



# Why it's getting easier to learn an African language

It's not necessary to keep the languages apart, so have fun and experiment by mixing things up



My smile does not end... my heart

A lovely reaction from a Starbucks employee as Tessa speaks Xhosa to him. (He said 'uncumo lwam alupheli' – my smile does not end.)

Photo: Supplied



By Tessa Dowling

Let's face it, most white people in South Africa can't speak or understand an African language. The figure for those who do is so low it's not even featured in Census data.

There are lots of reasons for this: the international clout of English, the perceived difficulty of African languages and the fact that urban black people speak English so fluently and elegantly – so why should white people patronise them by haltingly mispronouncing a few syllables of their languages?

Apart from the fact that only 9.6% of South Africa's population speak English as a first language – which makes learning one of the bigger first languages seem, well, at the very least a polite thing to do – wouldn't we like to have fun in each other's languages, to crack a joke, complain, like *n boer maak 'n plan* (a farmer makes a plan) kind of vibe?

And we no longer have to keep the languages apart, speaking either, say, pure English or pure Xhosa. We are free to dance and juggle with them together, cheek to cheek, cheekily!

And ... breaking news ... as someone who has studied African languages my whole professional life, I can tell you that African languages are getting easier to learn!

The other day I asked a Xhosa-speaking student of mine how she was feeling, and she answered "*Andikho happy*" (I am not happy). I tell my English- and Afrikaans-speaking students that, particularly in urban Xhosa, if you want to use an adjective about yourself in the negative you can just say *Andikho* and follow with the English, so: "*Andikho ready*" (I am not ready); "*Andikho angry*" (I am not angry). And don't bother right now about learning how to count in Xhosa; everyone uses English words for numbers, as in "*Iproblem eyiONE is that andikho ready*" (The ONE problem is that I am not ready).

Later, when you have mastered this urban form of the language, you certainly should learn all the beautiful words in African language as spoken in rural areas. But, for now, *thatha machance* (take a chance)! When you first start swimming in icy water you just stick your toe in, then you venture further and deeper until you abandon your friends drinking coffee on the rocks and become a fish.

If you spend time with TikTok (which I didn't until I realised what a treasure chest of urban Xhosa it was), the comments there can lift you out of your personal gloom about the country, spam phone calls, the petrol price, general exhaustion, problems with spouses, lovers and children, self-doubt and impending poverty – because young Xhosa speakers express all of those potentially negative things in a mixture of English and Xhosa that is truly funny and actually positive. Again and again I watch Kuhle Hlo-

ma's wonderful "From the bottom of my heart, *ndidiniwe* (I am tired)" because I find her weary expression and repetition of *ndidiniwe* paradoxically energising! She gives her upfront and personal takes on life in a mixture of English and Xhosa, like "*litshomi zam* will have to forgive me, but *andizumyeka, andizukwazi*" (My friends will have to forgive me, but I won't dump him/her, I just can't).

Emeritus Professor Raj Mesthrie and his student Lulu Mfazwe-Mojapelo discovered that young urban Xhosa speakers create Xhosa verbs from a whole range

of English ones by just suffixing *-isha* (study-*isha*, continue-*isha*, bother-*isha*) and prefixing *ubu-* to form sentences like *ubu-clever bakhe* (his/her cleverness) and *ubu-antisocial bakhe* (his/her being antisocial), while in 2011 I found out

that most Xhosa speakers surveyed in Cape Town did not use the Xhosa words for "left" and "right" (*ekhohlo* and *ekunene*), and "stress" was always just *istress!* There's actually loads of other scientific linguistic research showing that urban African language speakers use a lot of English.

All of this does not mean you shouldn't learn standard Xhosa (or one of our other beautiful languages) – but if what you need is a way to make the transition from English to Xhosa easier, then now is the time – *ke nako*, to use a Sotho phrase! *Jumpa! Uzoba* right! You will be okay!

Check out Tessa's online Xhosa courses on [www.skillfully.co.za](http://www.skillfully.co.za) **DM**

Tessa Dowling is a senior lecturer in Xhosa in the School of Languages and Literatures at the University of Cape Town.

Iproblem eyiONE is that andikho ready

Andikho ready



I Got Rhythm keeps ballet dancers on their toes  
Pages 22&23



The condition of our feet can tell us a lot about our health  
Page 24