

Translating the geological record into indigenous African languages

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Outreach and education work is commonly conducted in English¹, but people engage more and understand better when the conversation is in their native tongue²⁻⁴. In South Africa, English is a first language for under 10% of the population, yet it dominates scientific discourse, alienating huge sections of the population⁵. We summarised the most compelling, relevant parts of South Africa's geological history, and translated those stories into isiXhosa. IsiXhosa is the mother tongue of over 8 million people, and is mutually intelligible with Zulu, Northern Ndebele and Southern Ndebele, meaning it is potentially accessible to 23 million people.

This project eschews stuffy science writing in favour of compelling stories about our shared geological history that can spark conversation in social settings. The stories are hosted on our website (chosindabazomhlaba.com)⁶ and on Instagram, and on Youtube. The translation work was challenging for two reasons. First, many African languages are poorly represented on common translation and learning platforms such as Google translate or Duolingo. It is therefore critical that projects such as these are led by native speakers. Secondly, many geological terms such as meteorite or magma have no direct equivalent in isiXhosa. Therefore, part of this project involves enriching isiXhosa by building an open access geological dictionary. This presents an exciting opportunity to generate new, more intuitive and accessible vocabulary. The production of a geological dictionary in isiXhosa could provide a tool to transform geology departments, museums and public outreach events. It could also support international geologists to better engage with communities in their field areas.

¹Hamid, MO, Nguyen, HTM and Baldauf, R (2013), 14(1).

²Benson, (2004), EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, The Quality Imperative, UNESCO, Paris.

³King, K and Mackey, A (2007), New York: Collins.

⁴Salili, F and Tsui, A (2005), Series: Research in Multicultural Education and International Perspectives, 135-156. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

⁵Nomlomo, Vuyokazi Sylvia., Diss. University of the Western Cape, 2007.

⁶Chosi N dabazomhlaba (2022). Available at: <https://chosindabazomhlaba.com/>