



## **Wakanda Forever: Wakandan For Emphasis**

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*Black Panther* presents a unique environment for sociolinguistic analysis due to the use of *isiXhosa*, a South African language, as the national language of the fictional country of Wakanda (Eligon, 2016). Additionally, the United States' media's influence in producing this film added another layer to its sociolinguistic environment. While the movie was targeted towards a Standard American English (SAE)-speaking audience, Marvel is an increasingly global franchise as it continues to build a diverse cinematic universe of superheroes.

Furthermore, Marvel's decision to use *isiXhosa* as the language and accent basis for Wakandan—which began in Marvel's *Captain America: Civil War*, when the main character, known as T'Challa, or Black Panther, was introduced—has received praise from African viewers and critics. Maromo Maredi, a South African viewer with close links to *isiXhosa* speakers suggests, "It may be Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's baby, but it speaks with the beauty of our clicks. Let's keep at it" (Maredi, 2018). This is a reference to the authors of the comics after which the screenplay for *Black Panther* was based.

Wakanda has never been colonized allowing it to keep all of its natural resources. Consequently, Wakanda became not only self-dependent, but also the most technologically advanced country in the world due to their supply of a metal called Vibranium. The film follows King T'Challa, also known as the Black Panther, as he comes to power following the death of his father, the former king. T'Challa is faced with the challenge as the new king to either keep the country's current isolationist policies or open the country to the world. This dilemma escalates when an American born descendent of the royal Wakandan bloodline, Erik Stevens, also known as Killmonger, challenges T'Challa for the throne with the intent of taking over the country. Killmonger's goal is to take control of Wakanda solely in order to distribute their technology, especially their weapons, around the world to marginalized people groups so they can overthrow their oppressors. Correspondingly, the two main characters are a Wakandan and an American, there are many instances of code-switching between English and Wakandan.

Code-switching is usually motivated by context or company (Meyerhoff, 2011). In other words, *where* and with *whom* a speaker finds himself speaking are the most commonly cited factors which contribute to a speaker's decision to code-switch. More specifically, code-switching is defined by Merriam Meyerhoff as "the alternation between varieties, or codes, across sentences or clause boundaries" in contrast to code-mixing, which is the switch between codes within a sentence or phrase (Meyerhoff, 2011). Upon analyzing the scenes containing code-switching in *Black Panther*, it became evident that the characters' decisions to code-switch were patterned around context and company, consistent with Meyerhoff's assertion. In *Black Panther* specifically, the characters switch from SAE to Wakandan when using sentimental yet not title-bearing familial terms, for tribal and ritual purposes, and to ensure privacy or establish an in-group and out-group.

There are two distinctions in how familial terms are used in *Black Panther*. First as a title or substitute for a name, which is seen many times when T’Challa interacts with his sister, Shuri. Oftentimes during these interactions Shuri refers to him as “brother” in place of using his given name (38:20, 1:12:43, 1:49:16). Here the English word “brother” is always used. The second way familial terms are used are in more sentimental contexts, which can be seen between different family relations in a number of scenes. The first scene where this takes place is between two brothers—T’Challa’s father, T’Chaka, and his uncle, N’Jobu. King T’Chaka has come to the United States to confront his brother who reportedly betrayed Wakanda as a spy. The words in red denote where the character has switched from English to Wakandan.

**Example 1: (3:30-6:00)**

**N’Jobu:** My king.

**T’Chaka:** Leave us (to James)

**N’Jobu:** This is James. I trust him with my life. He stays—with your permission, King T’Chaka

**T’Chaka:** As you wish. At ease. Come, baby brother. Let me see how you are holding up. You look strong.

**N’Jobu:** Glory to Bast I am in good health. How is home?

**T’Chaka:** Not so good, baby brother, there has been an attack.

As can be seen by the red words in the dialogue above, T’Chaka continuously refers to N’Jobu using the Wakandan words for “baby brother” as a term of endearment. In this scene N’Jobu also uses Wakandan when he refers to his brother as “my king.” Although not something that would usually be considered a term of endearment, its use as a sentimental familial term would make sense in this instance due to the length of time for which N’Jobu and T’Chaka have been apart. In other, more formal contexts, the words “my king” are always said in English. Another scene where “my king” is said in English is when Shuri uses it sarcastically with T’Challa when she sees him for the first time after his coronation. The difference between these contexts is the formality associated with the utterance—when N’Jobu says “my king” it is the first time he has

seen his brother in at least 8 years. Due to the circumstances of their meeting, he is still required to be respectful, but the use of Wakandan for that phrase adds a layer of warmth to the interaction that would not be there otherwise.

Another scene that shows code-switching for endearment purposes is when the powers of the Black Panther are being restored to T'Challa and he goes to the Ancestral Plain, which is a way for him to converse with the deceased former kings of Wakanda, including his father, King T'Chaka.

**Example 2: (31:00-33:10)**

**T'Challa:** *Baba (Father).*

**T'Chaka:** *My son.*

**T'Challa:** I'm sorry (kneels down in apology)

**T'Chaka:** Stand up. You are a king. *What is wrong my son?*

**T'Challa:** *I'm not ready, Baba.*

**T'Chaka:** *Have you not prepared to be king your whole life? Have you not trained and studied, been by my side?*

**T'Challa:** That is not what I am talking about. I am not ready to be without you.

In this scene T'Challa uses the Wakandan word for father, “Baba,” in a similar way that an American child would call their father “Daddy” rather than “Dad” or “Father” which are often viewed as more formal titles. His father, T'Chaka then responds, calling him “my son” in the same language. Something that is unique in this scene is the snippet of conversation where they continue using Wakandan. However, this still fits with the sentimentality of familial conversation because his father switches to Wakandan when he is addressing T'Challa as his son, rather than addressing him as the current king. The switch back to English appears to serve the purpose of changing the topic, even though it is still part of that intimate dialogue.

Characters in *Black Panther* also switch from English to Wakandan for ritual purposes. This can be seen in Example 3 below. Here, T'Challa's advisor, Zuri, is explaining part of the ritual combat ceremony which composes part of T'Challa's coronation.

**Example 3: (19:20-22:35)**

**Zuri:** I, Zuri, son of Badu, give to you Prince T'Challa, the Black Panther. The prince will now have the strength of the Black Panther stripped away. **Praise the ancestors.**

**Crowd:** **Praise the ancestors.**

**Zuri:** Victory in ritual combat comes by yield or death. If any tribe wishes to put forth a warrior, I now offer a path to the throne.

**(Merchant, Border, River, and Mining) tribe leaders shout in Wakandan and the tribe collectively repeats those tribally specific shouts. Then the leaders say "The (Merchant/Border/River/Mining) tribe will not challenge today.**

As the example demonstrates, the use of Wakandan for ritual purposes does not mean that the entire ceremony was performed in Wakandan. As a movie that was made in the United States with English speakers as the principle audience, using Wakandan for the entirety of ritual scenes would be more than 5 whole scenes presented only in Wakandan. However, the most important phrase, "Praise the Ancestors," is always in Wakandan.

Another example that demonstrates ritual usage takes place just before Example 2 as Zuri gives T'Challa the heart-shaped herb to send him to the ancestral plain.

**Example 4: (29:00-29:37)**

**Zuri:** Allow the heart-shaped herb to restore the powers of the Black Panther and take you to the ancestral plain...T'Chaka, we call on you, come here to your son...**Praise the ancestors.**

As mentioned, the movie includes more than 5 ritual scenes. Within those scenes, the only instance where "Praise the Ancestors" is in English is when Killmonger becomes king and takes part in the herb ceremony (1:17:00-1:22:25). It is possible that this exception occurs because

Killmonger is an outsider. Because he grew up in the United States, performing the whole ceremony in English would allow him to understand everything they are doing.

The third and final context for the code-switch is when the characters desire privacy from outsiders or are asserting who is part of their in-group and who is not. The first scene where this is used for that context is after a car chase in Korea where T'Challa and his guards are trying to apprehend a man named Klaue for stealing vibranium—Wakanda's chief natural resource, but believed by most of the world to be exceedingly rare—and leaving a number of casualties in his wake. When they finally catch up to Klaue, T'Challa becomes highly aggressive and prepares to kill him. However, one of the other Wakandans who was present on the mission, Nakia, warns him that his actions will be a public statement more than an execution of justice.

**Example 5: (53:00- 53:46)**

**T'Challa:** Klaue! Did you think we would forget? Look at me, murderer. Where did you get this weapon?

**Klaue:** You savages didn't deserve it. (T'Challa gets more aggressive)  
Oh, mercy, King! Mercy!

**T'Challa:** Every breath you take is mercy from me.

**Nakia:** King, the world watches.

Here Nakia uses Wakandan to tell the king to stand down so that the world does not receive an image of him as a murderer. Although it is not common knowledge that the king of Wakanda is the Black Panther, it still nonetheless ran the risk of being traced back to Wakanda. By giving the warning in Wakandan she is effectively convincing him to stop without the rest of the crowd figuring out who he is or why she is telling him to stop. This privacy becomes important because of the growing crowd. The scene directly following exemplifies this point even more. Klaue sits in an interrogation room after having been captured and brought into custody.

Meanwhile the Wakandans and an American CIA agent are trying to decide who should interrogate him. T'Challa and Okoye being able to converse in front of him without him knowing the content of their brief discussion gives them an advantage in the negotiation process.

**Example 6: (54:15-55:23)**

**Ross:** So this is a big mess, huh? I figured we could go good cop, bad cop; I'll talk to him first, then you guys go in.

**Okoye:** *We can't let him talk to Klaue alone.*

**T'Challa:** *Better to let him talk to Klaue alone for five minutes than to make a scene here.* After your questioning we will take him back to Wakanda with us.

**Ross:** What? No. Look, I like you a lot, but he's in my custody now. He's not going anywhere. Listen, I'm doing you guys a favor by letting you even be in here (taps T'Challa on the chest)

**Okoye:** *If he touches you again, I'm going to impale him to this desk.*

**Ross:** Does she speak English?

**Okoye:** When she wants to.

The scene above illustrates T'Challa and the leader of the royal guard, Okoye, discussing their strategy while keeping the American, Agent Ross, out of the loop. Okoye's decision to advise her king in Wakandan provides them with an advantage in the negotiation process, because Ross is not yet aware of what they want. However, based on Okoye's later comments (not presented here) and her blatant disdain for Ross, her use of Wakandan is also likely driven by her distaste and distrust for Americans in general. The last three lines of this scene exemplify the intentionality for privacy in this use of Wakandan. Okoye gives a slightly idle threat in Wakandan and Agent Ross asks if she speaks English because he did not understand the threat, to which she responds "only when she wants to" in English to let him know that it was a conscious choice on her part to leave him in the dark as to what she said. This also lets Ross know that it was a conscious choice on T'Challa's part as well, in the beginning of the scene, to speak Wakandan because he knows that Okoye speaks English but T'Challa still responded to her in Wakandan

though they were in front of Ross. Soon after this interaction Ross goes into the interrogation room and immediately T'Challa and Okoye switch to speaking English with each other.

Driven by context and company, it is evident that Wakandan is used in *Black Panther* for three distinct communicative purposes. Wakandan is utilized when expressing deep familial sentiment, when performing a religious or cultural ritual, and when asserting privacy or in-group versus out-group dynamics in relationships with outsiders. This does not mean that characters only switch into Wakandan for these three reasons, nor that there were no other motivations for the use of Wakandan in the above scenes; there are some scenes where the use of Wakandan does pose a few unique challenges which do not quite fit within the parameters of familial terms, ritual conduct, or privacy.

As mentioned previously, Wakandan is not used every time a familial term is used, as Shuri uses the term “brother” in English. However, this does not contradict the use of sentimental terms in Wakandan, it simply adds a complicated layer to its use and context. Initially, it appeared that Wakandan was used in high-stress situations as well, such as during a bombing which occurred immediately after the aforementioned scene in which Klaue is questioned and T'Challa and Okoye converse in Wakandan. However, the film includes several battles and combat scenes where the use of Wakandan is not consistent enough with this hypothesis for it to hold true.

Another possibility was that Wakandan was used for emphasis. However, *emphasis*, is too vague of a term to be useful for gathering specific or motivation-based data. Furthermore, emphasis seems to be more related to theories about filmmaking and directing than to code-switching or sociolinguistics, which leads to the final dilemma; Wakandan is a real language



(*isiXhosa*) used in a fictional environment. Not only is Wakanda a fictional country with fictitious tribes, characters, and history, but it exists within the cinematic universe of the Marvel comic and movie franchises.

Certainly, the use of Wakandan did not occur organically in *Black Panther*, the film was targeted toward an American audience with the goal of making an accessible and entertaining movie. Further, the accent coach, Beth McGuire, did not have any influence on when Wakandan was used in the script. McGuire mainly contributed to the phonological aspects of Wakandan (Eligon, 2016). Consequently, it is only natural that Wakandan is seldom used for full conversations and is never used for complete scenes. The target audience, rather than the characters, may have more to do with the use of Wakandan in *Black Panther* than we give them credit.

Nonetheless, *Black Panther*, through the use of *isiXhosa* takes place in a manufactured setting, provides convincing enough support for familial terms, ritual, and privacy as code-switching motivations to call for further research on these factors. No other study has yet been done on *Black Panther*, although a sequel is projected to be released in early 2021, opening the door for new data and further research. Even more so, research on code-switching within *isiXhosa* itself, or other South African languages would prove to be invaluable in discerning the validity and usefulness of code-switching.



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