khou vha na u shumiswa ha kudavhidzanele kwao kwa Tshivenḁa, maitele aya a nga fa lune mvelele yashu i ḁo kwamea nga ḁdila i si yavhuḁi saizwi ri nga si vhe na mvelele i si na ho luambo, na uri luambo lu nga fa kana u sudzuluwa fhedzi arali ḁdila ya kudavhidzele ya shumiswa zwavhuḁi, luambo lu nga vhulungea.”*

(“Forms of address are useful because they form part of Tshivenḁa as a language, so if they are not in use, they can die, and our culture can be affected negatively as we cannot have a culture without a language, and it is only through the use of these forms of address that the Tshivenḁa language can be preserved without any challenge”).

The findings of this study showed that, indeed, these indigenous Tshivenḁa forms of address should be used to preserve language, and one of the ways of maintaining the Tshivenḁa language is by using these forms of address more often and without compromise. The study concurs with the findings of Sengani (2008) and Sebola (2021), who affirm that when a royal leader appears, traditionally, everyone bows with their heads nearly touching the floor and with their hands clasped in front of them. They express words of praise in unison for several minutes (*vha khou kumela* or *u lvvha* in Tshivenḁa). In their praises, they may proclaim “*muponda wa miokhwane*” (“killer of *miokhwane*”), “*ḁdau ya ḁduna*” (“the male lion”), and “*tshivhaivhai*” (“lightning”). From a linguistic point of view, the lexical items that are used in greetings, such as “*Nndaa*,” “*Aa*,” and “*Khakhamela*,” will be lost if the use of these forms of address is diminished.

The findings of this study concurred with those of Mudau, Mandende, and Mushaathoni (2022), who aver that indigenous forms of address can only be maintained by being used daily, and through such daily use, the language is also maintained and preserved as these forms of address form part of the language and customs of any speech community. Failure to do so may be a precursor of its death as a language. Similarly, the findings of this study agree with Wierzbicka (2003), who contends that greeting is an important activity for humans as social creatures all over the world as a way of preserving language as a whole. Interlocutors cannot function without addressing activities at various points when meeting with others as they form part of any language, and using them preserves language. At the base of this study, there is language, culture, and communication, so without language, there will be no greetings, and in culture, as an inherent element of language, greetings are understood and practised.

## 5.2. Social media as a site for preserving the Tshivenḁa language using forms of address

According to the findings of this study, the young generation uses social media frequently, and they spend much of their time socialising. Therefore, the findings of this study highlighted that there is a need for more Tshivenḁa-medium groups across different social media platforms designed to encourage the use of Tshivenḁa forms of address among the young. In this way, the Tshivenḁa language can be preserved easily because the young generation will get used to it and use it more often by practising its forms of address while communicating with each other and other community members. Accordingly, they will maintain and preserve Tshivenḁa as a language. One of the youth participants shared that:

*“Vhaswa ḁi vathu vhane vha ḁvesa kha nga zwileludzi zwa vhudavhidzani ḁuvha na ḁuvha lune u vha hone ha zwigwada kha zwileludzi zwa vhudavhidzi hune ha ḁo vha hu khou ambiwa Tshivenḁa, zwi nga thusa vhukuma u vhulunga kudavhidzanele kwa Tshivenḁa na Tshivenḁa tshone tshine sa luambo na uri vhaswa vha ḁo vha vha khou shumisa kana luambo nga ḁdila yone.”*

(“The young generation spends a great deal of time on social media socialising; therefore, having groups that use Tshivenḁa for communication purposes on those social media platforms will help the youth to use indigenous forms of address properly as a way of preserving and preserving the Tshivenḁa language for the current and future generations”).

The above view was supported by the elders as one of the mentioned that;

*“Vhaswa vha musalauno a vha tsha fana na musaluḁa saizwi vha tshi dzula vha kha ḁhingo dzavho vhunzhi ha zwifhinga. Zwi nga vha khwine nga maanḁa arali ndeme ya malumelise a Tshivenḁa hu u itela u vhulungu luambo na mvelele zwa Vhavenḁa zwa anḁadzwa kha zwileludzi zwa vhudavhidzani ha nnyi na*

*nnyi hune havha vhaswa vha tswesa hone, khamusi vhavhili vhararu vha nga zwi vhona nahone vha zwi dzhiela n̄ha vha kona u tevhedza maitete a Tshivenda u itela u vhulunga luambo na mvelele yashu.”*

(“The contemporary youth exhibit different behavioural patterns compared to previous generations, largely due to their pervasive use of smartphones. Consequently, utilising social media platforms where a significant portion of young people spend a substantial amount of time, could facilitate the dissemination of forms of address as a means of language preservation. By publishing these linguistic practices on such platforms, there is a potential for at least a portion of the youth to engage with and adopt the correct Tshivenda addressing norms, thereby contributing to the preservation of both the language and cultural heritage”).

The findings of the current study are congruent with those of Yang (2010), who opines that forms of address are significant for effective and successful communication and have long been considered a very salient indicator of the status of social relationships. Yang (2010) further states that one can use different forms of address to show respect or fondness, praise, show love, insult, or depreciate other people, among other functions, and in this way, forms of address form part and parcel of a language and its preservation. Furthermore, Ruddock (2017) comments that most youths spend much of their time on social media platforms; therefore, one should consider using those particular social communication platforms to get their attention. By using social media in Tshivenda, the youth can use the language more often without compromising it, which may guarantee the preservation of the language for future generations (Ruddock, 2017).

### **5.3. The interface of traditional schools and forms of address in preserving the Tshivenda language and culture**

According to the findings of this study, taking the youth to traditional schools may help them know who they are and make them proud of their culture. In traditional schools, young boys are taught how to behave when they grow up, and young girls are taught how to be future wives and mothers. They spend almost a month using Tshivenda indigenous forms of address and other cultural practices, which means that Tshivenda is being preserved in the process. Another important aspect taught in these traditional schools is respect, which is integral to greetings (Zwane, 2024). One of the elderly participants declared that:

*“U tevhezwa ha zwithu zwothe zwa sialala na u isa vhana ngomani dza sialala zwi nga ita uri vhaswa vha didivhe, ngauralo vha nga si hangwe vhubvo havho, lune kudavhidzanele kwao kwa Tshivenda na luambo zwi vha zwo vhulungea nga ndila yo leluwaho.”*

(“Practising all the traditional initiations and taking children to traditional schools can help with making the new generation know who they are, and in so doing, they cannot forget their origin; therefore, the Tshivenda language can be maintained and preserved easily through the use of these forms of address”).

The findings further revealed that taking children to traditional schools may play a substantial role in preserving the Tshivenda language through the use of forms of address and in helping to remind them who they are and where they come from.

Another elderly participant noted:

*“Zwikolo zwa sialala ndi one maitete ane a nga ita uri na vhothe vhatu vhatuku na vhaulwane vha shumise luambo nga ndila yone musi vha tshi lumelisa, u vhidza vhatu na zwinwevho. Sa tsumbo, murundu wa ima vhothe vhaulwane na vhatuku vha tswa haningei, vakalaha na vhanna vhaulwane vha vha khou shumisa Tshivenda u davhidzana na vhatu vhothe lune na vhana vhatuku vha do ita zwenezwo lune luambo lu do dzula lwo vhulungea misi yothe.”*

(“Traditional schools are the proper way to make young and old people meet and use the language properly. If the initiation for men takes place, both youths and elders spend much of their time there using proper Tshivenda. Thus, the young ones will automatically do so, which means that the language is preserved and maintained through the use of forms of address”).

The study's findings suggest that enrolling the youth in traditional schools can enhance their cultural identity and pride. These institutions educate young boys on adult behaviour and young girls on their roles as future wives and mothers while immersing them in Tshivenda forms of address and cultural practices for nearly a month. This approach contributes to the maintenance and preservation of the Tshivenda language.

### **5.4. Radio and TV programmes in Tshivenda as a means of preserving Indigenous Tshivenda forms of address**

The findings of the study revealed that the use of forms of address on television and radio programmes could catalyse the preservation of the Tshivenda language and culture. Using forms of address on TV and radio may help the youth, in particular, to understand their importance. As such, the indigenous forms of the address may be used properly, and the Tshivenda language may be preserved. One of the youth participants stated that:

*“Hu tea u vha na mbekanyamushumo nga kha radio na thelevishini dzine dza amba nga ndeme ya kudavhidzanele kwa Tshivenda. Vhaswa vha tea u d̥ɪtongisa nga luambo lwavho ngauralo luambo lu ɔo vhulungea nga n̥hani ha kudavhidzanele kwao kwa Tshivenda misi yothe.”*

(“There should be some programmes on radio and television that talk about forms of address and their importance. The youth should be proud of their language and use it often unless stated otherwise. Then, the Tshivenda language will be preserved through the use of these forms of address”).

This study's findings showed a noticeable shift in language use among the younger generation, who are increasingly influenced by digital communication and are less engaged in traditional forms of address. This shift is impacting the transmission of Tshivenda linguistic norms. Importantly, social media platforms have emerged as a significant medium for language preservation. Efforts to promote Tshivenda forms of address on these platforms could reach a broader audience and potentially encourage the younger generation to adopt and maintain traditional addressing practices.

One of the elderly participants shared that:

*“Mafhungo o raliho ndi a ndeme kha rine sa Vhavana, fhedzi a tea u ambiwa ngao kha radio ɔuvha l̥inwe na l̥inwe u itela uri vhaswa vha kone u ɔivha n̥dila yone ya kudavhidzanele kwa Tshivenda, zwi tshi katela kulumelisele, nga n̥dila ine vha tea u vhidza ngayo muthu muhulwane na muṭuku nga ṭhonipho. Izwo zwi ɔo thusa uri vha kone u vhona uri luambo lwavho ndi lwavhuḍi nahone vha tea u lu vhulunga u itela muraho u ɔaho.”*

(“This aspect is very important, but it must form part of radio programmes daily for the young generation to comprehend the indigenous Tshivenda forms of address fully, which include greetings, how you address elderly people and people of your own age with respect in Tshivenda. It will help them to see that they have a beautiful language, and they have to maintain and preserve it for future generations”).

The findings underscore the need for strategic efforts to integrate traditional Tshivenda forms of address into modern communication channels, mainly social media. As digital platforms become central to youth interaction, leveraging these mediums to promote and normalise traditional linguistic practices could enhance their adoption among younger generations. This approach not only aids in preserving the Tshivenda language but also supports the continuity of cultural values associated with these forms of address. To preserve the Tshivenda language and its associated cultural norms effectively, bridging the gap between traditional practices and contemporary communication methods is imperative.

The findings of this study can have significant implications for the advancement of the ethnopragmatic theory by incorporating indigenous forms of address into its framework. The ethnopragmatic theory examines the interplay between language use and cultural norms within specific speech communities and has traditionally focused on widely studied languages and contexts. This study extends the theoretical boundaries by highlighting the nuanced roles Indigenous forms of address play in preserving cultural identity and social structure within the Tshivenda speech community.

By systematically analysing how indigenous language is used and potentially preserved, this study offers empirical insights that can refine and broaden the ethnopragmatic theory. It provides a detailed understanding of how language use reflects and reinforces social hierarchies and cultural values in less frequently examined linguistic contexts. This contribution enhances the theoretical model by integrating diverse linguistic practices and underscores the importance of considering indigenous languages and their unique sociolinguistic phenomena.

The incorporation of these findings into the ethnopragmatic theory could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of how indigenous communities navigate language and cultural preservation in contemporary settings. It would also encourage further research into other speech communities, thereby expanding the theory's applicability and relevance across a wider array of linguistic and cultural contexts.

Conducting a study of language preservation through indigenous forms of address offers several advantages. Firstly, it provides a nuanced understanding of how traditional linguistic practices contribute to preserving the cultural identity and social cohesion within a community. By focusing on forms of address, researchers can gain insights into the subtleties of respect, hierarchy, and relational dynamics that are integral to language use. This approach enriches the understanding of language preservation and highlights the cultural significance embedded in everyday interactions. Additionally, such studies can inform effective strategies for promoting and revitalising endangered languages by illustrating how traditional practices can be adapted to contemporary contexts, including digital media.

However, there are also notable disadvantages to this approach. One challenge is the potential for the study to overlook broader linguistic dynamics, focusing too narrowly on forms of address at the expense of other crucial aspects of language use and preservation. This narrow focus might not fully capture the complexity of language loss and revitalisation. Furthermore, studying forms of address requires careful consideration of the context and cultural sensitivity, as misinterpretations or oversimplifications can lead to inaccurate conclusions about cultural

practices. Additionally, the reliance on specific forms of address may not address the overall vitality of the language or account for the influence of external factors such as globalisation and language contact.

The study of language preservation, particularly through indigenous forms of address, contributes to the broader field of intercultural communication by enhancing an understanding of how language reflects and maintains cultural identity and social norms. By examining how traditional linguistic practices are used and adapted across different contexts, such as digital media, this research provides insights into the mechanisms through which cultures communicate their values and interact with others. It also highlights the challenges and strategies involved in preserving linguistic diversity amidst the globalising influences, offering valuable perspectives for fostering effective intercultural dialogue and promoting mutual respect among diverse cultural groups.

## 6. Conclusions

Through the empirical data, the study accomplished its objective of exploring the importance of the preservation of the Tshivenda language and culture through the usage of indigenous forms of address by the Tshivenda speech community. The findings exemplified the importance of language preservation through the usage of Indigenous forms of address because, through them, Vhavaṇḁas identify each other, respect each other, praise, and acknowledge their social ranks, among other things. Without these forms of address, the Vhavaṇḁa speech community would be unable to speak politely or respectfully. The findings further revealed that preserving the Tshivenda language through the use of indigenous forms of address may help future generations as they may know the proper ways of greeting in Tshivenda, and they may also pass them on to the next generation. Accordingly, they may preserve and maintain the Tshivenda language fully for future generations. The findings showed that preserving one's language and culture through the use of forms of address helps to maintain a sense of identity and belonging, which can contribute to one's overall well-being, self-esteem, and the sustainability of civilisation. Culture is not just a set of customs but a vital part of who people are as individuals and communities. Therefore, it is recommended that the importance of Tshivenda indigenous forms of address be promoted on television and radio so that the youth can learn about them to preserve the Tshivenda language and culture. Lastly, it is recommended that the Vhavaṇḁa should use their forms of address without shifting to other languages. The Tshivenda language will be preserved, as these forms of address are elements of the language and culture.

## 7. Limitations

Firstly, the current study is a sociolinguistic study, focusing on indigenous language preservation through the use of Tshivenda forms of address. Secondly, the study sampled a small size, so the findings cannot be generalised. Thirdly, interview questions can introduce subjectivity and bias, both on the part of the interviewers and the interviewees. Interviewers may inadvertently lead participants with their questions or interpret responses through their own biases, affecting the objectivity of the data collected. Fourthly, interview questions may not always elicit in-depth or comprehensive responses. Participants may provide superficial answers if the questions are not sufficiently open-ended or probing, potentially limiting the richness of the data. Lastly, the variability in responses due to differing interpretations of questions by participants can make it challenging to compare and analyse the data systematically. This variability can affect the consistency and reliability of the findings.

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