CHAPTER 1

GENERAL ORIENTATION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

1.1   INTRODUCTION

That language is a very important instrument through which human beings communicate is unquestionable. Through language, human beings share their experiences, feelings, thoughts and ideas. In support of this view about language, Mnisi (1992:14) paraphrases Cingo that:

> *"...the language of people is its chief medium of communication.*
> *Through their language people communicate their human*
> *experiences, feelings, thoughts and cultural development;*
> *in fact, it is a depository of the people's culture and traditions."*

The relationship between language and culture is echoed by Mokae in **"The Sowetan"** (August 5, 1995), who states that language is the carrier of culture.

In his article, **"Our Black Languages are Being Suffocated"**, Mangena (1995:49) also emphasizes the importance of language as he says:

> *"Language, just like knowledge, is power. If you take away or cripple the*
> *language of a people, you take away their power to interact effectively*
> *with their situation."*

Mangena's words sum up what language is. Language is a very powerful instrument through which man can do virtually anything.

Generally, the languages of people are adequate as instruments for the expression of peoples' communicative, psychological, social, cultural and learning needs. That is: it is generally not necessary to intervene in the life of a language – a language will adapt in a natural way to fulfil

the needs of its speakers.

However, in multilingual communities the "natural" way is often disturbed, since languages become symbols and instruments of power, become instruments of manipulation and oppression.

Such a disturbance of the "natural way of a language to adapt to fulfil the needs of its speakers" has happened, for example, in South Africa, where there is an a-symmetric relationship between many of the languages regarding their role in public domains of economic, military and political power with regard to the South African situation.

In the South African situation English, for instance is the language of economic, educational, political and social power, and African languages only have meaningful roles in personal, religious and cultural life. This has given rise to a hierarchy of unequal languages.

According to the Language Plan Task Group (LANGTAG) Report (1995), colonial and apartheid language policy, in concert with socio-economic and socio-political policy, gave rise to a hierarchy of unequal languages which reflected the structures of racial and class inequality that characterised South Africa.

In support of the LANGTAG Report, Shabangu (1992:20-21) observes that English and Afrikaans: "...*have long been favoured or imposed by force of conquest and given the status of officialdom...On the other hand, African languages were prejudiced and marginalised...*"

The fact that African languages have for a long time been neglected is also mentioned by **Pace** magazine (June 1993) in an article entitled "**Let's be proud of Black languages**". According to this article, the Black languages have not only been neglected, they have been despised as well.

The effects or symptoms of the long-standing suppression of African languages, are, among others, *radio stations dominated by foreign music* and *few newspapers and magazines published in African languages* (Mangena: 1995).

Mnisi (1992:14-15) also shares the views expressed by Shabangu, LANGTAG and Mangena but he argues that the speakers themselves hold the major key to the survival or death of their languages as he says:

> *"Cingo... points out that nothing will destroy the African languages if the*
> *people who speak them do not wish to see them destroyed. Conversely,*
> *nothing will preserve these languages if the people who speak them don't*
> *wish to preserve them...If the African languages as such are held in*
> *contempt by the African people themselves, it will be difficult for them to*
> *attain respectable status."*

It seems that some African language speakers themselves now look down upon their languages. In Mangena's words (1995:49):

> *"Politicians are the worst culprits when it comes to neglecting indigenous*
> *languages. Only a tiny minority among them can address a meeting in*
> *an African language without resorting to English terms."*

Surely the messages of these politicians can be grasped more easily if they are conveyed in African languages as English is not the first language of the intended recipients of the message. This lack of understanding of the message being conveyed in English to those African language speakers is one of the reasons that made it difficult to curb violence as speakers misunderstood the message their leaders communicated with them. The message can still be misunderstood if translated as the meaning tends to be lost in the process of conversion from the original language to the language of the listener. (Pace: 1993 June).

In some *sophisticated* and *intellectual* black families, black languages have ceased to exist and have been replaced by English. There are also those blacks who appear to be embarrassed and even afraid to speak their mother tongue, or to be associated with their ethnic group. (Pace: 1993 June).

This feeling of low-esteem and inferiority complex among African languages speakers in South Africa is a direct result of the long standing oppression and neglect of African languages in South Africa. Indeed there is a general feeling among these African language speakers that mastery of their own languages would not lead them to full participation in education, economics, politics, social life, etc. Mastery of an African language in South Africa does not lead to employment in most cases.

In contexts such as this (a-symmetric power relations between languages) it is necessary for governments to intervene in the linguistic lives of their people, and governments have to make sure that the languages of its people perform the necessary functions in public life, that is, are available for use in education, the economy, politics, social life, etc. This area of government is known as *language management*.

South Africa has a long history of language management, starting with the Dutch colonists in 1652, who promoted the use of Dutch in government, trade and industry, etc. In the case of the African languages the missionaries played an important role in the middle of the 19th century. In 1910, when white people obtained political control of South Africa, English, Dutch and later Afrikaans, were strongly promoted by the relevant governments, and after 1948, when the white Afrikaner obtained political control, Afrikaans was strongly promoted.

The conclusion to be drawn from the historical background given here is that colonisation is responsible for the level of development of African languages.

Whereas language management in the case of the African languages had already begun during the times of the missionaries, language management of the African languages by the government began in earnest after 1948 (probably more specifically about 1953), when the government established what were first called language committees and later language boards.

Until 1994 language management served the exclusive rights of the white governments and churches, and the management of African languages was handled in the degree to which such

management supported the political interests of these governments.

In 1994, however, a democratic political set-up was established, which meant that the interests of all the people of South Africa were to be served, and not only the former ruling minority white South Africans. As far as language management is concerned, this means that government intervention in the promotion of the African languages must be considered, if necessary. No language must be neglected. All languages must be developed so as to serve their speakers effectively. (Pace: 1993 June).

1.2 CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM

1.2.1 South Africa's African languages

According to the **Founding Report of the Northern Province Language Council** (1997:2), Act No. 200, of 1993 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa "…*provided for eleven main languages of South Africa as the country's official languages.* " The eleven languages are listed by both the Founding Report of the **Northern Province Language Council** (1997) and **Die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns** (1993) as follows: Afrikaans, English, siSwati, siXhosa, siZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Ndebele, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga.

According to Mawasha (1990:13):

> *"History has created a situation in which Black South Africans*
> *often find themselves speaking more energetically and perhaps*
> *even acting with greater determination about English and*
> *Afrikaans than they do about indigenous languages."*

Mawasha (1990:9) further explains that: *"in the context of South Africa as elsewhere in Anglophone Africa, English is a colonial language."*

With regard to Afrikaans Mawasha (1990:11) says the language was perceived as the language of the *"oppressor, the language of oppression..."*

In this study, focus is on the management of the nine African languages which had until 1994 been disadvantaged and neglected by the former government. Alexander (1996:5) implies that these African languages had been neglected in the past as he says:

> *"...the GNU is contemplating the subsidisation of dictionary projects*
> *for all the official languages in the country and not only for the*
> *Afrikaans and English as was the case in the past."*

According to the LANGTAG report (1996:8):

> *"Colonial and apartheid language policy, in concert with socio-economic,*
> *and socio-political policy, gave rise to a hierarchy of unequal languages*
> *which reflected the structures of racial and class inequality that characterise*
> *South African society. The dominance of English – and later of Afrikaans –*
> *was sustained systematically in order to reinforce other structures of*
> *domination. These practices engendered the corollary low status of the*
> *indigenous languages and varieties of the African people..."*

This statement underscores the fact that indigenous languages in South Africa were neglected before the dawn of the new democratic order.

An analysis of language management in South Africa is clearly necessary. This is thus the problem which this thesis wishes to address. What can language management do to correct the past imbalances, the existing a-symmetric power relations between the languages of the country? This thesis wishes to make a contribution in this regard.

1.2.2 Xitsonga as one of South Africa's African languages

The issue of language management in a democratic South Africa is a huge and complex matter which cannot be covered in a masters study. So it was decided that a case study should be undertaken of the language management of one of the present official languages of South Africa, namely Xitsonga.

There are two primary reasons for selecting Xitsonga as a case study. Firstly, although in general all the African languages of South Africa have been affected by the a-symmetric power relations discussed in 1.1, Xitsonga seems to have been much more affected than most of the other African languages. This view is expressed by a number of people. Shabangu (1992:21), for example, speaking about the Xitsonga language, says:

> *"As you may certainly be aware, a lot of harm and injustice has been done to our language and culture during those days when we waited for other nations to write about us and write for us for their own convenience. Even today, what I am saying is still happening..."*

Mulaudzi (1994:14) says:

> *"...like most other things that come and go, language can come and go, become moribund, with all its rich vocabulary. It is easy to destroy a language: get all those who are gifted to dump it as their mother tongue. Bar it from the national television networks. Those who are bright enough to be actors will have to immerse themselves in other languages. Thus, no actors, no TV announcers, no drama script writers, nothing. ...I am talking about Venda and Tsonga languages that will soon become extinct..."*

In an article on **Some Languages,** the **"City Press"** of 10 April 1995 states implicitly that the Xitsonga and Tshivenda languages are looked down upon and that the reason for this attitude could be the relative small number of the people who speak these languages. Indeed **"The**

Sowetan" of 3 September 1996 in an article entitled "'The man with a golden voice' fitted in well on SABC" alludes to the fact that Xitsonga is a **minority** language by saying that in the years gone by it would be a criminal offence to feature minority languages on the screens of the SABC. This article is mainly about a continuity programme presenter who renders the service in Xitsonga.

It is perhaps fitting to define the concept "minority language". Richards et.al.(1985:170) define a minority language as: **"A language spoken by a group of people who form a minority within a country..."**

Whether Xitsonga, one of the eleven official languages in South Africa, is a "minority" language, is debatable. The debate about whether Xitsonga is indeed a **minority** language or not is carried over to the second chapter (see 2.9.1). But rightly or wrongly, the perception of some people is that Xitsonga is a minority language.

The editorial note on the LANGTAG report (1996) refers to Xitsonga as a "marginalised" language as follows:

> *"It was therefore decided that the overview of the final LANGTAG report should be made available not only in English, but also in an Nguni and Sotho language, Afrikaans and two of the particularly marginalised African languages, Venda and Tsonga.*

In most international lingusitic literature such as the **Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics** by Richards, Platt and Weber, the concept **"marginalise"** is not discussed or even defined. The **Chambers English Dictionary** (1990:872) says **"to marginalise"** is to: "...*push to the edges of society*".

The concept does not sound positive about the Vatsonga people and their language if viewed in this sense. The LANGTAG report (1995) however, uses the concept freely as in the following instance:

> *"...The smaller and more marginalised African languages remain invisible in comparison with the larger languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi and Tswana."*

Whether the concept is offensive to the Xitsonga speakers or not is not the issue at this stage. What is at issue here is the fact that in South Africa, Xitsonga is perceived by certain individuals and groups such as the LANGTAG Committee in a way that is different to other languages such as Zulu and Tswana. For this reason, Xitsonga is used as a case study in this study.

The second reason for selecting Xitsonga as a case study is that the language is accessible to the researcher. The researcher resides in Giyani, a place whose inhabitants are predominantly Xitsonga speaking.

This case study wishes to focus on three matters relevant to language management in South Africa. These matters are:

Language management for Xitsonga before 1994

Language management for Xitsonga in democratic South Africa, and

The reception of language management in the Xitsonga speaking community of

South Africa.

1.2.3 Language management for Xitsonga before 1994

The main structures that were entrusted with the language management before the democratic elections in 1994 were language committees and later Language Boards. The Language Boards were established along ethnic lines to manage the different languages.

The functions of the Language Boards were:

*controlling and cultivating the development of the languages, literature and
    culture;

*developing terminology;

*setting spelling rules;

*selecting books for use in schools and colleges, etc.

In short, the Language Boards were responsible for the development, standardisation and codification of individual languages.

As Xitsonga language is the case study, the spotlight will specifically be on the Tsonga Language Board. (Although speakers of the Xitsonga language use the word Xitsonga, the word "Tsonga" will be used alongside it as it was used historically). The role of the Xitsonga Language Board is articulated by Mnisi (1992:13/15) at the inauguration of the Tsonga Language Board on 24 September as follows:

> *"I consider the Board's principal function to be that of guardian and*
> *custodian of our language...I believe the inauguration of this Board is an*
> *attempt to preserve cultural identity, to develop our language and to*
> *cultivate a sense of pride in our language."*

1.2.4 Language management for Xitsonga in democratic South Africa

The Language Boards were formally disbanded in 1996 as recommended by the LANGTAG report (1995:20) as follows:

> *"Language development should be centralised. This implies*
> *that language development should be handled by a single*
> *body...and that the old Language Boards should be closed*
> *down."*

In democratic South Africa, the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) is the body that has been entrusted with language management.

1.2.5 The reception of language management in the Xitsonga-speaking community of South Africa.

As Xitsonga is the topic for the case study, an analysis of language management in South Africa includes the reception of language management in the Xitsonga-speaking community.

These are the three matters that this case study seeks to focus on.

In the attempt to provide a description of language management, using Xitsonga as a case study, some terms that are used frequently in this study are described below.

1.3 TERMINOLOGY

In this chapter, attempts at defining and describing the terms **minority** and **marginalised** have already been made. Other relevant terms that need to be clarified as they are used frequently in this study are:

Official language: According to **Die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns** (1993:Annexture 2 page 1), Unesco defines an "Official language" as a language that is used "in the business of government - legislative, executive and judicial". "It is the language that is used in the courts of law and in the official business. In multilingual countries there may be more than one official language, and then official language is used rather than national language."

In this study, the term is used as defined here.

Mother tongue: In this study, this term is used to refer to the language someone acquires as it is spoken in the family.

Language management: In this study, this term is used to refer to the process of formulating the goals of the language, determining its mission and vision, allocating resources to deal with norms and standards in

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spelling and orthography, lexical use, promotion of social status,
functional role in public life and exercising control by ensuring that
the goals of the language are pursued and that any deviation is corrected.

Language Board: In this study, this term refers to the body that is entrusted with the
responsibility of handling language management.

1.4 INFORMATION COLLECTION

Information on this topic of this research will be gathered through (a) a survey of the literature
on language management, (b) consultation of official documents (mainly the minutes, etc. of the
Xitsonga Language Board), and (c) information obtained through a questionnaire directed at
determining the knowledge speakers of Xitsonga (and others who have knowledge about the
Xitsonga Language Board) have of the Xitsonga Language Board.

1.5 ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS

In Chapter One, the background of the problem is discussed. This is followed by a description of
the context of the problem as well as the statement of the problem.

In Chapter Two, Xitsonga as the language chosen as a case study of the management of African
languages is described. The description of the language includes the history of the language and
its people; the structures involved in the management and development of the language as well
as the functions of the language.

In Chapter Three, the Xitsonga Language Board as a body that was created to develop the
Xitsonga language is discussed. The difficulties experienced by the Xitsonga Language Board as
well as the achievement of the Xitsonga Language Board are discussed.

In Chapter Four, the research design is outlined. The data obtained is analysed in Chapter
Four as well.

The present set-up of language management is discussed in Chapter Five. The focus is on the structures that replaced the Xitsonga Language Board as well as the processes that were pursued in replacing the Xitsonga Language Board.

In Chapter Six the data analysed in Chapter Five is interpreted. The interpretation is done after a summary of the entire research project has been provided.