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Education, multilingualism and bilingualism in Botswana

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2020-0114>

Received October 27, 2020; accepted December 3, 2020

Abstract: Botswana is a multilingual country. It has about 28 languages (see Anderson, Lars-Gunnar & Tore Janson. 1997. *Languages in Botswana*. Gaborone: Longman Botswana). Although multilingualism breeds bilingualism or vice versa, bilingualism in Botswana is not as extensive and as widespread among the 28 languages. It is mostly concentrated amongst certain groups of people and a limited number of languages. This paper interrogates the pattern of bilingualism in Botswana and the role that education plays in shaping it. Further, the paper examines the extent to which the pattern of bilingualism in Botswana fits into Liddicoat, Anthony. 1991. Bilingualism and bilingual education. *NLIA Occasional Paper 2*. 1–21 folk and elite bilingualism categories. The paper argues that even though bilingualism in Botswana is fostered by education, it is not elite. Most bilinguals in Botswana are speakers of minority languages who feel obliged to learn English and Setswana. There are not many speakers of English who also speak Setswana and not many speakers of Setswana who also speak the minority languages. The paper highlights one of the inadequacies of multilingualism, its inability to create equality and interrelationship between languages. This paper argues that the pattern of bilingualism found in Botswana is asymmetrical and is heavily influenced by the socio-economic-cultural power relations that exist in the country. Thus, the pattern of bilingualism that is found in Botswana does not support multilingualism, instead it is detrimental to it.

Keywords: Botswana; education; elite bilingualism; folk bilingualism

1 Introduction

Ngcongco (1979: 25) states that the Sotho Tswana group was not ethnically and linguistically well-defined nor fully differentiated when it crossed into southern Africa. It came in “small scale scattered movements of several segmentary lineage

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groups occurring slowly and gradually in many directions over a wide area.” Some members of this group proceeded to Bechuanaland (now Botswana) to form a group of people who are now called Batswana. Historical evidence suggests that, even after settling in Bechuanaland, these groups remained multilingual, so multilingualism is neither a recent phenomenon nor a product of formal education and globalization. Before and during British administration, Batswana (Botswana nationals) lived in isolated ethnic groups which spoke many languages. No ethnic group was linguistically and culturally homogenous, each group had a small percentage of core members (usually of Tswana descent), and a large percentage of outsiders who had voluntarily left or fled their original groups, or had been captured from other groups. Language was thus never used as a unifying or identification instrument. Instead, location, totem, and, most importantly, chief were used to unite and identify members of an ethnic group (Schapera 1994). However, though the core members were few, they were quite influential and for the most part managed to transmit their language and culture to the rest of the members who, in order to survive or gain acceptance, had to learn the language and culture of the core members.

British rule from 1885 to 1966 did little to change the status quo. First, they administered the Bechuanaland protectorate indirectly through the Setswana chiefs and, second, they had little involvement in the development of the social life and education of Batswana. The involvement of the Setswana chiefs in the administration bolstered the position of Setswana in the society. The linguistic situation of Botswana during the time of the British administration fits Fishman's (1967) model of diglossia without bilingualism. On one side there existed the British administrators who only spoke English, and on the other side there existed Batswana natives who spoke mainly Setswana and other indigenous languages. The two groups did not interact much, and translators and interpreters were used in situations where the two had to communicate. Fishman (1967: 33) argues that, in situations where the majority of the elites and the majority of the masses live separate lives with little interaction, “the linguistic repertoires become too narrow to allow for widespread societal bilingualism to develop.” The British and Batswana could not learn each other's language because of the impermeable language and social status boundaries between them. In addition, the British had no interest in developing and providing education for the masses. They created a few educational opportunities to train a small number of junior civil servants with a proficiency in English to work in their administration (Campbell 1979).

Even though it is common belief that English is Botswana's official language and Setswana is the national language, such a declaration does not exist in the Botswana Constitution (Anderson and Janson 1997; Nyati-Ramahobo 2008). Botswana does not have a national language policy, it seems English and Setswana

acquired their roles as official and national language respectively mostly out of practice instead of legislation. The only policy document in which they have been declared as such is the language-in-education policy. It seems in the absence of a national language policy, the education system and the schools have been used directly or indirectly to represent the linguistic interest of the nation as well as regulate language use in Botswana. Cenoz (2013) acknowledges the major role that education has in the sustenance of languages and argues that languages are learned, maintained, and reinforced through education because learners spend many hours and years of their lives at school. The roles that learners later play in life are therefore influenced or shaped by the languages that they learn at school.

2 Botswana language-in-education policies

There have been significant shifts in Botswana's language-in-education policy and language practices between the period that Botswana was under British rule and the present.

According to Mafela (2009), for the 81 years that Bechuanaland was under British rule, and 10 years following Botswana independence, there was no well-defined language policy for the country. English was mostly used for record-keeping and administrative functions, while Setswana was used as the local lingua franca. Setswana was also used as a medium of instruction in the first three or four years of primary school and then English took over. But this language arrangement was quite flexible, allowing some teachers to teach in Setswana or other indigenous languages up to the end of primary school. Mafela (2009: 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 and missionary schools. However, this flexible approach to language use in the classroom was replaced by more restrictive post-independence language practices and language-in-education policies that came in 1977 and 1992.

The major aim of the first National Commission on Education, which carried the banner "Education for Kagisano" (Education for Social Harmony), was to come up with an education policy that will facilitate nation building and unity. The Commission was concerned that the Botswana education system was according English a higher status than Setswana. It argued that

... the introduction of English as a medium of instruction as early as Standard 3, and the amount of class time allocated to English clearly discriminated against the national language.... The national language, Setswana, must be mastered by all, for it is an essential means of communication between Batswana.... (Botswana Government 1977: 76).

The Commission also acknowledged the role of English in linking Botswana to the international community and recommended that “English should have a place in the curriculum” (Botswana Government 1977: 31). It therefore recommended that “Botswana Primary schools should aim to ensure that children acquire a basic command of written and spoken English and of Mathematics which are the tools of further learning in school and are needed in many jobs.” Given this importance of Setswana and English, the Commission recommended that 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: 76).

The first National Commission on Education was revised in 1992 at a time when Botswana society, its cultural and linguistic values, and its economy had evolved. This revised policy, known as The Revised National Policy on Education, responded to these new changes by reducing the number of years that Setswana should be used as a medium of instruction and increasing the number of years English should be used. It 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: 59). The Commission claimed that the basis for the shift was the “poor performance of primary school children in English and the fact that learners do not get used to using English early enough in the learning process and yet they are required to write their examinations in the language” (Botswana Government 1994: 60).

The Government of Botswana’s approach, as reflected in the two aforementioned language-in-education policies, does not promote an inclusive and mutually beneficial multilingualism. Instead, it promotes multilingualism that favors the interest of the dominant and powerful groups.

Liddicoat (1991) makes a distinction between two patterns of bilingualism: folk bilingualism, where speakers of a minority language are forced to be bilingual as a matter of survival; and elite bilingualism, where individuals make a choice to learn an additional language or languages in school. This paper argues that in the Botswana context, the education system does not promote elite bilingualism; rather, it perpetuates folk bilingualism.

3 Folk bilingualism in Botswana

Most bilinguals in Botswana fall into the category of folk bilingualism; they have a combination of a local minority language, such as Ikalanga, Shekgalagarhi, Seyeyi or a Khoesan language, with Setswana. This bilingualism is a result of four factors. First, Setswana is widespread. It is believed to be spoken by about 70% of the

population as a first language and an additional 20% as a second language (Boikhutso and Jotia 2013). It is therefore easily acquired through the practical contact of speakers of minority languages interacting with speakers of the dominant Setswana language. Second, Setswana is a necessity. It is needed to communicate and interact with the majority of the population; to access all services such as at the post office, health center, government offices; and to participate in political and cultural activities. Third, it is also needed for one to belong and to be accepted in the larger community. Among the lay people, the definition of a *Motswana* hinges on one's ability to speak Setswana (Bagwasi and Alimi 2018). In their study of Batswana's perceptions of one another, Bagwasi and Alimi's respondents delineated two categories of a *Motswana*. The label *Motswana* was used more inclusively to refer to any citizen or national of Botswana who was born in Botswana, carries a national identity card, or whose parents are Batswana. However, the respondents differentiated this from a prototypical *Motswana* called *Motswana tota* (real, genuine *Motswana*), who had the following features; born in Botswana, speaks Setswana, belongs to one of the eight Setswana ethnic groups (Bagwasi and Alimi 2018: 59).

The view that a *Motswana* is somebody who speaks Setswana is quite common, though often contested by Batswana who are non-native speakers of Setswana. Unfortunately, this view is also promoted by the Government of Botswana; the Department of Immigration requires immigrants applying for Botswana citizenship to undergo a Setswana test and therefore to be competent in Setswana. Setswana is a high language when compared to the minority languages, and for speakers of a minority language, the acquisition of a high language is a mark of elevation from a small community and low position to high mainstream society.

Fourth, Setswana is needed at school, where it is the medium of instruction in the lower grades and it is taught as a school subject throughout primary and secondary school. Most parents who speak languages other than Setswana feel that they have to prepare their children for school by teaching them the language that they are going to need when they start school. The four factors cited above put non-Setswana-speakers under a lot of pressure to acquire Setswana and become bilingual. Unfortunately, this kind of bilingualism often leads to an abandonment of their first languages and monolingualism in Setswana.

This trajectory of bilingualism is detrimental for the minority languages. It has a predisposition to shift speakers from minority languages to Setswana and by so doing contributes to language shift and language death. Letsholo (2009), Batibo (2008), and Monaka (2013) document a shift from a minority language to the dominant Setswana. Letsholo (2009) documents a shift from Ikalanga to Setswana, and Batibo (2008) documents a "loss of identity amongst Khoesan language speakers who are progressively shifting to the dominant and privileged languages.

The young generations in these societies embrace Setswana language and culture at the expense of their parents' language." Monaka (2013) also documents a shift by speakers of Shekgalagarhi to Setswana. Batibo (2005) identifies five phases that a language goes through on its way to being replaced: first, the L1 is used in most domains; second, there is bilingualism but the L1 is dominant; third, there is continued bilingualism but L2 takes a predominant role; fourth, there is bilingualism but now there is restricted use and competence of the L1; and fifth, the L2 becomes dominant and replaces the L1. The language shifts noted by Letsholo (2009), Monaka (2013), and Batibo (2008) are indications of a detrimental type of bilingualism in which bilingual speakers in Botswana end up losing one of their languages.

Even though there are many speakers of minority languages who speak Setswana, there are not many native speakers of Setswana who speak any of the Botswana minority languages – an indication that folk bilingualism reflects power asymmetries. While speakers of minority languages need Setswana, speakers of Setswana do not feel the need to learn the minority languages. The acquisition of Setswana is involuntary because speakers of the minority languages have no choice; it is necessary for them to learn the dominant language for their survival and participation in the wider community. This paper argues that this kind of bilingualism does not promote equity, fair distribution of languages, mutual integration and respect for each other's languages and culture. Instead, it elevates Setswana over other local languages. This kind of bilingualism supports Duchêne's (2020: 95) observation that "multilingualism is not emancipatory for all, it can produce and reproduce exploitation and domination." This pattern of bilingualism is also found in such countries as Japan, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, where bilinguals are mostly speakers of the minority indigenous language (such as Maori in New Zealand, Welsh in the United Kingdom and Ainu in Japan). In these countries, just a few speakers of the dominant languages are bilingual – that is, speak the dominant as well as the minority language(s) found in their communities (Liddicoat 1991).

4 Education and elite bilingualism in Botswana

In the West, formal education and schools are associated with a pattern of bilingualism that is called elite bilingualism. According to Liddicoat (1991), a pattern of bilingualism is described as elite if the bilinguals acquire their bilingualism through school, are not forced to learn a second language but make a choice to become bilinguals, and choose the language(s) that they would like to learn – languages that do not overshadow their native language but enrich or complement it. Unlike in folk

bilingualism, learning a second language is not a matter of survival; the language is not needed to participate or access services in the community. There is also not much pressure associated with learning the second language because not all the learning is dependent on it. Learners who fail such a language are free to discontinue or withdraw from it. In the West, second-language learners are often members of middle- and upper-class families who need the language for cultural enrichment, travel, educational achievement, diplomacy and work. Further, elite bilingualism is associated with the learning of the so-called international and classical languages (English, French, German, Latin, Sanskrit, Greek and lately Mandarin Chinese), which schools in the West offer as school subjects.

Guerrero (2010) has noted that there are subtle differences between elite bilingual patterns in Canada on the one hand, and Colombia, China and South Africa on the other. He argues that in the first world (represented by Canada) elite bilingualism is voluntary: “learners are free to make the choice of learning a second language; they learn an additional language for personal or professional purposes, not to survive or because circumstances lead them to, as happens in folk bilingualism.” For example, in Germany, a learner can choose English, French, Spanish or Dutch. However, in South Africa and Colombia the learning of a second language is not voluntary. Learners in these countries are “forced” by their states or by circumstances to learn in English. The situation in Botswana is similar to that of South Africa and Colombia because the learning of the second language is not voluntary. Setswana and English are compulsory subjects and media of instruction from upper primary school to senior secondary school for all learners.

While in the West the learning of a second language has no educational or progression consequences for learners, in Botswana the learning of second languages has serious consequences in the sense that learners who fail to acquire these languages within the set periods are likely to struggle throughout the curriculum, which is taught in Setswana in the first year of primary school and thereafter solely in English. Failure in English can also affect the chances of progression into tertiary education. At the end of secondary school, learners progress to tertiary, where almost all the programmes require a pass in English. For example, the University of Botswana has the following language requirements:

The normal basic requirements for entrance to undergraduate degree and diploma programmes shall be Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) with a Grade C or better in English Language, but other qualifications may be accepted on their merit as alternatives. Entry into the Science Degree programmes shall be on the basis of BGCSE Science and Mathematics aggregates and a grade D or better in English language or equivalents (University of Botswana Calendar 2018/2019: 13).

Performance in the subject English has an effect on the overall points a learner can earn in their senior secondary examination. The points are drawn from what is called the learner’s best six subjects. However, the best six subjects does not refer to any six subjects that the learner could have performed well in; rather, the best six refers to grades from Mathematics, English, Science and any other three subjects in which the learner has performed well. It seems that there are two measures of “best” involved here. First, there are three subjects that are ordained “best” (Mathematics, English and Science) and second, three subjects which become best based on the learner’s performance in them. The inclusion of English, and indeed Mathematics and Science, in the best six subjects irrespective of the learner’s performance in them reflects the bias and high value placed on English and science subjects. The points are then used to award government scholarships and to select students for entry into tertiary institutions. Mathangwane (2008) questions the importance attached to the English language as an entry requirement into the University of Botswana. She wonders why applicants with poor results in English but good results in other subjects in the BGCSE examinations should be denied admission into the University. Using data from the University of Botswana Admissions Office, she compares the performance of three applicants for the 2007/2008 academic year to illustrate the selection process at the University of Botswana (see Table 1).

Table 1: Performance of three applicants to the University of Botswana.^a

Subject	Applicant X		Applicant Y		Applicant Z	
	Grades	Points	Grades	Points	Grades	Points
English	E	3	A ^a	8	F	0
Mathematics	A ^a	8	F	0	B	6
Chemistry	A ^a	8			A	7
Geography	A ^a	8				
Physics	A ^a	8			A	7
Additional Mathematics	A	7			C	5
Biology	B	6			C	5
Design & Technology	B	6	E	3		
Setswana	C	5	B	6	F	0
Development Studies			C	5	D	4
Commerce			C	5		
Science DA			CC	10		
Art and Design					D	4
Total of best subjects		=42		=34		=30

^aAdapted from Mathangwane (2008: 30).

Mathangwane (2008: 29) says Applicant X with 42 points is not qualified to be admitted into any degree programme at the University of Botswana because of his E Grade in English in spite of his good grades in other subjects, such as Mathematics, Chemistry, Geography and Physics. This candidate is only admissible into a diploma or certificate programme. Applicant Y in comparison to Applicant X has poor grades in Maths and Design and Technology but has a good grade in English, he thus qualifies for admission into a non-science degree programme such as Bachelor of Arts in Humanities or the diploma and certificate programmes, even though he has less points. Applicant Z on the other hand, is not admissible into any of the University of Botswana programmes because of his F grade in English, though he has good grades in Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics. Mathangwane (2008: 30) argues that this kind of selection process underscores the premium placed on English and reinforces Ngūgĩ's (1986: 12) observation that, in Africa, English is used as a measure of intelligence or ability in all subjects.

Further, education fails to create elite bilingualism in Africa because the motivation for offering second languages in African schools is economic, while in the West the motivation is to construct partnership, integration and enrichment. In Botswana, and indeed many parts of Africa, English and other European languages are offered as languages with transformative powers, capable of elevating their speakers educationally, economically and socially. For this reason, the aim is no longer for one to be bilingual, but rather to be competent in English at all costs. Bagwasi (2019) argues:

In Botswana, those who seek elite bilingualism only use English with their children and send them to private schools, which are called English mediums. In these schools, bilingualism is not promoted because only English is used. In reality, these schools thrive by promoting monolingualism in English not bilingualism in several languages, an indication that Botswana elite bilingualism is in reality monolingualism because it places less value on the number of languages that an individual speaks but rather on the elite language(s) they speak.

5 How can bilingual education be achieved?

This paper has problematized the practices of bilingualism and multilingualism in Botswana's education system. It has argued that instead of promoting multilingualism, the education system seems to be working towards promoting monolingualism. Bagwasi (2016: 12) argues that the Botswana language-in-education policy "promotes monolingualism instead of bilingualism because in the first two grades only Setswana, to the exclusion of the other languages, is used and when Setswana is removed after Standard 2, only English is used; either

way this is monolingualism because there is only one language in use at a time”. Similarly, The Government of Botswana is focused on the promotion of the official language and the national language to the exclusion of the minority languages and, by so doing, it has made them the focal point of all kinds of communication patterns in the country. These practices are detrimental to multilingualism.

There is a need to reflect on the practices of bilingualism and multilingualism in Botswana, not only as a way of acknowledging the presence of different languages in one space (such as in school) but as a way of breaking down language hierarchies and language barriers. The current practice excludes some languages in some spaces, it promotes hierarchical patterns and language boundaries that bolster the positions of dominant languages and weaken the position of minority languages. A school needs to be viewed as a focal point where different languages converge and where language networks can be forged. These languages could be allowed to thrive and flourish by reducing restrictions and boundaries between them. They could be used to support and complement each other in different aspects of learning, such as reading, speaking, writing, games etc. in order to allow for the different languages to have a role in the school. This point is also made by Duchêne (2020: 93), who sees multilingualism as a “site for the production of social differences” and “a site of struggle for access to and distribution of knowledge, resources and status”. He argues that recognition of the different languages is not enough, and we need to think and act in terms of recognition coupled with redistribution of languages. This suggests that it is necessary for multilingual societies not only to celebrate the different languages that exist in their communities, but also to ensure that these languages are equitably distributed in the education, economic and social systems of the communities.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued that education plays a role in shaping the pattern of bilingualism in Botswana. Though there are about 28 languages in Botswana, the country’s language-in-education policy only utilizes and promotes two languages and, by so doing, fails to create a language situation in which bilingualism and multilingualism can thrive. The multilingualism and bilingualism portrayed by such an education system is, according to Mohanty (2006: 279), “only superficially multilingual, but remains monolingual at an underlying level.” Bagwasi (2012) argues that “if bilingualism is to espouse collaboration and interdependence but not supremacy and dominance then we all have a responsibility to learn each other’s languages.”

The education system in Botswana has created folk bilingualism in which the languages involved are competing rather than complementing each other. The consequence is that the minority and weaker languages are being replaced by the more dominant and prestigious languages. For the Botswana education system to enable true bilingualism, it needs to create interdependence, interconnectivity and integration of languages. The existing local languages should each be given a role in the school and the curriculum, where they serve as subject languages, reading languages or discussion languages. Further, a variety of local languages should be required and demanded in such professions as health, media, social work, agriculture and public office. Such a requirement would motivate learners to expand their bilingualism by learning a variety of local languages.

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