



A sociolinguistic analysis of terms of address in Xitsonga literary texts

**Authors:**Respect Mlambo¹ Muzi Matfunjwa¹ **Affiliations:**

¹South African Centre for Digital Language Resources, Faculty of Humanities, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Respect Mlambo, respect.mlambo@nwu.ac.za

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Terms of address are typically used by interlocutors in spoken and written discourse. These terms serve a variety of functions across languages and cultures, reflecting social hierarchies, politeness, familiarity, and interpersonal relations. Despite the prominence of terms of address in Xitsonga, they have received limited scholarly attention in literary texts. This study examines the use of terms of address in Xitsonga literature from a sociolinguistic perspective, employing a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were drawn from three Xitsonga literary works: *Ndlandlalati ya Malenga*, *Byi le Tintihweni*, and *Xivoni xa Vutomi* and were subjected to content analysis. The study is underpinned by politeness theory, which provides a framework for understanding how terms of address function in negotiating social relationships and regulating interpersonal dynamics. The findings indicate a diverse array of terms of address, encompassing kinship terms, personal names, hypocoristic names, nicknames, personal titles, pronouns, teknonyms, and terms of endearment. Their usage varies according to social relationships, degrees of formality, and specific contextual factors within the literary texts. These results provide insight into the functional role of terms of address in Xitsonga written discourse, highlighting how they reflect and negotiate broader sociolinguistic dynamics and socio-cultural norms.

Contribution: This study provides insight into the pragmatic uses of address forms in Xitsonga literature. It reveals that these forms are used to fulfil socio-cultural functions and maintain social relations in the written discourse. The study also highlights that Xitsonga address forms are shaped by the social environment in which they are employed.

Keywords: Xitsonga; sociolinguistics; socio-cultural; terms of address; literary texts; politeness theory.

Introduction

Language has long been recognised as a fundamental component of human communication, shaping how individuals convey thoughts, emotions, and relationships (Alejandro 2024). It serves not only as a tool for interaction but also as a repository of cultural values, identity, and historical continuity (Mlambo & Hlungwani 2025). Through language, communities transmit traditions, beliefs, and worldviews, making it a powerful medium for understanding both individuals and societies (Hallås 2023). As a carrier of culture, language embodies the shared practices and social norms of its speakers, reflecting the dynamics of power, respect, and solidarity within a given community. Among the linguistic features that reveal these dynamics are terms of address, which occupy a central role. Terms of address are linguistic expressions employed in spoken or written discourse to identify and refer to others, simultaneously expressing respect, familiarity, intimacy, and social status (Surono 2018). These terms provide valuable insight into how societies organise themselves and how interpersonal relationships are linguistically negotiated.

These terms are not merely lexical choices; they are deeply embedded markers of social identity, hierarchy, and cultural etiquette (Bayo 2023). By conveying respect, familiarity, or kinship, the terms of address contribute to the construction and reinforcement of social relationships. In many communities, the use of these terms is guided by age, gender, kinship ties, and social status, thereby encoding broader systems of social organisation (Chamo 2019). Hamzah (2024) observes that these terms vary across cultures, but their underlying functions as indicators of respect, intimacy, and social roles remain consistent. Whether used in spoken discourse or written texts, terms of address function as a linguistic lens through which cultural values, interpersonal relationships, and societal structures can be better understood.

It is imperative to note that terms of address have been studied in Xitsonga based only on spoken discourse and the way their sociopragmatic functions shape their use (Kubayi 2013).

This approach overlooks other forms of discourse, such as written texts in which terms of address play linguistic and socio-cultural roles. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by investigating the use of terms of address in written discourse, which is Xitsonga literature. The study aimed to: (1) identify and categorise terms of address in the selected Xitsonga drama texts *Ndlandlalati ya Malenga*, *Byi le Tintihweni*, and *Xivoni xa Vutomi*; (2) analyse the function of these terms in shaping character interactions and social hierarchies; and (3) investigate how their use reflects the socio-cultural norms and values of Vatsonga. By bridging the gap between spoken and written discourse, this study enhances the understanding of terms of address in literary contexts. It offers insights into the representation of social relationships, politeness strategies, and cultural values in written discourse, contributing to the broader field of Xitsonga sociolinguistics and literary studies.

Literature review

Akindele (2008) explored the sociolinguistic significance of address forms in Sesotho, demonstrating their role in defining social relationships, status, and politeness within the Basotho community. The study identified various address forms, including first name, title plus name, nickname, multiple names, and teknonymy. Among these, the combination of title and first name (e.g. *ntate Thabo* for 'Father Thabo' and *'m'e Puleng* for 'mother Puleng') was the most prevalent in both formal and informal contexts. Teknonymy, in which individuals were addressed as the parent of a child (e.g. *Mmathato* for 'mother of Thato'), is particularly common among Basotho women, serving as a marker of respect and social identity. The findings indicated that age, gender, social status, and familiarity influence the choice of terms of address, with age being the most significant factor. Older individuals were typically addressed with honorific titles such as *mookamedi* [headmaster], *moruti* [pastor and/or priest], while younger people and peers were addressed by first names. Women frequently received teknonyms and title-based forms, reflecting social norms of deference. In professional settings, title plus last name and title plus first name dominated, whereas teknonymy was preferred in personal interactions. Married couples commonly used teknonyms, reinforcing traditional respect norms. The study also compared the forms of addressing in American English and Sesotho, highlighting key differences. In American English, a shift from a title plus last name to a first name often signalled increasing social closeness, while retaining the title plus last name may indicate formality or even tension. In contrast, among the Basotho, title plus last name and teknonyms were consistently used as markers of respect, with first names reserved for close friendships.

Additionally, Akindele (2008) also noted that Basotho address forms incorporate distinctions based on profession, chieftaincy, and kinship, reinforcing hierarchical structures. The study emphasised that address forms in Sesotho function as linguistic markers of identity, status, and social hierarchy.

Using a sociopragmatic approach, Kubayi (2013) investigated the socio-cultural norms governing address behaviour in Xitsonga dyadic interactions. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 29 participants from the Hlanganani region, a Xitsonga-speaking community in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study revealed distinct kinship terms for men, such as *papa* [father] and *boti* [brother], and for women, such as *mhani* [mother] and *sesi* [sister]. Outside the familial context, gender-neutral forms like *makhelwani* [neighbour], *munghana* [friend], and *chomi* [friend] were commonly used. Honorifics /mi/ and /va/, as well as the nonhonorific /u/, were also found to be gender neutral. Kubayi (2013) discovered that when a woman established her own family, her address could shift from her first name to a teknonym, *n'wa-X* [daughter of X], linking her to her father. Borrowed terms of address, such as *mfo* (from isiZulu), *doctor* (from English), *Mkhulu* (from isiXhosa), and *skoni* (from Afrikaans), were also identified. Additionally, creative terms of address, such as *skhwiza* [sister-in-law], were found to replace traditional terms like *N'wamaxalani* and *mihariva*. The study further noted that in-laws were generally addressed by using parental terms, such as *papa* [father] and *mhani* [mother], regardless of gender or family side. Factors influencing the address choices included age, sex, marital status, the presence of others, and contextual appropriateness. The study also highlighted male superiority in norms of addressing, with women often assigned the same lower status as children, their social standing increasing only through marriage and childbirth. Further research on terms of address in different speech communities or comparative studies across African languages was recommended.

Malatji (2015) examined the forms of address and terms of reference used by students when addressing lecturers at the University of Limpopo. The study identified various address forms, including names (first name, last name, and nickname) and titles (title only, title plus first name, and title plus last name). The commonly used titles were *Prof.*, *Dr*, *Mr*, *Sir*, *Ma'am*, *Ms*, and/or *Mrs*. The findings revealed that students who had close relationships with lecturers tend to use first names, last names, or nicknames, while those aiming to convey professionalism and respect use titles. The study also noted differences between how students address lecturers in conversation and how the students refer to them in discussions with others, with some using the same form of address in both contexts. Factors influencing these choices included respect, intimacy level, setting, and cultural perceptions of age. Additionally, students often used nicknames to express their feelings about lecturers. Malatji (2015) recommended implementing a policy to standardise forms of address in higher education.

Chamo (2019) discussed how academic staff in the Faculty of Arts and Islamic Studies at Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria, used various terms of address in their interactions. Employing an ethnographic approach and variationist sociolinguistic theory, the study identified three primary forms of address: titles, nicknames, and kinship terms, which were influenced

by factors such as age, gender, social status, and familiarity. Titles were found to be the most commonly used address forms, encompassing academic, administrative, and religious titles.

Academic titles such as *Doctor* and *Professor* were used within departments, although their application varied. Some departments strictly observed hierarchical distinctions, while others used professional titles more informally. Administrative terms like *Dean* and *Head of Department* were employed in formal settings, reflecting institutional roles rather than academic rank. The title *Malam*, originally signifying Islamic scholarship, was widely used among faculty members across disciplines, highlighting its cultural significance in Hausa society. Nicknames, particularly those based on place or family names, served as informal terms of address. Faculty members whose names are linked to specific towns or regions were often addressed accordingly, such as Dr Yola or Prof. Gusau. However, female staff were rarely addressed by using place-based nicknames. Kinship terms which are less frequently used also appear in faculty interactions, with *Baba* [father] occasionally employed to express endearment and respect. The study concluded that address forms among faculty members reflected Hausa socio-cultural norms, emphasising politeness, hierarchy, and social cohesion. The study underscored how academic institutions incorporate traditional practices of addressing, reinforcing cultural identity within a professional environment.

Bayo (2023) examined terms of address in the Iraqw speech community of northern Tanzania, categorising the terms into four types: kinship terms, personal names, titles, and personal pronouns. The study explored how social variables such as age, gender, status, and family relationships shape the use of terms of address, reinforcing respect and politeness in interpersonal interactions. Kinship terms were found to be central to Iraqw communication, distinguishing between older and younger relatives. For example, *baaba* [father] and *aayi* [mother] were used for biological and nonbiological parental figures, while *aako* [grandfather] and *aama* [grandmother] extend beyond immediate family circles. Addressing elders by their first names was considered disrespectful.

Younger individuals were commonly addressed with terms such as *garma* [boy] and *dasi* [girl], with kinship terms further differentiating between maternal and paternal relatives. Personal names, both traditional and religious, reflected cultural identity. Traditional names, like *Thuwaaay* [born during rainfall] and *Sikukuu* [born during a festival], were assigned based on birth circumstances, while religious names of Christian and Islamic origin were increasingly adopted. Titles signified a variety of social statuses, including traditional (*kahamusmo* [chief]), occupational (*mwaalimu* [teacher]), and religious (*patarmo* [priest]) forms. Personal pronouns, such as *kuung* [you male] and *kiing* [you female], established social distance, especially with strangers. Bayo's study, grounded in politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987), highlights how

terms of address reflect social hierarchies and maintain linguistic etiquette. The findings underscore the critical role of language in preserving social cohesion and avoiding communication breakdowns in the Iraqw society.

Hamzah (2024) investigated factors that influence the use of terms of address in English and Gorontaloese, focusing on situational context, marital status, and emotional expression. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with contrastive analysis, the study explored how cultural norms shaped address practices in both formal and informal settings. The findings indicated that in formal contexts, Gorontaloese speakers predominantly used Indonesian and job-related titles such as *Pak Hakim* [Mr. Judge] or *Bu Guru* [Mrs. Teacher] to convey respect, whereas English speakers employed titles like Mr, Mrs, or occupational terms such as Professor and Governor. In informal contexts, Gorontaloese speakers relied on kinship terms like *Baba* [father] and *Mama* [mother], while English speakers preferred pet names or nicknames. Marital status also played a role in address choices; traditionally, Gorontaloese speakers assigned specific nicknames to married individuals, such as *Temei* for husbands and *Tilei* for wives, whereas English speakers typically used *Mrs* followed by the husband's surname. Emotional expressions further influenced terms of address between the languages. In English, speakers maintained consistent address forms regardless of emotions, using last names for distant relationships and first names for closer connections. In contrast, Gorontaloese speakers adjusted their tone and choice of affectionate terms like *sayang* [dear] to convey emotions such as anger or frustration. The study emphasised the role of addressing terms as cultural markers, demonstrating how language reflects social hierarchy, politeness, and emotional dynamics.

Mudau, Mandende, and Mushaathoni (2024) employed an ethnopragmatic framework to examine how traditional greeting terms and kinship-based address forms contributed to linguistic and cultural continuity. Using qualitative research, they conducted semistructured interviews with 22 Tshivenda L1 speakers (14 youths and 8 elders) to assess attitudes towards indigenous terms of address. The findings revealed that traditional forms, such as *nndaa* (for men) and *aa* (for women), served as cultural identity markers, while kinship terms like *makhadzi* [aunt] and *malume* [uncle] reinforced social hierarchy and respect. However, some youth questioned their relevance, with one participant stating that English was prioritised in professional settings, making Tshivenda terms of address seem impractical. The study also highlighted social media as a tool for language preservation, advocating for Tshivenda-medium online communities to encourage usage. Additionally, traditional schools were found to immerse children in linguistic and cultural practices, fostering a sense of belonging. The researchers suggested that radio and television programmes could further sustain indigenous address forms. They elaborated that neglecting these terms might accelerate language shift and cultural erosion and recommended their integration into education and media.

The consulted literature demonstrates that terms of address have been widely examined across different linguistic and cultural settings, highlighting their vital role in shaping identity, expressing respect, and reinforcing social relationships. However, much of this research has primarily focused on spoken discourse, with limited attention to the written domain, in which terms of address equally fulfil significant sociolinguistic functions. This study addresses this gap by investigating the sociolinguistic use of terms of address in Xitsonga literary texts. It extends the scope of terms of address beyond spoken discourse, offering insights into how written discourse functions as a medium for preserving cultural values and negotiating social meanings within the Vatsonga community.

Research methods and design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the sociolinguistic use of terms of address in Xitsonga literature. This approach was particularly suitable as it facilitated an in-depth exploration of linguistic and cultural patterns within literary texts in their natural context, emphasising meaning and function rather than numerical analysis (Oranga & Matere 2023). The data were drawn from three Xitsonga literary works, namely *Ndlandlalati ya Malenga* by A.D. Mahatlane (1993), *Byi le Tintihweni* by C.M. Lubisi (2005), and *Xivoni xa Vutomi* by I.S. Shabangu (2008). These literary works were selected for their linguistic richness and their vivid depiction of social interactions through forms of address among the Vatsonga. Instances of terms of address were identified and systematically extracted from both dialogues and narrative sections in which character communication occurred. For analysis, the study adopted content analysis, a rigorous method that facilitated the identification, categorisation, and interpretation of linguistic patterns and meanings within the texts (Özden 2024). The terms were classified according to their linguistic structures, associated social roles, and contextual applications. Furthermore, the researchers' linguistic intuition played a critical role in interpreting how terms of address function to encode politeness strategies, reinforce hierarchical structures, and reflect cultural norms within Vatsonga society. By integrating textual evidence with sociolinguistic insights, this methodological framework not only uncovered how language mirrors social reality but also highlighted the role of literature as a repository of cultural knowledge and a medium through which communal values are preserved and transmitted.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is the politeness theory, developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Politeness theory is a sociolinguistic theory providing a framework for understanding the strategic use of language in managing social relationships, power dynamics, and societal norms (Zainal, Saleh & Sahib 2022). Central to the theory is the concept of face, which is divided into two types: positive face, the desire for approval and affection, and negative face,

the need for autonomy and freedom from imposition (Hu & Zhou 2024; Sapitri et al. 2020). Politeness strategies are employed to mitigate face-threatening acts that may threaten the social standing of either the speaker or the listener (Alabdali 2019). In this study, the politeness theory is used to investigate how terms of address in Xitsonga literature serve to maintain or negotiate social hierarchies and solidarity between characters. Additionally, the theory's concepts of social distance and power are essential for understanding how terms of address differ based on the relationship dynamics between characters in the texts (Sugiharti, Nababan & Santosa 2022). Therefore, the politeness theory offers a useful framework for analysing how the use of terms of address is shaped by cultural norms and personal relations in Xitsonga written discourse.

Data presentation and analysis

This study explored the sociolinguistic role of terms of address in Xitsonga literature, analysing their use in representing social relationships, power structures, and cultural identity within fictional narratives. The extracted data revealed various terms of address, including kinship terms, personal names, hypocoristic names, nicknames, personal titles, pronouns, teknonyms, and terms of endearment.

Kinship terms

Kinship terms serve as linguistic representations of familial relationships and broader social connections established through descent, marriage, or adoption (Makal 2022). They categorise individuals into roles such as parent, sibling, or extended family member, thereby mapping the structure of family and social networks (Baabaare 2023; Lalaouna & Sididris 2024). These terms are central to the organisation of social hierarchies, as they delineate authority, prescribe obligations, and reinforce cultural expectations (Bouchery & Longmailai 2018). Importantly, kinship terms extend beyond biological ties to encompass social relationships, often functioning as symbolic resources to express respect, intimacy, solidarity, or affiliation within a community (Makal 2022). Their significance lies not only in defining relational categories but also in mediating social behaviour and sustaining collective identity. Within Xitsonga literature, kinship terms frequently operate as address forms, reflecting underlying hierarchies, cultural norms, and interpersonal dynamics. Such usage demonstrates how language embeds social meaning and becomes a vehicle for reinforcing both familial and communal bonds, as shown in Box 1.

In Box 1, the kinship terms *papa* [dad], *mama* [mom], and *buti* [brother] operate as significant forms of address that structure interpersonal exchanges and foreground the social hierarchies embedded within the family unit. The repeated use of *papa* in conjunction with the second-person absolute pronoun *n'wina* [you] by Tiyani demonstrates deference and recognition of paternal authority, thereby reaffirming the father's position as a central figure of guidance and decision-making. Similarly, the use of *mama* emphasises maternal responsibility.

BOX 1: Kinship terms indicating familial relationship.

Tiyani: *Vanhu a va chuhile n'wina papa. Mama a va humele hi moya va khongela va ku Xikwembu xi va pfuna ku endleka masingita.* [People were scared dad. Mom had gone out of her way and prayed that God would help to make miracles happen.]

Sunday: *Se Cressida yi vuye na mani?* [So, who brought back the Cressida?]

Tiyani: *Hi vuye na buti Solomon. Va swi kota ku drayivha phela n'wina papa.* [We returned with brother Solomon. He is able to drive, Dad.]

Source: Shabangu, I.S., 2008, *Xivoni xa Vutomi*, Lingua Franca Publishers, Giyani

The term *buti*, followed by the proper name Solomon, highlights the importance of elder siblings in assuming practical duties, such as driving, while simultaneously reinforcing his elevated status within the kinship hierarchy. These forms of address illustrate how familial roles and relationships are linguistically enacted to maintain family structures, express respect, and delineate role differentiation. Beyond shaping character interactions, these kinship terms reflect the broader socio-cultural values of the Vatsonga community. The consistent acknowledgement of parental figures through *papa* and *mama* signifies their socio-cultural importance within the family, and the forms of address serve as respectful recognitions.

Likewise, the use of *buti* reflects the collectivist ethos of Vatsonga society, in which siblings are not only defined by biological ties but also by the responsibilities and duties they perform within the family structure. This practice demonstrates the community's emphasis on solidarity, mutual support, and the hierarchical organisation of social relations. Therefore, the excerpt in Box 1 illustrates that kinship terms of address extend beyond simple markers of familial identity and serve as cultural instruments through which Vatsonga values of respect, hierarchy, and collective responsibility are expressed.

Personal names

Personal names are linguistic markers assigned at birth to distinguish individuals within a cultural or social context (Machate-Kabinde, Mandende & Cekiso 2023). These names often reflect cultural heritage, familial lineage, religious beliefs, or personal attributes (Diko 2024). They carry symbolic meanings shaped by historical, linguistic, or societal influences. Beyond identification, they contribute to social recognition and interpersonal interactions (Machate-Kabinde et al. 2023). In Xitsonga literary works, personal names serve as terms of address that reveal social relationships, hierarchy, and cultural norms, while shaping character dynamics. The way characters use names to address one another can convey respect, familiarity, authority, admiration, or intimacy, as illustrated in Box 2.

In Box 2, the repeated use of the personal name Thuli by Prof. Xirilo functions as a key address strategy that shapes the dynamics of interaction and reinforces character relations. By directly naming Thuli, the professor establishes intimacy and personal recognition, thereby fostering a conversational atmosphere that appears both respectful and affectionate.

BOX 2: Names expressing intimacy, respect and authority.

Thuli: *(A nyumanyuma) Mi nga ndzi vunguny Prof.* [{shy} Don't lie to me Prof.]
Prof. Xirilo: *A ndzi ku vunguny. U mbhurhi ya timburhi.* [I'm not lying to you, you are the most handsome of all.]

Thuli: *Hikwalaho ka yini mina ndzi nga swi voni?* [Why am I unable to see it?]
Prof. Xirilo: *Tihlo a ri tivoni Thuli. Wa swi tiva na wena.* [The eye cannot see itself, Thuli; you are aware of this too.]

Thuli: *Kunene rona a ri tivoni.* [Of course, it does not see itself.]
Prof. Xirilo: *Wa tiva Thuli, ku hava munhu loyi a nga ta ku vona evuton'wini a nga yiveki mbilu.* [You know, Thuli, anyone who sees you would inevitably like to fall in love with you.]

Source: Lubisi, C.M., 2005, *Byi le Tintihweni*, Kagiso Education, Cape Town

Within the framework of character interactions, the use of Thuli's personal name reduces social distance and creates a sense of familiarity, positioning the professor not only as an authority figure but also as someone who seeks to engage Thuli on equal and personal terms. This deliberate use of her name rather than a pronoun or title signals attentiveness and recognition, which enhances Thuli's positive face, the universal desire to be appreciated and valued (Brown & Levinson 1987). In this way, the professor's linguistic choice highlights how terms of address can mediate hierarchical relations by balancing authority with interpersonal closeness.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the use of a personal name in this context reflects Vatsonga communicative norms, in which naming serves as a powerful tool of affirmation, intimacy, and social bonding. Unlike the use of other forms of address, which may convey critique, familiarity, or deference, the repetitive use of the personal name Thuli by Prof. Xirilo signals an intentional act of recognition and relational harmony, affirming her value within the interaction. Moreover, the professor's metaphorical compliment, *tihlo a ri tivoni* [The eye cannot see itself.], further positions Thuli as someone whose worth and beauty are acknowledged by others, thereby reinforcing her social value in ways that extend beyond the immediate literal conversation.

Viewed through the lens of politeness theory, this interaction exemplifies a positive politeness strategy, whereby the speaker seeks to enhance solidarity and affirm the hearer's self-image. By repeatedly using Thuli's name, the professor personalises the exchange to ensure that his compliments are framed within an intimate mode of address. This approach reflects the broader use of terms of address within Vatsonga society, extending from personal recognition to interpersonal relations. Thus, the excerpt in Box 2 illustrates how the personal name *Thuli*, employed as a form of address, operates not merely as an identifier but also as a discursive strategy for constructing intimacy.

Hypocoristic names

Hypocoristic names are modified or abbreviated versions of personal names that signify affection, familiarity, or informality (Mashaqba et al. 2023). These variations typically result from the addition of suffixes, syllable alterations, or shortened names (Zungu, Zulu & Bariki 2019). According to Jang (2023), such names are frequently used within familial

relationships, friendships, and close-knit social circles to express warmth and closeness. Across different cultures, these names serve as terms of endearment, often used by parents when addressing their children, between romantic partners, or among peers (Ehineni 2019). Furthermore, hypocoristic names reflect linguistic and cultural conventions. In Xitsonga literary contexts, hypocoristic names function as essential terms of address that emphasise intimacy, familiarity, and character relationships. Authors frequently use these affectionate name variations to highlight social connections, emotional undertones, and cultural backgrounds within narratives, as exemplified in Box 3.

In Box 3, Prof. Xirilo addresses Sukani using the hypocoristic name *Suki*, a shortened and affectionate form that conveys familiarity, emotional closeness, and a hierarchical yet caring relationship. Name shortening, as observed by Eshreth (2017), is a common strategy to express warmth and informality, often used among family members, friends, or romantic partners. Prof. Xirilo's choice of *Suki* reinforces trust and emotional support, as seen in his reassurance: *Ndza ku tshemba Suki, ndzi nga ka ndzi nga ku lahli* [I trust you, Suki, and I will never leave you]. Additionally, *Suki* balances authority and care, as Prof. Xirilo asserts his expertise (*ku hava lexi u nga dyondzisaka Profesa wa wena* [There's nothing you can teach your professor]) while simultaneously using an affectionate address to soften his stance. This method demonstrates his acknowledgement of Sukani's perspective while maintaining his authoritative role. Furthermore, hypocoristic names enrich cultural and linguistic expression, as name shortening is widely used in African languages to signal endearment or social connection (Ehineni 2019; Zungu et al. 2019). By using *Suki*, Prof. Xirilo aligns with cultural norms that emphasise relational dynamics through terms of address. Thus, *Suki* serves as a linguistic and social tool that enhances emotional intimacy and hierarchy in their interaction. A similar use of a hypocoristic name as a form of address in Xitsonga literary work is demonstrated in Box 4.

In Box 4, Tebogo uses the hypocoristic name *Sai*, a shortened and informal variation of Simon, to convey familiarity, social identity, and emotional expression. This modification reflects an existing social bond, even in Simon's absence. Additionally, the term *Bra-Sai* combines respect and camaraderie, as the morpheme *Bra-*, common in African languages like Xitsonga, signifies seniority or brotherhood (Mudau et al. 2024). This usage suggests Simon holds a certain social status among his peers, while Tebogo's use of *Sai* signals both a personal connection and an attempt to evoke sympathy from Matome. Furthermore, referring to *Sai* in Simon's absence highlights how terms of address extend beyond direct interaction, functioning as social markers and identity indicators (Magashi 2023). Tebogo's choice reinforces group identity and maintains a sense of familiarity despite Simon not being physically present. Thus, the use of *Sai* and *Bra-Sai* in this literary excerpt illustrates how modified personal names convey emotional tone, shape social dynamics, and strengthen relational bonds, even in indirect discourse.

Nicknames

A nickname is a modified or alternative form of a personal name, typically employed in informal contexts to express familiarity, affection, social identity, or humour (Matfunjwa, Mlambo & Skosana 2024). Within literary discourse, nicknames function as significant terms of address that transcend basic identification, signalling social relationships, emotional undertones, and character dynamics (Putri, Muliana & Suarniti 2022). Nicknames embody cultural practices and interpersonal connections, mediating relationships through markers of intimacy, hierarchy, or camaraderie. The presence of nicknames in texts not only reflects prevailing social norms but also contributes to the construction of identity, offering readers deeper insights into character interactions. Moreover, the deliberate use of nicknames enriches narrative strategies by reinforcing themes and intensifying characterisation. The strategic deployment of nicknames enhances storytelling by adding complexity to dialogue and depth to relational portrayals, thereby embedding cultural meaning within the literary fabric, as seen in Box 5.

In Box 5, N'wa-Khazamula repeatedly addresses Xihlayamagoza as *Dlomu!*, an ideophone that imitates the sound of something plunging into deep water. This term

BOX 3: Hypocoristic names expressing affection and familiarity.

Sukani: *Kambe tsundzuka nkata, Xitshembiso xi hundzuka xikweleti. Loko u tshembisa munhu ku n'wi endlela xo karhi, se wa n'wi kolota.* [But remember, my love, a promise is a commitment. Once you make a promise to someone, it becomes your responsibility to fulfil it.]

Prof. Xirilo: *Sweswo swi tiviwa hi mina Suki! Ku hava lexi u nga dyondzisaka Profesa ya wena. Hambiswirritano, ndza ku twa no ku twisisa. Ku chava ka wena a ndzi ku tekeli ehansi. Ndza ku tshemba Suki, ndzi nga ka ndzi nga ku lahli.* [I'm already aware of that, *Suki!* There is nothing you can teach your professor. However, I hear you and understand your concerns. I don't dismiss your fears. I trust you, Suki, and I will never leave you.]

Source: Lubisi, C.M., 2005, *Byi le Tintihweni*, Kagiso Education, Cape Town

BOX 4: Hypocoristic names expressing social identity and familiarity.

Tebogo: *Awu, kasi i ntiyiso leswaku Profesa Xirilo u rhandzana ni nsati wa Sai!* [Aw, so it is true that Prof. Xirilo is in relationship with Sai's wife!]

Matome: *Ina, kasi wena a wu nga tshembi na?* [Yes, you did not believe it?]

Tebogo: *Hey, lexi i xihlamariso eka mina. Sukani!* [Wow, this is shocking to me. Sukani!]

Matome: *Vavasati va tano munghana* [Women are like my friend.]

Tebogo: *Bra-Sai xem.* [Bra-Sai shame.]

Source: Lubisi, C.M., 2005, *Byi le Tintihweni*, Kagiso Education, Cape Town

BOX 5: Nicknames expressing personal behaviour.

Xisandzhaku: *Ndza tshembha leswaku na loko u nga swi twisisi u ta va u yingiserile. Ku tlanga hi mali a hi nga vuyeriwi hi nchumu, ehandle ka ku tirhambela vusiwana ni nhlupheko ntseka.* [I hope that even if you don't understand, you will have listened. Wasting money gains us nothing, except to invite poverty and misery to ourselves.]

Xihlayamagoza: *Ina, swa twala leswi mi swi ringanisaka.* [Yes, it makes sense, what you are suggesting.]

N'wa-Khazamula: *A wu n'wi twi? Dlomu! Se u dlomukerile loyi Matanato. Hi ri ndzi tshike ndzi bula na nuna wa mina wena, Dlomu!* [There we go, Dlomu! He's already interfered again, this Matanato. Please, let me talk to my husband – you, Dlomu!]

Xihlayamagoza: *Mhani N'wa-Khazamula ...* [Mother N'wa-Khazamula]

N'wa-Khazamula: *Dlomu! Wa n'wi twa? ...* [Dlomu! Here we go.]

Source: Mahatlane, A.D., 1993, *Ndlandlalati ya Malenga*, J.L van Schaik, Pretoria

functions as a nickname that metaphorically captures his habitual interference in the affairs of others. Much like an object making a loud splash, *Dlomu!* symbolises his sudden and disruptive intrusions. Its repetition reinforces the perception of his meddlesome behaviour while simultaneously serving as a striking and memorable form of address. Similarly, the nickname *Matanato*, also employed by N'wa-Khazamula, further highlights Xihlayamagoza's persistent tendency to involve himself in matters that do not concern him. Within Vatsonga socio-cultural practice, nicknaming is a well-established communicative strategy that may convey endearment, familiarity, or, as in this case, critique and social correction (Chauke 2016). By calling him *Dlomu!* and *Matanato*, N'wa-Khazamula not only censures Xihlayamagoza for intruding into her and her husband's affairs but also participates in a cultural tradition in which names and nicknames function as vehicles for negotiating respect, authority, and accountability.

Viewed through the framework of politeness theory, these nicknames constitute face-threatening acts, particularly to Xihlayamagoza's positive face of the desire to be tolerated and respected. Rather than using neutral or deferential forms of address, N'wa-Khazamula deliberately employs the nicknames that signal impatience and disapproval. This choice reflects the pragmatic function of impoliteness, in which social distance is reinforced. Thus, the excerpt in Box 5 illustrates how terms of address in Xitsonga discourse extend beyond simple reference to become dynamic markers of criticism and disapproval, and interpersonal strategies of politeness and impoliteness. The use of nicknames in Xitsonga literature also enhances realism, enriches characterisation, and introduces relational nuance, thereby deepening both dialogue and thematic development.

Personal titles

Personal titles are honorifics or designations placed before a person's name to denote aspects such as gender, marital status, professional rank, social standing, or academic accomplishments (AL-Rawi & Al-Assam 2018). Unlike first and last names, which focus on individual identity, personal titles emphasise the social relationship between the speaker and the addressee, making them less personal (Kubayi 2013). Bayo (2023) categorises personal titles into traditional, occupational, and religious titles, underscoring their socio-cultural significance in various contexts. This classification illustrates how personal titles function not merely as identifiers but also as markers of respect, status, and belonging within different social structures. In literary works, personal titles extend beyond formal terms of address, shaping character development, reinforcing power dynamics, and reflecting societal hierarchies, as presented in Box 6.

In Box 6, the borrowed Afrikaans term *Meneer* [Sir] functions as a general honorific title of address, used both independently and in conjunction with the proper name

Skhalele. Its deployment plays a crucial role in structuring interactions between characters and in marking social hierarchies within the dialogue. When Mafada addresses David solely as *Meneer*, the title conveys deference and recognises his authority, affirming his status as someone who exercises control within the academic context of the examination. This form of address highlights the asymmetry of power between the speaker and the addressee, reflecting institutional hierarchies in which authority is linguistically signalled through titles rather than personal names. Conversely, David's use of *Meneer Skhalele* combines the title with the proper name, thereby reinforcing respect while also specifying the individual towards whom the deference is directed. This dual form further strengthens the hierarchical distinction between student and teacher and ensures clarity in identifying authority within a formalised setting. More broadly, in Xitsonga literary texts, formal designations of roles, positions, or professional qualifications are also employed as forms of address between characters, as illustrated in Box 7.

In Box 7, the professional titles *Profesa* [Professor] and *Dokodela* [Doctor] are used as forms of address, often extended into their abbreviated forms, *Prof.* and *Dok.* These titles perform a crucial pragmatic function by shaping character interactions and marking social hierarchies. Through the use of institutional titles, characters acknowledge one another's academic authority and professional expertise, thereby signalling respect and legitimising the roles each participant occupies within the conversational context. The abbreviated forms, *Prof.* and *Dok.*, introduce an element of familiarity and solidarity, softening the formality of the interaction without diminishing the

BOX 6: Honorific titles indicating social hierarchies.

David: <i>Ee, Ngobeni, a mi lava ku vutisa swin'wana, right?</i> [Yes, Ngobeni, you wanted to ask something, right?]
Mafada: <i>(Hi nyanyuko) A ndzi tivi Meneer, ndzi nga va pfuna ku va pfuxetisa hikuva ku ni question paper yin'wana leyi ndzi nga yi larha leswaku swo boha yi ri kana exikambelweni.</i> [(Excitedly) I don't know, Sir. I can help them to revise because there is another question paper that I dreamed of that will be in the exam.]
David: <i>(Hi ku kanakana) A ndzi tivi, Meneer Skhalele, ta pfumela ti rules and regulations ta xikambelo leswaku va pfunana, right?</i> [(Suspiciously) I don't know, Meneer Skhalele. The rules and regulations of the examination allow them to help each other, right?]

Source: Shabangu, I.S., 2008, *Xivoni xa Vutomi*, Lingua Franca Publishers, Giyani

BOX 7: Professional titles indicating social hierarchies.

Dokodela Thulare: <i>(A langutile khadi) Mi ri mi karhata hi yini Profesa?</i> [(Looking at the card) What is bothering you, Professor?]
Prof. Xirilo: <i>Heyi, Dokodela, ndzi nga ka ndzi nga hlamuseli leswaku i ncini lexi ndzi karhataka.</i> [Hey, Doctor, I can't explain what's bothering me.]
Dokodela Thulare: <i>Xana swi mi sungule rini?</i> [When did it begin?]
Prof. Xirilo: <i>Mixo wa namuntlha. Ndzi pfukile ethelo ra ximatsi ra mubedo.</i> [This morning, I got up on the left side of the bed.]
Dokodela Thulare: <i>(A hleka) Kasi hambi mi vabya filosofi a yi mi sukeli!</i> [(Laughs) Yet, even in times of illness, philosophy remains with you!]
Prof. Xirilo: <i>(A hlekanyana) U ta ku yini Dokodela? Hi lo nyikiwa.</i> [(Laughs a little) What will you say, Doctor? We were given it.]
Dokodela Thulare: <i>E, Prof!</i> [Yeah, Prof!]
Prof. Xirilo: <i>Mi ri yini Dok?</i> [What are you saying, Dr?]

Source: Lubisi, C.M., 2005, *Byi le Tintihweni*, Kagiso Education, Cape Town

professional prestige associated with the titles. This alternation between full and shortened forms demonstrates the flexibility of the terms of address in balancing hierarchical recognition with interpersonal closeness. The same phenomenon of using the title *Prof.* is also observed in Box 2, in which Thuli (the student) deliberately addresses Prof. Xirilo with the abbreviated title. This choice reflects underlying sociolinguistic and pragmatic considerations that are central to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Thuli's insistence on using the title *Prof.* signals respect, acknowledging the age gap between the interlocutors, and reinforcing the hierarchical relationship within the institutional setting. This usage reflects the power dynamics between individuals and the identity construction in the interaction.

Beyond the immediate conversational context, the use of general honorifics and professional titles in Box 2, Box 6, and Box 7 reflects broader socio-cultural norms and values among the Vatsonga. The prominence of titles such as *Meneer*, *Profesa*, and *Dokodela* underscores the cultural esteem afforded to adult men, education, knowledge, and professional achievement. By foregrounding these roles in everyday exchanges, the discourse illustrates how linguistic markers of status are embedded within social interaction. Furthermore, the interplay between formal and abbreviated forms suggests that respect in Vatsonga culture is not incompatible with warmth and familiarity; rather, social harmony is maintained through a combination of hierarchical acknowledgement and relational closeness. Consequently, the excerpts demonstrate not only how titles mediate interpersonal dynamics but also how they encode and reproduce cultural values of respect, recognition, and social balance within the Vatsonga community.

Pronouns

Pronouns function as substitutes for nouns or noun phrases, serving to avoid repetition while identifying the speaker, listener, or a third party (Casan-Pitarch 2016). They play a crucial role in ensuring clarity, cohesion, and communicative efficiency. When employed as terms of address, pronouns go beyond their grammatical function to pragmatically identify, acknowledge, or refer to an interlocutor without recourse to personal names or titles (Brinton 2023). In this capacity, pronouns operate as tools for establishing interaction, signalling respect or familiarity, and negotiating social relationships, thereby making them integral to both spoken and written discourse (Rahmawati et al. 2021). Within Xitsonga literature, pronouns contribute to shaping meaning, narrative perspective, and character interactions. As terms of address, they influence tone, enhance reader engagement, and enrich characterisation, as shown in Box 8.

BOX 8: Pronouns indicating interpersonal dynamics.

Prof: Jean!
Jean: Prof!
Prof: <i>Xana munghana loyi wa wena wo xonga tani hi ntsumi i mani?</i> [Who is this friend of yours, who is beautiful like an angel?]
Jean: <i>O, a ndza ha mi tivisanga, i Thuli Zondo.</i> [Oh, I haven't introduced you. It's Thuli Zondo.]

Source: Lubisi, C.M., 2005, *Byi le Tintihweni*, Kagiso Education, Cape Town

In Box 8, the demonstrative pronoun *loyi* [this] and the absolute pronoun *wena* [you] are strategically employed as terms of address that both shape interpersonal dynamics and embody socio-cultural values among the Vatsonga. When Prof. Xirilo refers to Thuli as *munghana loyi* [this friend], the demonstrative extends beyond mere identification. This term simultaneously acknowledges Jean's social network and elevates Thuli by describing her as *wo xonga tani hi ntsumi* [beautiful like an angel]. In this context, the demonstrative operates as both a deictic marker and a discursive strategy that mediates social hierarchy, positioning the professor as an authoritative figure who uses his title as a means of politeness and positive recognition.

Importantly, the use of *loyi* illustrates how pronouns function as terms of address when the speaker does not know the addressee's personal name, thereby facilitating interaction and recognition. Similarly, the absolute pronoun *wena*, directed towards Jean, signals the professor's active participation in an interactional framework in which linguistic choices negotiate hierarchical roles. Within Vatsonga communicative practice, pronoun use is a salient marker of respect and relational positioning (Kubayi 2013). By addressing Jean with *wena*, the professor establishes immediacy and familiarity, yet he does so in a manner that maintains social boundaries and honours cultural norms of deference. This approach reflects the Vatsonga principle that terms of address must balance individual recognition with communal values of respect and relational harmony. Aligned with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, such pronoun use exemplifies a positive politeness strategy, fostering solidarity while mitigating potential social distance. Thus, the use of *loyi* and *wena* demonstrates that pronouns in Vatsonga are not merely grammatical devices but also essential tools for constructing interpersonal relations, managing face, and encoding cultural expectations of respect and cohesion. The excerpt in Box 8, therefore, emphasises how everyday linguistic practices serve as vehicles for expressing broader socio-cultural values of recognition, solidarity, and communal harmony.

Teknonyms

Teknonyms denote a naming convention in which a parent is referred to by the name of their child rather than by their own personal name (Mandende, Chaka & Makgato 2017). This practice is prevalent across numerous cultures and often serves as a marker of respect, social status, or an identity transformation associated with parenthood (Kubayi 2013). The custom reflects societal values that prioritise familial ties and communal relationships over individual identity, emphasising the interconnectedness of social roles and responsibilities (Akindele 2008). Teknonymy is particularly prominent within indigenous communities and cultural traditions, and its representation in literary works underscores its narrative and symbolic significance. This form of address not only conveys relational and hierarchical dynamics but also enriches textual portrayals of social structures, identity negotiation, and cultural continuity, as exemplified in Box 9.

In Box 9, the use of teknonyms *N'wa-Khazamula* [daughter of Khazamula] and *N'wa-Yingwani* [daughter of Yingwani] functions as a significant strategy for structuring interpersonal interactions and reflecting social hierarchies among characters. Teknonyms, which identify individuals through the names of their parents or children, carry both relational and social significance within Vatsonga culture (Kubayi 2013). In this excerpt, the characters were addressed by their fathers' names, *Khazamula* and *Yingwani*, with the prefix /n'wa-/ marking the female gender in accordance with Xitsonga cultural norms. A distinctive feature of teknonyms as forms of address in Xitsonga literary texts is that authors can assign a character a teknonym that is consistently used throughout the narrative for purposes of characterisation. For example, the character *N'wa-Khazamula* is referred to exclusively by this teknonym, without ever using her original name Mijaji, a practice that is unlikely to occur in everyday spoken discourse. Additionally, teknonyms may also function as forms of address through the use of children's names, as demonstrated in Box 10.

In Box 10, the interaction between Valerie and Bayizani illustrates how teknonyms function as forms of address in Xitsonga literary texts through the use of children's names. The repeated invocation of *papa Rhulani* [father of Rhulani], its shortened form *papa Rhuli* [father of Rhuli], and *mhana Rhulani* [mother of Rhulani] highlights both relational closeness and social recognition. By addressing each other through their parental roles, Valerie and Bayizani simultaneously convey frustration and invoke the cultural expectation that elders or parents bear responsibility for their actions. Bayizani's polite, yet pleading response: *Kasi swi lo yini mhana Rhulani? Wa nga yima ndzi ku hlamusela!* [What is the matter, mother of Rhulani? Could you allow me a moment to explain?] demonstrates the deployment of positive politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson 1987), in which the speaker seeks to preserve the addressee's face by showing deference and mitigating potential conflict, despite the tension inherent in the exchange.

BOX 9: Teknonyms reflecting identity and social structures.

Xihlayamagoza: <i>Heyi wena N'wa-Khazamula, swi lo yini ku ba huwa kasi a ku pfukiwanga laha mutini?</i> [Hey, N'wa-Khazamula. Why are you causing such a commotion while someone in the household is unwell?]
N'wa-Khazamula: <i>Kasi hi mina ndzi nga vanga yini?</i> [And what exactly have I done to cause this?]
Xihlayamagoza: <i>Pfala nomo wa wena wu rhungeka – wa swi twa na?</i> [Keep your mouth tightly shut. Do you hear me?]
N'wa-Khazamula: <i>Ku rhunga nomo, mi vula mani? A mi to miyeta nsati wa n'wina N'wa-Yingwani</i> [Sewing a mouth? Who are you referring to? You should be silencing your wife, N'wa-Yingwani.]

Source: Mahatlane, A.D., 1993, *Ndlandlalati ya Malenga*, J.L van Schaik, Pretoria

BOX 10: Teknonyms indicating relational closeness and social recognition.

Valerie: <i>A, a, a, a, Bayizani, papa Rhulani! Kasi hi leswi u ndzi endlaka swona leswi? Huu, papa Rhuli, hi kona ka James la u nge te u vhaka kona la?</i> [A, a, a, a, Bayizani, father of Rhulani! Is this what you're doing to me? Huu, father of Rhuli, is this truly James' home, the place you claimed you were visiting?]
Bayizani: (Hi ku xavelela) <i>Kasi swi lo yini mhana Rhulani? Wa nga yima ndzi ku hlamusela!</i> [Wheedling] <i>What is the matter, mother of Rhulani? Could you allow me a moment to explain?</i>

Source: Shabangu, I.S., 2008, *Xivoni xa Vutomi*, Lingua Franca Publishers, Giyani

From a socio-cultural perspective, the use of teknonyms and parental titles reflects Vatsonga values of respect, relational identity, and communal accountability. Addressing individuals through their child's name, parental role, or father's name affirms their social and familial status as well as responsibilities to position interactions within culturally sanctioned hierarchies and mediates authority across both domestic and broader community contexts. Furthermore, such forms of address enable speakers to negotiate politeness and face management simultaneously: teknonyms elevate the social recognition of the addressee while permitting critique or rebuke in socially acceptable ways. Consequently, Box 9 and Box 10 demonstrate that teknonyms and parental titles operate not merely as referential tools but also as dynamic markers of social hierarchy, relational positioning, and Vatsonga socio-cultural norms, with their pragmatic use closely aligning with Brown and Levinson's framework of politeness and face-sensitive communication.

Terms of endearment

Terms of endearment as forms of address are expressions used to convey affection, warmth, and emotional closeness between speakers. Unlike neutral terms of address, which identify or call attention to an interlocutor, terms of endearment carry strong affective meaning, functioning both as linguistic markers of relationship and as pragmatic tools in interaction (Landmann 2022). The terms not only express emotion but also play a central role in managing interpersonal relationships, maintaining social harmony, and constructing identity within communicative exchanges, as presented in Box 11.

In Box 11, the repeated use of the term of endearment *murhandziwa* [my love] as a form of address by Man Xirilo to Prof. Xirilo performs important pragmatic and socio-cultural functions. In shaping character interactions and social hierarchies, *murhandziwa* mitigates potential conflict by softening direct accusations. Although Man Xirilo expresses doubt about Prof. Xirilo's honesty *a ndzi mi tshembi* [I don't believe you.], the affectionate term cushions the face-threatening act. This method aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of positive politeness strategies, in which speakers attend to the addressee's desire for approval and solidarity. By framing her critique within an affectionate mode of address, Man Xirilo maintains relational closeness while simultaneously challenging Prof. Xirilo's credibility.

BOX 11: Terms of endearment expressing relational closeness.

Prof. Xirilo: (A ntlokola) <i>U vula leswaku a wu ndzi tshembi?</i> [He makes a lateral click] <i>You mean you don't trust me?</i>
Man Xirilo: <i>Murhandziwa, ndzi kom ...</i> [My love, I am ...]
Prof. Xirilo: (A n'wi kavanyeta) <i>E-e, ndzi ri u vula leswaku a wu ndzi tshembi ke?</i> [He interrupts her] <i>No, I mean, you don't trust me?</i>
Man Xirilo: <i>Ku vula ntiyiso murhandziwa, a ndzi mi tshembi loko mi ku a mi tivi nchumu hi ta le hubyeni. Wa tiva murhandziwa, mbilu ya munhu yi tshama ni ntiyiso.</i> [Truly, my love, I find it difficult to believe you when you claim to know nothing about the court. You know, my love, the human heart always aligns itself with the truth.]

Source: Lubisi, C.M., 2005, *Byi le Tintihweni*, Kagiso Education, Cape Town

The hierarchical dimension is also evident in Prof. Xirilo's interruptions, which assert authority; yet Man Xirilo's persistent use of *murhandziwa* subtly rebalances power by reminding him of their intimate bond and mutual obligations. Similarly, in Box 3, Sukani addresses Prof. Xirilo as *nkata* [my love], an expression of intimacy signalling a relationship extending beyond the conventional boundaries of a student-lecturer interaction. This choice of address reflects the presence of a romantic relationship that violates institutional expectations regarding professional conduct, protocol, and established power dynamics.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the use of terms of endearment such as *murhandziwa* and *nkata* reflects Vatsonga values of relational identity, respect, and communal harmony. Affectionate terms of address are not merely markers of intimacy but also tools for conflict negotiation within interpersonal and familial relationships. By invoking love as a relational anchor, Man Xirilo and Sukani appeal to cultural expectations that truthfulness and trust should govern marital and communal interactions. Furthermore, the phrase *mbilu ya munhu yi tshama ni ntiyiso* [the human heart always aligns itself with the truth] situates her appeal within a moral framework that echoes Vatsonga cultural norms, in which honesty is a valued social virtue. Consequently, the excerpts in Box 3 and Box 11 illustrate that terms of endearment in Xitsonga literary discourse serve dual functions: they express emotional intimacy while simultaneously operating as politeness strategies to navigate tension, critique, and hierarchical dynamics. This method demonstrates how literary language embeds socio-cultural values into everyday interactions, affirming that terms of address like *murhandziwa* and *nkata* are not only markers of affection but also pragmatic tools for maintaining face and reinforcing culturally sanctioned relational bonds.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the terms of address in Xitsonga literature extend far beyond their utilitarian function of reference, becoming powerful narrative and cultural tools that shape character interactions, encode social hierarchies, and reinforce communal values. Kinship terms, personal names, hypocoristics, nicknames, personal titles, pronouns, teknonyms, and terms of endearment were found to operate as key linguistic markers that negotiate respect, intimacy, authority, and solidarity within written texts. Through these address forms, authors embedded socio-cultural meaning into character dialogue, creating texts that reflect the hierarchical and collectivist ethos of Vatsonga society while simultaneously enriching literary characterisation and thematic development. These findings align with the politeness theory, which emphasises that linguistic choices are strategically employed to manage face needs, maintain social harmony, and navigate power relations within written discourse. The study has established that the terms of address are strategically employed to reflect power relations, sentiments, and provide readers with socio-cultural cues that deepen narrative engagement.

This study extends the scope of terms of address beyond spoken discourse, offering insights into how written discourse functions as a medium for preserving cultural values and negotiating social meanings within the Vatsonga community.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Respect Mlambo: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology. Muzi Matfunjwa: Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author, Respect Mlambo, upon reasonable request.

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