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Lexical and Semantic Variation in isiXhosa: A Comparative Study of Gqeberha and Mthatha Speech Communities

Yamkela Ngwadla ¹, Raphael Nhongo * ²

Department of Arts, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha 5099, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This study examines lexical and semantic variation in isiXhosa as spoken in the Gqeberha and Mthatha speech communities in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. Although isiXhosa is predominantly spoken in this region, it exhibits substantial dialectal variation influenced by social, historical, and geographical factors. These influences have led to the emergence of distinct regional varieties. The study focuses on comparing lexical and semantic features across these two urban centres, with the aim of understanding the sociolinguistic dynamics shaping their linguistic identities. The research is anchored in the diglossia theory and adopts a qualitative methodology. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with isiXhosa speakers from both Gqeberha and Mthatha. The findings reveal significant differences in vocabulary, lexical semantics, grammar, and accent. The variety spoken in Mthatha aligns more closely with the standardised form of isiXhosa, while the Gqeberha variant reflects greater lexical innovation and contact influence. The Gqeberha variety exhibits stylistic innovations in its lexicon where those imaging words are of no semantic significance in speech. These differences have implications for indigenous language education and policy, particularly regarding the accommodation of regional variation. Furthermore, the study highlights how these linguistic differences have contributed to the formation of sub-hegemonies, emerging identities, and underlying tensions among speakers of the different isiXhosa varieties.

Keywords: Eastern Cape Province; isiXhosa; Language Varieties; Lexical Variation; Semantic Variation

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Raphael Nhongo, Department of Arts, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha 5099, South Africa; Email: rnhongo@wsu.ac.za

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1. Introduction and Background

While isiXhosa is a vibrant and widely spoken language in South Africa, its significant dialectal variations that are shaped largely by social, historical and geographical factors are not always fully recognised or appreciated by its speakers. This limited awareness can, unfortunately, contribute to prejudice and discrimination against less familiar or non-standard varieties. Across the Eastern Cape Province, where isiXhosa is predominantly spoken, this language exhibits considerable dialectal diversity, resulting from historical, social, and regional influences that have led to the development of distinct varieties^[1-3]. IsiXhosa also has a strong presence in the Western Cape, illustrating its spread beyond provincial boundaries and highlighting its importance as a national language.

Studies by Matutu^[4] and Mtsatse and Staden^[5] underscore the multifaceted dialectology of isiXhosa in the Eastern Cape, highlighting the existence of both standard and non-standard varieties with distinct lexical and phonological features. These isiXhosa varieties have developed through history due mainly to migration and language contact. Despite both Mthatha, formerly part of the Transkei, and Gqeberha, formerly Ciskei, being associated with the Thembu variety of isiXhosa^[1,4,5], there is a widespread perception among isiXhosa speakers from other regions that the variety spoken in Gqeberha has significantly diverged from its original form^[6]. The presence of these linguistic varieties has sparked significant controversies between the two speech communities. Although both Mthatha and Gqeberha use the Thembu variety, however, there has been notable distinct variations of the language in these two geographical locations. Observations have confirmed that there has been divergence in the Thembu variety with the one spoken in Gqeberha being the one claimed to have significantly diverged from the original norm. McWhorter posits that varieties of a language cannot be considered as errors but rather as alternate forms of the language^[7]. It is therefore prudent to unpack the divergence in the isiXhosa variety spoken in Mthatha from the lexical and semantic perspective.

The common Xhosa language varieties mainly found in the Eastern Cape Province include isiMpondo, isiBhaca, isiNgqika, isiThembu also known as Gcaleka and isiHlubi^[1,8,9]. According to Bloom Strom, the Nqika and Nd-

lambe people are jointly referred to as the Rharhabe and are closely related to the Gcaleka^[9]. Nyamende and Bloom Strom note that the Nqika variant which is closer to the Thembu was the first to have an orthography through the efforts of the missionaries and was used as a standard in schools. Nomlomo notes that the Xhosa orthography is based on Gcaleka and Ngqika dialects^[8,9]. The Xhosa language cluster was significantly influenced by migratory movements precipitated by various factors, including Shaka's military campaigns. The controversy surrounding variation in Xhosa language is where Bloom Strom note that "it is considered incorrect by the population in the northern part of the Eastern Cape to refer to them and their language as Xhosa" but there are other ethnic and linguistic groups who speak languages that "are traditionally referred to as dialects of Xhosa"^[9]. This implies that the Xhosa identity is contested for some groups that speak what may be referred to as dialects of isiXhosa.

Nomlomo points out that the historical migration and settlement also led to significant language contact and linguistic convergence^[8], a common phenomenon in multilingual areas involving mutual borrowing and adaptation^[10]. According to Bekker, the varieties of isiXhosa utilised by the migratory ethnic groups slightly differ from the original varieties spoken by amaXhosa^[11]. Consequently, the influx of ethnic groups from migratory movements in different geographical areas among the Xhosa land introduced diverse linguistic influences.

Having dwelt on the history of isiXhosa, it is also important to review literature on lexical and semantic variation in mutually intelligible languages, as this forms the core of the paper. Nettle^[12] and Kronenfeld and Rundblad^[13] argue that the lexical and semantic changes in a language are as a result of cultural factors. These cultural factors that lead to language variation result from contact with other ethnic groups. Hasan says that lexical and semantic variation in a language result from sociolinguistic factors^[14]. On the other hand, Harrison attributes language variation to historical factors^[15]. Butters is of the idea that language variation can be argued to be stemming from broader functional and social factors^[16]. Sociolinguists have argued that variation in language can be traced from a synchronic perspective and such change can be attributed to imperfect language transmission from one generation to the next^[17]. However, Luraghi

contests this idea by questioning why a particular generation of children would have a homogenous understanding of language and be influenced in the same way at a particular moment in history^[17]. One can therefore argue that generally, language variation results from factors such as geographical location of a language, social, historical, language contact, cultural and technological exposure.

The distribution of isiXhosa varieties in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa can be effectively illustrated using a map, as shown below in **Figure 1**. However, it is important to note that this map does not provide a detailed representation of how these varieties are actually distributed and situated within the geographic space of the Eastern Cape.



Figure 1. Map of the Eastern Cape showing language distribution. Source originally by Monika Feinen and cited by Bloom Strom^[9].

Evidence of language variation from studies shows that code-mixing resulting from language change contributes to the creation of varieties. Bokamba investigated the effects of code-mixing on syntactic structures between Lingala and Swahili with French and English and concluded that this process has resulted in the formation of urban varieties of these Bantu languages^[18]. Beck argues that in most African countries, new varieties of languages are created in urban settings prompted by trade networks and cultural contact on one hand and Africa's colonial history and the quest for modernity on the other^[19]. This implies that since cities are

associated with modernisation, language contact due to the presence of people from diverse linguistic backgrounds and easy contact with the outside world, the languages found in urban centres quickly diverge from those found in the rural settings which would maintain purity. Similarly, Calteaux notes that cities resemble varieties that have diverged from those languages found in rural settings^[20]. Tegegne observes that in situations where a language consists of varieties, the one that is preferred as standard marginalises speakers of non-standard one in many crucial spheres of life, particularly in education^[21]. Recognition of all varieties brings a sense of

belonging, confidence and cognitive advantages to all speakers of a language^[21]. This idea is used in this study to show that the creation of sub-hegemonies and identity formation controversies are the result of dialect hierarchisation.

Bloom Strom conducted a study with the goal of exploring morphosyntactic variation in the Xhosa language varieties of the Eastern Cape^[9]. Bloom Strom observed that regional morphosyntactic variation in the Xhosa dialect cluster is minimal^[9]. The variation in isiXhosa can be understood from the history of migration, standardisation efforts and education^[9]. In that study, Bloom Strom concluded that “the differences reportedly experienced between standard Xhosa and the language spoken at home are not due to regional variation, and that their causes should be sought elsewhere, such as perhaps in an outdated standard”^[9]. These differences that Bloom Strom is referring to are the morphosyntactic ones across the Xhosa varieties whereas the current study is focused on the lexical and semantic variation in those spoken in Gqeberha and Mthatha^[9].

2. Theoretical Framework

This study uses diglossia as a theoretical framework to analyse the Xhosa language varieties spoken in Mthatha and Gqeberha. The term diglossia was first used by Charles Ferguson in 1959 to refer to a sociolinguistic situation wherein two varieties of the same language coexisted within a community, each serving specific functions^[22]. Ferguson observes that in diglossic contexts, two genetically related language varieties are often ranked as High (H), typically learned in formal settings and associated with prestige, being favoured for official and written communication^[22]. Conversely, the Low (L) variety, acquired locally and employed in informal and everyday interactions, is generally perceived as less valuable. Sayahi says that diglossia is a system where two related language varieties coexist in a speech community with one of those varieties assigned high status while the other receives the status of low variety^[23]. The H variety is used in more formal domains while the L variety is limited to oral communication in informal settings^[23]. Yule further elaborates on this concept, characterising diglossia as a specialised linguistic phenomenon involving two distinct varieties^[24]. Stepkowska underscores the existence of these language varieties and their assigned roles within society^[25]. In commenting

on Ferguson’s concept of diglossia Stepkowska, notes that the H and L varieties are not separate languages, but they exhibit significant linguistic differences^[25].

The concept of diglossia, which posits the coexistence of two distinct varieties of a language within a single speech community, is particularly relevant to this study of isiXhosa variations in the Eastern Cape Province. The paper explores the interplay between the varieties of isiXhosa spoken in Mthatha and Gqeberha. The view that diglossia describes the coexistence of H and L varieties where the H functions in formal contexts and writing whereas the L is for colloquial use ignites interesting debates in this paper^[23,26]. The view that one variety is superior while the other is inferior is used as a point of departure since viewing one language as formal and the other as colloquial raises controversies in the modern-day linguistic dispensation where the quest is to regard all languages as equal.

3. Methodological Path

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, aligning with its focus to explore the complexities of language in society from a humanities perspective. According to Creswell, qualitative research methodology involves examining the meanings of individuals or groups^[27]. This approach prioritises contextualised, narrative insights over statistical analysis, yielding rich descriptions of participants’ perceptions and experiences. Alharahsheh and Pius emphasise that qualitative research methodology is to provide a specific understanding of phenomena based on one’s experiences rather than broad generalisation^[28]. Given this study’s focus on language variations from participants’ lived experiences and knowledge, the qualitative research methodology was the suitable framework for conducting this study.

A case study design was adopted as Hart notes that this occurs when the researcher investigates a specific case to answer the specific research question which seeks a range of different kinds of evidence found in the natural surroundings^[29]. This research design was followed as this study is largely narrative and descriptive of the language variations in the two different geographical locations. The case study design was used to get personal narratives and knowledge of participants regarding the variations in their language. Because of the nature of this study, data collection was also

based on natural language usage combined with limited elicitation from isiXhosa speakers in Gqeberha and Mthatha.

The interpretivism paradigm was followed in the research and according to Alharahsheh and Pius, it enables the researcher to delve deeper into the experiences and perceptions of participants within a specific social context^[28]. An in-depth understanding of lexical and semantic variations in isiXhosa through exploration rather than simply identifying or describing the phenomena. Consequently, the meanings and interpretations of lexical and semantic variations were unpacked. The participants' subjective experiences and individual perceptions were examined through exploring how isiXhosa speakers interpret and make sense of the lexical and semantic variations in relation to their regional identities.

In alignment with the qualitative research methodology, non-probability sampling techniques were employed. Rahman refers to non-probability sampling as an approach that involves selecting participants from the population based on specific factors rather than random chance^[30]. The primary characteristic guiding the participant selection was the speakers' proficiency in isiXhosa. Purposive sampling technique was used to select isiXhosa speakers from Mthatha and Gqeberha who currently reside in Mthatha. This technique enabled the researchers to deliberately select individuals who are proficient in isiXhosa varieties from both geographical areas. Snowball sampling technique was also employed as a way of enabling the researchers to gain access to a more extensive range of participants who are proficient and have knowledge of the two isiXhosa varieties.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 16 research participants. Of the 16 research participants, 6 of them were those who have lived in both Gqeberha and Mthatha and had in-depth knowledge of both varieties spoken in the two geographical locations under study. The other 10 research participants comprised of isiXhosa speakers who resided in Mthatha and neither had prior exposure nor competence in the variety spoken in Gqeberha while the other five were those who resided in Gqeberha and had no prior exposure and competence in the isiXhosa variety spoken in Mthatha. The interview sessions took an average of 15 minutes per research participant.

The study employed thematic analysis as the primary method of data presentation and analysis. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis is a rigorous, systematic

and detailed approach used to identify, analyse and report patterns that formulate themes within the data^[31]. This method was suitable for this study as it explores the language variations through the proficiency of the speakers. The thematic data analysis method was employed to identify and extract themes and patterns that emerged from the information that was sought through semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, this method was particularly suitable for this study, as it aligns with the qualitative research methodology that guided the research design. The aim of employing this method of data analysis was to aid the researchers in presenting comprehensive and detailed information highlighting the themes and patterns that emerged from the speakers' opinions about lexical and semantic variation present in Mthatha and Gqeberha isiXhosa varieties.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the institution with which the authors are affiliated and was granted under reference number, REC/11(XXXXXXVII)/2024. Consent to record the interviews was sought from the research participants at the beginning of the interviews. All interviews conducted for this study were audio recorded using a mobile phone, and the recordings were saved on a USB drive for further analysis. All the recordings were deleted upon the completion of this paper. The names of research participants were neither recorded nor were used anywhere in this paper. The research participants were not coerced to participate in this study and the objective of this research was clearly explained orally in addition to the informed consent that was signed prior to the interviews.

4. Results

The section presents the findings of the study based on the data collected through semi-structured interviews in relation to lexical and semantic variation in isiXhosa spoken in Mthatha and Gqeberha. In addressing the aim of the paper, focus will be on vocabulary differences, region specific words, inflectional morphology, accents, language contact and formal and non-formality in these varieties.

4.1. Lexical Differences

The research participants exhibited varying levels of proficiency in the isiXhosa varieties spoken in Mthatha and Gqeberha. The research participants comprised of those who

were fluent in both varieties and those who were familiar with only the Mthatha or Gqeberha variety.

When the research participants were asked about the differences in the vocabulary of the varieties under study, they revealed that there exist homographs across these varieties. Homographs are words that are spelt the same, sound the same but differ in meaning^[32]. Notably, these words ex-

hibit identical phonology, yet their meanings and contextual applications differ significantly between the two varieties. To illustrate this phenomenon, participants provided several examples of words with distinct meanings in the two varieties of isiXhosa. Numerous examples, accompanied by detailed explanations, were provided by the participants with some of them presented in the **Table 1** below.

Table 1. List of identical lexical items with different meanings in Mthatha and Gqeberha varieties.

Lexical Item	Meaning in the Mthatha Variety	Meaning in the Gqeberha Variety
<i>Uthango</i>	A kraal	A wall built around the house.
<i>Ipapa</i>	Staple food made from maize meal	Porridge consumed in the morning
<i>Kusasa</i>	Tomorrow	In the morning
<i>Ukuzeka</i>	Paying the bride price	Having a sexual intercourse
<i>Ukulinda</i>	To wait	Being jealous
<i>Umntu omkhulu</i>	Someone big in body size	An elderly person
<i>Ipaloni</i>	Refers to Polony typically eaten with bread or fat cake.	Refers to sausage

4.2. Region-Specific Lexemes

When the research participants were asked about the existence of lexical differences between Mthatha and Gqeberha isiXhosa varieties, they indicated that indeed distinct words do exist between the two varieties. The idea was to identify the existence of lexical items that are peculiar to specific regions. In responding to the question, the research participants provided numerous examples with all those proficient in both varieties highlighting the word *dana* being specific to the Gqeberha variety. It was indicated that this word is common in women’s speech although men use it on rare instances. It is difficult to determine the meaning of this word as it serves no semantic significance but only stylistic one. The use of words without semantic significance but for stylistic reasons is called padding or an empty word^[33].

The research participants who were fully conversant with the Gqeberha variety noted that males often use the word *iponi* when referring to each other in conversation. Another word that was identified by the research participants and specific to isiXhosa of Gqeberha was *veri*, meaning ‘again’. Participants emphasised that the use of the word *veri* can

reveal the speaker’s geographical identity, as it is specific to speakers from Gqeberha. Four of the research participants who had lived in both Mthatha and Gqeberha confirmed that some words and phrases cause communication breakdown between speakers of the two varieties. It was observed that vocabulary differences between the two varieties of isiXhosa were a primary factor contributing to communication breakdown when individuals relocated from one region to another.

When asked to provide translations of selected words from English, it was observed that the research participants provided distinct equivalents in isiXhosa. Notably, research participants from Gqeberha provided uniform answers and explanations, which differed from those provided by participants from Mthatha. Similarly, participants who were proficient in both varieties provided different translations using both varieties, highlighting the existence of region-specific terms. A sample of translations that were provided by the research participants are presented in **Table 2** below. The word equivalents presented in the table provide for both varieties of isiXhosa spoken in Mthatha and Gqeberha.

Table 2 shows region specific words.

Table 2. Region specific words.

Words and Phrases	Mthatha Variety	Gqeberha Variety
To throw a stone	<i>Ukugibisela ngelitye</i>	<i>Ukugqaya ngelitye</i>
A romantic relationship	<i>Umjolo</i>	<i>Umdyolo</i>
A key	<i>Isitshixo</i>	<i>Isitixo</i>
A mug	<i>Imagi</i>	<i>Ikwati</i>
Coffee mug	<i>Ikomityi</i>	<i>Ikopi</i>
Elderly person	<i>Umntu omdala</i>	<i>Umntu omkhulu</i>

Table 2. Cont.

Words and Phrases	Mthatha Variety	Gqeberha Variety
Stomach	<i>Isisu</i>	<i>Isusu</i>
An eye	<i>Ilihlo</i>	<i>Imehlo</i>
A bed	<i>Ibhedi</i>	<i>Ibheyidi</i>
A window	<i>Ifestile</i>	<i>Ifeyistire</i>
Child	<i>Umntwana</i>	<i>Umntana</i>
Sexual intercourse	<i>Ukwabelana ngesondo</i>	<i>Ukuzeka</i>
Potatoes	<i>Amazambane</i>	<i>Iitapile</i>
A shack	<i>Umkhukhu</i>	<i>Ibobosi</i>

4.3. The Morphological Nuances of Singular and Plural Forms

Another significant theme that emerged from the data was the differences in singular and plural forms of nouns between the two isiXhosa varieties. During the interviews it emerged that even when the singular forms of nouns were identical in both varieties, the plural forms often differed. One participant provided an example using the word *ilitye* (stone), which belongs to class 5 of isiXhosa noun classification whose plural form is *amatye* (stones) falling under class 6. The participant noted that in the variety of isiXhosa spoken in Mthatha, the plural form of *ilitye* is indeed *amatye*, consistent with the standard Xhosa noun class table. However, in the variety of isiXhosa spoken in Gqeberha, the plural form of *ilitye* is *amalitye*.

Another research participant provided the example of the word *unyawo* (foot), which belongs to noun class 11, with its corresponding plural form as *iinyawo* (feet) in noun class 10. However, the same participant indicated that the plural form of *unyawo* in the Gqeberha variety is *amanyawo*, deviating from the standard Xhosa noun class pattern. The participant noted that in the Mthatha variety, the plural form of *unyawo* adheres to the standard Xhosa noun class pattern and is *iinyawo*. These examples highlight the differences in plural formation between the two varieties of isiXhosa spoken in Mthatha and Gqeberha, underscoring the linguistic variation between them.

4.4. Differences in Mthatha and Gqeberha Accents

One of the primary objectives of this study was to identify patterns of language use that reflect the geographical identity of the speaker. The researcher observed during interviews that speakers from Mthatha and Gqeberha exhibited

distinct differences in their use and pronunciation of lexical items. It came out during the interviews that tone was one of the distinctive features identifying whether a Xhosa speaker grew up in Mthatha or Gqeberha. Specifically, participants noted that the variety of isiXhosa spoken in Mthatha is more formal, with speakers placing emphasis on words when speaking. One participant shared his observation:

IsiXhosa saseMthatha umntu xa athe-thayo ingathi ume ebuhlanti, sona sinalanto iserious kakhulu maarn.

(When a speaker from Mthatha speaks isiXhosa, it can be associated with someone speaking standing beside the kraal)

With this statement, the participant was highlighting the way Xhosa speakers from Mthatha put emphasis on the words when speaking as if they were delivering a serious speech in a gathering. In contrast, participants agreed that the variety of isiXhosa spoken in Gqeberha has an accent similar to that of Coloured people speaking Afrikaans. One participant described the Gqeberha variety as ‘improper’ Xhosa language, stating that:

IsiXhosa esithethwa eGqeberha ndingathi sisiXhosa esinkwaphu-nkwaphu.

(The manner in which isiXhosa from Gqeberha is being uttered sounds more improper)

Additionally, the research participants noted that the tone of the Gqeberha variety is more similar to ‘*tsotsi-ta-al*’ when compared to the Xhosa language of Mthatha which is also used in media.

The study also investigated differences in the pronunciation of words between the two varieties. The research participants highlighted that the pronunciation of words in the Gqeberha variety is more similar to Afrikaans. In contrast, the pronunciation of words in the Mthatha variety sounds

more formal and is similar to the one used in education and other formal domains.

4.5. Influence of Language Contact

For a better understanding of the two varieties of isiXhosa spoken in Mthatha and Gqeberha, it was essential to consider how language contact influence divergence within a linguistic ecological space. 12 of the 16 research participants acknowledged the substantial influence of language contact in shaping both varieties under study. It was noted that the variety spoken in Mthatha is more formal due to the influence of the rural areas surrounding the city. The presence of diverse ethnic groups, including Mpondo, Mpondomise, Bomvana, Bhaca, and Sotho, was also highlighted. However, participants observed that speakers of other languages who migrate to Mthatha tend to shift towards isiXhosa, which is the dominant language in the area. In contrast, the linguistic ecology of Gqeberha was reported to have had a profound influence on the Xhosa language spoken in this region.

The research participants identified isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans as the most dominant languages in Gqeberha, with these languages co-existing in many areas, resulting in some notable changes. The presence of other languages in Gqeberha was also acknowledged. However, isiXhosa and Afrikaans were noted as the most common and dominant languages. Participants further mentioned that language contact between isiXhosa and Afrikaans has resulted in the incorporation of Afrikaans words into isiXhosa, even in situations where isiXhosa speakers are communicating among themselves. Words such as *veri* (again) and *gou* (act fast) have come into isiXhosa of Gqeberha as a result of contact with Afrikaans. It was highlighted that the earlier generations in Gqeberha who spoke isiXhosa as their first language were more familiar with Afrikaans, which they used as their second language, than with English.

4.6. Formal and Informal Speech

Through interviews, the researchers inquired about the participants' perceptions on whether one of these varieties was more superior and acceptable than the other. There were mixed responses to this question as some considered the Mthatha variety as formal while the Gqeberha one was regarded as colloquial. Participants overwhelmingly consid-

ered the Mthatha variety to be more important, highlighting its closer resemblance to the standardised form of isiXhosa employed in formal domains. Conversely, the Gqeberha variety was primarily associated with informal settings. Notably, participants from Gqeberha reported that their variety is not used in formal contexts, such as educational settings and government-related activities.

It also came out that in educational settings children are often compelled to adopt a more formal tone and abandon the unique lexical items characteristic of their Gqeberha variety. This phenomenon suggests that the Gqeberha variety is perceived as inferior and occupying a lower status compared to the Mthatha variety. The study also probed the potential use of the Gqeberha variety of isiXhosa as a language of learning and teaching in education. All six participants who were familiar with both varieties of isiXhosa under study rejected this notion, highlighting the variety's unique lexical items and perceived informality. One participant emphatically stated that the Gqeberha variety is unsuitable for formal activities, deeming it an improper form of the Xhosa language. However, nine of the research participants mentioned that the Gqeberha variety of isiXhosa is just a distinct language like isiMpondo and isiBhaca. They mentioned that isiXhosa of Gqeberha is condescended because it has for a very long time been labelled as "isiXhosa saseBhayi" by other isiXhosa speakers, which has made it unique and regarded as a separate non-standard variety.

5. Discussion

The results of the study presented in the previous section, suggest that the Xhosa varieties spoken in Mthatha and Gqeberha exhibit distinct linguistic variations. Nomlomo and Bongela confirm that variation in isiXhosa has been observed since earlier times^[8,34]. Although this variation has always existed, the findings of this study, along with the reviewed literature examined through a diachronic approach, show that the differences between the Mthatha and Gqeberha varieties has continued to occur within different historical epochs. A number of homographs were identified in the Mthatha and Gqeberha varieties. The homographs have been defined as words that have the same spelling, same sound but differ with different meaning^[32]. The homographs exist between Mthatha and Gqeberha varieties because of diver-

gencies that have taken place in these languages over time. When languages diverge there is a likelihood that some of its words would undergo semantic shift and broadening. This is the case with isiXhosa varieties of Gqeberha which is now characterised by same words having different meanings.

It was also observed, as presented in **Table 2**, that there are words specific to the isiXhosa spoken in Gqeberha that are not known in isiXhosa of Mthatha and vice versa. These words that are unique to one variety are as a result of divergence as well which is mainly influenced by language contact. It was noted that the term for ‘elderly person’ in the Gqeberha variety bears a resemblance to the Sotho language, where the equivalent term is *motho a moholo*, meaning ‘a bigger person’. In contrast, the Xhosa variety spoken in Mthatha employs the term *umntu omdala*, which translates to ‘an elderly person’ in English.

Jabavu observes that the migratory movements of the 19th century had a profound impact on the Xhosa language and its varieties^[35]. The influx of various ethnic groups, including amaGqunukhwebe, abaMbo (comprising Mpondo and Mpondomise), Bomvana, and Sotho, contributed to linguistic exchange and diversification among these groups^[35]. The findings of this study corroborate Jabavu’s assertion, demonstrating the influence of language contact on the birth of region-specific words in Gqeberha^[35]. The data suggest that the linguistic exchange resulting from migratory movements led to the incorporation of words from other languages, ultimately contributing to the distinctiveness of the Gqeberha variety of isiXhosa.

In the Gqeberha variety, the use of empty word also known as padding where a lexical item is of no semantic significance in a sentence but only for stylistic relevance. This was observed through the use of the word *dana* which is popularly used by women in the Gqeberha variety. Kacmarova et al. argue that padding results in syntactic complexity, terminological saturation and redundant exposition, a feature that was observed in the isiXhosa variety spoken in Gqeberha^[33]. The application of padding in the Gqeberha variety is most probably the reason why this variety is considered non-standard and suitable for usage in non-formal domains. The inclusion of padding in the isiXhosa of Gqeberha renders it synonymous with colloquialism.

The data collected from participants revealed the presence of regional accents in the two isiXhosa varieties, high-

lighting this feature as key in identifying them. Shillington notes that South Africa’s complex political history led to the displacement of many Xhosa-speaking individuals from their ethnic groups and homelands, forcing them to seek employment in urban areas such as Cape Town and the industrial hubs of Port Elizabeth, which is today known as Gqeberha^[36]. Seidman observes that migrant labourers, who often worked in Afrikaans-speaking environments, were compelled to prioritise their employers’ language, leading to linguistic influences on their first languages^[37]. This historical context provides insight into the linguistic evolution of the Xhosa language varieties with the tone in the Gqeberha variety having been mainly influenced by Afrikaans. This suggests that the linguistic legacy of the apartheid-era labour migration and language contact shaped the linguistic landscape of isiXhosa varieties in the Eastern Cape with the one spoken in Gqeberha diverting significantly.

Language contact, as noted by Matras, is a phenomenon that arises when speakers of different languages or varieties interact^[38]. This interaction often results in linguistic exchange, lexical adoption and convergence and isiXhosa is not spared from this phenomenon^[8]. Kerswill asserts that linguistic convergence often results in the formation of new varieties of the language^[39]. The data indicate that as isiXhosa came into contact with other languages in Gqeberha, particularly Afrikaans, which is perceived as prestigious, the variety of this region underwent changes. This language contact situation led to the evolution of the Gqeberha variety of isiXhosa, which has distinct features shaped by its interaction with other languages, particularly Afrikaans.

It has been shown that the variety of isiXhosa used in Gqeberha differs significantly from the standardised form spoken in Mthatha. The Gqeberha variety has primarily been limited to informal settings while that of Mthatha has been associated with formal domains such as educational contexts and government sectors. IsiXhosa variety spoken in Mthatha is regarded as the standardised variety. Bloom Strom reiterates that the standardised form of isiXhosa is a composite of the Ngqika and Thembu varieties^[9]. Research on the two varieties under study suggests that the Mthatha variety has maintained its original lexical and semantic characteristics, whereas the Gqeberha variety has undergone significant changes. This phenomenon highlights the complex dynamics of language variation and change, particularly in contexts

where language contact and social factors influence linguistic practices.

6. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that significant lexical and semantic variations exist between the isiXhosa varieties spoken in Gqeberha and Mthatha, reflecting broader sociolinguistic processes at play in the Eastern Cape Province. These differences, shaped by historical migratory patterns, language contact, and socio-political influences, underscore the dynamic and evolving nature of isiXhosa as a language with multiple regional identities. The Gqeberha variety, which is influenced heavily by contact with Afrikaans and other languages, has developed distinct lexical innovations, semantic shifts, and stylistic features such as padding, marking it as more colloquial and informal. In contrast, the Mthatha variety remains more aligned with the standardised form of isiXhosa and is associated with formal domains such as education and governance.

The presence of homographs, unique lexical items, and accentual differences between the two varieties further highlights the extent of linguistic divergence, while also revealing underlying social hierarchies and identity constructions within the isiXhosa-speaking community. These findings support predecessor research while also offering new insights into how contemporary language contact continues to shape isiXhosa.

Importantly, the study raises critical implications for indigenous language education and language policy in South Africa. Recognising and accommodating regional variation within isiXhosa is essential for inclusive and effective language planning. Ignoring these variations risks marginalising certain speech communities and reinforcing linguistic sub-hegemonies. Future research should continue to explore these dialectal differences and their impact on language identity, education, and policy, ensuring that all isiXhosa varieties are acknowledged and valued within the broader linguistic landscape.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Y.N. and R.N.; methodology, Y.N. and R.N.; formal analysis, Y.N. and R.N.; investigation, Y.N.; writing—original draft preparation, Y.N. and R.N.; writing—

review and editing, Y.N. and R.N.; supervision, R.N.; project administration, R.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Walter Sisulu University on 19 November 2014, with Ethical Clearance number, REC/11(XXXXXXVII)/2024. This study involved interviews on language variation.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Data for this study comprised of interview data and was discarded as soon as this study was completed.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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