Louis Molamu. *Tsotsitaal: A Dictionary of the Language of Sophiatown.* 2003, xxix + 130 pp. ISBN 1 86888 187 3. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

The compiler of this dictionary is perhaps the first and only person to have attempted to produce a dictionary of this 'language' or register, and he should be complemented on this. This is a dictionary in a class of its own, i.e. a specialised dictionary written to capture the vocabulary of Tsotsitaal, a language which may be regarded as 'obsolete' (or at least 'endangered') due to its nature and the versatility associated with it. It is gradually deteriorating and disappearing while changing from the original language of Sophiatown into various regional versions corrupted by the various other languages of South Africa. The compiler does not seem to have been motivated by knowledge of or experience in dictionary writing, but by a desire to preserve the vocabulary of the language he loves, and to share his knowledge with future generations who may have been unfortunate not to have encountered the lifestyle of Sophiatown.

It will be unfair of one to expect a dictionary of a language such as this to conform to all or most of the requirements for dictionary writing. And therefore, even though the dictionary has important features such as front and back matter, and micro- and macrostructural elements which are basic to dictionary writing, these are presented in a form suitable for a language:

— which has no proper and recognised vocabulary,

— which has no standard vocabulary and status,

— which is very much informal,

— which has no recorded literature,

— which is mostly restricted to the youth, especially gangsters,

— which is still little known and insufficiently researched, and

— which most of its users wanted to remain unknown to the general public.

The front matter includes most relevant data with even a detailed list of acknowledgements especially to those people who grew up with the author in Sophiatown and Johannesburg, and who contributed to the compilation of this dictionary specifically by supplying oral and written material. In the Introduction the author clearly outlines how the dictionary was compiled and what micro- and macrostructural elements the user can expect in it.

The paragraph entitled 'Sources of Information' gives a detailed description of the method the author used to gather information for the dictionary. This practice is usually not common in dictionary compilation, but in literary and linguistic research. This is due to the fact that the vocabulary of Tsotsitaal

is still very much a subject under research since it has so far only scantily been documented. The only documents available are those dealing with its usage and origin, and the influence it has had on the standard languages of South Africa. None of these contain a detailed vocabulary like the one that can be found in this dictionary. Another difficulty the compiler possibly had to face is the lack of any formal or informal orthography for this language. Researchers writing about this language utilise any spelling to try to render the pronunciation they hear the Tsotsitaal-speaking community use in a specific area. For the purpose of this dictionary, the author seems to have gathered data by visiting shebeens where most Tsotsitaal speakers usually gather, freely and informally conversing while drinking. For instance, the author (Molamu 2003: xv) says:

> The plethora of alcohol-related terms, phrases and expressions — including the often flowery names of the local drinking establishments — form an essential part of the lingua franca.

Besides shebeens, material for the dictionary was seemingly recorded at gatherings such as weddings, parties, funerals and other ceremonies where people meet and chat freely and informally.

What complicated the compilation of a dictionary of this type is the fact that this 'language' is changing continuously, and some of the terminology used refer to different, and sometimes conflicting concepts, depending on the environment, and the speech community in which it is used. For this reason, there are many terms in this dictionary which one may regard as having incomplete definitions.

Tsotsitaal is often ambiguous because in most cases the proper word adopted from one language is given an additional meaning, or its meaning is corrupted to refer to a related action or concept. Therefore, not every person may define the same word in the same way. For instance, definitions of words such as the following seem to be incomplete:

— **bind** (page 10). It is defined as follows: 'The term refers to the act of parking taxis at taxi-ranks.' To my knowledge, the term also refers to 'the incident when the taxis do not have enough passengers to transport, and, since the queue is not moving, most of them just remain parked'.

— **borg** (page 12). The definition reads: 'The term refers to money required as security against the temporary release of an offender pending trial; bail; surety.' As far as I know, the term also has the Tsotsitaal meaning of 'favour'.

One of the characteristics of Tsotsitaal is the many variants and synonyms, especially for those objects and concepts which were intended to be kept secret. This results in much cross referencing by the compiler to avoid reduplication of definitions in the dictionary, e.g. *boeta* (page 11), *bok* (page 12), *bombela* (page 12) and *boomba* (page 12) are referred to *boeda* (page 11), *skwiel* (page 96), *mbombela*

(page 65) and *fatty boom-boom* (page 31) respectively, where the definitions are given. The compiler does not, however, explain in the front matter of the dictionary where the use of cross-references is discussed, why certain words are preferred as lemmata for carrying the definitions. Should it be because they are the most commonly used variants and synonyms? This important information is not communicated to the user. If, however, there is no conclusive reason why the definitions should be given at a certain variant or synonym, the term which alphabetically comes first may be defined fully, and those that follow may be referred to the first where the required meaning can be found.

A few times lemmata in the dictionary appear in the wrong alphabetical order, e.g. on page 16, the lemmata *Cashbah* should be preceded by *Casbah Kids* and followed by *cashbar*, and on pages 65 and 108 respectively the lemma *matopana* should precede *matshingi*, and the lemma *Tshangi* should follow *tshama hansi*. These, however, are small inconsistencies compared to those that occur when terms are qualified and defined. While each and every page has more or less the same number of terms with the same inconsistencies, the following examples are all drawn from page 16.

The first irregularity concerns the indication of the part of speech to which each term belongs. Of the 21 terms on page 16, only eight are qualified, viz. the nouns or noun phrases *Cabin in the Sky*, *can't-gets*, *chandies*, *chanster* and *chara*, the verb *caza* and the adjective *chalkstripe*. Those left unqualified are: *cable*, *cancer stick*, *cards-up*, *Casanova*, *Casbah Kids*, *Cashbah*, *cashbar*, *casino*, *Cavalla*, *cazi*, *chacharag*, *chaile*, *chaisa* and *change marobalo*. One of these, viz. *cazi*, is cross-referred to *caza* which is qualified.

The second irregularity can be found in the form of the definitions. Of the 21 terms on page 16, thirteen are nouns, viz. *Cabin in the Sky*, *cancer stick*, *can't-gets*, *Casanova*, *Casbah Kids*, *Cashbah*, *cashbar*, *casino*, *Cavalla*, *chaile*, *chandies*, *chanster* and *chara*, six verbs, viz. *cable*, *cards-up*, *caza*, *cazi*, *chaisa* and *change marobalo* and the two adjectives, viz. *chacharag* and *chalkstripe*. For nine of these terms traditionally formulated definitions have been used, e.g.

> **caza**/v. To impress.

> **chanster**/n. A bully.

The definitions of the others when nouns, often start with statements such as 'The name of ..', 'An expression used to refer to …', 'The term referred to …', 'A term used for …', 'A pejorative term for …', and when adjectives, sometimes with a formulation such as 'The term describes …'. These two different ways of defining can sometimes be found in the same lemma, e.g.

> **chaisa**/ To finish work. The term also means 'to collide'.

When the parts of speech to which terms belong are missing, and the wording of the definitions do not indicate the parts of speech, the way terms should be used can be obscured, especially in the absence of elucidatory example senten-

ces.

Because of the inconsistent spelling used in the dictionary, it is not always clear how some of the terms are pronounced. Phonetic transcriptions to clarify the pronunciation would have been a great help to the user who is unfamiliar with Tsotsitaal, or with some of the languages from which the vocabulary of Tsotsitaal has been derived.

In spite of the criticisms raised in the previous paragraphs, the dictionary should be recommended to anybody interested in the characteristics and origins of Tsotsitaal. It is not a simple task to compile a work of this nature of a language of which the orthography is often uncertain and the vocabulary little documented. This is an important attempt to outline the concept Tsotsitaal.

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