

# Evaluating the Spelling of Loanwords in Sepedi: A Case of Two Grade 12 Prescribed Texts

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## ABSTRACT

Spelling forms a critical part of the writing skill. For learners and students to master the writing skill, their prescribed books should adhere to the correct spelling patterns of both native and foreign words. However, the standard spelling of loanwords remains a mammoth challenge for speakers and writers of African languages. This paper seeks to evaluate the spelling of loanwords adapted into Sepedi with special reference to two Grade 12 prescribed texts, namely *Kgalagalo tša Setu* and *O Iphihletšeng?* It is a qualitative and descriptive study that purposively sampled the two texts due to their practicality and the numerous misspelled loanwords. Data were collected using a document review method, which involves a thorough reading of the texts and identifying loanwords for the purpose of the matter under discussion. Data analysis was performed through a thematic lens. Findings demonstrate that, rather than other linguistic adaptation procedures and considerations, the consonant-vowel (CV) syllabic pattern is being ignored when adapting loanwords into Sepedi. The findings aspire to eliminate loanword spelling errors committed by literary writers as well as learners and ultimately recommend the inclusion of professional grammarians during the Department of Basic Education screening process. This study contributes to the call for proper standardization, preservation and development of Sepedi.

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## INTRODUCTION

The following humorous yet weighty statement by Chokoe marks the genesis of this paper:

Loanwords are like new clothes, sometimes they fit well with no alterations required, and at other times they need minor or even major alterations before they can fit the body of the buyer. The importance of all these processes is for the garment to suit the body of the buyer.<sup>1</sup>

The linguistic scholar in the above extract speaks to the importance of modifications that should be accounted for when words are being borrowed from one language to another. Similarly, Assayed notes that borrowings often undergo some modifications during the process of borrowing, aiming at making them correspond with the recipient language patterns.<sup>2</sup> This study presents the evaluation of the loanwords' spelling in Sepedi, with specific reference to the two literary texts prescribed for Grade 12,

<sup>1</sup> Sekgaila Chokoe, "Spell It the Way You like: The Inconsistencies That Prevail in the Spelling of Northern Sotho Loanwords," *South African Journal of African Languages* 40, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 130–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.2020.1733838>.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad K. Assayed, "Phonological Adaptation of English Borrowings in the Egyptian Press with Reference to Al-Ahram Newspaper," *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* 49, no. 2 (October 1, 2018): 3–18, <https://doi.org/10.21608/bfa.2018.188161>.

namely *Kgalagalo Tša Setu* and *O Iphihletšeng*?<sup>3</sup> The study was initiated after the realisation of the spelling (mis)treatment of some of the Sepedi loanwords. Sepedi is a language that allows for new developments, taking into account the rapid growth of digital technologies. These digital developments come with terminologies that global languages need to adapt into their standard spellings. The study problem was detected when the researcher was teaching literature lessons during the Grade 12 Sepedi Home Language classroom. Being conversant with orthography rules, he was amazed and disheartened to notice plenty of loanword spelling-errors in the prescribed novel and drama texts. Questions came up concerning the professional language editing and proofreading of the texts before and after prescription. It is often presumed that they only underwent literary reviewing and editing, with critical language implications being partially or not considered. It also noted that the issue ultimately leads to poor linguistic competence in learners' writing skills. The focus of the current paper is to critically probe how these loanwords should be written when borrowed in Sepedi.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguists across the globe have a similar view on the adaptation and adoption of loanwords from the donor/source language to the borrowing/target language, emphasising the importance of adherence to the general grammatical rules of the borrowing language. For instance, Kwon and Sebola state that loanwords should conform to the linguistic patterns and structure of the recipient language.<sup>4</sup> Hyman suggests that the adaptations are computed by the phonological grammar of the borrowing language.<sup>5</sup> The above scholars see the importance of the target language, while on the other hand, it is believed that not all loanword adaptations are in accordance with the native phonology.<sup>6</sup> Loanword adaptation refers to the changes introduced to loanwords in order for them to fit the grammar of the recipient language.<sup>7</sup> The process by which these foreign linguistic elements, known as loanwords, go through phonological, morphological, or semantic changes in order for them to fit the grammar of the recipient language is referred to as loanword adaptation. Loanwords go through these changes for them to become compatible with the grammar of the recipient language. These modification processes need to be carefully undertaken during borrowing. In their textual analysis, Tshikota and Musehane reveal that Tshivenḁa writers ignore the consonant-vowel pattern rule and rather settle for how adoptives are pronounced in the original language.<sup>8</sup> *Melao ya Mongwalo le Mopeleto ya Sesotho sa Leboa* clearly stipulates in its Rule 107 that all loanwords in the language should strictly adhere to the linguistic rules of the recipient language.<sup>9</sup> The guide further provides speech sounds that are allowed and those disallowed in the language. For instance, the grapheme /kr/ is not allowed in Sepedi. There should be a vowel inserted between the two consonants, allowing a better pronunciation in the borrowing language. Loanwords are adopted and incorporated into the formal linguistic structure of Sepedi.

The incorporated words and concepts from donor languages do not adhere to the rules of the target language and thus pose a mammoth problem for purists.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, most loanword adaptations seemingly change the shape of foreign words in order to make them comply with the surface phonological structure of the borrowing language.<sup>11</sup> The study thus calls for what can be termed in this article as 'Pedification' of loanwords, that is, to follow the standard orthography rules set when adapting foreign

<sup>3</sup> M.S. Machitela, *Kgalagalo Tša Setu* (Shiuvane: Seboi Publishers, 2013); L. Maphoso, *O Iphihletšeng?* (Gallo Manor: First League Trading C.C. , 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Harim Kwon, "Language Experience, Speech Perception and Loanword Adaptation: Variable Adaptation of English Word-Final Plosives into Korean," *Journal of Phonetics* 60 (January 2017): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wocn.2016.10.001>; Moffat Sebola, "Making the Foreign Familiar: (De)Scribing Linguistic Adaptation in Tshivenḁa," *South African Journal of African Languages* 45, no. 4 (December 19, 2025): 441–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.2025.2466431>.

<sup>5</sup> Larry Hyman, "The Role of Borrowing in the Justification of Phonological Grammars," *Studies in African Linguistics* 1, no. 1 (1970): 1.

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Peperkamp, "A Psycholinguistic Theory of Loanword Adaptations," *Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 30, no. 1 (June 25, 2004): 341, <https://doi.org/10.3765/bls.v30i1.919>.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed Hamid Abdulrazzaq and Sundus Muhsin Ali Al-Ubaidy, "Models of Phonological Loanword Adaptation," *Al-Adab Journal* 3, no. 144 (March 15, 2023): 17–24, <https://doi.org/10.31973/aj.v3i144.3881>.

<sup>8</sup> Shumani Leonard Tshikota and Nelson Mbulaheni Musehane, "An Evaluation of Tshivenḁa Orthography of Adoptives with Special Reference to Pan South African Language Board Spelling Rule Booklets," *South African Journal of African Languages* 40, no. 2 (May 3, 2020): 223–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.2020.1805188>.

<sup>9</sup> PanSALB, *Melao Ya Mongwalo Le Mopeleto Ya Sesotho Sa Leboa* (Pretoria: PanSALB, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Chokoe, "Spell It the Way You like: The Inconsistencies That Prevail in the Spelling of Northern Sotho Loanwords."

<sup>11</sup> Peperkamp, "A Psycholinguistic Theory of Loanword Adaptations."

words into the Sepedi language. The incorrect loanword spelling hinders the orthography development of the language, and therefore, the paper seeks to address the problem. A foreign word has to be adapted to suit the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical rules of the target language (TL).<sup>12</sup> Spelling plays a critical role in writing skills in general. For a writer to produce a user-friendly text, he is compelled to correctly spell the words. This study contributes significantly to the under-examined scholarship of linguistic theory in Sepedi. Literary authors and learners could read this article as a platform to improve their orthography. Having said that, this study critically evaluates how loanwords are spelled in the borrowing language (Sepedi). It makes reference to two literary texts prescribed for the Grade 12 classroom, namely *Kgalagalo Tša Setu* and *O Iphihletseng?*<sup>13</sup>

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The adoption vs adaptation model by Fantini serves as the linchpin for this kind of study. It argues that loanwords take either the adoption route (adhering to grammatical aspects of the source language) or the adaptation route (adhering to grammatical aspects of the borrowing language).<sup>14</sup> The Adaptation process stands as the relevant route for this study. While the model realises the evolution and interactions between languages, it states that borrowing languages should maintain the integrity of their own sound systems. It further says that sounds that do not exist in the borrowing language are replaced with appropriate ones, and spelling adapts accordingly. Adaptation is a process in which the form of borrowed elements is assimilated by undergoing certain alterations, aiming at making them correspond with the recipient language pattern.<sup>15</sup> The article seeks to protect the Sepedi orthography rules put forward by following the correct spelling of loanwords.

## METHODOLOGY

While the nature of the paper is qualitative in approach, the two texts (*Kgalagalo Tša Setu & O Iphihletseng?*) under linguistic scrutiny were purposively sampled on two bases: they are the prescribed texts in practice, and they contain plenty of misspelled loanwords. The descriptive design was utilised to describe the characteristics of the orthographic elements of the Sepedi language. A document review was used as a method for data collection while thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse and report on the phenomenon under discussion. For a clearer data performance, the wrongly spelled loanwords were identified and set aside during the reading of the two texts. They were then grouped into themes, that is, grouping them into whether they conform to the phonetic adaptation or the phonological adaptation. The theoretical lens was handy in ensuring the final categorization, leading to the write-up of the analysis.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the linguistic adaptation of loanwords from the two literary texts, seeking to showcase whether the authors followed the four phases of the adaptation process in Sepedi. The phases are: phonetic adaptation, phonological adaptation, morphological adaptation and semantic adaptation. Phonetic adaptation is when the adapter employs the sound systems of the borrowing language; phonological adaptation deals with the syllable structure of the borrowing language, morphological adaptation deals with lexical category, prefixation and suffixation of the loaned word, while semantic adaptation looks at the meaning modifications of the loaned word. So, the focus of this discussion will be only on phonetic and phonological adaptations since the focus is on the descriptive analysis of loanword spelling in Sepedi. The morphological and semantic adaptations are excluded because this study does not evaluate the structure and meaning of loanwords in Sepedi, but rather the spelling.

### *Phonetic Adaptations in the Two Texts*

When adapting a foreign word, the adapter should first comply with the sound system of the target language. Sebola states that in phonetic adaptation, the primary focus is on how a word sounds and strives

<sup>12</sup> Chokoe, "Spell It the Way You like: The Inconsistencies That Prevail in the Spelling of Northern Sotho Loanwords."

<sup>13</sup> Machitela, *Kgalagalo Tša Setu*; Maphoso, *O Iphihletseng?*

<sup>14</sup> Alvino E Fantini, *Language Acquisition of a Bilingual Child: A Sociolinguistic Perspective (To Age Ten)* (London: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1985).

<sup>15</sup> K. Assayyed, "Phonological Adaptation of English Borrowings in the Egyptian Press with Reference to Al-Ahram Newspaper."

by all means possible to represent the sound according to the orthographic and spelling conventions of the adapting language.<sup>16</sup> Boersma and Hamann support this idea by articulating that loanword adaptation must ultimately start from the auditory-phonetic form (the sound) of the word.<sup>17</sup> Sepedi authors of the selected texts seem to have deviated from this process at some points. The examples below reflect the neglect of speech sound systems by the adapters.

Example 1: Taxi (pg.40).

The word was neither adopted nor adapted. It retains all linguistic features of the donor language (English) but none from the borrowing language (Sepedi). The adapter did not adhere to the Sepedi sound system. The low vowel /a/ on this word is articulated as the mid vowel /e/ -[ɛ]- in Sepedi. The velar /x/ is represented by /k/ and /s/ respectively in Sepedi. With the prohibition of /k/ and /s/ as a combinatorial in Sepedi, the vowel /i/ will then be inserted in between them. Therefore, *thekisi* should be considered as the correct loanword.

Example 2: Thekinolotši (pg.31)

Adapted from the Afrikaans word “tegnologie”, the adapter did not adhere to the correct sound systems in Sepedi. On the second syllable, Mopedi hears /ke/, rather not /ki/. The mid vowel /e/ should replace the high vowel /i/.

Example 3: Mutsonga (pg.62)

The adapter in example 3 followed the Xitsonga sound systems when adapting this word into Sepedi, ignoring the phonetic rules of the target language. The prefix mu- is articulated as mo- in Sepedi, replacing the high vowel /u/ with the mid vowel /o/. Moreover, the prefix for noun class 1 in Sepedi is mo-. In the second case, the adapter also followed Xitsonga sound systems in the last syllable /-nga/ which in Sepedi is pronounced as /-nka/, thus, the voiced velar /g/ in Xitsonga is articulated as the voiceless velar /k/ in Sepedi. Therefore, *Motsonka* should be allowed as a fully and correctly adapted loanword.

[mu-] → [mo-]

[-nga] → [-nka]

Example 4: Disimpolo (pg.23)

In the above example, the adapter ignored the Sepedi sound systems, conforming only to the original language, *Symbol (Eng.) > Simbool (Afrik.)*. On the second syllable, Mopedi pronounces it as “se” rather not “si”. What might have triggered the adapter here is the rule of vowel-raising, unnecessarily applying the vowel-raising rule. The middle vowels are sometimes articulated (spoken language) as high vowels; however, they should still be written (written language) as middle vowels. Thus, the accepted spelling for this loanword is *disempolo*, adhering to the phonetic adaptation process.

### ***Phonological Adaptations in the Two Texts***

The adapted loanwords in Sepedi should conform to the syllabic patterns of the language. Like many more indigenous African languages, Sepedi prefers the consonant-vowel (CV) syllable structure more often.<sup>18</sup> Other syllabic structures will not be discussed in this study as they are not central to the problem under discussion. Like in the native Sepedi words, the CV pattern should be strictly adhered to when adapting foreign words. One loaned word which many Sepedi speakers and writers incorrectly spell is *Africa*. In one sampled text is spelled this way:

Example 5: Afrika (Pg. 70) Afrika→Afrikaans

Sepedi does not allow the grapheme /fr/ in all cases. Vowel epenthesis is missing in the above example. Assayed describes epenthesis as one of the most frequent mechanisms used to make borrowings comply with the syllable structure of the recipient language. It refers to the process of adding a vowel to make a word more pronounceable.<sup>19</sup> To comply with Sepedi syllabic rules, there should always be the insertion

<sup>16</sup> Sebola, “Making the Foreign Familiar: (De)Scribing Linguistic Adaptation in Tshivenda.”

<sup>17</sup> Paul Boersma and Silke Hamann, “Loanword Adaptation as First-Language Phonological Perception,” in *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (John Benjamins B.V. , 2009), 11–58, <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.307.02boe>.

<sup>18</sup> M.W. Madigoe, “Syllable Structure Processes in Northern Sotho: A Linear and Non-Linear Phonological Analysis” (Stellenbosch University, South Africa, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> K. Assayed, “Phonological Adaptation of English Borrowings in the Egyptian Press with Reference to Al-Ahram Newspaper.”

of a vowel between the fricative sound /f/ and the alveolar sound /r/. In practical orthography, the relevant vowel to be inserted is the mid /o/; resulting in the fully adapted *Aforika*.

Example 6: Klosari (pg.v) Glossary→English

Borrowed from the English word *glossary*, the adapter here inappropriately applied the grapheme /kl/, a syllabic structure which is prohibited in both Sepedi native and borrowed words. Phonetically, the glottal speech sound /gl/, which is a consonant blend, is represented by the speech sound /tl/ in Sepedi, irrespective of the source language. For instance, *glas* (Afrik) will become *tlelase* and *globe* (Eng) will become *tleloupu*. Therefore, the accepted resultant loanword, for example, 6 should be *tlelosari*, conforming to the standard Sepedi syllable structures.

[gl] (Eng / Afrik) → [tl] (Sep)

**Table 1: below reflects some detected loanwords which omit vowels between the graphemes.**

Loanword (Source Language)	Incorrectness	Correctness	Full Adaptation
Theknolotši (pg.21) (tegnologie> Afrik)	/kn/	/ke/	Thekenolotši
Kriste (pg.49) (Christ>Eng)	/kr/ - /ri/ /st/	/ke/ - /re/ /se/	Keresete
Troli (pg.53) (Trollie> Afrik)	/tr/	/te/	Teroli
Stethoskhoupu (pg.61) (Stetoskoop> Afrik)	/st/ /sk/	/se/ /se/	Setetosekhoupu
Khresemose (pg.104) (Christmas> Eng)	/khr/	/ke/	Keresemose
Dikrosarinyana (pg.66) (Grocery> Eng)	/kr/	/ko/	Korosari
Phekse (pg.129) (Pegs> Eng)	/ks/	/ke/	Phekese
Filthara (pg.18) (Filter> Eng)	/lth/	/le/	Filethara
Eksemšene (pg.18) (Exemption> Eng)	/ks/	/ke/	Ekesemošene
Petrole (51) (Petrol> Afrik)	/tr/	/te/	Peterole
Ditripi (pg.83) (Drip> Eng)	/tr/	/ti/	Tiripi

One other syllable sequence that gives Sepedi speakers and writers a mammoth challenge is the syllable that should follow the nasal speech sounds, /n,m,ng/. In both Sepedi native and foreign words, no consonantal syllable can follow a nasal sound (or syllable). For instance, implosive consonant sounds such as /b,d,s etc/ cannot follow the nasal speech sound, while only ejective consonant sounds /p,t,k/ are eligible to come after a nasal speech sound. Consider this:

Sebela (whisper) > [n]sebele (whisper me)> ntshebele

Adaptations of foreign words into Sepedi appear not to follow suit. In one sampled text, the following sentence was found:

Example 7: Nna ditaba di a mbora (pg.47) (news bore me)

From the English term *bore*, the adapter did not pay attention to two linguistic adaptation considerations: that the speech sound /b/ is represented by /p/ in Sepedi, and that the nasal sound /m/ cannot be followed by the voiced bilabial /b/, which should proximally be substituted by the voiceless plosive /p/. Therefore, *mpora* should be considered as the accepted resultant verb. Table 2 further presents some adapted loanwords reflecting this challenge and provides the correct adaptations of such loanwords.

**Table 2: Loanwords with syllables following nasal speech sounds.**

Loanword (Source Language)	Incorrectness	Correction	Full Adaptation
Saense (pg.31) (Science>Eng)	/ns/	/ntshe/	Saentshe
Eksemšene (pg.18) (Exemption>Eng)	/mš/	/mo/	Ekesemošene
(18) Laesense (pg.22) (Licence> Eng)	/ns/	/ntshe/	Laesentshe
Konstabolo (pg.50) (Konstabel> Afrik)	/nst/	/ntshe/	Kontshetabolo
Phenšene (Pension> Eng)	/nš/	/ntšhe/	Phentšhene

The above table shows that the voiceless consonant /t/, which is an alveolar ridge sound, played a mammoth role in ensuring that the nasal sound /n/ is not followed by the implosive fricative /s/. On the example regarding ‘exemption’, the palatal fricative /š/ does not come after any nasal sound in Sepedi, thus leading to the insertion of the mid vowel /o/. The bilabial /p/ is silent in the source language, hence it is also omitted in the adapted loanword.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As per the discussions, there is a need to raise awareness among literary authors and editors about the standard spelling patterns of Sepedi, in particular, regarding the spelling of loanwords. The DBE should include professional linguists in the screening of the Learner and Teacher Support Material (LTSM). As it stands, with the two discussed texts as reference, it appears that there is a lack of critical language editing of the prescribed textbooks. In a technologically-driven world of today, it is expected that there will be a reign of foreign words in the upcoming circle of the prescribed LTSM, with terminologies from multivarious disciplines dominating literary texts. The inclusion of professional grammarians would ensure that all the prescribed textbooks are free from language errors, particularly in the standard spelling of loanwords adapted into indigenous African languages like Sepedi.

## CONCLUSION

The study aimed to evaluate how Sepedi writers often overlook the standard procedures when adapting loanwords, an act which seems to hinder the orthographic development of the language. Out of the four adaptation phases, the paper discussed only phonetic and phonological adaptation processes to illustrate the standard orthography of loanwords in Sepedi. The mission of this study is solely to call for proper *pedification* (nativization) of the loanwords. Sepedi adapters seem to lack this modification skill, sticking partially to the structures of both the target and borrowing languages. The discussions demonstrated that certain syllables are strictly prohibited in Sepedi. Due to the fastest technological growth, loanwords shall prevail in our indigenous languages, hence the readiness for language practitioners to fairly adapt them.

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