

Where Language Mirrors

Lessons from S. Sotho borrowings

D. P. KUNENE

LINGUISTIC BORROWING FROM South Africa's two European languages come into Southern Sotho either from only one of the two possible sources per idea acquired, or from both sources at the same time, giving Sotho two synonymous expressions where none existed before. Where words have come from one language only, Afrikaans has been tapped to a much greater extent than English. This is hardly surprising, since the trek-boers moved into the interior of South Africa a relatively long time before the English came to open up the mines and establish industries. Which means that the Africans were farm-labourers on Afrikaner-owned farms a long time before they were town-labourers. This also explains why almost all words used with reference to farming are of Afrikaans origin. Examples of these are,

ëkgê (harrow), Afr. *eg*; *teselebômo* (shaft of wagon), Afr. *disselboom*.

Afrikaans has, in fact, penetrated right into Southern

In our June issue, Dr Kunene traced new patterns of social relationship between Black and White, through some attitudes reflected in linguistic behaviour, using S. Sotho as a model. The social significance of some S. Sotho expressions drawn from both Afrikaans and English is examined here.

Rhodesia where a not insignificant number of words of Afrikaans origin are found in languages of the Shona group, examples of which are,

bachi (jacket), Afr. *baadjie*; *torongo* (jail), Afr. *tronk*, but also *jeri* from English *jail*.

Examples of synonymous words, in Sotho, taken from English and Afrikaans, are,

khabetjhe/kôlô, Eng. *cabbage* and Afr. *kool*, resp.; *thêilara/senêiri*, Eng. *tailor* and Afr. *snyer*, resp.

Of such word-pairs, the one from English will be found to be used mainly by city dwellers, while the one from Afrikaans is used by country people. A woman who does *basegutê* (washing), Afr. *wasgoed* for her country mistress is not quite on the same social level as the one who does *washing* in the city.

It would appear, from the material analysed, that many words borrowed from English without equivalents from Afrikaans refer mainly to

(a) RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Examples

bôlô (ball, ball game, esp. football), *ball*; *thimi*, *team*.

(b) THINGS CONNECTED WITH THE SCHOOL

Examples

tijhêrê, *teacher*; *hommêkê*, *homework*.

The strange thing here is that the word for *school* itself comes from Afrikaans, and not from English.

(c) ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Examples

komiti, *committee*; *diminêishê*, *minutes*.

(d) DISPENSATION OF JUSTICE

Examples

khôtô (law court), *court*; *lepolesa/leponesa*, *police(-man)*.

(e) TRANSPORT [other than that specifically connected with farming and transportation of farm produce]

Examples

kutshe, *goods* (train); *baesekele*, *bicycle*.

Borrowed expressions help, where other evidence is lacking, to determine whether a given institution, item of material culture, etc., is indigenous to the people who use it, or whether it is acquired. For example one can tell from the word used for 'paper' in Sotho (viz. *pampiri*) that paper was first known to the Sotho people through the Whites. In examining the number of Sothoized words taken from English and Afrikaans, we become aware of a large-scale cultural borrowing by the Blacks from the Whites. Linguistic borrowing between White and Black in South Africa has thus been largely a one-way activity. The languages of the Whites have taken relatively little from the Bantu languages by way of borrowing. This can only mean that the African people have found themselves under pressure to acquire new linguistic forms (or, in some cases, to adapt old ones to new contexts) in order to name new concepts, new institutions, new items of material culture, etc., which, through such contact, for the first time came within the orbit of their daily experience. Conversely, the need for a similar adaptation on the part of the Whites was less urgent. Words like *mmaraka* (market), Afr. *mark*; *têmpêlê* (temple), Eng. *temple*; *tijhêrê* (teacher), Eng. *teacher*; *tênêsê* (tennis), Eng. *tennis*, *khônсарата* (concert), Eng. *concert*; *jatjhe* (judge), Eng. *judge*—these, and many others like them, show that in economics, religion, education, sport, entertainment, government, law-administration (among other things), the African's life has come to be permeated with European ideas.

While words such as the ones quoted above were taken over as of necessity, there yet remains a fair number of words, exclusively from Afrikaans, whose taking over was not occasioned by a lack of equivalent expressions in Sotho. A number of these are conjunctive expressions. Examples are: *ênê* (and), Afr. *en*, used side by side with Sotho *mme*; *masekini* (perhaps), Afr. *miskien*, cf. Sotho *mohlômong*. There are some belonging to other parts of speech as well, examples of which are *kanse* or *kantshe* (chance, opportunity), Afr. *kans*, cf. Sotho *sebaka*, *moryêtêlê*; *forotêla* (give a telling off), Afr. *vertel* (tell), cf. Sotho *juwêtsa*, *nêhêlêtsa*; *foronyoka* (cheat), Afr. *verneuk*, cf. Sotho *tsiêtsa*; *betere* (better), Afr. *beter*, cf. Sotho *ishêpisa*; *sekirilêkê* (suddenly), Afr. *skierlik/skielik*, cf. Sotho *ka tshohanyêtsô*.

In some cases, such substitute expressions are not even Sothoized, but are taken in their pure native form, and either used by themselves, or thrown into the body of a Sotho phrase. We may here illustrate with the following:— *En toe?* (Well?), cf. Sotho *Jwalê ho êtsahêtse jwang?* or *Jwalê molato ke'ng?*; *kant en klaar*

DR. D. P. KUNENE is a lecturer in Bantu Languages at the University of Cape Town.

(completely finished), as in *E fêdilê kant en klaar* (It is completely finished).

It is interesting to note that such words and phrases are used almost exclusively by illiterate and mainly country or small-town folk, especially of the older generation, but also by those of their children who, until their linguistic and other habits were well established, had mainly their parents as their model.

We see from the above that Afrikaans has penetrated into the inner mechanisms of the language, with its words being used at least side by side with the indigenous ones, while in some cases the likelihood is there of these Afrikaans words being used more frequently than, and thus slowly replacing, the equivalent Sotho expressions. The question is, Why is this the case?

Before attempting to answer this question, let me refer to another, quite interesting, phenomenon. African students will often use English in talking among themselves. This it may be assumed, is mainly the result of habit, as English has, up till very recently, not only been taught, but also used as the chief medium of instruction in African schools and colleges. It is also the result, of course, of the prestige which attaches to English as the language of culture, with the consequent snob value of this language. Sometimes these people will throw in an English word into the body of a Sotho sentence in the same way as the country folk do with Afrikaans. It is thus quite common to hear such sentences as:

Unfortunately ba re bôna (Unfortunately they saw us)

But then, ha a ka tla, (But then, should he come, . . .)

Should two students carry on a conversation in English in the presence of their elders (who do not understand the language), the most likely reaction such behaviour will evoke is that of annoyance on the part of the older people. Of course it is rude to converse in a language which is not understood by all the people present. Yet one may legitimately assume that the older people's reaction is not called forth solely by considerations of propriety, but also by a resentment of something which either in fact, or only seemingly, places them in a social class inferior to that of their children. But if these students chat in Afrikaans, everything is fine.

Even in the matter of personal names a tendency is observed for Africans to prefer English names to others. It is more fashionable to be known as *Harry* than to be just plain *Kgôtsô*. At one time it was quite common for students from small towns attending high school at bigger centres, to give themselves new (English) names. The more impressive sounding the name the better. For example, someone known to me chose the name MacPaddington. In quite a few cases, parents have actually approved of this, and used the new names themselves. But this is not unique. The great Philip Melancthon, the German reformer, was Schwarzerd (black earth; Greek *melancthon*) until, "following a contemporary custom," Johann Reuchlin, his teacher, translated his name into Greek.

Some of the conclusions which may be drawn are:

(a) that the African on the farms and in the small towns has a very frequent and close contact with the Afrikaner, whom he serves. We conclude (as indeed already indicated earlier on) that the African is a servant in this relationship because he has, apparently,

been forced by the necessity to earn his living, to acquire his master's language, for the latter's convenience; and, therefore,

(b) that Afrikaans is regarded as a language whose acquisition does not place the African on a higher social level, but, on the contrary, brands him as a hewer of wood and a drawer of water—the language of a group who have declared to the whole world "No equality in Church or State"; and, contrariwise,

(c) that the circumstances in which the African has come in contact with English have been mainly such that this language has been regarded as the language of the civilized. It is regarded as being, largely, the language of the school; and, in the sphere of employment, it is the language of industry, big business, etc., where the African, rightly or wrongly, considers himself to be better treated than his cousin on the farm; and, consequently,

(d) that, if you have been in contact with English, you cannot have escaped some measure of civilization.

It may be remarked, in passing, that Afrikaans forms the basis of the language of the *tsotsis* in Johannesburg and elsewhere. Suggestions as to the possible reasons why this should be so would be welcome. It may be that we have, in this, another manifestation of the same attitudes which are outlined in the above conclusions.

THE ABILITY OF AN AFRICAN to speak English has been, and still is, regarded as an indication that he has had some schooling. Indeed 'education' and 'English' have to a large extent been regarded as being synonymous. So that, when a child begins its schooling, his parents look forward to the time when he will say his first English sentence. This attitude confirms what was said earlier on, viz. that a great deal of prestige attaches to the English language. And well might this be the case, for, before the advent of Bantu education, English was not only taught as a subject in African schools, but was also the chief medium of instruction in subjects other than languages. Those who were responsible for this were, one feels certain, motivated by the most noble intentions. Firstly, this language has a rich store of literature, both technical and artistic, and it is thus a key to a new world, the wonders of which are great and manifold. It is a key that unlocks the dust-covered kists in which are preserved the wisdom and experiences of past ages. Secondly, English is as near as any to being an international language. An Afrikaans columnist "Jan Burger" (*Cape Argus*, 7 March, 1962) calls it "a vital, energetic, universal language." It is thus a means of communication among hundreds of millions of people with a multitude of different cultural backgrounds. Even among Bantu-speaking people whose languages are not mutually intelligible, English has (to those who know it) provided the means towards a closer relationship. To those engaged in intellectual pursuits, this very convenient tool has been, and continues to be, of great help in that it makes it possible for them to share their experiences with their colleagues in the same field of study. ●

A final article will comment on attempts to alter language habits artificially, through such agencies as "Bantu Education."