

Botswana's languages, use and policy

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Short history of Botswana language groups

- The first Sotho Tswana group to come to Bechuanaland, in the 14th Century, is said to have been the Bakgalagadi who found the San or Basarwa people already settled in the country. The Bakgalagadi are said to have been followed by the Barolong and Tlhaping who defeated and displaced the Bakgalagadi and the Basarwa.
- The last and largest wave of Sotho Tswana people to come, around 1540, are those who later became the Bahurutshe, Bakwena, Bangwaketse, Bangwato and Batawana. The Bakgatla, Batlokwa, and Balete are said to have arrived much later in the 19th century.

Short history of Botswana language groups

- These different Sotho Tswana groups are said to have expanded their territory and increased their membership through conquest of minority and less powerful groups such as the Bakgalagadi, Basarwa, Bakalanga, Babirwa, Batswapong, and the Bayeyi.
- The minority groups were subjugated and became the subjects of their conquerors. The conquered groups often had their land confiscated and their identities subsumed under the dominant Tswana group that conquered them.

The language situation of Botswana

- To date, the different languages in Botswana are closely bound up in ethnic, regional and political divisions; Setswana is spoken by Tswana ethnic groups in the central and southern parts of the country, Ikalanga is spoken by Bakalanga in the north eastern part, Shekgalahari is spoken by Bakgalahari in the western part, etc.
- Botswana's so called minority languages (Ikalanga, Shekgalahari, Sebirwa, Nama and others) are restricted, mainly used in informal domains and cultural events within their speech communities and have not been assigned any official functions.

Language situation of Botswana

- Mooko (2009, p. 20) argues that the sole focus has been on Setswana culture and language. Setswana is promoted as the language of cultural expression, national pride, unity and identity though there is a good percentage of Batswana who do not speak it.
- Setswana is the dominant language and lingua franca, spoken by 70–80% of the population as a first language, and by approximately 20% as a second language (Anderson and Jason 1997: 21).
- There are 25 to 30 languages in Botswana.

Dev. Of a Botswana language policy

- There have been significant shifts in Botswana's language-in-education- policy and language practices between the period that Botswana was under British rule to the current time:
- First, for the 81 years that Bechuanaland was under British rule, there was no well-defined language policy for the country. English was mostly used for official functions, Setswana was used as the local lingua franca but there was a lot of flexibility. Mafela (2009, p. 59) argues that it is specifically the lack of a coordinated language policy at that time which provided an opportunity for the use of various forms of indigenous languages in colonial schools.

Dev. Of a Botswana language policy

- And there was also no really defined language-in-education-policy in the first ten years following Botswana's independence, schools followed more or less the same kind of system that was used during the colonial period.
- At independence, Botswana was amongst the poorest countries in the world; shortage of skilled human resource and no infrastructure.
- Further, the population was organized into, 20 - 30 ethnic and linguistic groups that lived in different parts of the country.

Dev. Of a Botswana language policy

- These issues presented the newly elected Government with two challenges; how to bring all these different ethnic/linguistic groups together (nation building) and how to improve the human and physical development of the country?
- The first National Commission on Education which came in 1975 under the banner *Education for Kagisano* (Education for social harmony) aimed at coming up with an education policy that will facilitate nation building and unity.

Botswana language policy

- The Commission felt that Setswana should feature more prominently in the education system, in fact, the education system should promote and reinforce the status of Setswana. It argued that “a fundamental requirement is that the national language, Setswana, must be mastered by all, for it is an essential means of communication between Batswana and it is the medium through which a great deal of the national culture is expressed” (Botswana Government, 1977, p. 76).

Botswana language policy

- To address the issue of poor physical and human development, the Government identified English as the language through which development can be achieved; through which Botswana students could access education from abroad and the country could attract skilled personnel from all over the world to come and develop Botswana.
- The Commission was more focused on two languages; Setswana and English. It therefore recommended that;

Botswana's first liep

- “Setswana should be used as the medium of instruction for the first four years of primary school with the transition to English taking place in Standard 5, by which time children must have become fully literate in Setswana. Setswana should be given more time in the school time table, and should have the same status as English as a subject in the Primary School Leaving Examination and in the selection process for secondary school. English should continue to be taught as a subject from Standard 1, with the aim of preparing children for the transition to English as a medium of instruction at Standard 5 (Botswana Government, 1977, p. 76)

Botswana's 2nd liep

- In 1992, a second National Commission on Education was appointed to review the strengths and weaknesses of the first National Commission. This Commission came at a time when the Botswana society and economy were growing rapidly and creating more modern sector posts for middle and upper level manpower.
- The growth made fresh demands on the education system and the use of languages therein.
- These evolutions and demands are apparent in the recommendations:

Botswana language policy

- The Revised National Policy on Education recommended that “with respect to the teaching of languages in primary school, English should be used as the medium of instruction from Standard 2 or as soon as practical,” (Botswana Government, 1994, p. 59).
- The Commission claimed that the basis for the shift is the “concern about poor performance of primary school children in English... and using English as the medium of instruction from Standard 2 will improve their performance,” (Botswana Government, 1994, p. 60).
- However, many observers feel that the reason for the increase in the use of English in schools was a response to the high demand for the English language by the rapidly growing westernized job market in Botswana.

Implications: Botswana language planning and policy

- Some important issues emerge from the discussion above.
- 1. There have been significant shifts in the use and role of languages in Botswana education system from the colonial times to the current time.
- 2. Only two languages (English and Setswana) enjoy official recognition. The Government is silent about the roles of the other languages that exist in the country.
- 3. There is compartmentalization of languages in Botswana. There is an attempt to separate languages according to place, time, function, subject, teacher etc.

Implications; Botswana language planning and policy

- However, despite what the policy and the school authorities say, learners and teachers code-switch and mix their languages both inside and outside the classroom. For example, Nyati-Ramahobo (2000, p. 265) shows how in the North East District, Ikalanga is used as an informal medium of instruction alongside English and Setswana.
- Mafela's (2009, p. 74) study found out that "the language situation in Botswana classrooms resonates with many others around the world, where code alteration strategies are more the norm than the exception, in spite of official language policies that dictate otherwise".