

Book Reviews

Herman M. Batibo and Birgit Smieja (eds.): *Botswana: The Future of the Minority Languages*. (Duisburg Papers in Language and Culture Vol. 40.) Bern/Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000. 292 pp. EUR 52.

The Department of African Languages and Literature at the University of Botswana has compiled a list of minority languages for the country, 23 in total. They are Ikalanga, Shekgalagadi, Thimbukushu, Shiyeyi, Chikuhane (or Sesubiya), Sebirwa, Setswapong, Otjiherero, Naro, ||Gana, |Gui, }Huã, !Xóõ,

Jul'hoan, }X'ao||'ai), Kua, Shua, |Ani, Tshoa, Nama, Kxoe and Afrikaans. *Botswana: The Future of the Minority Languages*, is a varied collection of articles about these languages, their speakers and the relation of the languages to Setswana and English.

The book is divided into four parts. Part 1 contains a short history of the peopling of (what is now) Botswana: the Khoesan who lived there for many years and the Bantu speakers who moved into the area much more recently, how the latter became a majority and how their different languages became just the one, i.e., Setswana, in the beginning of the 20th century. Also the present (geographical) situation and vitality of the Khoesan languages is looked at. The articles in which these issues are discussed are: 'The history of the minority language speakers in Botswana' by Tore Janson, and 'Where are the Khoesan of Botswana?' by Sue Hasselbring.

Part 2 deals with patterns of language use and attitudes to change, and contains the following articles: 'Language shift tendencies of minority-language users in Botswana: fashion or rule?' by Birgit Smeija and Herman Batibo; 'The Shekgalagadi struggle for survival: aspects of language maintenance and shift', by Stephen Lukusa; 'The socio-linguistic survey of the Eastern Khoe in the Boteti and Makgadikgadi Pans area of Botswana', by Andy Chebanne

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and Moemedi Nthapelelang; ‘Linguistic barriers as a hindrance to information flow: the case of Botswana’, by Herman Batibo and Naledi Mosaka, ‘Future trends in the Botswana media: the destiny of minority languages’, by Joyce Mathangwane and Birgit Smieja. The serious “number crunching” starts in this part with a lot of numbers, percentages, tables and graphs which may look impressive but do nothing for the clarity of the articles.

The number crunching is continued in a few of the articles in part 3 which is entitled ‘Describing developments: future chances for the minority’, and contains the following articles: ‘Language gain and language loss: the spread of Setswana in Ngamiland’, by Gabriel Sommer and Rainer Vossen; ‘Code switching in Botswana: exception or rule?’ by Birgit Smieja; ‘Deculturalisation and language shift among the Otjiherero-Mbanderu speakers of Tshabong’, by Annah Molosiwa; ‘Language and cultural empowerment of the Khoesan people: the Naro experience’, by Hessel Visser; ‘Linguistic and cultural domination; the case of the Wayeyi of Botswana’, by Lydia Nyati-Ramahobo.

Part 4 is entitled ‘Applied linguistics for education and language policy’, and contains the following articles: ‘Jul’hoan-Language Education in Namibia and its Relevance for Minority-Language Education in Botswana’, by Megan Biesele and Robert K. Hitchcock; ‘An Applied Linguistics Approach to the Politics of Language Revitalisation’, by Christopher Stroud.

The main conclusion that is arrived at in parts 2 and 3 is that there is a language shift occurring from most minority languages to Setswana. In the worst case this would cause a loss of the minority languages, but not necessarily loss of identity or ethnicity of the speaker. An exception is the Naro language which seems to maintain its vitality.

The main recommendations given to counteract the threatening language loss are the official recognition of the minority languages, the creation of reading and writing materials, since having a written language helps create self-esteem and pride in one’s language and would thus help maintain a language’s vitality. It was also recommended that the languages be used in primary schools, in the media and at village level all in order to create the native-speakers’ pride in them.

One point I must get off my chest: there are unnecessary spelling and grammatical mistakes in a few of the articles. English is not the mother tongue of all the contributors and its use among them will therefore vary. This is of course very interesting for linguists. However, I don’t think an academic publication with which one wants to educate people and influence current language policies is the right place to show such diversity of the language. Especially as some of the articles were corrected and some very obviously weren’t, it seems a bit sloppy. It is better to stick to the standard form!

Apart from that minor point I think the book is very good. The articles are very well chosen, there are diverse subjects, not too much overlap and a good

representation of the languages. There is also a big range in the academic level of the articles. Since the book is not only intended for linguists this is not a problem, there is something for everyone's taste! Stroud's article is completely theoretical, Sommer and Vossen's piece is very linguistic and requires quite some linguistic knowledge whereas, for example, the article by Nyati-Ramahobo is mostly political, and Visser's piece contains masses of details and wonderfully practical information about the Naro language project, all the way to learning how to "help teachers to spell children's names correctly"!

The editors Batibo and Smieja give the following three aims of the book:

1. to inform the public (of Botswana?) about the minority languages of Botswana;
2. to provide information about the state of the minority languages and their future;
3. to present ideas and suggestions that should give insight to the policy makers and aid them regarding language policy.

To further these aims the book was to have a wide circulation in Botswana, South Africa and internationally, and it was hoped that it would thus reach the necessary decision-makers as well as a wider audience. I have learnt from Professor Batibo that the book has indeed been widely distributed – in Botswana it was given for free to the ministries concerned with language/culture – and commented on. Still, the circulation has been somewhat restricted due to the price of the book, but that I think is a general problem with any scientific work.