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The influence of Sepitori on Grade 6 learners' Setswana writing in Winterveldt Tshwane: An essay writing analysis

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Background: In Winterveldt, a semi-rural community north of Pretoria, many children grow up speaking Sepitori, a non-standard urban variety, while being taught Setswana as their official home language in school.

Objectives: This study investigates the influence of Sepitori on the Setswana literacy of Grade 6 learners in Winterveldt.

Method: A qualitative, comparative design was employed, drawing on essay writing and semi-structured interviews as data collection methods. Participants included 100 learners selected randomly through purposive sampling, and three purposively sampled teachers from two schools.

Results: Findings indicate that Sepitori significantly shapes learners' written Setswana, often leading to language transfer in grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. Teachers expressed concern that learners are disadvantaged by being assessed in a language variety they seldom use outside the classroom, arguing that the disjuncture between Sepitori and standard Setswana undermines literacy development.

Conclusion: The study concludes that non-standard varieties such as Sepitori should not be dismissed in educational contexts but rather acknowledged as resources that can support the acquisition of standard varieties.

Contribution: By highlighting the interplay between non-standard and standard varieties, this research contributes to debates on language-in-education policy, literacy development, and the role of linguistic diversity in South African classrooms.

Keywords: Sepitori; Setswana; literacy; home language; standard variety; non-standard variety.

Introduction

Many people have accepted that the languages that they speak form part of how they identify themselves, either as individuals or as members of a speech community. However, a vast majority of learners in Africa are introduced to school in a foreign language, that is, not their home language. As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2010) notes, Africa is the only continent where most children begin school using a language that is not their mother tongue. Similarly, the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) (2010) prioritises the use of official languages as the medium of instruction, which frequently differ from the languages children speak at home. Consequently, children often must set aside their home languages upon entering formal schooling, limiting the use and recognition of these languages in educational, governmental, and other formal contexts. Seemingly, one may argue that this situation is not in alignment with the *Language in Education Policy* (1997), which emphasises that all learners attending public government schools should not be linguistically disadvantaged, echoing concerns long raised by Heugh and October (2005). Because of this misalignment, learners who come from linguistically diverse backgrounds such as Sepitori may be disadvantaged. This disadvantage largely stems from the fact that Sepitori is not considered as part of the language varieties that form standard Setswana. In addition, Sepitori is extensively influenced by Setswana and Northern Sotho. According to Ditsele (2014a:220; 2014b), Sepitori has had many generations of speakers to develop it since around the 1850s when Pretoria was established by white Dutch-speaking people called the Voortrekkers. Sepitori has Setswana, Northern Sotho, Afrikaans, and English in its linguistic composition (Wagner, Ditsele & Makgato 2020:2). In addition, Malimabe

(1990:10) notes that Sepitori also has a few Southern Sotho lexical items in its vocabulary. Wagner et al. (2020) also found that Sepitori mainly draws its lexicon from Setswana and Northern Sotho, but also includes vocabulary from other languages, including a few lexical items from Southern Sotho, as well as adoptives from English and Afrikaans. Not only is it a *lingua franca* in black residential areas but it is also a marker of urbanisation and being 'city wise' (Bornman, Álvarez-Mosquera & Seti 2018:30). Wagner et al. (2020:2) argue that individuals who move to Tshwane use Sepitori for the sole purpose of distancing themselves from who they are and the languages that they speak. Schuring (1985, cited in Wagner et al. 2020:2) argues that Sepitori can be likened to the Sekgatlha dialect of Setswana, which was popular among the people of Hammanskraal, an area north of Pretoria. It has linguistic features from Northern Sotho (also known as Sepedi), Afrikaans, and English (Schuring 1985). Moreover, Sepitori is a mixed language because it emerged from the fusion of Northern Sotho and Setswana. A mixed language is created in an event whereby a common language is in place and there are no communication barriers (Meakins 2013:2). Ditsele and Mann (2014:160) advance that Sepitori is a language that is recognised by neither the schools nor the government because it is not written or formal. Be that as it may, Wagner et al. (2020) confirm that even though Sepitori exists as mainly spoken, it often influences how learners write Setswana at school. Research also shows that spoken language and written language influence each other. This study therefore seeks to examine the nature and extent of Sepitori's influence on written Setswana among Grade 6 learners in two primary schools in Winterveldt, Tshwane. Grade 6 was selected because learners at this stage are in the intermediate phase, capable of writing longer, more developed texts, which allowed the researchers a meaningful analysis of the influence of Sepitori on written Setswana. Grades 4 and 5 were considered too early, as writing skills are still developing, while Grade 7 is the exit year, where writing may be shaped more by exam preparation than by home language use.

Problem statement

Many learners in Winterveldt primary schools are exposed to Sepitori, a non-standard language variety widely used in their communities and often functioning as their primary language of everyday communication (Wagner et al. 2020). Despite this, Sepitori is not recognised as a language of teaching and learning, and learners are required to enrol for Setswana as a home language, even when it does not reflect their actual linguistic practices (Ditsele & Mann 2014). Languages spoken in learners' speech communities are frequently marginalised in formal school contexts, leading to the assessment of learners' written work solely against standard language norms (Gxilishe 1996). The problem addressed in this study is the lack of systematic understanding of how Sepitori influences Grade 6 learners' written Setswana in Winterveldt primary schools. While learners are expected to produce writing that conforms to standard Setswana norms, their everyday use of Sepitori may shape their lexical choices, grammatical structures, spelling, and overall written expression. Without recognising this influence, teachers may misinterpret learners' written output as mere language deficiency rather than as evidence of language contact and transfer. This study therefore seeks to examine the nature and extent of Sepitori's influence on learners' written Setswana, with the aim of contributing to more linguistically informed assessment practices and pedagogical approaches.

Research questions

This current article investigates the influence that Sepitori has on Setswana that is written by Grade 6 learners. As such, the following two research questions are posed:

- To what extent does Sepitori influence written standard Setswana as a home language studied by Grade 6 learners?
- What are the Grade 6 teachers' perceptions of the use Sepitori in standard written Setswana?

Theoretical framework

Standard Language Ideology (SLI) is used as an analytical lens to examine how Sepitori is constructed as linguistically illegitimate in Grade 6 Setswana classrooms in Winterveldt. Standard Language Ideology foregrounds the belief that only a single, codified form of Setswana is appropriate for formal writing, positioning urban contact varieties such as Sepitori as deficient rather than systematic. Through this lens, the study analyses how teachers' attitudes and assessment practices privilege Standard Setswana, leading to the routine identification of Sepitori features as 'errors' even when meaning is not compromised. These practices reveal how language difference is reinterpreted as linguistic failure, reinforcing deficit discourses about learners' competence. By applying SLI to learner essays and teacher marking, the study shifts analytical focus from individual learner shortcomings to institutional ideologies that reproduce linguistic inequality in multilingual township schools. In this study, SLI is applied analytically in two ways. First, it is used to interpret teachers' interview responses, specifically their perceptions of correctives, error, and legitimacy. Second, it guides the analysis of learner essays by shifting focus from individual learner shortcomings to the institutional ideologies that produce certain features as 'non-standard'. For example, when a learner writes *ba berekisa thekenoloji* instead of *ba dirisa thekenoloj*, SLI helps us see that the judgement of 'error' is not purely linguistic but ideological. This framework allows the study to link micro-level textual patters to macro-level processes of linguistic inequality in multilingual township schools (Cushing 2019, 2020; Milroy & Milroy 2012). This study is guided by the SLI theory, which holds that a particular form of a language is regarded as the 'most correct' or 'best', typically the standard variety. Under this ideology, all other forms of the language, namely the non-standard language varieties, are viewed as incorrect, corrupted, and of lesser value (Walsh 2021:775). Furthermore, this belief is mushrooming because of the government, business sector, education system, and media industry (Kroskrity 2000:26; Lippi-Green 2012:67). Government,

business, education, and media institutions collectively reinforce standard language ideology by privileging standard language varieties in official communication, professional contexts, teaching and assessment, and public representation. Through policies, employment practices, schooling, and media content, standard languages are presented as correct, authoritative, and credible, while non-standard varieties are marginalised, discouraged, or portrayed as informal. As a result, these environments legitimise the dominance of standard language forms and contribute to the devaluation of non-standard language practices. Standard Language Ideology is the cause for making members of a speech community believe that standard languages, those that happen to enjoy official status, are superior to other language varieties (Walsh 2021:775). Milroy and Milroy (2012) add that this belief leads to an assumption that standard language varieties should be fixed and are unchanged. Therefore, learners born in Winterveldt speak Sepitori and use it in their everyday lives even though when they enrol for school, they are expected to drop the language of home and select Setswana, a standard language variety, which appears to be a variety superior to the former variety. Considering the above views on SLI, non-standard language varieties such as Sepitori seem to be a great distance from being linked to nationality, even though language is an important factor in national identity (Walsh 2021:775). When members of a speech community speak or share the same language variety, it ensures that there is social unity; therefore, difference between standard and non-standard language variety should not be something to avoid in the language classroom.

Literature review

Sepitori (re-)defined

Sepitori is commonly defined as 'the language of Pretoria' (Ditsele & Mann 2014:159), a designation that foregrounds its emergence from urban multilingual contact. Sepitori acts as a linguistic marker for urban identity, particularly among the youth and residents within specific socio-economic and cultural contexts (Álvarez-Mosquera, Bornmane & Ditsele 2019; Madingwaneng & Ditsele 2025; Ndlovu 2018). Ditsele and Mann (2014) show that the name reflects local linguistic processes: Pretoria is rendered as *Pitori*, while the prefix *Se-* used in Setswana and Northern Sotho to name languages indexes an attempt to systematise the variety. The core lexical elements of Sepitori are predominantly sourced from Setswana and Northern Sotho, but it incorporates substantial English influences, particularly in urban settings and among younger speakers (Madingwaneng & Ditsele 2025). Malimabe (1990) positioned it within a Sotho dialect continuum, yet she describes the variety as informal, unwritten, and lexically diverse, drawing on Northern Sotho, other Sotho varieties, Afrikaans, and English. Subsequent work further identifies Nguni influences, particularly through discourse markers such as *yebo* and *awu* (Webb, Lafon & Pare 2010), underscoring Sepitori's status as a systematic urban repertoire shaped by multilingual interaction rather than linguistic deficiency.

Standard Setswana

Standard Setswana (also referred to as 'Setswana') is a standardised form of the Tswana language primarily spoken in Botswana and South Africa. Standard Setswana is codified and taught formally in schools, distinguishing it from various regional and sociolectal dialects of Tswana, which may not have the same level of recognition or codification (Andreiko, Medvedovska & Skarloupina 2021; Botlholo 2024). It serves as one of the official languages in both countries. Alongside Sesotho and Northern Sotho (Sepedi), it shares a high degree of mutual intelligibility, despite differences in phonology, morphology, and vocabulary (Nfila 2002). While earlier linguistic descriptions treat these differences as purely structural, this study foregrounds their relevance for writing, particularly in multilingual contexts such as Winterveldt. The absence of click sounds in Setswana and Northern Sotho, as well as differences in morphological marking and phonological realisation between Setswana and Northern Sotho, become salient in learners' written texts where Sepitori features are present. These structural contrasts influence orthographic choices, verb morphology, and grammatical constructions in learner writing, often resulting in forms that diverge from standard Setswana norms. In school contexts governed by SLI, such divergence is typically interpreted as error rather than as evidence of cross-linguistic influence within a mutually intelligible Sotho continuum. Thus, structural differences between Setswana and Sepitori matter not only linguistically, but pedagogically, as they shape how learner writing is evaluated and how linguistic legitimacy is constructed in the classroom

The influence of non-standard varieties on standard varieties

Over the years, researchers have focused on the influence of non-standard varieties on standard varieties in high schools, with less attention to primary schools. Wagner (2018), Nkosi (2008), and Malimabe (1990) conducted research on Sepitori's influence on the writing of Setswana and Northern Sotho among high school learners. Together, these studies show that learners often cannot distinguish between non-standard varieties and standard languages, substituting standard terms with non-standard equivalents. Malimabe found a misalignment between home and school language varieties, attributing this to learners' multilingual backgrounds. More recent scholarship reinterprets such 'interference' as systematic translanguaging practices, where learners mobilise available linguistic resources to make meaning in writing (Mbirimbi-Hungwe 2023; Probyn 2024). In addition, Majola (2024) conducted a similar study on the influence of a non-standard variety on a written standard variety with special focus on isiBhaca and isiXhosa co-existing side-by-side in Umzimkhulu schools, at senior phase level. This researcher's study findings revealed that isiBhaca influences the written output of isiXhosa at a senior phase level in Umzimkhulu schools. Therefore, it is worth noting that the three researchers' work (excerpt for Majola's) covered several research sites in Tshwane so that they could better see their chosen locations' role in the influence. In this article,

the researcher takes a different approach. Unlike the previous studies, this article hopes to fill the existing gap (and contribute) by focusing on two primary schools in Winterveldt, Tshwane.

Teachers' perceptions of the use of Sepitori in standard written Setswana

Teachers regularly have to confront the existence of non-standard varieties in their everyday teaching in the classroom (Jenkins 1991). The reason there appears to be opposition in the use of vernaculars in formal education is because there is a common assumption that it interferes with the acquisition of the standard language (Siegel 2007:71). Ford (1984) found that the speech patterns learners habitually use including their dialect, accent, vocabulary choices, and grammatical structures shape teachers' perceptions of their academic ability. Furthermore, Siegel (2010) opines that there is an inability to differentiate between the language of home and the standard language that must be learned in school. In the academic setting, the teachers as well as the authorities' perception of non-standard varieties used by learners has been a topic of discussion. In Switzerland, teachers tolerate the dialects and their use in education (Rosenberg 1989). In addition, in South Tyrol, Italy, there is wide acceptance of dialects, and the government has since introduced a dialect-oriented textbook (Tegegne 2016:95). In other countries such as Holland, however, teachers and education authorities do not view dialects in a positive light (Tegegne 2016); there is a popular belief that only the speakers of standard varieties will gain admittance to heaven because of the prestige of the languages they speak (Sturm 1989). In Britain, adds Hollingworth (1989), standard language-speakers see non-standard dialects as inherently inferior to standard languages and consider them to be of no linguistic value (Rosenberg 1989). To strengthen the above arguments, Craen and Humblet (1989) affirm that education authorities in Belgium believe that learners should strive to move away from non-standard dialect as much as they can and move towards the standard variety. Teachers and learners are from a society that ordinarily has a positive outlook on the standard language (Tegegne 2016:95) and, as result, they carry to school the beliefs and attitudes of the society from which they come (Maybin & Swann 2007). Hence, we often see teachers correct the non-standard form because it is perceived as a negative – a total opposite of the standard language (Tegegne 2016:95). In Majola and Cekiso's (2023) study on teachers' experience of teaching isiXhosa to isiBhaca-speaking learners, it was found that teachers believed it was important for learners to be taught in their home language, which they understand in any given context, because their knowledge of it will help them preserve their roots and identity. In addition, teachers opined that home language education helped learners to understand things such as learning a second language and communicating their thoughts (Majola & Cekiso 2023). However, teachers were worried that policymakers and curriculum designers excluded learners who took isiXhosa home language at school, despite it not necessarily being their home language (Majola & Cekiso 2023). Perhaps this is the reason for teachers to code switch between isiXhosa and isiBhaca language: they do it to ensure that learners understand them and are not left behind (Majola & Cekiso 2023). Their overall impression is that the teachers' experience with isiXhosa to isiBhaca-speaking learners is that learners were not as comfortable as they would have been if they were taught in their mother tongue (Majola & Cekiso 2023).

Research methods and design

Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which was considered appropriate for investigating the influence of Sepitori on written Setswana essays of Grade 6 learners in Winterveldt. The qualitative research approach is particularly suitable to research that seeks to understand meaning-making processes, social practices, and participant perspectives within specific contexts rather than to measure variables numerically (Braun & Clarke 2021; Creswell & Poth 2018). Given the study's focus on the influence of Sepitori on Grade 6 learners' Setswana writing, a qualitative approach enables close analysis of written essays alongside teachers' interpretive accounts of language use. Furthermore, the qualitative research approach is appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth, contextualised examination of a bounded system, in this instance literacy practices within two primary schools in a linguistically diverse township where Sepitori is a dominant everyday variety. It enabled a rich description and analysis of learner essays within their natural educational setting. The study followed case study research design, which also allows for an in-depth examination of a bounded system, while attending to contextual factors such as multilingualism, institutional norms, and classroom language ideologies (Merriam & Tisdell 2016; Yin 2018).

Research setting and participants

This study was conducted in two primary schools in Winterveldt, Tshwane, a linguistically diverse area where Sepitori is widely used in everyday communication. Participants comprised Grade 6 Setswana learners and their Setswana home language teachers. For learners, a purposive sampling method was used to select learners' essays for analysis. All Grade 6 learners in the two schools who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate. The final corpus consisted of 100 essays (50 Grade 6 learners), which provided a substantial corpus for qualitative linguistic analysis. Inclusion criteria required learners to be enrolled for Setswana Home Language, to be regular class attendees, and to have provided written assent alongside parental consent. For teachers, a purposive sampling method was used to select three Grade 6 Setswana teachers (one from School A, two from School B) based on their direct experience teaching Setswana as a home language at the time of data collection.

Data collection methods

Two complementary data sources were used to allow for methodological triangulation (Denzin 2017). Learner data

were collected through a written essay task designed to elicit extended Setswana writing under classroom conditions. Essays provide access to learners' actual written language practices and are particularly suitable for examining lexical choice, grammatical structure, orthography, and discourse patterns (Hyland 2016; Ivanič 2004). Learners responded to the same topic to ensure comparability across texts. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the three teachers. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore participants' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences while retaining flexibility to probe emerging issues (Brinkmann & Kvale 2018; Kallio et al. 2016). Interviews focused on teachers' perceptions of Sepitori, their experiences of marking learner writing, and how they interpret non-standard forms in relation to curriculum and assessment expectations. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a qualitative thematic and linguistic analysis approach. Learner essays were analysed inductively to identify recurrent patterns related to the influence of Sepitori, including lexical substitution, morpho-syntactic variation, orthographic features reflecting Sepitori pronunciation, and non-standard grammatical constructions. These features were examined not as isolated errors but as patterned language use shaped by learners' linguistic repertoires. Teacher interview transcripts were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis framework. Initial coding focused on teachers' attitudes towards Sepitori, perceptions of correctness, and assessment practices. Codes were then organised into broader themes related to language ideology, legitimacy, and pedagogical tension. Importantly, analysis was guided by SLI and translanguaging frameworks, ensuring alignment between the study's theoretical orientation and analytic procedures (Makoni & Pennycook 2012; Garcia & Wei 2014). This allowed the study to link micro-level textual features in learner writing to macro-level ideological processes shaping classroom practice. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the study employed data triangulation across learner texts and teacher interviews, as well as thick description of linguistic patterns and classroom context (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Nowell et al. 2017). Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process by critically examining how dominant language ideologies influence both participant responses and analytical interpretation.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology Ethics Committee (REC Ref #: REC2023/02/0016). Written informed consent was secured from school principals, teachers, and parents/guardians. Learner assent was obtained prior to data collection. All participants were assured of anonymity; schools and individuals are referred to using pseudonyms throughout.

Findings

Linguistic patterns of Sepitori influence in learner essays

A total of 100 essays were retrieved from Grade 6 learners who studied Setswana as a home language in two primary schools, denoted as School A and School B, situated in Winterveldt. The whole purpose behind the exercise was to determine the influence of Sepitori on the Setswana written by Grade 6 learners. Sepitori is a non-standard variety that has proven to be difficult for the Grade 6 learners to distinguish from Setswana. It is a variety that emerged when Setswana and Northern Sotho came into contact with one another. As with standard languages, Sepitori also uses borrowed, loaned, and transliterated terms, mostly from English and Afrikaans. The influence of Sepitori on Setswana written by Grade 6 learners is shown below by means of tables. The Sepitori terms presented in the tables are prevalent among the two primary schools. Furthermore, they are presented according to different word categories.

Category 1: Sepitori vs Setswana phrases

Table 1 presents Sepitori phrases that were identified from the two primary schools. The phrases in Table 1 illustrate systematic lexical and structural influence from Sepitori. For instance, *go tseba dilo* instead *go itse dilo* shows Northern Sotho lexical influence (*tseba* meaning 'to know'). Similarly, *ba phela ka thekenoloji* replaces standard *ba tshela ka thekenoloji*, reflecting a different verb choice common in Sepitori. These patterns are not random errors, but consistent features of learners' spoken repertoires transferred into writing. Table 1 shows the most used Sepitori phrases and their Setswana and English equivalents. The Grade 6 learners used these Sepitori phrases in their essays to contextualise their understanding of the essay question that was posed to them. This is represented on the column 'Sepitori phrases' while the appropriate Setswana phrases that the Grade 6 learners should have written are represented on the column 'Setswana phrases', and the last column is populated with English equivalents.

Lexical substitution: The most frequent form of influence identified in the learners' essays was lexical replacement,

TABLE 1: Sepitori phrases.

Sepitori phrases	Setswana phrases	English equivalent
Go tseba dilo	*Go itse dilo*	To know things
Ga bana monyetla	*Ga ba na tšhono*	They do not have a chance
O mo kereya mo mogaleng wa letheka	*O mo fitlhela mo mogaleng wa letheka*	You find them on the cellphone
Ba phela ka thekenoloji	*Ba tshela ka thekenoloji*	They live with technology
Ba berekisa thekenoloji	*Ba dirisa thekenoloji*	They use technology
Batho bale ko kgole	*Batho ba ba leng kgakala*	People that are far
Go utlwela ditaba	*Go utlwelela dikgang*	To listen to the news
Selo se re gwetsang	*Selo se re se fitlhelang*	Something that we find
Re ithutile le go tlhompha	*Re ithutile le go tlotla*	We learned (how) to respect
Re tethuta ka yona	*Re ithuta ka yona*	We learn through it

Source: Mbonani, B.S., 2024, 'The influence of Sepitori on Setswana studied by grade 6 learners as a home language at selected schools in Winterveldt, City of Tshwane', Unpublished Masters dissertation, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria

where Sepitori terms were used in place of standard Setswana equivalents. Examples drawn from learner texts include:

*Ba **berekisa** thekenoloji.*

[They **use** technology]

Standard Setswana: *ba **dirisa***

*Ga ke **utlwelle** ditaba ka gore ga di nkgatlhe.*

[I don't **listen** to news because it doesn't interest me.]

Standard Setswana: *ga ke **utlwelele***

These substitutions were not random but followed predictable semantic and phonetic patterns, often reflecting Northern Sotho or urban hybrid forms.

Morpho-syntactic transfer: Learners frequently employed Sepitori-influenced grammatical structures, particularly in verb morphology and noun class agreement:

*Re **ithutile** le go **tlhompha**.*

[We learned to respect.]

Standard Setswana: *re **ithutile*** [same] or *go tlotla*

***Selo** se re **se gwetsang** …*

[Something that we find]

Standard Setswana: *selo se re se fitlhelang*

Such constructions indicate deep-seated transfer from spoken Sepitori into writing, beyond mere vocabulary swapping.

Category 2: Sepitori nouns

Table 2 presents Sepitori nouns that were identified from the two primary schools. Table 2 shows Sepitori nouns that were most used in essays written by the Grade 6 learners from the two schools. The nouns in the table are presented without any specific context. The column 'Sepitori nouns' has a list of nouns that the learners opted to use rather than appropriate nouns listed in the column 'Setswana nouns', and the third column presents the English nouns. Worth noting is that these Sepitori nouns are a collection of coined, loaned, and borrowed terms from Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, English, and Afrikaans.

TABLE 2: Sepitori nouns.

Sepitori noun	Setswana noun	English equivalent
Kgotso	*Kagiso*	Peace
Phone	*Mogala-wa-letheka*	Phone
Dipoleke	*Mafelo*	Places
MaAfrica	*MaAforika*	Africans
Sinema	*Baesekopo*	Cinema
Ditaba	*Dikgang*	News
Mabone	*Motlakase*	Electricity
Bophelo	*Botshelo*	Life
Eloporeini	*Sefofane*	Aeroplane
Poramasetofo	*Setofo sa parafene*	Paraffin stove

Source: Mbonani, B.S., 2024, 'The influence of Sepitori on Setswana studied by grade 6 learners as a home language at selected schools in Winterveldt, City of Tshwane', Unpublished Masters dissertation, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria

Orthographic and phonological influence

Spelling often reflected Sepitori pronunciation rather than standard Setswana orthography:

Eloporeini for ***Sefofane*** [aeroplane]

Poramasetofo for ***Setofo sa parafene*** [paraffin stove]

These spellings reveal how learners' phonological awareness, shaped by Sepitori speech, shapes their writing.

Category 4: Sepitori verbs

Table 3 presents Sepitori verbs that were identified from the two primary schools. Table 3 shows Sepitori verbs identified from the Grade 6 learners' written essays. In the first column 'Sepitori verb', a list of common Sepitori verbs is given, followed by a column of Setswana verbs, and lastly, a column of their English equivalents. The verbs in the table are not presented in context. The Sepitori verbs identified are a collection of coined, loaned, and borrowed terms from Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, English, and Afrikaans.

Synthesis of data from learners' essays

All of the Grade 6 learners' standard Setswana writing was influenced by Sepitori. The learners proved that they are unable construct essays without the interference of Sepitori. This is a variety that they know so well, because they speak and understand it. All 100 learner essays showed evidence of Sepitori influence, although to varying degrees. The most frequent category was lexical substitution (approximately 68% of identified non-standard forms), followed by morpho-syntactic transfer (22%), and orthographic or phonological influence (10%). These proportions suggest that Sepitori influence operates primarily at the word level, but also affects sentence structure and spelling. Importantly, no essay was entirely free of Sepitori lexical items, indicating that for these learners, Sepitori functions not only as a spoken language variety but also a written one. This finding challenges the assumption that learners can simply 'switch off' their home variety when writing.

Analysis of data from the teachers

Three teachers from the two primary schools were interviewed (individually) to determine their views

TABLE 3: Sepitori verbs.

Sepitori verb	Setswana verb	English equivalent
Thusa	*Thusa*	Help
Berekisa	*Dirisa*	Use
Utlwela	*Utlwelela*	Listen
Refa	*Neela*	Give
Nyaka	*Batla*	Look for
Tšhatšha	*Go tsenya motlakase*	Charge
Laeta	*Tshuba*	Set alight
Kereya	*Fitlhela*	Find
Phounela	*Leletsa*	Call
Beya	*Baya*	Put

Source: Mbonani, B.S., 2024, 'The influence of Sepitori on Setswana studied by grade 6 learners as a home language at selected schools in Winterveldt, City of Tshwane', Unpublished Masters dissertation, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria

regarding the influence of Sepitori on Setswana. The researchers interviewed three Grade 6 teachers because one of the chosen schools at the time only had one teacher responsible for teaching Setswana while the other school had two. Furthermore, the study was only limited to teachers who taught Setswana in Grade 6 rather than a teacher from any grade who could teach the subject. Their profiles are provided in Table 4, where the codes SFT1 (Siamisang, Female, Teacher 1), MFT2 (Manamelong, Female, Teacher 2), and MMT3 (Manamelong, Male, Teacher 3) were given to keep anonymity. A semi-structured interview guide of six preset questions was used guide the interaction between them and the researcher.

Table 4 shows the biographic information of the Grade 6 Setswana teachers from the two chosen schools in the Winterveldt area. The three teachers teach Setswana in Grade 6, and only one of them does not speak Setswana as a home language. All of them are qualified teachers, with one having a Bachelor of Education Honours (B Ed Honours) as their highest qualification, and the lowest level of education being a Diploma in Education. They all speak and understand Sepitori. The three teachers from the two schools were asked to respond to preset questions posed to them in a semi-structured interview because they were the most suitable people to give the researcher insights on the influence of Sepitori on the Setswana written by the Grade 6 learners. The data from the teachers were organised in such way that three themes emerged. The themes identified are presented below.

Theme 1: The influence of Sepitori on standard Setswana

For this theme, questions 2, 3 and 4 were posed to the respondents, namely:

- Question 2: What is your perception of the influence that Sepitori has on Setswana?
- Question 3: How noticeable is Sepitori's influence on their written output of Setswana?
- Question 4: How does Sepitori influence your Grade 6 learners' written Setswana?

One participant could not adequately respond to the main question – their response was not satisfactory. In response to the main question, they explained their leniency on the use of Sepitori by the Grade 6 learners:

> 'Sepitori, I cannot oppress it too much because here in Winterveldt, learners are used to isiZulu, and are used to Sepitori, but when comes to Setswana, it seems like they know what is expected of them.' (SFT1, female, 28 years old, B Ed)

TABLE 4: Participants' demographic information.

Teacher	School	Sex	Age (years)	Qualification	Subject taught	Home language	Residence
SFT1	A	Female	28	B Ed	Setswana	Setswana	Mabopane
MFT2	B	Female	46	Diploma in Education	Setswana	isiZulu	Slovo (under Winterveldt)
MMT3	B	Male	52	B Ed (Honours)	Setswana	Setswana and English	Soshanguve

Source: Mbonani, B.S., 2024, 'The influence of Sepitori on Setswana studied by grade 6 learners as a home language at selected schools in Winterveldt, City of Tshwane', Unpublished Masters dissertation, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria

B Ed, Bachelor of Education.

Another participant reported that the Grade 6 learners could not write because of Sepitori's influence, and they were not creative writers:

> 'Yoh! The learners cannot write at all because most of the time … firstly, they are not that creative in writing. I do not know whether it is either us teachers who do not give them creative writing [*sic*].' (MFT2, female, 46 years old, Diploma in Education)

A participant reported that the influence of Sepitori on Setswana caused the performance of Setswana to drop:

> 'The level of performance have [*sic*] dropped, drastically. Whereby some you have to credit them for trying their best. So, the influence of Sepitori literally dropped the level of Setswana, pure Setswana.' (MMT3, male, 52 years old, B Ed)

Responding to the follow-up question, one participant reported that Sepitori could not be wished away and explained that it will continue to coexist side-by-side with Setswana in the classroom. On the other hand the particpant voiced:

> 'Yes, they do but it will always be known that Sepitori exists and [*they*] use it, and even if they proceed to other grades, it will continue existing – other words, we do not know them.' (SFT1, female, 28 years old, B Ed)

Another participant's response to the follow-up question was that both the Grade 6 learners and teachers saw Setswana as a language barrier for them because creative ideas could not be shared – competence of Setswana was a hindrance:

> 'Setswana is a barrier for us, and the root cause is the Foundation phase. So, if in foundation they do not do creative writing or they do not give it ample time, it becomes a problem. Even Grade 4s, Grade 6 is worse because some of the learners cannot write simple words that have basic phonics.' (MFT2, female, 46 years old, Diploma in Education)

A participant reported that the Setswana that was written by the Grade 6 learners was not meeting the standards, and learners were not penalised for not writing Setswana correctly. This participant added that the setback was a result of inadequate teaching of the language subject at Foundation Phase:

> 'The Grade 6 learners' Setswana writing is not up to the expected standard, and you have to be lenient.' (MMT3, male, 52 years, B Ed Honours)

Theme 2: The use of Sepitori in teaching and learning

For this theme, questions 5 and 6 were posed to the respondents:

- Question 5: What challenges do you face when you assess Grade 6 learners in Setswana writing?
- Question 6: What are the factors that contribute to the inconsistencies in the Setswana written by Grade 6 learners?

Two participants believed that the Grade learners' background played a huge role in the inconsistencies that they had observed. For one participant (SFT1), the major

factor was support from parents – they did not play their role. Parents perpetuated the use of Sepitori instead of discouraging its use. To add to this opinion, one participant (SFT1) mentioned that learners got discouraged because they were not mother-tongue speakers of Setswana, and therefore they received little support from their parents. In addition, learners lacked the motivation learn Setswana because they did not receive any incentives as they were used to in the past. Participant MFT2 held a different view. They alluded that there should have been a particular partnership or working relationship between the Foundation Phase teachers and Intermediate Phase teachers because, as things stood, it seemed as if they were doing little to no work in assisting learners in writing Setswana. Therefore, this put pressure on the Intermediate Phase teachers because they had to teach what learners should have known from previous grades.

Synthesis of data from interviews with teachers

The three teachers confirmed that Sepitori significantly influences learners' written Setswana. However, their responses also revealed ideological tensions. While teachers expressed concern about declining standards, they simultaneously admitted to leniency in marking. For example, one participant stated that learners' writing 'is not up to the expected standard and you have to be lenient' (MMT3). This leniency can be interpreted through SLI as a pragmatic response to an unrealistic expectation: requiring standard Setswana from learners who primarily speak Sepitori. Another participant (SFT1) explicitly acknowledged that Sepitori, 'cannot be oppressed too much' and will continue to coexist with Setswana in the classroom. These teacher perspectives suggest that while the curriculum enforces standard language norms, classroom practice already accommodates non-standard varieties in unofficial ways.

Discussion of findings

The findings demonstrate that Sepitori systematically influences Grade 6 learners' written Setswana across lexical, morpho-syntactic, and orthographic dimensions. Returning to the research questions: first, the extent of Sepitori influence is substantial, with lexical substitution being the most frequent pattern (e.g. *berekisa* for *dirisa*). Second, teachers perceive this influence as a problem but respond with pragmatic leniency, revealing an ideological contradiction between curriculum expectations and classroom realities. These findings are best understood through SLI. Under SLI, learners' use of Sepitori is framed as 'error', not because it impedes communication, but because it violates codified norms (Lippi-Green 2012). However, the high frequency and systematic International Telecommunication Union (ITU) of Sepitori features in learner writing challenge the deficit view. Instead, they support a language contact perspective, where transfer occurs naturally across mutually intelligible varieties (Odlin 1989). This study extends existing research (Malimabe 1990; Wagner 2018) by showing that Sepitori influence begins well before high school and is already entrenched by Grade 6. The pedagogical implication is significant: current assessment practices penalise learners for using their primary linguistic repertoire. Rather than dismissing Sepitori, teachers could use it as a bridge to standard Setswana, as Gxilishe (1996) suggests. This would require shifting from a deficit orientation to a resource orientation, acknowledging that multilingual learners do not have 'incomplete' language but a different, systematic repertoire. The findings from the interviews with teachers revealed that indeed Sepitori influenced Setswana written by Grade 6 learners across the two primary schools in Winterveldt, City of Tshwane. Sepitori is a variety that the Grade 6 learners, as well as the teachers, speak and understand. They had picked it up from their various communities and brought it into the classroom. This finding is in line with Malimabe's (1990:8) view that Sepitori has a huge influence on Setswana spoken in many areas in the Tshwane region, and influences the Setswana language that the learners ought to be learning in schools. Surprisingly, there were no terms or coinages from Nguni languages as was previously found by Webb et al. (2010:281), who claimed that the terminology of isiZulu (a Nguni language) was making its way into Sepitori. What must be noted is that the aforementioned researchers' data look slightly different because the linguistic compositions of Sepitori from their research site vary from those that this study found in Winterveldt. The use of Sepitori terms by the Grade 6 learners was generally high regardless of gender. Therefore, to some reasonable degree, this finding discredits Xia's argument (2013) that women use the standard language more accurately than men do – being strict on following the rules of a language.

Practical implications

For teachers, the study suggests that marking schemes should distinguish between errors that impede meaning and systematic transfer features that do not. For curriculum developers, it recommends incorporating awareness of Sepitori into teacher training and assessment guidelines. For policymakers, it argues against a strict standard-only approach and in favour of additive multilingual pedagogies that recognise non-standard varieties as legitimate resources.

Conclusion

The analysis of the data from the teachers and from the learners revealed that Sepitori indeed was influencing the written output of Grade 6 learners who studied standard Setswana at the two selected in Winterveldt, City of Tshwane. These findings confirm and support the findings by Wagner (2018), Malimabe (1990) and Nkosi (2008) who all found that Sepitori influenced the standard varieties of Northern Sotho and Setswana in high schools. This research makes three contributions. First, it extends the study of Sepitori influence from high school to primary school,

showing that transfer is already entrenched by Grade 6. Second, it applies SLI as an analytical framework to teacher perceptions, revealing how ideological beliefs shape assessment practices. Third, it provides empirical evidence from 100 learner essays and three teacher interviews, offering a robust qualitative dataset from an under-researched area.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Benedict S. Mbonani: Conceptualisation, Investigation. Yanga L.P. Majola: Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Tebogo J. Rakgogo: Data curation, Formal analysis, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. 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.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Tshwane University of Technology Digital Open Repository.

Disclaimer

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