Linguistic Features of Tshivenḓa Language

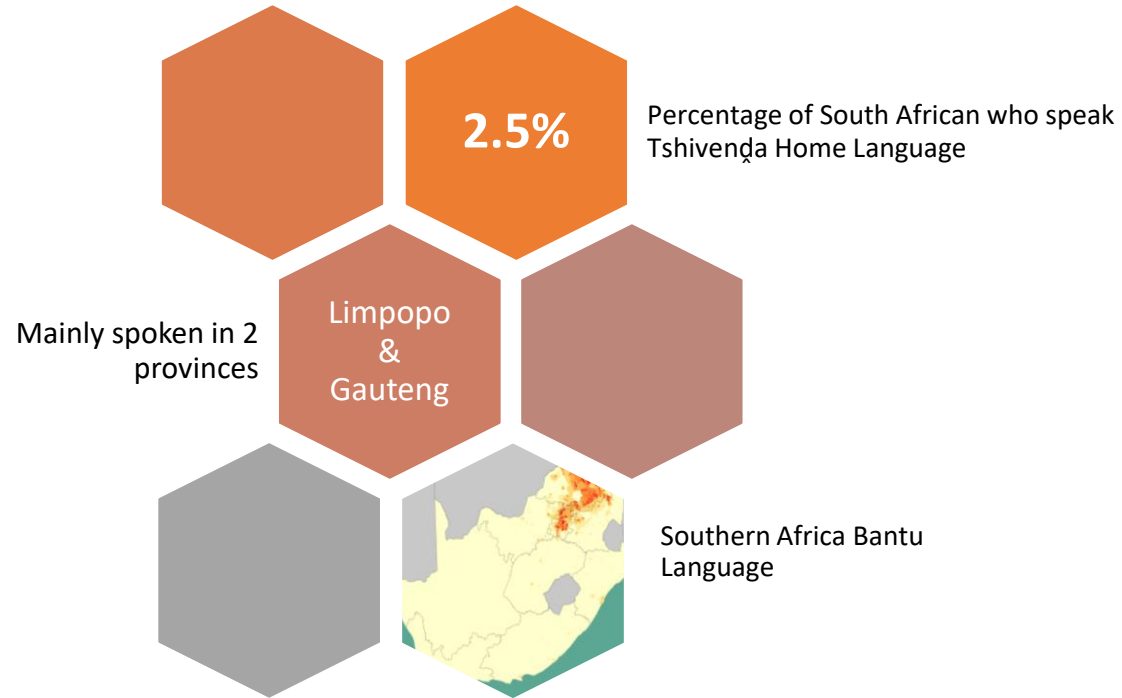**Presentation by:** *Thivhu Nethengwe*

EARLY GRADE READING BENCHMARKS

- Origin of Tshivenḓa as a Language
- Distinguishing aspects of Tshivenḓa
- Similarities between Tshivenḓa and other languages
- Learning to read in Tshivenḓa

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Tshivenḓa Demographics

2.5%

Percentage of South African who speak Tshivenḓa Home Language

Limpopo & Gauteng

Mainly spoken in 2 provinces

Southern Africa Bantu Language

Sources: Statistics SA, Census 2022
https://southafrica-info.com/arts-culture/11-languages-south-africa/

Linguistic Origin of Tshivenḓa

"The sequence of linguistic changes was complete by the time the Singo established the Venḓa nation in the 18th century"

Huffman, T. N. (2022). *The origins of Tshivenḓa: an archaeological challenge to historical linguistics*

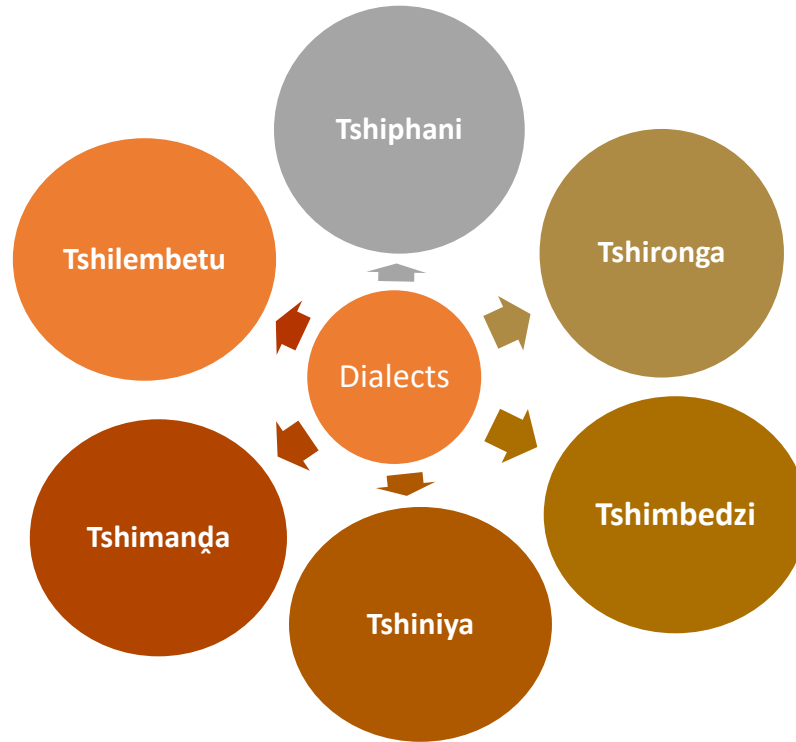| It is interesting to note that Tshivenda is related to the Niger and Congo languages like most African Languages | Tshivenḓa is also related to Kalanga Language which is spoken in Botswana and Zimbabwe. | Vhavenda are predominantly located in the Northern part of South Africa, Limpopo Province Venda and parts of Zimbabwe | Though apartheid tried to group us there, Vhavenḓa are now found all over South Africa and abroad |

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Tshivenḓa Dialects

Tshiphani has been elevated from a dialect to the standard language of Tshivenḓa

Tshiphani

Tshironga

Tshilembetu

Dialects

Tshimbedzi

Tshimanḓa

Tshiniya

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Reading Benchmarks for African Languages

Agglutinating languages

- Tshivenḓa is an agglutinative code with a very complex morphology and its orthography makes extensive use of diacritic symbols for the representation of speech sounds foreign to English
  - *Ammon 2006; Meshtri 2002; Van Wyk 1966*
- Like all Southern Africa Bantu languages, it has complex morphological structures (internal structure of words) comprising roots to which several prefixes and suffixes are added to convey semantic and syntactic information
  - For example: Musidzana: Kusidzanyana, Luṋowana compared to ṋowa and Ḽiṋowa
- In contrast, English and Afrikaans do not have complex morphology and are classified as mildly inflectional or analytic languages

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Reading Benchmarks for African Languages

LANGUAGE STRUCTURE

DISTINGUISHING ASPECTS

Letter sound transparency

- Roman alphabet
- Transparent (mostly easy to read)
  - Letter-sound relationship regular
  - No click sounds

sound /b/ is always represented by the letter b, as in 'bala' and 'bada'.

sound /f/ is always represented by the letter f, as in 'funza' and 'funa'.

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Word length

- Tshivenḓa more disjunctive orthography than conjunctive
  - "Vho vhuya mulovha"
- Tshivenḓa and Xitsonga were closely aligned to the Sesotho languages in terms of word length, with words being on average 4.07 and 4.29 letters long, respectively.

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Vowels in Tshivenḓa Languages

5 Vowels

a: ana

i: ila

e: ela

o: ola

u: umbula

Tshivenḓa has only the five "pure" vowel sounds like Latin or Spanish or many other languages

Semi Vowels in Tshivenḓa

There is an emerging argument that the following should not be semi-vowels, but intensive research needs to be done on their position as they also have their place in phonetics.

W

- Wanga, Wawe, Wela

Y

- Yone, Yavho. Ya

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Complex Consonant letter sounds

- Complex consonant sequences in Tshivenḓa include

ng dz vh kh ṱh tsh

  - These are among the 18 most common consonants in Tshivenḓa

Diacritics

- Afrikaans, Sepedi and Tshivenḓa are the only languages in South Africa that use diacritics

- Tshivenḓa has 4 dental consonants with a circumflex accent below the letter

    (ḓ, ḽ, ṋ, ṱ) and an overdot for velar nasal **(ṅ)**

- As opposed to their plain alveolar counterparts **(d l n t)** with diacritics changes the word meaning
    - Example "tamba" versus "ṱamba"

Ṅ Ḓ Ḽ Ṋ Ṱ ṅ ḓ ḽ ṋ ṱ

Tshivenḓa Sounds

- uses mostly labials and labiodentals

    f fh v vh bv pf pfh zw m

- diacritics as

    ḓ ḽ ṅ ṱ

- aspirated sounds as in

    kh   ph   th   ṱh

- ejectives as in

    k p t t

- nasals as in

    m n

- and other sounds like

  x s sh sw z zh dzh h l r tsh

Phonology (sound system)

- Tshivenḓa is comprised of mainly of V and CV syllables or variations of complex consonants preceding the vowel (CCV),
    - Example - the first syllable in *swika*
  - English (20) and Afrikaans (15) have many vowels
- Tshivenḓa has complex consonant systems, with consonants with various manners of articulation
  - including plain, implosive, and ejectives
- Additionally, tone (pitch variation on the nucleus of a syllable) is used phonemically (changes the word meaning)
  - Example: ṱhoho, dala, mala

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Implications on learning to read in Tshivenḓa

- Long consonant sequences
  - need to be processed visually as well as phonologically
  - Requires many practice opportunities of encountering learners in single words and words in extended text to map them orthographically so that they are easily and quickly accessed during reading.
  - Hence the syllabus and the DBE recommended progression is from simple to complex.

- Complex consonant letter sounds
  - Inadequate phonics instruction in these letter-sounds will hamper reading development.
  - If children have difficulty recognising digraphs, they will struggle to read texts at a fairly basic level.

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Reading Benchmarks for African Languages

Learning Diacritics

- might slow reading acquisition because children have more phonics to learn

- finer-grained visual perception is required to notice the diacritics, which may also take children longer to master initially

- digraphs and trigraphs are visually more complicated to recognise than single letters for young readers and would therefore typically be introduced later in phonics programs
  - The consonants **ng kh th nd nw ny tsh** are among the 18 most common consonants in Tshivenḓa so it would be difficult to delay their instruction

Thank you