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# WORD / INVENTION AND INNOVATION

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**The birth and fluid nature of Sesotho as we know it today.  
an interview with David Ambrose**

# decolonization  
# indigenous languages

by Lineo Segoete / Maseru Working Group

“The colonial discourses on languages are not neutral, but constitute a paradigm of modernity, which is strongly rooted in both Christianity and Enlightenment. This paradigm is a political colonial framework of exploration and control of land, people and languages. The colonial practice of naming and describing people and languages is political (Foucault, 1999a, 1996) and inaugurated a typical way of producing discourses on the “New World”, based on the European conceptual framework (O’gorman, 1958; Galeano, 2014). Such discourses, in turn, made the trajectories and experiences of existing peoples and cultures invisible (Leite, 1996), turning them into a target of colonizing and modernizing practices, such as Christianization, folklorization, scientification and schooling. Such practices produced specific colonial effects. Not surprisingly, in the African context, literacy and language education played an ambivalent role: as instruments of control and as a form of social emancipation (Makoni, 2003).” (Severo, 2016).

It is based on this knowledge that the Maseru Working Group began to formulate a dictionary project to respond to, instead of react to, the legacy of stunting and stagnating the growth of the Sesotho language as initiated (perhaps unconsciously, at best) by European Christian missionaries.

The interview

To help us make a case for the dictionary project, we sat down with seasoned scholar, Dr. David Ambrose, who is a British-born former professor at the National University of Lesotho. In true British fashion, Dr. Ambrose offered us tea as we sat down in his kitchen on that unusually warm winter afternoon in late July. We are in Ladybrand, South Africa, where Dr. Ambrose now lives, about 15 minutes from Maseru. This small town sits in a valley on Lesotho’s territory which was conquered by the Dutch (Afrikaners) towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ambrose is happy to mention this little anecdote with mischief glimmering in his eyes, a perfect way to ease us into the purpose of the visit. I tell him

about how I had stumbled upon a peculiarity in my research; the first writings (orthography) of Sesotho that I had come across had a strangeness about them. Some words looked and sounded almost comical when read in the context of the orthography that we are taught today. I had a hypothesis, and if anyone was going to shed light, it would be Ambrose. The man has an extensive repertoire of writings related to Lesotho, on virtually any subject from politics, to botany, to language.

Dr. Ambrose begins:

Not many people have written about the orthography, you see. Here is a story... Moshoeshoe sent two of his sons with the missionaries to Morija. But Letsie (the first) was already married and didn't have much to do with the missionaries. He set up his own village up at Phahameng. His second son was called Barend, which was Sesotho-ised to Bereng. Bereng isn't actually a Sesotho name, it comes from Afrikaans or Dutch. It became a royal name because of a Griqua chief called Barend Barends. Barends had settled at Lesoane mission, which is now a farm in the Free State. But back then it was part of Moshoeshoe's Kingdom and so he had to go to Moshoeshoe to pay tribute and be granted the right to settle there. When he arrived at Thaba Bosiu it must have been during the naming ceremony.

Orthography of course starts with Casalis. He wrote a book called *Etudes sur la langue Bechuana*. He regarded Sesotho as Setswana because they were more or less mutually intelligible, as they are today. It was only later that they (missionaries) realised that really it should be treated as a separate language. And you see, they were influenced by Setlhaping.

What is the very first word in the Bible?

LS: Qalong?

Dr. Ambrose:

Well, that is what you would naturally expect, but it isn't. It's "Tšimolohong," in the beginning.

LS: Tšimoloho is a Setswana word.

Dr. Ambrose:

It is also a Sesotho word, but it is quite a rare one. The missionaries you see, were guided by Setlhaping translations. Moshoeshoe and his people actually spoke Sekoena before his language formed into Sesotho. Setlhaping and Sekoena are both dialects of the Setswana language. The early French missionaries were initially unaware of any significant differences between Setswana (Setlhaping) and the dialect spoken by the people of Moshoeshoe, and were much guided by their predecessor in the region, Samuel Rolland<sup>1</sup>. Rolland used Robert Moffat's writings in Setlhaping to orient the new arrivals with the local language.

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<sup>1</sup> A missionary who was stationed at Beersheba and was the first to welcome Casalis and company to Lesotho.

Satisfied with this new information, I had the perfect lead for the type of texts to look for to support my hypothesis.

## Context

Sesotho is a language of the Bantu people spoken in Lesotho and South Africa. It is closely related to Setswana and Sepedi, and the three languages are together clustered as Sotho-Tswana because of their linguistic and cultural characteristics as well as a common ancestor in the person of Chief Malope, somewhere around Ethiopia during the 13th century (M. A Moleleki, 1999). The three languages should be seen as a family with a common origin rather than a language group based merely on shared affinities. (Moleleki, 1999). Setswana has eight dialects which include: Sekwena, and Setlhaping. It was first written in 1806 when Heinrich Lichtenstein wrote “Upon the Language of the Beetjuana”. Since then several other missionaries wrote about it including Robert Moffat<sup>2</sup> who also published a spelling book in 1826<sup>3</sup>. In Lesotho, Eugene Casalis, would write *Etudes sur la langue Bechuana* (Studies on the Bechauna Language,) in 1841 after having first interacted with the above-mentioned texts.

The Bakoena who ended up forming the Basotho nation under Moshoeshoe, originally separated from Botswana in the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>. David Coplan writes: “While the chiefs of Basutoland were largely of Moshoeshoe’s Bakoena clan, they made up only about 30 percent of the total population<sup>5</sup>... when Shaka’s expanding Zulu, along with forays by slave-trading Europeans, sent great clans and lesser refugees careening across southern Africa in the early nineteenth century, several formerly autonomous groups were welded into the emerging national amalgam of the Basotho.

The orthography of Sesotho not only had to be unique but it had to look different on paper too. Moshoeshoe is cited as having indicated his dissatisfaction with the missionaries’ conflation of Sekoena with the Setlhaping dialect. “The first grammar book by Casalis called *Studies on the Bechuana language* is most logically a blend of the Sekoena of the ruling clan, the Sefokeng of the aboriginal Bafokeng whose aristocrat

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to pages 28-57 in Robert Moffat *The Missionary Hero of Kuruman* listed in the bibliography

<sup>3</sup> He produced a Bechuana spelling book, even though he had problems with his interpreters and the fact that he was not a linguist. He saw Batswana as incapable of teaching him the language and decided to embark on a self-teaching exercise in order to learn Setswana language.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to *Prehistory of Southern Africa* (n.d) <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/prehistory-rustenburg-area> (retrieved on November 10th 2018)

<sup>5</sup> Refer also to page 354 of *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared meaning* By Gerald West, and Hans (J.H) de Wit

daughters the Bakoena chiefs deliberately married... and the Setlhaping usage, both lexical and grammatical, injected by the missionaries..." (Coplan, 1994).

However, in its formation, Sesotho was already dropping old terms and usages and picking up new ones, including numerous borrowings from the languages of the Dutch (Afrikaner) and British invaders (Germond, 1967)

Moshoeshoe is quoted saying, "my language is nevertheless very beautiful... thanks to the little books of the missionaries, it will not be altered... I only see words that are being changed because they are Setlhaping words. My language remains my language on paper. If that paper came from some remote corner of the Maloti, and if it arrived by itself at Thaba Bosiu, it would be recognised as a Mosotho." (Coplan, 1994).

\*These sentiments would set an indestructible precedent for how Sesotho exists in the present.

Casalis himself writes: "the language, from its energetic precision, is admirably adapted to the sententious style, and the element of metaphor has entered so abundantly into its composition, that one can hardly speak it without unconsciously acquiring the habit of expressing one's thoughts in a figurative manner" (Casalis, 1965).

Following Casalis' initial attempt and in keeping with Moshoeshoe's desire to distinguish his language from its cousins, in 1876, Adolphe Mabilille's,<sup>6</sup> published the Sesuto-English Dictionary. The book was also borne, perhaps primarily, in response to the missionaries' need to translate the Bible into Sesotho as well as to enhance effective communication with Basotho. An implicit factor, although just as critical, is the fact that the missionaries were coding the language in such a way that their reach in the region would be recognised by virtue of the number of people who read and wrote it. Meaning, more than following Moshoeshoe's wishes, they were also driven by personal ambition. The dictionary underwent several revisions with the fourth edition enlarged by H. Dieterlen and published in 1911. At that point, it contained 20,000 words. Around the same time in 1909, E. Jacottet published *Grammar e nyenyane ea Sesotho*, and then later a revised edition called *Grammar e nyenyane ea Sesotho e etselisoeng likolo tsa Lesotho* (The small Sesotho grammar book intended for Lesotho schools) also published in 1911<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> A Swiss-man who had joined the mission and started the Morija Printing Press refer to Mabilille, Adolphe (1836-1894) Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS) missionary in Lesotho (n.d) <http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/l-m/mabilille-adolphe-1836-1894/> retrieved on November 10<sup>th</sup> 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Find a complete list of his writings here: Jacottet, Édouard 1858-1920 <http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n80108731/> retrieved on November 10 2018)

“There is no denying the fact that African languages, Sesotho included, were reduced to writing by missionaries. As a result, as K. Mahlangu (2016, 124) points out, “the orthographies of individual African languages were modelled on European orthographies...In Msimang’s (1998, 169) view, since the missionaries were ‘dealing with foreign languages ... with little knowledge of their history, genesis, or linguistic or political boundaries, the transmutation and codification of such languages was marred by a number of discrepancies. Despite the discrepancies in the original recordings, many African languages have retained the missionary designs.” (Matlosa, 2017)

In the case of Lesotho, it is worth highlighting that in addition to his mother-tongue, Béarnese, Casalis spoke French, English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic in his lifetime. Armed with this array of languages as a reference, Sesotho would be designed to abide by the Latin alphabet, while linguistic elements borrowed from mostly English and French.<sup>8</sup>

### **Sesotho dictionaries**

Despite rapid changes in the development of Sesotho, the production of dictionaries to serve the needs of Basotho, as opposed to the missionaries, has stagnated over time. In 1950, a reclassified, revised and enlarged edition of Mabile’s Sesuto-English Dictionary by R.A. Paroz<sup>9</sup> appeared. As the name suggests, the dictionary is bilingual with Sesotho terms appearing before their English equivalents (Motjope-Mokhali, 2016). The form of this dictionary reflects the mind-frame of the missionaries when they created it. The missionaries had to not only understand Sesotho, but muster its phonology in order to be more relatable to their converts. The newly converted themselves had to learn to use the language of the new faith so as to demonstrate that they were of a calibre different from that of the non-Christian stock – that they were educated and civilized (Moleleki, 1999). Why was English the language of the new faith? Well, because of the mission’s affiliation with the London Mission society as well as Lesotho becoming a British protectorate and then crown colony in 1884<sup>10</sup>.

“What also manifests in the structure of this very first Sesotho dictionary, is the erroneous impression created, be it by accident or design, that seemingly obscure Sesotho signifiers can only be explained in terms of English equivalents. The impression is created that Sesotho is incapable of self-explanation.” (Moleleki, 1999).

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<sup>8</sup> Shared by Dr. Ambrose in the interview

<sup>9</sup> A Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS) missionary

<sup>10</sup> Luscombe, Stephen. (n.d) Basutoland: [www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/basutoland.htm](http://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/basutoland.htm) (retrieved November 1st 2018).

The dictionary only focuses on what the sense and phonological features of words are, whereas the syntactic characteristics, described as “mechanisms that enable human beings to utter or understand an infinite number of sentences constructed from a finite number of building blocks” (H. Eifring & Theil, 2005) are completely ignored. He writes: “, the dictionary is not meant for learners but for those who already have a sound competence in the language. (M. A Moleleki, 1999).

The mere fact that English translation equivalents are given rather than descriptions of the Sesotho lexes, seems to be based on the assumption that the user is steeped in English. English explanations are given only where a single English term equivalent for the Sesotho one cannot be found... As indicated earlier, it was Christianity-oriented in its initial thrust... subsequent editions only incidentally embraced the general world of the Basotho, especially their new work-places, the farms and the mines, as well as the cultural artefacts of the encroaching culture. (M. A Moleleki, 1999).

There are only three other Sesotho dictionaries which have been published by Basotho. Thabo Pitso's thesaurus on Basotho names, proverbs, synonyms and antonyms called *Khetsi ea Sesotho* (1997), Aunyane Matšela's *Sehlaosi: Sesotho Cultural Dictionary* (1994) and the *Sethantšo sa Sesotho* (2005) by Batho Hlalele. Nevertheless, these reference materials created by indigenous Sesotho speakers are also limited in scope, as the *Sehlaosi* and *Khetsi ea Sesotho* thesaurus fall under 'restricted' dictionaries, meaning they are thematic in nature<sup>11</sup>. The *Sethantšo sa Sesotho* on the other hand offers the impression that it might respond to the needs of the contemporary user considering it was published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Given that it serves as the first Sesotho monolingual general dictionary, one expects a glossary of modern Sesotho vocabulary but these are rare. What distinguishes it is the fact that it consists of words from various aspects of Basotho life such as initiation, poetry, dance, food, history, proverbs and idioms etc (Motjope-Mokhali, 2016).

### **Word invention and innovation**

As far as compilations go, besides from the three dictionaries produced by the Basotho already mentioned, the descendants of Mabile's original Sesuto-English Dictionary maintain their status of authority. The reprints are used in schools, media houses and by the community at large because they are essentially the only reference materials of that kind available.

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<sup>11</sup> Refer to pages 5 and 6

**The language never waited for either language experts or language practitioners to deliberate over its fate. It made and continues to make strides despite the intransigence of language purists.**

On reinvention and evolution, Moleleki breaks it down perfectly: “the linguistic situation in Sesotho has always been fluid, responding both to innovations and the new linguistic environment. The language never waited for either language experts or language practitioners to deliberate over its fate. It made and continues to make strides despite the intransigence of language purists.”. It is on this basis that we initiated the Ba re dictionary project.

The Ba re Dictionary

It consists of words intended to describe aspects of our everyday lives, from complex emotions to technology and interpersonal interactions. Descriptions are offered both in Sesotho and English as the two are prescribed

as official languages of Lesotho. Our formula is not limited to inventing new words from scratch but also giving recognition to words we already use daily. Our rationale is that as long as there is understanding between us, and new words are spoken with some frequency, the words then become legitimate. We even have the freedom to Sotho-rise words (indicating being deliberate about creative quality) and make sense of them through the meanings we create. We are not restricted to any specific rules except creating language symbols that are in sync with the times we live in. As culture happens in the present; more words are used, to the point that people across all demographics recognise them then there is no reason to call them foreign. As long as they are Sotho-rised to complement the Sotho-fication (indicating a direct appropriation of words by adding a Sesotho suffix, a practice we do daily) thus making our language more dynamic and truer to its creative core.

The BA RE Dictionary

**(n.) 'mopuoa**

Mong ea tsoang lefats'eng le leng ntle le leo re phelang ho lona.

A being from beyond planet Earth.  
An extraterrestrial.

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The BA RE Dictionary

**(v.) popoketsa**

Ketso ea ho bopa ntho e phelang e nang le semelo sa e tsoetsoeng ka tlhaho.

The act of creating a living thing that bares the qualities of one born naturally.

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The BA RE Dictionary

**(v.) jabasa**

Ha motho a ikhants'a joalo kaha eka o ts'oaneloa ke maemo a holimo.

To pompously behave as though one is entitled to be regarded highly.

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The BA RE Dictionary

**(v.) bosene-chini**

Bohlale bo isang ho ba motho bo qapeloang mechini ho etsa hore e ithome pele ka ts'ebetso.

A computer system able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence.

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The BA RE Dictionary

**(n.) lehlo**

Setšoantšo seo ralinepe a tsebang hore se na le botle le botebo hang-hang ha a penya konopo ea kh'amera e nkang senepe.

An image which a photographer knows is perfect the moment they press the shutter button on a camera.

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The BA RE Dictionary

**rakhele****(noun)**

Ha motho a ipha litšobotsi tsa mohlobo o fapaneng le oa hae oa tsoalo hobane a batla ho iketsisa e le e mong oa oona.

Assuming an identity alternate to one's own in order to assimilate.

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The BA RE Dictionary

**boichaeapele****(noun)**

Boemo ba ho ikutloa kapa ho ba ka sehlohlolong ho ba bang bohle ka maemo kapa matla.

Supremacy; the state or condition of feeling/being superior to all others in authority, power, or status.

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The BA RE Dictionary

**qamaki****(noun)**

Mochini o tsomanang le ntho e lahlehileng.

A tracking device.

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The BA RE Dictionary

## polelo-khaello

*(lereho/noun)*

Ntho e kekeng ea hlaloseha ka mantsoe.

Something which cannot be described by words.

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The BA RE Dictionary

## repolla

*leetsi/verb*

Ho qholotsa botsamaisa u itlhalosa ka mokhoa o nonofetseng.

To challenge power through creative expression.

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The BA RE Dictionary

## kh'onaisa

*lereho/noun*

Motho ea nang le tsebo e batsi le tatso e ikhethileng ka ntho e itseng.

An expert in a particular subject.

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The BA RE Dictionary

## mopatlotsa

*lereho/noun*

Motho ea tsebang ho tsetsinya maikutlo le poulelo ea sechaba ka malkemisetso a ho jala molaetsa o molemo.

A person who engages the passions of the public in order to drive a social message.  
A rabble rouser.

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The BA RE Dictionary

## tatolo

*lereho/noun*

Polelo eo moelelo oa eona eleng ho qoba kutluisiso e fosahetseng ka ntho e buueng kapa e ngotsoeng.

A statement that is meant to prevent an incorrect understanding of something spoken or read.  
A disclaimer.

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The BA RE Dictionary

## (n.) phomesollo

Kabelo ea ho sebelisa kelello ho tloha sebakeng se itseng u be u fihle ho se seng hanghang.

The ability to move from one place to another instantly using your mind.

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The BA RE Dictionary

## (n.) terentane

Ketso kapa taba e phatlalatsang ka sekhahla seka koluoa ho marangrang a setsoalle.

Something going viral on social media.

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