

Absolute and partial false friends between isiZulu and isiXhosa of South Africa

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Even though people can communicate fluently, the development of 'false friends' has resulted in misunderstandings and misinterpretations among closely related tribal languages. Studies show that ethnic groups belonging to closely related tribes often share common languages, resulting in several comparable phrases. However, these phrases may have the same form but have different meanings in related languages. The primary focus of the study is to establish the existence of absolute false friends as well as partial false friends between the isiZulu and isiXhosa languages. The study further investigates the extent to which the existing absolute false friends and partial false friends affect mutual intelligibility among the speakers of isiZulu and isiXhosa. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and followed a case study design. Data were collected through interviews with 12 purposively selected participants who were isiZulu and isiXhosa speakers residing in Soshanguve Township, Pretoria. ATLAS.ti software was utilised for data analysis, with the study grounded in contrastive analysis theory. The results of the study revealed that absolute false friends and partial false friends exist between isiZulu and isiXhosa. The study further revealed that absolute and partial false friends between the two Nguni languages were more prevalent among speakers who were not proficient in both languages than among those who were proficient. Additionally, the results indicated that mutual intelligibility was negatively affected by these false friends, as some speakers failed to convey their intended messages, leading to misinterpretations by listeners. The study highlighted the presence of absolute and partial false friends, emphasising their potential impact on mutual intelligibility between the two languages.

Contribution: The study's findings are expected to enhance our understanding of the linguistic complexities of isiZulu and isiXhosa.

Keywords: absolute false friends; partial false friends; Nguni languages; ethnic groups; misunderstandings; common languages; polysemous words.

Introduction

The process of acquiring and modifying a language has a significant impact on the daily lives of diverse ethnicities and belief systems across the globe. The distinctive characteristics of human beings, which allow them to communicate using spoken, written and sign language, are an integral aspect of our strong desire to establish enduring connections, particularly within closely related communities (Jones 2023). Nevertheless, despite the human capacity for fluent communication, the development and progression of 'absolute false friends and partial false friends' have resulted in misunderstandings and misinterpretations among closely related tribal languages (Hamza 2007).

False friends are words in two languages that have a similar appearance or sound but differ significantly in some or all contexts, according to Abou-Khalil, Flanagan and Ogata (2018). Furthermore, according to Abou-Khalil et al. (2018), the complexity of learning false friends varies depending on whether they are partial or absolute false friends. The authors state that while partial false friends are polysemous words, one of which has the meaning of a false friend – others are true cognates. In contrast, absolute false friends have entirely different meanings in both languages. As a result, partial false friends can act as either true or false friends, depending on the situation. According to a recent study by Abu-Snoubar et al. (2024), false friends can be divided into two groups. Absolute and partial false friends are the two categories into which the authors divided false friends. The definition of an absolute false friend given by Abou-Khalil et al. (2018) is comparable to the definition of an absolute false friend.

Studies have demonstrated that ethnic groups belonging to closely related tribes tend to have common languages, resulting in sharing several comparable phrases. These words may have

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identical meanings or varying interpretations for the user (Fought 2006). An example of such ethnic groups that belong to closely related tribal languages is the Nguni group. According to Maake (2009), the Nguni languages are a group of Bantu languages spoken in southern Africa (mainly South Africa, Zimbabwe and Eswatini) by the Nguni people. Maake identifies the Nguni languages as isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele and Siswati. The article focusses on absolute and partial false friends specifically within isiZulu and isiXhosa, two Nguni languages. These languages were chosen because they co-exist in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Gauteng. Additionally, the multilingual nature of South Africa makes it essential to master language usage to avoid misunderstandings, as many words are spelt similarly but may differ in meaning. Therefore, identifying these absolute and partial false friends and raising awareness among language users is crucial for accurate and effective communication between isiZulu and isiXhosa speakers.

According to Castro, Bonanata and Rosa (2018), false friends are terms that appear similar in multiple languages and are related to each other but have different meanings in each language. Similarly, Molina (2011) defines false friends as false cognates, which are words that have the same form but distinct meanings in related languages. The presence of semantic false friends in language translation might have ramifications for communication, as discussed by Dominguez and Nerlich (2002). The aim of their study is to examine the semantic structures in different European languages (English, Spanish, French and German) that underlie false friends, particularly semantic false friends. The authors claim that although semantic false friends have the same etymological origin, one can still identify semantic relations, even though their meanings vary depending on the language.

Roseline (2023:1) declares that false friends have been studied among foreign languages (French and English, French and Spanish, English and Spanish, etc.). Roseline further reveals that false friends were also studied among Indigenous languages and foreign languages (Roman and Swahili), but few studies have been conducted among African languages on the subject. Among the few studies is the study conducted by Gouws, Prinsloo and De Schryver (2004) that focussed on the false friends between Afrikaans and Dutch. Another study was conducted by Uchechukwa (2011), and it focussed on false friends between Spanish and English. A recent study conducted by Tshovhewaho (2024) focussed on the false friends between Tshivenda and Xitsonga. In the South African context, while several studies have been conducted on false friends between French, English and other regionally spoken languages in linguistics, investigations have overlooked the absolute false friend and partial false friend comparison between the isiZulu and isiXhosa languages. Hence, this study presents a chance to offer a well-supported summary and bridge the existing knowledge gap, considering the limited research attention devoted to the lexico-semantic conceptualisation of absolute false friends and partial false friends between the isiZulu

and isiXhosa languages. To achieve this goal, the article aims to answer the following research questions: (1) *Which absolute false friends and partial false friends exist between isiZulu and isiXhosa?* and (2) *How do the existing absolute false friends and partial false friends affect mutual intelligibility between the speakers of the two languages?*

Theoretical framework

The contrastive analysis (CA) theory guided this investigation. According to Mair (2023), CA is the systematic examination of two languages to identify their structural distinctions and similarities. According to the CA, learners tend to find elements that resemble the speaker's first language (L1) easier to understand, while those that differ pose more challenges. Al-Khresheh (2013) asserts that the foundation of CA lies in the idea that second language (L2) learners typically transfer the formal aspects of their L2 utterances. Learners are particularly inclined to incorporate habits from their mother tongue into their L2 speech. Therefore, transfer is a crucial component of language learning at all levels. According to Al-Rickaby (2023), there are two versions of CA: the strong and the weak. The strong version refers to complex areas of the mother tongue that are predicted by comparing L1 and L2. Al-Rickaby (2023) explains that these areas of contrast will subsequently serve as the foundation for educational teaching materials. In contrast, the weak form of CA acknowledges that while a learner's native language and the target language may differ, it does not claim that this interference is the sole source of errors.

Language transfer can be broadly classified into two categories: positive and negative, according to Gass and Selinker (2001). Positive transfer, according to Gass and Selinker, produces accurate utterances and promotes language learning. On the other hand, negative transfer yields inaccurate results and deviates from the L1. Al-Khresheh (2013) notes that when two similar languages diverge, four different kinds of divergences emerge. They are production, misinterpretation, underproduction and overproduction. Contrastive analysis is relevant in the context of this study because isiZulu and isiXhosa share similarities, which can lead to similar words having different meanings and sending unintended messages to language users. Therefore, despite the similarities between isiZulu and isiXhosa, there are absolute false friends as well as partial false friends that could result in misunderstandings between speakers of both languages. Consequently, misinterpretation is the most significant and applicable type of divergence within CA.

Literature review

Nguni languages

Nguni languages consist of the isiZulu, isiXhosa, Siswati and isiNdebele and are part of the Bantu languages of Southern Africa. Conducting a study on the classification of false friends and cognates in the Nguni languages requires an

understanding of how the languages are constructed. Govender (2006) highlights how the articulation of Nguni languages (isiZulu, isiXhosa, Siswati and isiNdebele) is dependent on the breathy voice of the speaker with some consonants nasalised while some are pre-nasalised. These languages are tonal languages and pitch variations are used to distinguish the meanings of words. Danesi (2022) posits that Nguni dialects share similar sounds because of the prime phenome between the two.

Zungu (1999) conducted a study on the lexical comparisons between Siswati and isiZulu. The statistical results obtained by Zungu after an analysis of 100 words commonly used in everyday life showed that there are 92 shared words between isiZulu and Siswati. Words such as 'khulu, inyoni, mnyama, inja, oma, indlebe, umhlaba, umlilo, gcwala and hlanu' were common between both languages. A later study by Govender (2006) also noted the words shared between the Nguni languages, which include Siswati, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. These findings reveal a close relationship exists between languages, where false friends and cognates can easily create confusion. The findings further reveal that the Nguni languages share borrowed terms and speakers of these languages are inclined to borrow from each other. It is important to find out what causes this phenomenon.

Language comprehensibility

Comprehensibility involves speech intelligibility and language proficiency, which results from the acquisition of competencies in the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic aspects of a language (Jung 2010). Suzuku and Kormos (2019) consider comprehensibility as the speech intelligibility and fluency essential for second language acquisition. It reflects the speed with which a listener can understand the intended messages. It focusses on the meaning. The pronunciation of the first language can be different from that of the second language, and it is important to understand this factor in multicultural communication (Jung 2010). Pronunciation and fluency are, therefore, important aspects of comprehensibility. Comprehensibility can assist in avoiding miscommunication by speakers of second languages and there is a need to learn varieties of speech sounds and styles. Jung (2010) argues that to attain comprehensibility, cultural competence and speech act functioning are needed. This can be achieved through intercultural learning, which increases intercultural competencies and fluency in a language.

Isaacs and Trofimovich (2012:476) argue that 'comprehensibility is congruent with the instructional goal of helping learners achieve intelligible pronunciation'. This makes it relevant to the study as it is important to assess learners' intelligibility when communicating in a second language, and this can determine their ability to detect false friends and cognates. The comprehensibility of a second language is affected by learners' ability to understand accent inflexions. This may cause misunderstandings when false friends and cognates are present.

Cognates and false friends in Nguni languages

Though important, the classification of true false friends and cognates has been an elusive exercise for many researchers in African languages, particularly for Nguni languages. The lack of a classification framework has not aided in the documentation of false friends and cognates. This has led researchers to take different approaches to classifying false friends and cognates. Moss (1992:158) classified false friends following a criterion that took into consideration the following aspects: (1) word length; (2) number of word differences between Spanish and English; (3) proportional difference; (4) part of speech; (5) whether the final letters are the same or different; (6) the number of vowel differences; (7) the number of consonant differences and (8) specific letter differences. This methodology adopted by Moss (1992) had a good measure of precision compared to the one adopted by Pinazo (1997), where the researcher collected 1800 potentially misleading words and categorised them into four groups using the following criterion:

- phonetic false friends
- graphic false friends
- false friends derived from false friends
- semantic false friends.

Beltran (2006) highlighted the inaccuracy of the methodology adopted by Pinazo (1997) by arguing that Pinazo did not consider the relationships that exist between the categories and overlooked the connections that exist between semantic, morpho-syntactic and phonological words. These formations are seen in Nguni languages, where shared formations are evident in shared nouns such as 'umu' (describing a single entity). This, among several other shared nouns, highlights the need for a classification method that considers the relationship and connections between languages because of the closeness of singular plural correspondence. This allowed the accurate classification of false friends and cognates among the languages of interest in the current study.

Dlamini (2016) analysed the impact of Siswati L1 on the acquisition of academic English by tertiary students in Eswatini. The study provided a history of false friends and classifies Siswati as part of the Nguni group of the Bantu family of African languages. She further added that Nguni languages are subdivided into the Zunda and Tekela groups. These groups consist of isiZulu, isiXhosa, Siswati and isiNdebele, and thus, they tend to be mutually intelligible. Mutually intelligible languages can be understood as languages that, when spoken by individuals, there is an inherent understanding of the other language at a functional level (Gooskens & Swarte 2017). Each speaker can understand the other based on their knowledge of their language, even with minimal knowledge of the other language (Raeymaekers 2020).

Closely related languages are known to have an ancestral linkage; thus, these languages bear linguistic features, which include orthographically similar words. Chatzopoulou (2017) highlighted that unrelated languages may also share

linguistic features because of language contact, which results in lexical borrowing. This leads to the adoption and transformation of words from one language to another (Gooskens & Swarte 2017). There is thus an existence of a relationship between two of the languages of interest within the current setting, which is the Zunda/Thithiza dialect spoken in the Shiselweni region, a dialect with a strong resemblance to isiZulu. This is because of the language employing isiZulu sounds such as (th), (t) and (z), while other dialects use (ts), (dz) and (t). As such, the researcher would like to investigate cognates and false friends within Siswati and isiZulu, which are parts of the Nguni language clusters, to add to the current minimal knowledge that exists about these languages.

There are a few clear reasons for uncertainty regarding how using false friends is perceived. According to Wang and Hatoss (2023), there are two different types of sources: one that focusses on the speaker's behavioural traits and the other that emphasises the linguistic approach. As a result, the main problem is the inappropriate vocabulary choice brought on by the informality and immediacy of conversational exchanges. The phenomenon results from the natural tendency to use the most instantly recognisable vocabulary that comes to mind when speaking, acting as an uncontrollable and automatic mechanism to promote clear and efficient communication.

Research methods and design

According to Kumar (2015), research design is the overall approach to a topic that calls for the logical integration of several study components in order to ensure that the study's problem is addressed effectively. Additionally, a strong research design should clearly define the issue that needs to be resolved as well as the strategy for gathering empirical data (Creswell 2003).

The researchers decided to adopt a phenomenology study design because the methodology sheds light on the fundamental nature of the phenomenon. Phenomenological research design is a qualitative technique that focusses on investigating and comprehending persons' lived experiences to discover the essence and significance of those experiences. It tries to capture participants' subjective viewpoints and perceptions, aiming to describe things as they are observed rather than interpreting or analysing them considering current theories (Creswell 2013; Moustakas 1994). Through in-depth descriptions and analyses of participants' perspectives, this research design aims to reveal the core phenomena within the environment. Assumptions are set aside as participants' perceptions and interpretations of their environment are directly examined. Two Nguni languages (isiZulu and isiXhosa) in Pretoria were compared for absolute false friends and partial false friends using a descriptive phenomenological research design. This research design was important because it gave the researchers the opportunity to understand the nuanced ways in which speakers of various

languages perceived and interpreted lexical and semantic absolute false friends and partial false friends in everyday communication.

Participants

The information on the absolute population of Nguni people residing in Soshanguve is not available. Statistics South Africa (2011) revealed that, while the exact number of Nguni people living in Soshanguve, Pretoria is not readily available, the township's name 'Soshanguve' itself is an acronym for 'Sotho', 'Shangaan', 'Nguni' and 'Venda'. The sample size for this study was 12 purposively selected participants with a distribution of six participants per language set. All the participants were residing in Soshanguve Township in Pretoria. While the sample size is small, it is judged enough for the exploratory nature of the research, which attempts to investigate the lexical and semantic links between the two Nguni languages in Pretoria. The use of 12 participants ensures a manageable yet diversified representation of the language communities under consideration. This sample size finds a balance between gaining rich, in-depth insights from individual participants and ensuring data collection and analysis capability. The research was intended to provide preliminary insights into the lexical subtleties and potential absolute false friends and partial false friends among the isiZulu and isiXhosa-speaking people residing in Soshanguve, Pretoria. Their ages ranged from 30 to 60 years old, with six females and six males. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with native language speakers. The findings of this study cannot be generalised because of the small number of participants. Nonetheless, the authors think that from a qualitative perspective, this sample size should allow for data saturation. Dworking (2012) supports this view by stating that a large number of books, book chapters and articles offer advice and suggest that between five and fifty participants are sufficient.

Data analysis

The data analysis process began with the drawing of inferences and the generation of meanings, which were presented as reconstructions. Using ATLAS.ti software, the data analysis examined the characteristics and dimensions of absolute false friends and partially false friends in the two Nguni languages. The researchers continually examined the coding for consistency as they processed the data. This is because human coders are susceptible to weariness and are prone to error, as well as the fact that the researcher's comprehension of the categories and coding rules may somewhat alter with time, thereby increasing inconsistency (Baletto 2018; Linneberg & Korsgaard 2018). Baletto (2018) states that when each participant's transcript is reviewed, meaning units – words and sentences that convey similar meanings – are found and coded. The identification of themes results from determining the connections between the meaning units.

As a result, the researchers focussed on expressions that were consistent with absolute false friends and partial false friends

within the languages being studied and they only copied the study's major questions. The creation of a code, notes Saldaña (2021), is seen as a construct that captures a particular characteristic of the data and typically takes the shape of a word or brief phrase. Moreover, Vaismoradi, Turunen and Terese (2013) argue that coding is a procedure that helps break down large amounts of data into smaller, more manageable chunks. Deductive analysis was used to do this, and the categories and codes that were created were based on prior research and theories (Zhang & Wildemuth 2017).

The coding indicated which words, phrases or sentences were absolute false friends or partially false friends between the two languages (isiZulu and isiXhosa). Coding schemes assist the aggregation and comparability of study findings across many investigations, which is why Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate for their implementation. Guest, Kathleen and Namey (2012) further argue that to achieve reliability and rigour, researchers create codes to reflect recognised themes and apply them to the data that is checked concerning the codes created. Strauss and Corbin (1990) provided a thorough definition of open coding as a qualitative data analysis method inside the grounded theory framework in this key work. They refer to it as the first stage of coding, during which researchers create initial codes to classify and make sense of unprocessed data, establishing the groundwork for more in-depth study. Open coding was also employed to supplement this strategy when the volume of data was substantial, but the existing codebook did not contain any relevant codes.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology and Faculty Committee for Research Ethics – Humanities on 29 April 2021. The ethical clearance number is FCRE/APL/ STD/2021/09. Participants were provided with personalised assistance to address any confusion they had regarding their roles in the research. This support instilled confidence in the participants, enabling them to independently carry out their research while still having the option to seek guidance when needed. Consequently, one of the researchers generated consent documents that necessitated the participants' signature before commencing with the interview. Before signing the consent form, the researcher responsible for data collection provided the participants with comprehensive information regarding the implications and obtained their consent. Additionally, the participants were given the chance to inquire about any uncertainties they may have had. Participants were visited at their homes.

Results

The focus of the first research question is on the nature of absolute false friends and partial false friends that exist between isiZulu and isiXhosa. To address this research question, the participants provided a list of absolute false friends as well as partial false friends that exist between the two Nguni languages. These absolute false friends and

partially false friends were based on the participants' experiences and exposure to the two languages. Table 1 provides a list of absolute false friends between isiZulu and isiXhosa. This list of absolute false friends appears in Table 1 with several words across the chosen Nguni languages that may carry the exact spelling and, at times, have similar pronunciations but different meanings.

Absolute false friends used by isiZulu and isiXhosa language speakers

Table 1 presents a list of absolute false friends that were contributed by native speakers. It is crucial to acknowledge that although these absolute false friends exist, they are not the sole terms in both languages produced from the mutual influence between them. It is important to comprehensively understand each language's lexicon, grammar and context to avoid misunderstandings. The examples provided demonstrate how certain words may have identical forms across languages yet convey wholly distinct meanings, thus leading to communication difficulties. Based on the absolute false friends listed in Table 1, the research revealed that absolute false friends can significantly affect the level of understanding between isiZulu and isiXhosa, especially among those with limited proficiency in the languages. The extent of the impact of absolute false friends is governed by factors such as language fluency, contextual understanding, and the frequency and intensity of interactions with false friends. For example, proficient speakers who possess a deeper comprehension of

TABLE 1: List of absolute false friends listed by the native speakers of the two Nguni languages.

Words	IsiZulu	IsiXhosa
1. <i>Isichenene</i>	When someone urinates little blood, it is called bilharzia or schistosomiasis.	Something small in quantity. Very small drops of urination that come after one has finished urinating.
2. <i>Indodakazi</i>	Daughter.	The sister of one's husband.
3. <i>Isondo</i>	The wheel, sex.	The edge of a cloth.
4. <i>Ukuxoxa</i>	To talk, discuss, chat.	To discuss a matter in the court context.
5. <i>Isilima</i>	Stupid person, fool, idiot.	Disabled physically or a cripple.
6. <i>Isibongo</i>	Surname.	Clan name, praise poem
7. <i>Umsindo</i>	Noise.	To be angry.
8. <i>Igagu</i>	One who can sing and dance nice and with confidence. A person who is good at doing something nice or dances nice.	One who normally volunteers.
9. <i>Ukuqabula</i>	To kiss.	To discipline, taking out [<i>babalaas</i>], that is, the act of drinking alcohol in the morning after a heavy night of drinking.
10. <i>Ukuchachamba</i>	Looking fine based on your physical condition.	To have cracks.
11. <i>Intandane</i>	An orphan.	The most loved individual or someone who is spoilt.
12. <i>Ukuxukuxa</i>	Shaking something watery or scrubbing stain.	To brush teeth.
13. <i>Joja</i>	To poke something.	To smell.
14. <i>Ukuzuma</i>	To do something unexpectedly. Referring to an act of grabbing or capturing something quickly. Suddenness, ambush.	To rape.
15. <i>Ukuphambana</i>	Go in the opposite direction, to cross, the intersection.	To be mad.
16. <i>Ukugeza</i>	To take a bath.	To be silly or to be rude.

these languages can handle false friends more efficiently by relying on contextual cues and nonverbal communication. However, false friends can hinder communication and understanding among individuals who are not proficient in the language. The results emphasise the importance of enhancing linguistic awareness and language proficiency to overcome the difficulties of false friends.

Table 2 presents a list of partial false friends that were contributed by native speakers. It is crucial to acknowledge that although these partial false friends reveal that there are similarities in meaning that exist between the isiZulu and isiXhosa words when used in the same context by native speakers. In this case, the context plays an important role. The partial false names listed in Table 2 show that the different meanings of an isiZulu word, for example, may be the same as those of an isiXhosa word. However, some meanings of the same word may differ from their isiXhosa interpretations, which leads to the concept of partial false friends. It means that the meaning of these words does not differ 100% in both languages as they share a similar meaning in some contexts.

The role of false friends on mutual intelligibility between isiZulu and isiXhosa

The second research question focussed on how the existing absolute false friends and partial false friends affect mutual intelligibility between the speakers of isiZulu and isiXhosa. The study established that false friends can indeed impact the comprehensibility of speakers of isiZulu and isiXhosa. However, the extent of this impact has been shown to vary depending on the language proficiency of the speakers and the specific context of the communication. The study has confirmed that the influence of false friends is particularly strong for persons with lower language proficiency. Beginner speakers or individuals who have not yet acquired familiarity with the complexities and distinctions among various languages may readily mistake visually or phonetically similar words. This can result in misconceptions and misinterpretations, which can impact the overall clarity. This is apparent in the answers provided by the participants during the process of gathering data. During the interview, two specific questions were posed to assess the impact of false friends on comprehensibility and lexico-semantic similarities between the two Nguni languages. Codes were used to hide the identity of the participants.

TABLE 2: List of partial false friends listed by the native speakers of the two Nguni languages.

Words	isiZulu	isiXhosa
1. <i>Ukufutha</i>	To spray, to let out a deep breath	To let out a deep breath
2. <i>Ukudinwa</i>	To be angry, fatigued or to be tired	To be tired
3. <i>Ukukhuleka</i>	To greet, to pray or to anchor something with a rope on a certain object so that it does not escape	To anchor something with a rope on a certain object so that it does not escape
4. <i>Ukuncoma</i>	To recommend or to praise	To praise
5. <i>Umuthi</i>	Medicine or a tree	Any tree
6. <i>Imbiza</i>	Traditional medicine, a huge clay pot	Clay pot
7. <i>Ixoxo</i>	A crowd, a frog	A frog
8. <i>Ukulibala</i>	To be late or to forget	To forget
9. <i>Inyanga</i>	Traditional doctor, a month, moon	Month, moon

Is there any inconvenience caused by using false friends in isiZulu and isiXhosa?

'Yebo, if ngitshela umXhosa ukuthi ngiyntandane, yena uzocabanga ukuthi ngithi ngithandwa kakhulu kanti mina ngisho ukuthi angisenabazali. Loko kwenza ukuthi singaboni ngeso linye. [Yes, if I tell a Xhosa speaker that I am an orphan they might think that I said I am the most loved person. This might cause confusion.]' (ZM1, male, 42 years, Grade 8)

This remark emphasises the possibility of misunderstandings caused by false friends. The participant illustrates how the word 'intandane' can be confusing, underlining the significance of context:

'Kunalegama elithi inyanga, ngesizulu legama elithi inyanga lichaza ukuthi umuntu wesizulu owelaphayo like a traditional healer bese sekuthi nje ngesiXhosa, inyanga eh sazu ukuthi eh mhlampe a month for instance ukuphela kwenyanga. Eh enyinto ilentonto ekhanyisa ebusuku, inyenti ivame kuphuma ngabo September nasekuzolinywa. Kuvame kuthi bese lina kakhulu, bese iyaphuma ke inyanga lesike I symbolic kuthi sekutolinywa. [The word inyanga in isiZulu means a traditional doctor, but in isiXhosa it means a month as in month end. The word also refers to the moon that brings light at night.]' (ZF3, female, 42 years, Grade 11)

This response illustrates that the word 'inyanga' has different meanings in isiZulu and isiXhosa. It emphasises that in a specific context, 'inyang' can refer to a traditional healer in isiZulu, while in isiXhosa, it signifies a month or moon. The response also highlights the complexity of language complexities and the importance of understanding context to avoid misunderstandings.

Is it possible to differentiate between isiZulu and isiXhosa in terms of words that look similar but convey different messages?

The close relationship between the two Nguni languages sometimes makes distinguishing words and meanings difficult. Language influence and distortion constitute a real problem when learning a language that is closely related to a language one is already familiar with, and the stronger the resemblance between two languages, the more enormous the potential for confusion. The participants confirmed this:

'Akukho possible ukuthi unghlukanisa sometimes up until uyazi language. [It is not possible that you can distinguish sometimes up until you know the language.]' (ZF2, female, 28 years, Grade 12)

This firm belief, expressed by the isiZulu participant, is further supported by another isiZulu participant and the isiXhosa participants below:

'Akukho [It is not] possible, not unless you understand the meaning in context.' (SM2, male, 51 years, Grade 8)

'It is only possible uma wazi ukuthi bekukhulunywa ngani. [It is possible only if you know what was discussed.]' (SF3, female, 26 years, Grade 6)

Discussion of findings

The discussion of the findings is based on the data drawn from the data collected. It follows the outlined research

questions and focusses on the concepts of absolute false friends and partial false friends. The study specifically examines the absolute and partial false friends that exist between the two Nguni languages in South Africa. The concept of cross-linguistic similarities and their utilisation has a broad scope and aligns with the CA theory, which served as the theoretical framework for this study. The contrastive analysis theory is the systematic study of a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities. The findings of the study revealed that although there could be similar words between the two Nguni languages, in some cases, the semantic meaning of those words could differ; hence, there are absolute false friends between the two languages.

Participants from the two chosen Nguni languages emphasised the difficulties encountered by native speakers when confronting linguistic matters and variations between these closely related languages. The study acknowledged the existence of absolute false friends and partially false friends within the two languages. It was expected because these languages are all Nguni, meaning they share a kind of background in terms of their formation, etymologically. Among the two languages, it was discovered that the sophistication of this linguistic phenomenon is determined by the extent of variation in meaning or the level of shared semantic similarity between visually similar terms in distinct native speakers. The 'overlap' is contingent upon the perception of equivalence of meaning by the native speakers of isiZulu and isiXhosa.

The study also shed light on the frequency of absolute false friends and partial false friends in isiZulu and isiXhosa, demonstrating how words with similar appearances or sounds can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The comments emphasised the significance of being aware of these linguistic nuances and knowing the context to avoid confusion, in particular, regarding partial false friends. Skilled speakers with a deeper comprehension of these languages can avoid false friends more effectively. However, despite being aware of the existence of false friends, the study found that native speakers still struggle with identifying and comprehending them, indicating a deficiency in language teaching in this area. In the literature review, a concise explanation was given concerning the two forms of false friends, which are coincidental and etymological.

The study established that absolute false friends could significantly impact comprehensibility between isiZulu and isiXhosa. It is reasonable to conclude that these absolute false friends represent a significant language challenge within the category of interference (also known as negative transfer). Even a partial false friend can lead to misunderstanding, especially if used in a critical context. The misunderstanding can have serious consequences, such as leading to a conflict or damaging the relationship between the two speakers. This aspect of false friendships emerges from the presence of collocational limitations. The concept of collocation is

intricately linked to the distribution of words and their likelihood of appearing in specific circumstances. The collocational spectrum encompasses word combinations in which the constituent parts can interact freely with other lexical objects. The extent to which false friends affect comprehensibility between isiZulu and isiXhosa depends on several factors, including:

- The number of false friends used: the more false friends that are used in a conversation or piece of writing, the greater the risk of misunderstanding.
- The context in which false friends are used: false friends are more likely to cause problems in contexts where the speakers or readers are unfamiliar with both languages.
- The level of familiarity of the speakers or readers with the two languages: speakers and readers who are familiar with both languages are less likely to be confused by false friends.
- The topic of the conversation or piece of writing: false friends are more likely to cause problems in conversations or parts of writing that deal with complex or sensitive topics.

There are some evident causes of ambiguity about the perception of the utilisation of false friends. Wang (2021) has identified two distinct categories of sources: one on the behavioural features of the speaker and another focussing on the linguistic approach. Therefore, the primary issue at hand is the selection of inappropriate vocabulary resulting from the immediacy and informality of conversational exchanges. The phenomenon arises because of the inherent inclination to employ the most readily recognisable vocabulary that readily springs to mind during verbal discourse, serving as an automatic and unregulated mechanism for facilitating smooth and effective communication. It is important to be aware of the potential for misunderstandings when using these languages and to take steps to avoid confusion, such as using unambiguous language and being mindful of the context in which words are used.

Conclusion

The study established that isiZulu and isiXhosa are closely related to Nguni languages spoken in Southern Africa. As a result, there are numerous absolute false friends, partial false friends and lexico-semantic similarities between them. Furthermore, the research highlighted the complexities of false friends and the parallels across these languages. According to participants, everyday vocabulary and pronunciation can enhance communication but also present challenges, particularly for less proficient speakers.

The data revealed how false friends influence comprehensibility between isiZulu and isiXhosa speakers. It is reasonable to conclude that these false friends pose a significant language challenge within the category of interference (also known as negative transfer) especially when used in critical contexts. Such misunderstandings can have serious consequences, potentially leading to conflict or damaging the relationship between speakers. Additionally,

the data also showed that the partial false friends that exist between the two languages allow the speakers to use context to respond and converse appropriately.

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Authors' contributions

S.I.M. contributed 60% towards the research article. I.P.M. and M.C. contributed 20% each to the research article. S.I.M. conceptualized the paper and wrote the introduction and literature review and collected data. I.P.M. wrote the methodology section and presented the findings. M.C. wrote the discussion of findings, conclusion, references and refined the manuscript.

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Data availability

The authors declare that all data supporting this research article and its findings are available within the article and its references.

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