**Interjections and Semantic Relations in Xitsonga: A Case of Synonymy, Polysemy, and Antonymy**

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**Abstract**

Interjections play a crucial role in spoken language, conveying a range of cognitive, emotional, and social meanings, yet their semantic relationships remain underexplored in Xitsonga. This study examines synonymy, polysemy, and antonymy as patterns of sense relations within Xitsonga interjections. Adopting a descriptive qualitative design and guided by Speech Act Theory (SAT), it analyses data extracted from Xitsonga literary texts using content analysis. The study identified instances of interjections exhibiting synonymy (sharing the same meaning but differing in sound and spelling), demonstrating polysemy (sharing identical spelling while conveying multiple related meanings), and reflecting antonymy (different spelling with opposite meanings), thereby highlighting the diverse semantic functions these expressive elements serve within Xitsonga discourse. The study also underscores the performative nature of interjections, consistent with SAT perspectives, revealing that interjections function not merely as expressions of emotion but as strategic linguistic tools that structure discourse, communicate speaker intent, and provoke targeted responses from interlocutors. These findings reveal the intricate interplay between phonology and semantics in Xitsonga interjections, emphasising the importance of examining how phonetic, orthographic, and semantic features collectively shape meaning and communicative function.

**Keywords:** *Xitsonga, interjections, sense relations, speech act theory, synonym, polysemy, antonym*

1. **Introduction**

Human language serves as the cornerstone of communication, functioning not only as a tool for conveying information but also as a medium for expressing emotions, shaping identities, and transmitting cultural values across generations (Korneeva et al., 2019). It enables individuals to share ideas, negotiate meaning, and engage in social interaction within and across diverse linguistic communities. According to Gorter (2013), language reflects the intricate relationship between society and communication, acting as a vital mechanism through which people construct and interpret their realities within complex multilingual and multicultural contexts. Central to the study of language are its structural elements, semantic intricacies, and pragmatic functions. Sense relations, an essential component within this expansive field, explore how words or lexical items interrelate in terms of meaning within a language (Cann, 2011; Afriska, 2020). They acknowledges that language functions as a dynamic system where words form interconnected networks of meaning, revealing patterns such as synonym, polysemy, and antonym, hyponymy, hyponymy, homonymy, meronymy (Winiharti, 2010; Afriska, 2020). By unraveling these relationships, linguists elucidate how words acquire and convey meaning in various contexts, reflecting the complexities of human cognition and cultural expression. The study of sense relations has evolved from its roots in structural linguistics to incorporate insights from cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics (Opoku, 2024). These interdisciplinary perspectives enrich our understanding of language as a multifaceted system of meaning construction.

Within the context of sense relations, interjections emerge as a compelling area of exploration. Interjections are emotive words or phrases that convey sudden emotions or reactions, typically standing alone in a sentence without referential content (Mao, 2020; Mlambo & Hlungwani, 2024; Mlambo & Hlungwani, 2025). Characterised by their spontaneous and emotive nature, interjections play a crucial role in interpersonal communication by conveying immediate reactions, emotions, and social attitudes (Rolfsnes, 2020). Unlike other parts of speech that convey propositional content, interjections primarily serve pragmatic functions by expressing speaker affect, interpersonal stances, and discourse management strategies (Elffers, 2008; Thompson, 2022). Despite their lack of grammatical connection to other sentence parts, interjections serve important communicative functions. Their emotionality and expressiveness are often enhanced by non-linguistic means like intonation, facial expressions, and gestures (Kolesnikova et al., 2021). Ameka and Wiikins (2006) classified interjections into primary and secondary types. Primary interjections, such as "wow", "ouch" and "oops" are words dedicated to emotional expression and are used spontaneously (Ameka, 1992; Libert, 2019). Secondary interjections, like "dam", "well" and "great" originate from other word classes but function as interjections in specific contexts (Norrick, 2014; Cruz, 2017; Mlambo, 2024). Additionally, interjections can also be categorised based on the emotions they convey such as expressive interjections (expressing strong feelings), volitive interjections (indicating commands or requests), cognitive interjections (reflecting thoughts or realisations), and phatic interjections (serving as social functions) (Ameka, 1992; Ameka & Wiikins, 2006; Nabila & Ena, 2022). These categories illustrate how interjections are used to express people's emotions and reactions. Their significance in languages lies in their ability to quickly and effectively convey nuanced emotional states, making them vital in both spoken and written communication. They also enrich language with emotional nuance, capturing the interlocutor’s or writer’s spontaneous reactions and drawing in the listener or reader.

Despite their significance in everyday language use, interjections have been relatively overlooked in linguistic research, particularly concerning their sense relations and semantic nuances in Xitsonga. This neglect stems partly from their brevity, primarily spoken form, and pragmatic functions in real-time communication (Ameka, 1992; Gehweiler, 2010; Widlok, 2016). As a result, interjections are often dismissed as peripheral or non-essential elements of language structure, leading to a gap in understanding how they encode meaning, reflect cultural contexts, and contribute to the emotional and interpersonal dynamics of communication (Poggi, 2009; Dingemanse, 2024). In under-researched languages like Xitsonga, this oversight limits the development of comprehensive semantic frameworks that include these expressive and multifunctional units. This study, therefore, investigates synonym, polysemy, and antonym as patterns of sense relations within Xitsonga interjections. It seeks to uncover how these semantic relations structure meaning, enhance expressive functions, and reflect the cultural and communicative dynamics of the language. The study contributes to broadening the scope of semantic inquiry, foregrounding the role of interjections as integral linguistic resources, and advancing the documentation and theoretical understanding of Xitsonga as part of African language studies.

2. **Literature Review**

Sense relations are central to semantics and offer key insights into how meaning is structured, interpreted, and communicated across languages. Ndlovu (2009) provided an insightful examination of sense relations in the *Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele* dictionary, focusing on how hyponymy, meronymy, and synonymy shape user accessibility and semantic clarity. The study argued that hyponymy and meronymy improve user-friendliness by organising definitions into hierarchical and part-whole relationships that facilitate understanding. For example, the entry for *indlondlo* (green mamba) is presented as a hyponym of *imamba* (mamba), which is itself a hyponym of *izinyoka* (snakes). This taxonomic structuring helps users navigate semantic fields intuitively. However, Ndlovu (2009) critiqued the overuse of synonyms as primary definitions, pointing out that this leads to circularity and confusion. Instead, the author recommended using synonyms as cross-references or supplementary explanations to support analytic definitions. Importantly, Ndlovu (2009) advocated for a more holistic approach to lexicography, incorporating sense relations alongside semantic field theory and componential analysis to improve dictionary quality and user engagement. This emphasises that thoughtful lexical structuring is not merely academic but has real-world implications for language accessibility and educational resource development.

Building on the theme of contextual flexibility in meaning, Omoke, Barasa, and Basweti (2018) explored sense relations in Ekegusii through the lens of Lexical Pragmatics Theory. Their study shifts focus from fixed semantic structures to context-dependent interpretation, showing how lexical pragmatic processes like narrowing and broadening refine meaning. Narrowing restricts a word's meaning to a specific context; for instance, *etwoni* (cock) can mean hero, while *omoswa* (hen) implies a coward, with meaning clarified by cultural and situational cues. Conversely, broadening expands meanings, as seen in *echae* (tea), which can refer to any hot beverage, a case of category extension. The study posits that sense relations are not static but negotiated in context, reflecting speaker’s intention and shared knowledge. This pragmatic dimension adds depth to our understanding of sense relations, suggesting that definitions alone cannot capture the full spectrum of meaning. Instead, real-time language use, shaped by culture and context, is crucial for interpreting sense relations in natural speech.

A similar emphasis on contextual meaning is found in the work of Chen and Zhang (2019), who investigated the implications of sense relations for translation. Their study marks a shift from a purely semantic to a more integrated semantic-pragmatic approach in translation studies. They argued that understanding sense relations like polysemy, hyponymy, and meronymy is essential for accurate translation, especially when dealing with culturally loaded terms. For example, the English word "uncle" covers multiple familial roles that Chinese distinguishes more precisely, creating potential for semantic mismatch. Similarly, translating the Chinese word "龙" (dragon) poses challenges due to its rich symbolic meaning, which lacks a direct English counterpart. Chen and Zhang (2019) also examined how meronymy reveals cultural tendencies: English tends to segment parts (e.g., "fingers", "wrists"), while Chinese uses more holistic terms (e.g., "手" for hand, encompassing all parts). Their study underscored that translation is not merely a matter of finding equivalents but requires cultural sensitivity and an awareness of how sense relations structure meaning in different languages. This integrative perspective highlights the importance of both semantic precision and pragmatic awareness in cross-linguistic communication.

Afriska (2020) offers a theoretical framework for understanding sense relations, categorising them into identity or inclusion (e.g., synonymy, hyponymy, polysemy) and opposition or exclusion (e.g., antonymy, complementaries, reversives). This typology provides a foundational understanding of how words relate semantically. For instance, synonyms like "pretty" and "beautiful" demonstrate identity, while homonyms (e.g., "bats" as animals or sports equipment) illustrate form-based ambiguity. Polysemy, where one word has related meanings and hyponymy, where one term falls under a broader category (e.g., banana as a type of fruit), enrich the semantic landscape. On the other hand, antonyms (e.g., pass or fail), reversives (e.g., up or down), and converses (e.g., borrow or lend) illustrate relational opposition. Afriska’s (2020) framework is particularly useful for language learners and educators, offering a systematic way to understand vocabulary meaning and usage. It also complements the more context-oriented studies by providing the semantic foundation upon which contextual interpretation is built.

Mao (2020) contributed a cross-linguistic perspective by examining interjections in Chinese and English, focusing on their morphological, semantic, and syntactic features. Unlike traditional lexemes, interjections are often marginalised in linguistic theory despite their central role in expressing emotions and attitudes. Mao (2020) revealed that interjections, too, exhibit sense relations such as synonymy, homonymy, and polysemy. For example, the Chinese interjections "哦" (ò) and "噢" (ō) are synonymous in expressing surprise or greeting, much like "hi", "hello" and "hey" in English. The study also noted that some interjections are perfect homonyms, like "嗨" (hāi), sharing spelling and pronunciation but differing in function depending on context. Uniquely, Mao (2020) highlighted tonal variation in Chinese, where the same spelling can have different meanings based on tone, a complexity less prominent in English. This study shows that even the most spontaneous and emotion-driven linguistic forms are governed by underlying semantic relationships. Interjections thus exemplify the universal nature of human expression while also reflecting language-specific features shaped by phonology and pragmatics.

The reviewed literature demonstrates extensive research on sense relations spanning various disciplines such as lexicography, translation, pragmatic interpretation, and interjection analysis. Despite this breadth, a notable gap exists in the investigation of sense relations of interjections within Xitsonga. This study aims to address this gap by examining synonym, polysemy, and antonym as patterns of sense relations within Xitsonga interjections, thereby deepening the understanding of their semantic properties and offering significant contributions to the study of Xitsonga linguistics.

3. **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted Speech Act Theory (SAT) as its foundational theoretical framework to investigate the sense relations of Xitsonga interjections, specifically synonym, polysemy, and antonym. Originally introduced by J.L. Austin in the 1962 and later refined by John Searle in the 1969, SAT provides a robust lens for understanding how language functions not only to convey information but also to perform actions within specific social and cultural contexts (Nidham & Hamid, 2022; Leilei & Chunfang, 2023). The theory classifies speech acts into three core components: locutionary acts (the literal utterance), illocutionary acts (the interlocutor’s intended function), and perlocutionary acts (the listener’s interpretation or reaction) (Xu, 2015; Mabaquiao, 2018; Hanna & Richards, 2019). Applying this framework to explore the sense relations of Xitsonga interjections allow for a nuanced understanding of their multifunctionality. Far from being mere emotional outbursts, Xitsonga interjections operate as pragmatic tools that can express commands, requests, acknowledgments, warnings, or reactions, depending on the interactional context (Mlambo & Hlungwani, 2024; Mlambo & Hlungwani, 2025). For instance, a single interjection may signal excitement, urgency, affirmation, or even disapproval, shaped by tone, situational cues, and speaker intention. Furthermore, the pragmatic orientation of SAT highlights how interjections function as culturally grounded communicative acts (De Jager, 2012). They are shaped by and reflective of the social norms, interpersonal relationships, and discourse expectations within the language (Kaburise, 2011). This makes SAT particularly suited to uncovering the sense relations such as synonym, polysemy, and antonym embedded in interjection relations that often go unnoticed due to their brevity and oral transmission. Therefore, by examining sense relations of Xitsonga interjections through this theoretical lens, the study not only reveals their semantic depth and communicative flexibility but also affirms their critical role in fostering shared understanding and social cohesion in real-time communication.

4. **Research Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore synonym, polysemy, and antonym as patterns of sense relations within Xitsonga interjections. This approach is characterised by its focus on producing a systematic, accurate, and factual account of the facts, characteristics, and relationships among the phenomena under investigation (Furidha, 2023). It is particularly well-suited for capturing the nuanced semantic and cultural dimensions of interjections, which may be overlooked by purely quantitative approaches. A corpus-based approach was adopted for data collection, involving the systematic compilation of authentic linguistic data drawn from written texts. As Bennett (2010) explains, corpus-based research enables the empirical study of language use by providing concrete examples of naturally occurring expressions. For this study, data were extracted in the form of interjectional words, phrases, and sentences from three selected Xitsonga drama texts, namely, *Byi le Tintihweni* (2005) by Lubisi C.M., *Xivoni xa Vutomi* (2008) by Shabangu I.S., and *Vadyondzi va Namuntlha* (2015) by Makhubele S.E. These texts were selected using purposive sampling, a strategy appropriate for qualitative research where information-rich cases are intentionally chosen to provide meaningful insights (Bouncken et al., 2025). The collected data were analysed using content analysis. This method is a systematic research method used to analyse and interpret textual, visual, or audio content in a structured and objective way (Khan, et al., 2023). In this study, content analysis allowed for the systematic classification of interjections based on their semantic and pragmatic features. It also facilitated the exploration of subtle distinctions in pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and use, shaped by factors such as speaker intention, discourse context, and cultural conventions. By integrating corpus linguistics with content analysis, this methodology provided a rigorous and context-sensitive framework for capturing the complexity and communicative significance of interjections in Xitsonga. It enabled the study not only to describe the formal and functional aspects of interjections but also to interpret their deeper roles in expressing emotions, shaping interaction, and reflecting cultural norms.

5. **Results and Discussion**

This section present results and discussion of the data on sense relations in Xitsonga interjections, with a focus of interjections exhibiting synonymy, interjections demonstrating polysemy, and interjections reflecting antonymy. Each theme highlights unique relationships between sound, spelling, and meaning, providing insights into the linguistic complexity and contextual interpretation of Xitsonga interjections.

5.1. ***Interjections exhibiting synonyms***

Synonymy, the sense relation involving identical meanings but differing in sound and spelling, is a fundamental feature of a language. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2015) defines a synonym as a word or expression with the same or nearly the same meaning as another within the same language. According to Rashidova (2021), synonyms often carry additional implications or connotations influenced by idiomatic or contextual usage. Synonymy encompasses two main categories: absolute synonyms and partial synonyms (Puncevič, 2016). Absolute synonyms have identical meanings across all contexts, sharing the same descriptive, social, and affective features, making them interchangeable in any situation (Ndlovu, 2009). Partial synonyms, on the other hand, share meanings in some contexts or are interchangeable only when truth conditions remain unaffected (Puncevič, 2016). In Xitsonga, synonyms are noticeable across various word categories, including interjections, where differences in sound and spelling often reflect dialectal variations, cultural subtleties, or individual preferences, as illustrated in Excerpt 1.

(1) a. **Jimmy:** (A n’wi tsundzuka) *Hoo* … luya wa munghana wa Ntsako? [(Remembering him) *Hoo* ... you mean that friend of Ntsako?] (Makhubele, 2015:13)

b. **Florence:** (Hi ku hleka) *Oh*, kambe a yi ri ou ya wena loko ha ha ri le Giyani College [(Laughing) *Oh*, he was your partner back when we were at Giyani College] (Shabangu, 2008:24)

In Excerpt 1, the interjections *hoo* and *oh* function as markers of realisation and recognition, demonstrating a synonymous relationship within conversational discourse. In 1(a), the interjection *hoo* is employed by Jimmy as he recalls a specific individual, signifying a moment of sudden recognition. In 1(b), Florence utilises *oh* while laughing, conveying a similar cognitive shift of realisation. Although both interjections denote recognition, *hoo* appears to maintain a more neutral tone, whereas *oh* carries an additional emotional nuance, likely influenced by the interlocutor’s tone and contextual factors. This subtle pragmatic distinction underscores their synonymy while also reflecting variations in emotional engagement. They are also considered partial rather than complete synonyms, as their usage is highly context-dependent and shaped by pragmatic, emotional, and phonetic factors. From the perspective of SAT, the interjections *hoo* and *oh* function across multiple layers of communication: locutionarily as markers of realisation, illocutionarily as expressive acts conveying recognition or sudden awareness, and perlocutionarily as triggers for listener engagement and affirmation of shared knowledge. This underscores the multifunctional nature of interjections, highlighting their integral role in both conveying speaker intent and facilitating interactive, culturally grounded communication. Furthermore, these expressions subtly function as directive speech acts, as they implicitly encourage the interlocutor to acknowledge or validate the speaker’s realisation. Thus, the application of *hoo* and *oh* within the SAT framework demonstrates that while these interjections exhibit synonymous qualities, their pragmatic force is contingent upon context and interlocutor intent. Excerpt 2 further illustrates how interjections in Xitsonga can exhibit synonymous relationships.

2 (a) **Jean:** *Oh*, a ndza ha mi tivisanga, i Thuli Zondo. [*Oh*, I forgot to introduce her, this is Thuli Zondo.] (Lubisi, 2005:46)

(b) **Prof Xirilo:** *Ohoo,* ndza tsundzuka. A nga hembi, kambe ndzi te a va yi va ya tiphina hi ku hlaya ntsena. [*Ohoo*, I remember. He was telling the truth; I advised them to go and read.] (Lubisi, 2005:49).

The interjections *oh* and *ohoo* also illustrate a synonymic sense relation, where they share the same meaning but differ in sound and spelling. Despite their phonetic differences, both interjections function as discourse markers that aid in structuring communication by expressing realisation, remembrance, or recall within a conversation. In Excerpt 2(a), Jean uses *oh* to mark a moment of realisation. The interjection acts as a discourse marker, signalling that the speaker has suddenly remembered the importance of introducing Thuli Zondo to Professor Xirilo. This use aligns with the cognitive role of interjections in spoken language, where they are employed to express sudden thoughts or recollections (Mlambo & Hlungwani, 2024; Nabila & Ena, 2022). Within the framework of SAT, the interjection *oh* functions as an expressive speech act, revealing Jean’s unexpected awareness and serving as a transition into the introduction. Similarly, in Excerpt 2(b), Prof. Xirilo employs *ohoo* as an interjection that conveys a moment of recall and remembrance. The elongated form *ohoo* amplifies the speaker’s recognition of a past event, underscoring the certainty of his memory. The extra phonetic lengthening distinguishes *ohoo* from *oh*, highlighting a stronger cognitive or reflective process. This form of interjection also serves as a phatic speech act, helping to sustain the flow of conversation by signalling the speaker’s engagement with the discussion (Wiles, 2020; House & Kádár, 2022). Although *oh* and *ohoo* differ in pronunciation and length, their meanings remain consistent within the contexts presented in Excerpts 2(a) and 2(b), illustrating their synonymic relationship in Xitsonga. This variation in interjections shows how phonetic changes can deepen the expressive quality of a interlocutor’s response while preserving the core communicative function of realisation, remembrance, or recall.

Mao (2020) observed that interjections can sometimes exhibit synonymic sense relations, where expressions share the same meaning and pronunciation but differ in spelling, a phenomenon evident in both English and Chinese. This highlights the flexible and dynamic nature of interjections, which often evolve through usage, borrowing, and context. Similarly, Xitsonga interjections reflect this synonymic relationship, especially among those borrowed from other languages, as illustrated in Excerpt 3.

(3) a. **Jimmy:** *Exi!* Wa tiva mbilu ya mina yi vava ngopfu he Voni? [*Eish!* You know, my heart is very sore, Voni?] (Makhubele, 2015:126).

b. **Jimmy:** *Exii!* Xiluva! (A khanisa timhunti, mihloti hohlo hohlo!)[*Exii!* Xiluva! (He broke into sobs, with tears streaming down profusely)](Makhubele, 2015:127).

The interjections *exi!* and *exii!* in Xitsonga illustrate a synonymic semantic relationship, as they convey identical meanings and share the same pronunciation, despite differences in orthography. These forms were transliterated into Xitsonga to express a range of emotions, with their origins traceable to Tsotsitaal or Isicamtho, and ultimately rooted in isiXhosa or isiZulu interjections such as "ashi" or "ishi" (Bowker, 2017). Despite their orthographic variation, both interjections serve an equivalent communicative function, primarily expressing intense emotional distress. In Excerpt 3(a), the interjection *exi!* reflects Jimmy’s anguish upon discovering Xiluva’s infidelity. Similarly, in Excerpt 3(b), *exii!* is used with even greater intensity as Jimmy calls out to Xiluva, amplifying his sorrow. The accompanying description ‘*A khanisa timhunti, mihloti hohlo hohlo!’* (He broke into sobs, with tears streaming down profusely), highlights how *exii!* extends the expression of grief, deepening the emotional weight of the moment. Although the interjections *exi!* and *exii!* differ in spelling and pronunciation, their function remains identical, with the latter incorporating phonetic elongation to intensify its impact. This pattern aligns with natural speech tendencies, where speakers prolong sounds to enhance emotional expression (Mlambo, 2024). Therefore, the adaptation of "ashi" or "ishi" into Xitsonga further demonstrates how languages integrate borrowed interjections while maintaining their emotive functions. Therefore, the presence of *exi!* and *exii!* as synonymous interjections in Xitsonga underscores the fluidity of language, where subtle phonetic modifications enrich meaning while preserving the essence of communication.

5.2. ***Interjections demonstrating polysemy***

Polysemy refers to words with identical spelling but multiple related meanings, often linked conceptually or historically. This sense relation enhances language by allowing a single word to convey nuanced meanings depending on context (Vicente & Falkum, 2017). Unlike homonyms, which lack a connection between meanings, polysemous words maintain a clear interpretive link and are a universal feature of language (Jumayev, 2024). Like other sense relations in Xitsonga, polysemy is evident in interjections, where one expression can convey multiple, contextually related emotions based on tone and usage. This characteristic demonstrates the flexibility and efficiency of Xitsonga, reflecting the dynamic interplay between language structure and cultural or social contexts, as seen in Excerpt 4.

(4) a. **Mafada:** (Hi ku chuha) *Yoo,* mhaneee, ndzi tidlele minooo! [(Frightened) *Yoo*, mhaneee (Oh, mother) I got myself into trouble minooo! (oh, myself)] (Shabangu, 2008:62).

b. **Misery:** (Hi ku chava) *Yoo*, mhanee, se nyoka leyi nga titsondela la a yi nga ndzi lumi ka bava? [(Fearing) *Yoo*, mhanee (Oh, mother), so the snake that coiled here will not bite me, sir?] (Shabangu, 2008:34).

The interjection *yoo* exemplifies polysemy by conveying closely related meanings of fright and fear, depending on the context in which it appears. In example 4(a), Mafada employs *yoo* to express a startled reaction upon realising the gravity of his self-inflicted predicament. The extended pronunciation of the second interjection, *mhaneee*, amplifies his distress, reinforcing *yoo* as an indicator of a sudden emotional response to an overwhelming situation. Similarly, in example 4(b), *yoo* signals an immediate sense of fear and uncertainty when Misery encounters a snake in Hadisa's consultation room. In this case, the interjection functions as an instinctive outburst triggered by perceived danger. Unlike the regretful tone in 4(a), *yoo* in this instance conveys heightened anxiety, as the speaker remains uncertain about the potential threat posed by the snake. The interrogative structure of the sentence further underscores the fear-driven nature of the utterance, as Misery seeks reassurance while still feeling unsettled in the presence of the traditional healer. SAT provides a valuable framework for analysing *yoo* by exploring its performative functions in discourse. According to SAT, interjections like *yoo* serve as expressive speech acts, communicating the interlocutor’s emotional state and prompting corresponding reactions from listeners. Thus, both examples highlight how *yoo* conveys distinct, yet interconnected meanings based on situational context, demonstrating its polysemous nature in expressing emotional responses. Whether it signifies fright due to a mistake or fear in reaction to a perceived threat, *yoo* adapts fluidly to different contexts, illustrating the versatile role of interjections in Xitsonga discourse.

5.3. *I****nterjections reflecting antonymy***

Antonymy is a semantic relationship between words that have opposite meanings, which is essential for distinguishing word meanings and understanding language in context (Titini, 2015). These lexical words are commonly expressed as single words, they can also appear in phrases or sentences, where the meaning of one expression contrasts with another (Fadillah, 2020). Antonyms can be classified into three main types: complementary, converse, and gradable antonyms (Gao & Zheng, 2014; Dhayea, 2023). Complementary antonyms represent a strict opposition, where the presence of one excludes the other, converse antonyms denote opposites based on a relational context, and gradable antonyms exist on a spectrum (Gao & Zheng, 2014; Li, 2016; Afriska, 2020). Antonyms are generally not associated with interjections, as this elements lack a direct oppositional relationship due to their context-dependent meanings. However, certain interjections in Xitsonga can convey contrasting emotions, as illustrated in Excerpt 5.

(5) a. **Sejeni Maepa:** (A hlamala no tsaka) *A, a, a, a,* hi wena Simon wena? [(Surprised and excited) *A, a, a, a*, you are Simon?] (Lubisi, 2005:37).

b. **Ella:** (Hi ku hlundzaka) *Heyi, heyi, heyi,* u nga ni hlanyeli, swi xaviwe hi mavito ya mani swilo sweswo? [(Angrily) *Hey, hey, hey*, don’t be crazy, in whose name were those things bought?] (Shabangu, 2008:147).

The interjections *a* and *heyi* in Excerpt 5 exhibit an antonymic sense relation, despite antonyms traditionally not being associated with interjections. While interjections are typically context-dependent and lack a fixed oppositional relationship, their contrasting emotional effects in these examples create an implicit antonymic function. In 5(a), Sejeni Maepa repeatedly uses the interjection *a* to express astonishment and excitement upon recognising Simon, who had been on the run after committing a crime by killing a university lecturer. The repetition of the interjection *a* amplifies the speaker's emotions, conveying warmth, enthusiasm, and a sense of joy and positive surprise, while setting a welcoming and delighted tone. Conversely, in 5(b), Ella employs the interjection *heyi* to convey anger and frustration after Bayizani demands the return of household appliances he had purchased during their relationship. The interjection acts as a forceful reprimand, underscoring her disapproval and disbelief. The repeated use of *heyi* strengthens her aggressive and confrontational tone, making it clear that she is upset and seeking justification. Although these interjections do not function as strict antonyms in a conventional linguistic sense, their emotional impacts contrast sharply. The interjection *a* conveys positive emotions such as joy and surprise, whereas *heyi* expresses negative emotions like anger and frustration. This contrast illustrates how Xitsonga interjections can establish an antonymic sense relation by evoking opposing emotional responses based on context. A similar pattern of antonymic interjections in Xitsonga is further demonstrated in Excerpt 6.

(6) a. **Hadisa:** *Huree!* Se a wu na nkingha wena. [(Interjection of confidence) *Huree!* Now you have no problem yourself.] (Shabangu, 2008:36).

b. **Sarah:**(Hi ku kanakana) *Uuuu, uuu*… [*(Doubting) Uuuu, uuu*…] (Shabangu, 2008:185).

The interjections *huree!* and *uuuu, uuu* in Excerpt 6 illustrate an implicit antonymic sense relation by conveying opposing emotional states. In 6(a), Hadisa uses the interjection *huree!* to express confidence and reassurance to Misery, affirming his capability as a traditional healer. This interjection conveys relief and optimism, suggesting that a challenge will be successfully overcome. The tone of *huree!* reinforces certainty and encouragement, signalling the interlocutor's confidence in resolving the situation. In contrast, 6(b) features Sarah using the interjection *uuuu, uuu* in a moment of hesitation and doubt as she contemplates revealing her pregnancy to Solly. This interjection reflects uncertainty and inner conflict, as Sarah struggles with the decision to share this sensitive information. Unlike *huree!*, which conveys confidence, *uuuu, uuu* expresses reluctance and emotional discomfort. The elongated pronunciation of the interjection suggests deep contemplation, unease, or even disbelief. The contrast between these interjections highlights an antonymic sense relation in Xitsonga. The interjection *huree!* conveys confidence, relief, and certainty, whereas *uuuu, uuu* expresses doubt, hesitation, and apprehension. Their opposing emotional impacts create a functional antonym, where one interjection affirms a positive state while the other signals uncertainty and indecision. This demonstrates how interjections in Xitsonga can exhibit antonymic relationships through their contrasting emotional connotations.

6. **Conclusion**

This study investigates the complexity and versatility of interjections in Xitsonga, with particular emphasis on their role in expressing a wide range of emotions, including shock, disbelief, pain, denial, disagreement, and distress. It highlights the linguistic richness of Xitsonga interjections through the analysis of sense relations, specifically synonymy, polysemy, and antonymy. In the case of synonymy, the study shows that subtle phonological and orthographic variations can convey nuanced emotional undertones, reflect dialectal differences, and signal shared cultural meanings. Furthermore, the study shows that Xitsonga interjections are inherently flexible, with individual forms capable of expressing multiple related meanings depending on context, and that some interjections, while not conventionally antonymic, can denote contrasting emotional states, such as confidence versus doubt or joy versus anger. These findings reveal that the meaning of Xitsonga interjections is highly context-dependent, influenced by factors such as tone, speaker intent, and discourse setting. They highlight the multifunctional nature of interjections in structuring communication, facilitating social interaction, and conveying culturally grounded meanings. This contextual adaptability reflects their performative role in Xitsonga, consistent with SAT’s core components: locutionary acts (the literal utterance), illocutionary acts (the interlocutor’s intended function), and perlocutionary acts (the listener’s interpretation or response), positioning interjections as active elements within discourse. The study thereby contributes to a deeper understanding of Xitsonga’s linguistic landscape, underscoring the crucial role of interjections in shaping interaction.

**Acknowledgement**

This work forms part of our PhD research. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) in collaboration with the South African Humanities Deans Association (SAHUDA).

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