



The elevation of Sepedi from a dialect to an official standard language: Cultural and economic power and political influence matter

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This study explored the role played by economic, cultural, and political power and influence when a particular dialect was elevated to the status of an official standard language. This was a qualitative study that employed text analysis where journal articles, dissertations, theses, academic books and Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review minutes were considered for data collection and analysis. In order to supplement the above-mentioned method, 267 research participants involving students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and lecturers from the selected five South African universities, including members of the language authorities, were also invited to participate in the study. Self-administered survey questionnaires and face-to-face interviews were chosen as qualitative methods for data collection. From a dialectal point of view, this study indicated that all official standard languages were dialects before. However, these dialects were considered superior and elevated to the status of official languages because of socio-economic power and political influence. This article further recorded that the status type of language planning in the South African context is quite political in nature, not less linguistic. It was against this background that the researchers claim that there is no official standard language that was not a dialect before.

Keywords: Sepedi, Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa, Tagalog, Missionaries, dialect; official language standard language; status type of language planning; renaming, and political power and influence.

Introduction

The minutes of the Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee (2011, 2016, 2017, 2020), and scholars such as Mönnig (1967), Mokgokong (1966), Mojela (1997, 1999, 2008), Rakgogo (2016, 2019), Rakgogo and Van Huyssteen (2018, 2019) and Rakgogo and Zungu (2021) confirm that Sepedi as one of the 11 official languages that are cited in Section 6(1) of the South African Constitution, 1996, has not yet been fully recognised as the official standard language by some of the first language (L1) speakers under attention. The reason for this submission is that there are a reasonable number of L1 speakers who are still considering Sepedi as one of the 27 dialects of the Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa) language, such as Pedi, Tau, Roka, Kone, Mphahlele, Tshwene, Mathabatha, Matlala, Dikgale, Mothiba, Nkwana, Molepo, Mamabolo, Tlokwa, Birwa, Kwena, Moletši, Hananwa, Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Nareng, Maake, Mametša, Tlhabine, Pulana, Pai and Kutswe (Doke 1954; Mokgokong 1966; Mojela 1997; Mönnig 1967).

Similarly, Kretzer (2016:18) articulates that the status planning in South Africa specified 11 languages as official languages in Article 6(1) of the South African Constitution (1996). However, the selection and announcement of the 11 official languages caused certain reasonable criticism and debates, specifically regarding Sepedi as one of the official languages. Kretzer (2016) further asserts that the main reason for the debate has been that, as per legally valid South African Constitution of 1996, Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa) was translated as Sepedi without following proper procedures and the inclusion of the relevant stakeholders, including the L1 speakers, in this whole process. He further states that this criticism was also because of the conception that Sepedi is a dialect like Khelobedu, Setlokwa, Sepulana, Sephalaborwa and Sehananwa.

It is also important to mention in this article the origin of the name Sepedi as early as from the missionaries era. When quoting the historical background of the speakers of the language under dialectal scrutiny, Mokgokong (1966:9) acknowledges that Bapedi originally broke away from the Kgatla tribe (one of the Batswana tribes) under the leadership of a certain Thobebe, moved eastwards, and finally settled in the area between Olifants and Steelpoort Rivers, now known as

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Driekop (Ga-Ratau). From this area, they adopted the name Bapedi, discarded their original totem *kgabo* (monkey) and venerated *noko* (porcupine).

Banda (2002) in Bock and Mheta (2014:346) states that the emergence of Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana as distinct languages was because of the activities carried out by three different missionary societies in different areas where the Sotho languages were spoken: the London Missionary Society was active in the West with the Sotho language there being Setswana; the Catholic missionaries were active in the South, with the Sotho language there being Sesotho, whilst the Lutheran missionaries were located in the North with the Sotho language being Sesotho sa Leboa. It is for this reason why the name 'Sepedi' is used instead of other dialects to form the so-called standardised form of Northern Sotho (Sepedi).

In his sociolinguistic study entitled *Sepedi or Sesotho sa Leboa*, Rakgogo (2016:113) mentions that a significant majority of the research participants preferred Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) as a language name, whereas a substantial minority of the participants held the opposite perspective that Sepedi is, indeed, the correct language name. The 'Sesotho sa Leboa' or 'Northern Sotho' is the best name that should be recognised as one of the official languages of South Africa, as Rakgogo (2016) considers Sepedi as one of the dialects of the Northern Sotho language, similar to other dialects like Lobedu, Tlokwa, Tlhabine, Kgaga, Phalaborwa, Pulana, Kutswe, Pai, Molepo, Mamabolo, Tau, Pedi, Roka and Kone.

In a Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee of 2017, it is documented that the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB 2017) once instituted an ad hoc committee that was led by the late Prof. Mawasha to conduct survey research that aimed to settle the sociolinguistic, dialectal and onomastic controversy surrounding Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) language names. The finding of the ad hoc committee indicated that 64% of the respondents opted for Sesotho sa Leboa, 34% opted for Sepedi, whilst 5% were undecided. Thus, it was argued from this finding that Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) is the preferred language name, according to the L1 speakers who were part of this research study. The justification behind the language name preference was that Sepedi is perceived and considered a dialect like others.

Research problem

What problematises the thrust of this article is the conception and narrative that Sepedi should not be accepted as the official standard language because it is a dialect similar to Tau, Roka, Kone, Mphahlele, Tšhwene, Mathabatha, Matlala, Dikgale, Mothiba, Nkwana, Molepo, Mamabolo, Tlokwa, Birwa, Kwena, Moletši, Hananwa, Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Nareng, Maake, Mametša, Tlhabine, Pulana, Pai and Kutswe (Doke 1954; Mokgokong 1966; Mojela 1997; Mönnig 1967). This conception is further

confirmed by Rakgogo (2019:238) who revealed that a significant majority of the research participants, 61%, rejected Sepedi as a symbol of their identity as this language name is more exclusive. In a more practical sense, the name 'Sepedi' is more associated with a particular ethnic group. The rejection of the mentioned language name was further perpetuated by the imposition that came as a concomitant part of politics when the Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) language name was translated as Sepedi in Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa, 1996. A lack of consultative and transparent processes perplexed the sociolinguistic and dialectal controversy surrounding this issue. A research problem that triggered this study is when it was found that the L1 speakers of Sepedi lacked knowledge of how South African indigenous languages were escalated to the status of an official language. It is for this reason that this study aimed to explore how the socio-economic, cultural, and political power and influence played a role when a particular dialect was elevated to the status of an official language.

Aims and objectives of the article

Taking into consideration the foregoing state of the dialectal, sociolinguistics and onomastic confusion surrounding Sepedi as an official standard language, the aims and objectives of this study were to:

- explore the qualitative variables that are associated with the selection of a particular dialect among others as superior and the basis of the official standard language
- identify the existing similarities between Sepedi and other officially recognised South African indigenous languages that are cited in Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa, 1996
- compare how the status type of language planning in the South African context corresponds to other countries, continentally and internationally.

Dialectology, standardisation and language planning as a conceptual framework that underpins this study

According to Yule (2010:241), dialectology is generally perceived to be the study of different dialects of the same language. Within the parameters of this study, dialectology as a conceptual framework is considered as one of the qualitative variables that may have given birth to the current problem initiating the investigation. The sociolinguistic and dialectal debate of whether Sepedi should be replaced or maintained in Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996) as one of the 11 official languages falls under the jurisdiction of language policy and planning. Equally important, the classification of Kopa, Setebele-Sotho, Molepo, Mamabolo, Mothiba, Mothapo, Makgoba, Kone, Tau, Roka, Moletlane, Hananwa, Tlokwa, Matlala, Moletši, Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Kgaga, Tswapo, Pai, Pulana and Kutswe as the dialects of the Sepedi language was also a direct result of status type of planning, which is also political in nature.

Fishman et al. (1968:31) view language standardisation as the process of one variety or dialect of a language becoming widely accepted throughout the speech community as a supra-dialectal norm – the ‘best’ form of the language rated above regional and social dialects, although these may be felt appropriate in some domains. According to Fishman et al. (1968), it can be understood that the standardisation process entails the selection of one language variety or dialect, which should be codified and accepted as the standard language. Van Wyk (1989) adds that some languages became the standard because of the influences of the dominant class, institutional decisions, and the fact that the dialect or that variety of the language was the first to be codified. Within the parameters of this study, the consulted literature argues that Sepedi was the first Northern Sotho dialect, amongst others, to receive codification.

Similarly, Webb and Du Plessis (2006:118) purported that sociolinguists have long written and spoken about ‘language and power’, which suggests that language can be an important political variable in addition to an instrument of communication or a symbolic marker of group identity. Mesthrie (2002:66) shares a similar perspective that standardisation because of language planning is notoriously political as a process, and the experience in South Africa is no exception. Fasold and Connor-Linton (2006:385) contend that the controlling segments of a society are the ones to decide what is meant by the term ‘standard’. and invariably the standard form is very close to the language the decision-makers use anyway. Kaplan (2004) in Rakgogo (2019:147) maintains that language planning is about power distribution and political expediency, and about economic issues and the distribution of time and effort of administrators, teachers and students. Dialectology, standardisation and language planning are also relevant to this article, as they all touch on the interrelatedness between dialects, official standard languages and political administration.

The missionaries’ approach to language standardisation

Citing the historical reasons, Rammala (2002:6) points out that the role of missionaries regarding Sotho languages cannot be ignored. Given the historical background and the relationship between colonialism and the language under investigation (Sepedi), Mönnig (1967:25) revealed that in 1860 Sekwati was visited by a Lutheran missionary of the Berlin Missionary Society, Alexander Merensky. They met in a friendly spirit, and Sekwati told Merensky that he could come at any time he wished to build a missionary station in the country. Eventually on 14 August 1860, Merensky and a fellow missionary, Grutzner, started their first mission, Gerlachshoop, near Bopedi amongst a Kopa tribe under Chief Boleu, where they were joined in 1861 by two more missionaries, Nachtigal and Endemann. The new station came into operation on 22 September 1861, where Merensky held the first service.

Focusing on the political reasons, Webb (2010:168) maintains that in the 19th century, the ‘standardisation’ of Bantu languages in South Africa was handled by missionaries: French missionaries in the case of the Sesotho cluster (from 1833); German missionaries for Pedi, Venda; and Swiss for Tsonga (from 1883). These missionaries developed orthographic systems (based on the Roman script of 26 letters and introducing diacritics), wrote grammatical rules, compiled dictionaries, translated the Bible into these languages and taught these languages in the schools they established (Webb 2010:168). It can thus be concluded that the orthographic system of some of the officially recognised South African indigenous languages, including the ones under attention (Sepedi), was largely influenced by the orthography system of non-African countries such as France, Germany and Switzerland.

It is for this reason that Mojela (2008:121–122) acknowledges that the development of the Northern Sotho orthography and the origin of its standard form were very much influenced by the work of the German missionaries in Sekhukhuneland. He further submits that the Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) dialects the German missionaries first learned to speak and write were Sekopa and Sepedi. In addition, he laments that the missionaries promoted the dialects in the areas where they firstly landed and operated. It is against this background that Mojela (2008) argues that the Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) orthography introduced by the German missionaries was first performed in Sepedi, which conferred on Sepedi a superior status, thereby side-lining and stigmatising other Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) dialects that did not have these missionary orthographies.

Webb (2010) in Rakgogo (2019:62) persuasively argues that the Bantu languages (Nguni, Sotho, Tsonga and Venda) have also been used as political instruments in the Republic of South Africa – firstly by the colonial powers (albeit overtly), leading to inferiorisation of the indigenous people of South Africa, and then through the work of the missionaries, who constructed different languages out of the existing dialect continua in the 19th century, and finally, by politicians in the 20th century, to strengthen the separateness between these communities as part of the policy of Apartheid.

In this article, it can be noted that scholars such as Rammala (2002), Webb (2010) and Mojela (2008), all share a similar perspective that the Sepedi dialect was considered superior to Kopa, Setebele-Sotho, Molepo, Mamabolo, Mothiba, Mothapo, Makgoba, Kone, Tau, Roka, Moletlane, Hananwa, Tlokwa, Matlala, Moletši, Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Kgaga, Tswapo, Pai, Pulana and Kutswe. Hence, it was elevated to the status of an official standard language. According to critics, this achievement was because of missionary activities, which were a direct concomitant of the political power and influence of the previous regime.

Research methodology

This was a qualitative research study, which employed a text analysis approach. The authors reviewed journal articles,

dissertations, theses, academic books and minutes of the Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee for data collection. An interpretative paradigm was employed for data analysis to make sense of the collected qualitative data.

Sample population

This article is based on a PhD study of Rakgogo (2019) where 267 research participants including students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and lecturers from the selected five South African universities (University of Limpopo, University of Venda, University of South Africa, University of Johannesburg and Tshwane University of Technology), and members of the language authorities (Pan South African Language Board, Sesotho sa Leboa National Language, Body and Sesotho sa Leboa National Lexicography Unit), were invited to participate in the study. However, it is important to mention that the current article considered only the qualitative data, which focused on the text and document analysis. In a more practical sense, historical records touching on the missionaries' efforts and activities focused on the selection and codification of the South African indigenous dialects that were later converted into official standard languages.

Presentation of the qualitative data

Sepedi (the language under attention): from dialect to language

According to Mokgokong (1966:8–9), the Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa) language consists of around 27 dialects: Pedi, Tau, Roka, Kone, Mphahlele, Tšhwene, Mathabatha, Matlala, Dikgale, Mothiba, Nkwana, Molepo, Mamabolo, Tlokwa, Birwa, Kwena, Moletši, Hananwa, Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Nareng, Maake, Mametša, Tlhabine, Pulana, Pai and Kutswe. Similarly, Ziervogel (1969:1) asserts that Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa) is the written language of the Northern and Eastern Transvaal. In this area, many dialects are spoken, some of which differ considerably from the written language, for instance, the language of the Lobedu and Phalaborwa in Tzaneen and Leydsdorp (currently known as Phalaborwa); Pulana, Kutswe and Pai in Pilgrim's Rest and Bushbuckridge; Moletši, Matlala and Tlokwa in the Capricorn district. Towards the south-west, we find the eastern Kgatla dialects which constitute a bridge between the Tswana and the Northern Sotho dialects.

In more simple terms, Poulos and Louwrens (1994:1) posit that Northern Sotho is a term that is used to refer collectively to a number of dialects that are concentrated in the Central, Eastern, North Eastern, North Western and Northern Transvaal (Transvaal is an old designation for provinces before 1994, which now consists of Gauteng, North West and Limpopo provinces). They further explain that Northern Sotho is commonly used today by scholars and speakers to refer to what is known as the official language, which is primarily based on the Sepedi dialect of Sekhukhuneland.

Focusing on the name of the official standard language, Mesthrie (2002:70) cogently argues that Northern Sotho, which is referred to as Sepedi in Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa (1996), is an instructive language name. He clarifies that the ethnic group Bapedi was demonstrably exposed by the Nationalist government to unify a diverse set of people, who were formerly called 'the Transvaal Sotho'. He further views Sepedi as the language of the prestigious ethnic group, which is rich in historical background. Thus, it is for this reason that it was selected as the foundation of the standard language which was later accorded an official status.

The submission is confirmed by Da Costa, Dyers and Mheta (2014:345) when indicating that the standardised version of the Northern Sotho language is based on the Sepedi dialect, although it also shows some influences of the Sekopa dialect. Similarly, Poulos and Louwrens (1994:1) assert that Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa) is commonly used today to refer to what is known as the 'official' language, which is primarily based on the Sepedi dialect of Sekhukhuneland. They further postulate that the codification started with the Pedi dialect, not any other Northern Sotho dialect.

Based on the sociolinguistic research carried out by Rakgogo (2016:101–102), it was found that there is sufficient linguistic evidence that classifies Sepedi as a dialect that is spoken in Sekhukhuneland. The participants further articulated that those speakers (people) and scholars who are advocating that Sepedi should be removed as an official language do not want to accept the historical facts of the Sepedi dialect. Thus, the following qualitative variables should be taken into consideration:

- Sepedi is the first dialect the German missionaries learned to speak and write.
- It is the first dialect amongst others to be codified.
- This is the reason why the Bible and other religious texts were translated into Sepedi dialect.
- It is a dialect that is associated with historical value.
- It is a dialect associated with political power and influence.
- The Bapedi (Sepedi speakers) is the first ethnic group to settle in the Limpopo province (Mokgokong 1966; Mönnig 1967).

It can, therefore, be concluded that Sepedi was a dialect as confirmed by the literature consulted in relation to this study. However, it is for the above-mentioned socio-historical factors that the Pedi dialect was taken as the foundation for the standard language. For obvious language planning reasons, it was further elevated to the status of an official standard language, as it is stipulated within Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South African (Act No. 108 of 1996).

A similar finding in the South African context

According to Malepe (1966:1), Setswana is a member of the Sotho group of the south-eastern zone of South African indigenous languages. Snail (2011:69) shares that the largest

group of the Sesotho speakers is the Batswana, with the majority of them from the former homeland Bophuthatswana (a homeland for Batswana) situated between the Northern Cape and former Northern Transvaal (today known as North West province) and stretches right to the border of Botswana and South Africa.

As each language has its own dialects, Setswana also has dialects. Cole (1964:179) mentions that spoken Setswana is divided into four subgroups each containing various dialects. They are:

1. Central Setswana

- Serolong, as spoken by the Tshidi, Ratlou and Rrapulana nations
- Serolong, as spoken by the Seleka in the Orange Free State
- Sehurutse
- Sengwaketse.

2. Southern Setswana

- Setlhaping
- Setlhware.

3. Northern Setswana

- Sekwena
- Sengwato
- Setawana.

4. Eastern Setswana

- Transvaal Sekgatla
- West-Transvaal Sekwena.

Based on the above-mentioned dialectal classification, Malimabe (1990:5) stipulated that it was quite difficult to select only one dialect or language variety to represent all other dialects and form the standard Setswana language as each dialectal or ethnic group regards its own dialect as superior and equally important.

However, Malepe (1966:13–14) differs with the above view, and he articulates that the standardisation of the Setswana language was based on a specific dialect. He is of the view that Sehurutse, although not considered a pure dialect, was used and converted into the standard Setswana. Malepe (1966) justifies that:

- Firstly, Bahurutse (Sehurutse speakers) are regarded traditionally, by most other Tswana tribes and ethnic groups, as the nucleus or parent-stock from which they branched off.
- They still occupy the same geographical area (Lehurutshe) in which they are believed to have lived for many years and from which the other Tswana tribes are believed to have branched off.
- Finally, because Sehurutse is more central and the least influenced by other South African indigenous languages, it can be expected to have retained more sound features

and characteristics of the original Tswana speech forms than other Tswana dialects.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned reasons, it can be noted that there are some similarities between the elevation of the Sepedi and Sehurutse dialects and the status of an official standard language. Bapedi are the first ethnic group in South Africa to have settled in the Limpopo province. Similarly, Bahurutse are also found to have lived for many years, from which the other Tswana tribes are believed to have branched off. In terms of this article, it can be argued that the geographical details of the superior dialect also play a role when a particular dialect or variety must be selected as the basis of the standard official language.

In addition, it can be observed that both Sepedi and Sehurutse dialects are linguistically classified as the central dialect cluster. Critics may support that the dialects that are spoken in the central cluster are less influenced by other South African indigenous languages. Based on the literature review in this article, it was confirmed that Sepedi dialects such as Sepulana, Sekutswe and Sepai were linguistically influenced by Xitsonga and Siswati languages. Mokgokong (1966:8–9) mentions that the dialects that are used in the north-eastern part show a strong influence of the Tshivenda language. Similarly, Kotzé (2004:20) emphasises that Khelobedu that belong to the north-eastern cluster of Northern Sotho (S.33), along with dialects such as Phalaborwa and Mahlo, show clear phonological and morphological influences of the Tshivenda language. Table 1 shows a comparison of how Tshivenda lexically influenced Khelobedu.

The details presented in the table confirm how a dialect can be lexically influenced by a different language. In terms of this article, it can therefore be interpreted that if the Khelobedu dialect was selected as the basis of the standard Sepedi language, a form of a different language would have been standardised. Thus, a less influenced dialect is considered an original version of that language. In a more practical sense, it may be questionable whether a particular standardised language produces significant resemblances and syntactical influences of another language.

A similar finding in an Asian country

The elevation of the dialect 'Tagalog' to the status of an official standard language in the Philippines is also relevant to be mentioned in this article. According to Porter (2017:47), Tagalog was recognised as the national language; many of

TABLE 1: A comparison of lexical items.

Lobedu	Tshivenda	Sepedi	English	Part of speech
Mphaga	Lufanga	Thipa	Knife	Noun
Booswa	Vhuswa	Bogobe	Porridge	Verb
Tabola	Tambula	Hlaka	Poverty	Adjective
Makoba	Makumba	Mae	Eggs	Noun
Mogayo	Mugayo	Bupi	Maize meal	Noun
Goulo	Goulo	Kgwele	Ball	Noun
Bebha	Beba	Belega	Give birth	Verb

the post-war presidents and administrations continued to use English in their speeches, thus consigning Tagalog to a secondary position. Moreover, in 1959, the national language Tagalog was renamed as Pilipino to separate the language from the ethnolinguistic group. Furthermore, on 13 August 1959, during the celebration of National Language Week (13–19 August), the Secretary of Education Jose E. Romero issued Department Order No. 7, which mandated that the national language would henceforth be referred to as Pilipino ‘to impress upon the National Language “the incredible character” of Filipino nationhood’.

One should carefully note that from 1959 onwards, when Tagalog was supposed to be enforced as the national language, the literature henceforth stopped using Tagalog as the name, undoubtedly to forestall any resentments on the part of non-Tagalogs. The language was referred to as the Filipino national language (*wikang pambansang Pilipino*) or simply the national language (*wikang pambansa* or even *wika*). As subsequent debates will show, a distinction between Tagalog (a local vernacular spoken in Luzon) and Tagalog-based Pilipino has become necessary for public relation purposes (so as not to antagonise the non-Tagalog). The use of the name Pilipino was a further step in this direction of super-regionalising and, in effect, nationalising what was once a regional vernacular or, what was then a current term, *dialect* (Porter 2017:47).

The above two paragraphs in this study indicate that there are some existing and noticeable similarities between Southern (African) sociolinguistics, dialectology and language standardisation, and Asian ones. In terms of this article, it can be argued that the elevation of the Tagalog dialect to the status of an official language in Asia is similar to the elevation of the Sepedi dialect to the status of an official language in the South African context.

Some of official standard languages were dialects

According to Rakgogo (2019:138–139), there is irrefutable linguistic evidence that amalgamation is followed during language standardisation as part of language planning of dialects. This implies that either some or all of the other dialects of the same language are marginalised and amalgamated, and can be converted into a single standard official language. The Shona language spoken in Southern Africa, mainly in Zimbabwe, is the most telling example of this approach. This language originated through the amalgamation of major dialects spoken in the Southern Rhodesia. This was after the Government of Southern Rhodesia appointed a Committee of Missionaries who subsequently commissioned a South African linguist and language expert, Clement Doke, Professor of Linguistics at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in 1929 to investigate and report to the Legislative Assembly on the possibility of unifying the dialects of the territory into a literary form. The idea was to focus on unifying the dialects for official and educational purposes and the standardisation

of the orthography, despite his lack of knowledge about the language. The major dialects, namely Zezuru, Korekore, Karanga, Manyika, Kalanga and Ndau, were amalgamated, and a new standard language was formed which was named Shona.

In addition, the selection of dialects entails that only one specific dialect or variety is granted an opportunity to be elevated to the status of a super dialect and serve as a standard language.

In this study, Sepedi was selected and considered the superior dialect amongst the other 26 dialects, such as Kopa, Setebele-Sotho, Molepo, Mamabolo, Mothiba, Mothapo, Makgoba, Kone, Tau, Roka, Moletlane, Hananwa, Tlokwa, Matlala, Moletši, Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Kgaga, Tswapo, Pai, Pulana and Kutswe. Meaning that speakers of the above-mentioned dialects must accept and consider Sepedi as their new group or national identity. This approach is greatly criticised by scholars such as Makoni et al. (2005:88) when lamenting that there are strong and many ethnolinguistic identities that make it difficult for the selection of any one dialect as the unifying language.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned submission, it can be understood that the official standard language Sepedi is purely based on the Sepedi dialect with some combination of the Sekopa dialect. Similarly, the official standard Setswana language is purely based on Sekgatla and Sehurutse dialects. The Tshipani dialect was considered as the basis of the Tshivenda language, when bearing in mind the historical background. Finally, Gcaleka and Ngqika dialects, amongst others, were considered as the basis of official standard isiXhosa language. Moreover, Shona is also based on the following major dialects: Zezuru, Korekore, Karanga, Manyika, Kalanga and Ndau (Rakgogo 2019:140).

Qualitative themes

The following are the qualitative themes that emerged from the above-discussed qualitative data.

Qualitative theme 1: Codification vis-à-vis superior dialect(s)

Focusing on Sepedi as an official standard language, it can be noted that Sepedi was one of the 27 dialects of the language under scrutiny. It is worth outlining that Sepedi was perceived as a superior dialect because it was the first amongst other Northern Sotho dialects to receive codification. It is for these reasons why scholars, such as Mokgokong (1966) and Mojela (1997, 1999, 2008), stated that the other Northern Sotho dialects did not have orthography because of one-sided support of the state, which gave special attention to Sepedi dialect because of the influence of missionaries. Fasold and Connor-Linton (2006:326) aptly observe that varieties associated with lower social classes may be highly stigmatised and their speakers subject to scorn and social sanction (and even discriminated against in educational or employment opportunities), whilst dialects associated chiefly

with a region may be thought of simply as interesting or unusual, or perhaps even quaint and charming.

Qualitative theme 2: Some official standard languages were dialects

The findings of this study revealed that it is important for speech communities, sociolinguists, dialectologists and language planners to accept that the standardisation of the South African indigenous languages that are cited in the Constitution was purely based on the dialects or varieties of the strongest tribes and ethnic groups. This article provides a brief dialectal description and classification of some of the officially recognised South African indigenous languages:

1. Official language 1: Sepedi

The Sepedi dialect was considered as the basis of the official standard language, and the rest of the 26 dialects (Kopa, Setebele-Sotho, Molepo, Mamabolo, Mothiba, Mothapo, Makgoba, Kone, Tau, Roka, Moletlane, Hananwa, Tlokwa, Matlala, Moletši, Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Kgaga, Tswapo, Pai, Pulana and Kutswa) will linguistically be classified as the dialects of the Sepedi language.

2. Official language 2: isiXhosa

The standard isiXhosa, for example, is based on the dialects of the Gcaleka (Transkei) and Ngqika (Ciskei) tribes, and the remaining nine varieties (Ndlambe, Thembu, Bomvana, Mpondomise, Mpondo, Bhaca, Cele, Hlubi and Mfhengu) are, therefore, administratively regarded as dialects of the standard isiXhosa.

3. Official language 3: Tshivenda

Tshivenda is based on the Tshipani dialect, with the remaining six dialects (Tshitavha-tsindi, Tshiilafuri, Tshimanda, Tshiguvhu, Tshimbedzi and Tshilembetu) being classified as the Tshivenda dialects.

4. Official language 4: Xitsonga

Xitsonga is based on the Nkuna dialect, and the other 10 dialects (Luleke, Gwamba, Changana, Hlave, Kande, N'walungu, Xonga, Jonga, Songa and Nhlangu) are considered as dialects of Xitsonga.

5. Official language 5: Setswana

The standard Setswana is based on Sekgatla and Sehurutse dialects, and the remaining nine varieties (Sengwaketse, Serolong, Setlhaping, Setlhwane, Sekwena, Sengwato, Setawana, Transvaal Sekgatla and West-Transvaal Sekwena) will be administratively regarded as Setswana dialects.

In this article, it is informative that the standardised forms of the officially recognised South African languages are purely based on certain dialects. The most important issue to be explored by sociolinguists is the key deciding factor that was considered when a particular dialect was selected.

Qualitative theme 3: Christianity and its contribution to the superior dialect

The arrival of Alexander Merensky, a German missionary who belonged to the Berlin Missionary Society at Ga-Sekhukhune in 1860, perpetuated Christianity as a religion. This was recorded as a profound activity in the sociolinguistic history of the Bapedi people. It is for this reason that the Bible and other religious texts were translated into the Sepedi dialect, not any other dialect of the language under dialectal scrutiny. Much historical research has been conducted on the introduction and use of Christianity by European missionaries as one of the powerful tools to transform African people.

Qualitative theme 4: Language planning is a political exercise

It has emerged that the dialects or varieties that were spoken by the powerful ethnic groups had an advantage of being selected and elevated to the status of an official language. Fishman (1999:26) articulates that most of the official standard languages are not confined to their own exclusive areas. He further records that there are only about 200 countries in the world, but there are over 5000 languages. This means that most languages are spoken in places where another language is officially recognised and favoured over any exclusively local languages, simply because the resources of the state chiefly support the official language. Any other language that happens to be spoken within the same environment receives less support and respect. He concludes by indicating that if the more powerful, more prestigious and wealthier people in a country or a region speak one or two languages, those languages will become the desirable languages, and the languages preferred by those speaking it in the environment where it is mostly endorsed.

The overall interpretation of the work of the above-mentioned submission is that political, social and economic opportunities go mainly to speakers of the languages that have institutional support. It can, therefore, be perceived that people who grew up speaking languages that lack institutional support, and then learn the standard language through formal platforms such as education and media, are likely to have a problem to accept the particular standard language due to knowledge of their original language. Therefore, the selection of Sepedi as the superior dialect cannot be separated from power and influence of politics.

Qualitative theme 5: One-sided process of standardisation

The selection of one dialect to serve as a standard language is criticised by scholars such as Makoni et al. (2005:137), lamenting that the conventional procedure for the selection of a specific dialect to serve as the standard language in most African communities has been unsuccessful in the case of most African languages. The problem is so acute that it undermines any serious effort towards mother tongue education. For example, non-standard Sepedi is so radically different from what is characterised as 'Sepedi' in urban settings that speakers who sociolinguistically feel affiliated with Sepedi ethnically, or are administratively classified as

'Pedi', may feel alienated, and their linguistic creativity may be stifled by the language assigned to them as their 'mother tongue'. It is against this background that Rakgogo (2019:137) submits that it is ethnically somewhat incorrect to select only one dialect amongst others, and at the very same time expect the speakers of the stigmatised dialects to accept the standard version as a symbol of their national identity.

Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring how factors such as economic, cultural and political power and influence play a significant role in selecting a language variety or dialect to serve as the official standard language. Emanating from a dialectal, sociolinguistic and language planning point of view, it is found that there is a mutual relationship between dialects and official standard languages. It is equally important to postulate that the two cannot be separated as they are sociolinguistically bound. In terms of this article, the arrival of the first Sepedi speakers in Ga-Sekhukhune, the missionary activities that started in 1860, the codification of the Sepedi and Sekopa dialects, and the translation of the Bible and other religious texts into Sepedi are cited as some of the qualitative variables that may have contributed to the elevation of Sepedi from a dialect to the status of an official standard language.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they do not have any financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

This study is partly based on the Master's dissertation (2016) and PhD thesis (2019) of T.J.R. that were completed under the supervision of Robert Kaplan and E.B.Z. T.J.R. drafted the article, whilst E.B.Z. revised it before both could finalise it.

Ethical considerations

This current dialectal and status type of language planning article has received written approval from the Tshwane University of Technology Research Ethics Committee and the reference number is Ref #: REC/2015/03/007. Similarly, the study has also received approval from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) R14/49 (Protocol No. H17/06/46). Copies of the approval letters can be obtained from the primary researcher. As the study targeted human participants from other South African universities and government

departments, ethical approval was also obtained from all the universities, organisations and relevant language authorities where the research was conducted.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the Wits Institutional Repository (WIREDSpace): Wits E-Theses/Dissertations (ETDs) and in the Tshwane University of Technology Open Repository (TUTDoR) at: <http://tutvital.ac.za:8080/vital/access/manager/Repository/tut:2541/SOURCE1>.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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