

# Examining the (Mis)Writing of Sepedi Proverbs on Social Media: A Loss of Language in the Fourth Industrial Revolution Epoch and Beyond

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## Abstract

The Fourth Industrial Revolution “4IR” is seeing the existence of many social media platforms which are used for various purposes. Among all the purposes, it seems joking takes the lead. These jokes are written in non-standardised (African) languages. Users are observed to be changing the standardised (coined) proverbs with the purpose of cracking jokes. Thus, proverbs on social media are generally (mis)used to suit the modern lifestyle. Of utmost disheartening is that this social phenomenon is setting its foot into formal writing. This paper examines how Sepedi social media users semantically miswrite and misuse proverbs. This misuse of proverbs on social media platforms leads to the loss of standardised language in such a way that successive generations will not know the original proverbs and their semantics. This paper is guided by a qualitative research approach. Data is gathered from two social media platforms, viz. Facebook and WhatsApp. These two platforms were purposively sampled on a basis that they are mostly preferred by Sepedi users. Names of users were kept anonymous. The collected data were thematically analysed. The paper argues that the miswrite and misuse of proverbs on social media results in the loss of standard language, of which proverbs are a cornerstone of. The correct versions of the discussed proverbs were given. The paper concludes by recommending that instead of misusing the proverbs, users should rather adapt them in order to make meaningful to their modern times.

**Keywords:** Proverbs, Standard Language, Semantics, 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution, Social Media, Modernity, Facebook & WhatsApp.

## 1. Introduction

Every day, millions of people express themselves by writing in social media (Park *et al.*, 2014). However, a plenty of language usage on these social media platforms is non-standard. The proverbs used on social media platforms are not written in a standard-oriented language, that is, their meanings are not those of accepted. Usta Tuzcu (2019) notes that individuals use proverbs to convey their attitudes, opinions and beliefs on social media. However, proverbs are losing their traditional forms as they are twisted and changed in many ways. This paper aims to examine how Sepedi proverbs on social media platforms are being miswritten and misused in terms of their meaning. In a nutshell, this paper is a semantic analysis undergounded by a qualitative approach. This is so to test the quality of proverbs written on the selected social sites.

Maponya (2016:47) points out the misuse of language on social media in the following assertion:

*Bontši bja batho, kudu go Facebook, ba na le go senya polelo ye ya Sesotho sa Leboa. Ntle le go ngwala goba go peleta mantšu bošaedi, ba senya Sesotho sa Leboa ka go se šomiše diema go ya ka mokgwa wa maleba, le ka go šomiša maroga goba mahlapa kudu.*

(Majority of people on Facebook tends to spoil this Northern Sotho language. Apart from wrong spellings, they spoil Northern Sotho by misusing the proverbs, and even by excessive vulgarism)

The issue of vulgar words as cited by Maponya above is central to the current paper and it will be demonstrated in the discussion. Although there are still plenty of orthographic issues related to the writing on social media, this paper will not focus on spelling but rather on the semantic. Rather than orthographical issues, this paper focuses merely on the semantic change applied in Sepedi traditional proverbs on social media platforms.

The main question in this paper is to ask whether the successive generations will know the standardised proverbs, not only in Sepedi but in other African indigenous languages at large? This paper seeks to answer that question. Observing how these proverbs are being miswritten and misused on social media platforms, one can certainly state that this is the death of our forefathers' proverbs. Addressing the residents of Limpopo province at the 1<sup>st</sup> O.K. Matsepe lecture, Emeritus Professor Maje Serudu expressed his concern in the following words:

I wonder whether the children we are KGOWAFATŠING by kombing, minibusing and vanning to white schools in town will ever know what a proverb is in Sepedi... **Eja!** We are fighting a losing battle. Our efforts to change the mind-set of our people is fruitless (2019:15).

Of tantamount to Serudu's concern seems to be Irabor (nd:155), who is of the view that the meaning of our proverbs is lost due to Western languages replacing African indigenous languages. Irabor further stresses that some Africans cannot even speak their indigenous tongues. This matter is central to this paper. Our students and learners cannot write standardised proverbs due to the influence they get from the use of language on social media. This paper endeavours to caution learners and students to avoid using social media language in academic writing. Thus, the article exposes the spoil of the language on social sites to the fore. By doing so it hopes to eliminate the misuse of proverbs on social media.

## 2. Towards Understanding the Significance of Proverbs

One day I was taught by *ramogolo* (uncle) (he did not receive formal education), that proverbs were formed to shape the society. He narrated to me the story of the proverb, "*Ya loka ngwatha e nwele*": this proverb was used to resolve cases of boys who refuse to take the responsibility after impregnating girls. Firstly, a boy may refuse to be a doer before the whole *kgoro* (traditional court). Then a king would instruct two old men to talk politely with the boy aside. The two old men would indeed politely ask the boy "*Ngwanaka, o ra gore le go robala naye ga se wa dira?*" (Son, haven't you ever slept with her?). The boy being nurtured by the humbleness of the old men would agree that he once slept with the girl but insist that he did not impregnate her. Then the two elders would return to *kgoro* and report that "*e lokile ngwatha*", solely translated as "it has set its foot in". In that way a matter is resolved, knowing that "*ya loka ngwatha e nwele*" (It set its foot in the water, it has drunk). An attempt is thus made in this paper to instil the significance of proverbs on social media users.

Proverbs should be of significance to the modern life. Rather than misusing them, users better resort to proper adaptability. As Possa (2012) found that Basotho have adapted the old proverbs to form new ones in order to suit the modern life, accordingly, Bapedi should do the same. A key point is to retain the meaning of a proverb to be educational rather than be of teasing a certain situation or people.

Ramohlale *et al.* (2021) in their recent study examines some irrelevant Northern Sotho proverbs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These scholars argue that some proverbs should be scrapped off as they cause among others, violence in communities, gender inequalities and wrong decisions. Their standpoint is that some of those proverbs are no longer relevant to the contemporary life. This paper is tempted to agree with their claim. It is for this reason that youth on social media platforms no longer recognise the importance of proverbs, hence they regard them as joking tools. Proverbs should be seen as tools for moral development, in particular in African context (Irabor, nd:140). Hence Maponya (2016:55) sees proverbs as the foundation of language. Irabor (nd:140) in the same boat views proverbs as a metaphorical information passed down from generation-to-generation.

Proverbs, as a strong components of language, should be living to us; they should give us life. We should not allow them to lose value in this 4IR epoch and beyond. As Schwab (2016:6) observes that the Fourth Industrial Revolution will finally change not only what we do but also who we are. Schwab

(*ibid*) further holds that the 4IR will affect our identity and all the issues associated with it: our sense of privacy. In our case, we should not allow this era to affect who we are, our languages should remain our identity.

### 3. Understanding Social Media

Dewing (2012:1) explains social media as wide range of Internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities. That is, according to Dewing, these platforms are an important space for communication. Xu *et al.* (2018:94) support this view when say that a large portion of people around the world are likely to use social media platforms to connect, learn and change information. These platforms, as Xu *et al.* (*ibid*) further allude, will transform the ways in which we live, work and interact with one another. The development of this kind is indeed acknowledged in this era of living, however, the challenge is that this speedily interaction (social media) uses non-acceptable languages in such a way that users tease, and sometime bully each other on these platforms. This paper acknowledges that Sepedi proverbs on social media are not used in a way that equates to sharing knowledge, but rather as a tool for cracking jokes. This fact is deeply concerning, seeing how people lost the understanding of social media platforms.

### 4. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the misuse of Sepedi proverbs on two social media platforms, viz. Facebook and WhatsApp. This is demarcated into four subthemes, the misused proverbs on (a) advice and (b) on gender differences, (c) on code-switching and (d) on the influence of social media language in formal writing. Eisenstein (2013:11) notes that many words that are endogenous to social media have been linked with specific geographical regions. This seems to be true even to our case as this phenomenon will be shown in the following discussions.

#### 4.1 On advising

The Sepedi proverb, like those of other worldwide languages, is meant to advise people among other purposes. This is to encourage people and to monitor irregular behaviour among others. When the Northern Sotho people advise a person on journey to visit other people or a place, they would say: “*Phukubje ya tshela moedi e dula mosela / ke mpsanyana*”, meaning that one must behave well when around the visited people. But one user posted the following for other users to fill in:

*Phukubje ya tshela moedi ke...* (When a jackal crosses the river...)

Other users responded:

... *e tla ka geno.* (it is coming your home)

... *e tlo le feletša dipudi taa!* (It is going to eat all of your goats)

... *o ka se sa e tswara* (You will not catch it)

... *e lese e tla boa akere e kgonne go tshela* (Leave it, it will come back as it managed to cross)

All these above responses are incorrect as they have no educational purposes, but deforming and ridiculing additions to the original proverb. The users' intentions were just to crack jokes about a poor jackal.

One user in *Marema ka dika le diema tša Sepedi* (15.06.2021) Facebook group posted the following incomplete proverb for users to fill in:

*Tšhwene ge e re hoo e ...* (When a baboon grumbles...)

Among respondents, others went jokingly this way:

... *e tswerwe ke tlala* (it is hungry)

...e tlo go bolaya tšhaba (run away, it will kill you)

... e kwele ka Ricrose (it heard Ricrose)

Instead of advising a person to have an armament, these users are teasing the baboon and the singing voices of certain individuals. The standard proverb *tšhwene ge re e hoo e botile/tshephile lewa*, advises one to always have a backup solution or a plan B whenever they venture into something, especially the unknown.

## 4.2 Gender Differences

There is lot of language usage on social media which reflects gender differences. Men use these social platforms to attack women and women also do the same. This matter is central to this paper as Sepedi users are observed to change proverbs in a way to suit their gender balance. It is disheartening to see how users are changing standard proverbs to attack their gender counterparts. This is seen as abusive language on social media. Such posts on social media have the potential to cause gender based-violence. Language is such a powerful too, it can be aggressive, oppressive, violent/abusive and transformative.

### 4.2.1 Attacks on men

These are women attacking men. A post on WhatsApp group chat went this about men:

*Sepedi se re monna ke nku, Bible e re monna ke hlogo, Basadi ba re monna ke mpša. Gabotse monna ke eng?*

(In Sepedi it is said that a man is a sheep, the Bible says a man is the head, while women says a man is a dog. Actually what is a man?)

One user jokingly summarised it as follows:

*Monna ke nku ka hlogo ya mpša.* (A man is a sheep with dog's head)

What an answer! Can we imagine the animal which a man is likened to here? What an insult! A creature with no human clear, sensible description! The standardised Sepedi proverb goes "*Monna ke nku o llela teng*", which depicts the strongest tolerance of a man when encountering problems. The original Bible verse says "*Monna ke hlogo ya lapa*", which solely means a man is the head of the family. The perceptions of women towards men in the Fourth Industrial Revolution is that a man is like a dog, "*Monna ke mpša*" or "a man is trash".

One user posted on *Kwenisto Makgakga* Facebook page:

*Monna ke nku o llela motepa wa ngwana.* (A man is a sheep; he cries for a baby's soft porridge)

The laziness of the modern man is depicted here. He is regarded as one who cannot go out and look for work, his is just to stay home hoping for a baby's left-overs. The user is certainly a woman who tries to expose lazy men. However, there is no such proverb in Sepedi.

### 4.2.2 Attacks on women

Men also misuse proverbs to attack women. One user writes the following about women who seem to control men:

*Sepedi se re "Ya etwa ke tshadi ko pele, e leba photoshoot".*

(In Sepedi it is said, "The one led by a woman leads to photoshoot")

This literary means that if a man (boyfriend in this context) is controlled by woman (girlfriend in this context), he will always find himself at a photoshoot, a spot for women. The user is certainly a man opposing the idea of men going to photoshoots, an activity initiated by women for their male partners. The standardised Northern Sotho proverb goes "*Tša etwa ke ye tshadi pele di wela ka leopeng*". This proverb is, in its nature, oppressive to women, that they are not fit to rule or lead. Even though this

is not the objective of this paper, but the said Facebook user knew the original semantic of this proverb, hence he was able to jokingly apply it, however modified.

One user kindly requested proverbs on snake in WhatsApp group. One respondent makes this shameful utterance about women:

*Mosadi ke noga, ga a na matsogo a go iperekela.* (A woman is a snake; she does not have hands to work)

Another user on the same post figuratively referred to women by saying:

*Noga e a kwata ge o sa e fe tšhelete end of the month.*

(A snake gets angry when you don't give it money month-end)

Sepedi has no such related proverbs. This is just a war on women thrust by men on social media. On *Kwenisto Makgaka* Facebook page there was a kind requested for users to give proverbs and their meanings. One user wrote the following about women:

*Diphala tša mona marula di a sepela: (Ge mosadi a feditše go go ja o a hlanama, a yo ja bangwe pele).*

(Springboks go away after licking marula fruits. User Meaning: After a woman is done finishing your monies, she changes on you and proceeds to finish that of others)

The given proverb is a standard one but the interpretation and meaning are incorrect. Here the user's meaning aims to attack women who make money by dating different men or date multiple men in a short space of time for money as opposed to love. The standard proverb does not refer to such prostitution-related behaviour, but rather it refers to friends who distances themselves after realising that they got what they want from you (Rakoma, 1978:133).

## 5. Code-switching

According to Metila (2009), code-switching affects teaching and learning negatively. Metila goes on to reveal that code-switching is a sign of linguistic weakness or inadequacy and many bilingual teachers work hard to fight code-switching when it occurs in their classrooms Palmer (2009) says "code-switching is a source of trouble only when one party is not used to the meanings of the words or phrases used in all languages". Kaschula and Anthonissen (1995:73) regard "code switching as a sloppy use of language, which is regarded as a corruption of their mother tongue and an indication of the language deficiency of the speaker". Code-switching is essentially switching from one language to another in the same discourse (Numan and Carter, 2001:275). According to Kieswetter (1995:25), "code-switching as an unmarked choice may function as a linguistic variety, or as a badge of identity". Code-switching is when the speaker or writer uses more than two languages in the same sentence. Even though it may be useful in some of classroom teaching, code-switching impacts negatively on the preservation of standard proverbs in social media platforms. This paper observed that users make use of excessive code-switching in writing Sepedi proverbs on social media, thereby contributing the death of the basic and important linguistic aspects of the language.

Another user on *Kwenisto Makgaka* Facebook page wrote this:

*Tšhiwana e sa hwego e leta R350 ya unemployment relief fund.*

(The one who persevere will get R350 from Unemployment Relief Fund)

The standardised Sepedi proverb goes: *tšhiwana e sa hwego e leta monono*, which solely means perseverance brings about success. To the user, *monono* refers to the R350 unemployment grant offered to the public by the South African government. This post has the potential to encourage laziness among the people, especially young people, only to wait for free things without hard work. Whereas the original proverb encourages hard work and perseverance towards the attainment of success.

Yet another user posted in *Dika le Diema tša Sepedi* Facebook page that:

*Ele ge bhaya ditau, mara nare e ka di bontsha game e ntse e kawatezile* (17.06.2021)

The above post consists of four languages: Afrikaana “mara>maar”, English “game”, tsotsitaal “kawatezile” and all other words with Sepedi. This leads to the loss of standardised Sepedi proverb which goes: *Tau tša hloka seboka di šiwa ke nare e hlotša*, solely meaning unity is the power.

On unofficial *Batheeletši ba Thobela FM* Facebook page, one user kindly requested proverbs about a goat. Many users gave standardised proverbs with the exception of few who wrote:

*Pudi wa bula lešaka ya kitima.* (You open a kraal the goat will ran away)

*Pudi ke Baxter mohlahli wa sehlopha sa Chiefs.* (A goat is Baxter, Chiefs coach)

*Pudi e re meeeeeeeee!* (A goat says meeeeeeeee!)

All of the above-given proverbs about a goat are non-standard. An advantage was used to tease a goat and certain individuals. There is no sense on what these users are educationally portraying. Such non-standard proverbs are therefore not accepted in Sepedi and other languages.

## 6. The Influence of Social Media Language on Academic Formal Writing

My major concern in this paper is the observation on how the misuse of proverbs on social media influences the formal writing of students in their academic essays and tests. A sole reason why this phenomenon is setting its foot into formal writing is that students today spend more time browsing and writing on social media (Galvin & Greenhow, 2019). This phenomenon is worrisome to the current researcher as there are influences (negative) of “digital social media in language acquisition of young learner” (Belal, 2014), which interferes with a student’s learning of the concrete and accepted aspects of a language. It is disheartening to learn that students at their tertiary level also acquire social media language and test it in the formal writing. Students seem to be familiar with this kind of misuse of proverbs as they spend more time on social media. The instances of this influences are found in the academic formal writing of students. Let us consider some of these following proverbs written by First Year Sepedi Education students at the University of Limpopo:

1. *Popotela ye e sa kwego e thibane tsebe* (The one who don’t hear suffers from an earache).

The correct proverb is *popotela ye e sa kwego e wela retheng la mohwelere*, meaning the one who does not take advises is likely to fall into troubles.

2. *Mosadi o botse bokgarebe, a tšofala ke letoko.*

(The beauty of a woman is at her teenage age, when she gets old she turns to be like an old home)

This sounds to be an insult to women, being likened to old house which no one like to enter into it. Essentially the student says men are not interested in women getting older. A standardised proverb is “*mosadi o botse bokgarebe a nyahlwa lešilo*”, which literally tells that a woman reveals her true colours in marriage.

3. *Moyaleswiswing o ya a swere serumula.*

(The one who goes to darkness carries a firewood)

The standard proverb goes “*moyamahlong a tau o ya a swere serumula*”, meaning that one must prepare resources for the planned duties.

From the three examples cited above, one can get a sense that social media language is impactful in influencing the language use of users. The non-standard writing practices which the students write in formal assessment is arguably derived from social sites they engage on normally basis. Social media

language should thus not be used for formal writing, should be discouraged. This is basically because a written language is used for formal purposes such as academic writing.

## 7. Conclusion and Resume

Most of the proverbs used in the social media platforms are non-standard, thus they are unacceptable. Though users themselves regard these platforms as spaces for joking, the phenomenon language misuse with special reference to proverbs spoils the Bapedi people identity, culture and morals in such a way that next generations will not understand the significance of proverbs, and lose touch with their culture, which must be carried in the language. Consider the following post from a WhatsApp group:

*Mosadi ke tšhwene o lewa bošego.*

(A woman is a baboon, she is eaten during night)

This above extract encourages prostitution. Sepedi has no such related proverb. The language use on social media is not monitored, therefore, our learners and students should not fall into the trap. *Marema-ka-Dika tša Sesotho sa Leboa* (1978) by J.R.D Rakoma is “a must has” to all Sepedi learners and students. This is the only collection so far in Sepedi which documented the standard proverbs and idioms. The book will be handful and helpful to the Bapedi youth, who must make effort to learn their language properly, thus preserving our standard proverbs.

Possa and Makgopa (2010) realise that Basotho culture is changing, a development reflected through the dynamism of proverbs. These scholars encourage the change of proverbs in a way to suit modern times. This should also happen with Bapedi. They should adapt irrelevant proverbs to make them more suitable for a contemporary life through the standardisation process. This will eliminate the misuse of proverbs on social media which threatens the future of the language.

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