Paul Flanagan discusses the Bantu language, Northern Sotho, and its structure and position as an official language in South Africa.

Northern Sotho

Where is it spoken?

Northern Sotho (pronounced 'sootoo', and previously spelt ‘Sutu’) is one of the eleven official languages of the Republic of South Africa (RSA) and has almost 5 million first language (L1) speakers and almost 10 million L2 speakers. The
majority live in the north-east of the country in the provinces of Limpopo, Mpumalanga and Gauteng, and make Northern Sotho the fourth most commonly spoken language in RSA.

Who speaks it?

Although usually referred to as a language, it is often considered to be a ‘language cluster’, as Northern Sotho is an umbrella term for around 27 dialects with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility. It is often referred to as Sepedi, which is the name of the dialect on which the standard form is based. While this is the term used for the language in the National Constitution (1998), it is problematic in that not all speakers of Northern Sotho are Sepedi dialect users.

Speakers of other major dialects such as Lobedu or Kopa might be more inclined to use the term ‘Northern Sotho’ or the local equivalent, Sesotho sa Leboa. However, for some speakers, the term sotho is also problematic as it is essentially a portmanteau word made out of the adjective root so ‘black’ and the noun motho ‘person’. These factors combine to make Northern Sotho an interesting language, but one which can be difficult to label.
What kind of language is it?

Northern Sotho is a Southern Bantu language, and is often placed in what is referred to as the Sotho-Tswana sub-group, along with Southern Sotho and Tswana, both of which also have official status in South Africa. There is something of a dialect continuum between these three languages, with some varieties of Northern Sotho sharing more mutual intelligibility with Tswana than with other varieties of Northern Sotho. Like other Bantu languages, it has agglutinative morphology and has a smaller range of phonemes than English.

Where did it come from?

We do not have a great deal of information on the early development of the language. It is thought that Bantu speakers arrived in Limpopo from further north around 500AD, probably displacing Khoisan languages already spoken there. The development of standardised forms of indigenous languages in South Africa was largely the work of German missionaries, led by Karl Endemann in the 1860s. Endemann and his colleagues settled in Sekhukhuneland, a large region in the Limpopo province, south of Polokwane, and documented the language of the Pedi people who lived in the area. This variety was used to produce bibles and literacy materials and hence, the Sepedi dialect became the basis for the standard form in which speakers of all 27 dialects receive their education. Over time, other dialects have contributed words to the standard form. The language
gained official status in 1998 and is used alongside English, Afrikaans and 8 other indigenous languages in government, media and other official contexts.

**Is Northern Sotho safe, endangered, moribund or extinct?**

The language has official status in South Africa and thus is institutionalised and has a reasonable bank of literature. Ethnologue classifies it at Level 1 status, meaning it is a statutory national language. However, the influence of English (also an official language in RSA) as a lingua franca and also as the global prestige language of the media and internet continues to increase. This means that the number of monolingual Northern Sotho speakers is likely to diminish in future generations in similar fashion to the position of Celtic languages in the British Isles.

**What is it like?**

Northern Sotho has fairly simple phonology, with most syllables containing just one consonant and one vowel. Consonant clusters are very uncommon compared to English, but do often appear at the start of words where they would not in English:

*Mpša ye kgolo ye telele*  ‘a big, tall dog’
In this phrase, the noun *mpša* ‘dog’ begins with the consonant cluster in the middle of the word ‘lampshade’, and the word *kgolo* ‘big’ begins with the /x/ sound which we only find in English in the way speakers of accents such as Scouse pronounce the <ck> in ‘chicken’. The lateral fricative /ɬ/ (also found in Welsh) is present in words such as *hlano* ‘five’. In some urban varieties of the language, clicks are used due to contact with other local languages. Northern Sotho does not have voiced stops, so the letters <b> and <g> sound a lot like their equivalents in Spanish. Such differences mean words borrowed from English have to be changed to fit in with the sound system of the language, so:

*Aterese ya imeile* ‘Email address’

The *ya* word here is known as a particle and is one of many such morphemes in the language. In the previous example, the adjectives *kgolo* ‘big’ and *telele* ‘tall’ follow the noun but are preceded by an adjectival particle *ye*, which simply has the function of linking the noun with the adjective.

Nouns in Northern Sotho do not have grammatical gender or number as such, but rather fall into one of eleven noun ‘classes’, which vary according to their morphology. For example, *mpša* is a class 9 noun, and thus takes the *ye* adjective or ‘qualificative’ particle. Class 1 nouns (usually a person) take *yo*, class 2 nouns (usually a plural noun referring to a person) take *ba* and class 3 nouns take *wo*:

*Motho yo mogolo* ‘big person’ (Class 1)
Like many other Bantu languages, Northern Sotho uses reduplication (repeating the same morpheme) to suggest intensity. The adjective kgolo means ‘big’, but kgolokgolo means ‘very big’. The noun lerato means ‘love’, but leratorato adds an intensity with a similar effect to the term ‘true love’. Both of these nouns are also common Northern Sotho names for both genders. When a verb is reduplicated, it usually expresses frequency or extent; so sepela means ‘walk’, but sepelasepela means ‘to walk back and forth’ or ‘stroll’.

Northern Sotho is an agglutinative language, which means that often several ideas which are different words in English are ‘glued together’ to make up one single word in Northern Sotho. This means that words are sometimes made up of a number of morphemes, such as the classic example gaaapee ‘she does not boil [eggs]’. Here, the ga means ‘she’, and the next two a morphemes indicate negation and present tense respectively. Each morpheme is pronounced separately, meaning this (admittedly rather uncommon) word is pronounced ‘ga-a-a-apee’. Similarly, the sentence keamorata ‘I love her’ is one word:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ke-} & \quad a- \quad \text{mo-} \quad \text{rata} \\
\text{I} & \quad [\text{present tense}] \quad \text{her} \quad \text{love}
\end{align*}
\]
Northern Sotho in 5 minutes

Hello (polite or pl.):  
*Dumêlang!*

How are you? (polite or pl.):  
*Le kae?* (lit. ‘where are you’)

I’m good:  
*Ke/ re gôna* (lit. ‘we’re here’)

Goodbye (pl. in brackets):  
*Šala(ng) gabotse* (lit. ‘stay well’), gabotse

Thank you:  
*Ke a leboga*

My name is:  
*Leina la ka ke*

I love you:  
*Keagorata*

Love (also a name)  
*Lerato*

Real love (also a name)  
*Leratorato*

Idioms:

Have a good journey:  
*Tsela tsweu* (white road)

To be very poor:  
*Go ja mpša* (to eat the dog)

To die  
*Go tšewa ke phiri* (to be taken away by a hyena)

To be brave  
*Go swara tau ka mariri* (to hold a lion by the mane)
Paul Flanagan is Lecturer in English Language at the University of Chester. During his PhD, he conducted fieldwork with Northern Sotho speakers in the Sekhukhuneland region of Limpopo, South Africa.

Find Out More

Online:
The University of South Africa provides a brief online introductory course in Northern Sotho at
http://www.unisa.ac.za/free_online_course/nSotho/nSotho.html

The Omniglot website gives a useful background and some key phrases:
http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/northernsotho.htm

Books:

A Linguistic Analysis of Northern Sotho by G. Poulos & L.J. Louwrens (Pretoria: Via Afrika, 1994)