

Problems in Teaching and Learning Southern Bantu Languages

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When I was drafting the introduction to the grammatical section of the *Sotho Newspaper Reader, Reference Grammar & Lexicon* (Zorc & Mokabe. 1998. Dunwoody Press), I entitled it “What Makes Sotho Hard.” Our editorial committee rightfully thought that would be off-putting for the student, and so the title became “The Challenges of Sotho Grammar.” There can be no doubt that any student is – in politically-correct terms – “grammatically challenged” by Southern Bantu languages. Although I am a trained linguist, I have worn the learner’s hat for both Sotho and Xhosa, and have found them to be among the most difficult of over eighty languages studied during my lifetime. These difficulties, which require special attention in both the teaching and the learning process, include:

1. a complex system of agreements or concords necessitated by the noun-class system;
2. a number of sound changes that make it difficult to identify a root;
3. an enormous number of homographs (where up to 20 different functions can apply to a single grapheme);
4. the lack of exemplification or explanation in the available literature of parts of the grammatical system.

In each case, I suggest we ask “what is the problem?” and propose “what is the solution?”

1. Complex Noun Agreements

The noun-class system in and of itself is not so difficult. There are analogies in the gender system of many Indo-European languages and in the alliteration sometimes used in English poetry.

It does not help that reference works (be they textbooks, grammars or dictionaries) use different numbering systems for the noun classes. I spoke about this at the 1997 ALTA Conference in Madison (“Pedagogical Problems with Sesotho Noun Classes”). One interpretation (which I call “Type B”) puts singular and plural forms together, i.e., in groups:

Sotho

motho 'person'	n1-sg
batho 'people'	n1-pl
Xhosa	
umntu 'person'	n1-sg
abantu 'people'	n1-pl

The other (which I call “Type A”) treats each class individually, usually relating them to a Proto Bantu system, so that missing numbers represent instances of loss:

Sotho	
motho ‘person’	n1
batho ‘people’	n2
Xhosa	
umntu ‘person’	n1
abantu ‘people’	n2

A third system, which represents the solution I opt for, and which I understand is the norm for teaching Swahili, is the MNEMONIC METHOD that teaches the root with both the singular and plural affixes.

Sotho	
motho ‘person’	mo/ba
Xhosa	
umntu ‘person’	um/aba

See Table 1 for a summary of the noun classes in Sotho and Xhosa. To distinguish them, I now suggest the cover terms CLASS for “Type A” (since individual classes are established), but GROUP for “Type B” (because singular and plural forms are grouped together).

What does make mastery difficult is the application of noun classes (or groups) in subsystems of the grammar. One such is the subject-verb agreement required for different kinds of clauses, as exemplified by Sotho:

S1 - independent clause (indicative) agreement

I write ~ am writing **Kè a ngola.**

S2 - participial (dependent) clause agreement

He found me writing **O fihlile ké ngola.**

Relative (REL) is separately marked but takes a participial verb.

S3a - present subjunctive agreement

Let me write **Ha ké ngole.**

S3b - past subjunctive agreement

I have written **Ke ile ka ngola.**

S4 - potential (conditional) clause agreement

I can ~ may write **Nka ngola.**

TEMP (limited to Xhosa) is the form of the subject in temporal clauses

when I arrived ... **Ndakufika ...**

Another is the cross-cutting system of possessive pronouns in Xhosa, whereby the form must agree with both the class/group of the possessor and of the thing possessed. This applies to both possessive and demonstrative pronouns. Thus in the following examples the final element belongs to a given noun class/group, but the first element must agree with the head noun:

- ngomsebenzi wakhe** 'for her work' [n1-sg poss n2-sg]
ubunkokeli bakhe 'his leadership' [n1-sg poss n7-sg]
Amabhinqa namadoda akuyo enza umsebenzi wawo! 'They are men and women who are doing their job! [n3-pl poss n2-sg]
ezi ntsapho zigxothwe elalini yazo ngabahlali 'these families were expelled from their village by the residents' [n6-pl poss n5-sg]
Izaphuli-mthetho ziyazi ukuba azohlwaywa ngezenzo zazo 'Criminals know they won't be punished for their deeds' [n4-pl poss n4-pl]
ngenxa yawo amakhosi 'on account of their chiefs' [n3-pl poss n5-sg]
abaMhlophe beli lizwe 'the Whites of this country' [n3-sg poss n1-pl]
sikarhulumente weli phondo 'of the government of this region' [n3-sg poss n1-sg]
umgangatho wezi lwimi 'a standard for these languages' [n6-pl poss n2-sg]
umnikazi wezi gusha 'the owner of these sheep' [n5-pl poss n1-sg]

2. Sound Changes

There are several changes in the formation of nouns, passives, and diminutives that make it difficult to recognize the root, which is the citation form in most dictionaries. A classic case is Sotho **mpho** 'gift,' which is formed from, and therefore cited under, the verb **-fa** 'give.' What happens here is the nasal prefix (**N-**) of noun group 5a (Bantu class 9) triggers a change of **f** to **ph**, the **N-** then assimilates to **m-**, and the noun suffix **-o** replaces the verb suffix **-a**.

Here are some other examples from Sotho; note that the root is highlighted in the bracketed explanations that follow:

- kahlolo** 'judgement' [= k-**ahlol**-a, with addition of k to vowel initial roots]
ketso 'act' [= k-**ets**-o, with addition of k to vowel initial roots]
tsejwa 'be known' [= **tseb**-w-a, with change of b to j]
potso 'question' [= **-bots**-o, with change of b to p]
leshwa 'be paid' [= **-lef**-w-a, with change of f to sh]
ithuta 'learn' [= i-**rut**-a, with change of r to th]
theko 'purchase' [= **-rek**-o, with change of r to th]
-bontsha 'show' [= **-bon-is**-a (causative)]

The following examples come from Xhosa:

ibhola ekhatywayo 'soccer' [lit: 'ball which is kicked' = e-**khab**-w-a-yo, with change of b to ty]
-setyenziswa 'be used' [= **sebenz**-is-w-a, with change of b to ty]
intlumo 'growth' [= in-**hlum**-o, with change of hl to tl]
umgangatho wentlalo 'standard of living' [= wa-in-**hlal**-o, with change of hl to tl]
bathunywa 'they are sent' [= ba-**thum**-w-a, with change of m to ny]
emlonyeni 'in the mouth' [= e-(u)m-**lom**-eni]
ndabanjwa 'I was arrested' [= nda-**bamb**-w-a, with change of mb to nj]
-hlonitshwa 'be respected' [= -**hloniph**-w-a, with change of ph to tsh]
elusatsheni 'in the family' [= e-lu-**saph**-eni, with change of ph to tsh]

Altogether thirty-three MORPHOPHONEMIC CHANGES were identified in Sotho (Zorc & Mokabe 1998:23-239) and so far forty in Xhosa. The student will need to be made aware of the most common of these (at least), and of the conditions which trigger them (e.g., passive **-w-**, diminutive **-ana**, noun-formation, etc.). Some form of drill (e.g., going from root to derivation) or practical exercise (e.g., looking words up in a dictionary) should help the learner gain some command in recognizing, understanding, and using words with these changes. Another help is an alphabetical list of consonants involved in sound changes, which the student may refer to when looking words up in a dictionary. Thus, if confronted with Sotho **tshenyeho**, he or she might try **tsh** and failing that, note that **tsh** can come from **s**, and then find the word under **-senya** 'spoil, destroy' and discover the meaning 'destruction, damage, harm' (Mabile et al. 1961:456).

3. Homographs

These are not simply the problem of the second-language learner. Even first language speakers can make mistakes. There was one instance in my Sotho consultant's translation of a verse that gave me pause:

'Nete ho eena ke semelo 'Truth is an embarrassment to him'

I thought that such a rendering was inappropriate, since this was a praise poem and the verse was sandwiched between two complimentary lines:

Bohlale ho eena ke lelomolo 'Wisdom to him is a vitamin' ...

Boitseko ke motswoalle 'Liberty is a friend'

It turns out the **semelo** can be a noun of group 4 (**se-/di-**) derived from the verb **-mela** 'grow (of plant), sprout' or it can be a noun of group 5 derived from the verb **-semela** 'embarrass, put s.o. into some difficulty.' If we take an extended sense of the former, i.e., 'nature' > 'second nature, characteristic,' we get this rendering:

'Nete ho eena ke semelo 'Truth is second nature to him'

Similarly, my Xhosa consultants translated **abafundi** as 'they don't study' (i.e., as a negative verb), but in context it had a nominal meaning:

Sifuna ukulumkisa abafundi bethu 'We want to warn our readers...'

In the Sotho project, we isolated 25 functions for **a**, 17 for **le**, 15 for **ba**, 14 for **ho**, 13 for **e** and for **se**, 12 for **ha**, 8 for **ke** (see the Lexicon in Zorc & Mokabe, 1998). If one studies the Xhosa possessives (in Table 6) a number of homophones in just this one subsystem will be noted.

4. Uncharted Territory

We have already discussed the complex subject-verb concord system that is at best touched upon by textbooks, but ignored in the treatment of preverbs, auxiliary verbs, and conjunctions in both dictionaries and grammars. While some of the grammars and textbooks discuss these in one place or another, most authors simply mark example sentences with "SC" (subject concord), therefore not specifying which subject it really is. A few do use "SC^P" for participial agreement, but the other (non-independent) clause types have generally gone without identification.

What makes these so difficult are the facts that:

- (1) with a few exceptions in some of the noun classes/groups, these constructions are homographic although (often) tonally different, and
- (2) preverbs, auxiliary verbs, and conjunctions require one or another of these constructions; some govern more than one type with subtleties in meaning. Thus, the Xhosa conjunction **ukuba** 'that' can be followed by:

S1 + indicative to mark a statement of fact

Undixelele ukuba nifikile.

'He told me that you [S1] arrived.'

S2 + participial to mark a given situation

Baphawula ukuba beza kufumana uchatha.

'They note that they [S2] are going to get an increment.'

S3a + present subjunctive to mark a statement of desire or purpose

Into ebangela ukuba ndihlale.

'The thing that makes me stay (lit: that I [S3a] should stay)

The student therefore feels an enormous sense of frustration when encountering these in written materials because they are homographic. If one searches through the dictionaries and textbooks, the usual result is to find that the meaning, but not the construction required, is covered. Both

lexicographers and course-developers have left the student of these languages hanging.

In most treatments, the locative noun classes are ignored, probably because they have so few members. However, locative agreement is found in the IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTION (“there is / are ...”) which has high text frequency in these languages. Unfortunately, allowing the student to interpret such instances as verbal nouns (a homographic class) is a factual, grammatical and semantic error.

We cannot underestimate the importance of grammatical features, context, and tone in disambiguating or untangling these challenges. Some examples from Sotho include:

Vuma o bolela. ‘Vuma says.’

[S1 (o) marks indicative, therefore **bolela** is present tense]

Vuma a bolela. ‘Vuma said.’

[S3b (a) marks past subjunctive, therefore **bolela** is narrative past]

ha ba tlaleha ‘if they report’

[**ha** ‘if’ is followed by a participial construction, i.e., the verb ends in **-a**]

ha ba tlalehe ‘they do not report’

[**ha** ‘not’ is followed by a negative construction, verb ends in **-e**]

O sa bua ‘He is still speaking.’

[**sa** is a preverb implying continuity; Note S1 (o) and indicative verb suffix **-a**]

A sa bue ‘he not speaking.’

[**sa** is a negative in participial clauses; Note S2 (a) and negative verb suffix **-e**]

Lastly, one cannot take an author on faith when he (or she) says that a particular grammatical construction does not occur. None of the Sotho grammars we surveyed mentioned a FUTURE SUBJUNCTIVE, yet we encountered:

hore o tle o fumane mosebetsi o motle ‘so you will find a good job’

nor did anyone offer an explanation of a Sotho REMOTE PAST CONSTRUCTION:

ke ne ke kope ba boholong I had requested the authorities

e ne e qalehe it had started

The Sotho grammars also claimed there was no NEGATIVE PAST SUBJUNCTIVE, but Derek Gowlett (personal communication) supplied examples (see Zorc & Mokabe, op.cit.:191).

The baby has been retrieved from the bathwater – grammar is “in” again. The Bantu languages are not easy, but an analytical approach provides a means of coping with the complex systems and subsystems that prevail. While I can wave no magic wand, I encourage teachers to present as student-friendly a grammatical analysis as possible – in a slow, hopefully humorous, and well-organized curriculum.

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Table 1: Southern Bantu Noun Classes / Groups

Bantu class	Sotho	Type B group	Xhosa	Type B group
1	mo-	n1-sg	um-	n1-sg
2	ba-	n1-pl	aba-	n1-pl
1a	zero	n1a-sg	u-	n1a-sg
2a	bo-	n1a-pl	oo-	n1a-pl
3	mo-	n2-sg	um-	n2-sg
4	me-	n2-pl	imi-	n2-pl
5	le-	n3-sg	ili-	n3-sg
6	ma-	n3-pl	ama-	n3-pl
7	se-	n4-sg	isi-	n4-sg
8	di-	n4-pl	izi-	n4-pl
9	zero	n5-sg	i-	n5-sg
10	di-	n5-pl	ii-	n5-pl
9	N-	n5a-sg	iN-	n5a-sg
10	diN-	n5a-pl	iziN-	n5a-pl
11	N/A		ulu-	n6-sg
10	N/A		iiN-	n6-pl
14	bo-	n6-sg	ubu-	n7-sg (abs)
6	ma-	n6-pl	N/A	
15	ho-	n7-vn	uku-	n8-vn
16	fa-	n8-loc	pha-	n9-loc
17	ho-	n9-loc	uku-	n10-loc
18	mo-	n10-loc	N/A	

Note that the first five groups in both Sotho and Xhosa correspond. Thereafter, Xhosa has a group 6 (descended from Bantu class 11), so the Sotho numbers then lag one behind, e.g., Sotho n6 (**bo-**) then matches Xhosa n7 (**ubu-**), etc. However, Sotho has the remnants of three locative nouns (**fa-**, **ho-** and **mo-**) whereas Xhosa only two (**pha-** and **uku-**). Hence, a language-specific (or “emic”) approach yields a total of ten groups for each language.

Table 2: Sotho Noun Agreement

CLASS	PREFIX	SUBJ †	OBJ	NP	ADJ	REL	IND-REL
n1							
sg	mo-	o / a	mo	wa	e mo-	ya	eo
pl	ba-	ba	ba	ba	ba ba-	ba	bao
n1a							
sg	#	o / a	mo	wa	e mo-	ya	eo
pl	bo-	ba	ba	ba	ba ba-	ba	bao
n2							
sg	mo-	o	o	wa	o mo-	o	oo
pl	me-	e	e	ya	e me-	e	eo
n3							
sg	le-	le	le	la	le le-	le	leo
pl	ma-	a	a	a	a ma-	a	ao
n4							
sg	se-	se	se	sa	se se-	se	seo
pl	di-	di	di	tša	tše (N-)	tše	tseo
n5							
sg	#	e	e	ya	e (N-)	e	eo
pl	di-	di	di	tša	tše (N-)	tše	tseo
n5a							
sg	N-	e	e	ya	e (N-)	e	eo
pl	diN-	di	di	tša	tše (N-)	tše	tseo
n6							
sg	bo-	bo	bo	ba	bo bo-	bo	boo
pl	ma-	a	a	a	a ma-	a	ao
n7	ho	ho	ho	ha	ho ho-	ho	hoo
n8	fa-	[follows class 9 agreement]					
n9	ho-	ho	ho	ha		ho	hoo
n10	mo-	[follows class 9 agreement]		moo	[follows class 9 agreement]		

† Note: For SUBJECT AGREEMENT FORMS see Table 3.

Agreement forms are quite similar except that the nasals [m, n] drop, i.e., **mo-** > **o**, **me-** > **e**, **ma-** > **a**.

Table 3: Sotho Personal and Subject Pronouns

PRO	S ¹	S ²	S ^{3a}	S ^{3b}	S ⁴	OBJ	ECHO
First Person = speaker (I, we)							
1sg	ke	ke	ke	ka	N-	N-	nna
1pl	re	re	re	ra	re	re	rona
Second Person = addressee (you)							
2sg	o	o	o	wa	o	o	wena
2pl	le	le	le	la	le	le	lona
Third Person (he/she, they - antecedent not stated)							
3sg	o	a	a	a	a	m(o-)	yena
NEG	a						
3pl	ba	ba	ba	ba	ba	ba	bona
Third Person (noun class agreement forms)							
n1-sg	o	a	a	a	a	m(o-)	yena
NEG	a						
n1-pl	ba	ba	ba	ba	ba	ba	bona
n2-sg	o	o	o	wa	o	o	wona
n2-pl	e	e	e	ya	e	e	yona
n3-sg	le	le	le	la	le	le	lona
n3-pl	a	a	a	a	a	a	ona
n4-sg	se	se	se	sa	se	se	sona
n4-pl	di	di	di	tsa	di	di	tsona
n5-sg	e	e	e	ya	e	e	yona
n5-pl	di	di	di	tsa	di	di	tsona
n6-sg	bo	bo	bo	ba	bo	bo	bona
n6-j/							jona
n6-pl	a	a	a	a	a	a	ona
n7-vn	ho	ho	ho	ha	ho	ho	hona

For SUBJECT AGREEMENT, see Guma 1971:162. Our abbreviations differ from Guma's in the following ways:

<u>Ours</u>	<u>Guma</u>
S ¹ SC	
S ² SC ^P	
OBJ	OC

Table 4. Example of Some Sotho Preverbs

a	is (am, are) doing VERB [progressive ~ long present preverb] Structure: S ¹ a Δ- a
a	let [optative ~ hortative preverb] Structure: a S ^{3a} Δ- e (present subjunctive) + -ng (plural, as opposed to dual) Alt: ha
a	did (not) do VERB [negative past preverb used in conjunction with ha and ka] Structure: ha S ¹ a ka S ^{3b} Δ- a
be	-ing [compound tense progressive preverb indicating continuous action] Structure: followed by S ² and full participial complement
be	do VERB ultimately; till ~ until one VERBs Structure: followed by S ^{3a} + present subjunctive
e ka kgona	must, ought to, should Structure: S ^{3a} + subjunctive
ha	let [optative ~ hortative preverb] Structure: ha S ^{3a} Δ- e (present subjunctive) [Alt: a]
hle	do VERB habitually; should do VERB right away ~ promptly Structure: followed by S ^{3a} + present subjunctive
hlile	actually VERBed; really do VERB [current relevance] Structure: S ¹ hlile S ¹ Δ- a
ile	have done VERB [past tense preverb] Structure: S ¹ ile S ^{3b} Δ- a
ka	can, may; could [potential ~ conditional preverb] Structure: S ⁴ ka Δ- a
ka	actually did [emphatic perfect preverb in negative clauses] Positive: kile ; Sub: ke ; Structure: ha S ¹ a ka S ^{3b} Δ- a
ne	-ed, was VERBing, did VERB [past preverb] Structure: followed by S ² and full participial complement
nne	do VERB sometimes ~ occasionally Structure: followed by S ^{3a} + present subjunctive
se	already, now, presently [exclusive ~ initiative aspect marker] Structure: S ¹ se S ² Δ- a

Table 5. Example of Some Sotho Auxiliary Verbs

atisa	do VERB often, frequently ~ usually [Perf: atisitse]; Structure: atisa ho VERB (infinitive complement)
batla	nearly ~ almost VERB [Perf: batlile]; Structure: followed by S ² + participial verb construction
batla	want to VERB ~ that SUBJ VERB [Perf: batlile]; Structure: takes ho + infinitive verb complement if subjects are the same and hore + S ^{3a} + subjunctive if subjects are different
boela	do VERB again [Perf: boetse]; Structure: S ¹ boela S ² Δ-a (participial)
boetse	did VERB again; Structure: S ¹ boetse S ¹ Δ-a (current relevance) ~ Δ-ile (past)
dula	stay VERBing; keep on VERBing (s.t.) [Perf: dutse]; Structure: S ¹ dula S ² VERB (participial form)
fela	indeed, certainly, in fact, really VERB [Perf: fetse ~ fedile] Structure S ¹ fela S ² Δ-a (participial)
hla	actually VERB; really do VERB; VERB indeed [Perf: hlile ; Imp: hloo]; Structure: hla S ^{3b} + past subjunctive
hlola	do VERB always ~ repeatedly; be accustomed ~ used to VERB [Perf: hlotse]; Structure: followed by S ² + participial verb construction
kgona	can VERB, be able to VERB; manage to do [Perf: kgonne ; Neg part: sa kgone]; Structure: S ¹ kgona ho Δ-a
lala	do VERB at night ~ through the night, spend the night doing VERB [Perf: letse]; followed by S ² + participial construction
lokela	supposed to; have to, must, should Structure: lokela ho Δ-a
nyafa	act opportunely, do VERB in the nick of time [Perf: nyafile]; Structure: S ^{3a} + present subjunctive
sala	do VERB eventually ~ later; then, afterwards, after a while [Perf: setse ~ sadile]; Structure: followed by S ² + participial

Table 6. The Possessive Pronoun System of Xhosa

ROOT	n1-sg	n1-pl	n2-sg	n2-pl	n3-sg	n3-pl	n4-sg
English	his/her	their	his/her	their	his/her	their	his/her
n1-sg	wakhe	bakhe	wakhe	yakhe	lakhe	akhe	sakhe
n1-pl	wabo	babo	wabo	yabo	labo	abo	sabo
n2-sg	wawo	bawo	wawo	yawo	lawo	awo	sawo
n2-pl	wayo	bayo	wayo	yayo	layo	ayo	sayo
n3-sg	walo	balo	walo	yalo	lalo	alo	salo
n3-pl	wawo	bawo	wawo	yawo	lawo	awo	sawo
n4-sg	waso	baso	waso	yaso	laso	aso	saso
n4-pl	wazo	bazo	wazo	yazo	lazo	azo	sazo
n5-sg	wayo	bayo	wayo	yayo	layo	ayo	sayo
n5-pl	wazo	bazo	wazo	yazo	lazo	azo	sazo
n6-sg	walo	balo	walo	yalo	lalo	alo	salo
n6-pl	wazo	bazo	wazo	yazo	lazo	azo	sazo
n7-abs	wabo	babo	wabo	yabo	labo	abo	sabo
n8-vn	wako	bako	wako	yako	lako	ako	sako
n10-loc	wakho	bakho	wakho	yakho	lakho	akho	sakho

ROOT	n4-pl	n5-sg	n5-pl	n6-sg	n7-sg	n8-vn	n10-loc
English	their	his, her	their	his, her	its	its	its
n1-sg	zakhe	yakhe	zakhe	lwakhe	bakhe	kwakhe	kwakhe
n1-pl	zabo	yabo	zabo	lwabo	babo	kwabo	kwabo
n2-sg	zawo	yawo	zawo	lwawo	bawo	kwawo	kwawo
n2-pl	zayo	yayo	zayo	lwayo	bayo	kwayo	kwayo
n3-sg	zalo	yalo	zalo	lwalo	balo	kwalo	kwalo
n3-pl	zawo	yawo	zawo	lwawo	bawo	kwawo	kwawo
n4-sg	zaso	yaso	zaso	lwaso	baso	kwaso	kwaso
n4-pl	zazo	yazo	zazo	lwazo	bazo	kwazo	kwazo
n5-sg	zayo	yayo	zayo	lwayo	bayo	kwayo	kwayo
n5-pl	zazo	yazo	zazo	lwazo	bazo	kwazo	kwazo
n6-sg	zalo	yalo	zalo	lwalo	balo	kwalo	kwalo
n6-pl	zazo	yazo	zazo	lwazo	bazo	kwazo	kwazo
n7-abs	zabo	yabo	zabo	lwabo	babo	kwabo	kwabo
n8-vn	zako	yako	zako	lwako	bako	kwako	kwako
n10-loc	zakho	yakho	zakho	lwakho	bakho	kwakho	kwakho