


Exploring the Use of an African Language in the Cinematic Sci-Fi Movie, *Black Panther*



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ABSTRACT

Black Panther is the first blockbuster science fiction film to be produced by Hollywood with a predominantly black cast, which places black people at the front and centre of futuristic worlds. The language used in *Black Panther* is the South African Nguni language, IsiXhosa. A survey of literature shows that there is scant research that has been done so far to explore the use of the African language and how the sci-fi movie preserves and promotes African languages, particularly isiXhosa. The aim of the study was to explore the use of the African language by young black South African viewers. This study also aimed to explore how the film preserves and promotes South African languages. The study employed a qualitative methodology to explore the promotion of the isiXhosa language in the film, specifically the audience reception method. The study used a cultural studies approach as its conceptual framework. The reception analysis consisted of focus group discussions as well as follow-up in-depth interviews. A purposive sampling method was employed to select its participants. The study found that cultures and languages have primarily been inferior to Western cultures and languages. The movie, however, challenges that notion by promoting and reflecting on African cultures, using a South African language. This study contributes towards critical studies in media and communication research that aims to understand audience consumption of media texts. This is achieved by providing insight into how and why audiences in specific social contexts make sense of media text and the use of African languages in media text.

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INTRODUCTION

The popular Marvel Studios' *Black Panther* movie opened to moviegoers on February 16, 2018. *Black Panther* was the first movie in the Marvel Cinematic movie to feature a black superhero, black director and a predominantly black cast.¹ The movie has been watched and loved by millions of moviegoers locally and globally and has received glowing reviews. It captures what it means to be black, by using an African language to tell an African story.

The movie portrays black people on screen as powerful and advanced and having a way of thinking about determination. *Black Panther* draws on the rich, layered concept of Afrofuturism, born out of black

¹ Matthew Babcock, David M Beskow, and Kathleen M Carley, "Beaten up on Twitter? Exploring Fake News and Satirical Responses during the *Black Panther* Movie Event," in *Social, Cultural, and Behavioral Modeling: 11th International Conference, SBP-BRIMS 2018, Washington, DC, USA, July 10-13, 2018, Proceedings 11* (Springer, 2018), 97–103.

artists imagining a possible new future.² The movie tells the story of King T'Challa, who becomes the king of Wakanda after his father, King T'Chaka, dies. T'Challa heads the kingdom of Wakanda, a nation with incredible wealth and prosperity and maintains insularity. Wakanda's prosperity comes from its supreme technology. Its culture is unique in that its women and men both serve important roles, and women warriors are the sole protectors of the king. The official language used in the movie is isiXhosa, one of the eleven official languages in South Africa. The language is spoken by almost eight million people in South Africa as a first language. This language was selected among other reasons because of John Kani, who portrayed T'Chaka as the father of T'Challa and the former king of Wakanda.³

There are no empirical studies known to the researcher which have examined how the movie promotes African languages. Other than for speculative conjectures and inferences drawn by scholars and writers from reading off meanings from texts, it is evident that there is little, or no research done as far as analysing and accounting for the promotion and preservation of African languages in the cinematic movie, *Black Panther*, taking into consideration the black South African viewers.⁴ To achieve the objectives, the study analyses the use of the African language by the producers of the movie as far as black South African viewers are concerned. This study further seeks to explore how international sci-fi film preserves and promotes South African languages. To analyse the use of the isiXhosa language in the cinematic sci-fi film, the study follows an audience reception analysis that suggests that the meaning of the text is not necessarily in the text/media but rather negotiated and constructed by socially situated audiences. The theory further emphasises the importance of the interpretation of the text by the reader.⁵

Describing Black Panther, The Movie

The movie *Black Panther* is a 2018 science fiction superhero film. According to Ferguson, "The *Black Panther* movie creates a credible alternative to colonialism, exploring an Afrofuturistic narrative of a country that had never been colonized and oppressed."⁶ Unlike other African countries, Wakanda (the kingdom) was able to fully explore the concept of self-determination, the process by which a country determines its own statehood, allegiance and government. This is visible on two different levels: isolationist economics and an untouched culture." The movie portrays black people on screen as powerful and advanced. "Black Panther draws on the rich, layered concept of Afrofuturism, born out of black artists imagining the endless possibilities of new futures."⁷ The movie uses the isiXhosa language as this fictional country's official language alongside English. This arguably allows the language to be ideologically positioned in the viewer's mind as an important aspect of the kingdom.

The Promotion of African Languages through Films

The Use of Official Languages Act 12 of 2012 has encouraged using indigenous languages to foster unity, coalition, and Ubuntu. Department of Sport, Arts and Culture DSAC's objective is to develop and promote all forms of indigenous languages, including sign language.⁸

According to Farma, film contributes to the promotion of African languages. It also portrays aesthetic aspects of humanity which cover language, narratives, visuals and sounds.⁹ African artists like Gaston Kaboré produced films that particularly promote African languages. His films used meaningful words, phrases, proverbs, and riddles that allowed audiences to discover and appreciate language. The titles of his films allowed audiences to appreciate language. Farma views language as a fundamental component that shapes films by carrying depth and authenticity rather than just translation.¹⁰ Films offered

² C. Loughrey, "Black Panther Brings Afrofuturism into the Mainstream," Independent, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/black-panther-afrofuturism-ryan-coogler-definition-explainer-watch-release-date-a8209776.html>.

³ Chelsea Avestruz, "Black Panther: What Language Is Spoken In Wakanda," Screen Rant, March 30, 2022, <https://screenrant.com/black-panther-movie-wakanda-language-xhosa-explained/>.

⁴ Délice Williams, "Three Theses about Black Panther," *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 11, no. 9 (2018): 27–30.

⁵ Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies* (NYU Press, 2005), 2.

⁶ D. Ferguson, "Marvel Embraces a Black Superhero: Black Panther' Review," International Policy Digest, 2018.

⁷ Loughrey, "Black Panther Brings Afrofuturism into the Mainstream."

⁸ Parliamentary Monitoring Group, "Presidential Employment Stimulus; African Languages; Music / Art / Flags in Schools; Community Libraries, with Minister," 2022.

⁹ Bamoussa Farma, "The Role of Cinema in the Promotion of African Languages and Aesthetics," *African Renaissance* 14, no. 3–4 (2017): 13–24.

¹⁰ Farma, "The Role of Cinema in the Promotion of African Languages and Aesthetics."

in African languages become carriers of the African heritage by expressing emotions and complex meanings that may be lost when presented in European languages. Using a native language in films connects audiences to their traditions, cultures and values. Audiences honour their roots and are reminded of the beauty and resilience of their shaped human experiences.¹¹

Languages in the New South African Constitution of 1996

The South African Constitution of 1996 Act No. 108 of 1996 is the supreme law of the country. It is the basis of public life in South Africa and reflects the hopes and aspirations of the country. The constitution, among other aspects, outlines the protection and preservation of all the South African languages.¹² The constitution was passed by the Constitutional Court on the 4th of December 1996 and then came into effect on 4 February 1997.¹³ In line with an overall vision for the new South Africa, Chapter 1 Section 6 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 states that: 6(1) “The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.” It further states in subsection (2) that it recognises the use and status of the previously diminished Indigenous languages of its people by taking practical and positive measures to lift their status and advance their use. Subsection (5) outlines how a Pan South African Language Board that was established by national legislation must: (a) promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of - (i) all official languages; (ii) the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and (iii) sign language. The subsection further alludes that the board (b) must promote and ensure respect for (i) all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu; and (ii) Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa.¹⁴

Understanding Audience Reception Studies

Silverstone views audience reception studies as a phenomenon that focuses on the interpretative relation between the audience and the text, where this relationship can be understood within a largely ethnographic context.¹⁵ Audience reception studies trace back to Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding model that suggests that text is polysemic and that meaning is not necessarily in the text but rather negotiated and constructed by socially situated audiences. Staiger stressed that the study puts great emphasis on the interpretation of text by the audience.¹⁶ The model further suggests that text may have the power to suggest certain meanings; however, audiences are active decoders and may not accept the preferred meanings.¹⁷

One needs to understand that audience studies do not only help to understand that text has more than a single meaning and that audiences are active decoders but also assist in understanding that audience interpretation and decoding are not entirely free and incidental for “In that case, they are not the only way to understand the power of the audience, but understanding the power of rhetoric.”¹⁸

Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Media

The study is largely influenced by the cultural study’s approach to the study of media. This approach was used to understand the relationship between media texts and audiences. The cultural studies approach to the study of media text views audiences as active decoders and media texts as having more than one interpretation.¹⁹ In making sense of the audience readings, the study employed a reception studies

¹¹ F. Odugbemi, “Africa Indigenous Language Films: Prospects and Imperatives,” *Naija Times*, July 11, 2023, <https://ntm.ng/2023/07/02/africa-indigenous-language-films-prospects-and-imperatives/>.

¹² Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, “The South African Constitution,” 2021, <https://www.justice.gov.za/constitution/index.html>.

¹³ Matthias Brenzinger, “Eleven Official Languages And More: Legislation And Language Policies In South Africa,” *Journal of Language & Law/Revista de Lengua i Dret*, no. 67 (2017).

¹⁴ *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 1996).

¹⁵ S. Silverstone, “Relationships between Media and Audiences: Prospects for Audience Reception Studies,” in *Media, Ritual and Identity: Essays in Honour of Elihu Katz*, ed. T. Liebes and J. Curran (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁶ Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, 2.

¹⁷ S. Hall, “Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Model,” *Communication Theory* 2, no. 3 (1980): 221–33.

¹⁸ Jens E Kjeldsen, *Rhetorical Audience Studies and Reception of Rhetoric: Exploring Audiences Empirically* (Springer, 2017).

¹⁹ R. Silverstone, “Television and Everyday Life: Towards Anthropology of the Television Audience,” in *Public Communication: The New Imperatives*, ed. M. Ferguson (London: Sage Publishers, 1990).

approach to explore the movie and further investigate how it preserves and promotes African languages, particularly isiXhosa.²⁰

METHODOLOGY

To analyse the movie and further investigate how it preserves and promotes African languages, particularly the isiXhosa language, the study employed a qualitative methodology. This methodology is useful in finding out how people feel or think about a specific subject.²¹ As recommended by Schroder, a reception analysis should be used when exploring meanings and experiences people create as a result of their contextualised encounters with media text.²²

The audience reception studies consisted of focus groups, a form of qualitative research, which Nieuwenhuis describes as a small group of people asking questions based on their beliefs, opinions and perceptions - to gain more knowledge on the research conducted.²³ A focus group is a form of qualitative research that will help gain an in-depth understanding of the interviewees' experiences, perceptions and opinions of the underlying issue. This kind of research tries to collect rich descriptive data with respect to a certain phenomenon.²⁴ The reason for this selection is that focus groups can receive a wide range of responses during one meeting. Participants can also ask each other questions, lessening the impact of researcher bias.²⁵

The study also used follow-up in-depth interviews to gather some of its data. This was conducted for participants selected from the focus groups who would have raised interesting views that could not have been pursued during a focus group. This was also to understand aspects that the researcher did not have time to ask. Zhang and Wildemuth describe unstructured interviews as those with questions and answers that are not predetermined; instead, they rely on social interaction between the researcher and the informant. This was used as a follow-up mechanism.²⁶

Focus group discussions are important in reception studies because they simulate the routine and usually inaccessible communication in which audiences construct meaning through everyday talk.²⁷ Focus group discussions were conducted after the film was viewed so that audiences could refresh their memory of the events and issues in Black Panther. Audience members viewed the Film as they would have in a normal viewing. This allowed them to experience and speak freely to the content.²⁸

The study adopted a purposive sampling method. The researcher made use of three focus groups which consisted of diverse participants who were chosen based on having previously watched the film, race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Each focus group discussion consisted of seven to ten participants which is the optimum number for focus group discussions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that cultures and languages have primarily been inferior to Western cultures and languages, the movie however, challenges that notion by promoting and reflecting on African cultures by using a South African language, isiXhosa. The use of the African language is a fundamental component that shapes films by carrying depth and authenticity rather than just translation.²⁹

²⁰ Sonia Livingstone, "Active Audiences? The Debate Progresses but Is Far from Resolved," *Communication Theory* 25, no. 4 (2015): 439–46.

²¹ Chakravanti Rajagopalachari Kothari, *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques* (New Age International, 2004).

²² Kim Christian Schröder et al., "Researching Audiences," 2003.

²³ J. Nieuwenhuis, "Introducing Qualitative Research," in *First Steps in Research*, ed. J. Nieuwenhuis, Revised Edition (Hatfield: Van Schaik Publishers, 2012), 15.

²⁴ J. Langford and D. McDonagh, *Focus Groups: Supporting Effective Product Development* (USA & London: Taylor & Francis, 2003).

²⁵ Catherine Dawson, *Practical Research Methods: A User-Friendly Guide to Mastering Research* (How to books, 2002).

²⁶ Y. Zhang and B. M. Wildemuth, "Qualitative Analysis of Content," in *Applications of Social Research Methods to Applications to Question in Information and Library Science*, ed. B. M. Wildemuth, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, 2017), 318–29.

²⁷ Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone, "Rethinking the Focus Group in Media and Communications Research," *Journal of Communication* 46, no. 2 (1996): 79–98; Livingstone, "Active Audiences? The Debate Progresses but Is Far from Resolved."

²⁸ Schröder et al., "Researching Audiences."

²⁹ Farma, "The Role of Cinema in the Promotion of African Languages and Aesthetics."

Restoring the Dignity of African Cultures

Participants opined that the use of African languages in the Black Panther movie restored the dignity of African cultures globally as it challenged the perceptions of Africa and its cultures. Participants feel that native languages in films protect their African heritage which could possibly fade away as the world changes. It is believed that these languages hold generational wisdom and knowledge that is important to our overall identity.³⁰

“It was nice seeing our cultures and language portrayed in a Hollywood film, who would have thought we would see our beautiful heritage on big screens watched globally? I loved that they had African costumes and music. It was nice forgetting about Western Cultures for a moment and embracing our own. Our culture has been given some relevance in the world and in that sense, it builds on the importance of our heritage. This is already showing us that our heritage will be restored and will live for years to come without being lost, our dependants and future generation will never be lost”.

A Repository of African Languages

The movie ensures the survival of African languages in the future and inspires the new generation to embrace and cherish their linguistic backgrounds. Participant F revealed that:

“Using isiXhosa in a big film like Black Panther does save our language from being instinctive and being influenced by Western cultures. By this, our language will not be forgotten for years to come, and that will protect our heritage as black Africans. So the movie restores and saves our languages as Africans from being something of the past, but something that will remain a part of us for years to come. From this our history, culture, values, and who we are as people is restored.

The Representation of a Powerful and Hopeful Africa

After watching the movie and enjoying the use of a South African language in Black Panther, the viewers felt that the use of isiXhosa depicted a powerful and hopeful Africa through culture and language, and not the narrative of a poor and dark continent. The movie provoked feelings of hope and positivity among these viewers.

This is reflected in the views of Participant J:

...they made it seem like Africa can be great, and it reminds me of the movie 2012. I don't know if you guys know it where the apocalypse where everyone dies. Everything is just destroyed. The only land that's left is Africa. Hence, everybody, whoever survived that, had to move to Africa, so Africa was the only thing in this whole world, and for me, it just takes me back to that. You know Africa is great. However, we are not being portrayed as a good continent because of many issues. But, still, we can be great and show it to the world. I saw the greatness of Africa, especially in the vibranium, that it was created in Africa, and it just has so much power, so I liked that.” (Cited in Sibiya, 2021).

“This Africa that I saw was amazing, it depicted a very powerful Africa. Using our African language was incredible for me because it showed that there is hope for our continent. This shows that we can be great, and we are recognised as a continent” (Participant B).

A Reflection on African Cultures

The study found that cultures and language in films reflect and depict African cultures by using a South African language, isiXhosa.

“As a black person living in South Africa, or even in the world was inferior, so having our African language used in an international sci-fi as big as Black Panther portraying our African culture and speaking one of our Nguni languages is a big thing. It has promoted our culture and put us on the map in a way. This was a nice way of reflecting on our African Culture”.

³⁰ Odugbemi, “Africa Indigenous Language Films: Prospects and Imperatives.”

The Focus on Blackness and Black People

The use of the isiXhosa language puts black people at the centre and forefront by putting some sort of importance on the language. The isiXhosa-speaking people in Black Panther were powerful and heroic. The film introduces black perspectives and stories to science fiction. Participant C shared the following:

“The fact that the isiXhosa language is used in the movie shows us the element of power amongst black people. A black person is portrayed as a hero in such a big film. For me this means that using our language shows how much we matter and how valued our traditions are around the globe.”

The Importance of African Culture

Black Panther shows that African cultures and traditions are still unbroken and recognised. There is still hope for the progression of its indigenous cultures. Black Panther removes the narrative of a helpless African culture and promotes an identity shift in black communities. Participant E shared the view that the film erases the misrepresentations of cultural minorities in Hollywood films by portraying their culture as equal and important.

“Our culture was given too much importance by using the isiXhosa language. We were seen as equal to other tribes when it came to international movies. This made us proud to be Africans, represented on a big stage. Finally, the black community was held in high regard. In reality, our cultures are devalued to be quite honest, any black culture is devalued, but this movie changed that by using our very own language and culture to portray power.”

Sense of Belonging and Inclusiveness

The findings show that participants were able to resonate a lot with the isiXhosa-speaking characters of the film, as it gave them a sense of belonging. Participant D shared the following:

“It felt great seeing my own language being portrayed in that manner considering how the world views Africa, so being in the spotlight in such a big Hollywood film created a sense of importance for our culture and language. Putting Africa on the map in that manner gives us that sense of belonging globally.”

Another participant was of the view that:

This also helps us as Africans know where we come from and where we are going. This brings inclusiveness to our culture and offers a sense of belonging.

The findings suggest that the popular sci-fi film preserves and promotes South African languages by reflecting on African cultures and using an African language that connects audiences to their traditions, cultures and values. Audiences are able to honour their roots and are reminded of the beauty and resilience of their heritage. The researcher strongly believes that using an indigenous language in an international film like Black Panther erases the narratives and perceptions about a hopeless Africa and gives hope to a heritage that could possibly fade away in future.

CONCLUSION

The paper aimed to analyse the use of the African language, isiXhosa by young black South African viewers. The study sought to explore how the popular international sci-fi film preserves and promotes South African languages and cultures. The findings of the study showed that the use of African language in a Hollywood film provokes several feelings among black South African viewers. African culture and language have always been inferior, particularly in Western cultures and languages, the movie, however, challenges that by using African languages and culture in an Afrofuturist film. The study revealed that using language in a film not only promotes and preserves language, but it gives the film more meaning and authenticity than just translation. Using a native language in films connects audiences to their traditions and values. Audiences are reminded of the authentic beauty and resilience of their shaped human experiences. The study was able to show that the use of African languages in Black Panther ensured the survival of African languages from disappearing in the future. It inspired the new generation to embrace and cherish their linguistic backgrounds. Using an African language is believed to hold generational

wisdom and knowledge that is important to Africans' overall identity. Not only that, but it also removes the negative perceptions about Africa and its people.

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