

LINGUISTIC VARIATION AND INTER-DIALECT CONTACT IN SETSWANA: A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON CURRENT RESEARCH

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Introduction

Setswana is a southern Bantu language (S 31 in Guthrie's [1967-71] referential classification) spoken by over three million people mainly in the Republic of South Africa and in Botswana. There are also pockets of speakers in Namibia and Zimbabwe.

In Botswana Setswana is the dominant language. It is the only national language and — beside English — one of the two official languages. As a second language Setswana is used by the majority of the non-Tswana population.

In spite of the significant role that Setswana plays in Botswana's everyday life, the language has not been studied to this day in as great detail as other southern Bantu languages. Moreover, the available sources derive for the most part from varieties of Setswana as spoken in South Africa. In the field of dialect geography very little has generally been published, almost nothing about the situation in Botswana. The only exceptions to this rule are Tucker's article on "Some Little known Dialects of SePedi" of 1932, in which two Botswana-based dialects (Setlokwa and Sekgatla) are dealt with, and Malepe's contribution of 1968 entitled "Classification of Tswana dialects". Especially Malepe's paper appears to be a good point of departure for the study of linguistic variation in Setswana. He (1968:61) states that

"As spoken today ... none of the Tswana dialects can be said to be 'pure' in the sense that it does not employ forms which are characteristic of others. They have influenced one another considerably with the result that forms which may be said to be characteristic of a given dialect now occur in nearly all the other dialects. ... [Based] on those speech forms which can be said to be typical of any one of them or a group of them"

he presents a classification of Setswana dialects into four main groups, viz.

- (1) Hurutshe,
- (2) Ngwaketse — Kwena — Kgatla of Mochudi (Botswana), Pilansberg and Rustenberg districts (both in South Africa),
- (3) Kgatla of Hammanskraal district (South Africa),
- (4) Rolong — Tlhaping — Tlharo.

It is worth mentioning that in Malepe's study only "such ultimate local vernaculars as are recognized by the Native speakers under special names" (Malepe 1968:61) are taken account of. In other words, neither second language users of Setswana nor speech forms that no names exist for have there been considered.

Our own (still ongoing) investigation rather aims at a systematic documentation of *all* varieties of Setswana in Botswana, whether there are names for them or not; whether they are spoken by people of Tswana descent or by persons of other ethnic background. Given the fact that nearly 70% of Botswana's territory is inhabited by non-Tswana people who use Setswana regularly as a second and often even as a first language, the emergence of as yet unnamed varieties of Setswana would not come as a surprise. During the survey of Setswana varieties 147 interviews have been conducted all over Botswana (see Maps 1-3) between 1992 and 1994. The interviewees were men and women of all ages (over 18), of varying ethnic and educational backgrounds and social levels. We therefore trust that our data base can generally be taken as solid enough for making substantial statements on dialectal or variety boundaries on the one hand, and on inter-dialect contact on the other. In what follows, however, statements on dialectal delimitation and interference must be seen as provisional as they are based only on part of the data that we have.

Defining dialectal boundaries

Dialectal boundaries can be defined by phonological, morphological and lexical features. Phonological characteristics are of primary, lexical ones of secondary importance; morphological features are very few and, therefore, of minor significance.

When taking a diagnostic wordlist as a basis of comparison — a selection of items forming part of this wordlist are given in Table 1 below —, we find that in cognate words some varieties of Setswana make exclusive use of a particular sound as against the other varieties. For

example, in no. 10 'owl' Kgatla uses the alveolar affricate *ts* where others have *s*. Or, in no. 1 'bottle' Tswapong uses the voiced bilabial fricative *β* where others have *b*. The occurrence of a given sound in only one variety versus the others is most frequent in Tlokwa, Kgatla, Tswapong, Rolong, and Birwa. In a good number of cases such exclusive occurrences are regular. Thus Tswapong tends to always use *β* where the others have *b*.

However, sometimes (individual speakers of) a variety diverge(s) from this pattern as is the case in Rolong where in no. 16 'whisper' the voiced labiodental fricative *v* is used instead of the expected *b*. Generally speaking, the usage of sounds that are believed to be typical, and in the past might actually have been characteristic of just a different variety, appears to be gaining the upper hand over dialectal purism.

Table 2 shows the consonantal sound correspondences contained in the selected wordlist (cf. Table 1). It also gives an impression of the various patterns of sound sharing that exist between Setswana varieties. Considering only the most frequent associations of varieties, we arrive at a picture as represented in Table 3. Curiously enough, two varieties said to represent rather independent units within Setswana, viz. Rolong and Birwa, display the highest degrees of association with others. In fact Birwa has not even been recognised in the literature as a speech form of Setswana. And yet both Rolong and Birwa belong to the group of varieties with the largest number of exclusive isophones. Another interesting point is that these associations are not confined to varieties neighbouring one another. For instance, Kwena quite often links up with "Botletle", Tawana goes frequently with Rolong etc. (cf. Map 4). When taking account of both exclusive isophones and associations we can tentatively distinguish at least seven dialectal units: (1) Ngwaketse—Kwena, (2) Rolong, (3) Birwa—Tswapong, (4) Kgatla, (5) Hurutshe, (6) Tlokwa, and (7) Tawana—Ngwato—"Botletle".

The analysis of morphological and lexical differences between Setswana varieties does not seem to yield strong evidence to contradict this subgrouping. In our selective wordlist we find exclusive isomorphs (see Table 4) in no. 1 'bottle' where Rolong uses noun class 9 as against class 5 in the other varieties; in no. 8 'navel' where in Ngwaketse the noun appears in class 9 as opposed to class 3 in the other varieties; and in no. 15 'water' where Tswapong makes use of class 6 prefix *ma-(atsi)* as against other varieties applying either *me-(< *ma+itse)* or *me-(etse)*. Significant associations can be observed between Rolong ⊃ Birwa (no. 10), Tswapong ⊃ Birwa (no. 13), Birwa ⊃ "Botletle" (no. 15), and Kgatla ⊃ Tawana ⊃ "Botletle" (no. 13).

Table 1. A selection of diagnostic words between Setswana varieties.

	1 'bottle'	2 'cold' (n.)	3 'dog'	4 'eagle'
Hurutshe ¹			ntfw?a	nts?u
Rolong	botlolo	serame	mptfa	ntsu
Ngwaketse	lebotlili	serame		nts(h)u
Kwena	lebotlolo	serame	ntfa	
Tlokwa ²			mpf?a	
Kgatla	lebotlolo	maruru	mpc'a	nts(h)u
Birwa	lebotlolo	serame	mmpsa	mpfa
Tswapong	lebotele	mariha	mpfa	ntsu
Ngwato	lebotele	serame	mp(t)sa	ntsu
Tawana	lebotele	serame		ntsu
"Botletle" ³	lebotolo	serami	mmptfa	ntsu

	5 'earth/land'	6 'grind'	7 'hat'	8 'navel'
Hurutshe				
Rolong	lefatse	setla	thoro/hutshe	mohubu
Ngwaketse	lehatse	sila	hutshi	khubu
Kwena	lefatshe	sila	futshi/tlhuru	mohubu
Tlokwa ²	lefase	sila		
Kgatla	lefatshe	sila	huani	mofufu
Birwa	lefatse	sila	hutshe	mokhuφu
Tswapong	lefatse	sila	hutshe	mokhuβu
Ngwato	lehatshe	seta/sila	thoro	mohubu
Tawana	lehatse	seta	thoro	mohubu
"Botletle" ³	lehatshe	seta	thuru	mohubu

	9 'ostrich'	10 'owl'	11 'smash/split'	12 'snore'
Hurutshe ¹	ntʃhwe			
Rolong	mmamptʃe	le-/morubisi	fatsa	rɔra
Ngwaketse	mptʃe	morubisi	hatsa	rora
Kwena	mptʃe	morubisi	fatsa	rɔra
Tlokwa ²	mpʃhe		pɕhaɕa	
Kgatla	mpcʰe	morubitsi	fatsa	ɔna
Birwa	mmpse	le-/morubisi	phatsa	lɔra/kxorotha
Tswapong	mmps(h)e	leko(o)da	phatsa	khorotha
Ngwato	mp(t)se	morubisi	phatsa	kxorotha
Tawana	mmtʃe	morubisi	hatsa	rɔra/kxorotha
"Botletle" ³	mmptʃe	morubisi	fatsa/phatsa	rora

	13 'thorn'	14 'umbrella'	15 'water'	16 'whisper'
Hurutshe ¹				seba
Rolong	mutlwa	sekhukhu	metsi	seva
Ngwaketse	mutlwa	sekhukhu	metsi	
Kwena	mutlwa	sekhukhu	metsi	
Tlokwa ²			metse	
Kgatla	mmu-/mmitlwa	mokxele	metsi	
Birwa	mootlwa	sekhukhu	meetsi	
Tswapong	muutwa	cekhukhu	maatsi	seβa
Ngwato	mitwa	sekhukhu	metsi	
Tawana	mmu-/mmitwa	sekhukhu	metsi	
"Botletle" ³	mmitwa	sekhukhu	meetsi	seba

¹ data taken from Malepe (1968)

² data taken from Tucker (1932)

³ provisional label coined by the authors to refer to a regional variety spoken alongside the Botletle river

Table 2. Phonetic-phonological correspondences.

no.	gloss	correspondences
1	bottle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tswapong β vs. others b • Ngwaketse—Kwena—Kgatla—Rolong—Birwa $t1$ vs. Tswapong—Ngwato—Tawana—"Botletle" t
3	dog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hurutshe $ntfw?$ vs. Kwena ntf • Tlokwa $mpf?$ vs. Kgatla mpc^r vs. Tswapong mpf vs. Rolong $mptf$ vs. Ngwato $mp(t)s$ vs. Birwa $mmps$ vs. "Botletle" $mmptf$
4	eagle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hurutshe $nts?$ vs. others $nts(h)$
5	earth/land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tlokwa—Kwena—Kgatla—Tswapong—Rolong—Birwa f vs. Ngwaketse—Ngwato—Tawana—"Botletle" h • Tlokwa s vs. Ngwaketse—Tswapong—Rolong—Birwa ts vs. Kwena—Kgatla—Ngwato—"Botletle"—Tawana tsh
6	grind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rolong $t1$ vs. Ngwato—Tawana—"Botletle" t
7	hat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kwena f vs. others h • Kwena $t1h$ vs. others th
8	navel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ngwaketse—Tswapong—Birwa kh vs. Kwena—Rolong—Ngwato—Tawana—"Botletle" h vs. Kgatla f • Ngwaketse—Kwena—Rolong—Ngwato—Tawana—"Botletle" b vs. Kgatla f vs. Tswapong β vs. Birwa ϕ
9	ostrich	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tlokwa mp/h vs. Ngwaketse—Kwena—Rolong $mptf$ vs. Kgatla mpc^r vs. Tswapong—Birwa $mmps(h)$ vs. Ngwato $mp(t)s$ vs. Tawana $mmtf$ vs. "Botletle" $mmptf$
10	owl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kgatla ts vs. others s
11	smash/split	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tlokwa pch vs. Ngwaketse—Tawana h vs. Kwena—Kgatla—Rolong—"Botletle" f vs. Tswapong—Ngwato—Birwa—"Botletle" ph • Tlokwa t vs. others ts
12	snore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birwa l vs. others r • Kgatla kh vs. others kx
13	thorn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ngwaketse—Kwena—Kgatla—Rolong—Birwa $t1w$ vs. Tswapong—Ngwato—Tawana—"Botletle" tw
14	umbrella	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tswapong c vs. others s
16	whisper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hurutshe—"Botletle" b vs. Tswapong β vs. Rolong v

Table 3. Patterns of sound sharing.

<i>Rolong</i> ⊃	<i>Birwa</i> ⊃		<i>"Botletle"</i> ⊃	<i>Tawana</i> ⊃
Ngwaketse	Ngwaketse		Kwena	Rolong
Kwena	Tswapong		Rolong	Ngwato
Tswapong	Kgatla		Ngwato	Birwa
Kgatla	Rolong		Birwa	"Botletle"
Birwa	"Botletle"		Tawana	
Ngwato	Tawana			
Tawana				
<i>Ngwaketse</i> ⊃	<i>Kwena</i> ⊃	<i>Ngwato</i> ⊃	<i>Tswapong</i> ⊃	<i>Kgatla</i> ⊃
Kwena	Ngwaketse	Rolong	Birwa	Rolong
Rolong	Rolong	"Botletle"	Rolong	Birwa
Birwa	"Botletle"	Tawana		

More conclusive than the isomorphs are the isoglosses (cf. Table 5). Exclusive usages are attested especially for Kgatla but also for Tswapong and Hurutshe. The only significant association is Hurutshe ⊃ Kwena. All in all it appears to be clear that although it is possible to determine dialectal "boundaries" — sometimes even in bundles — in the fields of phonology, morphology and in the lexicon, the prevailing pattern which we arrive at is isolines cutting across one another to the extent that one finds it hard to speak of chief characteristics of varieties at all.

The picture becomes even more complex when taking a closer look at the internal coherence of the putative dialects, as in some of the Setswana speech forms the intra-dialectal variation is considerable. Tswapong, for example, is recognised by the Batswapong as a dialect in its own right but our Tswapong sample contains relatively few cases of full coincidence amongst the informants. Although it is not impossible to trace out common linguistic properties of Tswapong, this can only be done on a rather abstract level because there is not only a lot of variation between speakers of the same dialect but even within the speech of the individual speaker.

Table 4. Morphological divergences.

no.	gloss	oppositions
1	bottle	• Rolong cl. 9 (\emptyset) vs. others cl. 5 (<i>le-</i>)
8	navel	• Ngwaketse cl. 9 (\emptyset) vs. others cl. 3 (<i>mo-</i>)
10	owl	• Rolong—Birwa cl. 5 (<i>le-</i>) in addition to cl. 3 (<i>mo-</i>) vs. others cl. 3 only
13	thorn	• Tswapong—Birwa cl. 3 (<i>mu-/mo-</i>) vs. Kwena—Ngwaketse— Rolong—Ngwato cl. 3 (<i>m-</i>) vs. Kgatla—Tawana—"Botletle" cl. 3 (<i>mm-</i>)
15	water	• Tswapong cl. 6 (<i>ma-[atsi]</i>) vs. Birwa—"Botletle" cl. 6 (<i>me-[etse]</i>) vs. Tlokwa—Rolong—Kgatla—Kwena—Ngwaketse—Ngwato— Tawana cl. 6 (<i>me- < *ma-i...</i>)

exclusive isomorphs: Rolong, Ngwaketse, Tswapong

significant associations: Rolong \supset Birwa, Tswapong \supset Birwa, "Botletle" \supset Birwa,
Kgatla \supset Tawana \supset "Botletle"

Table 5. Lexical divergences.

no.	gloss	oppositions
2	cold	• Tswapong vs. Kgatla vs. others
3	dog	• Hurutshe—Kwena vs. others
6	grind	• Rolong—Tawana—"Botletle"—Ngwato vs. others
7	hat	• Kgatla vs. Tswapong—Rolong—Kwena—Ngwaketse—Birwa vs. Rolong—Kwena—Ngwato—Tawana—"Botletle"
9	ostrich	• Hurutshe vs. others
10	owl	• Tswapong vs. others
12	snore	• Tswapong—Ngwato—Birwa—Tawana vs. Rolong—Ngwaketse— Kwena—Birwa—Tawana—"Botletle" vs. Kgatla
14	umbrella	• Kgatla vs. others

exclusive isoglosses: Kgatla, Tswapong, Hurutshe

association: Hurutshe \supset Kwena

Sociolinguistic background

Now, what circumstances are/were responsible for this chaos? What factors have caused this ever increasing muddle of linguistic features which in the more distant past must have been characteristic of particular dialects but today tend to more and more lose their demarcating power? To answer these questions in Malepe's (1968:61) words:

"That the Tswana dialects should show such overlappings today is due to the fact that modern political, economic, social, religious and educational conditions as well as population shifts and urbanization have more or less eliminated tribal and, therefore, dialectal boundaries. Tribal isolation has given way to tribal intercourse."

Let us have a brief look at but one of the above-mentioned factors, i.e. education, which is of particular importance in this context. In the educational system of Botswana, only two languages play a decisive role: English and Setswana. At primary school English is taught as a subject from the beginning. As from Standard 5 it is also used as a medium of instruction alongside with Setswana. At secondary school level, at university, vocational training centres and colleges, use is made of English almost exclusively. Setswana is the only language of instruction during Standard 1 through 4 and as such still predominant even in Standard 5 through 7.

Over the past twenty years the Botswana government has made every effort to improve and extend the school system (see, e.g., Swartland 1984). The network of primary schools today reaches even the remotest corners of a country which at Independence in 1966 was probably one of the least accessible in Africa. The number of pupils, especially at primary level, is increasing rapidly, illiteracy has been cut down to a minimum certainly by African, possibly even by international, standards. As a consequence, practical competence in Setswana is improving tremendously in the younger generations of all ethno-linguistic communities.

Yet the kind of Setswana these youngsters learn at school is not standard; for teachers are recruited from all over the country, and they are transferred from one school to another at more or less regular intervals. This way the pupils come across, and are confronted with, all kinds of Setswana varieties. The school books offer them some kind of "standard Setswana" but the teachers as mediators between the books and the pupils are inclined to transform this Setswana into what they themselves are used to. They often employ their own pronunciations, words etc. (cf. Vossen 1990). Hence, over time the pupils become familiar with a language that finds itself

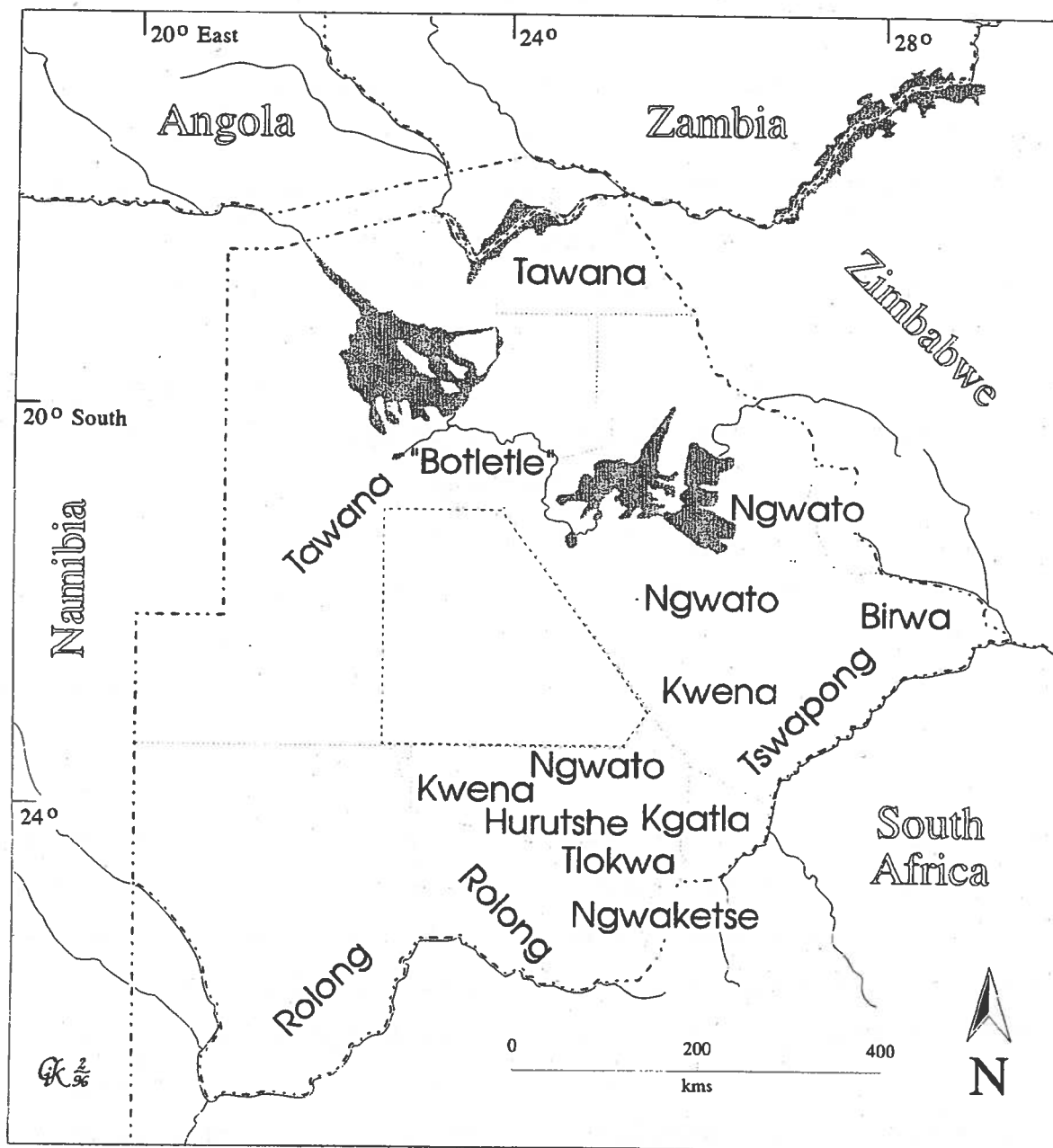
in a process of homogenisation in the sense that dialectal characteristics tend to overlap and, thus, boundaries to gradually disappear. And yet, in spite of this increasing homogenisation, the resulting form of Setswana will probably not be a standard but rather a conglomeration of speech forms. To assume that the speech of the parents' and grandparents' generations is being affected, too, — at least partly — by the youngsters does not appear to be too far-fetched.

Of course, there are still other facets of education than schooling which play an important part in the homogenisation process. (For example, radio broadcasts from Gaborone would seem to contribute a great deal.) And, naturally, there are as yet other factors than education — especially historical factors — which have given, and are still giving, rise to inter-dialect contact and, as a result, linguistic homogenisation; but for reason of economy, we will not discuss them in this paper.

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Map 1: Distribution of some major varieties of Setswana



Map 2: Places of origin of the Setswana informants

