

BOTSFA General Meeting

Presentation by Professor Lars-Gunnar Andersson on Languages in Botswana



On October 9, 2009, BOTSFA held a general meeting to listen to a presentation on languages in Botswana, by Professor Lars-Gunnar Andersson of Göteborg University. Professor Andersson has concentrated on the documentation of Khoisan (Bushman) languages since the 1990s. Also present was his colleague, Professor Tore Janson, whose main focus has been the Bantu languages. At least 35 participants attended the meeting, including representation from the Botswana Embassy in Sweden.

A key message by Professor Andersson was that, for minority languages to survive, efforts have to be made by the minority language speakers themselves to keep their specific language alive. Botswana has a policy of promoting Setswana as the national language and English as the official language. The constitution of the population being of mainly Tswana ethnicity, defines Botswana as a very homogeneous country compared with many other African countries.

The audience was informed that Botswana has at least 29 languages, with Setswana being the majority language (80 percent of the population), followed by Ikalanga (12 percent) in the north east and the rest distributed among the Yeyi, Herero, Khoisan, Mbukushu, Subiya (mainly in central and north west Botswana), and others. Of interest was that there were more languages than had been perceived by the audience and, in particular, that the Khoisan, constituting about 2 percent of the population of Botswana, had at least 10 languages.

Professors Andersson and Janson had conducted surveys of the languages used by and among Botswana University students in different circumstances. The first survey was in the early 1990s, with a follow-up in 2008. The latest survey showed clearly that the profile of language use had evolved significantly since the first survey. In particular, there appeared to be more students using English in informal settings, for example, when speaking with parents. Professor Andersson also referred to a book he and Professor Janson had written and which was published by Longman Botswana in 1997, *"Languages in Botswana: Language Ecology in Southern Africa"*. The book discusses most of the languages, their role in society, their history, number of speakers, etc.

As part of the program, the meeting viewed two documentaries on Tsodilo Hills: a BBC documentary based on Laurens van der Post's book *"The Lost World of the Kalahari"* and a 2009 interview by Mats Ögren Wanger (journalist and film producer), featuring Xhao Xontae born in Tsodilo Hills in 1958.

The meeting, held at Etnografiska museet, turned out to be very informative and entertaining. The audience mingled to a treat of Swedish tasty breads, cheeses and other delicatessens.

By Julia Majaha-Järtby



Pictures: Per Järtby