

# Umlungu: The colorful history of a word used to describe white people in South Africa

August 8 2023, by Andiswa Mvanyashe



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

In South Africa "umlungu" is a word that's commonly used to refer to white people. It comes from isiXhosa, the language of the country's [Xhosa people](#). It's always been a mystery how the word originated or

what it actually means because no human beings were referred to as umlungu before the arrival of white people in the country by ship. There was, however, a word "ubulungu" which meant "that deposited out by the sea" or sea scum.

While it may have been considered impolite in the past, [today](#) umlungu is a polite word. Many white South Africans don't mind calling themselves umlungu—there are even T-shirt ranges bearing the word. And it's now also commonly used to refer to [black people](#)—meaning "my employer" or "a wealthy person." So how did umlungu come to change its meaning?

As a linguist who teaches and studies isiXhosa, I recently published a [study](#) that considers the word from a sociolinguistic perspective. Sociolinguistics can be [defined](#) as the link between language and society. I chose to frame my study through this theory because a language is not independent of the people who speak it. Individuals shape words to reflect the changing context of their society.

The word umlungu has taken on multiple meanings as a result of historical events, showing how language evolves through social interactions.

## Colonial times

According to one [study](#), the term umlungu arose from an incident in which shipwrecked [white people](#) were deposited from the sea. The sea's tendency is to toss anything out that is dirty in order to clean itself. The shipwrecked white people were given the name "abelungu/umlungu," which [means](#) "filth that is rejected by the ocean and deposited on the shore." Some of those shipwrecked remained and the clan name Abelungu [was used](#) to record their children.

The words umlungu and abelungu (plural) are used by [Nguni](#) people across South Africa. The Nguni are a large cluster of Bantu-speaking [ethnic groups](#) in southern Africa who have played an important role in the country's history and culture. The Nguni ethnic groupings include the Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi and Ndebele. These subgroups share linguistic and cultural similarities while adhering to their own traditions and practices.

According to [Zulu historians](#), white people arriving in South Africa were called "abelumbi" (magicians). This is because [Shaka Zulu](#), the powerful leader of the Zulu Kingdom, witnessed a white person killing a man without touching him (with a gun). He stated that only a witch could kill a person without any physical contact. As a result, he called them abelumbi, which was later altered to abelungu (philanthropists) as time passed.

Various events throughout the colonial era forced black people into poverty, particularly after the [Nongqawuse](#) episode. Nongqawuse was a Xhosa prophetess who, in 1856, had a vision that if the Xhosa people killed all their cattle and destroyed their crops, the spirits would drive the British colonizers out of South Africa and bring about a new era of prosperity. Many Xhosa people then [slaughtered](#) their own cattle and destroyed their own crops. Some people died because of hunger.

## **Apartheid**

This poverty was exacerbated under [apartheid](#)—an organized system of white minority rule in South Africa that imposed racial segregation and discrimination from 1948 until the early 1990s.

An umlungu was an esteemed member of society during the apartheid era because of the power and authority that they possessed. It's my view that because of the apartheid system, black people were psychologically influenced to perceive everything linked with a white person as better

and of a higher standard.

Due to the reality of colonization and apartheid, most black South Africans were forced to work for white people and so an umlungu came to be defined as a white boss or employer. With time, this came to include all bosses or employers—even black people came to refer to a black boss as umlungu.

## **Today**

I argue that the views of black people toward white people had a significant impact on the word changing and gaining numerous positive meanings. The concept that anything finer, richer and whiter in color is umlungu has given rise to new positive connotations for the term. The word umlungu today can refer to an employer, a black person of a certain ethnicity with a lighter skin color, someone of higher standing, a wealthy person—or simply a white person.

A black person who owns and runs a farm like a white person using a labor tenancy arrangement, for example, is [referred to](#) as an umlungu. University students may be [referred to](#) as abelungu since they represent class mobility and luxury.

Xhosa people have further adapted the term, with some naming their children Nobelungu (the one who is of white people), Umlungwana (young white person) or Mlungukazi (white woman).

Social class and status influence the evolution of language. Change is also related to the relative safety of a group's standing in society, with lower-status groups generally imitating higher-status ones. As a result, those identified as abelungu, particularly among the black population, are seen as having ascended the social ladder.

"Umlungu" demonstrates how the meaning of a word can change to reflect a changing society. Language is not static, it is a growing and shifting way of reflecting the world.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Umlungu: The colorful history of a word used to describe white people in South Africa (2023, August 8) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-08-umlungu-history-word-white-people.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.