A Note on Language

South Africa has eleven official languages: Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Swazi, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu. In addition to these, other African and European languages such as Shona, Tonga, Lingala, French, and Portuguese are commonly heard in the urban soundscape. These languages are mixed in creative ways, both in *kwaito*’s lyrics and in everyday discourse among black South Africans. The process of language mixing has a long history in South Africa. The best-known and researched creole is *tsotsitaal*, which emerged in the freehold township of Sophiatown in the 1940s. There, *tsotsi* referred to the slick urban hustler, modeled on characters from American films like *The Street with No Name* (1948). The word is derived, in fact, from the attire worn by dapper Hollywood heroes—zoot suits.

*Tsotsitaal* is a creole that incorporates strains from many languages but is constituted primarily by Afrikaans, English, and Zulu. It is commonly used throughout urban areas in South Africa and forms the basis of most kwaito lyrics. Some linguists have argued that in the greater Johannesburg metropolitan area a new creole, *isicamtho*, has replaced *tsotsitaal*. Bonner and Segal take a longer view, observing that the difference between the two language-varieties is based on their respective historical origins. *Tsotsitaal*, they maintain, was transported from Sophiatown directly to the Soweto township of Meadowlands after black residents of the former were forcibly removed. *Isicamtho*, by contrast, “spontaneously evolved in the slightly older areas of Soweto, such as Orlando East and West” (Bonner and Segal 1998, 59). The lat-
ter language-variety, by their account, evolved in the 1960s and is based on Zulu, unlike tsotsitaal, which is based on Afrikaans.

What does it mean to say that a language-variety is “based on” another language? As Dumisani Krushchev Ntshangase explains, both tsotsitaal and isicamtho are used “through” other languages. Like tsotsitaal, he observes, isicamtho “has no structure of its own since it relies heavily on the language structures of the languages from which it ‘operates.’ This means that it has not yet developed its own syntactic base which will make it linguistically independent of the base languages” (2002, 407). Ntshangase suggests that the main difference between tsotsitaal and isicamtho is the syntactic base, which is Afrikaans in the former and Zulu (or sometimes Sotho) in the latter.

Ntshangase’s comparative analysis of tsotsitaal and isicamtho confirms my own research in most respects. There is, however, one important aspect where our work diverges: I found that in Soweto many people use the word tsotsitaal as a general term referring to any urban slang. In other words, my interlocutors refer to the Zulu-based creole that they speak as tsotsitaal and not isicamtho. I am not arguing that they would refuse the designation isicamtho, but only that they seldom use that term. In this book, then, I use the term tsotsitaal when referring generally to urban creoles.

Although I took courses in Zulu and continued to study the language during fieldwork, I was not prepared to follow conversations that continually mix and move between four or more languages—as is frequently the case in Soweto and other parts of the Johannesburg area. The conversations I understood best were those in Zulu-based tsotsitaal, because I was able to draw on my Zulu education from university and my twelve years of Afrikaans study in school (grades 1–12). Still, I relied on friends in the field for help understanding conversations and for translations into English when necessary. I am very grateful for their generosity and goodwill.

One final small point is in order. For the sake of convenience, and to avoid confusion, throughout this book I omit prefixes of Zulu noun stems when referring to languages or ethnicities. For example, I refer to the languages Zulu and Xhosa, and not isiZulu and isiXhosa (the latter being technically more accurate by some accounts). I also simplify plural forms, referring to Zulus and Xhosas (rather than the amaZulu and ama-Xhosa) and to more than one “traditional healer” as sangomas rather than izangoma.