

The Demise of Sesotho Language in the Democratic South Africa and its Impact on the Socio-cultural Development of the Speakers

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ABSTRACT The Constitution of South Africa provides for eleven official languages, and all of them have equal status, but Afrikaans and English are unfairly privileged over Black languages. This state of affairs has therefore resulted in the possible death of Black languages. The aim of this paper is therefore; to examine factors that have led to possible demise of Black languages in the new democratic South Africa, and emphasis is placed on the Sesotho language spoken in the Free State and Southern Gauteng provinces. It has been observed that the speed at which Sesotho is dying out is currently having negative consequences in the lives of the speakers, as they struggle to organize their world around them. Further, the Sesotho language has been extremely stigmatized to the extent that the speakers between the ages of 15 – 30 cannot speak and write the language properly. It is for these reasons that the researcher examined factors that contributed to this state of affairs in the post-Apartheid South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The paper focuses on the death of a language, also called language extinction. Various critics such as Moreosele (2010), Khanye (2009), Hweshe (2010), Szabo (2011) to name a few; have registered their concerns regarding the marginalisation or possible death of indigenous languages. Their arguments are based on the view that a few Black people are speaking indigenous African languages today than previously and the dawn of democracy could be the death knell of African languages in South Africa. Black people in South Africa prefer English to their own languages and this could threaten these languages. The preceding statement is underscored by a KwaZulu man who has been recently reported to be crossing the province on foot to emphasise the importance of indigenous languages. His aim is to meet the Zulu King, Goodwill Zwelithini to discuss how to effectively promote the use of African languages (eNCA 29 June 2013). It is for this reason that the researcher looks into how Sesotho is affected by the marginalisation of the African indigenous languages in South Africa.

Objectives of the Study

In order to realise the aim of this paper, the following objectives will be pursued: to examine what the constitution of South Africa recom-

mends/prescribes regarding the use of African indigenous languages; to scrutinise whether Sesotho language to was adequately developed to be granted official recognition; to investigate factors that led to the possible extinction of this language; evaluate the national agenda on languages; and to propose recommendations that will remedy the situation in future.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Sesotho is the language spoken in the Free State and Southern parts of Gauteng in the Republic of South Africa. The language is one of the eleven languages which were accorded official status after the democratic elections in 1994, and until then, it was spoken publicly everywhere and studied at almost all formerly Black universities. In the past, Sesotho was supported from all angles by its speakers and sympathizers of the language. The reason for jealously supporting and identifying with the language was that the language is important to culture as it allows humans within groups and communities to communicate in a sophisticated manner with each other. It often reveals cultural norms and customs, allowing an outside person to experience a little bit of Sesotho culture. After the democratic elections in South Africa, the language, though it had official status, started fading out of the public domain as a result of new changes in the society.

Borrowing from Christine ([sa]:1) 'We have all heard about endangered species of animals, but what about endangered languages? When the last fluent speaker of the language dies the world of information dies with him or her'. The preceding contention implies that, when one says that the language has departed (dead), is like saying a person has passed away for language cannot stay alive without people and their culture. In echoing Christine's assertion, Simon ([sa]:1) states that culture and language are interdependent. Societies are created and maintained by a common language. Language reflects the beliefs and the culture of the society. A man without a language is like a tree without the roots. A tree with no roots cannot withstand the strong winds and can easily fall down.

After the democratic elections of 1994 in South Africa, various concepts were used to define the new South Africa. The concepts were coined in such a way that they project South Africa in a positive light. One such concept that comes to mind is the 'rainbow nation', a concept invented to symbolize the country's cultural varieties (Tutu 2009:1). The cultural varieties were bound together by multilingualism and respect for others' cultural identities. This resulted in the population of South Africa being described as one of the most intricate and diverse in the world. Of the 51 490025 million South Africans, nearly 79.4% are Black, 9% White, 9.0 % Coloured and 2.5 % Indian as illustrated (South Africa 2011/2012).

Bamgbose (2003) as quoted by Beukes (2004:5) asserts that South Africa's language multiplicity is sustained by the most progressive constitutional language provisions on the continent, and preserves plurilingualism. The former language dispensation based on the official bilingualism has been replaced by official multilingualism. Equal rights are entrenched for the 11 languages used by the South African population. These languages are former official languages, English and Afrikaans, and nine African languages: Sesotho, Sepedi, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivhenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. The Constitution prescribes affirmative action for African languages that were marginalized in the past. These languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.

As the constitution states, every citizen of South Africa has a democratic right to speak the

language that he/she is comfortable with at any given place, be it the court of law, church, schools etc. Nineteen years down the line after the new democratic order, the Black languages, Sesotho in particular, are no longer used frequently as official languages in schools, courts and parliament. English has now become a predominantly used language, thereby impacting negatively on the survival of Sesotho and other African indigenous languages. It (English) is a language that is understood by everybody and has become a language of politics, business, media and the country's lingua franca as illustrated by Simon Fraser University (2010). Szabo (2011) asserts that "English is taking over in business, advertising, consumer and so on. Government correspondence and legislation is supposed to be translated into all 11 official languages, but this is impossible due to prohibitive costs". The preceding assertion implies that even if the government recognizes all eleven languages, there are some impediments in place to recognize African indigenous languages, hence the researcher contends that they are facing possible extinction.

As indicated above, the researcher focuses on Sesotho spoken in the Free State and other parts of Gauteng. The people who speak the language are referred to as the Basotho, and their culture is known as Sesotho. Like any other language, Sesotho went through various stages of developments. It started as a spoken language, and then written, and finally an understanding and explanation of its grammar was developed. Sesotho language was first translated into written form by the missionary Eugene Casalis who came to Lesotho in 1833. He compiled the first Sesotho grammar in 1841 and his works were carried forward by Reverend Mabile. Mabile brought together Sesotho language words and is also responsible for setting up a printing press in Morija which is still there to date as reported by Language Services (sa).

A number of other missionaries who arrived later in Lesotho further developed the Sesotho language, and the translation of the Bible into Sesotho was completed in 1872 in Lesotho (Language Services [sa]). The dawn of apartheid in South Africa also contributed greatly in the development of the Sesotho language. The grammar books written by well-known Sesotho grammarians such as C.M. Doke and M. Mofokeng, *Textbook of Southern Sotho grammar* (1957),

T.B. Kgwadi – *Mampodi - Kgwaholla Ditswakotleng* (1986); R.A Sempe – *Sesotho se hlwahlwa* (1987); and many other writers, elevated Sesotho to the highest level where it could compete equally with other languages. Literature texts, written by renowned Sesotho writers such T. Mofolo – *Moeti wa botjhabela* (1906); K.E Ntsane – *Nna Sajene Kokobela CID* (1984); M.A Moleleki - *Makokonane*; R.J. Masiea – Lephonantho – *South Sotho Grammar* (1988), J.M. Lenake – *Poetry of K.E Ntsane* ((1975); and I.M. Moephuli – *Peo eo e jetswe ke wena* (1982); Maphalla – *Kabelwamanong* (1987), to name a few, circulated in the Sesotho communities and the speakers were able to read and understand the world around them. Literary theories were translated into Sesotho to evaluate the works of Sesotho literature. The Basotho were very proud of their language and culture, and both were displayed publicly at the national conferences and other festivals organized by language speakers. The death of Sesotho comes as a result of the factors which are outlined hereunder. In the discussion, the researcher also intends to highlight the consequences that come about as a result of marginalizing Sesotho and elevating English as the only language and a communication medium in the Free State.

The migration of Black learners to model C schools (former schools in white suburbs reserved for white learners in the apartheid period) after the democratic dispensation in South Africa, created problems in respect of the preservation of Sesotho language and culture amongst the learners. The Sesotho learners had to discard their language which is their mother tongue, and embraced English as the language of learning. They adopted a completely new culture where they had to express themselves in English. Grischy ([sa]:1) contends that, when a language is lost, the particular culture of the people that spoke it is in danger of being subsumed into a larger culture. In support of the preceding contention, Khanye (2009:2) asserts that ‘the learners in the new educational setting were never afforded the right to learn African languages, even at second language-level as the Governing bodies at such schools perceived teaching and learning an African language at “their” schools as adulterous to their language and school system’.

The learners in the new educational space had to adopt new values and social habits. They

had to learn the English language first before they could learn and understand the contents of their subjects. This implies that, the years of schooling for these learners had to be extended for a year or two as they had to master the English language and culture first before they could understand the content of the subjects they had registered for. English can still take the upper most position in society, but the consequences of English being the only medium in our education system may impact negatively in the preservation of Sesotho and other African languages. In support of the preceding argument, Englebert (2004:1) states that to ‘teach a foreign language is also to teach a foreign culture. Uprooted children who lost their mother tongue lost their relationship with their society in the world of their birth’. On this view, Singh (2009:127–135), stresses that the teachers remain to teach the African children who are trying to shift English as their second language to becoming their first language.

Hitt (2004:1) writes that by the time the language dies under the pressure of a dominant language like Spanish, the language will pull out of sight from the public domain first, hiding in the living rooms and kitchens of the fluent, where it becomes increasingly private and intimate and frail. The situation in Sesotho is that the learners learn the English language and culture at school during the day, and in the afternoon when they arrive at home they are faced with the new situation where they have to switch to Sesotho when they communicate with their parents. The language is used for communication only and it matters not as to how one speaks it. Even in situations where parents attempt to correct some grammatical errors committed by their children, such children do not take this exercise very seriously and continue speaking Sesotho as they like. This de-motivates the parents who in the end lose hope and leave the issue of language in the hands of the teachers.

Sesotho has withdrawn from the public sphere, and as time goes on, very few people will be speaking the language. The question arises: what happens when you no longer have any person to talk to in your own language? The answer simply put is that ‘language is not just words and grammar, it is a web of history that binds people who once spoke the language, all the things they did together, all the knowledge they have imparted to their descendants’ as il-

illustrated by Science Daily (2009). When the language dies, you lose part of the system of life and you lose everything it could impart. Many Sesotho practices such as fables, proverbs and idioms, songs and riddles, as well as philosophical beliefs which were used to hold communities as unified entities are also disappearing with the language. With no speakers to continue them, they fail to be transmitted to the next generation, and so they disappear from this life. The people who are supposed to pass them on to other generations when they become future adults, are not interested in learning them, and in this way, they lose important information that could steer their lives in the right direction.

All the people of the world learn in their languages, as Moreosele (2010) contends. This argument is underpinned by the following example: at one university the lecturer who teaches literary theories through the medium of English, could not achieve his goal in respect of the pass rate. His students memorized the theories without understanding, and could not apply them satisfactorily when they analysed the Sesotho texts. The state of affairs frustrated the lecturer. He devised a new mechanism: Students in class were divided into two groups, that is, they joined the groups voluntarily. One group studied literary theories in English, and the other one in Sesotho. The lecturer taught them according to the languages of their choice. For Sesotho classes, terminology used in the theory was Sesothoized, meaning, words and concepts were pronounced in Sesotho, for example, parole > parola; signifier > sikinifaya; prose > porouse; and the discussion or teaching was conducted in Sesotho. At the end of the first semester, those who studied in Sesotho had a full understanding of the theories and managed to pass with good marks, say 72%-80%. The English group memorized the contents without understanding, and the highest mark in the group was 59%. The system used by the lecturer had a positive impact in the teaching of literary theories and the entire class agreed to be taught in Sesotho in the new academic year. This short example clearly shows that language goes hand in hand with the understanding and not only strengthens one's intellectual capacity, but also perpetuates one's culture and the speaker's identity. Every system of Education is based on understanding of the content/s of the subject/s. It is a futile exercise to teach learners in the language that they cannot understand or that is foreign to them.

Olade (2009:2) reinforces the value of education in one's mother tongue as follows: 'we often complain of, and yearn for solutions to our declining educational standards. We have failed to realize that the foundation of our problems in the educational sector lies in the absence of our mother tongue for instruction in schools'. The foregoing argument is echoed by Porte (2002:4) who confirms that the loss of bilingualism in the education system, may intimidate development and cultural assets for the society as a whole. The Asian countries have developed significantly and technologically with the use of their local languages. Why can the Basotho not do likewise? To date, we have failed to make discoveries about certain phenomena in our surroundings because the language of research is English, which in many cases impedes our progress in the field of research. If one was allowed to research any phenomenon in his mother tongue, say in Sesotho for instance, we could be having a lot of the Basotho researchers who have uncovered the existence of many occurrences in our society.

In the current news, it emerged that the students wanted to be taught in Isi-Xhosa at one of the colleges in Cape Town. The students registered for a course in early childhood development, and the institution could not find them a lecturer who would assess them in Isi-Xhosa. They were forced to be assessed in Afrikaans and English. The students claim that if the college has the capacity to 'assess the others in Afrikaans, why not us in our own language? We need to go to a school where we are comfortable... We can express ourselves better in our languages' (Hweshe: Sowetan 30 July 2010). This situation is not isolated, but is occurring everyday and everywhere in South Africa, and is affecting almost every African student.

Understanding something is prone to interpretation. The meaning is dependent on cultural context. A statement that is a joke in one culture may be regarded as scary in another culture. The following incident is a case in point: At one industrial unit in the city of Welkom in the Free State province, two Basotho employees were having a heated argument, and one out of anger, verbally abused the other by saying "*o tla bona mmao*" roughly translated as 'you will see your mother'. The offended party lodged a grievance against the other, and the disciplinary case was

referred to the full panel of white officials. The presiding officer (a white official), found nothing offensive in the utterance, and instead, said to the complainant that he should be happy if someone shows him his mother as the mother is the most important thing in one's life. If the same case was referred to the Basotho traditional courts, the defendant would have been severely punished as the utterance constitutes a serious offence. This implies that meaning is lost because of cultural boundaries which do not allow such ideas to persist.

Language has a higher likelihood to fall out of use when people speaking it are assimilated by other cultures, as Ivan ([sa]:1) aptly puts it. In this case, the language dies slowly by merging with the language of the assimilator or its death can go faster when the speakers give up their own language because they don't find any benefit in using it. The foregoing assertion implies that, it is perfectly natural for Sesotho to develop through the generations. However, it is gradually becoming abandoned. Peters (2007:1) writes that language provides us with linguistic information and linguistics is not just about the study of syntax structures and semantic meanings, but also serves as a means of looking into what makes us as humans. If we link Peters' (2007) argument with the current state of affairs in Sesotho, we will agree that Sesotho as a language, reflects the inner feelings of the speakers, their joy and happiness, sorrows and pain and in the end, defines who they are, and where they come from.

As stated earlier, it was argued that the knowledge of Sesotho is lost, and the speakers can no longer define the world around them. Its culture and its wisdoms have been affected greatly by the new political dispensation. The preceding assertion is supported by Olade's (2009:1) that African melancholy should be placed partly on the shoulders of the leaders who discarded their cultural inheritance for foreign ways of life without realizing the impact of their actions on national development and integration. In South African today, Black leaders have abandoned the ways of life of Africans. This is evident during the time of national, provincial and municipal elections where English is used as a political instrument to garner support from the voters. In the Free State province where Sesotho is the dominant language, the politi-

cians address the masses in English rather than in Sesotho. The majority of the voters in townships are illiterate and in many cases do not understand English. They just listen to the sweet sounds of the Queen's language without making meaning out of them. For them, proficiency in English is a sign of intelligence and the leader who speaks English fluently is regarded as a good leader and can deliver services to the masses. Communication between the leader and the followers is one-way as the followers are restricted to ask questions because English, which is foreign and complex for them, is the medium used at the political rallies. What we realize at the end of the day is that the political rally was held successfully, but the followers could not understand the proceedings as well as the theme of the rally. It is quite clear that the leaders cannot communicate with their followers in Sesotho because Sesotho is very simple and as such, will not make a lasting impression on the leaders' status. Therefore, English in this regard, is used to keep the gap between the leaders and followers so wide so that the leaders can still claim their political power for the next years to come. Mapheto (2009:1) sums up the state of affairs as follows: 'No self-respecting people treat their languages as shabbily as we do in this part of the world. At the rate we are going, there is no guessing why our education system is in such a shambolic state.'

The demands of global economy are increasing the necessities of communication in English, and in urban areas, and particularly amongst the learned young Blacks, English is more and more spoken, as Singh (2009:128) observed. This implies that English has become the language of status and the employment market. Whoever is capable of speaking and writing English, has a potential to be absorbed into the labour market. The students, who studied Sesotho and other African languages at universities, stand no chance of being employed in the new South Africa. The government is contributing to this state of affairs because it keeps on advocating for 11 official languages without putting in place the strategies and mechanism in respect of maintaining the usage of Black languages.

In South Africa today, there are many incurable diseases affecting the lives of the entire population. The medical field is doing everything in its power to remedy the situation, but communication is ineffective as the information

pertaining to such diseases is only available in English except at places where such information has been translated in many languages. It is the responsibility of the health sector to provide information to the society in the languages spoken in communities. As manuals, documents and brochures are written in English only, this makes it difficult for adult members of the communities, who in most cases are illiterate, to read, understand and act in accordance with the advices of the medical information. If information was made available in Sesotho, specifically in the Free State and Gauteng (regions where Sesotho is spoken) regarding good health care and preventative measures, the spread of diseases such as HIV-AIDS, STD, TB and other related diseases could have been prevented. Again, counselors who are non-Sesotho speakers are often assigned duties to counsel the TB and HIV sufferers. In the interviews with the sufferers, language becomes a barrier where the interviewees are mostly Sesotho speakers who do not understand English. Translators are sometimes called in to interpret the proceedings, but a lot of information is lost in the translation process as translators only relay vital points and ignore other facts that may have shed a light on the circumstances of the patient.

It has been stated in the discussion above that language and culture are related, and this implies that if a literate Mosotho can be given the opportunity to inform, advice and counsel patients suffering from the above-mentioned diseases, the prevention and proliferation of the diseases could be under control. The culture steps in here because both the patient and counselor speak the same language and are from the same cultural background. The feeling of trust dominates the interaction. Currently, the counselors are from other cultural backgrounds and this makes it impossible for the patients to divulge important information that may be of assistance to them. The feeling of fear, mistrust and suspicion, dominates the discussion/interview as according to the Basotho tradition, people are not supposed to speak to strangers and should at all times be careful of what they say to others.

The view that Sesotho is socially inferior or rustic (rural), compels the speakers to abandon their language in favour of English and languages such as isi-Zulu and isi-Xhosa. A typical example is that of the social causes that excludes certain programs on television. The national tele-

vision has certain programs that are solely used to promote other languages. The Gospel Time Music programme aired on channel 2 (TV2) designed to service Sesotho listeners, is conducted in isi-Zulu and isi-Xhosa. The state of affairs does not promote Sesotho religious music as many Basotho artists now believe that composing the songs in Sesotho is a futile exercise as the songs cannot be marketed successfully in the communities.

The 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa has come and gone. It was expected that the South Africans, specifically Blacks, will display their rich cultural heritage by means of their languages, but that did not happen. It would have been worthwhile for the Television stations to use the 11 South African official languages to broadcast the matches in different provinces. In the Free State, the listeners were hoping that they will switch to any of the three languages, viz. Sesotho, English and Afrikaans, but that did not happen. English dominated the whole World Cup games from the beginning to the end, and other languages were not part of the World Cup as they were relegated to inferior status. On the reconstruction of our value system, Olade (2009:2) warned that 'our languages are our primary instruments, and without them, we cannot move forward'. During the World cup matches, illiterate members of our society were merely making sense of actions they saw the players performing on the television screens as they could not understand the comments made in English by commentators. This made it impossible for non-native speakers of English to understand some of the controversial decisions taken by the match officials because comments were made in English.

The foremost cause of language extinction is the migration of the youth in search of economic opportunities. The lack of jobs in the Free State has forced a migration of the young people to the cities, and in the long run, these youngsters lose their native language and embrace the language spoken in their new space. Roque (2002) as quoted by Singh (2009:128) postulates that when individuals come into contact with a more economically strong culture, such individuals tend to abandon their language and embrace the new language in the new social setting. Black (2010:1) sums up this state of affairs as follows: 'often people move to the city for work and therefore speak traditional languages less and less. It therefore becomes natural not

to teach them to their children'. This implies that young men and women who leave the rural communities leave behind old people who are the custodians of language and culture. These old folk become discarded shells of what they once were. When they die, there is nobody who carries the language to the next generation. When the young men and women come back home, they display artificial ways of life that show signs of moral corrosion as they were staying in the cities without guidance. They cannot write nor read Sesotho, meaning that the language disappears as a result of the movement between the rural spaces and urban cities.

The class distinction also plays a major role in the extinction of a language. There is a tendency for the upper classes to shift to English in their daily conversation as the command or proficiency in English is the symbol of academic achievement and economic progress. Again, the parents who have a poor command of English urge their children to speak English on a regular basis in the hope that they will master the language and secure a place in the job market. This implies that, English has become a yardstick that determines one's qualification in the job market, as a result, this impacts negatively on the survival of Sesotho and other African languages.

On provision for the language use in the state administration, Beukes has this to offer:

Each government department must designate a working language interdepartmental communication. Official documents by national government departments must be published in all 11 languages. Communication with the public via official correspondence must take place in the language of the citizen's choice (2004: 9).

The above stipulation has not been successfully implemented in most governmental departments in the Free State. Many documents are still written in English and no provision has been made to translate them into Sesotho. Minutes of the meetings are written in English and the attendees in most cases are Sesotho speaking. English is spoken everywhere in the corridors of the government, and the officials prefer it as a result of their attitude towards Sesotho. They feel that speaking Sesotho will demean their status and put them on the same level with the cleaners and gardeners. They must preserve their status by speaking the language of 'intelligence' which is English. In the criminal justice system, the offenders are always sentenced un-

fairly as a result of communication problems. In many cases, the magistrate, the prosecutor as well as the accused are Sesotho speakers, but the proceedings are conducted in English. The interpreter sometimes interprets the statements of the accused wrongly and this affects the merits of the case. It is therefore imperative for the courts and administration of justice, state institutions, and public administration to support the constitutional democracy by enforcing the laws of the country that govern languages. In provinces, a preferential treatment must be given to the strongest language/s of a particular region.

On a positive note, a joint meeting of the Portfolio Committee on basic Education and the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training has welcomed the plan by the department of Basic Education to implement the use of African languages in all South African schools as reported by South African Government Information (2013). This is the right step in the right direction as the base or foundation, namely Grade R and Grade 1 will strengthen the higher grades which in turn will positively influence the communities to be proud of their languages.

CONCLUSION

An overall review of this work has revealed the following about the demise of the Sesotho language in the post-apartheid South Africa: Language still remains the crux on which every cultural unit is founded. It is through language that we express our aspirations and desires in the world characterized by conflicts and high degree of moral corrosion. Through language, individuals express the way they perceive the world around them. The death of Sesotho in the new democratic order has negative consequences on the lives of the Basotho as they no longer perceive and organize the world around them. The speed at which Sesotho is dying out is a cause for concern. The hard work done by the late forefathers in creating a stock of knowledge mirrored in the Sesotho language has disappeared into thin air. The fading away of Sesotho oral literature has contributed largely towards the normlessness in the Basotho communities, as this literature used to provide direction regarding how people should live. South Africans should be given the freedom to build their country using their languages, and one language should not dominate others. The South African government has now recently put a mechanism

in place to protect all official languages, and this will restore dignity to the speakers of these languages. Frequent usage of Sesotho at schools, private and public places, will make it possible for the speakers to develop their language and preserve their culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The solution to the problem pertaining to the survival of the Sesotho language in the new democratic order is that: the governmental and administrative services should be made available in Sesotho in the Free State province – in cases where the documents are not available in Sesotho, interpreters and translators should be roped in; Sesotho should be made compulsory in model C schools, and learners should be afforded opportunities to study difficult subjects in Sesotho as meaning and content become easier when one uses one's mother tongue; students at the universities in the Free State should have Sesotho at level one (either academic or communication) as a compulsory subject; learners should be encouraged to read Sesotho literature as it contains the values, customs and traditions of the Basotho. This will help the learners to shape their lives in accordance with the Basotho culture; learners should hold debates on topics revolving around the Sesotho language and culture. It is about time that Sesotho enjoys the same status as other languages in the Free State especially English and Afrikaans.

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