

Wietie: The Emergence and Development of Tsotsitaal in South Africa

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Introduction

Tsotsitaal is essentially a language made up of elements of Afrikaans and other languages spoken in South Africa. As a pidgin, it developed rapidly as a means of verbal communication between people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds in the urban milieu. Many people have always understood the term 'wietie' to mean to be able to communicate in Tsotsitaal. Variants of Tsotsitaal have been spoken widely in townships along the Reef from Randfontein to Springs.

Modern scholarship has accumulated a vast body of knowledge on the subject of pidgins internationally (DeCamp & Hancock 1974; Todd 1990). However, very little or no scholarly discourse on the sociology of language with respect to Tsotsitaal has been undertaken. A brief historical account of languages in southern Africa by Lanham (1978) includes a discussion on Tsotsitaal. Gowlett (1968) in his study makes passing reference to 'languages ... confined mainly to the gangster element' in urban South Africa. Similarly, in a survey on lingua francas in southern Africa, the existence and use of Tsotsitaal receives scant attention (Heine 1970). In their extensive surveys of languages in Africa, for instance, Greenberg (1970) and Alexandre (1972) make no reference to both Afrikaans and Tsotsitaal. In other studies, broad lists of languages and dialects of languages throughout the world exclude Tsotsitaal (Voegelin & Voegelin 1978; Katzner 1986).

What is missing from this literature is a comprehensive dictionary of the words and expressions used by those who spoke this distinct language. An exception, to a limited extent, is Branford's (1987) seminal study which has included a variety of terms 'from the street language of the gangster's underworld'. The general contention amongst many scholars has been that

Tsotsitaal constitutes an unsystematic and vastly corrupt form of Afrikaans which was used mainly by thugs and other social misfits.

Purpose of the Study

The present paper forms part of a larger study. The overall project seeks to break relatively new ground by presenting specifically a historical and descriptive dictionary of Tsotsitaal. The dictionary constitutes a modest repository of the linguistic experience of sections of the black population in urban South Africa. It sets out to provide a comprehensive catalogue of words and phrases used in Tsotsitaal. As part of southern Africa's heritage, it is not something which is concerned solely and exclusively with the past. Rather, since many people continue to communicate in Tsotsitaal, it is an essential part of the culturally and politically exciting present.

The present paper sets the scene for the overall study and is essentially an exploratory investigation of the relationship between language and society. Its aim is to briefly trace the history of Tsotsitaal and the philosophy behind its use. It concerns itself with identifying the social functions of Tsotsitaal and the manner in which it has been used to convey social meaning. However, it cannot possibly explore in detail all the dimensions of the historical evolution of this language. It has of necessity to be selective and will obviously reflect the author's subjective impressions of the spoken language of Tsotsitaal.

Methodology

The main method adopted for the study was that of participant observation. The success of this technique of data gathering heavily depends on the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the research subjects. To the extent that one grew up and participated actively in the street culture of black urban South Africa, the data presented therefore also reflects an insider's view.

Although participant observation was the primary method employed in this study, other data gathering techniques were used to supplement and reinforce it. For instance, face-to-face interviews with selected key informants in Meadowlands, Rockville and other parts of Johannesburg were conducted in July and August 1994. Important information which was gathered from these respondents included: ethnic background, socio-economic status, education, the type of environment in which they grew up and language experiences. As proficient speakers of the language, the

respondents were also requested to suggest a core of terms and phrases which they believed should form part of a Tsotsitaal dictionary.

In addition, some use was made of data published in books, newspapers, journals and magazines such as *Drum* and *Zonk*. Their value is that they provide accounts of events and places associated with the development of the language.

The Setting: Kofifi

Sophiatown ('Kofifi'), Western Native Township ('Die Kas') and Newclare ('Maglera') were three townships which were located to the west of Johannesburg. Since the 1920s they were amongst the most important centres of the black population on the Witwatersrand. The three communities came to represent a physical manifestation of the differential access to residential space. One of the dominant criteria used for designating these townships as residential areas was race.

For purposes of this study, these three townships constitute the speech community from which the stock of words and expressions have been drawn. Although the study is restricted to this area, many of the terms, phrases and expressions which have emerged from the research were undoubtedly employed in other black communities on the Witwatersrand.

In no sense were the communities in these townships entirely self-contained. They were intertwined with the life of the rest of the Reef and beyond in many respects (Hannerz 1994:184). Western Native Township was established after World War I to provide housing for Africans who were employed in Johannesburg. It covered an area of approximately 75.5 hectares and was situated over eight kilometres to the west of the city centre. Sophiatown and Newclare were located on both sides of Western Native Township. In both these townships, land could be held freehold (Horrell 1957:109; Beavon 1982:11; Gready 1990:140 and Parnell & Pirie 1991:131). The housing and living conditions of the majority of families could at best be described as 'basic' (Hellman 1935; Hellman 1948; Boetie 1967; Lodge 1983; Mashile & Pirie 1984; Mattera 1987 and Nicol 1991).

Aspects of Urbanization

This section of the study seeks to provide a brief account of the early history of the black communities in Johannesburg. It is expected that such a descriptive account will enhance our understanding of the dynamics of community life in Sophiatown, Western Native Township and Newclare. It

will also help us to appreciate the extent to which all aspects of life have had a bearing on the development of Tsotsitaal.

The social structure of urban life in South Africa, as in other parts of the world, is a product of powerful and diverse forces (Gold 1982; Spates & Macionis 1987). The mineral revolution of the late 19th century was accompanied by a massive movement of contract workers from the largely subsistence-farming areas of the African peasantry. They came to form a dependable supply of cheap African labour. In addition, increasing numbers of Europeans also arrived in the mining areas and the new towns. The white community included settlers who came from Holland, the mines, cities and countryside of Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Belgium, Eastern Europe and the United States of America.

A distinct presence of Indian families developed over the years. They came mainly from India via Natal where they first settled as indentured labourers in the sugar plantations. Subsequently, many of these wage-earners migrated to Johannesburg and other towns on the Witwatersrand (Mesthrie 1991:32). Out of this group emerged a significant number of petty entrepreneurs who undertook their activities and lived in Sophiatown and Newclare. A large proportion of semi-skilled and unskilled Indian workers in Johannesburg settled in 'Fietas' (Vrededorp), Doornfontein and other parts of the city (Cammack 1990).

Chinese immigrant contract labourers, originally recruited on the mines, also swelled the total population of towns on the Reef. A part of Newclare where a concentration of Chinese-owned neighbourhood shops emerged, was popularly known as 'Chinatown'. Also settled amongst the blacks were many Coloureds from the Cape.

The Second World War brought along immense changes to the lives of black people on the Witwatersrand. The tremendous growth in the number of industries and factories associated with the war effort led to increasing demands for cheap black labour. Formal sector employment became an important source of livelihood for a significant proportion of black families as the manufacturing sector expanded. The local communities which emerged—especially on the Witwatersrand—consisted largely of working class Africans and Coloureds (Lodge 1983). In the 1920s and 1930s racial mixing increased with the arrival of 'poor whites' in Johannesburg (Parnell and Pirie 1991:131). Some of the white families bought stands in Sophiatown.

The majority of the wage-earners were employed as unskilled or semi-skilled labourers in the city centre or industrial centres near Johannesburg. The policy of colour bar determined the position of blacks in society. It was essentially a policy of job reservation under which the most poorly paid and unskilled positions were reserved for black employees. White workers in

contrast, received preferential treatment in that they were offered the semi-skilled and skilled and, invariably, better-paying forms of employment.

A number of activities in the informal sector developed in these communities. These activities were spearheaded by petty-traders and hawkers who included sellers of fat-cakes, sweet-corn, sweet-reed and shoe laces. Tailors, barbershops and laundry services formed a significant part of the informal sector (Bozzoli 1991:140).

A significant proportion of the youth were caddies at nearby exclusively white golf courses such as Consolidated Main Reef (CMR), Parkview and Windsor Park (presently Rand Park). Yet others sold local newspapers such as the *Rand Daily Mail*, *Bantu World*, *The Star* and the *Golden City Post* (Hellman 1940:47). Significantly, as Koch (1983:162) notes perceptively, these casual income-generating activities 'formed the bedrock of popular class responses to the conditions of slumyard life'.

Many other individuals who were unemployed were engaged in criminal activities and other forms of deviant behaviour. The wide range of illegal activities included the sale of dagga (cannabis), brewing and selling of illicit alcoholic beverages such as *mbamba* and *skokiaan*, and the receipt and sale of stolen property. Pickpocketing and stealing were important ways of obtaining money. As Bozzoli (1991: 140) notes, some women 'earned money in the semi-legal sphere of Chinese gambling, or fah fee'. Prostitution, involving black and white women, began to thrive as urban South Africa expanded.

An important aspect of social differentiation in these communities was the emergence of a black middle class (Lodge 1983). It consisted mainly of teachers, nurses, clerks, journalists, lawyers, medical doctors, craftsmen and traders (Gready 1990). A striking feature of these communities was the existence of close ties, very often at a personal level, of many members of the nascent middle class with individuals and families of the working class (Hellman 1940:22). The shared conditions of life in the congested townships engendered solidarity.

The social bonding between the two classes was often blurred—a product of considerable social contact in these communities.

The drama and distinctiveness of black urban living has been captured in the studies of a number of writers who lived in these communities (Modisane 1963; Boetie 1967; Dikobe 1973 and Mattera 1987). For instance, Sepamla (1976:46f), in his poem, 'Mnta Kazibani-bani' describes the social life of streetwise youth in Tsotsitaal. Using a combination of English and Tsotsitaal, Motjuwadi (1990) also wrote about the pain caused by apartheid. The linguistic skills of some of these writers, mainly in English, and to a lesser extent in Tsotsitaal, constitute an invaluable insight into the black urban experience.

Mzamane (1986:XIII) referred to Sophiatown as primarily one of the 'great centres of literary, artistic, musical and other artistic activity'. And for Trevor Huddleston, Sophiatown was 'a remarkable and vitally vigorous community' (Nicol 1991:23). In similar vein, Coplan (1979) and Ballantine (1991) focus on related aspects of the cultural vibrancy of Johannesburg.

Social and Cultural Origins of Tsotsitaal

The term 'Tsotsitaal' is derived from two words 'tsotsi' and 'taal'. According to Glaser (1992:47), the term 'tsotsi' described a style of narrow-bottomed trousers which became particularly popular amongst the black urban youth during the 1940s. In time, the word came to refer to young, black, urbanised and mainly working-class males (Sampson 1983:78) and was also increasingly associated with young black thugs and members of gangs. A number of studies have examined the youthgang subculture amongst the permanently urbanised black population of the Witwatersrand (Glaser 1992; James 1992). In his book, *House of Bondage*, Cole (1968:123) observed that:

Tsotsis take their name from the U.S. Zoot-suitor of a generation ago, and they act the part. They are street-corner dandies, lounging in the doorways of vacant stores, idling in the train stations and bus terminals, giving passersby the hard eye

It is clear that a full understanding of the development of Tsotsitaal requires sensitivity to the place of the tsotsi's—gangsters—in the various communities.

The word 'taal' is an Afrikaans term meaning 'language'. Thus 'Tsotsitaal' came to refer to the language spoken mainly by young black males in the urban areas—especially since the 1940s. According to Gready (1990:146), Tsotsitaal was essentially a 'Sophiatown patois'.

Historically, Tsotsitaal is a product of the ethnolinguistically diverse groups which converged in the urban areas on the Witwatersrand. The multi-ethnic composition and multicultural character of the communities in Sophiatown and Newclare more specifically, have been described vividly in various studies (Beavon 1982; Parnell & Pirie 1991). As a language, it blossomed in the streets—the favourite meeting places for groups of young men. Many of these often had nothing else to do but to *blom* or 'hangout', passing hours amidst conversation in Tsotsitaal. This language came to be known widely, also, as 'Fly-Taal', the language spoken by those who were 'fly-' or 'streetwise'.

The evolution of Tsotsitaal was shaped by the dynamics of the inter-

play between the political-economic arena and socio-cultural forces. This interplay was an essential element in the spontaneous evolution of a distinct youth subculture which took root in post-Second World War South Africa (Glaser 1992:49). As an instrument of survival in a particularly hostile environment, the origins of Tsotsitaal lie deep in the slums of the Reef. Like other pidgins it evolved in situations of social pressure and inequality (Coulmas 1992:158). Other distinguishing features of the urban subculture of the time were distinct clothing, music, dance, sport, sexual mores and crime (Sepamla 1976; Motjuwadi 1980).

Tsotsitaal had Afrikaans as its base. Earlier, Smuts (1970:5) noted that Afrikaans had originated from Dutch and Flemish dialects of the 19th century and developed into a language. It is perhaps for this reason that some writers view Afrikaans as a good example of a creoloid language (Trudgill 1992:22). According to Mattera (1987:14), Tsotsitaal derived principally from a brand of Afrikaans which was spoken mainly by black domestic workers. It was pejoratively termed *kombuistaal* or kitchen language. Tsotsitaal is distinctly different from another lingua franca, Fanagalo. The birth of the latter can be traced to the work context. As a lingua franca based mainly in the Nguni group of languages, it was meant to facilitate employer - employee relations especially at the coal-face of the mining industry. It became a medium of communication among workers from different ethnic and racial backgrounds (Cole 1964; Heine 1970; Mesthrie 1989).

By the 1940's Tsotsitaal had stabilised on the Reef. It had acquired a measure of prestige as a vehicle for social interaction amongst youth. Many young people sought social acceptance and status on the streets partly through an emphasis on the correct use of the language. The ability to speak Tsotsitaal also tended to encourage a greater social arrogance which totally excluded other young persons from the ranks of *clevers*—'streetwise youth'. It was also meant to reveal and reinforce perceptions of social differences between *clevers* and others.

Bilingualism

It is important to point out at the outset that, in general, most people on the Reef, as in many African societies, spoke two or more languages (Whiteley 1971:1; Brindley 1976:7). For the black youth, bilingualism was a fact of social life which invariably involved the use of one or more African language as the mother tongue. As primary institutions of cultural transmission, the family and the schools played a seminal role in ensuring that young people learnt and spoke their respective mother tongues. In addition, the young

people were also competent in one or more of the other languages spoken in southern Africa. In many instances, the second language spoken by the youth specifically, was Tsotsitaal. As Katzner (1986:37) observes: 'A pidgin language has no native speakers ... it is always spoken in addition to one's mother tongue'.

As a vehicle of relatively easy communication, Tsotsitaal cut across racial and ethnic boundaries. It is, however, significant to note that historically speaking, very few whites spoke Tsotsitaal. As stated earlier, Tsotsitaal had Afrikaans as its base. There is however no linguistic evidence to suggest that many Afrikaner youth spoke nor understood this *lingua franca*. A comparatively greater proportion of Indian and Coloured youths were fluent in Tsotsitaal. For the African youth and young adults, this language became an established common medium of communication which was passed on through legitimate processes of socialization.

Power Relations and Language

In the political, economic and cultural arenas, the relative position of one distinct social group against another clearly influences, *inter alia*, language use (Romaine 1993). In this context, given that material conditions prevail—specifically in the urban areas—political, cultural and economic relations shape power relations in time. The nature of these relationships in turn come to play a crucial role in determining the content and form of language use. The influence of power relations on and in the urban youth subcultures was a key element in determining Tsotsitaal and vice versa.

It is clear, for instance, that the influence of the politically and economically dominant Afrikaners in this setting was most significant. Some essentially Afrikaans terms such as *baas* (boss) or *oubaas* (old boss) and *miesies* (madam) for white males and females respectively are a reflection of unequal power relations in local communities and society in general.

Perceptions of superiority and inferiority based on the rural - urban divide were reflected in the use of terms such as *moegoe* or *dzaa* for rural folk and *autie* and *clever* for urbanite males who spoke Tsotsitaal. These words provide clues to the antagonism which still deeply mark the relations between urban-dwellers and rural folk. The ability to converse in Tsotsitaal often encouraged a greater social arrogance which totally excluded non-Tsotsitaal speakers from the ranks of 'clevers'—streetwise youth. It was also intended to reveal and reinforce perceptions of social difference between 'clevers' and others. MaKera (*Sowetan* 23 September 1994) wrote:

Often the street vocabulary was so densely encoded and colloquialised that some

township inhabitants, 'moegoes or barrees', could not even keep pace with the innovative but rapidly changing lingo.

Those who did not acclimatise readily to the urban environment, or did not demonstrate that they were streetwise, were labelled *speek* or *spy*. They often ended up being outwitted or outmaneuvered by the 'clever'. Quite often they were considered to be relatively easy prey for *bul vang* (mugging), *taap* (pickpocketing) and *gwara* (ridicule). As in many main urban centres in other parts of the African continent, considerable pressure was brought to bear on immigrants from the rural areas to 'adapt to the sociocultural patterns of the city' (Brenzinger, Heine & Sommer 1991:32).

Vocabulary

The source of languages of Tsotsitaal was varied and accounts for the hybrid linguistic outcome. As a lingua franca one of the primary distinguishing features of Tsotsitaal is the incorporation and use of words, phrases and expressions from different languages. These invariably have subtle connotations which derive from the situational context. Moreover, what appears to be a potpourri of many familiar and some strange words and expressions represents an attempt to resolve problems of interethnic communication by youth in the urban setting. The phenomenon of 'borrowing' may be defined as follows:

The process whereby bilingual speakers introduce words from one language into another language, and those loan words eventually become accepted as an integral part of the second language (Trudgill 1992:14).

The bulk of the vocabulary is drawn from Afrikaans and the Nguni (especially IsiZulu and IsiXhosa) languages. IsiZulu and IsiXhosa are members of the Nguni sub-family of Southeastern Bantu languages. Tsotsitaal also drew from the Sotho group of languages (i.e. Sesotho and Setswana) and from xiTsonga. Many of the loanwords from the African languages were adopted with minimal or no phonological change. Some of these words included the following in isiXhosa: *gwazeka* (to object) and *bangalala* (civic guard). Derivatives from Setswana included *kgangs* (news) and *gata* (policeman) and from xiTsonga *tshama* (sit).

Another significant feature of Tsotsitaal is the retention of some of the click sounds derived from many African languages (Herbert 1990; Janson & Tsonope 1991). Terms such as *caza* (impress), *mca* (fine), *qava* (observe) and *sqa* (sorghum beer) were used extensively.

There is also evidence of borrowing from European languages. This category of derivatives is mainly English and to a limited extent Latin, French and German. Many of the words and expressions drawn from the various languages assumed different meanings. In French the word *cherie* means 'darling' (Mansion 1989:c42). It was incorporated into Tsotsitaal to mean 'girlfriend' or 'young woman'. In its daily use it conveyed strong proprietary overtones. In Latin, *panis* refers to 'bread' but in Tsotsitaal it means 'water'. Another loanword which has a peculiar semantic history is the term 'miering'. It seems to be derived from the German word *schmieren* which means 'to lubricate or to grease' (Scholze-Stubenrecht & Sykes 1990:636). In Tsotsitaal 'miering' referred to money.

Hannerz (1994: 191) refers to Tsotsitaal 'as a variety of Afrikaans with an unusually large proportion of American slang'. The main channels for the transmission of such words and phrases were American films, books and magazines. Some of the words taken from American slang included: 'baby' (girl or sweetheart); 'broke' (very short of money); 'fuzzy' (side-kick); 'hooch' (alcohol); 'movies' (cinema); *palooka* (a large, clumsy and/or slow-witted male) (Thorne 1990:381); 'blind' (dull).

Despite the significant Asian presence on the Reef, there seems to have been no obvious loanwords from languages such as Gujarati, Telugu, Bhojpuri, Hindi and Tamil. Nor was there any significant borrowing from languages spoken by the Chinese, Portuguese and Greeks. The presence of these visible minority groups who were differentiated from the Africans in terms of culture and physical appearance did not necessarily lead to a significant lexical contribution of their various languages to Tsotsitaal.

Phonology

Another significant feature of Tsotsitaal and common in other African languages, is the practice of using natural sounds of objects in the environment to enhance one's vocabulary (Pasteur & Toldson 1992). For instance, in relating a violent altercation, one may say: '*Majieta! Mhlonyan! Wabaa! Zithi!*'. In essence, the speaker would be saying 'Guys! (*Majieta*), I slapped him or her (*mhlonyan*)'. The word *wabaa* is meant to simulate the sound and feeling of physical attack. The term *zithi* conveys the crashing sound as the victim lands on the ground. Such a linguistic mosaic of terms and expressions constitutes one of the peculiarities of Tsotsitaal.

Grammar

Although there seems to be a coherent underlying structure, Tsotsitaal often

defies the formal constraints of grammar. Grammatical creativity and spontaneity were sometimes accompanied by peculiar violations of structured syntax. Speakers of Tsotsitaal used some words and phrases in special ways which excluded from the group any persons who did not share their meanings. For instance, the simple word *ga* meant 'give'. And the strange expression *ma ga* which meant 'let us share'—especially food—was part of the esoteric repertoire of Tsotsitaal.

The individuality about the language is reflected in quaint expressions such as *haba wiete* or *ha wiede*, literally meaning 'I have nothing to say'. Both expressions were perfectly understandable as responses to the form of greeting, *Heita*. Other forms of response to such a greeting included *grand*, *simboli*, *singali*, *sharp* and *sweet*. A more flamboyant expression indicating that one was in good health is: *sweet job no mkatakata*. The linguistic and grammatical monstrosity: *Ha sal howl*, meaning 'I am fine' was considered to be a stylish and appropriate response to 'Hoezit?'. All these words and turns of phrase marked the speakers as 'clevers'. The mastery of intonation, inflections and speech rhythm invariably reinforced the expression of the speaker's emotions. The gestures and facial expressions that accompanied the words and phrases provided a fitting context for the meaning of the communication.

Racial and Ethnic Prejudice: Linguistic Expressions

Where several ethnically diverse groups reside in close proximity with each other, various forms of conflict and prejudice tend to emerge. As noted earlier, groups of people with distinctive physical features and cultures lived side by side in and around Sophiatown, Western Native Township and Newclare. In this setting, negative images and stereotypes of the different racial and ethnic groups was a pervasive phenomenon in the social consciousness.

A number of the most enduring and commonly held stereotypes found expression in Tsotsitaal. In a sense, the terms used by the 'clevers' were part of the broader collective action by the various oppressed groups, responding to the exigencies of socio-political conflict. The increasing intolerance, specifically of young blacks, was expressed in part by the use of terms of derision such as *japie* and *maboerkie* when referring to working class Afrikaners from the neighbouring residential areas of Albertskroon, Newlands and Westdene.

The antipathy towards Greeks and Portuguese was expressed through the use of the pejorative term, *stapora*. Young blacks also tended to use derogatory forms of address such as *chara*, *jananda* and *mememe* for the

descendants of Indian indentured labourers. The Chinese were widely known as *chingo* or *gong*.

A number of terms were also used by 'clevers' to express hostility towards some members of the different African ethnic groups. For instance, the epithets *dromoor* and *zoempie* were terms which contained demeaning and contemptuous overtones, and were reserved for the so-called tradition-bound Zulu migrant worker. Similarly, negative images are contained in the word *Makwankie* when reference is made to Shangaan individuals. Curiously, Basotho were known as *Riders*, presumably, a reference to their legendary association with horses.

The inability of many of these individuals to *wietie* was one of the overt sources of the prejudice against them. Quite often they stoically became accustomed to the aspersions which were cast on their identities. Accepting these provocative epithets with little or no complaint was one way of ensuring that no physical violence ensued. On occasion, the use of these derogatory words triggered off trouble—*shandies*—in which ferocious fratricidal violence was unleashed.

Alcohol Abuse

Distressed neighbourhoods are often characterised by a variety of deviant behavioral patterns. Two of the most visible and negative features of black urban life are alcohol and drug abuse. Drinking alcoholic beverages of different types seems to have always played a significant role in black township life. A great deal of the drinking was done in unlicensed premises where alcoholic beverages were sometimes brewed. The hours of custom were flexible and the patrons were invariably involved in group drinking. In Tsotsitaal, these premises were known as *cook-dladla*, *shebeen* and *spot*.

The centrality of these drinking outlets in black urban culture has been captured graphically in the writings of some of the leading black writers and journalists of the 1950s and 1960s (Patel 1975:57-58). These literary figures have come to be described rather extravagantly as a 'small cluster of bohemians'. Like the Bohemians of nineteenth century Europe, it is argued, their appetite for alcohol was prodigious. They shared drinks with thugs and held conversations in Tsotsitaal (Gready 1990:155). Quite often, the personal lives of these writers of unmistakable originality were in disarray, or ended up tragically precisely because of alcohol abuse. The *shebeens* they patronised included *Back o' the Moon*, *Cool House*, *House on Telegraph Hill* and *Thirty Nine Steps*.

Terms such as *haja* (halfjack), *hooch* (alcohol), *mahog* (brandy), *yanya* (drink) and *nuk* (drunk) for instance, are also a manifestation of the

place of alcoholic beverages as desired commodities in many black communities (Dodson 1974; Rogerson & Hart 1986). A number of these words were coined by the literary figures and found their way into the stock of words used by the youth to refer to alcoholic beverages.

Drug use amongst youth centred mainly on cannabis or dagga, and to a lesser extent, benzene. Words such as *tari* and *yabus* for cannabis and *nzena* for benzene converge to suggest the significance of substance abuse especially by young males. The use of dagga specifically, was meant to enhance one's appreciation and enjoyment of music, food and sex. The overall effect produced by smoking the relatively easily available cannabis was one of euphoria. The inhalant, benzene, led to hallucinations or confused states which were described as being *gerook*.

Violence

Many observers have argued that one of the most debilitating psychological effects of years of racism on blacks is violent and anti-social behaviour. The lives of the blacks in the townships have always been plagued by violence and crime (Brandel-Syrier 1971; Marks & Anderson 1990; Goodhew 1993). The vast bulk of some of the criminal violence was perpetrated by the hardcore of the criminal world. The most notorious of the gangs of the time included, *inter alia*, the 'Berliners', 'Co-operatives', 'Gestapo', 'Head-quarters', 'Russians', 'Vultures' and the 'Young Americans' (Guy & Thabane 1987; Mattera 1987; Van Tonder 1990). Other gangs with equally bizarre names were the 'Black Koreans', 'Dead-end Kids' and the 'Hitlers'. These were groups of young males, usually teenagers or young adults in their twenties, with clear organizational structures.

The *sterk man* or 'strong man'- image of some of the gangsters carried considerable honour and prestige in the criminal underworld. The young males often felt the need to assert themselves through violence. The medium of communication which was used for expressing themselves was largely Tsotsitaal. Jimmy Boyle (1992:34) refers to a 'square-go' as a fight where the fists, head and feet were used. The use of weapons, in this instance, was not allowed. In the dusty streets of the slums of Johannesburg, the equivalent of the Scottish 'square-go' was 'flea go'.

What James (1992:3) describes as 'the ritualization of male violence and aggression' has always been a disturbing feature of the tsotsi subculture. Individual acts of violence such as assault, mugging and rape were widespread phenomena. Kgositsile (1971:60) refers to the 'bloodstained streets of Sophiatown'. Hellman (1940:49) in her study concluded that:

In all locations, and especially in Sophiatown, many robberies and assaults are

attributed to gangs. It appears that the older the gang members, the more dangerously anti-social their activities.

Some of the words and phrases associated with such violent personal crimes included *hash* (coerce), *rutla* (mug), *moer* (assault), *thef* (stab), *bul vang* (mug) and *ganda* (kick). In this context, the use, for instance, of the term *thwa* (to shoot)—apparently through onomatopoeic imitation—also comes to mind.

The local cinemas—'Balanski' and 'Odin' in Sophiatown and 'Reno' in Newclare—often showed American films which were showcases for fashionable life-styles and deviant behaviour. Quite often, the youth were furnished with popular images of rebellion and deviance. Richard 'Styles' Widmark in *Street With No Name*, Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney in *Angels with Dirty Faces* and Broderick Crawford in *The Fastest Gun Alive* were popular film stars with a reputation as tough guys (Sampson 1983:81; Nicol 1991:70; Coplan 1979:147).

Sexuality and Sexist Language

What appears to be a preoccupation with sexuality is linked to various terms and phrases which denote sexual attitudes and mores and intimate physical experiences. In the main, the men controlled the language—a clear index of the relationship between power and language. The language is replete with terms and expressions of sex-stereotyped roles and character elements of females. Beauty and the number of girlfriends one had, represented success and often generated envy. Some of the words were extremely patronising terms of praise for certain types of females. Examples of such words include: *cherie*, *tlakaduma* and *wibit*. Some of these terms may, arguably, have well been neutral. They may eventually have acquired negative connotations as they increasingly referred exclusively to women and as their meanings focused on women as sexual objects.

In a study of the pejoration of terms designating women in the English language, Schulz (1975) notes the role of comparable linguistic experience. In Tsotsitaal terms such as *rubber-neck*, *skêr* and *tickey-line* are severe swear words which portrayed derogatory images of women. The word *bitch* falls in the same category as a term of individual affront. It is interesting to note that there seems, arguably to be parallels between the use of the term *bitch* in Tsotsitaal and its use by some African-Americans. Thorne (1990:4) observed that in the case of African-Americans the term was 'used with proprietorial or condescending overtones rather than with personalized malice'. Many among the older generation of 'clevers' in Soweto maintain that it was essentially in this context that the term was used.

One of the features of Tsotsitaal is the prevalence of rather unaffectionate terms associated with the feminine anatomy. Peculiar words referring to the vagina, for instance, include *gwang*, *khwet* and *twer*. These are indeed a reflection of the fixation on female genitalia. As Mcfadden (1992:177) notes, 'the female genitals ... are couched in secrecy and negative definitions'. For the women, these words always represented the height of insult and affront. Many of these terms and associated expressions were used almost exclusively by men. The overall sexist character of the language is a reflection of the stereotyped attitudes to women.

Swearing

Forms of swearing in Tsotsitaal were many. Such use of foul or obscene language was a distinctive feature of this lingua franca. In a recent study, Hughes (1991:3) observed that

... in many cultures swearing is fascinating in its protean diversity and poetic creativity while being simultaneously shocking in its ugliness and cruelty

Swearing was used mainly to be offensive and insulting. It was also used to demonstrate strong emotions. Terms and phrases such as *gat*, *moer* and *moeskont* were vivid swear words used as personal insults. In addition, terms for human excrement are typical swear-words used in Tsotsitaal. Two such synonyms, *kak* and *pung* were used in fixed expressions for swearing. The figurative meaning of the expressions *Jy is vol kak* and *Jy praat pung* are: 'You are irritating me' and 'You are talking rubbish' respectively.

'Ek sal jou jou ma wys' meaning, literally 'I will show you your mother', evoked gross vulgarity and extreme provocation. The hidden meaning of this sentence refers to one's mother's genitalia. Even a seemingly innocuous *Jou ma* (Your mother) has always been considered to be extremely obscene. The rather copious use of such hauntingly aggressive terms and expressions—invariably carrying with them implications of obscenity—often led to fist-fights and stabbings.

Language Contraction

The year 1955 signalled the beginning of a new phase in the development of Tsotsitaal. For many people it marked the beginning of the contraction of the language. As the decades and the golden age of Sophiatown recede in the distance, so too, the use of Tsotsitaal seemed to diminish. There are a

number of social factors which accompany language contraction and language death (Romaine 1989; Brenzinger, Heine & Sommer 1991). These may include, *inter alia*, resettlement, dispersion and inter-marriage.

As part of a broader policy of systematic social separation between the various racial groups, working-class shanty-towns in various urban areas were demolished (Horrell 1957; Platzky & Walker 1985). In Johannesburg specifically, a government-appointed 'Natives Resettlement Board' implemented the Western Areas Removal Scheme. The first notices were issued to residents of Sophiatown and Martindale to vacate the premises they had occupied for years. Families and communities were moved to ethnically segregated townships in Soweto (Mashile & Pirie 1977; Lodge 1983; Mattera 1989; Parnell & Pirie 1991). Soweto had derived its name from an abbreviation of what until April 1963 was known officially as the South Western Bantu Townships (Lewis 1966:45).

The brutal implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1950 led to a partial disintegration of the Tsotsitaal speech community. It may well be viewed as one of the major external factors which led to the apparent contraction in the use of Tsotsitaal. The fact, however, that most of the families were moved *en bloc* and accommodated largely in Meadowlands and Rockville in Soweto meant that a number of seminal elements of Tsotsitaal were retained. Thus, language maintenance has occurred precisely because a significant number of speakers continued to 'wietie'. But the retention of the use of Tsotsitaal seem to have declined in the urban settings of the Reef.

In more recent years this decline may be attributed to increasing negative attitudes towards this language. In some circles, the rejection of this lingua franca was part of ideological and political debates about the historical and current place and role of Afrikaans in South Africa. The tendency to view Tsotsitaal in negative terms stemmed in part from the rejection of Afrikaans as the language of the oppressors (Van den Berghe 1970:253).

In the course of this process of contraction, all that seems to be left over is a language which, arguably, is spoken mainly by grey-haired and middle-aged 'clevers' who are caught in a cruel time warp. This, of course, represents the cynical view. A more positive scenario draws from evidence which seems to suggest that significant numbers of young men, especially in Meadowlands and Rockville, still speak the language. Despite the apparently continuing decline, Tsotsitaal still seems to supply a considerable stock of terms and phrases. Perhaps one should add that even during the heady days of the transition to a democratic South Africa, political activities are known to have used Tsotsitaal expressions directly. It was thus not uncommon to hear: 'Heita, Comrade Madiba, Heita!'. All in all, it still seems to serve important functions in many black communities.

Conclusion

The above study of language use in its context is essentially preliminary in nature. In this exploratory effort it has been shown that the geographic, socioeconomic and cultural conditions under which the speakers of Tsotsitaal lived, gave form and content to this language. Undoubtedly, it fulfilled the communication needs of those young people who had no common language and had chosen a life-style associated with being street-wise. It flourished for a while, albeit as a relatively marginal language. As a language of the streets, it was capable of tremendous flexibility, including innovation of grammar, idiom, pronunciation and vocabulary. As in other languages, change was inherent in the nature of Tsotsitaal.

Tsotsitaal remains, arguably, a sufficiently important symbol of identity to ensure its continued use among black people on the Reef. It is however possible that other lingua francas, such as *isicamtho*, which is spoken in many parts of Soweto, may come to replace Tsotsitaal.

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