

Call to have Khelovedu recognized as an official language and included in the mandate to develop the Khoi and San languages, and sign language that have been mandated in Act 10 of 1999 (amending Act 59 of 1995) of The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

Valodagoma NPC – Oral Presentation to Joint Constitutional Review
Committee

31 March 2023

Khutso Selowa



Historical Background and Context

- Valovedu, at some point in their history, had contact with the people presently known as VhaVenda and North Eastern Sotho people. Although Khelovedu as a language still has distinct grammatical features which suggest that Khelovedu is an independent language.
- Up until when the apartheid government took power in the 1940s, the indigenous languages were being developed by missionaries. The apartheid government demoted Modjadji from being a queen to being a chief, along with their language and subsequently culture. Although the government has since restored Modjadji's title of queen, the language is still subjected to dialect status.
- Despite Khelovedu being an independent language, Lovedu learners still have to do Sepedi as a "mother-tongue" language at school. The word mother-tongue is a misnomer to Valovedu because the language they speak at home is not the same as the language they are required to do as a home language at school.
- Instead of solving the problem by letting Lovedu learners and teachers work with Khelovedu as their home language, programmes are being developed that force teachers to help their learners first comprehend Sepedi before teaching them, instead of developing the Khelovedu language and allowing both teachers and learners to continue interacting in their mother tongue which is Khelovedu.
- Valovedu have not been able to get a useful oral tradition because they do not have access to the language in its entirety due to their language being Sothoized.

Development And Testing Of The Lovedu Orthography

- The Lovedu language is a result of the amalgamation of Karanga, Ngoṅa and Sotho; the statement “It approximates to Venḁa in much of its vocabulary, falls midway between Sotho and Venḁa in grammatical structure, but Sothoized in phonology, but many of its sounds are unknown in Sotho” made by the Kriges (1943) could not be more true.
- Due to the similarities between the Lovedu language and the Venḁa language, an orthography akin to the latter was developed for Lovedu, and a developmental dictionary made available to the public as means to initiate a review and testing process for possible standardization of the orthography.
- With the Bible Society of South Africa green-lighting the translation process for a Lovedu bible, the developed orthography was put to the test.
- The review committee consists of about 15 individuals speaking 4 different varieties of KheLovedu; i.e. Khekhwevo, Khedzwabo, Kheroga and the Mamaila variety.
- The inclusion of these different varieties ensures that not only a single variety will be represented in the work produced, thus side-lining other groups, leading to superiority complex in those whose dialect is represented, as well as marginalization of the excluded varieties.
- This inclusion also benefits the language as it expands and enriches the written form with a vast number of vocabulary as utilized by the different groups.
- The presence of the elderly as part of the review committee provides an added benefit, being the recovery of vocabulary displaced by the standard Northern Sotho forms in the Language.

Development And Testing Of The Lovedu Orthography

- As the work progresses, the orthography also evolves and letters are adjusted to take into consideration the readability but also the functionality of the orthography.
- The extensiveness of the Bible translation process also provides a platform for constructive arguments and fruitful debates which form the basis of the standardization process.
- This rigorous review process also ensures that not only is the work of a high quality, but the integrity of the Lovedu language is well preserved.
- The grammar of the language is also established during the process and therefore highlighting how the Lovedu language functions.
- In all this process, it becomes more and more evident that Lovedu is neither a Northern Sotho dialect nor a Venda dialect, but a bridge or rather a transitional language between the two.
- While the Lovedu and Venda might have been formed in a similar process, by mixing speech varieties, the proportions contributed by each language group varies resulting in two languages similar in vocabulary, but conspicuously different in grammar.
- With regard to Northern Sotho, though the Lovedu grammar leans more towards it than it does Venda, much of its vocabulary is similar to the latter and some of its features are absent from the former, thus creating a dilemma that needs a resolution which does not lead to the sacrifice of the integrity of the Lovedu language.
- It is because of the afore-mentioned reason the language should be accorded the status of a stand-alone language.

Struggles of Lovedu Learners Doing Sepedi as a Home Language

- A study titled “Exploring Grade 8 Khelovedu-speaking learners’ writing challenges in Sepedi Home Language in Mopani District, South Africa” indicated the following:
- According to the CAPS, which guides teaching and learning in South African public schools, the home languages offered at schools in Mopani District are Sepedi and Xitsonga (Department of Basic Education 1997). Therefore, learners who are raised in Khelovedu communities, who speak Khelovedu at home and socially are compelled to learn Sepedi as their home language in schools.
- Despite Khelovedu being an independent language, Lovedu learners still have to do Sepedi as a “mother-tongue” language at school. The word mother-tongue is a misnomer to Valovedu because the language they speak at home is not the same as the language they are required to do as a home language at school.
- In 2015, learner performance in Sepedi was reported as 53.71% pass rate in the Greater Tzaneen Municipality, where Maputa Circuit is located. (Observer Newspaper 2016). The learners’ performances are 14.59% less than the national average, posing a serious concern in the district. According to basic education requirements, for one to proceed to the next grade they need to have passed their home language.
- It is evident from the data presented in the study that the Grade 8 learners are struggling to write in Sepedi, because it is not their L1 or home language
- Learners spell as they speak, they have limited vocabulary in Sepedi and consequently end up using Khelovedu words in Sepedi writing. As a result, their spoken language appears to interfere with their writing instead of being additive.
- This supports Kroll, Barry and Vann’s (1981) conclusion that the writing of all learners closely resembles ‘talk written down’, which is likely to incorporate many features of speech, including speech sounds of their language.
- All these experiences are contrary to behaviourist theory, where learning will occur more frequently when followed by reinforcement, imitation and association, under controlled conditions, as pointed out by Skinner (1957:167).

Restoring the Dignity of Valovedu and the Potential that 4IR can offer KheLovedu

- The position of KheLobedu as a dialect of northern Sotho/Sepedi, or as a marginal language in the South African official language family has roots in a punitive exercise by colonial and apartheid era governments. This punitive measure manifested in the demotion of Queen Modjadji to a chieftainess in the 1970s with a systematic suppression of missionary and civil-led language standardization process.
- The issue of the demotion of Modjadji to chieftainess has been addressed with the restoration of the Balobedu Royal status in 2016. What remains is the restoration and the development of the language to a point that it can gather the constituency associated with the Balobedu Queenship or kingdom.
- The question of making KheLobedu official is not just about securing the constitutional mandate allocated in terms of language rights, but also about restoring Balobedu (through fostering self-pride in an official status) into the franchise of the South African nation. It carries the importance of reassuring Valovedu that they are a part of South Africa by elevating their language, culture and identity.
- The opportunity for KheLovedu in the 4IR era.
- Developing digital tools for low resourced languages like KheLovedu with very little published material.
- Opportunity offered by recordings drawn from the Bible Translation for unpacking KheLovedu.

Constitutional Imperatives

- Section 6(5) of the constitution and its interpretation
- Section 6(5b) of PanSALB mandate
- Section 7 (18) of the constitution and its interpretation
- Section 2 of the Traditional Leadership and Governance framework

Thank You

- Khutso Selowa – khutsosk@gmail.com
- Kgothatso Seshayi - khuthajo@gmail.com
- George Mahashe - george.mahashe@uct.ac.za
- Tebogo Rakgogo - rakgogotj@tut.ac.za