Urban Life

Readings in the Anthropology of the City

Fourth Edition

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Urban Language in a Rural Setting

The Case of Phokeng, South Africa

Susan E. Cook

This piece argues that "urban" can be an aspect of someone's identity as well as a geographic location. By analyzing the speech habits of people in a rural South African community (Phokeng), Cook illustrates how people who admire and seek to emulate the styles and values of the cities can do so symbolically through language. Although rural Setswana speakers are usually thought to speak a "pure" standard form of the language, we can observe that residents of Phokeng instead use urban forms of Setswana that vary according to the speaker's age, gender, and education level.

Introduction

South Africa is a multiracial, multilingual country where most people grow up speaking two, three, or even more languages. South Africa's majority black population is divided into nine language groupings.[1] The country's other two major languages, for a total of eleven official languages, are English and Afrikaans. These two European languages are spoken natively by whites and people of mixed race known as "Coloureds." South Africa's black population is mostly based in the rural areas, where people farm or work in small business enterprises. Culturally, by contrast, black South Africans are

Source: Article written expressly for *Urban Life*.

increasingly oriented towards the styles, practices, and cultural symbols of the city. How does a rurally based population integrate urban trends and values into their behavior, their attitudes, and their identities? This essay answers that question by using observations from one community in South Africa's North West Province. There, in a village called Phokeng (pronounced PO-KENG), "urban" is not a geographic location, but rather a set of socially prestigious habits, and a symbol of socioeconomic mobility. In particular, language is one way that people identify themselves with urban spaces even if they don't actually live there.

For most South Africans, whether they live in cities, towns, townships, or rural communities like villages and farms, things associated with urbanness are highly valued. Urbanness conveys not only modernity and fashion, but also economic mobility: in short, the identity many people aspire to in post-apartheid South Africa. As a result of the popularity associated with urban styles and habits, many South Africans favor fashion trends, pop culture, and even varieties of speech that are considered "urban." This essay will examine people's speech behavior in the village of Phokeng. Rural-dwellers are usually thought to speak a "pure" version of the local language (i.e., unaccented speech with perfect grammar and no nonstandard words). Their counterparts in the city, on the other hand, are often thought to use a nonstandard form of the language. Contrary to this stereotype, however, people in Phokeng are every bit as urban-sounding as their city friends.

Phokeng, South Africa[2]

Seat of the Paramount Chief (*kgosi*) of the Royal Bafokeng Nation, Phokeng has a population of approximately twenty thousand, and covers two thousand square kilometers. Previously located in the Bophuthatswana "homeland" during the apartheid era, Phokeng nevertheless has a long, proud history of settlement by one group. The people, known as "Bafokeng," are a Setswana-speaking clan who trace their origins to a single ruler, Chief Sekete, who reigned at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Breutz 1953). As Setswana speakers, or ethnic Tswanas, these people belong to one of the major ethno-linguistic groupings of black South Africans. From a car window, Phokeng looks like a small dusty town with some shops, a few gas stations, and not much else. There are surprisingly few symbols of agrarian life here: no cattle or goats grazing by the side of the road, no donkey carts hauling water or firewood, no freshly ploughed fields waiting for the first rains. The shops and houses are concrete blocks with corrugated iron roofs, not the mud-thatched huts found elsewhere in the South African countryside.

Not far from the main road, however, is the evidence of Phokeng's unique history and impressive development. The Bafokeng Civic Centre sits on a hillside in a place traditionally used for meetings of the tribal authorities. This huge brick structure houses the kgosi's offices, the Assembly of the Bafokeng Tribal Council (*kgotla*), as well as a public library, civil and crimi-

nal courtrooms, and an auditorium with a capacity of one thousand.[3] Next to a shopping center, a $10 million sports complex houses a stadium (capacity forty thousand), Olympic-sized pool, indoor arena, and tennis courts.

Where does the money come from to build these impressive facilities? Platinum. Phokeng, and the surrounding territories it administers, sits on one of the world's richest platinum reserves. Mining operations began here in 1969, and the profits reaped from this industry have provided the Bafokeng people with unusual economic strength and political ambitions. Phokeng is part of a territory that is governed by a combination of traditional/hereditary and modern/democratic institutions. The *kgosi* ("king") is the highest local authority, and has wide-ranging powers. The present kgosi is Leruo Tshekedi Molotlegi, age thirty-three, who inherited the position from his brother in 2000.[4] Kgosi Leruo holds a B.A. in architecture from the University of Natal in South Africa. Although Kgosi Leruo is the traditional heir to the Bafokeng kingdom, he is unequivocally a national figure with a cosmopolitan upbringing and an urban outlook. It is easy to see why, for average people in Phokeng, Kgosi Leruo is as much a South African celebrity as he is the Bafokeng King.

Tradition is thus a matter of perspective in Phokeng. Although the hereditary leader of the nation is an international businessman as comfortable in New York and Monaco as in Phokeng, he is also responsible for establishing the place of the Royal Bafokeng Nation in the post-apartheid era in South Africa. He is not only Chairman and CEO of the Royal Bafokeng Administration, but he also presides over the council of tribal elders. He may track fluctuations in platinum prices on the Internet every hour, but as the head of the Bafokeng customary court (*kgotla*), he also mediates disputes between villagers over inheritance, bridewealth (*bogadi*), and local boundaries. Local issues such as these, however, are not many steps removed from global economic and political concerns. Rather than simply coexisting, the global and the local converge in Phokeng, resulting in an ethnic nation of platinum entrepreneurs whose decisions and fate generate as much interest on the financial pages of European newspapers as they do in the village gossip networks.

Workers mine the stopes at Impala Platinum. [Photo by Susan E. Cook]

Aside from the mines and the royal household, Phokeng is a community of people of modest incomes and local interests. Many Phokeng residents are forced to migrate for work to nearby towns and townships. Outside of the mines, there are few employment opportunities in Phokeng. Although Phokeng is considered semi-urban in comparison with the surrounding villages that don't have paved roads or electricity, it is still a sleepy backwater, "boring" and "uncivilized" in the words of its own citizens. Ironically, no amount of platinum revenues can buy for the Bafokeng the aura of sophistication and worldliness that comes easily to residents of cities. As a result, residents of Phokeng value the symbols of middle-class urbanness, including driving BMWs, copying the hairstyles seen on the TV show "Living Single," and speaking "urban" dialects. Cheaper than a new car and available to nearly everyone, urban speech forms are one of the principle means of identifying with urban values.

Language, Identity, and Social Change

Anthropologists and sociolinguists have long recognized that language can be an important index of identity. By "index" we mean something in a person's appearance or behavior that *points to* an aspect of their identity. Studies have shown that variations in speech, ranging from pronunciation to word choice to grammar, often correspond with social faultlines such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and so forth (Wardhaugh 1998; Milroy 1980; Labov 1972). In addition, many studies have shown that different speech varieties can index different levels of social prestige, whether or not people consciously acknowledge this (Labov 1966; Trudgill 1983). Thus, people who occupy positions of social power or prestige are often associated with a particular way of talking that others recognize and try to emulate.

From the perspectives of both theory and method, this essay takes language as an important point of entry into an examination of other sociocultural phenomena. Language not only symbolically reflects components of people's identities in Phokeng, including ethnicity, age, and gender, but also is used by people to align themselves with reference to particular ideas, styles, and values. Language is thus not only a mirror of social structures, but is also a tool used strategically by individuals and groups to shape their identities, their social status, political leanings, and even their economic pros-

pects. For the researcher, speech is a concrete form of behavior that can be recorded, quantified, and analyzed; furthermore, speech is symbolic behavior in which nearly everyone engages. Language data thus constitutes an excellent empirical (something that can be proved through observation) base from which to explore broader aspects of a particular society.

Let us turn to the linguistic landscape of Phokeng and explore some of the ways in which the broad forces of history, ideology, and change are writ small in day-to-day personal interactions. To paraphrase an idea from the beginning of this essay, language can index not only *where* you are, but also *who* you are. Linguists have identified several regional dialects of Setswana, including Eastern Kwena, the version traditionally spoken by people in Phokeng. This regional dialect differs from the standard version in terms of phonology (sounds) and some vocabulary. When evaluating languages as either "urban" or "rural," however, regional dialects fall into the same category with standard Setswana, the official variety taught in school and used for writing. Standard Setswana and its regional variants are considered "rural" and they exist in sharp contrast with the nonstandard urban dialects speakers use to transcend physical location and align themselves with a broader community of speakers; in this case, South Africans.

The nonstandard variety of Setswana spoken in and around Phokeng can be called "Street Setswana." Similar to Setswana, but clearly not the standard dialect, Street Setswana can be characterized as a hybrid language because it contains a large number of words incorporated from at least three other languages, namely English, Afrikaans (a uniquely South African language that developed from fifteenth-century Dutch), and Zulu (the language of the largest ethno-linguistic group in South Africa). These three languages all convey high status on the rural-urban spectrum. Not easily reduced to a fixed set of linguistic rules, Street Setswana can better be understood as a range of expressive inventories that not only enables people to communicate with each other, but also allows people to communicate something about themselves to the world.

Street Setswana is spoken by men and women, young and old, poor and middle class. It is spoken in the home and in the office as well as on the street and in the bars. There is some variation, however, in the type of Street Setswana spoken by different groups. Styles of Street Setswana associated with rapidly changing fashion trends, popular music, and other urbanisms (i.e., those that incorporate lots of slang, Zulu words, and certain prosodic features[5]) are more commonly spoken by young people (those under twenty-five). In another type of variation, girls and well-educated people are more likely to emphasize English words in their speech, whereas boys and less well-educated people are more likely to use more Afrikaans.

An excerpt from a conversation among three teenaged girls will help illustrate these patterns. Wendy[6] is a fifteen year old who attends high school in the nearby township, Tlhabane. She lives with her grandmother in the township during the term, returning home to Phokeng on weekends and holidays.

Her two friends, Dineo and Masego, go to school in Phokeng and, like Wendy, are fashion conscious and popular. This conversation took place in Phokeng at Wendy's house. **English** words appear in boldface, those originating from Afrikaans are underlined, and those from *other African languages* are in italics.

These three teenagers mix a fair amount of English into their speech, in both common and uncommon ways. For example, the use of words like "exist," "contest," and "joke" is stylistic and noticeable, whereas the word "mborile" from "bore" is a very common usage. Similarly, the few Afrikaans items in this excerpt fall into two categories: conventional borrowings, such as "s'petlele" from the Afrikaans *hospitaal* and "hirile" from Afrikaans *huur* (hire); and more stylistic code-switching, such as "suo fer" from *suo ver* (so far).

With the exception of "pila," which is a regional variant of the Setswana word "sentle," (good/ok/fine), and "sogelwa" (pronounced with a hard "g"—as in "girl"—which doesn't exist in Setswana), there are few items from other African languages in this fragment. Although words from Zulu and

	Transcript 1	English Gloss
1	Wendy: E?e, le sa bua ka batho bao tu, batho ba ba sa **existeng**. E?e a re bueng ka batho.	Wendy: No, don't talk about those people, people who don't **exist**. No, let's talk about [real] people.
5	Masego: Nna, waitse ke eng? Ka re bathong ke mo rata gore . . .	Masego: Me, you know what? I say, you guys, I really like him . . .
10	Wendy: Ka re ga se go so*Gelwa* ke batho ga re tswa **contesteng** phakela, iyo!	Wendy: I'm saying I was *provoked* by people when we came from the **contest** in the morning, yo!
15	Dineo: E?e o sa e bua eo. Waitsore ke eng tsala ya me? Ke nako e ke buang ka yona, ga ke **jouke** bathong. O ko s'petlele. Ga se go robega fela looto.	Dineo: No, don't say that. You know what it is, my friend? It's that time I'm talking about. I'm not **kidding**. He's in the hospital. He broke his leg.
20	Wendy: Ka re ka so*Gelwa* tsheg'wa ke batho, ba mpolel'la gore, ba mpolel'la gore ka a ba **spitela** mare ke tswa Tlhabane suo fer, ke hirile fo Phokeng mare ka ba **spitela**.	Wendy: I'm saying I'm being *provoked* and laughed at by people, they told me, they told me I **ignore** them, but I came from Tlhabane so far, I'm renting in Phokeng, but I **reject** them.
	Dineo: Ba re nna'a ke *pila*. *Leshambola* le le tshwanang le nna e be ba tloo re nnaa ke *pila*, huu, waitse ba **mborile** waitse.	Dineo: They said I'm not *beautiful*. Looking like I look, how can they say I'm not *beautiful*, whew, you know they **bore** me.

Key: **English**
Afrikaans
Other African Language

Tsotsitaal (a term for black urban language varieties based on nonstandard Afrikaans) do appear in this conversation, they do so less often than in the Street Setswana of boys.

A second example illustrates the contrast between the Street Setswana of men and women. The following excerpt is from a longer conversation among a group of men in their thirties who are drinking outside a bar. Several interactions are going on at once, but what the conversation lacks in coherence, it makes up for in richness of language. The speakers are identified by number, as I did not speak to them or get all their names.

It is immediately obvious that the nonstandard elements in Transcript 2 derive mostly from Afrikaans, and secondarily from Tsotsitaal or other African languages, with hardly any English at all. Although English borrowings and code-switchings appear elsewhere in this conversation, this fragment demonstrates some general differences between men's and women's speech. This style of Street Setswana reflects the social biographies of the individual speakers and the setting in which they are gathered. These men are not well educated (some high school or less), most are unmarried, and many of them are unemployed. They are drinking, flirting, and socializing in a very informal (almost illicit) setting. Their vocabulary and syntax gives an overall impression of language that is rough and uneducated, but also urban and stylish.

A comparison of Transcripts 1 and 2 suggests that different styles of Street Setswana spoken in Phokeng correlate strongly with gender. Girls mix more English into their speech while boys mix more Afrikaans, Tsotsitaal, and other languages. This is especially true for younger people (the speech of old women often contains plenty of Afrikaans). This gender variation reflects the common attitude in Phokeng that Street Setswana is a male form of speech, inappropriate for girls. People usually think of Street Setswana as a male gendered form of speech first, and a marker of urbanness second. In practice, however, the opposite is true. While people of both sexes use Street Setswana to sound up-to-date and urban, they nevertheless associate these styles with male, urban criminality. So while girls would be sanctioned for speaking the way the men in Transcript 2 do, they can still use the type of Street Setswana that contains more English. Still urban and hip, the English-influenced speech of girls (and educated men) apparently lacks the associated maleness that would otherwise mark girl-speakers as rough, tomboys, ill-reputed, and so forth. Likewise, if the men in Transcript 2 spoke Street Setswana heavily mixed with English, they might be regarded as feminine and soft (maybe even pretentious). This distinction is very subtle, it seems, for no one in Phokeng consciously distinguishes between the style of Street Setswana spoken by girls (called "Pretoria Sotho" by some linguists) and that of boys (often referred to as Tsotsitaal). People refer to any form of nonstandard Setswana that marks urbanness as Street Setswana, or Tsotsitaal, regardless of its variations. So while Street Setswana serves to index urbanness in anyone who speaks it, the association of maleness with Afrikaans and Tsotsitaal has an impact on the style of Street Setswana available to different speakers.

	Transcript 2	English Gloss
1	1: Hei! Popompo! Abuti Popompo, abuti Popompo! Ga waa apara bine bruku . . .	1: Hey Popompo! Brother Popompo, brother Popompo! You're not wearing underwear . . .
5	3: Eish! ga ke itsoore kajeno koo bereka yang waitse.	3: Hey! I don't know how I'll manage today, you know?
10	2: Wena o betere o . . . O *tjela* mo nameng mare o ntsoore o patagantse . . .	2: You're fine . . . you're *living* well but you keep saying you're struggling . . .
	4: Aye ga gona sepe	4: No, there's nothing like that
	3: E?e, ga gona gore ga go na . . .	3: No, there is no . . .
15	1: Ko . . . go na le nama mos	1: But there is meat
	3: Hei	3: Hey
20	5: Motjitji, go na le nama?	5: Motjitji, is there meat?
	1: A?e, e teng nama, monna	1: The meat is there, man
	2: Bo bo bo bo bo Cleophus	2: Cleophus and . . .
25	3: Ke tswa ko teng	3: I just came from there
	2: Ko Cleophus?	2: From Cleophus's place?
30	3: Ee	3: Yes
	1: **Noo**, o maaka, wena *manga*	1: **No**, you're lying, you're *lying*
	2: Ko'ore goo fa wa *shashara*, waa ba Dolphina	2: Because if you're *lying*, . . . Dolphina

KEY: **English**
Afrikaans
Other African Language

CONCLUSION

As black South Africans try to shake off the mentality of apartheid, in which they were oppressed, intimidated, segregated, and relegated to ethnically defined "homelands," the prospect of identifying themselves as South Africans with rights, mobility, and ever-expanding opportunities is an attrac-

tive one. And if cities and towns represent the new South Africa in the eyes of many, geography presents no barrier to acquiring the habits and values that index urbanness, including language. Counter-intuitive though it is, urban dialects such as Street Setswana are a symbolic resource available to anyone who wishes to adopt them. While certain social constraints on their use do exist, as in the difference between girls' and boys' Street Setswana, urban dialects are just as "at home" in the rural areas as they are in the cities.

NOTES

[1] These include Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, Sotho, Tswana, Pedi, Venda, Tsonga, and Ndebele.
[2] Phokeng is the capital of the Bafokeng Magisterial District, one of six magisterial districts in the Rustenburg District Council Area.
[3] This information comes from "The Bafokeng," a glossy brochure produced and distributed by the Royal Bafokeng Administration [n.d.].
[4] Kgosi Leruo's older brother, Kgosi Lebone II, died unexpectedly at age thirty-five.
[5] Think of the highly modulated sound of valley-girl speech, as opposed to the fewer highs and lows of standard American English.
[6] All individuals' names in this essay are pseudonyms.

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Urban Danger
Life in a Neighborhood of Strangers

Sally Engle Merry

In a landmark study, Wirth argued that the urban way of life is characterized by relations between strangers. Despite considerable research that shows that urbanites' social lives include intimate and enduring social ties, relations between strangers continue to define an essential and problematic quality of urban social life. Sally Engle Merry's ethnographic study of a multiethnic housing project in a high-crime neighborhood shows how the boundaries between social groups contribute to the sense that the city is dangerous. The existence of social boundaries makes the project a fertile place for crime, while the residents' awareness of danger comes from their belief that they live in a world of dangerous and unpredictable strangers. These strangers are people in other social networks, known across the social boundaries which divide the intimate worlds of the project.

In "Urbanism As a Way of Life," Wirth describes cities as places of anonymity and disorder, as settlements in which people treat each other with indifference, competition, and exploitation. A city is a place of strangers. The web of gossip, social pressure, and concern about the opinions of others is unable to hold in check the criminal, the prostitute, and the social deviant or to prevent the personal breakdown of the increasingly isolated individual. Wirth's famous article, written in 1938, distills the ideas of two decades of urban research done by sociologists and anthropologists at the University of

Source: Article written expressly for *Urban Life.*