

The Functional Distribution of Setswana and English in Botswana

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In multilingual societies such as Botswana, language use is an extremely complex matter, further compounded by the fact that the languages involved are themselves dynamic phenomena that often elude the planned outcomes of policies which try to shape and constrain them. The paper describes the functional distribution of the national language Setswana, spoken as a mother tongue by 80% of the population, and English, the official language in Botswana. The role of the two languages is outlined, with particular regard to cultural identity, on the one hand, and social and economic status on the other.

Botswana, like many African countries is a multilingual country. However, unlike most of them, it has an indigenous lingua franca, Setswana, which is spoken by about 80% of the population as a mother tongue. The 80% is represented by eight ethnic groupings who speak different but mutually intelligible dialects of Setswana. Besides these eight Setswana groupings, there are other indigenous minority language groups such as: Bakalaka, Basarwa, Bayei, Bambukushu, Babirwa and Bakgalagadi which make up 15% of the population (Janson & Tsonope, 1991). In addition, there is a small percentage (about 5%) of people of Asian or European origin.

Diglossia in Botswana

According to Fishman (1972: 92) diglossia refers to the functional distribution of more than one language to serve different communication tasks in a society. Diglossia exists in multilingual societies which officially recognise several languages and utilise vernaculars as well as those that employ separate dialects, registers or functionally differentiated language varieties of whatever kind. The language that is used for formal functions such as education, government administration, law and business is referred to as the high (H) language and the language that is reserved for less formal and more personal functions such as family use and personal communication is referred to as the low (L) language.

In Botswana, English is restricted to the educated population. Estimates of the proportion of Batswana (natives of Botswana) who have knowledge of English range from 35 to 40%. This estimate includes those speakers who are completely fluent and those who have a basic knowledge of English. Those who are not educated use their local languages even at official and formal levels. Despite this low percentage of Batswana who are competent in the language, English is the official language that is used in government administration and records, law and courts, business and education. It is also the

official medium of instruction from the third year of elementary school to university. The restricted use of English in Botswana gives one the impression that English is more of a foreign than a second language in the country. Schmied (1991) contends that the status of English in Botswana could be best described as a foreign language if the country was not so small and dependent on international relations for its economic growth.

As a result of its official status and economic functions there is high value placed on the English language in Botswana. Botswana is like many African countries where, 'the English language is seen as a personal asset, as an instrument to promote one's personal career, as a stepping stone to getting a better job and as a social status marker', (Schmied, 1991: 170). Thus, in Botswana, English can justifiably be given the status of a high language.

On the other hand, Setswana is spoken by at least 80% of the population as a mother tongue and understood to some extent by another 10%. This gives Botswana an almost homogenous character, making it unnecessary for English to be strictly and largely spoken by the general population. The education language policy requires that Setswana be used as a medium of instruction from the first to second year of elementary school (National Commission on Education, 1977). At government and official levels Setswana is used both in spoken and written form to communicate with regional authorities and the local population. Setswana is also used in the deliberations of many official and formal meetings where the record or minutes are later translated into English.

Setswana is used in everyday communication in government offices, local business, transport, shops, market-place, traditional courts and gatherings, political rallies and at home. Schmied (1991: 170) contends that in many African countries, family life, which in Africa means extended family, is the domain of the mother tongue. English is considered inappropriate for communication at home with the elderly because it suggests that the young generation have abandoned their values and want to distance themselves from their culture and their language. Thus, Gabasiane (1994: 4) asserts that on occasions that require one to have a deeper cultural understanding of Setswana customs and norms such as in traditional court trials, marriage negotiations etc, Setswana must be spoken and spoken well. The National Commission on Education 1977 states that Setswana is the language of national pride, unity and cultural pride. On the basis of its role in the community Setswana can thus be said to be a low language.

Fasold (1987) agrees that although diglossia may remain stable for a long time in most communities, overlap is very common and certain specific functions tend to occur in connection with both the high and low. Obeng (1997) points out that increased literacy and broader communication may lead to a demise of diglossic situation and leakage of functions. This is true of both English and Setswana in Botswana where despite the fact that English is considered the language of government administration, Setswana is competing effectively with it as the official language. Setswana is standardised and used with English in business, government and media. The national radio station operates with equal weighting in English and Setswana with the sequence of news broadcast and announcements over the radio always being in Setswana

first followed by English, and children are taught in Setswana throughout most of their elementary schooling despite the education language policy which requires the use of Setswana as a medium of instruction to stop at grade two. Botswana has what Fasold (1987) calls a double overlapping diglossia where both the national and official language are occasionally used in official situations and as mediums of instruction in schools.

Obeng (1997) argues that diglossia does not necessarily imply bilingualism for all the people in the community. Two or more languages may exist in a communicative situation but that does not mean that everyone will be capable of understanding or using all the languages. For example, despite a widespread acceptance of the English language in Botswana, lack of competence in English is a common problem. Estimates of Botswana who have knowledge of English are very low, about 35–40%. This percentage includes both fluent speakers and those who have a basic knowledge, suggesting that the number of Botswana who can be considered bilingual in Setswana and English is actually in the minority. Fasold (1987) calls this kind of situation a diglossia without bilingualism. Botswana has a history of diglossia without bilingualism. Even at the time of British rule, English was restricted to a small number of people such as those working in the British administration, secretaries for the chiefs, a few English businessmen and their families while the rest of the community who only spoke and knew Setswana had very little power in government.

Cultural Identity, Economic Mobility or Social Status?

Language is not only a medium of communication but it is also a medium by which the identity, culture as well as social and economic status of the speaker is conveyed. Because of its role in personal, family and regional communication Setswana is considered to be more of a cultural and identity marker, while the use of English in business and educational arenas makes it more of an economic, educational and social status marker in Botswana. The kind of attitudes that the use of these languages represent has naturally led to much debate about which language should be promoted in the country. Those who want to promote culture advocate for an increased use of Setswana in government, parliament, schools while those who want to promote educational and economic advancement advocate for an increased use of English in the country.

In the last few years there has been a growing concern over the increased use of English in the country. This concern has even necessitated the formation of a National Setswana language council. Chebanne *et al.* (1993: 17) state that one of the issues that this council has to deal with is the loss of the Setswana language and culture. They argue that extensive use of English will assimilate Botswana into the English culture and negate the values of the Setswana language and culture. In addition, Janson and Tsonope (1991) argue that the official attitude of Setswana can be best described as benign neglect. The language has been neglected in the sense that it has been seen as part of the traditional society, and by that token, not very interesting for the generation of policy-makers and planners who have been busy leading Botswana to economic development.

After investigating the status of Setswana in education and society, Nyati-Ramahobo (1991) also concludes that there are basically two broad reasons why Setswana is taught in schools: (1) early concept formation and (2) cultural identity and unity. But these reasons do not make it a valued subject when compared with English that has economic value. English is taught for socio-economic advancement because skills in English lead to jobs. Nyati-Ramahobo argues that the status of Setswana is low in education and among the general Botswana population, and consequently there is very little motivation for studying Setswana in school since both educators and the community value economic mobility over cultural identity.

Janson and Tsonope (1991) as well as Nyati-Ramahobo (1991)'s concerns for the diminishing status of Setswana are evident and supported by the 1994 revised education language policy which reduced the number of years that Setswana should be used as the medium of instruction in government schools from grade five to grade two (compare the Botswana government 1977 education language policy and the 1994 revised language education policy). The growing number of parents who pay large amounts of money to send their children to private, also known as English medium schools, is further evidence that there is an increasing preference for more learning and use of English in the country. The Botswana Government Educational statistics indicate a growth in the number of private and English medium schools over the years: for example there were nine in 1981, 48 in 1991 and 71 in 1999.

Many of the teachers in these schools are expatriates and in some cases native speakers. Children from rich, élite and bilingual families are often sent to these English medium schools to equip them with the language of political, economic and social power. The households that these children come from are also likely to have facilities such as television, radio, library and computer which are all good sources of standard English. Children who go to English medium schools and those who come from wealthy families with such facilities are likely to have more exposure to English.

Among the middle-class teenage group who attend such élite schools, a new variety of English that is influenced by American English and discotheque jargon is emerging. This variety, which is spoken in an accent and pronunciation that is neither Setswana nor English, is gaining prestige among peer groups and can be heard on a local radio station called RB2 or some television programmes which cater for the interests of youth. This variety is, however, considered distasteful and 'unEnglish' by the elderly and conservative members of the population.

The above argument clearly shows that although Setswana is the dominant language in the country it will soon face competition from English which is becoming popular not just for educational and economic reasons but also for reasons of status. The important question to consider at this point is how Setswana is withstanding the pressure and whether Setswana is in danger of being assimilated into the English language as the National Setswana Language Council fears.

In reality, Setswana is much more widely used than the government policy and socio-economic terms dictate, and thereby far from being assimilated by English. For example, most children come from poor families and go to

government or Setswana medium schools where most of the learning and teaching from grade one to grade seven is in Setswana despite the education language policy which states that the use of Setswana should stop at grade two. Setswana is used as a medium of instruction for that length of time because by grade three most pupils have not learnt enough English to be taught in it and most teachers are themselves not competent enough in English to teach in it. Also, despite the status of English as the official language, a large amount of verbal interaction and correspondence between government officials with regional authorities is conducted in Setswana.

There is also very little exposure to English in the country especially in the villages and rural areas. Most children and adults live in rural areas which mainly have a pastoral lifestyle where there is no television *let alone* a computer or library and the only language that the child hears outside the English language class is the mother tongue or Setswana. These children's acquisition of English is in most cases slow.

It is also interesting to note that although there is a growing preference for the use of English there is also social pressure even on those who speak fluent English to impress their Botswana identity on their English. Many words from Setswana have been borrowed into English and are used in English conversations without any explanation. For example, such words as *kgotla* meeting (meeting held at a traditional gathering place), *matimela* cattle (stray cattle), *bo-bashi* (street kids), *omang* cards (national identity cards) are common words in the English language in Botswana indicating that English is acculturating to Setswana not the other way round. It should also be noted that in Botswana as in many African countries good English with standard grammar and expressions is commendable. However, speaking good educated English does not entail speaking in a native accent and pronunciation. In Africa those who strive to approximate a native pronunciation are frowned upon as distasteful and pedantic (Kachru 1992). This means that the type of English that is used in Botswana is one that reflects Botswana culture, norms and pronunciation not a type of English that reflects British or American culture.

Conclusion

Our language policies have become a struggle between our national languages and English rather than a struggle to educate our people and give them the best of what our education systems can offer in terms of efficient communication, cultural identity and development. Current debate on the issue of which language Botswana should promote only serves to keep Setswana and English apart, as if they cannot function at the same level. Adekunle (1976: 25) points out that a sound national language policy should provide for the exposure of the nation's high manpower to a major language in which scientific and technology information is made available to the world's community because in this era of rapid technology it would be unwise to give our people an education that limits them to their local areas and local languages. People should study a language that gives them jobs, economic power, political influence, social acceptability and mobility. African governments should come up with policies that aim at equipping African children with a language that would enable them to function and do research not only in Africa but at an

international level and at the same time promote cultural pride, unity and development of local languages. This can be done by striking a balance between the local languages and English and using them to complement each other.

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