

What Sets siSwati Apart from isiZulu?

Owen G. Mordaunt, PhD

Department of English, Language Studies, TESOL
International Studies Professor, University of Nebraska Omaha, Omaha, NE
USA

Paul A Williams, PhD

Department of Religious Studies (African Religion, Christian Studies & Islam)
University of Nebraska Omaha, NE
USA

ZT Motsa Madikane, PhD

Executive Director, Department of Leadership and Transformation
Office of Principal and Vice Chancellor, University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

A review of the historical and taxonomic contexts of siSwati and isiZulu clarifies the relationship between these languages. Further, identifying and comparing particular linguistic features provides a phonetic and morphological basis for differentiating the languages. Consequent to the comparative analysis, we make an additional claim concerning the relationship between siSwati and isiZulu: that is, the comparative evidence suggests that the current form of siSwati is in fact older than isiZulu.

Keywords: orthography, phonology, morphology, cognates, alphabet, nasals, siSwati, isiZulu, Nguni

Introduction

SiSwati, sometimes called Swati or Swazi, is the national language of Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland), and it is also one of the eleven official languages of South Africa. The change of name from Swaziland to Eswatini was made official through a gazette signed by King Mswati III on April 19, 2018. Both siSwati and English (the language of the former colonial power) are two official languages, and both languages are the languages of proceedings in the Parliament of Eswatini. English is the medium of instruction in schools and is the prerequisite for admission into most post-secondary institutions. About 1.27 million people in Eswatini speak siSwati, along with an equal number in the Mpumalanga Province of the Republic of South Africa (the Eastern Transvaal) for an approximate total 2.5 million speakers. Contemporary classification systems place siSwati as one of the Nguni languages of the south-eastern branch of the Bantu languages, isiZulu and isiXhosa being the other two major languages of the Nguni group.

Although these are within the Nguni group of languages, one may also differentiate between *Zunda* Nguni, including isiZulu and isiXhosa and *Tekela* Nguni, including siSwati, siPhuthi and siLala. (See Canonici, 1994; Mpunga, 1995; Maho, 1995; Donnelly, 1999; Msimang, 1989; Tak, 2003; Zungu, P. 1989; Zungu, E, 2000). Further, Maho's (2009) revised Guthrie list classified isiZulu as S42 and siSwati as S43, underscoring that they are closely related, yet distinct languages.¹ (In addition, siSwati is more closely related to isiZulu than it is to isiXhosa).

There is a prevalent view that isiZulu has a long-written tradition that siSwati, which is supported by the fact that many 'older' Swazis received much of their education in isiZulu. This has led to some confusion about the relationship between these languages. In fact, one scholar of the early 20th century suggests that Swazi is merely a dialect of isiZulu. In his summary of "The "Linguistic Situation in South Africa," C. M. Doke argued that the dialect of Swazi deserves scientific research upon its phonetic, linguistic, and idiomatic phenomena, but it will always remain a dialect; and administrative, missionary, and educational work can well be carried out through the medium of Zulu (1928:479).

Despite this strikingly unequivocal claim, temporary taxonomic systems and a comparative examination of specific phonological and morphological features demonstrate both the structural claim that siSwati and isiZulu are distinct languages and also suggest a historical claim that siSwati and isiZulu are distinct languages.

In addition to a general confirmation of this, a comparison of phonetic and morphological features also suggests a historical claim regarding the priority of some siSwati features over the isiZulu cognates. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to review the historical and taxonomic contexts and then identify particular linguistic features that differentiate siSwati from isiZulu. Consequent to the comparative analysis demonstrating the systematic phonetic and morphological differentiation of the languages, we make an additional claim concerning the relationship between siSwati and isiZulu: the comparative evidence suggests that the current form of siSwati is in fact older than isiZulu.²

Historical and Institutional Contexts

Despite this widespread acceptance of linguistic differentiation of siSwati from other Nguni languages, it is helpful to stress that there are also historical and institutional contexts. These contexts of siSwati language development help to set the stage for the analysis of feature contrasts, ending with a return to a historical puzzle. After the annexation of large portions of land by colonial concessionaries following the death of King Mswati II, the Kingdom of Eswatini was reduced to the present small country of about 4,704 square miles, making it smaller than New Jersey, USA. As a distinct political entity, Swazi identity goes back as much as 400 years, one of the oldest extant dynasties in African history. By the year 1200, the emaSwati had had about 27 kings, and by the 1740s their 41st monarch Ngwane III (who reigned from 1745 to 1780) was ruling as the first king in modern Swaziland. Like most dynasties of the time, such as Zwide, Soshangane, Moshoeshe, Dingiswayo and Mzilikazi, the dynasty of Ngwane (emaSwati) was driven by needs for expansion and securing better lands for settlement and livestock grazing. So, emaSwati scoured Lubombo mountains and settled in present day Eswatini. Parallel to this, King Zulu, son of King Malandela, became the ancestor who founded the Zulu royal line in about 1670. This dynasty was consolidated into a strong empire by King Shaka kaSenzangakhona (1816 – 28). The emaSwati expanded to the north of present-day territory of Eswatini. As other groups assimilated into the isiZulu empire, the Swati identity was preserved when autonomy was guaranteed by Britain and Transvaal (South Africa), with Britain assuming control in 1903. Independence was achieved September 6, 1968. The country's leader is King Mswati III, the son of King Sobhuza II who died in 1982. The Swazi get their name from a great leader of the past, King Mswati II, under whose leadership the Swazi nation reached the height of its power. It is during King Mswati II that siSwati was reduced to writing.

Therefore, foregoing linguistic hypotheses notwithstanding, historical accounts on the writing of siSwati point you to the 19th Century during the early days of the reign of King Mswati II in 1846 wherein the Reverend James Allison of the Methodist church produced the Wesleyan Catechism in siSwati, naming it, "*iTenkantekisemi ta la baWesley Methodisti*" (Motsa in Vincent, 2020:108). An 18-page pathfinder of written siSwati some 18 years after the death of King Shaka kaSenzangakhona, hailed as the founder of the amaZulu nation.

Perhaps it is vital to explain that when the founder of the amaZulu nation came into the political scene, the people of Ngwane (emaSwati) were being ruled by King Ndvungunye, the 42nd monarch in Swati history, and Mswati II who succeeded his father Sobhuza I, the son of Ndvungunye was the 44th monarch. This should establish the stability of the dynasty, culture and language of emaSwati. This should not in anyway impute any discredit of stability in the sister dynasty of amaZulu, but merely clarifies the credibility of siSwati being a dialect of and subsidiary to isiZulu.

Changing political arrangements continued to shape linguistic development. Under the independent Kingdom of Eswatini, siSwati has benefited from strong institutional support. With independence in 1968, siSwati steadily replaced isiZulu in education, administration and public life, and its use as a written medium began to grow, thus phasing out isiZulu altogether as a school subject. 1979 marks the last high school isiZulu examination introduced in 1980.

The development of siSwati as a written language did not of course happen overnight. Prior to independence, siSwati orthography underwent development. Ziervogel and Mabuza (1992) make reference to the existence of a joint Language Committee for the Swazi-speaking area, i.e. Eswatini and the Republic of South Africa, which was set up to work on standardizing the orthography. The orthography officially adopted by the Eswatini Government in 1969 (Rycroft, 2004) is based on the so-called "royal dialect" spoken mainly in western Eswatini and around the nation's capital.³

Further, Corum (1.2) cautions students of the Swazi language against influence from isiZulu, a difficult challenge because of the long exposure Swazis have had to isiZulu as a written language. Mooney and Evans state that "Whether a language variety reflects something positive or negative depends very much on what or who that variety is associated with" (18). In any case, siSwati has become Eswatini's language of national pride and identity. Through work in various institutional settings, at the National Curriculum Center, the Ministry of Education, the University, Teacher-training Colleges, and in the community at large, siSwati has reached a new phase in its history. Swazis were encouraged to take pride in and appreciate their own language. In the 1970s and '80s, Longman and Macmillan publishers and UNESCO conducted workshops to equip local people with writing skills, so that Eswatini could develop an indigenous written literary tradition and improved teaching materials in the language. Concomitant with the linguistic and literary aspects of siSwati was the endeavor to inculcate traditional values as well as an appreciation of culture in schools and in the different communities. SiSwati language education is present in all national schools and literacy in this language, defined as the ability to read and write, is a high priority in Eswatini.

In sum, the institutional setting of language development in independent Eswatini facilitated an official form of siSwati that further differentiates it from isiZulu at a socio-political level. In terms of language planning, this reflects a type of status planning, "also known as language determination, [and] is concerned with choosing between available languages or varieties and promoting one over another" (Van Herk, 2018:197).

Phonological and Morphological Differences

While siSwati and isiZulu have extensive linguistic and cultural affinities, differences also exist. The linguistic contrasts of concern in this paper are morphological and phonological. The following is a review of six of the phonological and morphological differences: alphabet and click omission, consonant substitution/addition, nasal substitution, prefix vowel deletion/addition and substitution, adjectival and relative concord variation (0/1), and lexical differences. The initial purpose of the comparison is to illustrate some of the particular features where these languages show regular differences.

A. The Alphabet and Click Omission

The siSwati alphabet (standardized in 1969) utilizes the letters **A** to **Z** but omits **Q** and **X**. In isiZulu (and Xhosa) /**Q**/ and /**X**/ stand for additional "click" consonants (post-alveolar + velar, and lateral + velar, respectively). SiSwati perceives only the dental + velar click /**c**/ written as /**c**/ but uses this in more combinations than isiZulu. For example, the prenasalized velar nasal + click /**nc**/ may also be followed by aspiration, thus /**nch**/. The three clicks referred to here are actually borrowed sounds, originally restricted to the languages of the Bushmen (San) and Hottentots (Khoi) of South Africa and to two languages in East Africa (Sandawe and Hatsa).

These sounds, it appears, do not appear anywhere else in the world.

SiSwati has fewer clicks than isiZulu. Most of the isiZulu words with the click sounds /c/, /q/, and /x/ are represented by the click sound /c/ in siSwati. Compare the following isiZulu and siSwati words:

<u>IsiZulu</u>	<u>siSwati</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
-qina	-cina	be hard
-qhina	-china	braid
-gcina	-gcina	be last
-ncinca	-ncinca	ooze/suppurate
-qala	-cala	start/begin
-qhuba	-chuba/-qhuba	drive along
-gqoka	-gcoka/-gqoka	dress up
-ngqola	-ngcola/ngqola	be dirty
-xega	-ceka/-qiga	be loose
-xhafuza	-chafuta	squelch in mud/eat noisily (like a pig)
-gxoba	-gcoba	crush/stamp/trample
i-nxele	li-ncele	left-handed person
i-nxeba	li-nceba	wound

From this data, we notice that the click sound /c/ is used extensively in siSwati. At times this click sound seems to be used interchangeably with the click sound /q/. This is not always true as we can see from the following words:

<u>IsiZulu</u>	<u>siSwati</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
i-qoqo	li-qoqo	collection/anthology
i-xoxo	li-coco	frog

B. Consonant Substitution/Addition

Standard siSwati exhibits certain systematic differences from isiZulu and the Zunda dialect of siSwati—resembling isiZulu and spoken mainly in Southern Eswatini. One such difference is that siSwati uses the voiced alveolar fricative /z/ less frequently, substituting it with the alveolar ejective /t/ (where IsiZulu has /z/ in several stems, and in the prefixes and concords used for classes 8 and 10. For example, the prefix **izi-** in IsiZulu is written as **ti-** in siSwati. When the prefixes **-izi/** and **ti-** are attached to a stem, for example **-tja** (meaning dish-es) and **-nja** (meaning dog-s), the IsiZulu and siSwati versions are rendered as **izitsha/titja** and **izinja/tinja**, respectively. In conjunction with the use of the /t/ sound in siSwati for the /z/ sound in IsiZulu, it is well to mention that according to tradition, the Swazi ruling clan, the Nkhosi Dlamini, came from east of the Lubombo mountains and spoke a Tsonga-like language because of their relationship with tribes which are today called Tsonga. The Swazis are said to *tekela* and the Zulus are said to *zunda*.

Another consonant shift appears between IsiZulu words with the speech sound /z/ and siSwati cognates with /t/. Examples are:

IsiZulu	siSwati	Gloss
-zama	-tama	try
-zala	-tala	give birth
-woza	-wota	come
-zamula	-tamula	yawn
-zuma	-tuma	surprise/take unaware
-zumeka	-tumeka	fall asleep
isi-zungu	si-tunge	loneliness

Other examples of consonant substitution also involve either consonant deletion or consonant addition to the stem, depending on which language is considered first. The following examples show both consonant deletion/reduction from the IsiZulu perspective, and addition, from the siSwati perspective:

	IsiZulu	siSwati	Gloss
a.	thola	tfola	(to) find
b.	thula	tfula	(be) quiet; bring down
c.	thokoza	tfokota	(be) happy
d.	li-thole	li-tfole	calf
e.	thela	tsela	pour
f.	-thini	-tsini	say
g.	thiya	tsiya	hinder, trap
h.	thatha	tsatsa	take
i.	-doda (indoda)	-dvodza (indvodza)	man
j.	-dodokazi (indodakazi)	-dvodzakati (indvodzakati)	daughter
k.	-dolo (idolo)	-dvolo (lidvolo)	knee
l.	dubula	dvubula	shoot
m.	funda	fundza	learn, read
n.	-didi (umdididi)	-dzidzi (umdzidzi)	anus
o.	dabula	dzabula	tear
p.	dedesa	dzedzesa	cry like a cry baby
q.	delela	dzelela	act contemptuously, despise, be insolent
r.	dilika	dzilika	fall down
s.	diliza	dziliza	cause to fall down
t.	dikila	dzikila	reject with disdain
u.	dinsi	dzinsi	falling with a thud

The IsiZulu aspirated voiceless alveolar plosive /**th**/ is generally realized as /**tf**/ or /**ts**/ in siSwati, depending on the following vowel. The /**tf**/ occurs with back vowels /o/ or /u/, and /**ts**/ with front and central vowels /a, e, or i/ (See examples a. to h. above.).

The isiZulu post-breathy-voiced alveolar plosive /d/ converts into the siSwati /dv/ or /dz/ (see examples g. and h). The /dv/ functions with back vowels /o/ and /u/(See examples i. to l. above). The /dz/ sound functions with front and central vowels /a, e, and i/ (See m. to u. above).

In addition to the isiZulu /th/, there are other consonant clusters, /mp/, /nt/, and /nk/, and these usually correspond with /mph/, /ntf/nts/, and /nkh/ in siSwati. The IsiZulu /dw/ is /dvw/ in siSwati. Examples are indicated below:

<u>IsiZulu</u>	<u>siSwati</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
-mp - (impendulo)	-mph- (imphendvulo)	reply
-nt- (into)	-ntf- (intfo)	thing
-nt- (intambama)	-nts- (intsambama)	afternoon
-nk- (inkomo)	-nkh- (inkhomo)	cow
-dw- (dwala)	-dvw- (lidvwala)	large rock

C. Nasal Substitution.

The IsiZulu ng /ŋ+g/ in **angazi** (I don't know), is pronounced with a sounded /g/ as in English "finger"; the siSwati **ng** /ŋ/ however is usually a pure velar nasal sonorant as in "singer." Only if the **ng** /ŋ+g/ is stem-initial is it pronounced with a sounded /g/.

D. Prefix Vowel Deletion/Addition and Substitution

The structural difference between isiZulu and siSwati noun prefixes are obvious (See the examples below). One of the most striking structural differences between isiZulu and siSwati is the absence of siSwati prefixes in words such as **abantu** (IsiZulu); the siSwati rendering is **bantfu**. IsiZulu prefixes have an initial vowel, but in siSwati this feature only appears in class 1,3,4,6 and 9 prefixes (where it precedes a nasal consonant) and with a few nouns of class 1a. Another contrastive feature peculiar to siSwati is the substitution of the initial vowel of the plural noun in class 6. Refer to the comparative examples of isiZulu and siSwati noun classes below:

Examples of IsiZulu and SiSwati Noun Classes

<u>Class</u>	<u>IsiZulu</u>	<u>siSwati</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
	singular/plural	singular/plural	
1/2	umu-ntu/aba-ntu	umu-ntfu/ba-ntfu	(person/people)
1a/2a	u-thishela /o-thishela	thishela/ bo-thishela	(teacher/s)
3/4	umu-thi/imi-thi	umu-tsi/imi-tsi	(medicine)
5/6	i-kati/ama-kati	li-kati/ema-kati	(cat/-s)
7/8	isi-tsha/izi-tsha	si-tja/ti-tja	(dish/-s)
9/10	in-to/izi-nto	in-tfo/ti-ntfo	(thing/-s)
9/6	in-doda/ama-doda	in-dvodza/ema-dvodza	(man/men)
11/10	ulu-thi/izinti	lutsi/tintsi	(stick/-s)
14	ubu-sika	bu-sika	(winter)
15	uku-dla	ku-dla	(food)

E. SiSwati **adjectival** and **relative concords** have an initial **-l** which are absent in isiZulu. The following are examples:

isiZulu: umnyango **om**khulu (a large door)

thishela **om**ncane (a young/small teacher)

umukhwa **lon**cono (a better knife)

siSwati: umnyango **lom**khulu

thishela **lom**ncane

umukhwa **lon**cono

F. Different Lexical Items (Words)

SiSwati uses different lexical items from isiZulu at times. These have to be learned. Some of the words that are different in siSwati and isiZulu are:

<u>IsiZulu</u>	<u>SiSwati</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
phuza	natsa	drink
xuba	bhica	mix
bhixa	gcobisa	smear with mud
xhopha	phandla	dazzle/put a foreign body into the eye
u-mame	make	mother
u-baba	babe	father
in-galo	um-khono	arm
um-lenze	um-bala/um-lente	leg
in-gxibongo	lu-fala	smallpox
thula	bindza/thula	be quiet
i-sonto / isi-khombisa	li-sontfo/si-khombisa	seven

Analysis

The preceding comparative presentation of phonetic, morphological, and lexical features of isiZulu and siSwati serves to identify some key differences that support the general argument that isiZulu and siSwati are sufficiently different to warrant the classification as different languages. Although Doke argued early in the twentieth century that siSwati was simply a dialect of isiZulu, most classification schemes differentiate the two (See Guthrie, NUGL, Maho, glottology.org).

- a. alphabet and click omissions
 - b. consonant substitution / deletion (e.g., t and z)
 - c. nasal substitution
 - d. Prefix Vowel Deletion/Addition and Substitution
 - e. adjectival and relative concord prefixes (l in siSwati, absent in isiZulu)
 - f. lexical differences
- b, d, e – suggests two different usage patterns – because one tends to be more complex than the other (stop vs. sibilant, ...)

Conclusion

The linguistic features discussed in this paper show some of the contrasts existing between siSwati and isiZulu. Differences between siSwati and isiZulu are regular and predictable in some cases but not in others. It is important to realize that siSwati and isiZulu are two different languages, neither one a dialect or version of the other.

Putting this structural relationship in an historical context, compared to siSwati isiZulu has a longer uninterrupted history as a written language. So, it has often crept into siSwati by way of books and newspapers. However, this is changing as siSwati is becoming more and more established as a written language. It is also important to acknowledge the autonomy of each language as they evolved each in its own way post the common-Nguni point of origin. For many centuries, siSwati developed on its own away from isiZulu save the intermittent contact that came with the constant intermarriages between the two empires. Positioning one as the subsidiary of the other does not have much of a historical linguistic basis.

Notes:

1. See population statistics and language classification in NUGL Online – Online version of the New Updated Guthrie List, a referential classification of Bantu languages compiled by Jouni Filip Maho, Dated 4 June 2009, p. 93 on Nguni Group S 42 Zulu, S 43 Swazi, Glottolog.org.
2. C.M. Doke, “The Linguistic Situation in South Africa,” *Journal of the International African Institute*, 1.4, (Oct 1928), 479 [478-485]
3. E.g., Guthrie, Maho’s NUGL, Glottolog.org
4. See also *Say It In Siswati* (Rycoft, 1979) and *Say It In Zulu: Shono Ngesizulu* (Rycoft & Ngcobo, 1979).

Bibliography:

- Canonici, Noverino, N. (1994). *The Nguni languages: a simple presentation and comparison of Zulu, Xhosa, Swati*. Durban: Department of Zulu Language and Literature, University of Natal, 78pp.
- Corum, C.W. (1976). *An Introduction to the Swazi (siSwati) Language*. Indiana University, African Studies Program.
- Dent, G.R. & Nyembezi, C.L.S. (2009). *Scholar's Zulu Dictionary*. Pietermaritzburg, SA: Shuter & Shooter.
- Doke, Clement M. (1927,1992). *Textbook of Zulu Grammar*. 6th ed. Cape Town: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Doke, C.M. (1928). The Linguistic Situation in South Africa, 1.4, 478-485.
- Donnelly, Simom. (1999). Southern Tekela Nguni is alive: reintroducing the Phuti language. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 136, 97-128. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Maho, Jouni Filip. (1995). Calculating differences in phonological features of consonant in a sample of 25 Bantu languages, 44+15pp.
- Maho, Jouni Filip. (2009). NUGL Online. The online version of the New Updated Guthrie List, a referential classification of Bantu Languages. Retrieved from Glottolog.org., December 17, 2018.
- Mooney, A & Evans, B. (2015). *Language, Society and Power*. London: Routledge.
- Mpunga wa Ilunga. (1995). *Description de la langue swati: bantou S43: grammaire et lexique*. Bruxelles: Univ, libre de Bruxelles. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Bruxelles, 671pp).
- Msimang, Christian Themba. (1989). *Some phonological aspects of the Tekela Nguni dialects*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of South Africa, UNISA, 341pp.).
- Nyembezi, C. L. S. *Learn Zulu*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1957.
- Rycroft, D.K. (1979). *Say It In Siswati*. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- Rycroft, D.K. & Ngcobo, A.B. (1979). *Say It In Zulu*. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- Rycroft, D.K. (2004). *Concise SiSwati Dictionary*. Pretoria, SA: J.L. van Schaik.
- Tak, Jin-Young. (2003). Verbal reduplication in some Bantu languages: a diachronic approach. *Eoneohag*, 35, 261-292.
- Van Herk, Gerard; (2018). *What is Sociolinguistics?* 2nd eedn., Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons.
- Ziervogel, D. & Mabuza, E, J. (1992). *A Grammar of the Swati Language SiSwati*, Pretoria, SA: J.L. van Schaik Ltd.
- Zungu, Phyllis, J. N. (1989) *Hlangwini: a Tekela-Nguni dialect and its relationship to 'Standard Zulu' and other Nguni dialects*. (MA thesis, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal, 234pp.).
- Zungu, Elphas Mahunyuzwa. (2000). *A Comparative phonological and morphological analysis of the North and South Lala dialects of Tekela Nguni*, (Doctoral dissertation, Univeristy of South Africa, UNISA, 181pp).