

The Socio-linguistic Perspective in Tswana Literature

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This essay draws its material from Tswana literary texts. It reflects the extent to which socio-linguistics can be embedded in literature. Its focus is on role relations, social classes and ingroups and outgroups - i.e. social and interpersonal attitudes and relations.

At any particular time two speakers within a given speech network must recognize the role relationship that exists between them. Such recognition is part of the communality of norms and behaviours upon which the existence of the speech communities depend; for example, parent/child, husband/wife, and ruler/subject (Fishman, 1972: 36-37). Role relationships therefore are implicitly recognized and accepted sets of mutual rights and obligations between members of the same socio-cultural system.

One of the ways in which members reveal such common membership to each other, as well as their recognition of the rights and obligations they owe to each other, is via appropriate variation of the ways they talk to one another. For example, when a child talks to a parent, its language becomes different from the language it uses when it talks to its peer.

In the literature the writer has observed two broad types of role relations: First, relations among the members of the speech community, and second, role relations between the community members and the members of the outgroup. within the ingroup are relations between gods and the people, men and women, husband and wife, adults and children, royalty and commoners. This is a power relationship, which can be summarized as a relationship between the superordinate and the subordinate or the high and the low. Tswana language, in strict terms, does not yet have a standard variety. As a result, people or classes of people cannot yet be differentiated in terms of their

usage of either the standard or the non-standard variety. In addition to that, in native villages which are the ones in which the community is concentrated, there are no separate residential areas for different socio-economic classes. The whole community is residentially integrated, and the result of this is social and linguistic levelling. Hence, no dialect yet has superseded the other. In a situation like this, it is not the phonology nor the syntax that can help in the identification of classes or identification of role relations linguistically. Usually role relations are identified by linguistic styles and classes by usage of certain linguistic variables in a certain way peculiar to the users. If, then, the above has not been helpful, how has detection of role relations and assignment of social classes been accomplished? It has been through the terms of address and the vocabulary of social intolerance. The vocabulary of social intolerance is the vocabulary of class distinctions and social segregation.

Regarding the internal superordinate/subordinate class relations, evidence places the royal group as the high social class in the traditional society. The chief ("Kgosi") occupies the highest rank. The first linguistic evidence that places the chief is the plethora of praises that appear in the texts and are addressed to the chiefs.

The following words suggest the hierarchy and stratification of classes: "Kgosi" (Chief), "Kgosana" (Headman), "Mohumagadi" (Chief's Wife), "Motlhanka" (Traditional Serf), and "Morongwa" (Messenger), and "Lelata" (Beggar Type of Serf).

When a chief is addressed by persons belonging to a social status lower than his, whether they are royals or not, they would use the word "Kgosi" (chief), or address him by a totem, or by the terms "Mmabatho" (mother of people), "Mongwame" (my lord), "Modimo" (god), "Motho yo Montle" (a handsome person), or "Mogolole" (my elder). The other members of the royal circle are often addressed in similar terms by their social inferiors.

Unlike the chiefs and other upper social stratum members, the commoners are not addressed by the terms which designate their class status when the upper classes talk to them. Politeness is observed

by the superior group when they talk to their inferiors. This, the writer feels, is because when a commoner addresses a person of higher social status, he does that with great respect and, in turn, the respect is reciprocated. The "lesser" man's designation is often used when he is being talked about but not when he is addressed. The only time which he can be addressed as a serf, for instance, is when anger or contempt are intended. The royalty/commoner role relationship is one of the most characteristic in the Tswana community, and they have the proverbial expression which confirms it, namely :

"Motlhanka ga Mogolo go Mongwagwe".

(A serf cannot be senior/superior to his lord/chief).

The following is a classical example of hierarchy of social classes, their role relationship, and in part, the language style that is used in these relationships :

Ha a fitlha fa kgotleng a dumedisa letona la kgosi, mme a re mo go lone: "Mokwena, raya Kwena e Kgolo o re motlhanka wa yone o a dumedisa". Lefoko ja tsamaisiwa ke melomo ya matona, mongwe le mongwe a bolelela mogolowe mo boreneng go fitlhelela tumediso e be e fithe go yone kgosi. A dumela Ramonamane, mme le yone tumelo ya gagwe ya ya ka tsela e tumediso ya ga Mapadimole e fitlhileng go yone. Jaanong Mapadimole a re: "Kgosi, ntša ya gago e utlwile pitso ya gago, mme e tlile go utlwa se o neng o e biletsa sone". (Moloto, D.P., Mokwena, 7-8).

(When he arrived at the chief's court place he greeted the chief's councillor, and said to hi, "The Crocodile Totemite, tell the big Crocodile that its sert is greeting". The word went from the mouth of one councillor to the other's, each reporting to the one immediately senior to him in the line of royalty until it reached the chief. Ramonamane received the greetings and greeted back through the same line. Then Mapadimole said, "Chief,

your dog has heard that you were calling it and it has come to hear what it is being called for").

This exemplifies social class stratification, where direct speech communication is determined by the nearness of status or class. Mapadimole's social status keeps him at a distance from the chief; hence the societal norms do not allow him to talk directly to the chief. What is more interesting is the type of language that Mapadimole uses. He refers to himself in the third person and his language is humble to the extreme, self-belittling, and self-effacing. He refers to himself as the chief's dog ("ntš'a") and serf ("motlhanka"). This type of language labels him as a member of a lower social class, and it is the language this class often uses when it talks to someone belonging to the superior social class. The style is transactional and formal.

Again here, the role relationship is power directed, and the language that goes with it is a language that reflects a relationship where one group is superior to the other and vice versa. The royal class is the one that has the right to the respect and the other class has the obligation to show that respect. It is a norm of behaviour culturally observed and the language that marks this role relationship is a way of recognizing it as societally accepted behaviour. The point can further be illustrated by the following examples :

O bua le kgosi e nngwe jaaka o ka re o bua le motlhanka wa gagwe (Moloto, D.P., Mokweana: 87).

He speaks to the other chief as though he is talking to his serf.

The above quote suggests that the chiefs within their role relationship have the right to the others' respect and that they are under obligation to respect each other. Failure to observe this is to violate the norm.

O morwa mang o ka tlang go ema fa gare ga Bakwena wa bua sengwe? (Moloto, D.P., Mokwena: 148).

(Whose son are you that you dare stand up in the midst of the Bakwena to say something?)

The implication is that the accused person is being objected to because his social status is questionable. "He is born of low class parents" is the connotation of "Whose son are you?" Hence, he is expected to be humble, to choose when, how, and to whom he speaks. The speech event turned out to be what Fishman terms "an incongruent social situation" (Fishman, 1972: 39).

Role Relationship Between Men and Women

In this order of role relationships are men and women relations. There is first the broad category between men and women. The writer chooses, however, to analyze this under the husband/wife role relationship. In Tswana, husbands and their wives do not address one another by their names. They use "father" or "mother" of so and so. The firstborn's name is usually used. For example, in Raditladi's Dintshontso tas Lorato, Sakoma and his parents are called RraSakoma and MmaSakoma (Father of Sakoma and Mother of Sakoma) respectively. This is particularly observed by women because men occupy a higher position in the marriage relationship, and one of the first duties of a wife is to show respect to her husband. But generally any woman or man who has children is addressed by his or her first born. The address is more distinct and effective put as, for example, RragoSakoma or MmagoSakoma. RaSakoma may be ambiguous because there are many names such as Mmapula or Ranko which do not necessarily mean that their bearers have children.

In their interactions, women are wary not to fail to respect their husbands. For example,

The terms of respect used by a younger or inferior person are "mma" for addressing women and "rra" for addressing men. The adults expect them from the children and the children are obliged to use them.

Apart from the respect coded relationship, the other thing that distinguishes adults from children is the type of language they use. The adults usually speak in metaphors and proverbs while the children normally use plain language. The following dialogue between an uncle and his nephew is a good example :

Lerumo : "Motlogolo"
(Nephew)

Lerolo : "Malome!"
(Uncle!)

Lerumo : "Bakwena na a lela. Tsaya lesela o ba phimole dikeledi".

(The Bakwena are weeping. Take a cloth and wipe their tears).

Lorole : "Malome, le nna ke a lela. Pelo ya me e thubegile".

(Uncle, I am also weeping. My heart is broken).

Lerumo : "Lobone lwa ntlo ya mogoloo lo timilwe ke diphefo tsa loso. Ke wena fela o ka le gotetsang".

(The light of your brother's home has been blown out by the winds of death. You are the only one that can

Lerole : "Malome, tihalosa gore ke tle ke go utlwe sentle. Nna ke mmotlana, mme nka seka ka re ke a tihaloganya fa o bua le nna ka diane" (Moroke (a) 66).

(Uncle, explain so that I may understand you clearly. I am young, and cannot say I understand when you address me in proverbs).

Mosadi ga ka a tsena monna (Kitchin, M.S.: Molotlhanyi: 25).

(A wife never interrupts her husband).

and,

Le ene Nnodana o a itse fa rona basadi ba Setswana re seka re tsena dilo tsa banna, re sa tshwane le ba Setebele (Kitchin, M. S.: Molotlhanyi: 25).

(Even Nnodana himself knows that we Tswana women, unlike the Ndebele ones, never pry into men's affairs).

Women themselves have a style of language which is basically different from that of men. Tswana men are associated with the formal, transactional style of language and the hallmark and style of Batswana women is informality. Light, intimate style is what they use when they talk among themselves. The authors of the texts unfortunately have not allowed their female characters to speak in this style. They have restrained them. However, two statements wryly hint on this in one of the texts :

Mafoko a utlwiwa ka basadi, ka banyana, le ka ditseno (Seboni: Rammone wa Kgalagadi: 17).

(Secrets are heard through women, young children, and lunatics).

Mmutla ga o kitla o rotha madi le fa lo re basadi ga ba ke ba tshegetsa sepe ka tlhaa (Seboni: Rammone wa Kgalagadi: 35).

(The secret will not be divulged even though you say women never keep any secret).

If the author could have allowed the women, young children, and lunatics to say something, it would have been better than announcing their speech or gossip habits. Incidentally, the authors of all the books in Tswana to this date are men, and most of the characters in the books are also men. Some books hardly have female characters in them, or if they appear, their appearance is brief and limited

to a very small space. Even in authorship and literature, the Tswana man is still holding the dominating position. This seems to confirm the pattern of the superiority of the men and its persistence in the Tswana social structure.

Christians and their language mark the contact of the two cultures, the Western exotic culture, and the Tswana native one. In the language of Christians there are biblical allusions and the high frequency of the work "Modimo" (God). For example,

"Motho yo wa Modimo yo ..." (Moroke (a): 9).

(This poor God's creature ...)

and

"Ba mo Kanana, ba ja maši le dinotshe" (Moroke (a): 9).

(They are in Canaan enjoying mild and honey).

In Ntsime's Kobo e Ntsho, the story is about the Christian convert family whose son ultimately turns out a priest and all they speak of is Christianity (Ntsime, Kobo e Ntsho). Some of Moroke's poems are mere Christian sermons (Moroke (b). M.S. Kitchin composed a poem about David Livingstone, the Christian missionary (Kitchin, M.S. (a). Part of the Christian language comprises attack of traditional beliefs, for example :

Ga ke itse gore lo tla gololwa ke mang mo serung sa badimo! Le fa ebile baruti ba gorogetse mo motseng o...
Bo;oi bo bolaya yo o bo dumelang (Kitchin, M.S. (b): 45).

(I don't know who will set you free from the trap of the gods! Even though the missionaries arrived in this village ... Witchcraft kills one who believes in it).

The conflict between Christians and non-Christians is reflected in the above words. The conflict in itself is symbolic of the clash

between the cultures. The new foreign culture has entered the ranks of the old and native one. They have, however, already established contact, and what remains for them is to adjust to each other, and this will take place by degrees.

The ingroup and outgroup role relationship is the next to be examined. In this context the ingroup would be the Tswana speech community and the outgroup would mean the non-members of the Tswana speech community.

The terms that the Tswana use in the ingroup/outgroup role relationship suggest that the society is closed to itself and secludes other groups. The language that marks this situation is strictly the vocabulary of class distinctions and social segregation.

One illustration is to be found in Raditladi's Dintshontsho tsa Lorato. The dialogue between Sakoma and Mmamotia is revealing. Social and class distinctions are its theme. The first term encountered is "Nswana wa bafaladi", which means a child of immigrants or refugees. The term attaches a stigma to the person it refers to. He is not a member of the ingroup and he is, therefore, unaccepted and discriminated against on those grounds. His marriage to a girl who belongs to the tribe is opposed on the grounds that she belongs to the ingroup and is born of the upper class while he is a foreigner and has no important status in the tribe.

Mmamotia, the girl, asks Sakoma, the young man who wants to marry her, whether he knows that she is a daughter of men of very high social standing. She further goes on to say, "If you were not a 'Mhaladi' (refugee) I would consider listening to you". "If we can get married, our marriage would cause an upheaval in the tribe". (Free translation of the text). The main terms of social intolerance in this context are "Mhaladi" (refugee) and "tshaoelele" (segregation).

In Sekgoma I, the following statement is used:

"Dilo tseo ke Matebele" (Raditladi (b): 8).

(Those things are the Matebele).

The proper statement should have been "Those people are Batebele". They are being referred to as "things" because they belong to the outgroup. More than that, in Tswana the normal plural prefix used for people is /ba-/ not /ma-/. /Ma-/ is used to indicate contempt, disapproval, or belonging to the other group, and "Matebele" has been used in this context by a Motswana to show that he is referring to an outgroup which is socially despised and unaccepted by the Batswana. "Masarwa" (Bushmen) Raditladi (b): 23) is used in the same text with the same connotations. Others are "Makarapa" (a contemptuous name used for mine labourers from countries like the then Rhodesia and Malawi) (Seboni (b): 14), "Letlalapowa" (someone belonging nowhere and having no permanent place of abode) (Moloto, D.P., (a) 68: 27), "Letebele" (singular for Matebele) (Kitchin, M.S. (b): 11), "Makgoa" (Whites) (Moroke (a): 8). Unlike the others, the term "Makgoa" in its usages expresses the idea of belonging to the other group and does not have other pejorative connotations.

It is of interest to note that the exclusion of the outgroup by the ingroup was sometimes lopsided. The following ambivalent expression illustrates :

"Mosarwa ke yo Motonanyana, yo Monamagadi ke Motaung". (Moloto, D.P.) (a)

(A Bushman is the male one, the female is a Motaung).

Among the Bataung, one of the Tswana tribes, there were Bushmen, who possibly could have come to live with them as servants. With passage of time some Bataung men married Bushmen women. This was resented by society, and especially its women, who regarded such behaviour as a social affront. In self-defence and in an attempt to normalise their questioned behaviour, Bataung men came up with the expression cited above. On the other hand, for a Bushmen male to come near a Motswana woman was taboo and was simply unheard of. The information derived from the expression reveals that the terms of relationship were dictated by the superordinate ingroup and that in this group the higher status of men is upheld. However, in the expression the word used is "Mosarwa" but not

"Lesarwa". The word suggests acceptance. In other words, this is to say that the Bushmen are people as the Bataung are people and cannot be kept outside the Bataung social fold. Still, the expression betrays that the Bataung men unconsciously have a similar attitude to the Bushmen as their women. The words "Yo motonanyana" and "Yo monamagadi" whose stems are '-tonanyana' and '-namagadi' are never used to refer to human beings. They are used for referring to the sex of the animals. This tells us that essentially even the Bataung men still regard the Bushmen as a community much inferior to them and socially unacceptable.

There is another section of the Tswana speech community called "Bakgalagadi" in plural form, the singular being "Mokgalagadi". These are the tribes which live in the Kgalagadi Desert and are regarded as inferior by the Tswana major tribes. They often refer to them contemptuously as "Makgalagadi" (Moloto, D.P., Mokwena: 73). Often when they intend to offend anyone, they address him or refer to him as a "Mokgalagadi". For example,

"Tlogela go baka Mogkalagadi" (Moloto, D.P., Mokwena: 73).

(Stop praising a Mokgalagadi).

and

"Motlokwanyana ke wena wa Mokgakagatsana" (Moloto, D.P., Mokwena: 101).

(You petty Motlokwa of an insignificant Mokgalagadi).

Someone is cursing some "Motlokwa" by referring to him as a petty and an insignificant "Mokgalagadi". The terms are much stronger because they are used in the diminutive, with the diminutive suffixes '-nyana' and '-ana'. One use of the diminutive in Tswana is to express derogation. However, what interests the Writer most is that the term "Mokgalagadi" can be used to express contempt, for it

suggests the relationship and the negative attitude of the main Tswana tribes towards the other groups.

The following passage can further elucidate the above while commenting on the parent/child role relationship simultaneously :

A bua a tonne matlho, a lebile rragwe. Bantsi ba gakgamala gonne Mokwena e ne e le ngwana yo o ikoko-beletsang rragwe thata.

Mongwe a re: "O tswa go tsaya Mekgwa ya Sekgalagadi ya kwa Tlhaping kwa go seng yo motona le yo monnye".
(Moloto, D.P. Mokwena: 80)

(He spoke with his eyes wide open, staring at his father. Many were surprised because Mokwena was a child who was known to be very humble and obedient to his father. Some said: "He has picked up the ways and conduct of the Kgalagadi people from Tlhaping where distinction is not made between adults and children").

While the above words once more cast contempt on the Kgalagadi people, they also suggest that there is a way in which a child is expected to address an adult in Tswana. Their speech interaction must reveal that their relationship is that of senior and junior, an authority and a subordinate and an informed and the uninformed, and that underlying these role relationships must be the overt respect shown by the child. Once more this is a power coded relationship of inequality in which the parent has the right to the respect and the child has the obligation to show respect. This observation is supported by the following evidence :

O kile wa bona kae motho a dumedisa mogwe? (Moroke (a): 56).

(Where have you ever seen someone greeting his son-in-law?).

the expectation is that the son-in-law as a junior must greet the parent. Tswana culture prescribes that subordinates must be the ones who greet the superordinates.

Matlakala, o bua jang le rrago? A o itebetse?
(Monyaise (a): 50).

(Matlakala, how are you talking to your father? You must be absent-minded).

Malobajale go sa le molao, Mosimane o ne a ka se eme mo kgotla, a gobolola kgosi ya ga rragwe, Mosimane e ne e le niša... Compieno pudulogo (Monyaise (a): 14).

(Years back, when there was still law, a boy could not stand up at a tribal meeting and address his father's chief as he liked. A boy was a mere dog... Nowadays enlightenment).

Ga se mafoko a bana (Monyaise (b): 50).

(These words are none of the children's business).

One other thing observable in the dialogue above is that the nephew must preface whatever he says to his uncle by the word "Uncle". It could have been "father", "mother", "aunt", "elder sister", depending on who he was communicating with. That is the style which the younger people are expected to address their seniors in, which is regarded as a respectful way of talking.

Yet another discernible role relationship in modern literature is the elite-nonelite. This is not linguistically characterized through the native language, but by the usage of a foreign Western language side by side with Tswana. At present, as stated earlier, there is not yet a variety of Tswana that can be justifiably called the standard variety. The elite, therefore, are marked by their use of either English or Afrikaans, but mainly English. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, two authors have exploited this situation to expose the

pretensions of social climbers and the would-be-elegants. The characters who enact this are Motheo¹ and Lobisa.² The idea behind this technique is that the people who ape the manners of the class above them are prone to imitate incorrectly. They are likely to notice some point of difference between their own class and the higher and then exaggerate the difference. Motheo and Lobisa overindulged in switching English, or even Afrikaans, in Lobisa's case, and Tswana codes. In their attempt to sound like the educated elite, they would use English at a wrong time, place, and to people who do not need to be addressed in English.

In the bulk of the one time colonial African countries, the language of the coloniser has by and large remained as the school and government language; hence its prestige and the resultant prestige of its users. There seems to be no recognition of mutual rights and obligations in the role relation signalled by it as there is for the other

¹ Motheo is male character in Moloto's Motimedi.

² Lobisa is a female character in Moroke's play, Lobisa Radipitse. role relations. The alienation of this type of relation seems to the writer explicable in terms of attitude towards different languages. The attitude towards Tswana as opposed to the one towards English or Afrikaans is different. The former is connected with a sense of group identity, of loyalty to traditional ways and ancestors; the latter is a utilitarian instrument, important for getting ahead in the world, but not as diffused into the native culture and not as yet setting up a real bond of solidarity.

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