

**FACTS ABOUT  
THE WORLD'S LANGUAGES:**  
An Encyclopedia of the World's Major  
Languages, Past and Present

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# SESOTHO

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**Name:** Sesotho. **Alternates:** *Southern Sotho, Sesuto, Sutu.*

**Location:** Lesotho and adjacent central parts of South Africa including urban centers around Johannesburg.

**Family:** Southern Bantu group of the Bantu branch of Niger-Khordofanian.

**Related Languages:** Other Sotho languages, including various dialects of Setswana (spoken in Botswana and adjacent parts of South Africa), Sepedi, or Northern Sotho (spoken to the north of Johannesburg), and Silozi, or Lozi (spoken in southeastern Zambia). In general, there is much mutual intelligibility among these languages. Sesotho is also related to other southern Bantu languages of Guthrie's zone 30, which include the Nguni languages (ZULU, XHOSA, Ndebele, SISWATI) as well as Venda, Tonga, and Shangaan.

**Dialects:** Sesotho is generally considered to be relatively homogeneous, especially within Lesotho. Even within Lesotho, however, there is an ideolectal difference with respect to a rule of verb-tone sandhi. Sesotho as spoken in South Africa contains another tonal rule affecting verb stems, and shows the influence of Setswana in the tense/aspect system.

'Deep Sesotho', or *Sesotho se tebileng*, is a more formal speech register used for special purposes such as storytelling and the like. This more ritualized use of Sesotho is generally maintained in rural areas by older generations, and is being lost by the young and the urban, especially with the spread of television and radio, as well as an increasing number of lexical items from ENGLISH, AFRIKAANS, Zulu, and other languages in the area.

**Number of Speakers:** About 5 million as a first language, split approximately equally between South Africa and Lesotho, and in addition many more speak it as a second language.

## Origin and History

It is thought that speakers of contemporary Southern Bantu languages migrated south from the northern lake regions. Speakers of the Sotho languages were subsequently dispersed in the mid-1800s, fleeing the armies of Shaka Zulu that were based in what is today the province of Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa. This Sotho dispersion accounts in part for the Silozi presence in Zambia to the north. It is also responsible for the creation of one major Sesotho linguistic group, where speakers of various Sotho regional dialects came to be politically united under the protection of Moshoeshoe in the mountains of what is today Lesotho. Interestingly, Sesotho seems to have lost some of the morphological richness found in other Sotho languages. It is possible that morphological leveling arose as a result of this political upheaval and subsequent national and linguistic incorporation and consolidation.

## Orthography and Basic Phonology

Sesotho is written with two different orthographic systems, one used in Lesotho, the other used in South Africa. The major difference between the two is that in Lesotho orthography phonemic /l/ is used for the [d] allophonic variant before high vowels (e.g., /li/ is pronounced [di]), and the mid vowel graphemes /e/ and /o/ are used for front and back glides respectively. In addition, Lesotho *ch, kh, tš, 'n,* and *'m* = South African *tjh, kg, tsh, nn,* and *mm,* respectively. Several different orthographic conventions were used by different missionaries in the 1800s and early 1900s, generally resulting in no orthographic repre-

sentation of aspiration on aspirated stops, and high mid vowels being represented as high vowels. Lesotho orthography will be used here unless otherwise indicated.

Sesotho has a rich inventory of consonants—as many as 45—including an extensive array of affricates and laterals, as shown in the consonant table. Word-internal syllabic laterals and nasals are orthographically represented with a double consonant *nn, ll,* whereas word-initial nasals are represented with an apostrophe, *'n.* Sesotho also demonstrates phonemic use of aspiration, indicated by *h* after the voiceless stops /p/ and /t/, the click /q/, and the lateral affricate /tl/. Aspirated /k/ is realized as /k'h/, the aspirated affricate /ts/ as /tš/, and the aspirated lateral fricative /tl/ as /tlh/. Sesotho has no /d/ or /g/ phoneme. [d] occurs only as an allophonic variant of /l/ before high vowels /i/ and /u/, as in *mosali /musadi/* 'woman' and *lumela /dumela/* 'hello, agree'.

In Table 1, consonants found in foreign acquisitions are written in brackets [ ], and (z), (r), and (o) indicate alternate positions for *j, r,* and *o,* respectively. Orthographic *g* is /x/.

Vowels:

	Front	Back
High	i	u
Mid-high	e	o
Mid	e	o
Mid-low	e	o
Low	a	

While most Bantu languages have five or seven vowel sys-

Table 1: Consonants

		Labial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Pre-palatal	Velar	Uvular	Glottal	Compounds
Stops	Voiced	b							bj
	Ejective	p		t		k			pj
	Aspirated	ph		th		k'h			psh
Fricatives	Voiced		[v]		(z)				
	Voiceless		f	s	sh	[g]		h	fsh
Affricates	Voiced				j				
	Voiceless			ts	tj				
	Aspirated			tš	ch	kh			
Lateral Affricates	Ejective			tl					
	Aspirated			tlh					
Laterals	Voiced			l, ll					
	Fricative			hl					
Nasals		m		n	ny	ng			
	Syllabic	'm, mm		'n, nn	'ny	'ng			
Trill				r			(r)		
Glides		(o)			e	(o)			
Clicks	Ejective				q				
	Aspirated				qh				
Nasal					nq				

tems, Sesotho has a nine-vowel system, with three different heights of mid vowels as indicated in the vowel chart. Orthographically, all mid vowels /i/, /e/, /ɛ/, and /u/, /o/, /ɔ/ are written with the graphemes *e* and *o*, respectively.

Tone is not marked in Sesotho orthography. The tonal system can be described as containing a two-way tonal contrast between (H)igh tone and the lack of high tone, the latter being realized as L(ow) tone. Tone functions both lexically and grammatically in the language. Verbs can be classified as H or L toned and this basic tone then interacts with tone-spreading phenomena to produce a specific tonal pattern or tonal melody.

Basic phonological rules include "strengthening" (*n + ruta > nthute* 'teach me'), palatalization (*roba* 'break' > *rojoa* 'be broken'), and alveolarization (*laela* 'order' > *laetsa* 'cause to order').

Sesotho has no phonemic vowel length, but the penultimate syllable of phonological phrases is somewhat lengthened. Open class word roots are generally disyllabic. Monosyllabic verbs in the imperative must therefore be lengthened to form two syllables or a minimal prosodic word, e.g., *ja* 'eat' > *ja!* ~ *jaa!*

## Basic Morphology

Like most other Bantu languages, Sesotho has a rich noun-

class gender and agreement system. Nouns fall into several singular/plural class pairs, and verbs and nominal modifiers 'agree' with these nouns through the use of fairly phonologically regular agreement prefixes.

The Sesotho noun-class system has 14 productive noun classes, as shown below. Although much of the productive semantics of Bantu noun-class systems have been lost, some of the core semantics remains, especially in the derivation of new nouns.

Class	Singular	Class	Plural	Gloss
1	mo-tho	2	ba-tho	'person'
1a	Ø-rakhali	2a	bo-rakhali	'aunt'
3	mo-se	4	me-se	'dress'
5	le-tsatsi	6	ma-tsatsi	'day/sun'
7	se-fate	8	li-fate	'tree'
9	Ø-ntja	10	li-ntja	'dog'
14	bo-phelo			'health'
15	ho-phoha			'to cook'

Nouns agree with a wide range of nominal modifiers, as well as relative pronouns and verbs. The use of noun class and agreement morphology is illustrated in the following sentence (SM =

subject agreement, ADJ = adjective, PERF = perfect tense/aspect, and numerals = respective noun classes). Note that Sesotho does not use case marking or articles.

Lesela le-lecha le-taboh-ile  
5-cloth 5ADJ-5new 5SM-TORN-PERF  
'The new cloth is torn.'

Unlike other Bantu languages that use noun class prefixes in the formation of locatives, Sesotho uses only the invariant locative suffix *-(e)ng*:

tafoleng 'to, at, on, by the table'  
bukeng 'by, in, near the table'

As in other Bantu languages, the Sesotho "verb" is a highly inflected entity composed of the verb root, an obligatory subject agreement marker, the possibility of a tense/aspect marker (FUT = future), and a final vowel (FV) that generally marks mood. If the object is pronominalized (OBJ) it occurs immediately prior to the verb root, as shown below:

Ke-tla-ba-bon-a  
1S.SM-FUT-OBJ-Verb-FV 'I will see them.'

In addition to this inflectional morphology, Sesotho verbs also exhibit a productive system of derivational morphology, where grammatical function-changing morphemes (verbal extensions) are infixes between the verb root and the final vowel. These infixes include the passive, applicative, reflexive, reciprocal, etc. In general, verbal extensions occur immediately after the verb root, followed by the perfect tense/aspect (Perf) and then the passive (Pass), if applicable:

rek-is-its-o-e  
Verb-CAUS-PERF-PASS-FV  
'caused to have bought'

The reflexive *-i-* however, occurs immediately prior to the verb stem, and is in complementary distribution with a pronominal object, for example, *ipona* 'see oneself'.

Deverbal nouns can be productively created from most verbs, and derive slightly different meanings depending on the noun class to which they are assigned. Suffixal diminutive and augmentative/feminine morphology is also productive. Although noun-class prefixes are generally considered to be obligatory, those from Classes 5, 7, 8 and 10 can be omitted when a nominal modifier or subject agreement marker follows:

(le)tsatsi lena 'this day/today'  
(le)tsatsi le chabile 'the sun shown'

## Basic Syntax

Sesotho is an SVO language. However, because Sesotho maintains obligatory subject marking on the verb, and because the pronominal object prefixes to the verb root, subject and object can be extraposed under appropriate discourse situations, giving rise to any surface order of lexical items:

SVO Thabo o-rat-a nama  
T. 1SM-Verb-FV 9meat  
'Thabo likes meat.'

VOS o-rat-a nama Thabo  
OVS nama o-a-e-rat-a Thabo  
SOV Thabo nama o-a-e-rat-a  
VSO o-a-e-rat-a Thabo nama  
OSV nama Thabo o-a-e-rat-a

In locative inversion and expletive constructions, the subject comes after the verb, and the subject marker is *ho-* (Class 17-locative):

(Maseru) ho-je-o-a nama  
Maseru 17SM-Verb-PASS-FV 9meat  
'(In Maseru) meat is eaten.'

Main-clause negation in simple tense constructions occurs after the lexical subject, but prior to the verb complex:

Thabo ha a-rat-e nama  
Thabo NEG 1SM-Verb-FV 9meat  
'Thabo doesn't like meat.'

In main clauses with complex tense constructions, and in subordinate clauses including relative clauses, negation is embedded within the verbal complex itself: (REL = relative complementizer, RL = relative suffix).

nama eo Thabo a-sa-e-rat-e-ng  
9meat 9REL T. 1SM-NEG-OBJ-Verb-FV-RL  
'The meat that Thabo doesn't like'

The third-person subject marker, final vowel, and tonal melody all change in negative, subjunctive, and participial/embedded constructions.

## Contact with Other Languages

Sesotho has borrowed various lexical items from surrounding languages, including Zulu, Afrikaans, and English. Sesotho has incorporated many words from Zulu along with their accompanying clicks (e.g., *ho-qala* 'to begin', *ho-qeta* 'to finish'). The relatively large number of borrowings from Zulu accounts for many of the differences in vocabulary between Sesotho and Tswana. Verbs from other languages are incorporated morphologically with a final vowel *-a* (e.g., *pusha* < [English] 'push'). Nouns are incorporated into noun classes on the basis of either phonology or semantics, or assigned to the "default" Noun Class 9.

"Semantic classification"

1/2 From English: *mo-lepera* (< *leper*) 'leper'  
1a/2a From Afrikaans: *base* (< *baas*) 'boss'  
7 From French: *se-fora* (< *français*) 'French'

"Phonological classification"

3/4 From English: *mo-chini* (< *machine*) 'machine, engine'  
 5/6 From Afrikaans: *le-lente* (< *lint*) 'ribbon'

"Default classificaton"

9/10 From Afrikaans: *tafole* (< *tafel*) 'table'  
 9/10 From English: *ofisi* (< *office*) 'office'

## Common Words

Adjectives require an agreement prefix in order to agree with the noun they modify.

man:	monna	long:	-lelele
woman:	mosali	small:	-nyane
water:	metsi	yes:	e
sun:	letsatsi	no:	e-e
three:	-raro	good:	-tle
fish:	tlhapi	bird:	nonyana
big:	-holo	dog:	ntja
tree:	sefate		

## Example Sentences

- (1) Lintja tsena li-noele lebese.  
 10:dog 10:DEM 10:SM-eat.PERF.FV 5:milk  
 'These dogs drank the milk.'
- (2) Re-batla lebese leletle.  
 1PL.SM-want.FV 5:milk 5:ADJ.5:good  
 'We want good milk.'
- (3) Ba-batla lebese le-beiloeng tafoleng.  
 2SM-want.FV 5:milk 5:REL-put.PERF.PASS.FV.RL 9:table:LOC  
 'They want the milk that was put on the table.'

## Efforts to Preserve, Protect, and Promote the Language

Sesotho is one of the Southern African Bantu languages with a relatively long literary history, with epic novels being written

and read during the late 19th century. The Sesotho Academy, established in Lesotho in 1972, has the broad aim of preserving, protecting, and promoting the use of the Sesotho language and has worked together in pursuit of these goals with a similar body in South Africa. Although many rural speakers of Sesotho are monolingual, much of the urban population in both Lesotho and South Africa is multilingual, and all of the Bantu languages spoken in South Africa now have official status. The impact this will have on the preservation and promotion of Sesotho in its spoken and written form, both within the educational system as well as more informally, is still to be determined.

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