Lexical similarities between Khelobedu dialect and Tshivenḓa and Sepedi languages

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This article endeavours to argue from a linguistic point of view for the 'independence' of Khelobedu, to be recognised as an additional official language in the Republic of South Africa. The speakers of Khelobedu speak neither Sepedi or Tshivenḓa as some linguists claim. From the wide range of literature on this phenomenon, some Sepedi and Tshivenḓa linguists claim that this language (Khelobedu) is their dialect. This indecisiveness leaves Khelobedu speakers in limbo. As a result, Balobedu learners end up performing poorly academically because they learn the Sepedi language as their second language instead. The purpose of this article is to argue on linguistic grounds against such a classification by the earlier linguists and missionaries as the findings succinctly provide evidence in support of this position. In attempting to dispute this classification, the content analysis method was employed for data gathering purposes. A comparative lexicostatistic approach was used to undergird the study. In terms of data, Khelobedu, Tshivenḓa and Sepedi lexical items were collected and compared to corroborate the claim. Nevertheless, Khelobedu strongly shows its 'independence' as do Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana and isiZulu, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and Siswati. Furthermore, Khelobedu and Sepedi differ greatly in terms of their pronunciation. The issue around mutual intelligibility, we argue, should not be put into this equation. The article recommends that Khelobedu be regarded as an official language that Balobedu learners and students could use as a medium of teaching and learning; furthermore, Balobedu's identity should also not be compromised.

Contribution: The significance and contribution of this article to scientific knowledge resides in its contention that the classification of Khelobedu as one of the dialects of the Sepedi or Northern Sotho language lacks linguistic justification. The article further argues that this misclassification was due to the partnership that existed between the missionaries and the colonial government in consultation with their informants who only recognised varieties where the missionaries settled and operated. Therefore, it is postulated that Khelobedu should be considered a fully fledged language since it shows its own linguistic repertoire.

Keywords: Khelobedu; Tshivenḓa; Sepedi; dialect; language; lexical item; comparative lexicostatistics and ethnography.

Introduction

In this article, both names, Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa, have been used interchangeably when referring to one official standard language. In addition, the Sepedi language name is also used when referring to a dialect, when it comes to its classification as part of the Sepedi language group, that is one of many dialects. The purpose of this explanation is to help the reader deal with the confusion that they may experience because of the synonymous use of both names, Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa, when referring to the official language. As authors, we are fully aware that 'Sepedi' replaced 'Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa' as the official name for the language according to the Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996 (Rakgogo & Van Huyssteen 2018, 2019; Rakgogo & Zungu 2021, 2022a, 2022b).

The object of this article is to explore the possibilities of Khelobedu becoming one of the official languages in the Republic of South Africa, based on linguistic grounds and, to some extent, its cultural background. This critical matter cannot be viewed exclusively as a language issue. Language and culture are intertwined; a language is a medium through which a culture is transmitted. From an ethnopragmatic point of view, a language reflects people's worldviews and their thoughts about life in general (Cliff & Wierzbicka 1997; Mamvura 2021). It is the authors' view that if the issue of classification of languages is approached from this angle, a better result could be arrived at.

At a general level, lexical items may be perceived as a single word or as part of a word that forms the basic elements of a language's lexicon or vocabulary. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010:334), a lexical item is also called a lexeme, which is considered the smallest unit in the meaning system of a language that is distinguishable from other similar units. On the other hand, Beltrán (2006) defines cognates as words in two or more languages with a common origin because of their diachronic relationships; as a result, these words have shared formal and/or semantic affinity. While Khelobedu is regarded as one of the Sepedi dialects, Tshivenḓa and Sepedi are independent languages, which are among the 11 South African official languages that have been accorded official status by the 1996 South African Constitution, while Khelobedu has not been accorded such status, and as such its speakers are in limbo. Geographically, the authors put forward that the Balobedu are located in three ethnic groups: the Vhavenḓa, to the north, the Bapedi, to the south-west and the Vatsonga to the north-east. Some of these linguistic communities are commonly found in most parts of the Bolobedu villages. The central tribal village of the Balobedu is Khethakong, which is situated in Ga-Modjadji under the Mopani District Municipality, north-east of Polokwane, the provincial capital of the Limpopo province. The Balobedu has grown into a large community organised into 134 large towns and hamlets under 128 local traditional leaders who have been consecutively led by six kings and queens.

The original sub-tribes of the Lobedu, apart from the royal Bakwebo group, were Baroka or Balaudi (different groups of north-eastern Sotho), Bathobolo, Balepa and Bakona or Vhangoṇa. Vhangoṇa is the Venḓa aborigine, and those who came with or were found by the royal group of Balobedu in the area were conquered and successfully incorporated into the kingdom, which is why they are not singled out. Over the years, this group has been completely assimilated into Balobedu. Vatsonga flooded into Bolobedu very late, and they were looked down upon by many of the 'original sub-tribes' of Balobedu, which is why they were singled out. Thus, the Vhavenḓa people who retain their language and inhabit the Bolobedu area, are from recent migration, and they are very few, which is why it would seem there are only a few Tshivenḓa-speaking people among Bolobedu. Parsons (1993) describes the Balobedu as follows:

> Oral evidence shows that the Lobedu were originally a Venḓa group which has since been heavily influenced by Pedi language and culture. The same may apply to Phalaborwa people whose traditional pottery is like that of Lobedu. (p. 40)

Similar to this, Mohale (2014:1–2) cites Cartwright (1974) to say that the Balobedu tribe first appeared in the early 17th century. The Mapungubwe Kingdoms and Balobedu, who are descended from the Shona people of Zimbabwe, are where this group's origins and affinities lie. According to the oral literature, Monomotapa founded this kingdom in the early 17th century following a conflict with her father. A previous spirit made the head of the tribe his successor.

According to Mohale (2014:1–2), the Balobedu people were once split into the Northern Transvaal BaRozwi and the Southern Transvaal BaRozwi. Bana ba Tsiekhalaka ('the children of ants') was another name for the BaRozwi of the North-Eastern Transvaal (an earlier name for the province).

When expounding the historical background of the Balobedu tribe, Mohale (2014:2) avers that the first chief who broke away from Monomotapa had a daughter known as Dzugudini who had a sexual relationship with her brother and fell pregnant. She and her mother refused to reveal to her father the secret of who had impregnated her, and they decided to leave the royal house. She fled from her father's brutality and took some of his followers and her rainmaking powers to the Venḓa region of the Northern Province, now known as the Vhembe district. In the 19th century, the Balobedu tribe migrated further south to the fertile Molototsi valley, where in 1894 they founded present-day Ga-Modjadji. In this article, the researchers find this historical background to be of paramount importance as it emphasises the interrelatedness of the Balobedu and Vhavenḓa after the Balobedu broke away from Zimbabwe.

Nomenclature of the Khelobedu language

Khelobedu is frequently referred to by its various names that are written differently, such as Khelobedu, Khelovhedu, Khelovedu, Khelozwi, Selodzwi or Selobedu (Rakgogo & Mandende 2022). As the language was never standardised, it is currently challenging to determine whether or not the spelling of the designation is accepted as being correct. Practically speaking, all forms of the above-mentioned spellings were used in writing; hence, it lacks an established written form and spelling. Given that lexical elements designating languages or cultures can be found in class 7 and contain the prefix khe-, the name Khelobedu will be used in this article. In addition, the prefix ba- (Balobedu) designates the language's speakers, while the prefix bo- (Bolobedu) designates the location where the language is spoken (class 14 and class 2). These prefixes, *bo-* and *ba-*, are similar to the Sepedi and Tshivenḓa prefixes. The only difference that exists is in the Tshivenḓa orthography, since the prefix vha- is used. In terms of this article, what is crucial is that all these languages have the same pronunciations. This comes as no surprise because all of these languages are members of the same language family, that is, Bantu languages (Doke 1954; Guthrie 1948).

The khe- prefix is typically used by speakers of this language, as in the expressions *khelo khela kha maabane*, which means 'that object of yesterday', and *khebhebhe khela kha maabane*, which means 'that van of yesterday'. It should be observed that the voiced bilabial stop [b] and voiced bilabial fricative [β] are both represented by the sound /b/ in this phrase. The use of two distinct sounds, according to the researchers, will make it straightforward for non-Khelobedu speakers to understand and distinguish the differences. However, the researchers concede that the prefix se-, rather than khe-, is

used in several parts of Bolobedu, including Mamokgadi, Ga-Mamaila, Ga-Nakampe, Bothabelo and Makgakapate. For obvious reasons, this dialect's name is pronounced Selobedu rather than Khelobedu in the aforementioned locations. However, it should be mentioned that the term Khelobedu is preferred in this study (Rakgogo & Mandende 2022).

Dialect vis-à-vis language

The authors (2022) hold the linguistic view that, so far, sociolinguists have not yet succeeded in providing a clear distinction between a dialect and a language. Makoni (2005) as cited by Rakgogo and Mandende (2022) laments that in African countries, indigenous linguistic forms are typically referred to as *vernaculars* or *dialects*, whereas European linguistic forms are called *languages*. He further argues that this terminology was part of the colonial discourse that stigmatised African languages in relation to European languages. In the context of this article, we share a similar view with Makoni (2005), who articulates that it is also important in African sociolinguistics to interrogate this point further, focusing specifically on the classification of African languages, where some of the minority languages were grouped with languages associated with high status, education and socio-economic power.

Fasold and Connor-Linton (2006) in Rakgogo (2019:103) candidly state that an important point for linguists, and for linguistic study, is not whether we choose to call a variety a language or a dialect or whether we choose to uphold a particular variety as a standard, but that all language varieties, no matter what their label or their political or social standing, are equally linguistically well formed and operate according to precise patterns or rules. It is against this background that Rakgogo (2019:107) submits that the relationship between dialect and language is inclusive rather than exclusive and that language is just a generic or superordinate term embracing any number of dialects and styles. It can, therefore, be understood within the context of this article that the two are practically considered as languages. Meaning that Khelobedu, Sepedi and Tshivenda should be considered as three separate languages. Technically, the only distinction is the fact that the standard languages (Sepedi and Tshivenda) have been codified. This means they have linguistic (spelling and grammatical) rules, and they are the ones that are strictly associated with positive connotations such as education, sophistication, power, prestige and high status while the other one (dialect) is associated with negative connotations such as low level of education and low status (Rakgogo 2019).

According to Mesthrie (2002:66), standardisation because of language planning is a famously political process, and the South African experience is no exception. Similar to this, Fasold and Connor-Linton (2006:385) argue that the dominant social groups determine what is meant by the term 'standard', and that the standard form is invariably quite similar to the language that the decision-makers use. In Rakgogo (2019:147), Kaplan (2004) emphasises that language planning is about political expediency, power dynamics, economics

and the allocation of the time and energy of administrators, instructors and students.

Similarly, Webb (2010:168) reveals that missionaries were responsible for 'standardizing' Bantu languages in South Africa during the 19th century, including the Swiss for Tsonga, the Germans for Pedi and the French for the Sesotho cluster (from 1833). These missionaries constructed schools where they taught these languages and created orthographic systems (based on the Roman script of 26 letters and introducing diacritics), grammar rules, dictionaries and Bible translations in these languages (Webb 2010:168).

It is against this background that Rakgogo and Zungu (2022a) submit that the official standard language Sepedi is purely based on the Sepedi dialect with some combination of the Sekopa dialect, and the rest of the 25 languages were administratively classified as Sepedi dialects. Similarly, the official standard Setswana language is purely based on Sekgatla and Sehurutse dialects, and the remaining nine varieties (Sengwaketse, Serolong, Setlhaping, Setlhware, Sekwena, Sengwato, Setawana, Transvaal Sekgatla and West-Transvaal Sekwena) are administratively regarded as Setswana dialects. The Tshiphani dialect was considered as the basis of the Tshivenḓa language with the remaining six dialects (Tshiṱavha-tsindi, Tshiilafuri, Tshimanda, Tshiguvhu, Tshimbedzi and Tshilembetu) being classified as Tshivenda dialects. Xitsonga is based on the Nkuna dialect, and the other 10 dialects (Luleke, Gwamba, Changana, Hlave, Kande, N'walungu, Xonga, Jonga, Songa and Nhlanganu) are considered as dialects of Xitsonga. Finally, Gcaleka and Ngqika dialects, among others, were considered as the basis of the official standard isiXhosa language while the remaining nine varieties (Ndlambe, Thembu, Bomvana, Mpondomise, Mpondo, Bhaca, Cele, Hlubi and Mfhengu) are, therefore, administratively regarded as dialects of the standard isiXhosa.

Within the parameters of this article, we submit that the classification of Khelobedu as one of the dialects of the Sepedi language needs to be linguistically interrogated. The current article will determine if such classification accommodated linguistic or administrative reasons. Our argument will be validated by the lexical items that will be randomly collected and analysed in this article.

The Khelobedu orthography

It is significant to be cognisant that Khelobedu has never been formally codified. According to Mojela (2008:121–122), German missionaries' activities in the Sekhukhuneland had a significant impact on the evolution of the Sepedi orthography and the emergence of its standard forms. He further asserts that Sekopa and Sepedi were the first and only Sesotho sa Leboa (Sepedi) dialects that German missionaries were able to learn to speak and write. Because of the missionaries' unjust promotion and elevation of the dialect or dialects in the regions where they initially settled and functioned into a standard language, languages like Khelobedu did not have an orthography.

In addition to creating orthographic systems based on the Roman alphabet's 26 letters and adding diacritical marks, the missionaries also translated the Bible into these languages, created dictionaries, formulated grammar rules and built schools where these languages were taught (Webb 2010). It is important to note that the Khelobedu language may use an orthographic system similar to that of German, which was also adopted by the Sepedi and Tshivena languages. The authors then draw the conclusion that if earlier missionaries and linguists had attempted to reduce Khelobedu to writing, they would have done so in accordance with the same rules they used for Tshivena and Sepedi writing.

Equally important, the orthography of the current standard Tshivenḓa is influenced by Sepedi, as the missionaries that came to Venḓa around 1872 were accompanied by Sepedi speakers as their interpreters, which resulted in Tshivenḓa borrowing a lot of the linguistic forms from Sepedi as far as orthography is concerned (Mafela 2005). In terms of this article, it needs to be stated that Khelobedu has no official orthography and vocabulary. Therefore, the authors used phonetic transcriptions and phonological processes to transcribe the spoken vocabulary into lexical items, based on the linguistic knowledge and experience of both Tshivenḓa and Sepedi.

Research problem

Scholars such as Kretzer (2016); Makoni (2005); Mohale (2014); Mulaudzi (1987); Mojela (1999, 2007, 2008); Rakgogo and Mandende (2022) contend that the classification of the South African indigenous languages has been a problem since its inception. It is argued that this classification left some idiomatically suboptimal among other language communities and ethnic groups, as their languages were never, deliberately or otherwise, regarded as languages of official status, but dialects of languages with which they show some degree of similarity, despite the acknowledgement by the same linguists that some languages that likewise show similarity were recognised and accorded official status. The case at hand is the one of the Sotho and Nguni languages. This can be seen between Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi and isiZulu, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and Siswati, which are treated as independent languages despite their mutual intelligibility. And as such, all these languages are given official status. One wonders why Khelobedu was not treated the same way as these languages, as it shows some similarities with Tshivenḓa or Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana. The current situation in Bolobedu is against social justice principles (Fraser 2008). Balobedu learners, particularly at Foundation Phase, also need to access education in their home language (HL), that is, Khelobedu. It is against this background that we argue, empirically, for Khelobedu to be accorded official status, as a language that Balobedu learners and students can be allowed to use as a language of teaching and learning and also be proud of and not be treated as a dialect of Sepedi.

The objective

The objective of the article is to explore the lexical similarities between Khelobedu, Tshivenḓa and Sepedi and further argue against the current classification of Khelobedu as a dialect of the Sepedi language.

Comparative lexicostatistics as a conceptual framework

According to Van Niekerk (2020:12), the method of comparative lexicostatistics is most commonly used when comparing the lexicons of different languages with the intention of determining if there is an existing relationship between two languages or varieties. The relevance and significance of comparative lexicostatistics for this article are that, through lexical items and pronunciation, a conclusion can be made about whether the phenomena are similar or not. Gudschinsky (1956) avers that the percentage of similarity gives an indication of the relatedness of the languages being compared. In this article, after data analysis, we envisage to establish whether there is considerable empirical evidence that supports our claim that Khelobedu should not be regarded as a dialect, which subjects its speakers to learn Sepedi or Tshivenda or any other language as their mother tongue or HL, as this language, that is, Khelobedu, is purely distinct from these other languages. The mutual intelligibility criterion should not be used as a yardstick in this case, as it was not used between Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana, and isiZulu, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and Siswati. A Grade 2 learner growing at Ga-Modjadji, who has not made any language contact with Sepedi or Tshivenḓa, would find themselves lost if spoken to in any of these languages which linguists claim are mutually intelligible.

The historical account of Khelobedu

Kotzé (2004:20) postulates that Khelobedu, or Lobedu as it is generally called by scholars, is one of the dialects belonging to the North-Eastern cluster of Northern Sotho (Sepedi in this case) (S.33), along with such dialects as Phalaborwa and Mahlo. The dialects of this cluster show clear phonological and morphological influences of Tshivenḓa, which is spoken to the north of the greater area within which speakers belonging to the North-Eastern dialect cluster (Van Wyk's classification 1969) are found. This area includes towns such as Duiwelskloof (now known as Modjadjiskloof) and Tzaneen and stretches north towards the Vhembe district, where Tshivenḓa speech communities are found, east towards the Mopani district, where the Xitsonga speech communities are found, and the Kruger National Park.

When confirming the lexical relationship between Khelobedu and Tshivenḓa, Maylam (1986) in Sikhweni (2016:15) posits that Tshivenḓa has a relationship with Chishona of Zimbabwe and with the Basotho of South Africa. He also indicates that all languages of Southern Africa have similar characteristics in common. To this end, he states:

It is certainly true that the Lemba have displayed distinctive cultural and physical characteristics that seem to set them apart and the Venḓa had strong historical links with the Shona of Zimbabwe. However, elements of [*the*] Sotho language and culture can also be found among the Vhavenḓa – another danger of rigid ethnic classification. (Sikhweni 2016:15)

This is further buttressed by Doke's (1954) and Guthrie's (1948) classification of African languages. Furthermore, regarding the linguistic relationship between Balobedu and Vhavenḓa, Parsons (1993:40) avers as follows:

But oral evidence shows that the Lobedu were originally a Venḓa group which has since been heavily influenced by Pedi languages and culture. The same may apply to Phalaborwa people whose traditional pottery is similar to that of Lobedu. (p. 40)

In agreement with Parsons (1993), Mönnig (1967:v) shows that there are significant cultural distinctions between the Pedi and some of the tribes of the Transvaal Sotho (later known as the Northern Sotho). He further contends that compared with the other Sepedi dialects, the Lobedu dialect and its speakers are more culturally similar to Tshivenḓa. It is significant to note that international experts like Mönnig have long recognised the cultural similarities between the Balobedu and the Vhavenḓa (Mönnig 1967).

Regarding the linguistic disparity between the Khelobedu dialect with the standard Sepedi language, Monareng, in a Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee (2017:01), points out that with respect to Khelobedu, the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) set up a research commission in 2001–2002 headed by Dr. Boshego, funded by the National Research Foundation, entitled, 'Is Khelobedu a dialect or a language?'. The finding thereof was that Khelobedu is among one of the 30 dialects of the Sepedi language. Similarly, the Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee supported this finding.

Kretzer (2016) posits that the pronouncement of the 11 official languages of the Republic of South Africa created some unpleasant national debates, specifically regarding Sepedi, among Northern Sotho speakers. This was so because of the change of the nomenclature for this language, that is, Northern Sotho, to Sepedi. The 1993 Interim Constitution of South Africa pronounced (in Article 3[1]) 11 official languages, among which was Sesotho sa Leboa, that is, Northern Sotho. However, in the current legally valid Constitution of South Africa (*Act No. 108 of 1996*), Sesotho sa Leboa was renamed Sepedi. This caused some criticism from the Balobedu community who speak Khelobedu, a current dialect of Sesotho sa Leboa. They demanded a more impartial term covering many speech varieties without privileging one, in this case, the Sepedi language. The Khelobedu speakers, thus, protested against the renaming of Sesotho sa Leboa into Sepedi. Currently, they are demanding that Khelobedu be recognised as another South African official language.

According to Webb (2010:161), speakers of Lobedu, Tlokwa and Pulana, supposedly dialects of Sepedi (also called Northern Sotho and Sesotho sa Leboa), insist that they do not speak Sepedi but different languages. In fact, in the late 1990s, a delegation of the Balobedu requested that PanSALB support their application for the recognition of Khelobedu as an official standard language. From this objection, one may extrapolate that the aforementioned speech communities (Balobedu, Batlokwa and Bapulana) do not accept Sepedi as a symbol of their identity, because of ethnic pride and tribal differences, and thus they find it insulting and demeaning when they are addressed as Bapedi (Sepedi speakers), while they do not speak such a dialect.

The Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities Commission reported that it had previously submitted to the Constitutional Review Committee as an intervention strategy to resolve the challenge faced by the Balobedu community and was still awaiting a response from the Committee, according to a Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee (2017:1). The Commission considered it extremely important to maintain and advance the linguistic rights of both endangered and declining languages in the nation. In this context, the Commission urged for the modification of the Constitution and proposed that Khelobedu be protected and recognised as one of the official languages.

Boshego (2002) in Mojela (2007:127) confirm the reaction of the Balobedu community regarding their language Khelobedu, and he says:

Balobedu (Khelobedu speakers) suggested that their language, Khelobedu, should not only be given due consideration but be included as an official South African language. They also suggested that it should be used as a medium of instruction in their schools. He further records that when the then President of the then Republic of South Africa, Dr. Nelson Mandela, visited Her Majesty Queen Modjadji V at Kheṱhakoni (the Balobedu Palace) on 23 February 1999, she requested him to consider the recognition of Khelobedu as 12th official language. The *Sowetan* of 24 February 1999 reported as follows in this regard:

The Queen told Mandela that her language, Khelobedu, was not officially recognised and her people were forced to be taught Sepedi, and in Sepedi, which is not their native language.

In terms of this article, the researchers find the work by Kotzé (2004) very profound in the dialectal classification of the Sepedi dialects. Sharing a similar perspective, Mulaudzi (1996:8–9), from a linguistic point of view, asserts that Tshiguvhu (one of the dialects of the standard Tshivenḓa language) and the Sepedi dialects, that is Khelobedu and Setlokwa, could perhaps be regarded as belonging to the same language, by taking into consideration the linguistic similarities.

In an article like the current one, one may notice that the suggestion by the Balobedu community and their Queen of having Khelobedu as an official language gains justification when one considers the linguistic differences with the standard Sepedi language. It is, thus, germane to state that if there were no great lexical dissimilarities, they would not be complaining and requesting their dialect to be elevated to the

status of an official language. A concomitant issue in this study is that there are great lexical dissimilarities between the Khelobedu dialect and the standard Sepedi language. Therefore, comparative lexicostatistics as a conceptual framework adopted in this article will establish if there is considerable evidence from the lexical similarities between Khelobedu and Tshivenḓa.

Research methodology

This article is qualitative in nature and employs content analysis as a qualitative approach and utilises an ethnographic design. During the process of data collection, lexical items that show the interrelatedness or differences between the languages under attention, that is Khelobedu, Tshivenḓa and Sepedi, were randomly collected from different content in these languages and later compared. In addition, active participant observation was also employed in order to supplement the above-mentioned context. This method allowed the researchers to interact with the first language speakers of these languages (Khelobedu, Tshivenḓa and Sepedi) at different social gatherings such as funerals, weddings and community gatherings, interchanging with each other, and collected the data that were relevant to the objectives of the article. The reason for this approach was that the researchers wanted to collect authentic data from the natural environments. No interviews were conducted. The researchers' view is that the chosen methods clearly articulate the problem statement that is being investigated and further determine the ontological argument that led to the epistemological and phenomenography stances.

Sampling method

For the purpose of this article, purposeful sampling as a technique was employed to select lexical similarity, and pronunciation closeness was used as a criterion to select lexicons that have been collected and analysed in this article. In this quest, four place names, nine surnames and 34 lexical items that show linguistic affinity were collected and analysed qualitatively.

Methods of data analysis

Descriptive and interpretative research paradigms were mainly used for data analysis. The two methods helped the researchers to make sense of the collected data and also contributed to the rigour of the analysis of a considerable number of lexical items gathered from qualitative sources – primary and secondary (Saldana 2016). It is also important to state that no human participation was involved in the article.

Findings

Lexical similarities between Khelobedu, Tshivenḓa and Sepedi are explored and juxtaposed with regard to proper names and surnames as indicated in the tables. These data were randomly collected from qualitative sources by the researchers who are Sepedi and Tshivenḓa linguists,

respectively, thus it was easy for them to collect lexical items that are relevant for this article. Of equal importance, one researcher is also a Molobedu, who studied Sepedi up to a postgraduate level. As earlier mentioned in the literature that was consulted in this article, it needs to be reiterated that the Sepedi orthography was used to guide the authors to categorise Khelobedu nouns into classes as they did. The reason for using Sepedi classes to categorise the Khelobedu nouns is motivated by the linguistic justification that the missionaries who were involved in the codification of the Sepedi and Tshivenḓa languages are the same and used a similar approach. Thus, it can be implied that had the missionaries considered to codify Khelobedu, the same orthography was going to be used as this language (Khelobedu) appears to be in-between Sepedi and Tshivenḓa.

In Table 1, there is a noticeable spelling similarity between Khelobedu and Setlokwa (as Sepedi dialects) and Tshivenḓa (as a language). From the above, it can be deduced that speech sounds /ḓ/ and /gw/ that exist in Khelobedu and Tshivenḓa differ much from the Sepedi sounds /tl/ and /kw/, respectively, in speaking and writing. Furthermore, when comparing Khelobedu, Setlokwa and Tshivenḓa, it can be argued that there is some degree of similarity regarding pronunciation because in Khelobedu and Setlokwa as well as Tshivenḓa, the first sound is pronounced as [β] (voiced bilabial fricative), even though the spelling differs.

The literature reviewed in this article reveal that scholars such as Mönnig (1967), Mulaudzi (1996), Kotzé (2004), Mojela (2007) and Kretzer (2016), to mention a few, interrogate the classification of the Sepedi dialects, particularly when it comes to the Khelobedu dialect. These scholars argue that from a linguistic point of view, it may be cogently stated that Tshiguvhu, as one of the dialects of Tshivenḓa, should be grouped with the Khelobedu and Setlokwa dialects. They further argue that these dialects should be regarded as dialects that belong to the same language, in this case, Tshivenḓa. Table 2 interrogates data based on some of the surnames and kinship terms that are found in these two languages, that is, Khelobedu and Tshivenḓa.

Table 2 clearly indicates a complete lexical similarity between the examples that have been provided. It is worth mentioning that the only difference that exists is based on the pronunciation of the speech sound [l] which is pronounced as [d] in Tshivenḓa. And in some instances, a voiceless sound is replaced by a voiced sound in another. For example, [k'] is replaced by [g], and all of them are velar sounds. The difference that exists between the vowels [o] and [u] is in orthography, but they are pronounced as the vowel [u]. These differences were identified by the researchers in a form of participation observation when they interacted with Khelobedu-speaking people.

TABLE 1: Spelling variation of the word 'Botlokwa'.

Khelobedu	Setlokwa	Tshivenḓa	Sepedi
Boḓogwa	Bodogwa	Vhuḓogwa	Botlokwa

Another critical and interesting argument that comes to the fore is that the above-mentioned surnames and kinship terms do not exist in the Sepedi language but do exist in the Khelobedu and Tshivenda languages. It is against this backdrop that Table 2 could not provide and accommodate Sepedi equivalents. To dialectologists, sociolinguists and language planners, the following is the question that the researchers pose: Why should similar surnames and kinship terms be realised between Khelobedu and Tshivenda and the same surnames and kinship terms not exist between Khelobedu and Sepedi? Table 3 deals with place names.

Table 3 encapsulates the lexical and pronunciation similarities that are realised in some of the place names that are found in Venda and Bolobedu. In terms of this article, it can be deduced that the relationship between Khelobedu and Tshivenda is not only limited to lexical similarities but goes deeper to the level of similar proper names that are attached to certain villages. Similarly, the place names provided in Table 3 do not exist in the Sepedi language, and it is for this reason that Sepedi equivalents could not be provided.

In this article, the authors put forward that the non-existence of these names in the Sepedi language brings in another crucial question that should be taken into consideration. The question is why should there be a lexical similarity between place names that are found in Venda and Bolobedu, whereas Khelobedu is regarded as one of the dialects of the Sepedi language? An answer to this question may provide some light on the injustice that was done to some of the South African indigenous languages that were politically and administratively classified as dialects. Table 4 reflects on names of animals.

TABLE 2: Surnames and kinship terms.

Khelobedu	Tshivenda	English translations
Surnames		
Selowa	Tshilowa	None
Ramabulana	Ramabulana	None
Mafoho	Mafoho	None
Mokhola	Mukhola	None
Rabohale	Ravhuhale	None
Ramakalela	Ramagalela	None
Lebepe	Luvhimbi	None
Muofe	Muofhe	None
Masiya	Masia	None
Kinship terms		
Rakhadi	Makhadzi	Aunt
Malume	Malume	Uncle
Morathu	Murathu	Younger brother
Khaetjadi	Khaladzi	Sister
Moduhulu	Muduhulu	Niece
Mozwala	Muzwala	Cousin
Mmane	Mmane	Aunt

TABLE 3: Place names.

Khelobedu	Tshivenda
Tlatsa	Dazha
Maolwe	Dzimauli
Khikhutini	Tshikhudini

In this article, the researchers' contention is that Khelobedu as a dialect shows more lexical similarities with the Tshivenda language than the standard Sepedi where it is classified as one of the dialects. Table 4 further provides a number of linguistic repertoire resources that prove a lexical similarity and mutual intelligibility of the two languages, as the latter also depends on the degree of phonetical and morphological similarity.

From Table 5, it can be argued that a reasonable number of lexical items have speech sounds that show affinity to each other, for example /kh/ in Khelobedu and /kh/ in Tshivenda, /o/ in Khelobedu and /o/ in Tshivenda, as well as /d/ in Khelobedu and /d/ in Tshivenda confirms the lexical similarity between Khelobedu and Tshivenda languages. These speech sounds are realised when speaking and writing. The issue of mutual intelligibility between Khelobedu and Tshivenda makes the classification of Khelobedu as a dialect of Sepedi linguistically questionable. Table 5 reflects a snapshot of the phonemic representation of lexical items that exist between these languages.

From Table 5, it can be argued that a reasonable number of lexical items have speech sounds that show affinity to each other, for example /kh/ in Khelobedu and /kh/ in Tshivenda, /o/ in Khelobedu and /o/ in Tshivenda, as well as /d/ in Khelobedu and /d/ in Tshivenda. In the above-mentioned tables (Table 1 to Table 5), the researchers tried to harmonise the Khelobedu orthography throughout the article. In this regard, it can also be noted that the voiced bilabial stop [b] is written as /b/ and /bh/. On the other hand, the voiced dental stop [d] is written as /d/ and /dh/. Of equal importance, a phonetic representation was also used in an attempt to show a clear lexical relationship between the Khelobedu dialect and Tshivenda, in terms of pronunciation.

It is evident that the main lexical similarities are derived from the underlying sound systems of both Khelobedu and Tshivenda. Critics may also argue that the pronunciation of the above-provided lexical items shows a great influence of the Tshivenda language on the Khelobedu dialect. Thus, all the collected lexical items from Table 1 to Table 5 sound almost the same, while some of the words are spelled exactly the same. The elements of similar pronunciation and exact spelling observed in Khelobedu and Tshivenda differ greatly from the ones of standard Sepedi (see Table 1 to Table 5).

TABLE 4: Names of animals.

Khelobedu	Tshivenda	Sepedi	Gloss
Noha [nɔha]	Ṋowa [ɲɔwa]	Noga	Snake
Khomo [kʰɔmo]	Kholomo [khɔlɔmɔ]	Kgomo	Head of cattle
Khobe [kʰɔβɛ]	Khovhe [khɔβɛ]	Tlhapi	Fish
Khoho [kʰoho]	Khuhu [khuhu]	Kgogo	Fowl
Ngu [ŋgu]	Nngu [ŋŋgu]	Nku	Sheep
Dongi [ʃɔɲɲi]	Donngi [dɔŋŋgi]	Tonki	Donkey
Khebode [kʰebɔdɛ]	Tshibode [tʃhibɔdɛ]	Khudu	Tortoise
Khedola [kʰedola]	Tshiḓula [tʃhiḓula]	Segwagwa	Frog
Khwara [kʰʷara]	Khwara [khwara]	Kgaga	Pangolin
Khemange [kʰemaŋgɛ]	Tshimange [tʃhmangɛ]	Katse	Cat
Mamolemalema [mamolɛmalɛma]	Mulemalema [mulɛmalɛma]	Mankgagane	Bat

TABLE 5: Phonemic representation of some Khelobedu, Tshivenḓa and Sepedi lexical items.

Khelobedu	Tshivenḓa	Sepedi	English
Mofhaga [moɸaga]	Mufhanga/lufhanga [muɸanga/luɸanga]	Thipa [tʰipʼa]	Knife
Maato [ma:tʰɔ]	Maṱo [maṱɔ]	Mahlo [maɬɔ]	Eyes
Hasha [haʃa]	Hasha [haʃa]	Gaša [ɣaʃa]	Present
Aba [aba]	Amba [amba]	Bolela [βʊlɛla]	Talk
Dibhalo [ʃibalɔ]	Dzimbalo [dzimbalɔ]	Dipalo [ʃipʼalɔ]	Numbers
Goloi [gɔloi]	Goloi [gɔlɔi]	Koloi [kʊlʊi]	Car
Booswa [βo:ʂa]	Vhuswa [βuʂa]	Bogobe [βaɣɔβɛ]	Porridge
Maada [maˈaɖa]	Maanḓa [maanɖa]	Maatla [maatlʼa]	Power
Bosihu [βosiɦu]	Vhusiku [βusikʼu]	Bošego [βaʃɣɯ]	Night
Dhala [ɖala]	Ḓala [ɖala]	Tlala [tlʼala]	Full
Dzoha [d͡zoha]	Vuwa [vuwa]	Tsoga [tsɯɣa]	Wake up
Ndo [n̩ɖɔ]	Nnḓu [nnɖu]	Ntlo [ntlʼɔ]	House
Dala [ɖala]	Nḓala [nɖala]	Tlala [tlʼala]	Hunger
Tabola [tʰabola]	Tambula [tʼambula]	Hlaka [ɬakʼa]	Poverty
Goulo [ɣɔulo]	Bola [bɔla]	Kgwele [kxʰwele]	Ball
Makhoba [makʰoba]	Makumba [makumba]	Mae [mae]	Eggs
Khida [kʰiɖa]	Khida/bambela [bammɛla]	Rutha [rutʰa]	Swim
Bheba [bɛba]	Beba [bɛba]	Belega [βɛlɛɣa]	Give birth
Toku [tʰokʰo]	Ṱhukhu [ʈhukhu]	Nnyane [ɲɲane]	Small
Nyala [ɲala]	Nyala [ɲala]	Eiye [eiye]	Onion
Mothannga [motʰaŋga]	Muṱhannga [Muṱhannga]	Lesogana [lesɯɣana]	Gentleman
Ho twa [ho tʰwa]	kovhela [kʼɔβela]	Dikela [ʃikʼɛla]	Sunset

Discussion of the main findings

Qualitative theme 1: Similarities in sound system

The findings of this article reveal that some of the sounds in the sound system of Khelobedu are not found in the standard Sepedi language but instead in the standard Tshivenḓa language. The literature reviewed for this article and the data analyses support the notable lexical similarities that exist between Khelobedu and the Tshivenḓa language (see Kretzer 2016; Mohale 2014; Mojela 1999, 2007; Mönnig 1967; Mulaudzi 1996; Ramothwala et al. 2021; Sikhweni 2016; Webb 2010). One of the contributing factors to this similarity is that the majority of the sound systems used in Khelobedu are from Tshingoṋa, the main language that contributed to present Tshivenḓa linguistic forms. Tshingoṋa can be regarded as the prototype of both the Tshivenḓa language and the Khelobedu dialect. One wonders why such explicit evidence escaped the earlier linguists, as they concluded that Khelobedu should be regarded as a dialect of the Sepedi language, and perceived in a way as a dialect of a dialect.

Rakgogo and Mandende (2022) contend that the difference in speech sounds between Tshivenḓa and Khelobedu is attributed to the presence of spirantisation in the former and other phonological processes, which the latter does not use. In addition to that, Khelobedu favours primitive proto-Venḓa sounds while Sepedi and Sekopa, that form the basis of standard Sepedi, favour much more evolved Sotho sounds.

The minutes of the Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee (2017) confirm that the concerned parties who requested Khelobedu to be elevated to the status of an official language also fortified the linguistic justification against the classification of Khelobedu into Sepedi, as the two languages are separate and distinct. In this context, we argue that there was no need for a submission of this nature if there had been considerable lexical evidence that links the Khelobedu dialect to the Sepedi language. It is against this backdrop that we think Sepedi as a language is being unfairly forced down the throats of Khelobedu speakers. Their language and culture position them as distinctly different from the Sepedi language and culture.

Another critical argument that comes to the fore is that if culture is part of language, which culture does the Balobedu practise that makes them socially identical to Sepedi speakers? Balobedu are being denied their participation in the national discourse because if they have to do so, they have to express themselves in a language that is not theirs; they are further being excluded from using their language for self-development and denied opportunities to participate economically in their mother tongue. Information is power, because Balobedu are denied their language in learning and teaching, they do not receive information in the same way as Vhavenḓa, Bapedi and Vatsonga in the province. This makes them politically and economically discriminated against.

Qualitative theme 2: Phonological similarities between Khelobedu, Tshivenḓa and Sepedi

Considering the lexical items that have been collected and analysed in this article, the findings further reveal that the Khelobedu dialect is phonologically similar to the Tshivenḓa language, and it is different from the other Sotho languages, that is Sesotho and Setswana. Then, one fails to understand why Khelobedu was included as a dialect under Sepedi and not under Tshivenḓa. Was this done because of geographical proximity between speakers of Khelobedu and Sepedi? If so, Khelobedu, geographically and historically speaking, is much closer to Tshivenḓa. Linguistically speaking, as proved by the data, Khelobedu is closer to Tshivenḓa. Because of this finding, Khelobedu seems to be a dialect with many legs, as a result of its location.

The reason for this confusion and classification could be the fact that both Sepedi and Tshivenḓa adopted the German orthographic system. The missionaries who came to Venḓa in 1872 came with Sepedi speakers as their interpreters and this resulted in Tshivenḓa borrowing much from Sepedi as far as orthography is concerned (Mafela 2005). It can, therefore, be concluded that Khelobedu is phonetically more similar to Tshivenḓa when taking into consideration the lexical items collected in Table 1 to Table 5, than to Sepedi, where it is currently classified as one of its dialects.

Another critical point that comes to the fore, particularly, when looking closely at the linguistic aspect, is that Khelobedu and Tshivenḓa are mutually more intelligible

than Khelobedu and any of the other dialects of Sepedi (see Mulaudzi [1987, 1996] who calls this dialect Tshiguvhu). Mulaudzi further suggests that Tshiguvhu should be regarded as a dialect that forms part of the Tshivenḓa language, based on the linguistic affinity between these languages. Among Tshivenḓa speakers, the speakers of the Khelobedu dialect are also classified as Vhaguvhu.

Qualitative theme 3: The phonemic differences

On the issue of pronunciation, the findings revealed that the standard Sepedi language does not use the sound system used in the Khelobedu dialect, while the standard Tshivenḓa language does. A typical phonemic example is the difference between the pronunciations of /kh/ [kh]: *khobe, khabo* (Khelobedu) and *khovhe, khavho* (Tshivenḓa) and kg- [kxh] in Sepedi. The tonal pattern is another component of the data that led to the argument that Khelobedu has a totally distinct accent from other Sepedi dialects. It is sufficient to say that some of its lexical items have a tone pattern similar to Tshivenḓa. An additional illustration would be the velar sounds /k/ and /g/. Khelobedu makes use of the voiced velar sound [g], whereas Tshivenḓa makes use of the voiceless velar sound [k] (see Table 5).

Qualitative theme 4: Linguistic intelligibility

In this article, the findings reveal that the Khelobedu dialect seems to be lexically and grammatically more similar to Tshivenḓa, than to Sepedi, where it is considered as belonging to one of its dialects. Linguistically, it is, thus, relevant to submit that the degree of mutual intelligibility between Khelobedu and the standard Sepedi language is less than the linguistic relationship between Khelobedu and Tshivenḓa. It can be confirmed from a lexicostatistical point of view that the data provided and analysed revealed that there is evidence to support the claim that there are more noticeable lexical similarities between Khelobedu and Tshivenḓa than what appears between Khelobedu and Sepedi. If mutual intelligibility is a factor, why are Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana and isiZulu, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and Siswati not merged? Why is the mutual intelligibility factor used discriminately in the classification of South African indigenous languages?

Qualitative theme 5: Misclassification of Khelobedu as a dialect

The literature consulted in this study confirms that language planning in the South African context has always been politicised and decisions that were taken on the status of South African indigenous languages only accommodated the administrative system and demarcations created by the Apartheid regime as a concomitant part of colonialism, not necessarily the linguistic reasons. Had the system taken into consideration the linguistic background and justifications, Khelobedu would have been classified as a language in its own right.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the objective of this article was to look at the lexical similarities between Khelobedu, Tshivenḓa and Sepedi in the Limpopo province, South Africa. The findings suggest that Khelobedu should be regarded as an official language despite its similarities with Tshivenḓa and Sepedi. The issue about intelligibility cannot be used as a criterion because of its flaws, locally and internationally. The classification of South African indigenous languages was never based on intelligibility when it comes to according them official status. This argument has been succinctly corroborated in the discussion above. Linguistically, these languages have some differences. The findings may shed some light on the ongoing debate about whether Khelobedu should be a language accorded an official status. Speakers, learners and students of this language (Khelobedu) seem to be displaced linguistically. This article provided a plethora of evidence to this end, supporting the argument that Khelobedu should be regarded as an official language to give its speakers the power to participate freely in the economy and politics of the country. A language gives one power and ability to express one's feelings and thoughts through it; this should be the reality for the Balobedu learners of South Africa. Balobedu people are being deprived of their linguistic rights, rights that they were supposed to be enjoying in the new and democratic South Africa.

Recommendation

The authors argue that there is a need for sociolinguists, dialectologists and language authorities such as PanSALB and its sub-structures, namely National Language Bodies, National Lexicography Units and Provincial Language Committees, to understand the impact of the partnership that existed between the missionaries and the colonial government on the status of South African indigenous languages that were misclassified as dialects without linguistic justification. In the literature that was consulted for this article, Makoni (2005) argued that the concept of dialect is part of the colonial discourse that aimed to stigmatise African languages over European languages. It is against this background that the researchers postulate that there is a need to redress some of the injustices that were done to the South African indigenous languages. Therefore, Khelobedu is one of the languages that should be given official status under Section 6 (1) of the Constitution of South Africa (*Act No. 108 of 1996*) because it does not qualify (linguistically) as a dialect of the Sepedi language. The project that is underway by the Bible Society of South Africa to translate the Bible into Khelobedu is also a step in the right direction, and this will profoundly contribute to strengthening a call for the recognition of Khelobedu as one of the official languages.

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Competing interests

The author(s) declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

The content of this article has been contributed equally by both authors, T.J.R. and I.P.M. They both drafted the article and revised it before finalisation.

Ethical considerations

This article is based on a study that received written approval from the Tshwane University of Technology Research Ethics Committee and the reference number is Ref #: REC/2015/03/007. The authors randomly collected lexical items that show many similarities between the Khelobedu dialect and Tshivenḓa language. In addition, it is worth mentioning that the researchers are also lecturers who are teaching Sepedi and Tshivenḓa as first language modules at a university level. Thus, this enabled them to easily collect different lexical items that were compared using comparative lexicostatistics as a theoretical framework. Copies of the approval letters can be obtained from one of the authors.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the Tshwane University of Technology Open Repository (TUTDoR) at: http://tutvital.ac.za:8080/vital/access/manager/Repository/tut:2541/SOURCE1.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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