

## Similarities and differences between varieties of speech: Expressions of language ideologies and attitudes in four Namibian communities

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### Abstract

In attempts to determine what a so-called “language” and what a so-called “dialect” is, the linguistic criterion of mutual intelligibility has frequently been stressed for the latter (e.g. Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000; Heine & Nurse 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; Wolff 2000, 2016; Lewis et al. 2016). In general, this terminological dilemma cannot be solved as no clear-cut description exists. Therefore, the terms *variety* or *speech form* have been used. Still, further illumination on these concepts is needed as they occupy an important position in linguistic studies, especially with regards to language attitudes and behaviour. In the following, the “language” / “dialect” distinction shall be assessed in the Namibian sociolinguistic context. In this discussion, theoretical approaches will be combined with expressions of language attitudes and ideologies, focusing on mutual intelligibility. These expressions are taken from 77 semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews conducted in four Namibian communities in early 2015.

**Keywords:** Namibia, dialect, language, attitudes, ideologies

### 1. Introduction

So far, several attempts to define “language” and “dialect” have been put forward. However, definitions of what a “language” and what a “dialect” is frequently overlap and the terms “languages” and “dialects” have been applied and used interchangeably for the same variety, depending mainly on policy makers in so-called nation states. This tends to imply a certain regional, linguistic or ethnic superiority of one group or region over another (Alexander 1989: 8, 79; Heine & Nurse 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000: 29; Wolff 2016: 290 and following.). In particular, African speech forms cannot be defined by European terms and standards as has often been the case. Wolff (2000) points to the diverging uses of “language” and “dialect” in Europe and Africa:

[W]e still hear people say that compared to Europe with its sixty or so ‘languages’, Africa has about 2,000 or more ‘dialects’. This implies a linguistic as well as cultural superiority of Europe over Africa and an (often subconscious) attempt to belittle African languages and cultures. The reasons given are often related to factors such as writing traditions and standardization: a proper ‘language’ in this evaluative sense has a standard or high variety and a relatively long history of writing – a ‘dialect’ has neither of these. (Wolff 2000: 300)

Accordingly, a number of African varieties have not been considered “languages” since they are solely spoken ones that are neither codified nor standardised, i.e. no standard orthography for this speech form has been developed and officially accepted (yet) (Töttemeyer 2009: 8).

Usually, three factors are specified to distinguish “language” from “dialect”: “the *linguistic* criterion of mutual intelligibility, the *political* criterion of distribution over national territories and the *historical* criterion of divergent development from a common origin, plus the explanatory model of so-called *dialect continua*” (Wolff 2016: 289 [o.e.]).

The model of *dialect continua* or *dialect chains* proposes that differences between “dialects” are not clear-cut but rather embedded in a continuum with mutually unintelligible “dialects” at the periphery and intermediate ones in-between. There is no clear boundary between them (Wolff 2016: 292 and following; see also Heine & Nurse 2000).

The *historical* classification considers “language” change with ensuing “language” diversity, i.e. mutually intelligible “dialects” developing into individual “languages”. Wolff (2016: 291 and following) gives the Indo-European family tree model as an example here. This argument has been evaluated as ambiguous by Skutnabb-Kangas (2000: 6-9), for example.

The *political* criterion assumes a “language” to be based in one country, grounded on the concept of the *nation state*, which can be considered a rather absurd term to use in an African country like Namibia (Alexander 1989: 10), but also in European (officially) multilingual nations like Belgium. In this light, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) emphasises the political role of “languages” as the most important argument:

In fact the main criterion for whether something is a dialect of another language or a separate language (and what is being standardized, what not) is the relative political power of the speakers of that language/dialect. The decisions about what are ‘languages’ and what are not are thus political decisions. (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 15)

Consequently, the political power of the entity that categorises linguistic varieties always plays a significant role in this terminological challenge (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 16). Generally, this political principle can be contradicted by dialect continua at the German-Dutch border and the Sotho languages Sesotho, Sepedi and Setswana, for instance (Wolff 2016: 290 and following; see also Alexander 1989: 8). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000: 6-9) reasons that people at national borders understand each other despite these political hindrances. Hence, national status contributes to a variety being treated as a “language” and not a “dialect” (Heine & Nurse 2000). Alexander (1989) stresses this challenging political criterion, describing the difficulties of differentiating “languages”:

However, “languages” become such not simply because sounds produced by human beings are understood by others, they get definition in the course of

class struggles in the history of peoples. “A language”, in other words, is usually the result of political and economic developments in an area and not simply of particular rules of grammar and syntax. (Alexander 1989: 79)

Finally, the *linguistic* principle states that the membership of varieties, i.e. “dialects” and speech forms of one “language”, is based on mutual understanding (Wolff 2016: 289; see also Heine & Nurse 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 6-9; Lewis et al. 2016). It suggests that speakers of “dialects” can usually understand each other. However, mutual intelligibility is generally difficult to determine; relationships between “dialects” are hard to define. Moreover, the criterion ignores the recourse to standard forms when speakers are misunderstood or not understood (Wolff 2016: 289). In this light, Heine & Nurse (2000) outline that “dialects” tend to be defined by being local, spoken but not written and deviating from the standard. Webb & Kembo-Sure (2000: 29) add to this and specify “dialects” as “varieties of a language used in specific geographical areas or by particular social groups” (see also Heine & Nurse 2000).

Standardisation is listed as another criterion for the “dialect” “language” distinction and suggests that only the standardised and codified linguistic forms could be called “languages” (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 13; see also Heine & Nurse 2000). Similarly, Webb & Kembo-Sure (2000: 28) state that “language” mostly refers to “proper language” or “correct language” or “standard language”, these being forms mainly imposed by teachers. However, this description would exclude vernaculars and other varieties that do not conform to the standard (Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000: 28 and following). Therefore, Wolff (2016: 290) disapproves of both the linguistic as well as the standardisation criterion, as it does not treat varieties of speech equally.

Overall, “[a] particular linguistic variety may [...] be categorized by one linguist as a language and by another as a dialect” (Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000: 29). Consequently, different terms have been used. Maho (2003: 640 and following), for example, refers to varieties that have been called “dialects” as “sub-entities” (see also Guthrie 1948, 1967-1971). Other terms used instead of “language” and “dialect” are *speech form* and *variety*, as, for example, used by Heine & Nurse (2000). They see “languages” and “dialects” placed on a continuum, comparable to the *dialect continua* or *dialect chains* explained above:

A common situation is a string of similar varieties, in which the speakers of variety A understand those of adjacent B, who in turn understand those of C, and so on, but the speakers of A do not understand speakers of the variety at the other end of the continuum, or even those part away along. (Heine & Nurse 2000: 2)

This continuum will be further assessed in the following by analysing potential mutual intelligibility among the varieties spoken in Namibia.

In general, it can be argued that terminological attempts put forward to define “languages” and “dialects” have failed, both in and outside Africa (Heine & Nurse 2000). National borders, mutual understanding, codification, standardisation, functions, diversity and continua, and status have been suggested as criteria for defining what a “language” or a “dialect” could be. Nevertheless, none of these seem clear-cut as varieties are not static systems but dynamic in character. In the end, the “language” / “dialect” distinction tends to remain a question answered by policy makers of different “nation states” (Alexander 1989: 8, 79; see also Heine & Nurse 2000; Wolff 2016: 290 and following).

In the following, the terminological dilemma of defining “languages” and “dialects” shall be further illuminated, as applied to the Namibian context. In this connection, language attitudes and ideologies expressed by Namibians will be assessed since these form part of the speakers’ identities. Emphasis will be placed on Bantu varieties since most speakers of the corpus data at hand use a Bantu variety of speech as their first language (L1). Among others, this terminological discussion is key for studies on linguistic and ethnic identities, language attitudes and ideologies (Tophinke & Ziegler 2006; Arendt 2011).

## **2. Varieties of speech in Namibia**

For Namibian speech forms, the terms “language” and “dialect” have been applied interchangeably and contradictorily in several linguistic and anthropological studies, e.g. Knappert (1981), Brock-Utne (2000), Nampala & Shigwedha (2006), and Ejikeme (2011: 16) (see also Maho 1998: 21 and following for this terminological challenge). Thus, it is said that the linguistic repertoire of Namibia ranges from 10 to 30 “languages” (Maho 1998). In this discussion, Brock-Utne (2000: 195) refers to the apartheid policy as a reason for different categorisations: “It must have suited the divide and rule of the apartheid policy to keep the two dialects [Oshindonga and Oshikwanyama] as separate written languages. The more separate they were, the easier a policy of divide and rule would work”. After independence, this policy was continued, regardless of the new policy of “unity in diversity” (Brock-Utne 2000: 195). Hence, the political component is evident in defining linguistic forms in Namibia as well.

The Namibian constitution does not list speech forms used in Namibia at all (Government of Namibia 1990). However, the latest Population and Housing Census refers to different “languages”, e.g. “San languages”; “Caprivi languages”; “Otjiherero languages”; “Kavango languages”; “Oshiwambo languages”; “Other European languages”; “Other African languages”; and “Other Asian languages”. Few of the speech forms used in Namibia are named individually, respectively without reference to potential “sub-entities”, e.g. Nama/Damara, Setswana, Afrikaans, German and English (NSA 2011: 68). Furthermore, Namibia’s language policy lists the following thirteen varieties as “languages” to be offered as subjects at school: Afrikaans, English, German, Khoekhoegowab (Nama/Damara), Oshikwanyama, Oshindonga, Otjiherero, Ruciriku, Rukwangali, Setswana, Silozi, Thimbukushu and Jul’hoan. All of them have to be treated equally according to the policy document (MoEC 1993: 5-7).

Maho (1998: 22 and following)<sup>1</sup> calls this list “a functional view” as only varieties with an official status as national language are mentioned. Thus, they can be used in education, broadcasting and administration in Namibia and an official orthography was developed for all of them (Maho 1998: 23). Maho (1998: 28 and following) refers to the varieties used in Namibia as “languages/dialects” or “a cluster of dialects or languages”, i.e. he does not distinguish between the two terms. He divides the varieties into three parts: Bantu, Khoesaaan and Indo-European “languages”. Bantu “languages” comprise the speech forms used by the Owambos, Ovahereros, Kavangos, people from the Zambezi, formerly called Caprivi, and Tswanas. He states that each of the eight Owambo kingdoms, that is Uukwanyama, Ondonga, Ongandjera, Uukwambi, Uukwaluudhi, Ombalanhu, Uukolonkazi and Eunda, “has its own language/dialect, although all of them are more or less mutually intelligible” (Maho 1998: 31).<sup>2</sup> Of these varieties, Oshikwambi, Oshindonga, and Oshikwanyama have been codified, the latter two standardised as well (Maho 1998: 21, 31). Among the Ovahereros, Maho (1998: 34 and following) distinguishes between the “dialect” and “norm variety” Otjiherero, the “dialect” Otjimbanderu, and three “dialect zones” of Kaokoland Otjiherero. Moreover, Maho (1998: 40-44) lists Shishambyu, Rumanyo, Rukwangali, Thimbukushu and Rugciriku as “languages” used by the Kavangos; the latter three have also been recognised as national languages. In the Zambezi Region, formerly called Caprivi, Maho (1998: 47-52) locates six “languages”, that is Cisubiya, Chifwe, Shiyeyi, Chitotela, Mbalangwe and Silozi, of which only the latter is standardised and serves as a lingua franca in that area. In addition, the “language” Setswana is mentioned, which has been standardised and is mainly spoken in Botswana and South Africa (Maho 1998: 52, 54). Along with Setswana, Bakgalakgadi is also referred to as a “language” but it is not standardised and not much has been published on it (yet) (Maho 1998: 55).

As “Khoesaaan languages”, Maho (1998: 100, 105-118) considers Khoekhoegowab, !Kung, Kxoe, Naro, and !Xóǀ. Additionally, “dialects” of Khoekhoegowab are listed, i.e. Hailom Damara, Sesfontein Damara, Namidama, Central Damara and Nama (Maho 1998: 106). As “dialect clusters” of !Kung, Northern, Central and Southern !Xúũ are mentioned (Maho 1998: 113).

Lastly, Maho (1998: 161) includes Indo-European “languages” into his account of “languages of Namibia”, that is, Afrikaans, German, English and Portuguese. He does not provide further differentiations of the “languages”, such as “dialects”; nonetheless, he states that they have influenced each other but also Bantu and Khoesaaan languages and vice

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<sup>1</sup> Maho (1998) seems a reliable source on the account of Namibian “languages”. Apart from the *Ethnologue* no detailed sources on Namibian varieties are known to the present author.

<sup>2</sup> Therefore, language harmonisation has been suggested for Namibian Bantu languages, including Rukwangali, Rugciriku, Thimbukushu, Otjiherero, Silozi and Setswana, apart from the Oshiwambo varieties (Brock-Utne 1997: 244; see also Brock-Utne 2000: 195). In addition, harmonisation of Namibian Bantu and Khoi and San languages was discussed at a meeting of the Ministry of Education in Namibia in 2013 (Banda 2016: 259-261); however, no further attempts have been made in this direction, according to my knowledge.

versa. Hence, Namibia's Indo-European languages "have [...] developed various regional characteristics" (Maho 1998: 161).<sup>3</sup>

The *Ethnologue* gives a similar account of the many "languages" of Namibia. On the country profile, the *Ethnologue* lists 27 individual, living languages for the country of Namibia: "Of these [27 languages], 22 are indigenous and 5 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 6 are institutional, 10 are developing, 8 are vigorous<sup>4</sup>, and 3 are in trouble" (Lewis et al. 2016). Most of the "languages" listed by the *Ethnologue* are similar to Maho's (1998) account. Differences include the addition of Jul'hoansi, Mashi, Namibian Sign Languages and Zemba as "languages" (Lewis et al. 2016); they were not detected as such in Maho (1998). Besides, Maho (1998) lists Rumanyo and Gciriku as two "languages" whereas the *Ethnologue* lists them as the same with alternate names. A similar approach is taken towards Kuhane, which is listed as a "language" in the *Ethnologue* with alternate names, such as Subiya and Mbalangwe (Lewis et al. 2016). Maho (1998), however, mentions these two as separate "languages". Hailom Damarais is listed as a "dialect" of Khoekhoegowab by Maho (1998), whereas the *Ethnologue* lists Hailom as a "language" on its own. Moreover, Portuguese, Oshinganyera, Oshikwaludhi, Oshikolonkazi, Oshieunda, Chitotela and Bakgalakadi are not listed in the *Ethnologue* (Lewis et al. 2016).

In general, the acknowledgment of most of these varieties as "languages" rather than "dialects" seems to recognise their speakers' identities and not to follow a view in which, for instance, only codified linguistic varieties count as "languages" (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 13). Therefore, it is possible that different speech communities are more valued, including their potential contribution to linguistic belonging. Then again, this classification might date back to the missionaries who codified some of the Namibian speech forms in order to spread the Christian beliefs (Bamgbose 1991: 136; Brock-Utne 1997: 245 and following; Brock-Utne 2000: 195; Nampala & Shigwedha 2006: 117). This might be the case with Namibia's national languages as all of them are codified and standardised (NSA 2011). Overall, clear-cut definitions do seem neither feasible nor applied as such in the Namibian linguistic situation, also due to the lack of more recent publications on Namibian speech forms.

### 3. Expressions of language ideologies and attitudes

As discussed above, mutual intelligibility of so-called "dialects" has been considered ambiguous as a criterion to differentiate between speech forms (Heine & Nurse 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 6-9; Wolff 2016: 289). With regards to the Namibian linguistic situation, mutual understanding of different varieties, such as Oshikwanyama, Oshindonga, Rukwangali, Ruciriku, Thimbukushu, Otjiherero, Silozi and Setswana, has been mentioned in connection to "language" harmonisation for educational purposes, for

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<sup>3</sup> These regional characteristics of English(es) have been extensively analysed in the field of *World Englishes*. See Steigertahl (2017) for Namibian characteristics of English(es).

<sup>4</sup> *Vigorous* here means that "[t]he language is used for face-to-face communication by all generations and the situation is sustainable" (Lewis et al. 2016). Kuhane, also called Subiya, is one example of a vigorous "language". It is spoken, but not codified.

instance (Brock-Utne 1997: 244; Brock-Utne 2000: 195). Terminologically, this sounds rather odd if all of these varieties are seen as “languages”. However, this has also been expressed by Namibians themselves. In the following, language ideologies and attitudes as expressed by Namibian interviewees during a field trip in February and March 2015 shall be further assessed.

### **3.1. Data collection and methodology**

For my PhD project on a link between the variety status of the English(es) spoken and the educational policy in post-independence Namibia, I conducted 77 one-on-one semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews with 77 Namibians in four Namibian communities and their surrounding areas: Ruacana (Rua), Divundu (Div), Gobabis (Gob), and Usakos (Usa)<sup>5</sup>. These settings were chosen as they represent Namibian towns of an average size which are not chiefly influenced by the tourism industry, i.e. the majority of the residents are Namibians who primarily communicate with Namibians.

For practical reasons of trust and accessibility, the 77 participants were contacted through the friend-of-a-friend approach, also called “snowball sample” (Meyerhoff et al. 2012: 128). The interviews were semi-structured, i.e. guided by both interviewee and interviewer, so as to give the formal setting of the interview a more relaxed character. To let the speakers focus more on content instead of speech, the interviews were of a natural character and the interviewer included her own interests and experiences (Labov 1972; Schilling 2013: 6 and following). In this way, the distance between interviewee and interviewer was decreased (Feagin 2004: 29; see also Schilling 2013: 178, 203).

The purpose of the interviews was primarily elicitation of spontaneous speech in order to analyse the morphosyntax of the English(es) spoken in Namibia. In addition, expressions of language attitudes were encouraged and assessed through a content-based approach afterwards. Hence, questions on language use were included. The participants were selected on the basis of Namibian citizenship, that they were at least 16 years of age and had sufficient English(es) proficiency so that a conversation between me as a researcher of English studies and the participant was possible. The age of the interviewees ranges between 17 and 53 years, with a mean age of 29. Nearly half of the interviewees were between 17 and 25 years old. 52% of the interviewees are female (f) and 48% are male (m). Many participants were teachers, learners, students, or working in the hospitality sector<sup>6</sup>. Thus, they give a realistic cross-section of Namibian society. The L1s of the participants

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<sup>5</sup> Two interviews were conducted in Windhoek. However, Ruacana, Usakos, Divundu and Gobabis served as the main settings for the project. Locations were, of course, also included; however, the names of the bigger towns shall be mentioned here for a better geographical overview and to avoid confusion. The interviews accompanied questionnaires on language use and attitudes. Over 300 questionnaires were distributed and 263 were evaluated for further analyses in the PhD project. These, however, are not of importance in this paper and will thus not be further discussed here. For more details, see Steigertahl (2017).

<sup>6</sup> To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, their exact professions are excluded from the study.

comprised Oshiwambo varieties<sup>7</sup> (32%), Rukavango varieties (18%), Khoekhoegowab (18%), Otjiherero (14%), Zambezi varieties (12%), Oshiwambo/Silozi (1%), Oshiwambo/Rukavango varieties (1%), Afrikaans (1%) and English (1%)<sup>8</sup>. Most interviewees belong to the ethnic group of their respective L1. In addition, they speak several other varieties as L2, L3, L4 etc. Sometimes the boundaries between the different language practices are not clear, e.g. in interethnic households where several varieties are spoken at home. Besides, code switching and mixing is a frequent practice in multilingual Namibia.

All the 77 interviews were recorded and then orthographically transcribed to compile the corpus of *English(es)<sup>9</sup> Spoken by Black<sup>10</sup> Namibians Post Independence (ESBNaPI)*. This micro-corpus consists of 190,000 spoken words (excluding my speech as the interviewer) and makes up 28.5 hours of recorded speech. Hence, the corpus includes only English(es) spoken by Namibians. The focus being on spoken data, a written component is not included. For practical reasons, each interview lasted around 20 minutes on average. Back-channeling and filled pauses were transcribed, such as *eh*, *ehm*, *ah*, *oh*, *uh*. Further mark-up conventions can be seen in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Mark-up Conventions used for *ESBNaPI* (see du Bois 2006)**

Mark-up	Function
[ ]	overlap
[[ ]]	added text for improved understanding of context
[...]	content left out
.	terminative tone
,	continuative tone
!	exclamation tone
?	appeal tone
/	truncated intonation unit
wor-	truncated word
@	laugh
@word	laughing word
((COUGH))	vocalism
#	unintelligible syllable

<sup>7</sup> For statistical reasons, but also due to the more general answers given by the interviewees, different varieties are summed up under one name as a cluster.

<sup>8</sup> Percentages are rounded and might therefore not add up to 100%.

<sup>9</sup> The plural form is used as it is not (yet) clear if several varieties of English exist in Namibia, if at all (Steigertahl 2017).

<sup>10</sup> In this context, *Black* shall be understood as a social construct and self-attributive term. It is part of one's identity and identification process and therefore capitalised (Arndt 2005: 343 and following; Sow 2008; Arndt 2012: 20 and following; Bologna 2013; Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte 2017). Most of all, *Black* shall not reaffirm apartheid categories of South West African respectively Namibian and South African citizens.



#word	uncertain word
((words))	comment
~name	pseudonym

In the following examples, the speakers' place of residence, sex, age and ethnic belonging are indicated by abbreviations, i.e. Rua m42 Owambo is a 42 years old male participant who lives in or near Ruacana and stated that he is of Owambo ethnicity<sup>11</sup>.

### 3.2. Findings

In the interviews, mutual intelligibility of different varieties was frequently pointed to, e.g. between Oshiwambo varieties, between Oshiwambo and Otjiherero varieties, between Oshiwambo and Rukavango varieties, between Rukavango varieties, and Zambezi varieties. The following examples (1) to (4) stress mutual intelligibility among Oshiwambo speech forms and illustrate that slight differences are perceived in syntax, phonology, and lexis.

(1)

[[Oshimbalantu, Oshiwkwanyama and Oshikwambi are not]] different, th- they're different on the tone only. [...] On the tone, just the tone but, I can understand, any t-, any tribe, let's say Wambo a different tribe, [...]. It's only the tone it's it's one which is different. [...] [Dhemba] Yeah it's similar to Oshiwambo

[Rua f22 Owambo]

(2)

Them, they, [Oshiwambo, the] [...] Ndongas, the #Gua Nganjera, the Kwanyamas, the Kwambis and so forth, eh, it's just an accent, you, but the them they understand, they'll know this one is Nganjera, this one is what or what, is the same. They understand each other.

[Gob m45 Yeyi]

(3)

From Oshiwambo the branches, Oshim- Oshimbanhu, Oshingandjera, Oshikwaluudhi but, we can understand each other, ya. Only, little bit of ehm, of of of of word structure, ehm, and and sounds, but but, the whole thing is Oshiwambo, is like now, you can use dialects of eh the main language #and

[Rua m42 Owambo]

(4)

When I'm in Okahao, they speak Oshingandjera so I just have to speak Oshingandjera. When I'm with my dad, he's a Kwambi, I speak, I sometimes try speaking Oshikwambi but, when I'm here in Etunda, I s- speak Oshikolonkadhi. [...] But, they are not really different but some words you might not understand.

[Rua f17 Owambo]

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<sup>11</sup> For further information on the data collection, see Steigertahl (2017: 124-162).

According to examples (1) and (2), the different Oshiwambo varieties are treated as “accents” as they differ phonologically only. Interviewee Rua f22 Owambo adds Dhemba, called Zemba in the *Ethnologue* (Lewis et al. 2016), to this variety cluster when she indicates that “it’s similar to Oshiwambo”. In example (3), the different Oshiwambo speech forms are seen as “dialects” as the interviewee states that they are mutually comprehensible and differ “only” with regard to syntax and phonology. Interviewee Rua f17 Owambo then asserts that the Oshiwambo varieties she speaks differ in lexis and “are not really different”. Although these varieties are called by their separate names and not clustered together under the label “Oshiwambo”, it remains unclear what kind of attitudes the speakers hold towards these Namibian speech forms. However, it can be assumed that these speakers are multilingual and use the different varieties in everyday life as they are characterised as similar. This similarity and mutual intelligibility, which has been ascribed to so-called “dialects”, could result from structural similarities of the varieties or from multilingual repertoires and practices of the speakers who have acquired or learned these speech forms.

Other participants identified mutual intelligibility between Oshiwambo varieties and Otjiherero, as shown in examples (5) to (7) below. In contrast to examples (1) to (4), no particular areas of similarities or differences were mentioned.

(5)

I understand, I hear it, so mostly it's like Otjiherero, Oshiwambo, eh eh little bit same. [...] That I talk Otjiherero, but I'm not interested in Oshiwambo, but I will hear if somebody talk with me a little bit I will understand what he's trying to say, but I can't answer in Oshiwambo so

[Usa f34 Damara]

(6)

[[Otjiherero and Oshiwambo]] I do understand. [...] It's eh, you know it's similar. And, as I said, the, area where I grew, I grew up there there are different people. [...] Ya. Hereros, there are Wambos, there are Damaras as well. So, of course, the kids you are playing with, from those, eh, eh, when #they are Wambos you playing then this one is talking in his language, you are talking your language/ [...] That's how you are learning.

[Usa m33 Herero]

(7)

Oshiwambo I cannot say I speak but I understand. [...] Maybe I will say yes Walalepo eh nawa to ahea. OK then we end there. [...] Oshiwambo. Yeah, but if they're speaking a deep language, then I would not understand. [...] But if they are lightly just speaking ## lightly, then I would understand.

[Usa f31 Herero]

In example (5), interviewee Usa f34 Damara states that she can understand Oshiwambo varieties because she can speak Otjiherero. She does not refer to her L1 Khoekhoegowab as

a speech form of similarity, but rather her L2 or L3 or L4. Interviewee Usa m33 Herero in example (6) specifies that he “learned” Oshiwambo when he was a child and adds that the “languages” are “similar”. This similarity might have facilitated his language acquisition while being exposed to the variety. The interviewee in example (7) again mentions mutual intelligibility between Oshiwambo varieties and Otjiherero. She can understand Oshiwambo if a “light” form of it is spoken and not “a deep language”. This might refer to what others have called “dialect”. This quote could lead to the assumption of structural similarities between Oshiwambo and Otjiherero varieties as the interviewee seems to understand naturally, without being exposed to the other speech form very often.

As already pointed to in example (1), Dhemba is specified as mutually understood by Oshiwambo speakers. The following examples (8) and (9) describe mutual understanding between Oshiwambo and Dhemba L1 speakers.

(8)

I'm also learning how to speak their language because, if somebody speak Oshidhemba, I'll be able to understand, I understand [#little #bit.] [...] Let me say eighty-five percent

[Rua m35 Owambo]

(9)

I understand [[Oshiwambo]]. Ya. [[I even [...] speak]] many languages. [...] I speak, oh, ya. Oshiwambo is consist of, eh, eight languages. Eight we say #two language #or #crate. Something like that. And I speak eh, English, Afrikaans, I speak, E-, Ongambwe, Khumbi, Herero, and I, @ Ya.

[Rua m43 Dhemba]

These interviewees state that Oshiwambo and Dhemba speakers can communicate and understand each other; passive competence is sometimes higher than active competence. Moreover, in example (9), Oshiwambo varieties are named “languages” by the interviewee, which stands in contrast to examples (1) to (3) above and confirms the classifications made in the literature to some degree. It is possible that this speaker holds the Oshiwambo cluster in higher esteem than the first interviewees.

Furthermore, Oshiwambo L1 speakers seem to understand Rukavango varieties, as indicated in examples (10) to (12):

(10)

[[Oshiwambo and Kavango]] languages are a different, but of course we #sub similarities just like I mentioned earlier that we are Bantu-speaking people [...] We we understand one another, eh eh in places we, we we we we have eh common words and words of the same, exactly the same meaning/ [...] And and at times you struggle because words may differ in places. [...] Ya. So I'm eh eh I'm finding it not very easy

to learn Thimbukushu but, eh, I understand, eh, eh, what is it? Rukwa- Rukwangali, eh very well [...] Rukwangali is much closer to Oshiwambo

[Div m43 Owambo]

(11)

first I came I was at Mbungu, where they speak Kwangali. Kwangali is easy more than Mbukushu but, when I came here now I mix when I want to speak Mbukushu, y-local language because sometimes you work we are, I'm working with casual worker, some they don't know, English always/ [...] They can ask in Mbukushu but I understand sometimes now, at least I can answer, we can talk story/

[Div f37 Owambo]

(12)

[[I speak]] English, but some would rather speak in their languages, and I would respond in English, cos I only understand and speak a little of Thimbukushu. [...] hm, some [[is difficult]], but, I think in the long run I'll be able to speak it before the end of the year.

[Div f23 Owambo]

In the example (10), similarities of “Oshiwambo and Kavango languages” are emphasised and only differences with regard to lexis indicated. Then again, the interviewee stresses differences among the Rukavango varieties and says that Thimbukushu is more difficult to understand and “learn” than Rukwangali as the latter “is much closer to Oshiwambo”. It seems that he learned some of the Kavango varieties, as he is working in that area. However, Rukwangalo might be naturally acquired while Thimbukushu might not be due to the linguistic differences. The same is outlined in example (11), in which the interviewee adds that she has passive competence of Thimbukushu. Again, it is said that Kwangali is structurally closer to Oshiwambo speech forms. In example (12), difficulties with Thimbukushu and passive competence of it are also pointed to by the Oshiwambo L1 speaker. It seems the interviewee attempts to “learn” it in her sociolinguistic setting. As all of these speakers are based in and around Divundu, it can be assumed that they *have* to learn Thimbukushu for conversations in everyday life. Hence, it is possible that understanding results from learning, while being exposed to the variety in their sociolinguistic setting, and not structural similarities. Moreover, the examples clarify structural differences among the Kavango varieties.

The next example (13) demonstrates similarities within the Rukavango cluster:

(13)

Apart from English I only speak my home language which is Thimbukushu. [...] And s-, kind of Gciriku and Kwangali. [...] [[They are]] almost [[similar to Thimbukushu.]] [...] Is only that, they they click what, they don't click they sound very much highly than Thimbukushu. Ya.

[Div m21 Kavango]

Interviewee Div m21 Kavango differentiates between phonological features here, that is, “clicks” used in Gciriku and Rukwangali in contrast to Thimbukushu. This quote is similar to examples (10) and (11) above, which state that Rukwangali is “easy” in comparison to Thimbukushu. However, in this case the interviewee refers to linguistic similarities and not to understanding because of (formal) learning.

Furthermore, similarities within the Zambezi cluster were specified by some interviewees, as shown in examples (14) to (16).

(14)

Ya. We eh, like here, there are, Subiyas, there are others, speaking other, ya, Totela, eh, other languages. [...] Ya but the good thing about it is that, we understand each other. [...] When a Subiya speaks, and I speak, we understand each other without any problem. I can also speak Subiya [...] It's only that it's not my mother tongue, I don't speak it as often as I would speak my [...] mother language.

[Rua f42 Silozi]

(15)

Eh, culture and tradition, they, we have eh we actually have four tribal groups. We have the Masubiya, we have the Mafwes, we have the Mbalangwe, no no, we have the Subiyas, the Mafwes, the Mayeyis, it's actually three. Eh but, the culture is the same. Yes. It's it's not different. What the Mafwes do, the Masubiyas also do. [...] Yes. The language #is OK, we we understand each other. Yes, if there's Subiya, if the Masubiyas speaks ehm and the people from the other tribes, they understand what, what he or she is saying.

[Div f34 Silozi]

(16)

This languages, some, they understand each other, like the Subiya when they speak, the Totela would understand, and the Mbalangwe will understand, eh, but when the Mayeyi speaking people speak, mos with their clicks, few will understand. I think the elders, some of the elders, you, those days, our elders they used to #interrate, they visit each other, they intermarry, maybe few will understand Siyeyi, but eh, our youth, and some of the people, they find it very difficult to speak Siyeyi, but the Mayeyi speaking people they understand all the languages in, yes, in Zambezi.

[Gob m45 Yeyi]

In example (14), the Silozi L1 speaker stresses that she can understand Subiya. She further states that Totela, Subiya and Silozi are “languages” and that speakers of it can understand each other. A similar statement is made in example (15), in which the interviewee stresses mutual intelligibility between Subiya, Fwe and Yeyi speakers. She also calls them “languages”. In contrast to that, interviewee Gob m45 Yeyi discusses mutual understanding between Subiya, Totela and Mbalangwe in example (16) but concludes that Yeyi is different “with their clicks” so that “few will understand” except for “some of the elders”.

This quote demonstrates unidirectional understanding in the Zambezi region. On the one hand, this might relate to the fact that this variety is relatively new in comparison to the others in Namibia as the Bayeyi migrated from today's Botswana not before the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Maho 1998: 49). Therefore, language contact could be less intense than with the other varieties used in the Zambezi Region. On the other hand, this could imply asymmetric attitudes, including a generational cline. It is possible that the older generation had to or used to learn Yeyi, for instance at school, whereas the younger Zambezi people do no longer do so. Besides, all speech forms are referred to as “languages” and that they are not clustered together under one term.

In addition, four interviewees stated that they understand other “languages”, e.g. because they were taught at school or “learned” it during everyday communication. The examples (17) to (20) differ from the earlier ones as they do not specify structural similarities between the varieties.

(17)

the languages, ah, if me, I only speak Oshiwambo and English, other languages, you can just at least you understand when the person is speaking but anyway it, it's difficult for you to answer. Yeah, like the Afrikaans, the Oshidhembra, the Hereros, you only understand when people are speaking, but actually it's difficult for you to, to answer.

[Rua f32 Owambo]

(18)

[[I speak]] English, Thimbukushu, eh, I wouldn't say I speak Afrikaans but I understand, most of, and I can also, in for communication purpose, so Afrikaans I can use, but not that like I'm a fluent speaker because eh the time I started school, Afrikaans was phased out, ya.

[Div m29 Kavango]

(19)

I might say for now I understand [[Kavango languages]], because I used to be in Rundu before. [...] I've been in Rundu, but the problem of me I don't know, whether I'm having ignorance or is selfish, I don't know. I'm trying by all means, that maybe, one day, I must also speak the language, but I don't know. OK I can hear and I can understand when people they are talking, now the problem is to respond.

[Div f26 Subiya]

(20)

And Damara is only taught for one year at Katora. So I don't speak Damara, but I I understand sometimes.

[Usa f19 Owambo]

In example (17), Oshiwambo, English, Afrikaans, Oshidhembra and Herero are called “languages”. The interviewee states that she speaks the first two but struggles to answer in

the other three “languages” that she has only passive knowledge of, i.e. she can understand but not speak. In example (18), the formal learning of Afrikaans at school is stressed, which the speaker did not experience as he went to school after apartheid. He further indicates that he can “use” Afrikaans “for communication purpose”, i.e. in short everyday conversations. The Subiya interviewee in example (19) addresses difficulties with learning “Kavango languages”, which she has only passive competence of. This might indicate structural discrepancies between Subiya and Rukavango speech forms. Example (20) points to formal “language” learning again. The interviewee was taught Khoekhoegowab at school; this, however, does not imply understanding due to structural similarities. Again, some speech forms are clustered together, such as “Oshiwambo” and “Kavango languages”, whereas others are given more specific names such as “Oshidhembra”. This could lead to the assumption that Oshiwambo varieties are recognized as similar to each other, while the others are seen as separate forms. Another explanation could be a simplification pattern of the different varieties.

Rarely, similarities and mutual intelligibility of other non-Bantu speech forms such as Damara>Nama, i.e. Khoekhoegowab, were mentioned by the interviewees, as exemplified below.

(21)

I'm a mixed [...] With Nama. Ya, Damara Nama. It's the same, it's just the, some pronunciations, with those Damaras and the Namas it's different. [...] Yeah, but we understand each other. So is just like ehm, Oshiwambo people, they, some speak different Oshiwambo than the other ones.

[Usa f30 Damara]

In example (21), the interviewee states that Damaras and Namas pronounce their respective varieties differently and compares that to the Oshiwambo cluster. Hence, she stresses differences on the phonological level mainly. Overall, Khoekhoegowab respectively Damara>Nama tends to be termed “language” and no “dialects” of it are mentioned. However, it is said that Damaras and Namas pronounce the variety differently. Oshiwambo is here grouped together. This might imply differing attitudes towards the speech forms or a simplification pattern for me as the German interviewer.

Next to these views on linguistic similarities and understanding, some of the 77 interviewees mainly referred to difficulties and differences between the speech forms used in Namibia. Examples (23) to (26) refer to differences between linguistically related varieties that are often clustered together, e.g. Rukavango and Oshiwambo varieties and Dhemba.

(23)

I used to learn different languages like Rumanyo, compared to Rukwangali, their clicks are more #close #to the same but themselves they will say that ah no, we can't understand each other. Even Thimbukushu and this people tal- eh speaking Rumanyo,

you can hear that they are similar but eh we cannot understand each other. Here and there, some of the words which are mentioned in in Rukwangali, are in Thimbukushu, but it means different things.

[Div m28 Kavango]

(24)

Yes I, somehow I like the, the tribe, Mbukushu tribe, I liked it because, eh, I don't do that language, I don't understand, but somehow when I reach here, I'm now becoming understand the language. Yeah, to us [[it is difficult]], if you don't know that's it's difficult to us special, Kwangali people because normal way, we are this you know this language. [...] But we are all Kavangos.

[Div m23 Kavango]

(25)

[[Oshindonga]] is my first language but is not my home language. My home language is Oshimbalantu. [...] [[Oshimbalantu and Oshindonga]] They're very different. [...] Ya ya I understand #Oshindonga.

[Rua f52 Owambo]

(26)

Ya, they [[the Dhembas]] understand because, they learn Oshiwambo in/ [...] In #a school. [...] But they are not really similar but/ [...] They understand they know it because, they are close at their home, parent sometimes the neighbor is a Wambo/

[Rua f23 Dhemba]

In example (23), Rukavango varieties are contrasted. The interviewee “used to learn different languages” and thus speaks Rumanyo, Thimbukushu, and Rukwangali. Comparing these varieties, he points to phonological and lexical differences. Therefore, he does not consider Rumanyo, Thimukushu and Rukwangali as mutually intelligible. Moreover, he stresses the “learning” procedure. A similar notion is expressed by interviewee Div m23 Kavango. He is a Rukwangali L1 speaker and indicates differences between his L1 and Thimbukushu. This notion on the speech form stands in contrast to the *Ethnologue*, which specifies that “Mbukushu” is similar to “Kwangali” (Lewis et al. 2016). Additionally, he stresses that these varieties belong to the Kavango people; hence, he combines them under one term for their speakers who all seem to identify with being “Kavango”. This might be a simplification pattern. Furthermore, in example (25), the two Oshiwambo varieties Oshindonga and Oshimbalantu are viewed as “very different”. Then again, the interviewee indicates that she can understand Oshindonga although it is not her home language. In this example the terminology used is striking. Usually, the terms *mother tongue*, *first language* and *home language* are used as equivalents in everyday speech in Namibia. This interviewee, however, differentiates between *first language* and *home language*; still, it remains unclear what she understands by these terms. Maybe *first language* refers to the language she learned first or to the language she uses primarily in everyday life. What is more, in contrast to examples (1), (8), and (9), interviewee Rua f23 Dhemba expresses differences between Oshiwambo and Dhemba varieties and says that the



respective L1 speakers only understand each other because they tend to communicate as neighbours or “learn” it at school. In general, these examples might indicate different language ideologies and attitudes than the ones earlier expressed. By stressing contrasts between varieties of speech that have been described as closely related in linguistics (Brock-Utne 1997, 2000; Maho 1998; Lewis et al. 2016) and as mutually or at least unidirectionally understood by speakers in earlier examples, these interviewees might want to distance themselves from the other groups and speakers. This might stress their feeling of ethnic and linguistic belonging to their respective groups and not to an overall superordinate cluster like “Oshiwambo”. It could also indicate that others have learned these varieties as being exposed to them and not based on linguistic similarities, hence mutually intelligible by nature. Besides, they might not have deemed it necessary to use simplified terms, thus cluster varieties together.

#### 4. Discussion

All in all, these examples represent language ideologies and attitudes as expressed by some of the 77 Namibians that were interviewed to compile *ESBNaPI*. Firstly, the examples show that speech forms are mostly referred to as “languages”, that is in 16 out of 26 examples. 7 times no label is given, while “accent” and “dialect” are each used once to refer to different Oshiwambo varieties. These varieties tend to be clustered together and are seldom mentioned separately. Secondly, mutual intelligibility has been stressed for different speech forms, i.e. among Oshiwambo varieties, between Oshiwambo varieties and Otjiherero, between Oshiwambo and Rukavango varieties, among Rukavango varieties, and Zambezi varieties. This might refer to structural similarities but also to positive attitudes towards these speech forms. Besides, it is possible that varieties were learned and are thus intelligible, not because of structural similarities, as some of the participants had to adopt to new sociolinguistic settings, e.g. for work. This boundary is hard to define. Thirdly, differences within certain clusters are mentioned, such as unidirectional understanding of Yeyi and Subiya, Totela and Mbalangwe, and Thimbukushu and Gciriku and Rukwangali. These discrepancies seem extraordinary as these varieties are often grouped together in the literature (e.g. Maho 1998; NSA 2011; Lewis et al. 2016). Consequently, these quotes might indicate asymmetric attitudes among the speakers. Again, it is also possible that this refers to different language acquisition settings or possibilities.

On the one hand, the examples examined above seem to support the clusters of different varieties together to a certain extent. Some varieties seem more related than others do. Still, a number of interviewees indicated that they do not understand linguistically closely related speech forms. On the other hand, the quotes make clear that ethnolinguistic belonging is a key factor for identity formation. Many varieties are called “languages”; thus, it can be implied that they are held in higher esteem than “dialects” and “accents”. However, especially Oshiwambo varieties tend to be named together and not separately such as Zambezi varieties, i.e. Yeyi, Subiya, Totela, Mbalangwe, and Fwe, and Rukavango varieties, i.e. Thimbukushu, Rukwangali, Gciriku, and Rumanyo. It could be assumed that the eight separate kingdoms (Maho 1998: 31) are not identity markers but many Wambos identify with the whole cluster as Owambo, these people making up the biggest group in

Namibia. Another explanation could be a simplified classification for me as the foreign non-Namibian interviewer. It is possible that labels for speech forms differ, depending on who inquires about it.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has shown that it is difficult to define “languages” and “dialects”, although a number of factors have been discussed in the literature, such as status, nation state, mutual intelligibility, and codification and standardisation. Accordingly, the concepts have been applied differently and interchangeably in linguistic and anthropological research, especially in the African context. As a solution, it has been suggested that “languages” and “dialects” form a sort of continuum (Heine & Nurse 2000: 2; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 6-9; Lewis et al. 2016; Wolff 2016: 292 and following). Other terms such as *variety* (Heine & Nurse 2000: 2), *speech forms* and “sub-entities” (Maho 2003: 647-649) were proposed instead. In the present case of Namibia, Maho (1998) and Guthrie (1948, 1967-1971) still seem to be helpful and reliable sources as they give a name to the bulk of the speech forms used in this country. Unfortunately, there is a lack of more recent sources and the government of Namibia does not provide further information about the languages of their country either (Government of Namibia 1990; NSA 2011). Generally, varieties of speech should not be undermined because they contribute to people’s identity formation and social reality. Consequently, it is crucial to question terms such as “language” and “dialect” even though theory and practice cannot always provide a clear-cut answer.

This was proven by the analyses of speech examples from *ESBNaPI*. The 26 examples examined above show language attitudes and ideologies as expressed by several Namibian interviewees. The informants mainly discuss similarities and differences between several varieties spoken in Namibia, also with regard to “cultures” and “traditions”. Generally, the speech forms are termed “languages” by the informants. The qualitative content-based approach has illustrated that several varieties tend to be clustered together, such as Oshiwambo varieties, but sometimes also Rukavango and Zambezi varieties. The Rukavango speech forms seem to form an exception, in which Thimbukushu tends to play an extraordinary part as it is not always mutually understood by Rukwangali and Gciriku speakers, for instance. Oshiwambo varieties seem to be mutually intelligible among their speakers; so are Zambezi varieties, except for Yeyi. Additionally, even between the different language groups (mutual) understanding was expressed, e.g. between Oshiwambo and Otjiherero speakers, and Oshiwambo and some Rukavango varieties. However, distance is kept by clustering the languages together in these superordinate groups. Some participants even stated that the varieties are “very different” although they understood each other. Hence, the interviewees seem to identify with their respective superordinate group and not necessarily with their specific varieties, i.e. “Oshiwambo” and not “Oshindonga”, for instance. This could reflect lower esteem of these speech forms among the speakers. However, it could also indicate a simplified view on these varieties for the sake of the foreign researcher in the community.

On the whole, this small-scale study has provided an insight into language ideologies and attitudes as expressed by Namibians in the four communities of Usakos, Divundu, Ruacana

and Gobabis. (Mutual) intelligibility was predominantly discussed and shows how speakers view and talk about the varieties of speech they hear and speak in everyday life. These varieties tend to be called “languages” by the informants at hand.

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