

Can the new African Language dictionaries empower the African language speakers of South Africa or are they just a half-hearted implementation of language policies?

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Language planning was always a very sensitive topic in South Africa, as language was used to separate people during apartheid. This presentation analyses three different Sesotho sa Leboa dictionaries, which can be seen as examples of a successful implementation of language policies. The policies which are discussed here are the constitution of the Republic of South Africa from 1996, The National Lexicographic Units Bill from 1996 and the South African Languages Bill from 2000. The main objective of those language policies is the development and promotion of the eleven official South African languages. Dictionaries are one possibility to develop languages, i.e. they describe the standardised variety of a language. They can be used as tools to promote the African languages, as they are the visible proof that the language has the words to be used in a specific situation, for example a dictionary of Maths shows that the language has words for mathematical concepts.

The three dictionaries which are discussed here are a Sesotho sa Leboa – English general dictionary which was published by the Sesotho sa Leboa National Lexicographic Unit, a bilingual Sesotho sa Leboa English school dictionary published by OUP South Africa and a Sesotho sa Leboa – English online dictionary published by TshwaneDJe HLT. This presentation discusses the advantages of each dictionary and shows that they all can empower their users but that none of the three dictionaries can cater for everybody in all situations because there is no such thing as THE dictionary that provides a solution for everything.

1. Introduction – Sociolinguistic facts about South Africa

The Republic of South Africa is a country at the southern tip of Africa and has a population of approximately 49 million people (SA statistics online). It has nine provinces, Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, North West and Western Cape. According to the mid-2006 population estimates (southafrica.info: online), most people live in KwaZulu Natal (9.9 million) and Gauteng (9.5 million). Gauteng is the smallest province with only 16 548 square kilometres but is the most densely populated province with 526 people per square kilometre. The largest but least densely populated province is Northern Cape with 372 889 square kilometres but only three people per square kilometre (southafrica.info: online)

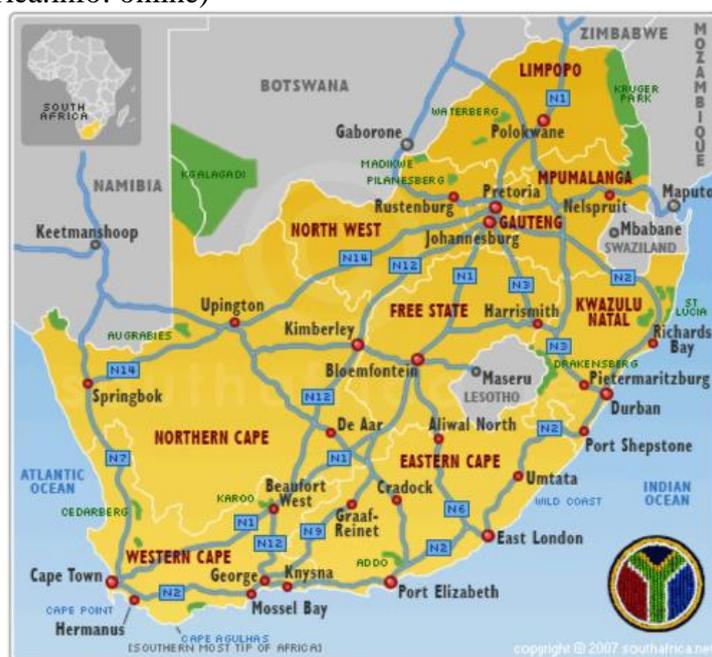


Figure 1. Map of South Africa

South Africa is a sociolinguistic complex country that has eleven official languages: two Germanic languages (Afrikaans, English) and nine African languages (Ndebele, Sesotho, Sesotho sa Leboa¹, Setswana, SiSwati, Tsonga, Venda, Zulu, and Xhosa). Zulu has the most L1 speakers with 23.82 %, followed by Xhosa (17.64) and Afrikaans (13.35), whereas English only shares the 5th rank with Setswana, and is spoken by 8.2 % (census 2001).

Home language	Eastern Cape	Free State	Gauteng	KwaZulu Natal	Limpopo	Mpumalanga	Northern Cape	North West	Western Cape	South Africa
Afrikaans	9.3	11.9	14.4	1.5	2.3	6.2	68.0	7.5	55.3	13.3
English	3.6	1.2	12.5	13.6	0.5	1.7	2.5	1.2	19.3	8.2
IsiNdebele	0.1	0.4	1.9	0.2	1.5	12.1	0.1	1.3	0.0	1.6
IsiXhosa	83.4	9.1	7.6	2.3	0.3	1.5	6.2	5.8	23.7	17.6
IsiZulu	0.8	5.1	21.5	80.9	0.7	26.4	0.3	2.5	0.2	23.8
Sepedi	0.0	0.3	10.7	0.1	52.1	10.8	0.1	4.2	0.0	9.4
Sesotho	2.4	64.4	13.1	0.7	1.3	3.7	1.1	5.7	0.7	7.9
Setswana	0.0	6.8	8.4	0.1	1.6	2.7	20.8	65.4	0.1	8.2
SiSwati	0.1	0.3	1.4	0.1	1.1	30.8	0.1	0.6	0.0	2.7
Tshivenda	0.0	0.1	1.7	0.0	15.9	0.2	0.0	0.5	0.0	2.3
Xitsonga	0.0	0.3	5.7	0.0	22.4	3.8	0.0	4.7	0.0	4.4
Other	0.2	0.2	1.0	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 1. Home languages in the nine provinces (Census 2001)

Table 1 shows the distribution of the home languages (L1) in the different provinces. Although English has L1 speakers in all provinces, there is no province in which it is the L1 with most speakers.

Although South Africa is a multilingual country with eleven official languages, which, theoretically, all have the same status, the nine official African languages still lack the status of English and Afrikaans. One reason for this is that they are still ‘underdeveloped’ in the areas of electronic, online and specialised dictionaries and Human Language Technology. This is due to the fact that the African languages were not used in all domains of life and had no official status in South Africa during the apartheid area. As language, next to colour, was one of the main factors that were used to classify people into different races and ethnic groups, the African languages had a low status during apartheid because they indicated a ‘lower-class’. The African languages were not developed in the way English and Afrikaans (the two official languages during apartheid) were developed and they never became proper languages of teaching, science and commerce during apartheid. English was always seen as the language of the struggle against apartheid and as the language of success, it therefore still has a high status among most African language speakers.

2. Lexicographic scene in South Africa

The lexicographic scene in South Africa can roughly be divided into three major groups. The first group contains commercial publishers like, for example, Oxford University Press South Africa, Pharos or Maskew Miller Longman. The second group consists of private individuals and researchers, who compile all kinds of dictionaries. The last group consists of government related organizations, i.e. the eleven National lexicographic Units (one for each official language), PanSALB (Pan South African Language Board), 13 National Language Bodies (one for each official language, one for the Khoisan languages and one for sign language), 9

¹ Also called Sepedi or Northern Sotho

Provincial language councils and the National Language Service (NLS) of the Department of Arts and Culture.

2.1. Language policies that support lexicography

The Constitution, the National Lexicographic Units Bill, and other language policies provide a firm legal footing for lexicography in South Africa. Although most of the language policies do not specifically mention dictionaries, they can be interpreted in a pro-dictionary way. Having such a legal backing is important for the African languages, as those documents clearly state that the African languages must be further developed and that their use in various domains must be promoted. This implies that the African languages indeed need new dictionaries in order to bridge the gap between the African languages and English/Afrikaans, as English and Afrikaans still have a higher status among the people than the African languages. A negative effect of those policies is that the lexicographic scene in South Africa became extremely complex, as dictionaries are compiled by a broad range of different organizations and people.

2.1.1. Constitution

The most important document is the constitution, which does not only grant everybody the right to life and states that everybody is equal before the law but states also that the country has eleven official languages. According to the constitution, ‘the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these [the African] languages’ (SA constitution online). The phrase ‘take practical and positive measures’ implies that the government is indeed obligated to do more for the languages than just formulating policies. The state must do something that the languages can be used in a variety of domains, for example in medicine, law or commerce. Using the African languages in several domains also implies that the languages must fulfil some technical requirements, for example, the language must be standardized and have a standardized technical vocabulary for the various domains. As there are not enough different types of dictionaries available for the African languages, compiling dictionaries is one measure to elevate the status of the African languages. Such dictionary types do not only include school dictionaries and general dictionaries but also technical dictionaries and online dictionaries.

‘A Pan South African Language Board [PanSALB] established by national legislation must promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of all official languages’ (SA constitution online). This was implemented when PanSALB and the NLUs (National Lexicographic Units) were established. All NLUs have compiled at least one dictionary and are therefore promoting and developing the respective languages.

2.1.2. National Lexicographic Units Bill 1996

This act provides the legal background for the NLUs. According to this bill, a national lexicographic unit for each of the official languages must be established. This goal was achieved, all official languages have their NLU. Dictionary units that existed prior to this bill (e.g. the Afrikaans unit) or dictionary projects that already existed (e.g. Xhosa) were transformed into new units but continued their work.

‘3. The objectives of a unit shall be to initiate, maintain, continue, complete and from time to time improve the compilation of the dictionary and other products by (a) the continuous and comprehensive collecting, arranging and storing, in a lexicographically workable form, of the general vocabulary of the language concerned; (b) ‘the editing, adaptation, and publication of

the collected material according to lexicographic principles in printed and electronic form’’ (NLU Bill online).

All units have by now compiled and published at least one dictionary. They all have some kind of data collection that is used for lexicographic purposes, for example a large electronic corpus. Although most of the dictionaries are available in printed form, some are also available in electronic or online form, as for example the monolingual *Online Explanatory Sesotho sa Leboa Dictionary*.

2.1.3. South African Languages Bill 2000

This Act provides for ‘an enabling framework for promoting South Africa’s linguistic diversity’ (SA language bill online), that is based on the language provisions stated in the constitution. Main objects of this Act are: to promote ‘the equitable use of the official languages ...to develop and promote the official African languages... to provide for the learning of South African languages’ (SA language bill online).

Although providing an enabling framework is important, actually implementing this language bill is more important. Promoting the languages can be done through language awareness campaigns or through actually developing the languages. One possibility to develop the languages is by compiling different types of dictionaries for the African languages and through making them available to the speech communities.

In order to elevate the status of the African languages and to promote their use, African language school dictionaries are ideal tools for learning one of the South African languages. As school dictionaries are not yet available for all languages, compiling such dictionaries should be one of the priorities for publishers and NLUs.

3. African language dictionaries in South Africa – State of the Art

There are plenty of English and Afrikaans dictionaries of all kinds available. General bilingual/multilingual (paperback) dictionaries exist for all official languages, although there are no African language – African language paper dictionaries available. The only available African language – African language dictionary is a Xhosa – Sotho online dictionary, which is a component of the interpret.co.za dictionaries and has 2373 entries. Oxford University Press South Africa published small bilingual picture dictionaries for all official languages. They include English and one of the other languages and are children’s dictionaries that aim at making children familiar with dictionaries. School dictionaries are still not widely available for the African languages, there is English – Sepedi school dictionary available and an English-Zulu one in preparation but most general dictionaries have a broader target user-group.

There are plenty technical/restricted dictionaries available for English and Afrikaans but only a few for the African languages, for example a multilingual (English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans) Maths dictionary and a multilingual (English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans) Science dictionary by Longman. Other terminology lists that are available include a Linguistics Terminology (English Northern Sotho) by Africanlanguages.com and a few terminology lists by the government. A wide range of online dictionaries is available for English and to a lesser extent for Afrikaans. Most of the African languages are still lacking online dictionaries, although there are a few compiled by individuals, for example a Zulu-English dictionary (<http://isizulu.net/>) and a Sesotho sa Leboa English dictionary (<http://Africanlanguages.com>).

4. South African dictionary users – the need for user-friendly dictionaries

Gouws and Prinsloo (2005: 46) state that the majority of South Africans still live in a pre-dictionary culture and that ‘the average member of the different South African speech communities is still quite naïve when it comes to dictionary use and the choice of specific dictionaries for specific purposes’. A pre-dictionary culture does not only mean that people do not know much about dictionaries and their uses, it also means that there are often not many different dictionaries available. It is important to bear in mind that in such a situation, the ‘target users of a general language dictionary are not academics and students but the average members of the speech community who can be empowered by the access to a dictionary’ (Gouws & Prinsloo 2005: 46). This implies for South Africa that dictionaries must be extremely user-friendly in order to be useful for the average user. Somebody who is not familiar with the concept of dictionaries needs a dictionary that is either self-explanatory and/or has an easy to understand user-guide that explains in a simple way how the user can find the word he is looking for.

5. Three different Sesotho sa Leboa dictionaries = three different ways to empower the speech community?

The three dictionaries in this section are examples for the different dictionary types that are available for one of the official South African languages. One dictionary is a free online dictionary made available by a software company that produces a dictionary production system, one is a school dictionary (paperback) compiled by OUP SA that has won the SATI (South African Translators’ Institute) Prize for Outstanding Translation Dictionaries 2009 and the last one is a general bilingual dictionary compiled by the Sesotho sa Leboa National Lexicographic Unit.

5.1. Sesotho sa Leboa/English Dictionary

This dictionary claims to be a bilingual, explanatory dictionary and was compiled by the Sesotho sa Leboa National Lexicographic Unit (NLU). It contains a short introduction in Sesotho sa Leboa and a Sesotho sa Leboa- English; English – Sesotho sa Leboa central part. The structure of the central part is simple, lemma, POS, lemma. An example entry is the Sesotho sa Leboa lemma *fela*: ‘*fela*¹ *adj* only; but, just; *fela*² *v* finish; come to an end, being completed’ (2006: 21). Such an entry structure provides the user with a quick translation but does not help the user in actually using this word.

According to the compilers, the target user groups of this dictionary are: ‘Sesotho sa Leboa Home Language learners, First Additional Language learners, Sesotho sa Leboa students as well as speakers of other languages who need a working knowledge and understanding of Sesotho sa Leboa words’ (Sesotho sa Leboa /English Dictionary 2006: 218). As this dictionary has only a Sesotho sa Leboa introduction and no English user-guide, the group that will profit most from the dictionary are Sesotho sa Leboa Home Language speakers, as the other target-user groups are expected to know how the dictionary works and which lemmatization principle is used because they might not be able to understand the outer-texts.

A general dictionary like the Sesotho sa Leboa/English one has three main functions for the speech community. First, it is compiled to cover the general vocabulary of the language, i.e. it documents the written (standard) language. Documenting the general vocabulary of a language is a never-ending task, as it is impossible to include all words of a language in a dictionary. If one compares this dictionary with general dictionaries of other languages, as for

example the Greater dictionary of Xhosa, the OED or the WAT, this dictionary is quite small for a general dictionary. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the dictionary is a bad dictionary it just means that there was a selection of the words included. The compilers for example chose not to include all numbers, for example ten is included but eleven and twenty are missing in this general dictionary compiled by the NLU.

The second function of this general dictionary is psychological, as such a dictionary can be seen as a status symbol for the language. Having a general dictionary shows the speech community of languages which do not have a high prestige that the language has enough words and is 'good and important' enough to be written down in a dictionary. Therefore, this dictionary carries a high symbolic value, as it is compiled by the Sesotho sa Leboa NLU, an institution that is supported by the government and consists of members of the speech community.

The third and probably most important factor for the individual user is that such a dictionary helps the user to communicate on a broad range of everyday topics and is essential for decoding and encoding language. This is especially important in multilingual societies where people must communicate with people from other speech communities. Although this dictionary is on the textbook catalogue of Gauteng, it is most useful for more experienced users, as it expects the user to have already mastered the basics of dictionary use. As there are no usage examples and no pronunciation information, the dictionary empowers people mainly in decoding activities and less in encoding activities. It may provide a quick help if the user wants to read a text and does not understand some words.

5.2. Oxford Sesotho sa Leboa – English School Dictionary

This dictionary is a bilingual Sesotho sa Leboa – English – Sesotho sa Leboa school dictionary that contains 5000 entries on each side. 'This dictionary is the first for Northern Sotho to focus on the needs of school learners in grades 4 to 9, whether they are learning English or Northern Sotho [and] has won the [SATI \(South African Translators' Institute\) Prize for Outstanding Translation Dictionaries](#)'². A dictionary that has won a prestigious prize in the dictionary category carries a high symbolic value for the language and its speech community, i.e. it is a visible proof that the language is good enough to be recognised and get an award. Such an award does not only promote a dictionary but is also a good way to make it visible in the speech community. This award also empowers the members of the speech community, as it elevates the status of the language itself. A higher status of the language implies that the language is likely to be used in more domains, which means that a L1 speaker of this language can use the language he knows best in formal domains and express himself better.

This dictionary is one of very few African language dictionaries that also provide a detailed user-guide and a diversity of additional information in the outer-texts. The user-guide and the additional information are available in both languages. It provides information on irregular English verb forms, a Northern-Sotho mini-grammar, pronunciation and punctuation, English punctuation and spelling, as well as several dictionary activities.

² <http://tshwanedje.blogspot.com/2009/10/tshwanedje-oxford-university-press.html>

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re ka go tšhela le ngwaga ka tšhele. I will send you a letter by fax.

fela¹ *** /fêlal/ *adverb* ■ only; just ♦ Ke basadi fela bao ba dumeletšwego go tsena ka mo. *It is only women who are allowed to enter here.*

fela² *** /fêlal/ *conjunction* ■ but ♦ Diaparo tše ka moka di botse fela di bitša tšhelete ye ntši. *All these clothes are beautiful, but they are expensive.*

fela³ *** /fêlal/ *verb* 1 ■ finish ♦ Marotho a a fela ka lebenkeleng. *There is no more bread in the shop. (Literally: Bread is getting finished in the shop.)* 2 ■ come to an end; end ♦ Beke e thoma ka Mošupologo ya fela ka Lamorena. *A week starts on Monday and ends on Sunday.*

► **felago** /fêlago/ 1 ■ who/which get(s) finished 2 ■ that end(s)

fela⁴ *** /fêlal/ *auxiliary verb* 1 ■ usually ♦ O be a fela a etla go eta. *He usually comes to visit.* 2 ■ continuously; regularly ♦ Re ile ra no fela re eba le diphadišano ngwaga ka ngwaga ge re hweditše bathekgi. *We have competitions regularly every year if we have sponsors.*

The auxiliary verb stem **fela** is usually followed by a main verb in the situative mood.

fele ** /fêle, fêlê/ *verb* c FELA³ ■ (must) finish; (must) cease; (must) come to an end ♦ A ntwā e fele, re be balata ba gago. *Let the war come to an end so that we can become your followers.*

◊ **ga/sa/se** (...) **fele** ■ not finish; not cease; not come to an end ♦ Ke gopola gore ntwā

re eba tšhele.

felelela /fêlêlêla/ *verb + double applicative (e/el)* c FELA³ ■ complete thoroughly ♦ Ge a bula lemāti go felelela a bona batho ba bantši ba kgobokane fao. *When he opened the door completely, he saw many people gathered there.*

feleletša /fêlêlêtša/ *verb + double applicative (e/el) + causative (iš)* c FELA³ 1 ■ complete thoroughly ♦ **Feleletša** temana ye ka go tlatša dikgoba tšeo di tlogetšwego. *Complete this paragraph by filling in the blank spaces.* 2 ■ end up ♦ E thomile e le tabanyana ye nnyane eupša ya feleletša e le molato wo mogolo. *It started as a small issue, but ended up being a serious case.*

feleletše¹ *verb + double applicative (e/el) + perfect (ile)* c FELA³ ■ be fully completed ♦ Mathapama ge a boa a feleletše mešomo ye a e kgonago. *In the afternoon when she returned, she completed whatever work she could.*

► **feleletšego** ■ who/which is finished completely

feleletše² /fêlêlêtše, fêlêlêtšê/ *verb + double applicative (e/el) + causative (iš)*

c FELA³ 1 ■ (must) finish completely for/at 2 ■ (must) end up

◊ **ga/sa/se** (...) **feleletše** 1 ■ not finish completely ♦ Ba re ba ka se feleletše mošomo woo pele a ba lefa. *They say they will not finish the job completely before he pays them.* 2 ■ not end up ♦ O be a ipoditše gore yena a ka se feleletše a le kgolegong. *He told himself that he will not end up in jail.*

felelwa /fêlêlwa/ *verb + applicative (el)*

Figure 2. entry examples Oxford dictionary

Figure 2 shows some typical entries from this dictionary. The entries are clearly structured, i.e. lemma, sense number and frequency info when necessary, pronunciation, part-of-speech information, English translation, Sepedi example sentence and English example sentence. Providing frequency information is useful for learners, as they can identify frequent and therefore probably important words easier. Three stars indicate that the lemma belongs to the 500 most frequently headwords, two stars that it belongs to the next 500 and one star that it belongs to next 500. ‘Taken together, all three-star words in Northern Sotho account for 72% of all the words in common written or spoken Northern Sotho’ (de Schryver 2007: xi). If one adds-up all words that have a star, this figure reaches 80%. According to de Schryver (2007: xi) all 5000 words of the dictionary ‘cover as much as 89% of any material in Northern Sotho’.

As a general dictionary, this dictionary documents the general vocabulary of the language. Although 5000 entries per side do not sound too much, the headwords were selected in such a way that a user can find approximately 89% of all words he might find in texts. This is due to the frequency of how words appear in texts. In order to be a useful general dictionary, a dictionary does not need to list all words that might occur once in a text but the words which are most frequent in texts and will help the user most in communicating about general topics.

As every entry has usage examples in Sesotho sa Leboa and English, the dictionary can be used for decoding and encoding activities. A dictionary that includes usage examples helps the user to choose the correct word and therefore enables him not only to decode a text but also to write and speak in an additional language.

This dictionary is listed on the Gauteng textbook catalogue for Grades 8-10, which allows it to be used officially in schools. As dictionaries are identified as key resources in the National Curriculum Statements, a school dictionary should ideally be a useful educational tool. This can only be the case if the dictionary is easy to use and helps the user in decoding as well as encoding activities. This dictionary does this because it is user-friendly and has usage examples for every entry.

In the middle of this dictionary, several dictionary-activities in both languages are included. This part contains activities that illustrate basic dictionary competences, such as alphabetical order, finding words or translating. It also provides examples of formal letters and e-mails in both languages which help users who have to write a formal letter or e-mail.

There is an additional dictionary workbook (Taljard et al 2007) that accompanies the dictionary which is a valuable educational tool for teachers, as it provides them with many dictionary activities that familiarize students with dictionaries and provides them with possibilities to use the dictionary during language classes.

According to OUP online, this activity book might 'help learners overcome common problems, e.g. choosing the right translation; build learners' vocabulary through practice, focusing on top-frequency (star-rated) words; guide learners to get the most from their dictionary, e.g. grammatical constructions in Northern Sotho, or degrees of comparison and irregular verb forms in English'.

The activities in the workbook are available in both languages, i.e. L1 speakers of both languages can profit from those exercises because they can solve them in their L1. The activities are based on the most important dictionary concepts, pupils learn, for example, to master the alphabetical order of words. Other activities include tasks to understand the content and the different parts of the dictionary. A focus is on understanding dictionary entries, i.e. pupils have to work with the dictionary in order to find plural forms or to find a certain lemma. More advanced activities include composing and correcting e-mails or letters as well as translating exercises.

Such dictionary activities are very useful educational tools, as they do not only help in teaching the actual language but also help students to become confident and competent dictionary users.

In the South African context, where the medium of Instruction is often not the L1 of the students, good (school) dictionaries are especially important as they help pupils to understand the teacher and teaching materials.

5.3. Online Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) - English Dictionary

This corpus-based dictionary contains approximately 24900 Sesotho sa Leboa to English entries and is available online free of charge (<http://africanlanguages.com/sdp>).

Although internet access in South Africa is not as common as in Western Europe (approx. 10.8% have internet access in South Africa), more than 40% of South Africans have cell phones and most cell phones can connect to the internet. Having a cell phone that enables internet access implies that the online dictionary can be accessed via the cell phone, i.e. a user does not need a computer to be able to use such a dictionary.

The user can choose between a Sesotho sa Leboa or English interface, i.e. the user can access the dictionary in the language he knows best. The user can enter either a Sesotho sa Leboa lemma or an English lemma.

A huge advantage of such a dictionary is that it can be used by inexperienced users, as they only have to enter a search word and click on ‘look-up’ in order to get a quick result. The results are displayed immediately and one or more senses of the word are displayed, the Sesotho sa Leboa form first, the English translation underneath. If a word has more than one sense, all senses are displayed. A user does not need to know how a traditional dictionary works, i.e. he does not need to know that the entries are usually ordered alphabetically, as he only has to enter the search word and click on ‘look up’. So anybody who knows how to use a search engine, something most internet users know, can use such a dictionary. One of the biggest advantages of an online dictionary is that the lemmatization principle of entries can include whole words and irregular verb forms instead of only stems, which is often the case in traditional African language dictionaries. Being able to look up the word as it is written in the text makes it easier for an inexperienced user who might not know that nouns and verbs are often entered according to their stem and not as the word form that is in the text. As online dictionaries have virtually no space restrictions, all word forms can easily be accepted as search words, something that is often not possible in paper dictionaries because it makes the dictionary too big and therefore too expensive.

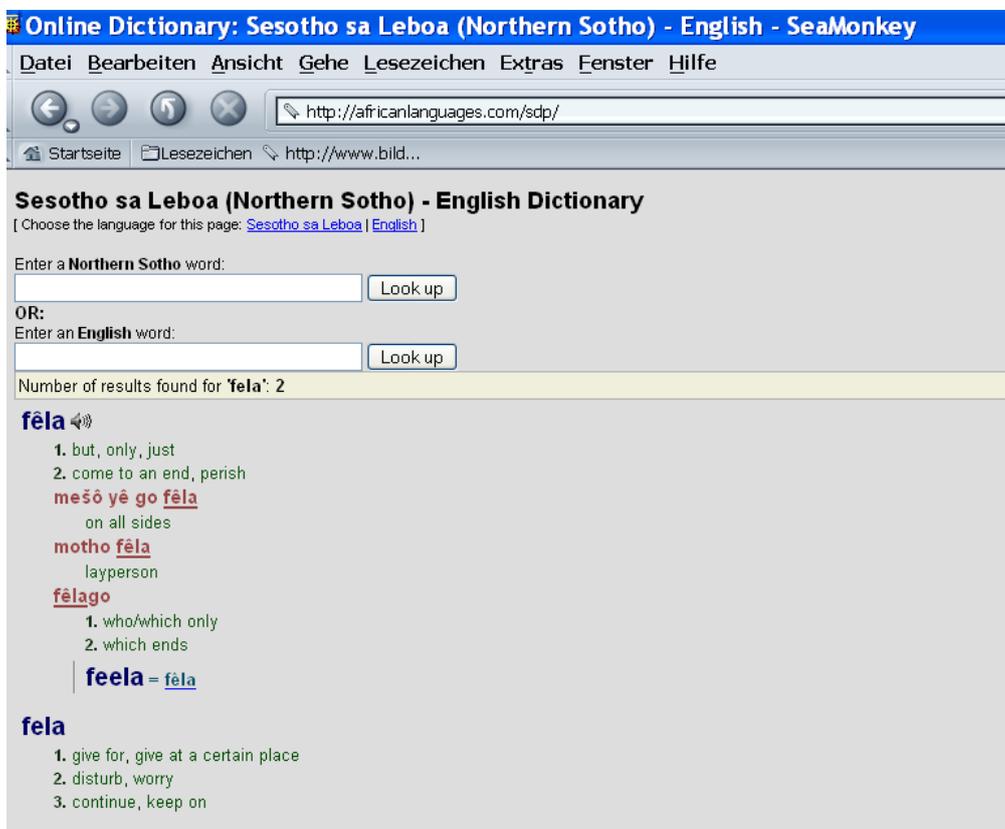


Figure 3. Sesotho sa Leboa – English dictionary

A special feature of this dictionary is that some Sesotho sa Leboa forms have a sound file with the correct pronunciation added. This feature is extremely useful for second/additional language learners of a tone language like Sesotho sa Leboa who want to be able to speak the language and be able to communicate with L1 speakers of the language. Figure 3 shows a typical entry of this dictionary.

The Sesotho word that was entered as search word was 'fela'. The entry does not only provide different meanings of the word but also some lexical units that contain the word. If one clicks on the little speaker symbol after the lemma, the user can hear the correct pronunciation of the lemma, a very useful function for learners. Hearing the word is especially important in tone languages, as the tone can change the meaning of a word. Applying different colours to different parts of the dictionary entry is a visual help for users as well. A user can easily distinguish between the blue Sesotho sa Leboa lemma and the lexical units which are red.

Another huge advantage for the user is that an online dictionary can be compiled to be always up-to-date, as this is the only kind of dictionary that can be truly dynamic instead of static, i.e. a change of usage of a word can be included as soon as the users demand it (via user-feedback forms) or as soon as the compilers have enough proof (corpus data) that the usage changed. Such a dynamic online dictionary is a valuable tool in documenting the actual language usage. As online dictionaries often have the possibility to save search statistics anonymously, the compilers can easily add new words if there is a need, i.e. if several users try to look-up a word that does not exist in the dictionary. Such features are extremely important in empowering the users, as they provide the users with the exact words they need. Online dictionaries provide quick and easy help whenever a dictionary is needed. The psychological aspect of having one or more online dictionaries for a language is probably the most underestimated one. Having an online dictionary shows the speech community that their language is worth enough and well enough developed to be used on the Internet and in connection with modern technologies. This gives online dictionaries the role of status symbols for languages, a factor that should be exploited by lexicographers and language planners. Another advantage of those 'new' technologies is that they are valuable means to enhance the status of the African languages, as they can be seen as a status symbol for the language. Those modern dictionaries bridge the link between traditional languages and modern technologies. Having an online dictionary means that the language is developed enough to be used on the internet

6. Conclusion

A good dictionary that empowers people is a dictionary that provides its users with the solution they are looking for. This implies that THE DICTIONARY (one for all users and all situations) does not exist and will probably never exist. It seems clear that a user who needs a technical dictionary dealing with medical terms will not be satisfied with one of the general dictionaries discussed here, whereas a user who wants to understand a text or write a letter might find all he needs in such dictionary. Nevertheless, any (user-friendly) dictionary has the potential to empower people, depending on the user and the situation, as it gives people the words to talk.

The psychological factor of African language dictionaries is important in empowering the people as well. An African language dictionary could be introduced as a status symbol for the language, showing the speech communities that their language is important enough and worth enough to have modern applications like for example, online dictionaries. Having all kinds of

dictionaries and especially larger general and technical, shows people that there language has enough words to be used in more formal domains of life.

Although the African languages still lack technical, online and user-friendly school dictionaries, the situation is getting better, as more and more dictionaries of a higher quality are compiled and available, an example being the new Oxford corpus-based English-Zulu school dictionary by GM de Schryver (in press). Reasons why the situation is slowly improving are the fact that compiling dictionaries is becoming more easily with the help of off-the-shelf dictionary writing software applications, as for example, TLex, ‘a professional, feature-rich, fully internationalised, off-the-shelf software application suite for compiling dictionaries or terminology lists’ (TshwaneDJe HLT: online). Using such software does not only help the compiler to produce a product of better quality in a shorter time, it also allows the dictionary to be published online and in electronic form as well. Another factor is that the African speech communities are becoming more experienced in dictionary compilation and that dictionaries are becoming more visible in South Africa.

So all of the dictionaries discussed here can be viewed as tools to empower people and not as half-hearted implementations of language policies, but only as long as the speech communities are able to get the dictionaries. If the dictionaries are not freely available, they can only be considered a failure and a half-hearted implementation of language policies (and a waste of money).

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