

SOWETO IS WHERE IT'S AT

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INTRODUCTION

Soweto is the largest single modern ghetto in Africa. It is a bastard child born out of circumstances following the dispossession of the African people and the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand. It was born out of White greed and racism. Even its name is a bastard one, taken from its geographical location: SOutH WEst TOWnship (so - where - to). It serves as a Black labour reservoir for Johannesburg, Pretoria, and other major towns along the Witwatersrand

Soweto, like any other modern community, is made up of all sorts of people. Its population is a mixture of all the African tribes in Southern Africa. People from South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia have merged into a single united African community - Soweto.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SOWETO YOUTH

The influence of the Soweto youth has spread as far as Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland. In these countries, one will come across young members of the community, especially in urban areas, who try to identify with the youth of Soweto. They try to imitate their way of dressing, of talking, behaving, and - to a certain extent - their general interests. Why imitate and identify with the Sowetans? Back in history, Johannesburg became the centre of attraction after the discovery of gold on the Reef. Many Africans in the villages were told of the great city with streets paved with gold, and set off for Johannesburg

to look for the gold in the streets. Hence the name "Egoli" - city of gold. Many of the Africans in Soweto were far better off than Africans elsewhere in South Africa. They were able to afford motor vehicles, flashy clothing and expensive jewellery. So Johannesburg became "the" place. Soweto was where it was. Even today, Soweto is still regarded as the place where it is all happening.

The township where my study was carried out is in the Northern Transvaal. The majority of the people in this township work in places as far away as Johannesburg and Pretoria. They spend most of the year in Johannesburg working in the mines, factories, shops, and offices. The only place where the majority of them can reside while working there is in Soweto. On returning home for the vacation, they bring back with them many of the traits picked up in Soweto. Many families in the township have relatives in Soweto who visit them occasionally, bringing with them the Sowetan way of life. Sowetans receive considerable respect and to a certain extent are given demi-god status by the youth in the other townships.

In many Western European countries, and in the United States, young people start "revolutionary" trends or movements such as the Hippies, the Mods, Punks, and Skinheads. These groups can be identified by their mode of dress, speech, and general appearance. The Hippies, for example, shared a gut solidarity, common aspirations, strategy, style, mood and vocabulary. Soweto, too, has its own version in the "Mahippie" and "Mapantsula", although they have not been as widely publicized as their Western counterparts. They, too, can be identified by their general appearance, their attitudes, and their mode of speech. "Mahippie" and "Mapantsula" are usually young males between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one; thus, the youth.

MAHIPPIE

Mahippie is the plural for the word hippie. The article "Ma" is placed in front of most nouns in Zulu or Sotho. Mahippie are in no way similar to the European hippies, because of their mode of dress, their futile attempts to speak like Black Americans, and their pseudo-intellectualism and sophistication.

Mahippie are particular about what they wear - trousers with flares or bell bottoms, stylish and expensive shoes, and denim jeans.

Listening to typical Mahippie language can at times be hilarious. Let us take, for example, the following conversation:

"Howz you bebeh?"

"Sweet!"

"Cute, bebeh."

"Hey man, howzabout stenge gwy 'sbema man?"

(Hey man, buy some cigarettes and let's smoke)

"Hey man, stenge tjwala 'sbooza man!"

(Buy some alcohol, and let's drink)

These sentences are spoken in a resonant, melodious manner, with a phony American accent. One notes the use of broken English, plus Zulu. "Stenge" is Zulu slang for "buy" and "gwy" is common slang for a cigarette. "Tjwala" is the Zulu word for liquor or alcohol.

MAPANTSULA

Mapantsula are the really interesting group, and they are overwhelmingly popular, maybe not with the older generation, but very much so with the younger generation. Their mode of dress and their "slanguage" are different from those of the Mahippie.

A Pantsula will always wear long, straight-cut trousers, which must have turn-ups. Bell-bottoms are a no-no. Stylish shirts or T-shirts must never have elaborate designs or be too colourful. Shoes with low heels and tennis shoes are popular. Unlike the Mahippie, who aspire to be Westerners, the Mapantsula draw their inspiration from local gangs and the big time gangsters. The label "Mapantsula" is actually the newest word for the old term "tsotsie", which refers to an urban thug.

At parties and discotheques one will notice a particular style of dancing which is definitely neither disco dancing nor rock and roll. It is a style that is unique, eye-catching, and intriguing. It is the Mapantsula style, known as "sMapantsula". It is so unique, I doubt one will find anything similar anywhere else in the world. While dancing, the Pantsula is unconsciously attempting to bring out an African flavour and to express himself in an inherently African manner. The Mapantsula loves to dance and loves himself dancing. Co-mingled with his dancing are short phrases or chants which verbally express his joy in dancing. When he is really going he will utter "Hola, Hola, Hola ...", or "Yesss!", or even a combination of "Yesss" and "Hola" all to the beat of the music.

TSOTSIE-TAAL

One of the biggest influences on African youth is the language (or "slanguage") which is known to many as "tsotsie-taal". Translated, tsotsie-taal means "thug language". Originally,

tsotsie-taal was used by gangs, who developed it in order that ordinary people did not comprehend what they were talking about, for example when planning a pickpocketing operation in a crowded city centre.

Today, tsotsie-taal has become a street dialect, and is not confined to thugs. The Mapantsula are the main users of this dialect. "Once outside the classroom ... the pupils and students listen to, and use, two or more vernacular languages, including some kind of street dialect called Tsotsie-taal. ... While some of its words are foreign to the vernacular, they may not necessarily be of English origin. It is a hodge-podge of words whose derivation ranges from English, Afrikaans, north African languages and goodness knows what else."*

Tsotsie-taal has its earliest origins in the days of the colonialists in Africa. The colonialists were not able to communicate with the indigenous people in their own language. Thus they developed a language which is commonly known from Central to Southern Africa as "Fana-Galo". This dialect is essentially a mixture of pidgin Zulu and English. Intermarrying between White settlers and Africans brought about communication problems, which were partially solved by an enriching of this bastard dialect by the addition of new terms, phrases and expressions, which have survived up to the present day in - amongst others - dialects such as tsotsie-taal.

The origin of tsotsie-taal can also not be discussed in isolation from drama, story-telling (folk lore), music and dance. So tsotsie-taal goes hand in hand with Marabi (township jazz) and disco music, and with general life in the township. Tsotsie-taal has a tradition, conservatism, and certain basic terms and styles that never seem to go out of use. For example, the following words : ausie (sister), bra (brother), cherrie (girl), ou (friend).

The following words are interesting:

Pikinini, which means small boy, originated from a word in Chinese pidgin English that actually referred to a small or young woman, as in the question: "Do you want a pikinini hola?" (a young whore). "Hola" in Chinese pidgin English was taken from the Dutch " hoeren", and is now used in tsotsie-taal in the form "amahore".

*Thebehali, Irene, *The English Academy Review* 1981, p. 45

"Amajita" is an old word in tsotsie-taal. Its equivalent in English would be "chaps", or in American English, "guys". The term "jit" used to be synonymous with the word nigger, but Black people fashioned a mantle out of a slur. Adding the prefix "ama" and the suffix "a" created "amajita". The shortened version is "jitas".

"Heita" is a popular greeting used by the Mapantsula. It simply means "hello". Of course, one can go further by saying "Heita hoezet majita?" (Hello, how are you, friends?). "Hoezet" is a corruption of the Afrikaans phrase "Hoe is dit", or the English adoption of this ("Hello, how's it?").

Phrases or words used when returning a greeting are numerous. These include singali, sharp, sweet, shwii, covered, simanje-manje and many others. Phrases can also be used to describe or explain one's feelings or motives. For example "Twine-twine", meaning "so-so", or "Dolly-Operasi", meaning "I've just spotted a special girl whom I'd really like to get to know". (Dolly refers to a girl or woman, and operasi is the equivalent of operation.)

Innovations sprout around daily activities or new crazes. Smoking, for example, has a terminology all its own: ifag, izoli, fu, duzu, skyf.

Some verbatim quotations from tsotsie-taal should convey its vigour and excitement:

Djy ken wat? Since ek oDoomza se cherrie gencinza het, die mpava goggle my mit 'n critical eye.
(Do you know what? Ever since I broke up Doomza's relationship with his girlfriend, the fool has been giving me really dirty looks.)

Note the mixture of English, Afrikaans, and Zulu. (Gencinza is tsotsie-taal for 'remove' or 'take away': mpava is tsotsie-taal for a 'fool' or someone who is ignorant - possibly from the Zulu word "mpata" which means ignorant or untrained, like a novice.)

Another example is the following:

"Ek het my muntu-obligado gister gechaya."
(I saw my best friend yesterday).

Most of the words in this example are Afrikaans. Muntu-obligado is tsotsie-taal for best friend. Its origin is interesting. Muntu is Zulu for "person". Obligado is from the term medulla oblongata. The medulla oblongata is an organ found at the back

of the brain. In some African tribes there is an intimate connection between a person and his medulla oblongata, so obligado represents a close or intimate relationship between two people.

Another example:

"Sweet braZakes, sojajana lee eDuntown spinseven."
(Fine brother Zakes, we will meet down town, come seven o'clock.)

Sojajana is tsotsie-taal for "we will meet": and spin is tsotsie-taal for "when a particular incident occurs".

Tsotsie-taal has spread so far that if one were Sotho speaking and in a Zulu area and could not speak Zulu, one would only have to speak tsotsie-taal to communicate.

Tsotsie-taal has its drawbacks, one of which is its over-enthusiastic usage by students. One teacher had the following to say "An adventurous student groping for words in conversation or in writing does not hesitate to replenish his stock of English words with those English-sounding ones borrowed from the street dialect."*

For example, an English teacher in the township where the study was carried out allowed me to inspect some English examination papers. In one of them the following was noticed: ... because of smegana problems, my father can't buy a new jalopy." Smegana is tsotsie-taal for money, and jalopy is the tsotsie-taal term for a motor vehicle.

Despite its non-standard infringement on standard English, tsotsie-taal is fun, unique, colourful. Listening to a conversation between two people who are well versed in it can be exciting, if you understand. What will happen to tsotsie-taal in the future? Will it ever become an internationally recognized language, or an official language in South Africa? Will it become a new discipline in the South African educational system? Whatever the outcome, tsotsie-taal has become an important part of the lives of the youth of Soweto and of South Africa.

"So sweet, my bra, sojajana spin some sweet day."

*Thebehali, Irene, *The English Academy Review* 1981, p. 45.

GLOSSARY

<i>acing</i>	:	winning
<i>ausi</i>	:	sister
<i>bra</i>	:	brother, male companion
<i>bricate</i>	:	brother, close male companion
<i>bligadoki</i>	:	female model
<i>cawa</i>	:	able to understand
<i>campta</i>	:	to speak
<i>cherrie</i>	:	girlfriend, female
<i>chick</i>	:	any female
<i>jewish</i>	:	to dress up
<i>duzu</i>	:	cigarette
<i>fota</i>	:	drive or move away
<i>fu</i>	:	cigarette
<i>Johzee</i>	:	Johannesburg
<i>magata</i>	:	police
<i>ofie</i>	:	mother or old woman
<i>plita</i>	:	to propose
<i>tanana</i>	:	girlfriend

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