

# LANGUAGE AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BOTSWANA

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## Abstract

This study looks at the importance of language in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Botswana. Using linguistic framing, the study focuses firstly on the frames of interpretation built by government communication through the discourse on COVID-19. Secondly, the study analyses how coronavirus-related experiences are labelled in indigenous languages. The results show that war metaphors are used to frame coronavirus discourses. Furthermore, there is evidence of a repurposing of existing Setswana terms to cater for novel coronavirus experiences. Taken together, linguistic framing and the use of repurposing existing familiar words are used to shape the nation's understanding of COVID-19, garner public support for the government's policy stance, educate the nation, and ensure people's participation in prevention and containment efforts.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, health communication, linguistic framing, repurposing, education

## 1.0 Introduction: The importance of communication in health care

This article investigates how the government of Botswana communicates about the COVID-19 pandemic in its effort to promote buy-in of preventative messages, garner support for interventions, curb the spread of coronavirus, and educate the nation about the virus. The investigation is done by assessing official communication from the government and from Presidential Task Force updates and focuses on the timespan between 27 March 2020 and 31 August 2020.

Communication is one of the key factors not only in education but also in quality healthcare. In reference to the influenza pandemic, Barry (2009, p. 1039) opined that “in the next influenza pandemic, be it now or in the future, be the virus mild or virulent, the single most important weapon against the disease will be a vaccine. The second most important will be communication.” Health communication is often provided by governmental institutes since it is related to public policy (Uittenhout, 2012). Ratzan et al. (1994, p. 361) define health communication as “the art of informing, influencing, and motivating individual, institutional, and public audiences about health issues through planned learning experiences based on sound theories.” The authors further aver that effective communication in healthcare helps to prevent diseases, enhances the health and therefore the quality of life of people, promotes health-related businesses, and can make contribution to health care policy. Krige and De Wett (2009) concur,

adding that health communication empowers patients and the public with relevant health education to make informed decisions about their health behaviour.

Communication occurs through language (Sure, 1992) since language carries an inherent communicative function. Lack of effective communication hinders the provision of healthcare (Ondondo, 2020). Barriers to effective communication include differences in language and culture, low health literacy, and the use of a non-native language in a setting where those involved are not proficient in the language (Schyve, 2007). Using a non-native language creates a triple threat to communication. Firstly, a non-native language creates a barrier that disrupts effective communication. Secondly, different languages mean different cultures, and this also impedes communication since culture is pivotal not only in one's view of the world but also in how they interpret words. Thirdly, the use of a non-native language means there will be low health literacy, and this is also a barrier to communication. Amery (2017) adds that communication gap is most pronounced in remote areas where cultural and linguistic differences are most significant.

Ahmad (2020) observes that there are two major linguistic challenges in containing the spread of a virus: the dissemination of information about preventive measures to all in the mother tongues, and countering misinformation about its spread and prevention. The importance of language in health communication, therefore, cannot be overemphasised. Linguists and cognitive scientists have long established that language, and in this instance the packaging of messages in public health, influences how people think and view the world (Partida, 2012; Broyles et al., 2014). It has been established, for example, that language sways public views of addiction (Krisberg, 2018). Therefore, the use of language in conveying messages and (conscious or unconscious) linguistic choices matter in communication.

## **2.0 Coronavirus in Botswana**

COVID-19, the disease that emerged in 2019 from Wuhan in the People's Republic of China, is an acronym formed from the initial letters of the words **corona virus disease**, and the final two numbers of **2019**. What started as an epidemic in China spread phenomenally across the globe to the extent that on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it a global pandemic.

On 30 March 2020 Botswana confirmed the first cases which were three in number, and on 31 March 2020 President Mokgweetsi Eric Keabetswe Masisi declared a state of public emergency for the purpose of containment of the virus. The President further summoned an urgent sitting of parliament to get comprehensive guidance and approval of appropriate actions to mitigate impact on the nation. A Presidential Task Force was established, and, working together with the health sector and the Ministry of Health and Wellness, its mandate was to coordinate a multi-sectoral response to the pandemic in the country.

Live briefings on Botswana Television and simultaneous broadcast on both public and private radio stations (e.g., Radio Botswana and Duma FM) were some of the main forms of communicating with and educating the nation about COVID-19. Updates were also live streamed on government and private social media pages such as Facebook and Twitter. Press releases were made through various media houses and social media, savingrams, COVID-19 public education campaigns, and bulletins. These extensive communication efforts were necessary to ensure that the public accessed reliable information and were efficiently educated.

### **3.0 The linguistic context of Botswana**

Botswana, like many other African countries, is a multilingual country (Mooko, 2006) with an estimated 26 languages (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2000) spoken as mother tongue. The linguistic picture resembles a triglossia comprising English as a high language, Setswana as a high and low language, and other indigenous languages as low languages (Batibo, 2005). Batibo (2006) states that a high language such as English has privilege and status. It is the language of government, international communication, diplomacy, science, higher education, among other things. Setswana is lower than English in privilege and status but is higher than the other indigenous languages. Setswana is the national language used for inter-ethnic communication, lower primary education, social services, semi-official governmental business, among other things. The other languages comprising *Sotho-Tswana*: Shekgalagari, Shebirwa, Silozi, Chetswapong, *Shona-Nyayi*: iKalanga, Nambya, isiNdebele, and Shona, *Herero-Kavango*: Otjiherero, Shiyeyi, Kwangale, Chiikuhane (Sesubiya), Thimbukushu, and Rumanyo, *San*: !Xóõ, Ju|'haonsi, †Hua, and Sasi, and finally *Khoe*: Gllana, Glui, Naro, Shua, Danisana, Cua, Goro, Tshwa, Cire-cire, Ts'ixa, Khwedam (Alnikhwe, Bugakhwe, |Anda and Khwe), and some already extinct languages (Deti, Haise, Cara, and Caite) (Chebanne, 2022, Andersson & Janson 1997; Smeija 2003), are classified as 'minority languages' and are spoken and used on a smaller scale compared to Setswana and English. They are mainly used for intra-ethnic communication, family interactions, and cultural expression among members of their speech communities (Batibo, 2006).

### **4.0 Study aims and research questions**

The aims of the article are to a) investigate the framing of COVID-19 in Botswana, and b) examine how language challenges in communicating about the novel virus were addressed. The study therefore seeks to answer the following research questions: a) How does the government of Botswana frame discourse on COVID-19? b) How were language challenges in communicating about the novel virus overcome?

### **5.0 Framing of discourse on COVID-19 in Botswana**

Framing is the way a communication source defines and constructs any piece of information (Davie, 2020). It refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue. For instance, a frame in a communication "organises everyday reality" (Tuchman, 1978, p. 193) by providing "meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p.143). Framing is especially

important in a pandemic where there is a heightened need for effective communication, intervention, and community cooperation, and education in the shortest time. In a pandemic, frames play a critical role in educating and shaping public understanding of a highly contagious viral disease, and attitudinal and behavioural reactions that impact prevention, containment, treatment, and recovery (Lee & Basnyat, 2013).

Linguistic framing aligns perspective; therefore, the way things are linguistically framed influences the way social matters, political attitudes, and moral and causal reasoning are conceptualized (Lakoff, 1987). Furthermore, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) aver that linguistic framing shapes the way the world is perceived and has a bearing on how information about people, events, and situations is gathered.

Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) outlined several framing techniques such as the use of jargon/catchphrases, contrasts, and metaphors. An object may be framed using a catchy phrase to make it more memorable and relatable. Metaphors are used for ornamental purposes; they play a significant role in the way people conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another and are one of the linguistic tools used for framing new experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Research has over the years shown that metaphors provide a mode of re-representation, that is, words take on new semantic roles in a communicative context (McGregor et al., 2019). Lakoff and Turner (1989) provided numerous examples of conceptual metaphors and their respective linguistic metaphors in discourse, such as the ‘death is sleep’ metaphor as in the expression ‘he is finally resting in the Lord.’ Furthermore, to describe someone as a snake evokes properties that highlight deceit, underhandedness, and backstabbing—when someone is described as a snake, there is a transfer of properties from one domain to the other. This encompasses a shift in conceptualisation and cognitive and linguistic representation (McGregor et al., 2019).

A prevalent metaphor in public health communication is the military metaphor. Sontag (1989) observed that military language is utilised in discourses of plagues, for example, the expression ‘cancer cells are invasive.’ Cancer is described as invading society and efforts to reduce the spread of the disease are often referred to as a fight, a struggle, or a war (Sontag, 1989). The advantage of the military metaphor is that it arouses in people a state of fear and urgency, a springing into preventative action, and a preparedness to mobilise against this state of emergency (Gwyn, 1999).

War metaphors are commonly used by many governments and the media. For instance, the global community and national and local governments “fight against” and hope to “win the war against the pandemic” (Cori et al., 2020, p. 3113). The primary reason officials use war metaphors is to convey a sense of urgency and emergency, and a militancy by the state. Schnepf and Christmann (2021) state that this framing increases civil support for strict COVID-19 policies and encourages preventive behaviours. In the previous pandemic to embroil Botswana, HIV/AIDS, the then President, Festus Gontebanye Mogae, launched a ‘War on HIV/AIDS’. Military framing has

an advantage of turning *an* issue into *the* issue. As Entman (1993) observed, metaphors can foreground a particular problem, give a causal interpretation, present a problem evaluation, and/or promote a possible solution. In the context of COVID-19 war metaphors were important in preparing populations for hard times, in showing compassion, concern and empathy, in persuading citizens to change their behaviour, in ensuring their acceptance of extraordinary rules and sacrifices, in boosting national sentiments and resilience, and in constructing enemies and shifting responsibilities (Seixas, 2021).

However, the use of military metaphors in health care is not without criticism. In her analysis of metaphors used for tuberculosis and cancer, Sontag (1989), for instance, argues that there is a shift from fighting the disease to fighting the patient, an increased risk of stigmatisation, and a tendency to impose unnecessary suffering on the patient. This author also states that military metaphors used to fight HIV/AIDS “over-mobilises, over-describes, and powerfully contributes to excommunicating and stigmatising the ill” (p.182). Furthermore, Schnepf and Christmann (2021) opine that there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of militaristic metaphors, and that in the United States (US), the non-militaristic concept of ‘struggle’ was consistently more strongly associated with the desired outcomes than militaristic metaphors. Criticism levelled at the use of military metaphors also state that such language use gives legitimacy to governments to encroach on civil liberties (e.g., the #ReframeCovid initiative on Twitter) (Olza et al., 2021).

Despite this criticism, militarist language is recurrent during health crises, perhaps because of its effectiveness as a rhetorical tool (Seixas, 2021). Seixas (2021) argues further that war metaphors are not inherently negative and can be used for positive outcomes.

## **6.0 Terminology of novel experiences**

As mentioned earlier, the function of communication is inherent to language. Communication exists to educate and fulfil other needs of society. There is need to denote and communicate about new experiences and innovations. Vocabulary has the most direct association with new developments in a society (Kan & Xu, 2013). With the advent of COVID-19, new vocabulary items were needed for talking about coronavirus-related issues: preventative measures, lockdown, isolation, quarantine, general education on the topic, etc (cf. Lawson, 2020). It is not surprising that there has been an explosion of new words and phrases, both in English and in other languages.

## **7.0 Data**

Naturally occurring data were used for this study and were comprised of official communication from the government of Botswana released through the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, parliament, and the Ministry of Health and Wellness. Communication was in the form of (live) updates and advisory messages, written press releases, and savingrams, and were obtained from the government of Botswana Facebook page, Twitter, and other social media platforms. The search feature on the Botswana Government Facebook page was used to manually

and randomly find communications related to COVID-19 in Botswana. Keywords were ‘coronavirus’, ‘COVID-19’, ‘covid19bw’, ‘pandemic’, and ‘corona’.

Seventeen hours and twenty-two minutes of video recordings were collected for analysis. The video excerpts were transcribed and translated into English if they were originally in an indigenous language. In addition, 20 pieces of written communication comprising public advisory notes and memorandums were sampled from shared communication by the government. Both written and video data were randomly sampled from the available pool of communication released by the government. Communication was selected based on prevalent use of war language, and information was coded according to its use of militaristic metaphors.

Data was collected over a period five months between 27 March 2020 and 31 August 2020. This period represents the initial stage of the government of Botswana’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **8.0 Data analysis method**

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on collected pieces of official communication. Content analysis was used as a technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1968), with the aim to reveal patterns on how concepts related to COVID-19 are communicated by the government. The approach of content analysis can be applied to “virtually any form of linguistic communication to answer the classic questions of who says what to whom, why, how, and with what effect” (Blanca et al., 2017, p. 268).

Firstly, the researcher read through the selected data to see the kind of content they contained. This familiarised the researcher with the data and enabled a determination on their suitability for the study. The data was then categorised according to the frames that were being communicated. This thematic grouping was then reviewed as a validation process. Thereafter, a random sampling of videos and articles for the study was done.

Furthermore, a metaphor analysis was done on selected communications to reveal words which were used metaphorically. The metaphors were then interpreted, and an explanation was given for the metaphors. The list of lexical items was confirmed against, for example, the WAR frame on MetaNet repository of conceptual metaphors and frames (Karlberg & Buell, 2005). This repository lists words related to various metaphors including war metaphors. For example, ‘battle,’ ‘conquest,’ ‘front line,’ and ‘enemy’ are listed as relevant lexical items for war metaphor.

## 9.0 Findings

### 9.1 The framing of COVID-19

The metaphor of ‘coronavirus as a war’ stands out in various communications from the government. War metaphors that invoke images of being on the frontline and fighting an ‘invisible enemy’ in a fierce ‘battle’ abound. In a televised address to the nation, President Masisi said the nation is ‘at war’ with ‘an invisible enemy.’ In closing, he stated:

#### Excerpt 1

I wish to thank all Batswana and residents for cooperating with government in *fighting* this pandemic. I particularly want to express my profound gratitude to those who are in the *frontline* of this *war*, and I would like to assure them of continued full government support in their invaluable *service* to the nation (Statement by President Masisi on the declaration of the state of emergency in Botswana regarding the outbreak of COVID-19, 31 March 2020).

Excerpt 1 is not an isolated instance of framing the coronavirus as a ‘war’ since many political leaders around the world such as Boris Johnson, the then United Kingdom Prime Minister, and Donald Trump, the then United States of America President, used the same military metaphors to describe the coronavirus pandemic in their countries. This metaphor of ‘disease is war’ draws on experiences that people have of wars, whether it is first-hand experience or otherwise.

Other instances of framing the coronavirus as a ‘war’ in Botswana are found in excerpts 2 to 6.

#### Excerpt 2-6

2. *Ba le ba ntsi ba kgonne go halola ka mabaka a go intsha sethabelo ga lona.*

‘Many people have managed to *evade* the virus because of your *sacrificing* of yourselves’ (Honourable Member of Parliament, Mr Kgotla Autlwetse, 13 June 2020).

3. With your assistance, we shall *conquer* COVID-19. Continue practicing social distancing, wear a face mask (Directorate of Public Service Management Savingram, 13 June 2020).

4. In another effort to *combat* the spread of COVID-19, the Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19 would like to inform the public... (Presidential Taskforce Media Release, 14 June 2020).

5. *Masole ke lona, ke lona ba le tlaa itwelang.* ‘You are *soldiers*, you are the ones who will *fight* for yourselves’ (Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health and Wellness, 5 August 2020).

6. Only the fearless and supportive will help *defeat* the coronavirus (Presidential Taskforce Media Release, 28 June 2020).

As excerpts 2-6 show, militaristic language (e.g., *evade, conquer, combat, defeat*) is prevalent in discourses on coronavirus in Botswana. The public is referred to as ‘soldiers’ who are engaged in a ‘battle’ with the coronavirus.

## 9.2 COVID-19 related terminology

### 9.2.1 *Serubi* ‘quarantine/isolation area’

The Setswana word *serubi* is usually used in the agricultural sector to refer to a small enclosure within a larger enclosure/kraal for livestock. The smaller enclosure, kid pen, is used for separating goat kids from the rest of the flock for various reasons including safety and restriction of breastfeeding at certain times. *Serubi* adopted a new sense, ‘COVID-19 quarantine/isolation area,’ when it was first used by President Masisi in a selfie-video shared on his personal Facebook page on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 while on quarantine. This was after he had travelled to neighbouring Windhoek, Namibia, which had already registered coronavirus cases. In the video the President said:

#### Excerpt 7

*Batswana betsho ne ke re ke le itekodise. Ke hano ke mo ntlong, mo serubing, jaaka ke sa bolo go tsena malatsi a a supa a a fetileng.*

Fellow Batswana, I wanted to give you an update on my health. I am here in the house, in a kid pen enclosure, as I have been for the past seven days (President Masisi, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020).

President Masisi informed the nation that he was housebound in a ‘kid pen’ enclosure, *serubi*, referring to his self-isolation. It was after this that the word *serubi* became synonymous with COVID-19 quarantine/isolation area. An expansion of the domain of use is observed in adopting *serubi* from agriculture to the health sector for COVID-19 ‘quarantine/lockdown area.’ The purpose of safety of *serubi* is also extrapolated onto the homes in which the public was kept safe from the coronavirus, and onto the rooms where they were frequently quarantined/isolated.

### 9.2.2 *Peita* ‘disinfect/fumigate’

The Oxford English-Setswana Setswana-English bilingual school dictionary defines *peita* as a verb meaning ‘to give an enema’ (2013, p. 686), that is, colon cleansing. *Peita* is formed through backformation from the noun *sepeiti*, which is originally borrowed from Afrikaans *spruit* ‘syringe/spray.’

The coronavirus discourse adopted *peita* to mean ‘disinfect’ or ‘fumigate.’ The use of *peita* on the coronavirus discourse was first introduced by President Masisi in his televised speech on



the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2020. He informed the nation that a building in a village near the capital city where some cases of coronavirus had been reported would be disinfected, and he used the word *peita*. The word was further popularised by Pono Moatlhodi, a member of parliament, in his deliberations in a televised session of parliament on the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated that:

#### **Excerpt 8**

*Mothusa Tautona, maker sure gore ha diteraka tse di goroga, di a peitiwa, le bakgweetsi ba, ba peitewe ha go kgonagala, le ba peite.*

‘Assistant Minister, make sure that when these trucks arrive, they are *disinfected/fumigated*, even their drivers, they must be *sanitised*, if possible, you should *sanitise* them’ (Honourable Moatlhodi, 11 May 2020).

In calling for trucks and truck drivers coming into Botswana from neighbouring South Africa to be disinfected, Honourable Moatlhodi used the word *peita* as did the President. This novel usage of *peita* caused quite an uproar on social media and radio stations. Some native speakers argued that *peita* has negative connotations and conjures negative childhood memories for many people who underwent ‘deworming’ by means of processes when they were filled with vinegar concoction from the hindside. Others felt that the term would bring stigma to an otherwise necessary procedure in combating the virus.

*Tipa* ‘dip’ was suggested as an alternative instead of *peita*. *Tlhalosi ya medi ya Setswana* dictionary defines *tipa* as immersing livestock in a disinfectant liquid to kill harmful parasites (Otlogetswe, 2012, p. 600). This word is synonymous with livestock while *peita* is typically used in relation to people. Unlike *peita*, *tipa* does not have negative connotations and is more acceptable to a wider audience.

In any case, the meanings of both *peita* and *tipa* have been extended to label coronavirus experiences such as the necessity to disinfect offices, schools, homes, etc to get rid of the virus.

#### **9.2.3 Sebipamolomo ‘mask’**

The wearing of medical and non-medical masks in public settings is one of the key measures used to suppress the spread of coronavirus. Masks were one of the containment measures and formed part of the coronavirus discourse. The term ‘mask’ posed a labelling challenge in indigenous languages. One of the early labelling of mask in Setswana was *pipamolomo* ‘mouth cover’. This is derived from the use of this item as masks cover the mouth and nose. *Pipamolomo*, therefore, is a noun that means ‘mouth and nose cover’. However, this word already exists in the Setswana lexicon to refer to bribery, a silencing of someone by paying them. The repurposing of *pipamolomo* therefore did not take off because of this negative connotation. A variation, *sebipamolomo* ‘a thing used to cover the mouth’, gained traction over *pipamolomo*. For instance,

in one of the live COVID-19 briefings, the Deputy Permanent Secretary in the Department of Information and Broadcasting stated that:

### **Excerpt 9**

*Ke dirisa sebipamolomo se ka ke molao. Re tshwanetse gore gongwe le gongwe fa re leng teng ra bo re se dirisa.*

‘I am using this mask as stated by law. We are supposed to use them wherever we are’  
(Mr Oshinka Tsiang, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Information and Broadcasting, COVID-19 Pandemic briefing, 16 May 2020).

There were debates among Setswana speakers on radio and social media on appropriate indigenous terminology for the word ‘mask’ or how to translate the word into Setswana. Some observers pointed out that public figures such as members of parliament were uncomfortable with *pipamolomo* as it reminded the public of the leaders’ corrupt practices. Both *pipamolomo* and *sebipamolomo* are not widely used for the word ‘mask’, and the English adaptation, *maseke*, now enjoys wider usage and is even shorter than the two Setswana terms *pipamolomo* and *sebipamolomo*. Another English adaptation that came into popular use is the word *vaerose* from the English ‘virus,’ although this tends to be used side by side with the Setswana word *mogare*.

## **10.0 Discussion**

### **10.1 The framing of COVID-19 in Botswana**

The main framing technique illustrated by discourse on coronavirus in Botswana is the use of metaphor. Research has established that metaphors are used to frame a conceptual idea through comparison to something else (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Metaphors are used in this regard to educate and shape public understanding and response. The government through the President, members of parliament, and public health agencies make use of metaphors to talk about the virus, its effects, and the measures that are needed to reduce its spread. This framing portrays the nation as soldiers who can *fight*, *conquer*, and *sacrifice*, and who are not passive victims. This framing comes across in both Setswana and English communication, as shown in the excerpts (1-6).

War language communicates the gravity of the coronavirus pandemic to the nation. War metaphors are effective because of the emotional valence they convey. There is a reliance on war metaphors to encourage the nation to be fearless like soldiers to defeat the virus. Health workers and the public are shown appreciation for joining forces with the government in the fight against the virus. Furthermore, health workers are shown compassion and understanding in the risks they face in their line of work during the pandemic. Inclusivity is encouraged such that the nation feels part of the fight against the virus. All this is achieved by using war language.

The study results are consistent with findings of similar research such as Sontag (1989) and Cori et al. (2020). COVID-19 is presented as an invader of society, while mitigations to curb

the spread of the virus are presented as a fight or war. This re-representation of coronavirus aligns with the framing evident in other countries and governments, as reported by Cori et al. (2020). This linguistic framing of the COVID-19 pandemic convinces leaders and the nation that they should go all out against the disease. Massive resources are directed at the 'war,' and an arsenal of technology, ventilators, personal protective equipment, etc, is harnessed to combat the disease (Annas, 1997). Education of the nation using military language is effective as people are more accepting of the rather costly mitigating measures, since they have been primed that the nation is at war.

### **10.2 COVID-19 related terminology**

As observed from section 9.2, results indicate that sources of coronavirus vocabulary are generally native Setswana words and adaptations from English words. Not surprisingly, all observed indigenous words were in Setswana; there were no words from the other indigenous languages in the country. This may be attributed to the fact that Setswana is the national language used by the various ethnic groups in the country for inter-ethnic communication and for semi-official governmental communication, among other things. Thus, the coronavirus messages are predominantly in Setswana and English.

Repurposing of words, however, does not overcome some challenges such as specificity of terms. For instance, *serubi* 'kid pen' is used for both quarantine and self-isolation, even though the two terms mean totally different things in the coronavirus discourse in English. In English, isolation refers to the separation of people sick with COVID-19 from people who are not sick, whereas quarantine refers to the separation and restriction of the movement of people who were exposed to COVID-19 to see if they would become sick. The Setswana term *serubi* makes no distinction between the two processes. This challenge of naming scientific and other technical experiences in African languages has been noted in research. For instance, Wild (2021) stated that there are no separate words for the words 'viruses' and 'bacteria' in isiZulu.

One way of overcoming vocabulary challenges is through repurposing existing words. Repurposing, or re-contextualising, is where a new sense is added to an already existing word (O'Dell, 2016). It is basically taking a word from one context and applying it to another, as with the computer 'mouse' which was named after the long-tailed, medium-sized rodent. This is because language is dynamic and is constantly changing to reflect ongoing social and cultural changes. The COVID-19 era is not an exception, 'new' words were needed to cater for, label and describe new experiences, and where translations were often not apt. There are several instances where existing words were given new senses to cater for new COVID-19 experiences in Botswana, as shown in section 9.2.

### **11.0 Conclusion**

This article sought to show how language has been used to shape the discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic in Botswana through framing and the repurposing of existing words. It

demonstrated that the coronavirus is conceptualised and framed as an adversary and a war to influence how the nation perceives the pandemic. Medical professionals were envisaged as a *frontline army*, medical tools as *weapons*, and mitigating the spread of the virus as *fighting*. This framing comes across in both English and Setswana communications. The language of war is used to show the gravity of the pandemic, to encourage the nation to be courageous, to show compassion for health workers who must face the pandemic head-on, and to educate. The use of militaristic metaphors in health crisis has been reported in other parts of the world such as the US and the UK. The present study contributes to the literature on COVID-19 framing in an African setting.

The study further demonstrated the repurposing of vocabulary to cater for new experiences related to the coronavirus. Setswana words such as *serubi*, *peita*, and *sebipamolomo* were repurposed and their meanings were extended from their original senses to label coronavirus experiences. The linguistic framing of the discourse on coronavirus and repurposing of existing and familiar Setswana words educated the nation, shaped people's understanding of COVID-19, influenced the choices people made, helped garner public support for government's policy stance, and ensured the nation's participation in prevention and containment efforts.

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