Mutual intelligibility among Sesotho sa Leboa dialects: A linguistic overview

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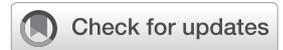
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Sesotho sa Leboa comprises multiple dialects, estimated at around 33, primarily spoken in Limpopo Province and Mpumalanga Province. Although most dialects are considered mutually intelligible, those in the eastern part of Limpopo Province (Selobedu, Sepulana and Sepai) are argued to be mutually unintelligible with dialects associated with the standard language, that is, Sepedi, Sekopa and Sekone. However, a closer observation of arguments reveals four linguistic factors that have not been considered by previous studies. Firstly, the opinions are advanced without any direct measurement of the mutual intelligibility of the dialects. Secondly, when mutual intelligibility is not bidirectional, the dialects are misconstrued as mutually unintelligible. Thirdly, the dialect continuum has not been explored to explain the linguistic landscape of the dialects. Lastly, language (dialect) contact has not been considered when reference is made to the mutual intelligibility of the dialects. Considering this background, the current study provides a linguistic overview of the mutual intelligibility of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects as reported by various scholars, while also arguing that the above-mentioned linguistic factors are intricately linked to mutual intelligibility and, therefore, essential to be considered when reflecting on the mutual intelligibility of these dialects. The study adopted a qualitative desktop research method, whereby various secondary sources on mutual intelligibility and Sesotho sa Leboa dialects are reviewed for analysis.

Contribution: The study postulates that speakers of Selobedu, Sepulana and Sepai can understand speakers of Sepedi, Sekopa and Sekone based on acquired intelligibility as speakers of the first three dialects learn the standard language as a home language in schools. The study further proposes for adoption of a revised methodological approach as a possible means to measure and ascertain mutual intelligibility, while also demonstrating how the approach could be adopted in the context of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects.

Keywords: mutual intelligibility; Sesotho sa Leboa; dialect; dialect continuum; language contact.

Introduction

Mutual intelligibility refers to a linguistic phenomenon where speakers of different but related varieties can comprehend one another in a conversation because of the similarities between the two varieties (Wolff 2000:312). It is also considered a critical criterion through which varieties are distinguished from one another as dialects or languages (Webb & Kembo-Sure 2006:29). Sesotho sa Leboa, also known as Sepedi, is characterised by a high number of about 23-33 dialects (Mokgokong 1966; Van Wyk 1969; Van Warmelo 1935). The language is spoken by over 6.4 million (10.0%) population in the country as a first language (Statistics South Africa 2022). It is important to indicate that the current researchers are aware of the ongoing debate and different views by language experts and speakers of the language regarding the use of Sesotho sa Leboa and Sepedi to identify standard language. In the context of this study, Sesotho sa Leboa is used in general terms to refer to the standard language, while Sepedi is used to refer to a dialect spoken in a specific region. Therefore, the use of one name over the other in the study does not imply that the other one is incorrect.

Sesotho sa Leboa dialects are concentrated in the Limpopo Province and spread to Mpumalanga Province. The majority of dialects in the Limpopo Province are considered to be mutually intelligible, where some are closely associated with the standard language, that is, Sepedi, Sekopa and Sekone. Although the majority of the dialects are mutually intelligible, dialects such as Selobedu (Khelobedu), Sepulana and Sepai (Hipai), found in the eastern part of Limpopo Province and Mpumalanga Province, are argued to be mutually unintelligible with those associated with the standard language (Mojela 2008, 2013; Rakgogo 2019). However, critical examination of these arguments brings to light four linguistic factors which were not considered in previous studies.

Firstly, it is not clear how the lack or existence of mutual intelligibility among the dialects is established and measured. Secondly, the asymmetry of mutual intelligibility is not explored. Similarly, the dialect continuum is not taken into consideration to explain the linguistic relationship among the dialects. Lastly, language (dialect) contact is not taken into consideration in previous studies in relation to mutual intelligibility among Sesotho sa Leboa dialects.

The current study seeks to provide a linguistic overview of mutual intelligibility among Sesotho sa Leboa dialects as reported by various linguistic scholars (Flanagan 2016; Mojela 2008, 2013; Rakgogo 2019). The study examines previous arguments on mutual intelligibility among Sesotho sa Leboa dialects, while also demonstrating the significance of the four linguistic factors in providing a detailed insight regarding mutual intelligibility among the dialects. The study argues that the inclusion of these linguistic factors in the discourse offers a different perspective on the linguistic relationship of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects. This is achieved by reflecting on six dialects, which are geographically spread along five dialect clusters as encapsulated in Van Wyk (1969). The study also outlines how a revised methodological approach can be factored in measuring mutual intelligibility in the context of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects. The following sections provide background on Sesotho sa Leboa dialects, methodology, discussion and lastly, the findings of the study:

Sesotho sa Leboa dialects

Sesotho sa Leboa dialects are primarily spoken in the Limpopo province, while some are found in the Mpumalanga province. Research on Sesotho sa Leboa dialects emerged in the 1930s, whereby attempts have been made to identify and classify the dialects (Mokgokong 1966; Van Wyk 1969; Van Warmelo 1935). In their quest to identify and classify the dialects, the above-mentioned studies assume different approaches. Van Warmelo (1935) offers a geographical classification of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects, while also covering the historical account on the origin of various ethnic groups as well as a partial account of their linguistic characteristics. On the other hand, Mokgokong (1966) provides dialect classification, which is based on the phonological correspondence of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects. Van Wyk (1969) provides a classification that is premised on the geographical areas in which Sesotho sa Leboa dialects are primarily spoken.

An examination of these studies shows that there is variance in the number of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects as well as the identified dialect clusters as reflected in Table 1. For instance, Van Warmelo (1935) identifies 33 dialects, which are clustered into four geographic dialect clusters, while Mokgokong (1966) indicates 23 dialects, which are grouped into six linguistic dialect clusters. Meanwhile, Van Wyk (1969) presents 27 dialects, which are found in five geographical clusters. This lack of consensus regarding the identification and classification of the dialects shows that there is a need for further research in Sesotho sa Leboa dialects. Although the three sources are undoubtedly old, they remain indispensable

sources in the field of dialectology concerning Sesotho sa Leboa dialects, as they are widely cited for their relevance. However, the issue of mutual intelligibility is not explored in the aforementioned studies. Instead, the studies provide phonological affinities among the dialect clusters without expounding mutual intelligibility among the dialects. This issue is discussed in detail in the following section of the current study.

Mutual intelligibility of the languages

On the above-cited definition of mutual intelligibility, Webb and Kembo-Sure (2006) emphasise its function as a linguistic factor through which various dialects are classified as varieties of the same language. However, a critical overview of the three sources on Sesotho sa Leboa dialects shows that the identification and classification of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects is not based on their mutual intelligibility. In fact, studies reflecting on the mutual intelligibility of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects do not indicate how the mutual intelligibility, nor the lack thereof, is measured. The following sections reflect on what has been reported with regard to the mutual intelligibility of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects and other observations relating to the concept of mutual intelligibility.

In a study exploring the tonology of the Setswapo dialect, Monareng (1993:1) declares that the Sesotho sa Leboa dialects are mutually intelligible. Although the scholar acknowledges that the dialects are mutually intelligible, the degree to which these dialects are intelligible is not qualified or substantiated. In contrast, Mojela (2013:291) argues that the dialects found in the Central cluster, that is Sepedi, Sekopa and Sekone, differ from those in the East, North-east and North clusters to an extent that effective communication is not possible to take place between speakers of those dialects. Furthermore, Mojela (2008:125) argues that speakers of Selobedu and Sepulana dialects are able to comprehend speakers of dialects in the central cluster, while the former would experience difficulties in comprehending the two dialects. In other words, mutual intelligibility is not bidirectional between dialects associated with standard language and those in the eastern part of Limpopo province, that is, Selobedu and Sepulana.

Still on mutual intelligibility, Rakgogo (2019:108) summarises the complexity associated with applying this concept in the context of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects and the Sotho-Tswana language group. According to Schilling-Estes (2006:313), when two varieties are linguistically similar and mutually intelligible, the two should be considered as varieties of the same language. On the contrary, if the varieties are different and not mutually intelligible, then such varieties should be considered as different languages. Rakgogo (2019) argues that the Selobedu dialect, in the North-east cluster, and the Setlokwa dialect in the North cluster, are mutually intelligible. However, mutual intelligibility is not realised between the Selobedu and Sepulana dialects in the East cluster. Furthermore, mutual intelligibility is not realised between

Sepulana and Sekone dialects found in the Central cluster, regardless of the two being considered as varieties of the Sesotho sa Leboa language. The scholar further submits that on linguistic grounds, Selobedu and Setlokwa could be considered as varieties of the same language, while in the context of Selobedu and Sepulana, the two could be viewed as separate languages. On the other hand, speakers of Sesotho and Setswana can communicate effectively without any linguistic barriers, which could suggest that the two should be understood as varieties of the same language.

The complexity associated with the concept of mutual intelligibility in the context of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects and the Sotho-Tswana language group is evident. Moreover, basing his argument on Schilling-Estes (2006)'s definition, Rakgogo (2019)'s view that Selobedu and Sekone are not mutually intelligible may appear to be directly in contrast with Mojela (2008, 2013)'s observations. However, it could be argued that the above definition of mutual intelligibility does not address situations where mutual intelligibility is not bidirectional. In other words, the definition does not describe a situation where speakers of dialect A understand speakers of dialect B, while speakers of the former do not comprehend the latter dialect. This point is discussed in detail under the section 'Mutual intelligibility of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects' of the current study.

The difference of opinions by the abovementioned scholars concerning the mutual intelligibility of some of the Sesotho sa Leboa dialects is evident. Similarly, it is also clear that these contradictory opinions are advanced without a clear methodological approach on how such conclusions have been arrived at. Therefore, the need to develop or adopt a research model that would ascertain or refute the extent of mutual intelligibility for Sesotho sa Leboa dialects is of paramount importance.

Theoretical framework

The study is premised on the conceptual framework of dialectology. Dialectology is concerned with the systematic study of different dialects of the same language (Yule 2010:241). As the study is primarily concerned with the issue of mutual intelligibility and other linguistic factors within the conceptual framework of dialectology, such as language contact and dialect continuum, it has been deemed of paramount importance to examine the dialects through these linguistic variables. This allowed the study to present the linguistic landscape of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects and how linguistic phenomena such as language contact and dialect continuum interact to provide a detailed linguistic insight for the dialects. This enabled the current study to delve into the linguistic situation concerning Sesotho sa Leboa as a language and the dynamic relationship among its dialects. As such, linguistic phenomena concerning mutual intelligibility, language contact and dialect continuum are adopted in the study as essential linguistic aspects through which Sesotho sa Leboa dialects are examined.

Research methods and design

The study adopted a qualitative approach to document and explain the linguistic landscape concerning Sesotho sa Leboa dialects. The qualitative approach is concerned with the use of different qualitative methods to gather and analyse non-numerical data for the purpose of generating in-depth and contextualised insights into a particular phenomenon (Kalpokas & Hecker 2023). A desktop research method, which involves the collection of secondary data from existing sources (Jacobs 2023), is utilised to sample secondary sources, which comprise articles, books and theses. These secondary sources on mutual intelligibility and Sesotho sa Leboa dialects were conveniently sampled for review to establish emerging themes on the dialects for analysis. Convenience sampling is concerned with the selection of research subjects or units based on their availability and convenience (Creswell & Creswell 2023:162). This enabled the study to provide a detailed overview of research conducted in Sesotho sa Leboa dialects while also outlining knowledge gaps on mutual intelligibility, Sesotho sa Leboa dialects and proposes a revised methodological approach, which could be adopted to further explore mutual intelligibility of the dialects.

Findings

When expounding the linguistic situation regarding Sesotho sa Leboa dialects, it has been found that mutual intelligibility is not always equal in both directions. This is observed from previous research conducted on Sesotho sa Leboa dialects. One such study is by Mojela (2008), who argues as follows:

> 'The Balobedu people understand all that is said in Sepedi, Sekone, Sekopa and all the dialects of Sesotho sa Leboa, while Bakone and Bapedi will need interpreters to understand what the Bapulana and Balobedu say.' (p. 125)

Such asymmetric mutual intelligibility reflects that there are other linguistic factors at play, leading to the imbalanced level of mutual intelligibility among the above varieties. Firstly, it could be argued that Balobedu and Bapulana speech communities are conversant with the above varieties, associated with standard language, on the basis of acquired mutual intelligibility as the two speech communities learn Sepedi as a Home Language in school. Secondly, on the other hand, speech communities of Sepedi, Sekone and Sekopa are unable to comprehend Selobedu and Sepulana because of a lack of inherent mutual intelligibility between these varieties. Therefore, Selobedu and Sepulana varieties are inherently distinct from Sepedi, Sekone and Sekopa to the extent that mutual intelligibility between the varieties is one-sided in favour of Balobedu and Bapulana speech communities because of previous language exposure in the form of formal education. Another linguistic factor having an impact on mutual intelligibility among the varieties relates to the dialect continuum.

With regards to the Sesotho sa Leboa dialect continuum, it has been found that it gradually extends from the central cluster and permeates to North West province, where Setswana is spoken. This is despite the dialects in the central cluster being geographically distant from the Setswana language in comparison with the dialects (east cluster), which are geographically closer to the central cluster. This is observed in Figure 1, where Sekone and Sepedi are geographically distant from Setswana, while the two varieties are geographically closer to Sepulana, Sepai and Selobedu. Table 2 shows the lexical comparison between Sesotho sa Leboa, Setswana and Selobedu, as provided in Mojela (2008:126, 2013:294) which further presents the difference between the three varieties.

Although the spelling of lexical items between Sesotho sa Leboa and Setswana is variant, the same forms are radically different from many of the forms presented in Selobedu. Therefore, this supports the linguistic view that Selobedu is distant from Sesotho sa Leboa and to some extent, this could be attributed to the dialect continuum. It should be noted that the language continuum between Setswana and varieties of Sesotho sa Leboa in the central cluster is barely interrupted by non-Sotho languages. Meanwhile, on the eastern part of the central cluster, the dialect continuum is adversely interrupted by non-Sotho languages, such as Xitsonga, Tshivenda and Siswati.

This is a result of language contact among Sesotho sa Leboa dialects and the above-mentioned languages. This is further supported by Rakgogo and Zungu (2022), who argue as follows:

**TABLE 1:** Sesotho sa Leboa dialect clusters.

Geographical dialect cluster	Van Warmelo (1935)	Mokgokong (1966)	Van Wyk (1969)
Central or Pedi-like dialect cluster	Pedi, Tau, Kwena, Koni, Roka, Ntwane, Nareng, Tswako, Mohlala, Moraba, Nkwane, Mphogo	Pedi, Tau, Kone, Roka, Moletlane	Pedi, Kopa, Tau, Mphahlele, Masemola, Kone, Kwena, Molepo and Mmamabolo
East-central or Kutswe-Pulana dialect cluster	Pai, Kutswe and Pulana	Kutswe and Pulana	Kutswe and Pulana
Northern or Tlokwa-like dialect cluster	Kgaga, Koni, Molepo, Birwa, Tlokwa, Gananwa, Tlou, Kwena, Tlhaloga	Tlokwa, Hananwa, Matlala, Moletsi, Mamabolo	Tlokwa, Gananwa, Kone, Kwena, Matlala, Hlaloga and Birwa
North-eastern or Lobedu-like dialect cluster	Phalaborwa, Mahlo, Letswalo, Lobedu and Kgaga, Šai, Mametša, Mmamabolo, Kolobe	Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Khaga, Dzwabo	Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Letswalo, Hlabeng, Kgaga, Mahlo, Kone and Roka
Eastern or Pai dialect cluster	N/A	Pai	Pai
Kopa-like cluster	N/A	Kopa, Ndebele-Sotho, Mothiba, Molepo, Mothapo, Makgoba	N/A

Source: Please see article's full reference list, https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v46i1.2208

TABLE 2: Lexical comparison between Sesotho sa Leboa, Setswana and Selobedu.

Sesotho sa Leboa	Setswana	Selobedu	English
Mopani	*Nato or mopani*	*Motanare*	Mopane tree
Leribiši	Lerubisi	Mmankhoto	Owl
Mmankgagane	*Mmamanthane*	*Molema*	Bat
Hlapi	*Tlhapi*	*Khobe*	Fish
betha or itiya	*Betsa*	*mota or tiya*	Wallop

Source: Extracted from Mojela (2008), see article's full reference list, https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v46i1.2208
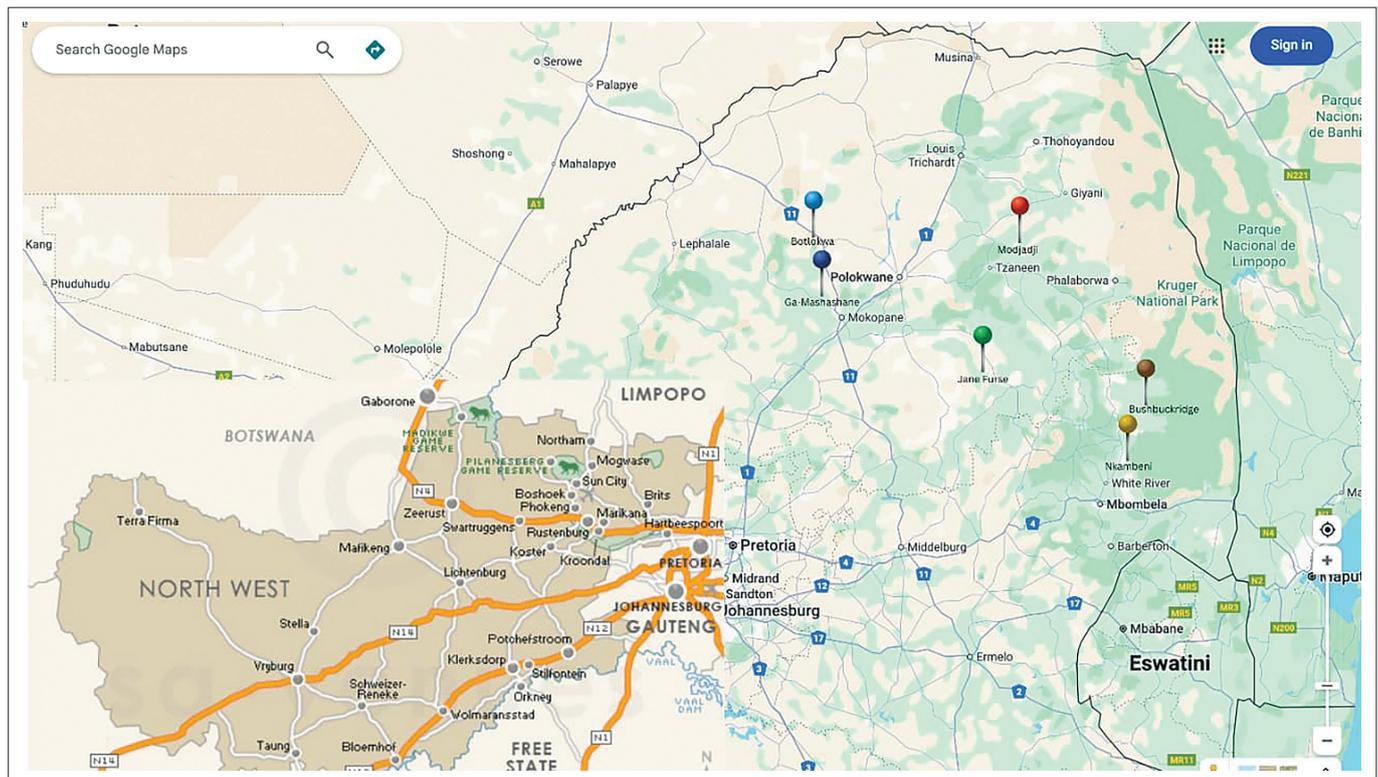
Source: Adapted from Google Maps by Hasane Mathe, see article's full reference list, https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v46i1.2208

◊ Sepulana; ◊ Sepai; ◊ Sepedi; ◊ Sekone; ◊ Selobedu; ◊ Setlokwa.

FIGURE 1: Geographical map for Sesotho sa Leboa dialects.

'Critics may support that the dialects that are spoken in the central cluster are less influenced by other South African indigenous languages. Based on the literature review in this article, it was confirmed that [Sesotho sa Leboa] dialects such as Sepulana, Sekutswe and Sepai were linguistically influenced by Xitsonga and Siswati languages.' (p. 5)

Sesotho sa Leboa dialects found in the eastern cluster are in close contact with non-Sotho languages, such as Tshivenda, Xitsonga and Siswati. As a result of the contact among these varieties, mutual intelligibility is hindered between dialects in the central cluster and those found in the eastern cluster. However, since Bapulana and Bapai speech communities are expected to learn Sesotho sa Leboa language as Home Language, they are more likely to understand the language because of acquired mutual intelligibility. Moreover, it is clear that there is a need for a clear methodology to establish or refute mutual intelligibility among Sesotho sa Leboa dialects. This can be achieved through the adoption of a revised Recorded Text Test (RTT) process, which is refined to suit the Sesotho sa Leboa dialectal situation. This is explained in more detail as part of the study discussion.

Discussion
Mutual intelligibility of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects

When defining the concept of mutual intelligibility, Chambers and Trudgill (1998:4) state that, in practice, mutual intelligibility is not always equal in both directions and that it is also dependent on the degree of exposure to other languages or dialects. In other words, speakers of dialect A may be able to comprehend speakers of dialects B, while the latter do not understand speakers of the former. This encapsulates the linguistic state of affairs for Sesotho sa Leboa dialects, where speakers of Selobedu and Sepulana understand Sekone, Sepedi and Sekopa, while speakers of these very three dialects are unable to understand the two dialects mentioned earlier. The mutual intelligibility among these dialects of Sesotho sa Leboa is not equal in both directions. However, because speakers of Selobedu and Sepulana are exposed to standard Sesotho sa Leboa through education and media, it is expected that they would understand dialects such as Sekone, Sepedi and Sekopa as the three dialects are associated with the standard language.

Such a linguistic phenomenon is referred to as acquired mutual intelligibility of which Eberhard, Simons and Fennig (eds. 2022) explain as the ability of speakers of one variety to understand another on the basis of having been exposed to or learned that variety. These scholars adopt this term to differentiate instances where speakers of two varieties are able to understand one another on the basis of similarities of the two varieties, which is referred to as inherent intelligibility. Because dialects such as Sekone, Sepedi and Sekopa are associated with the standard language, it is expected that the speakers of these dialects will be able to have effective

communication as a result of inherent intelligibility. On the other hand, speakers of Selobedu and Sepulana are able to understand Sekone, Sepedi and Sekopa on the basis of acquired mutual intelligibility, which is asymmetric.

Dialect continuum among Sesotho sa Leboa dialects

Flanagan (2016) postulates that a dialect continuum is observed between Sesotho sa Leboa, Sesotho and Setswana, whereby some dialects of Sesotho sa Leboa are mutually intelligible with Setswana than with other dialects of Sesotho sa Leboa. Although none of the Sesotho sa Leboa dialects sharing mutual intelligibility with Setswana are mentioned in Flanagan (2016), a detailed exposition is provided in Mojela (2008) through lexical comparison between standard Sesotho sa Leboa, Setswana and Selobedu. It is shown that the standard Sesotho sa Leboa share more lexical items with Setswana than with Selobedu, therefore suggesting that the dialects associated with the standard Sesotho sa Leboa are mutually intelligible to a greater degree with Setswana than with Selobedu.

However, a closer look at the map, in Figure 1, reveals that the area in which the Sepedi dialect is spoken, marked with the green button (Central cluster), is closer to the red button, highlighting the area where Selobedu is spoken in relation to the area where the Setswana speech community is found. Although geographical features such as mountains, which may hamper contact between the two language communities, have not been taken into account, Sepedi dialect is geographically closer to Selobedu (North-east cluster), Sepulana (East-central cluster) and Sepai (East cluster) than Setswana in the west of the map.

This may appear not to uphold Chambers and Trudgill's (1998) observation that the greater the distance between dialects, the more difficult it would be to comprehend, as the dialects associated with standard Sesotho sa Leboa are perceived to be mutually intelligible with Setswana despite the geographical distance. However, when taking into account the geographical position of the Sekone dialect, which is also among the dialects in the central cluster and associated with the standard Sesotho sa Leboa, it could be argued that Sekone serves as a linguistic bridge between Sepedi dialect and Setswana language, thus extending the gradual mutual intelligibility of Sepedi dialect and Setswana language. With this in mind, language contact has an impact on the gradual mutual intelligibility between Sesotho sa Leboa dialects associated with standard languages and the Setswana language. The following section provides a detailed discussion regarding language contact among Sesotho sa Leboa dialects.

Language contact among dialects and other languages

The language contact between Sesotho sa Leboa dialects in the central cluster and Setswana, to a greater degree, is not interrupted by non-Sotho languages. In contrast,

Sesotho sa Leboa dialects found in the eastern part of Limpopo Province are in contact with non-Sotho languages, that is, Selobedu and Tshivenda; Sepulana and Xitsonga; Sepai and Siswati. Therefore, it could be concluded that language contact between dialects of Sesotho sa Leboa in the eastern part with non-Sotho languages has a bearing on the degree of mutual intelligibility of the said dialects with those in the central cluster.

As Rakgogo (2019) asserts that the Setlokwa dialect in the North cluster is mutually intelligible with the Selobedu dialect in the North-east cluster, while the latter is not mutually intelligible with Sepulana in the east central, it would still be interesting to establish whether Sepulana is mutually intelligible with Sepai, as the two dialects are geographically closer and, most importantly, in contact with different non-Sotho languages such as Xitsonga and Siswati. In spite of the perceived lack of mutual intelligibility between Selobedu and Sepulana, because of the acquired intelligibility of the two dialects in relation to dialects associated with the standard Sesotho sa Leboa, it could be argued that there is a perceived gradual mutual intelligibility from the area where Setswana is spoken (North West province) to the eastern part of Limpopo province. However, this gradual mutual intelligibility is hindered by the language contact in the eastern part of Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces due to contact between dialects such as Sepai and Sepulana with non-Sotho languages, which are Siswati and Xitsonga, respectively.

Methodological approach to mutual intelligibility

In a study with broad objectives on Fipa varieties spoken in Tanzania, Woodward, Lindfors and Nagler (2010) explore mutual intelligibility of the eight varieties associated with the Fipa language. As part of the methodology to establish whether the dialects are mutually intelligible, the scholars use RTT for the comprehension of the dialects among speakers. The RTT involves eliciting and recording a short story in one dialect and playing back the recording to speakers of other dialects, and asking them to retell the story to establish if there is comprehension. This is followed by observations, which involve paying close attention to participants' reactions, such as laughing at an amusing story, to gauge the level of engagement with the recording. Post-RTT interviews are then conducted where the testees are asked various questions concerning the recording, which was played. In addition to these methods, probable cognates are elicited using Swahili gloss as prompts to draw up a wordlist from each dialect consisting of nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. Although the challenge associated with having to use the Swahili language for participants to translate is mentioned as a limiting factor because it is not the first language of the participants, the RTT method yielded valuable insights concerning mutual intelligibility through observation and post-RTT interviews. Phrase lists were also elicited through having to translate Swahili phrases and clauses into the targeted dialects. Both the wordlist and phrase list were used to determine whether there were any differences revealed in the dialects.

In order to apply the RTT method in the context of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects, this method could be revised with the purpose of establishing whether mutual intelligibility is bidirectional. This would involve eliciting one story per dialect from five different geographical clusters for a balanced geographical spread and representation of the dialects. The narrative stories would be elicited from Selobedu (North-east cluster), Sepulana (East-central cluster), Sepai (East cluster), Sepedi (Central cluster) and Setlokwa (North cluster). Although the task where listeners were expected to transcribe the narratives was fruitful for Fipa dialects, it was not without hurdles. The current researchers recommend an interactive task with listeners, where researchers are expected to transcribe the narrative and draw up questions based on the narrative for a comprehension test before meeting participants. The interactive task would involve playing a recorded narrative to the participants and posing questions about the narrative, while also recording answers using a suitable word recorder. This task should be repeated across the dialects to enable the researcher to determine whether mutual intelligibility is bidirectional, based on the responses provided by the participants.

Conclusion

This research aimed at providing a linguistic overview of mutual intelligibility among Sesotho sa Leboa dialects. The study focused primarily on six dialects, which are located in five geographic dialect clusters in the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces. An overview of dialect classification, inconsistencies regarding the number of dialects and respective geographical dialect clusters have been presented as background of the study. Four main linguistic factors were explored to further explain the linguistic landscape of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects. The linguistic issues pertaining to inherent and acquired mutual intelligibility were adopted to explain the asymmetric intelligibility between dialects in the central, north-east and central-east clusters. The study also delved into the concept of dialect continuum to discuss the linguistic relationship among the dialects and other languages such as Setswana, Xitsonga, Tshivenda and Siswati. This also enabled the study to explore the linguistic landscape of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects and other languages in the context of the language (dialect) contact phenomenon. The study also provided a revised RTT method, which is suitable for establishing and measuring the mutual intelligibility of Sesotho sa Leboa dialects. Future research could benefit from adopting a revised RTT method as a qualitative research tool to measure and ascertain mutual intelligibility for Sesotho sa Leboa varieties and other languages in general, for in-depth insight into mutual intelligibility. This would further enhance our understanding of the mutual intelligibility phenomenon and how it manifests under various linguistic contexts.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Dimakatso S. Mathe: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Writing – original draft. Sekgaila Chokoe: Conceptualisation, Supervision. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its listed references.

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