

(Re)Visiting the Semantics of Some Northern Sotho Gender-Related Proverbs: A Gender Schema Analysis

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Abstract

Several gender-related Northern Sotho proverbs are often interpreted in a limited, one-sided manner by language custodians, even though their meanings may allow dual interpretations. For instance, in Northern Sotho culture, the proverb *Lebitla la monna le kgauswi ga tsela* is typically understood as placing responsibility solely on men, while there are women who have equally taken the responsibility for feeding their families. This study examines 13 gender-related Northern Sotho proverbs to decipher their deeper semantic dimensions. Adopting a qualitative approach, it examines the selected proverbs that are believed to be gender-specific. Data were drawn primarily through textual analysis, with Rakoma's *Marema-Ka-Dika tša Sesotho sa Lebowa* (1978) providing some proverbs, and supplemented by observation of how contemporary Northern Sotho speakers use and interpret these proverbs in cultural contexts. The proverbs were purposively sampled for their relevancy to the topic under discussion. Thematic analysis was used to revisit their semantics. The gender schema theory by Sandra Bem guides the study with regard to how individuals internalise the cultural meanings of gendered proverbs as well as their application and attitudes towards such proverbs. The article argues that though some Northern Sotho proverbs employ generic masculine nouns, they are contextually applicable to both genders. A few proverbs that carry feminine nouns also form a crucial part of this study.

Keywords: proverbs; semantics; culture; gender; folklore; masculine; feminine

Introduction

Among the various elements that shape a language, proverbs are arguably the most fundamental. They are the basic elements of every language globally, serving as tools for discourse and philosophical expressions (Maluleke 2024). It is for this reason that their semantics should be preserved and protected in all ways possible. According to Seanego (2021, 478), some Northern Sotho users of social media platforms misuse gender-specific proverbs to insult their gender counterparts. Seanego further describes this demeaning behaviour as “abusive language on social media” (478), and further cautions that such language has the potential to perpetuate gender-based violence. This matter serves a crucial submission to the present study. As this article endeavours to revisit and rethink the semantics of gender-specific proverbs, it is believed that the mindset of our people towards these (gendered) proverbs will change. Northern Sotho proverbs were not intentionally invented to oppress women or men. Their coinage was not to dispirit any individual due to their sexuality. It is the role of Northern Sotho proverbs, like those of other languages, to teach the youth highly admirable and recommendable behaviour in the society and beyond. Mamaleka and Makgopa (2021, 93) postulate that for traditional purposes, proverbs served to teach children morality and good conduct. These scholars further stress that proverbs were meant to teach children how to behave and respect other members of the society, especially elders. However, we acknowledge that some Northern Sotho proverbs are gender stereotypical when contextually applied. For instance, a proverb such as *Tša etwa ke ye tshadi pele di wela ka leopeng* (If they are led by the female one they fall into the pit) thematically expresses that women are not capable of leadership. Montle (2021, 234) concurs, noting that this proverb culturally restricts women from assuming leadership positions. For the purposes of societal development and gender equity in the 21st-century era, Ramohlale, Mogoboya, and Chauke (2021) recommend that gender stereotypical proverbs such as the above one should be scrapped. Mieder (2004) adds that some proverbs have been dropped because their messages and metaphors do not fit the times any longer. It is for this reason that men are assumed to be the group most resistant to change, unwilling to give up their privileges, and therefore, they are seen as an impediment to gender equality and part of the reproduction of unequal gender-based power relations (Bhatti 2022, 2). The present study, however, does not discuss proverbs that are in essence gender-stereotypical; rather, it contends that some Northern Sotho proverbs are gender-generic, though they carry masculine and feminine key words or nouns.

Problem Statement

Proverbs are traditional expressions that portray commonly held beliefs and values of a particular cultural group. They function as powerful tools for preserving and transmitting indigenous knowledge across generations. However, a challenge identified prior to the development of this study concerns Northern Sotho proverbs that are often claimed to be and classified as “gender-specific.” In many cases, language custodians appear to misinterpret the use of the masculine noun *monna* (man) in proverbs, restricting its meaning exclusively to male persons. Considering both the context and

the etymology of the noun “man,” we argue that people had and still have limited understanding of some so-called gendered proverbs. This study addresses this issue by exploring the dual meanings in selected gender-related proverbs.

Literature Review

The literature review draws on the views of scholars whose opinions align with that of the present study. Serudu (1984) cautions against interpreting proverbs in isolation, arguing that one can only glean their full meaning by approaching them from different perspectives. Serudu’s above opinion serves a crucial and relevant argument to this study. Speakers, authors, researchers, and people have long been interpreting Northern Sotho proverbs from one gendered perspective. In line with Serudu’s opinion, Sebola and Abodunrin (2021, 3) agree that the appropriateness of each proverb depends on the context. Finnegan (2012, 395) further stresses that proverbs can be maximally understood only if the context is considered as crucial. Context appears to play a mammoth role in reaching a complete understanding of every proverb. Gender-specific proverbs are no exception.

Machobane (1996) observes that some Sesotho proverbs depict men in a more elevated and positive way than they do women. Lee (2015) finds that Chinese proverbs present women as inferior to men. In Nigeria, Ezeifeka (2017) also found that most Igbo proverbs discriminate against women and thus elevate patriarchy. Similarly, Oha (1998) reveals that womanhood is negatively represented in the language’s proverbs, often portraying women as being senseless, morally debased, devilish, childish, and weak. On a further note, Machobane (1996, 37) argues that several Sesotho proverbs that employ masculine nouns can be generically interpreted, thus embracing both sexes. Lee (2015, 563–564), in the same vein, submits that a common manifestation of sexism in the English language is the “generic” use of masculine pronouns such as “he,” “him,” and “his,” which can refer to people in general or to people whose gender is unknown. Similarly, the present study acknowledges that Northern Sotho gender-specific proverbs pay more respect to men than women. Even so, the study contends that plenty of these gendered proverbs carry generic interpretations. The masculine noun *monna* (man) for instance, can refer to both men and women depending on the context. In some instances, the use of the feminine noun *mosadi* (woman) in some proverbs also refers to both genders, as will be demonstrated in the discussion section.

As Masenya (1991, 181) notes, the metaphorical nature of proverbs makes their interpretation inherently complex. In many African cultures, they (proverbs) are usually formed metaphorically and express abstract ideas through allusive phraseology (Finnegan 2012, 380). Thus, their complex and figurative meanings have long been misunderstood and improperly interpreted, in particular gender-related ones. The Northern Sotho gender-related proverbs have not been and are still not properly understood. The underlying issue in the misuse of these proverbs seems to be their masculine and feminine nouns. The masculine noun *monna* is often used to generalise human beings, be they male or female. The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*

(2010, 901) explains the word “man” as “humans as a group or from a particular period of history.” It further explains “man” as referring to a person, either male or female. Similarly, some Northern Sotho proverbs that employ the masculine noun *monna* do not necessarily point to only male persons, but to any human being. Ezeifeka (2017, 103) points out that the problem in many global languages lies in the understanding of masculine-feminine pronouns and other linguistically gender-marked expressions like generic references. As this article’s examples demonstrate, the issue of generic semantics seems to have perpetuated the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of some Northern Sotho gendered proverbs for a long time. Proverbs have been a major cornerstone of global languages. Their semantics should thus be properly used and sustained, taking into consideration their context and times. Northern Sotho proverbs, which have long been linked to a certain gender, are revisited and rethought according to modern times.

Research Aim and Objectives

Aim

Guided by gender schema theory, this study aims to critically (re)examine the semantics of selected Northern Sotho gender-related proverbs.

Objectives:

- To re-evaluate the meaning of the so-called “gendered proverbs” that contain the masculine noun *monna* (man).
- To challenge and correct the misconception that certain Northern Sotho proverbs exclusively empower male persons.
- To demonstrate that as language evolves, the interpretation of proverbs should also adapt accordingly.

Research Methods and Theoretical Framework

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach. A qualitative study aims to understand how individuals make meaning of their social world; thus, a social reality seeks to be interpreted (Hesse-Biber 2010). This study seeks to thoroughly probe the meaning of some gendered proverbs with an eye to understanding their wide application to both genders.

The population of this study comes from the numerous Northern Sotho proverbs that are gender related. The language has a pool of such proverbs. From this corpus, 13 proverbs were purposively sampled for critical analysis. The study adopted a purposive sampling technique to sample the proverbs. Rai and Thapa (2015) observe that purposive sampling is when the researcher chooses units that may help them to answer

research questions. The 13 proverbs were thus sampled due to their relevant themes, which serve the phenomenon under discussion. The applications of these proverbs were semantically queried and thus a gap for revisiting them was identified.

In terms of data collection, the study employed textual analysis and observation methods to gather relevant information. The discussed proverbs are primarily taken from Rakoma's collection of Northern Sotho proverbs entitled *Marema-ka-Dika* (1978). Secondary data were drawn from scholarly articles published in scientific journals, dissertations, and literary texts. For observations, the researchers observed how Northern Sotho speakers apply these proverbs in their everyday oral communications. Both primary and secondary sources were synthesised and discussed thematically. Proverbs were demarcated into their themes and examined semantically.

Theory

For maximum understanding of how Northern Sotho speakers perceive some gendered proverbs, Sandra Bem's gender schema theory (1981) foregrounds the analysis of this nature. For Bem, individuals, from their childhood, form gender schemas, that is, the mental perspectives that help them organise and interpret basic information related to gender. Children, as they grow up, meet senior societal members who have long had a particular worldview regarding gender-related matters and as such, they indirectly carry on with such a worldview. The same worldview is passed from one generation to the next. Bhatti (2022, 3) on this note maintains that the characteristics, behaviours, and roles of womanhood and manhood are learned and internalised during the process of gender socialisation starting from birth. Therefore, the whole society, regardless of age, ends up observing the same perspective for gender matters including the application and attitude towards gendered proverbs in this case. Because proverbs are cultural expressions passed down across generations, it is argued in this study that Northern Sotho speakers developed incorrect gender schemas on some proverbs and thus we seek to bring attention to the matter.

Data Presentation

Most Northern Sotho proverbs that are interpreted as gender-specific employ the masculine noun *monna* (man), as will be demonstrated in this section. Only a few proverbs that employ the feminine noun *mosadi* (woman) are interpreted more broadly to apply to both genders.

(1) *Monna o bolawa ke seo a se jelego* (A man is killed by what he has eaten).

The above proverb is often contextualised as referring exclusively to male persons. However, the masculine noun *monna* is used in this proverb to mean every human being. According to this proverb, every person, whether male or female, should be responsible for his or her own sordid deeds.

(2) *Mosadi ke theko ya (le) rumo re foša kgole* (A woman is like a spear plate; for it is thrown far away).

Northern Sotho people understand this above proverb to mean that a woman usually gets married far away from her village. The spear plate is used here to imply distance. In a general sense, even males marry far from their villages. Thus, the feminine noun *mosadi* is employed in this proverb to generalise any human being.

(3) *Monna ke tšhwene o ja ka atla tše pedi* (A man is like a baboon; he eats with two hands).

The above proverb is understood by Northern Sotho communities to mean that men are allowed to have more than one sexual partner. Like the baboon, which uses its two hands to eat, language users interpret this proverb to mean that men are also capable of sleeping or marrying more than one woman. However, this is far from the truth. Essentially, this proverb encourages every human being, whether male or female, to work hard in order to make a living. The two hands in this proverb demonstrate using every tool you have to earn a healthy living. This proverb cautions against laziness rather than encouraging adultery or polygamy.

(4) *Lesogana le le sa etego le nyala kgaetšedi* (A boy who does not travel marries his sister).

In many cultures across the globe, it is believed that a boy child should regularly explore both nearby and faraway villages in order to meet his future wife. The above Northern Sotho proverb attests to such a belief. To many, this proverb means that a male person who does not take his time to explore places, to engage with different people, and to socialise with various people, is likely to be unmarried. This is true in the entire sense. However, this truth is also applicable to women. A woman who is not seen by men will always have less chances of attracting one. Like a man, a woman can also explore the world, and one man may be interested in her, thus resulting in marriage.

(5) *Monna ga a hloke maaka* (Every man is a liar).

Though the above proverb employs the masculine noun “man,” the meaning is dual. Rakoma (1978, 204) correctly states that with this proverb, every human being has something bad to be spoken about. The noun *maaka* (lies) is used in this proverb to indicate bad worldviews attached to a person. Therefore, the semantics of this proverb do not mean only male persons are perceived as bad by other people. Both men and women can be perceived as bad. The masculine noun “man” is used in this proverb to generalise that a bad perception or a bad rumour can be attached to any human being.

(6) *Monna ke selepe, o lala a louditšwe* (A man is like an axe; he is readily sharpened).

In the above proverb, a man is likened to an axe that is sharpened during the night. To many, this proverb means that a male person is sharpened by sex during the night. However, according to Rakoma (1978, 205), if someone needs help from another person, they should tell them in advance so the invited person can get ready to avoid disappointing the inviter. The verb *lala* literally means one should invite the friend in advance. The verb *loutšwa* (sharpens) literally means to prepare someone. The masculine noun *monna* (man) in this proverb has nothing to associate with male persons. Ideally, a person should not invite a friend to something in the eleventh hour. This may cause major disappointments if the invited person is not ready.

(7) *Lenaka la monna ke mpa* (A man's stamina is from food).

From the above proverb, it can be assumed that not only male persons gain stamina from food, but so do females. Food is made to feed any person without considering gender differences. Therefore, every human being is empowered after eating. The masculine noun *monna* should not only be limited to males. Both men and women are filled with new energy upon consuming food.

(8) *Lebitla la monna le kgauswi ga tsela* (A man's grave is near the roadside).

In terms of the above proverb, Rakoma (1978, 163) incorrectly explains that male persons usually die far away from their homes when trying to fend for their families. According to Rakoma and most people's interpretations, only male persons are able to leave their families to seek something to feed their children. However, this sounds oppressive to modern women. Modern women are on the same level with men in terms of going out to feed their families. Women go out to work and responsibly put butter on the table.

(9) *Thakadu se epe tseleng wa ruta basadi go epa* (Groundhog, do not dig on the roadside, women will imitate you).

In the above proverb, women are taken as the ones who learn bad deeds if one teaches them. A groundhog is an animal that likes to dig the ground, thus leaving a place untidy and complicated. Many Northern Sotho speakers associate women with this untidy behaviour by incorrectly applying this proverb. Explaining this proverb, Rakoma (1978, 251) says that when a person (any gender) behaves in an unacceptable manner, they rather do it secretly so that other people cannot see and learn of their evil deeds. The evil deeds learned from that person may disperse into the society if they are not hidden. Men, too, do evil deeds; they should thus hide these deeds to prevent them spreading to the society, especially to children. Thus, the meaning of this proverb is applicable to both genders, not only to women.

(10) *Tswalelabanneng ga e farelwe* (A matter brought before men never fails).

To many, the above proverb is associated only with men when it comes to problem-solving. It is believed that when a matter is brought before male persons (or elderly men), a solution is expected to emerge. Etymologically, this proverb was used in a Sotho (African) traditional gathering, wherein only men were allowed. The locative *banneng* (men's place) in the proverb refers to a traditional gathering, *kgoro*, administered only by men. This has led society to believe that only men are capable of resolving complicated and complex issues in the community. For instance, Matsepe (1963) used this proverb throughout his novel *Lešitaphiri* to address the matter of kingship. Matsepe believes that the kingship disagreements between Tšhwahledi and Kgathola can be resolved if the matter is brought before the traditional court, which was administered only by men. However, Rakoma (1978, 259) correctly explains that this proverb refers to a situation wherein one should report or share one's worries with one's people (both men and women). By so doing, people will assist such a person with solutions. This holds true in the real world. Men are not alone in solving problems. Women are also capable of solving problems in families and governmental and traditional institutions. For instance, women form a crucial role in parliaments worldwide, with some as speakers, chief whips, presiding officers, and members of those paramount houses in every country. By serving institutions such as parliament, it is proof that women play an integral part in problem-solving in our societies. This proverb should therefore be regarded as women empowerment in terms of leadership roles. People should refrain from misusing proverbs with the intention of oppressing women or keeping them from managerial positions.

(11) *Mošemane morogamonna, sešego o loga hlwaela* (A boy who insults a man ruins his humanism).

This Northern Sotho proverb teaches children to be respectful to their elders. Respect is an important aspect of raising an African child. A disrespectful child in the Northern Sotho community is regarded as an outcast. In Northern Sotho, we say to such child *ga se a kwala komelo*, meaning "he or she is not properly raised." Explaining the above proverb, Rakoma (1978, 210) rightfully says it advises children to respect elders as they are the ones to show them the right path of life. The masculine noun *mošemane* (boy) in this case does not only imply a boy-child, but a girl-child too. Therefore, both boy and girl children are advised in this proverb to heed their parents' calls so as to be better men and women in their future lives.

(12) *Lebadi la monna ga le segwe* (A man's scar is not to be laughed at).

Everyone in their lifetime encounters hardships. Life problems and challenges do not choose gender. Both men and women experience the ups and downs of existence. The above Northern Sotho proverb attests to this claim. The traditional noun *lebadi* (scar) here implies the hardships of life. The masculine noun *monna* refers to a human being, not to a specific gendered people. Therefore, this proverb should not see males as the

only ones who encounter hardships. The advice given by this proverb is that one's struggles should not be taken as a laughingstock.

(13) *Monna ga a bone gabedi* (A man does not see twice).

A Northern Sotho proverb does not always see gender differences. When it advises, it equally covers both men and women. It is people who include gendered interpretations. The above proverb means that every human being learns from their initial mistakes and should therefore take a lesson. The first mistake a person commits serves as an eye-opener. Not only male persons learn from their first mistakes, but women too are equally included. The masculine noun *monna* should not mislead Northern Sotho speakers regarding the meaning of this proverb.

Data Discussion

This semantic investigation reveals that many Northern Sotho gendered proverbs are misinterpreted by speakers, writers, teachers, and the broader language community. A proverb is a form of oral lore that typically carries figurative rather than literal meanings. Gendered proverbs, Northern Sotho ones in this case, have been proved by this semantic investigation to be misunderstood and misinterpreted by the majority of language practitioners in many life instances. The confusion comes with differentiating the internal meanings of the masculine noun *monna* (man) and the feminine noun *mosadi* (woman). The primary challenge lies with proverbs employing the masculine noun *monna*. In a universal linguistic usage, "man" denotes "human beings," encompassing both males and females (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 2010). Therefore, it appears that in an attempt to reach a maximum understanding of a gendered proverb, a Northern Sotho speaker or writer has to critically look at both genders, their applications and relevancies. A proverb fitting both male and female shoes should never be overlooked.

From a semantic perspective, the study also shows that some Northern Sotho proverbs do not, in fact, oppress or restrict women, contrary to popular belief. A proverb like *tswalelabanneng ga e farelwe* (A matter brought before men never fails) implies that both men and women are equal in terms of problem-solving skills. Women, like men, are trusted in resolving issues around leadership and other duties. Thus, the locative *banneng* (men's place) as used in this proverb should never be misinterpreted to mean only male persons.

Learners in schools should be taught the correct meanings of so-called "gender-specific" proverbs. Over-reliance on the surface or literal interpretation is inadequate, especially in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and beyond. Proverbs remain valuable cultural tools for guiding behaviour and transmitting knowledge, and as such, the fallacy of attaching their meanings exclusively to one gender must be abandoned.

The study findings further show that the challenge of interpreting gendered nouns in African languages, Northern Sotho in this case, persists and needs to be thoroughly clarified by language critics. The masculine noun *monna* is a case in point of this study. People, including language practitioners, have limited understanding and interpretations of proverbs employing the masculine noun “man” as their key word. This study therefore attempted to resolve the issue of misinterpreting gendered proverbs with special reference to Northern Sotho.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that misconceptions surrounding Northern Sotho gendered proverbs have long resulted in their being narrowly interpreted to refer to one sex. It has argued that these proverbs can be more broadly contextualised. Given that proverbs are metaphorical in nature, a proverb containing the masculine noun *monna* may in fact refer to both men and women, while one employing the feminine noun *mosadi* can likewise carry a generic meaning. From the analysis of 13 discussed Northern Sotho proverbs, it appears that the majority employing the masculine nouns may signify both genders, while a smaller number employing feminine nouns may also signify both genders. The main issue lies in the failure to contextualise proverbs, which leads to persistent misunderstandings of so-called gender-specific expressions. The study therefore urges Northern Sotho communities to exercise greater vigilance and sensitivity when applying these gendered proverbs, so as to prevent reinforcing gender misconceptions and to ensure that proverbs continue to serve as tools of wisdom, guidance, and social cohesion in contemporary society.

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