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The Discursive Strategies in the Spoken Narratives of Multilingual Sepitori and Sesotho Speakers †

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Abstract: In linguistically diverse and multilingual South African communities, it is common to use non-standard language varieties (NSLVs), often called mixed languages, as lingua franca. These NSLVs are primarily spoken in black townships throughout South Africa. Previous studies show that the discursive production of oral narratives impacts the development and use of higher-order language processing, as they require the knowledge, language skills and abilities to produce coherent discourse. The main focus of the existing literature in oral narrative is mostly on standard languages. In this study, we explore how speakers of Sepitori, a non-standard language variety (NSLV), produce an oral narrative compared to Sesotho, a standard language. The current study investigates the oral narrative production of a total number of 20 participants who are adult speakers of Sesotho and Sepitori (ten from each language). The Sesotho speakers were bilingual speakers of English and Sesotho. The Sepitori speakers were multilingual speakers of English, Sesotho, Zulu and other languages spoken in the Mamelodi township. This study used a mixed methodology of quantitative and qualitative analysis. Narratives were annotated for language complexity in the macro- and microstructure elements: the length and type of clause, pragmatic acts, referential lexical choices and code-switched words. Sepitori speakers produced narratives characterised by interactive clauses unrelated to the narrative level and with a greater range of lexical referents, showcasing more individual linguistic variation. Sesotho speakers produced a more sequential oral narrative in line with story schema with fewer interjections to the researcher. In an increasingly linguistically heterogeneous South Africa, more research is required to gain insights into how multilingual individuals develop and refine their narrative skills, emphasising the much-needed focus on NSLV from a psycholinguistic perspective, which may ultimately inform tools of assessment for multilingual children and adults in social, clinical and academic contexts.

Keywords: non-standard language; standard language; language varieties; oral narrative strategies; Sepitori; Sesotho; multilingualism

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1. Introduction

The vast body of research on oral narrative production has long established the importance of oral narrative ability in several fields of inquiry, from speech therapy and language development to education, such as developing text competency in typical and atypical speaking populations. Speakers typically structure their experiences and memories of human events into narratives (Berman, 2008; Bruner, 1991; Peterson & McCabe, 1991).

This narrative format is not only conventional and culturally shared but is also shaped by the speaker's proficiency in one or more languages. According to Colletta (2004), from a cognitive perspective, understanding a narrative requires the listener to develop a mental model of the described situation to grasp its significance. From the standpoint of language production, creating an original story is a complex and intensive task, demanding the planning and organising of ideas beyond simple sentences, along with self-regulatory skills such as formulation and presupposition—essentially, pragmatic abilities (Kunene Nicolas et al., 2017). Thus, storytelling involves integrating various cognitive and linguistic skills, making it a complex form of language processing.

The literature on the discursive production of oral narratives of South African languages has looked chiefly at standard languages such as isiZulu, Sesotho and Siswati (Kunene Nicolas, 2015; Nhleko, 2020). This study investigates the oral narratives of a standard language, Sesotho, and a non-standard language, Sepitori. We explore how bi-lingual speakers of Sesotho and multilingual speakers of Sepitori conceptualise an oral narrative. On the one hand, Sesotho is a standard official language of South Africa. On the other hand, Sepitori is a non-standard language variety (NSLV) used in a conversational context in certain townships in the Tshwane area of Gauteng. Our study adds to the literature on the discursive behaviour of bilingual speakers using a standard language that is official and a sociolect non-standard language register spoken in a specific context by its users (Ditsele, 2022). Before delving into the definition of NSLVs, it is important to provide the linguistic foregrounding of languages in South Africa.

The Constitution of South Africa recognises the diverse linguistic and cultural identities which mirror most of the diverse linguistic groups in the country. The recognised standard languages which are classified as official languages are the following 12 languages: isiZulu, siSwati, Sepedi, Sesotho, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, Setswana, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, English, Afrikaans and South African Sign language (SASL). In addition to these official languages, there are non-official languages, including but not limited to non-standard language varieties or registers. In such a linguistically diverse and multilingual country, it is common practice in many black townships throughout the country to use non-standard language varieties (NSLV), often called mixed languages as lingua franca (Ntuli & Kunene Nicolas, 2023; Tshotetsi et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2020).

Mixed languages refer to a systematic mode of communication characterised by the incorporation of elements—such as words or complete constituents—from multiple languages (Finlayson et al., 1998). This linguistic practice reflects both structural consistency and social norms, as speakers fluidly alternate between languages in their interactions, often perceiving their speech as a unified linguistic system rather than as distinct language alternation (García & Wei, 2015; Makalela, 2018). In the South African context, this pattern is prevalent among urban Black township residents and serves as a pragmatic response to their multilingual environment (García & Wei, 2015; Finlayson et al., 1998; Ditsele, 2022; Makalela, 2018).

In addition to the official languages of South Africa, non-official languages, including non-standard language varieties (NSLVs), are also spoken in the country. These varieties are typically unwritten and informal, contributing to their unofficial and unstandardised status. NSLVs are speech varieties derived from multiple languages and are predominantly used by Black citizens in urban townships, where they function as lingua francas. Serving a unifying purpose, they have become the vernacular norm in these areas (Ditsele, 2014; Hurst, 2015; Webb et al., 2011). Children raised in townships often acquire these colloquial varieties as their first language (L1) (Calteaux, 1996).

NSLVs are part of South Africa's dynamic language situation and are essential in bridging language barriers. Their use has spread from the informal to the formal domains

of education, media and workplaces (Álvarez-Mosquera & Marín-Gutiérrez, 2018; Calteaux, 1996; Ditsele, 2014, 2022; Ntuli, 2016; Wagner et al., 2020). Moreover, these NSLVs have contributed significantly to the widening of linguistic repertoires in multilingual South African communities, making them the preferred vernacular norm in many of these townships (Ditsele, 2014, 2022; Hurst, 2015; Ntuli, 2016).

1.1. Sesotho

Sesotho (also known as Southern Sotho) belongs to Zone S of the Southern Bantu languages (Demuth, 1992; Guthrie, 1967). It is classified as belonging to the Sotho-Tswana group S.30 and Southern Sotho S.33.

Sesotho is closely related and mutually intelligible to Setswana and Sepedi (Ditsele, 2022; Mbirimi-Hungwe et al., 2020; Ditsele & Mann, 2014)—all part of the Sotho language group. Like most other Bantu languages, they are morphologically agglutinative. Sesotho's basic word order is Subject Verb Object (SVO). Bantu languages like Sesotho provide a very rich source of information for several areas of language development research. In particular, they exhibit complex tonal systems, pervasive morphological noun class and agreement systems, intricate tense/aspect systems, pro-drop, word order flexibility and many other grammatical phenomena (Demuth, 1992). As a standard and official language, it is used for teaching and learning in schools. Sesotho also has the necessary general vocabulary and morphological and syntactic capacity to express whatever meaning its speakers wish to express (Webb et al., 2011).

1.2. Sepitori

Sepitori is a mixed language that comprises features of several local languages, but it is mainly based on the mutually intelligible Sotho group languages (Ditsele, 2014, 2022; Ntuli, 2021). Therefore, the syntax structure of Sepitori is the same as that of its parent Sotho languages. Sepitori has brought about a generation of children and young adults who identify as first-language speakers of this mixed language. However, it is still neither standardised nor an official language. While there is a considerable body of work on non-standard language varieties in South Africa (Mulaudzi & Poulos, 2001; Rudwick, 2005; Hurst, 2008; Ditsele, 2014), no studies have explored the linguistic and pragmatic factors of non-standard language varieties in adult narratives.

1.3. Theoretical Background

As the introduction mentions, oral narratives are discursive texts that speakers utilise to shape their experiences and memories. Narratives provide a robust method for assessing language in multilingual contexts, as their structural features are shared across languages (Antonijevic et al., 2022). Consequently, proficiency in oral narratives requires an understanding of a language's structural, syntactic and semantic elements at the sentence level, along with a grasp of the pragmatic features that define well-formed discourse (Hickmann, 2002). The complexity of oral narratives increases with age and language skills; for instance, research indicates that children under five typically produce script-like stories characterised by simple, common action sequences rather than intricate causal and sequential narratives (Colletta et al., 2015; Berman & Slobin, 1994). Thus, narratives serve as a highly valued language sampling tool, particularly for individuals speaking one or more languages, providing the opportunity to examine a wide array of the speaker's language production skills (Bedore et al., 2010; Nhleko, 2020). This article presents an investigation into the pragmatic behaviour of how some South African multilingual speakers conceptualise and produce a narrative.

As a distinct form of discourse, the narrative exhibits specific characteristics that distinguish it from single utterances and dialogues (Colletta et al., 2015). Firstly, narratives

are more constrained in structure, and their everyday use for narrating events relies on the comprehension and generation of linguistically organised information, as observed in expository discourse involving verbal explanations and reasoning (Berman, 2008; Hickmann, 2002). Secondly, narratives possess specific properties of coherence and cohesion (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 2014), which are absent in dialogues that primarily rely on the sequencing of short speech turns. Lastly, storytelling requires cognitive abilities such as expressing absent referents, contextualising linguistic information and cognitive decentration to grasp the perspectives of interlocutors or readers.

Oral narratives, in particular, hold a significant role as a means of everyday communication in social and academic contexts (Spencer et al., 2013; Greenslade et al., 2020); they represent a sophisticated form of oral language known as storytelling. While narratives are found universally and narrative skills are considered to be nurtured through early language socialisation within families and communities, there are variations in narrative styles both within and across cultures (Willenberg, 2017). Narrating is inherently complex, requiring both linguistic, social and cognitive abilities (Berman, 2004; Hickmann, 2002) and therefore serves as a primary mode of complex discourse that provides a framework for organising and structuring events in a story (Silva et al., 2014). Narratives are important in communication because they help observe the development of language skills (Berman, 2008). Narrating a story involves skills such as attention, memory, metalinguistic awareness, semantics, syntax and sequencing. These skills range from the narrator's ability to remember and recall the story, organising the events into structures that make sense, being aware and able to talk about the story, to understanding and using appropriate vocabulary, descriptions and language (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013). As such, narrative skills require the integration of multiple competencies, encompassing both linguistic and cognitive challenges.

This study examines the strategies employed by young adults aged 18–24 during an oral narrative production task. We compare two language groups: a standard language (Sesotho) and an NSLV (Sepitori). We used an oral narrative elicitation production task conceptualised by Colletta et al. (2015). The oral narrative elicitation language production task by Colletta et al. (2015) investigates the discursive development of children's multimodal capabilities across several languages, including French, American English and Italian. This study forms part of the project where we examine languages belonging to the Bantu language family (Kunene Nicolas, 2015). Most studies on oral narrative abilities focus on monolingual populations (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Colletta, 2004; Hickmann, 2002) and standard languages, such as those assessed using the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (Lindgren et al., 2023). The current study compares the oral narrative production of multilingual speakers who, on the one hand, speak a standard language (Sesotho) and, on the other hand, a non-standard language. The research question is as follows:

> How does the discursive production of a non-standard language variety (Sepitori) compare to the standard language (Sesotho)?

1.4. Oral Narratives of Bantu Languages

Research on narrative skill has primarily focused on (a) how narratives serve to organise experiences meaningfully and (b) the structure and development of narratives—with a particular focus on coherence and cohesion (Hickmann, 2002; Silva et al., 2014). Researchers have delved into these aspects to understand how individuals develop and refine their narrative skills. Many studies have, in particular, looked at the narrative abilities of children and adults of different languages (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Colletta et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2022; Košutar et al., 2022), discursive production of oral narratives of South African standard languages (Kunene Nicolas, 2015; Nhleko, 2020) and non-standard

language varieties (Ntuli, 2016), narrative structure and production in social, cultural and linguistically diverse environments across Africa (Tappe & Hara, 2013; Willenberg, 2017). However, there has been no systematic comparison of a standard language, Sesotho, to a non-formal language register, Sepitori.

1.5. Translanguaging

Beyond the investigation of oral narrative production, examining multilingual populations and how they conceptualise a narrative requires more literature. Multilingual speakers employ code-switching and translanguaging strategies when producing discursive text.

Code-switching is the act of switching between two or more languages during a conversation (Das, 2012). This phenomenon can occur when a word or phrase from one language is substituted with its counterpart in another, or when complete sentences in various languages are used in the same discourse.

On the other hand, translanguaging is a dynamic process in which speakers of one or more languages flexibly use their complete linguistic repertoire without rigorously following linguistic boundaries (Canagarajah, 2011; García & Wei, 2015; Wei, 2018; Maseko & Mkhize, 2021). Translanguaging adopts an integrated and fluid approach to language use, in contrast to code-switching, which alternates between different linguistic systems.

Accordingly, translanguaging is a universal phenomenon of language that may be observed in every society practising multilingualism (García & Wei, 2015; Ngubane et al., 2020). The ability of multilingual people to push and break barriers between standard languages and language varieties and "*disobey*" social conventions, including linguistic standards, is a clear indicator of their inventiveness in a translanguaging environment. Consequently, translanguaging helps language users establish a social space (Makalela, 2018; Wei, 2018). Most research has focused on translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy in primary, secondary or tertiary education (Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2021). Translanguaging is not exclusive to educational settings. Therefore, this study considers multilingual communicative behaviours outside the classroom.

2. Materials and Methods

As stated under the theoretical background, this study forms part of a larger oral narrative project (Colletta et al., 2015). The methodology employed is an oral narrative elicitation task. An animated video is shown to participants, who retell what they have seen in a narrative. By using the cartoon extract, this investigation can test the variation that occurs, as people do not speak in the same way—allowing researchers to make a systematic comparative analysis concerning the choice of word use. Furthermore, the narration enables researchers to examine and analyse the participants' language abilities and accuracy in storytelling.

2.1. Procedure

Participants were asked to watch a wordless cartoon video (2 m 47 s) from Tom and Jerry's TV series (Colletta et al., 2015). After watching the cartoon, they retell the story to the researcher.

The story is categorised into a macrostructure schema of the cartoon (Colletta et al., 2015). The macrostructure schema has several episodes that entail a mother bird leaving her egg in the nest (macro episode 1). The egg accidentally falls out of the nest (macro episode 2) and rolls into Jerry's house (macro episode 3). The egg hatches in Jerry's house (macro episode 4), and a baby woodpecker emerges. The baby bird then destroys Jerry's furniture (macro episode 5). After a few failed attempts to calm the bird down (macro episode 6), Jerry gets angry and takes the bird back to its nest (macro episode 7). The

different macro episodes provide a range of discursive abilities in the form of narrating, commentary, personal interpretation and even explanations.

2.2. Participants

Sesotho speakers were students at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, while Sepitori speakers attended Tshwane North TVET College in the metropolitan area of Mamelodi, Pretoria.

The study sample consists of 20 adults: 10 native Sesotho speakers (5 females and 5 males) and 10 Sepitori speakers (5 females and 5 males) (see Table 1). The Sepitori speakers, hailing from Pretoria in Gauteng Province, acquired Sepitori as their first language (L1) in a home environment and learnt additional second languages (L2s), English and Afrikaans, at school. Similarly, the Sesotho speakers, from Free State Province, acquired Sesotho as their L1 from birth and learned L2 languages (English and Afrikaans) at school.

Table 1. Data sample.

Age	Language	Males	Females
18–24	Sepitori	5	5
	Sesotho	5	5

We utilised a multi-tier coding grid in ELAN[1] to facilitate transcription and annotation, initially developed for the Colletta et al. (2015) cross-linguistic study and an accompanying coding manual. This manual outlines adapted transcription rules from the Belgium VALIBEL system (Dister et al., 2009), defines the linguistic and gestural variables for analysis, explains the tier-by-tier coding process, and offers examples for each variable. This annotation scheme offers valuable insights into various aspects of language, including lexical (words), syntax, and discourse analysis. (Colletta et al., 2015; Kunene Nicolas et al., 2017). This article excludes the gesture analysis and focuses specifically on the speech results. In assessing the informational quantity of oral narratives produced by the Sepitori and Sesotho speakers, transcription and annotation involved segmenting of the speech stream into distinct linguistic units, such as speech turns, clauses, pragmatic acts, and macro- and microstructures. This study is centred on the variables described below.

2.3. Clauses

The number of clauses or words can indicate the amount of information in a verbal production. However, research in Conversation Analysis shows that spontaneous conversation includes hesitations, filled pauses, vowel lengthening, restarts, repetitions, rewordings and other signs reflecting the speaker's ongoing process of enunciation (Goodwin, 1981). Therefore, to compare the narrative performance of all participants—who may vary significantly in their speech production markers—we removed these indicators from the transcripts prior to segmenting the participants' speech clauses.

For the narrative analysis, all measures were transcribed to measure the macrostructural levels of analysis. All oral narratives produced by the participants in the retelling of what they had seen on the animated video clip, all speech was transcribed verbatim and then further segmented into clauses (a predicate matched by one or several arguments). The following examples from Sesotho (1a) and Sepitori (1b) illustrate how a clause was coded:

(1) a. Mme wa roka
"Mother is knitting"
b. Mamazala nza roka
"Mother in-law was knitting"

Each was coded as one clause with one verb predicate, "roka".

Like all narrative analyses, clausal analysis offers a thorough assessment of narrative ability, syntactic skill and discourse capability regarding coherence and cohesion. All clauses are measured in terms of their link to the narrative event, i.e., are they directly linked to the narrative of the animated video, as found in the literature for standard languages? A Pragmatic Act analysis was applied using the frameworks from Labov and Waletzky (1967) and McNeill (1992), where we classified each clause according to one of the four discourse functions (Colletta et al., 2018, p. 144):

(i) Narrating: when the clause describes an action depicted in the cartoon (e.g., "there was a mother bird in the nest")
(ii) Explaining: when the clause conveys a causal piece of information, the subject includes an additional explanation for the narrated event (e.g., "the mother bird left the nest because it was hungry")
(iii) Interpreting: when the clause presents an inference or an interpretation regarding the situation or the intentions of the characters, the subject constructs some information based on the event and makes a hypothesis (e.g., "it looked at the time and realised it was time to fetch food")
(iv) Commenting: when the clause addresses neither explicit nor implicit aspects of the course of events but presents either a "meta-narrative comment" (McNeill, 1992, p. 185) relating to the story, its genre or its structure or a "para-narrative comment", personal appreciation, judgement on a character or event or a comment on the act of telling the story itself (e.g., "it is a crazy bird").

2.4. Interactive Clauses

All clauses that were not related to the narrative event were further segmented to what we termed as *interactive clauses*. Interactive clauses are not the standard clauses found in oral narrative telling in the sense that they deviate from recounting the story but the speaker employs an interesting strategy of "conversing" with the interviewer (Ntuli, 2016).

The interactive clauses indicate that these clauses had different interaction elements, ranging from rhetorical questions and statements to responses. Consider the following Sepitori interactive clause examples:

(2)	a.	La fihla ko hongwe	ga ke itse	ko reng?	ko ntlong ya bear	or ke eng?
		"It arrived somewhere"	"I don't know"	"what am I (going) to say?"	"at the bear's house"	"or what is it?"
		Narrative	**Interactive**	**Interactive**	**Narrative**	**Interactive**

The Sepitori narrator starts with a narrative-level pragmatic act by narrating that the egg arrived somewhere; the speaker is not specific on where the egg arrived, but just that it arrived. This is followed by an interactive clause stating that she does not know where the egg arrived. Next, the speaker creates a new interactive clause, contemplating what to express about the exact location that the egg arrives. The speaker then steps back into the narrative level by identifying the location as the house of a *bear* (no bear in the stimuli). However, the following clause shows that the speaker continues to doubt the previously produced interactive clause, as seen in the last interactive clause, where they question whether it was a bear, directing the question to the interviewer and seeking some form of response or acknowledgement.

(2)	b.	Nkare o tlo tshwarisa Jerry stress motho	wa ntshwara?
		"It looks like he/she is going to give Jerry stress"	"You get me?"
		Narrative	**Interactive**
(2)	c.	Le ntshe ngwana	wa bona?
		"it took out a child"	"You see?"
		Narrative	**Interactive**

The clauses in examples (2b) and (2c) also show how the Sepitori speaker uses interactive markers with the interviewer, such as questions that were directed at the interviewer and required a "y*es* or *no*" response before continuing with the storytelling.

2.5. Words

From the transcription of clauses (above), further segmentation of participant words (coding manual p11) was conducted to measure lexical referents used in the oral narrative. For the analysis in this article, we selected two macro episodes of the story schema, which had the highest quantity of information. The following referents were selected due to their high production frequency; commonly recurring referents from the narrative were "mother-bird", "egg", "time", "cobweb", "flower" and "bed". We also analyse code-switched words as they appear.

2.6. Reliability

For reliability, all coding was carried out by two separate coders. Inter-rater agreement was 90% on the linguistic coding.

2.7. Data Analysis

This oral narrative production task sought to study and compare the discursive production of a standard language and a non-standard language variety. This analysis presents the findings of the communicative behaviour of adult multilingual speakers of Sesotho and Sepitori.

Language was the independent variable, and the clause was the dependent variable. Because our gender analysis failed to reach significance for both languages, IBM SPSS statistics (version 27) non-parametric Mann–Whitney test statistical analyses were performed across both genders.

A qualitative analysis was conducted on words, examining the speakers' lexical referent production as well as code-switching.

3. Results

In presenting the findings, we will first report on the quantitative analysis the linguistic measure of the clause and interactive clause variable in Section 3.1. Subsequently, we will present the qualitative findings of the lexical referents and code-switching linguistic terms in Section 3.2 to indicate the variation and discursive performance of both language groups.

3.1. Clauses and Interactive Clauses

All participants were able to produce the oral narrative. Table 2 presents a summary of the results.

Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to determine whether there is a difference in the number of clauses produced by Sepitori speakers and Sesotho speakers. The results indicate a non-significant difference between groups, U = 47.50, $p = 0.850$. There was no difference in the quantity of clause production between the two language groups.

Table 2. Sepitori and Sesotho total clauses.

Language	Clauses	
	Total # of Clauses	**%**
Sepitori	276	50.1
Sesotho	275	49.9

The number of clauses served as an indicator of information quantity, i.e., participants could produce an oral narrative and how much information they produced.

When one examines the clause in terms of quantity, i.e., how many clauses are produced, we can only observe that speakers generate discursive text, but it does not provide a clear picture of the quality of the clausal production in terms of how the clauses are directly linked to the micro- or macrostructural levels of analysis. Therefore, following the statistical analysis, a closer qualitative examination of the produced clauses reveals an unexpected finding. When analysing the quality of the clauses concerning the information conveyed in relation to the oral narrative event, Sepitori speakers, unlike Sesotho speakers, produced fewer clauses pertaining to the retelling of the animated video and tended instead to engage more with the interviewer, such as by asking questions or seeking their opinions or acknowledgement before continuing the narrative.

We further segmented the clauses into Non-interactive clauses (clauses that form part of the oral narrative event) and Interactive clauses (clauses with little to no reference to the oral narrative event, focusing on the speaker engaging the researcher). This clausal analysis revealed differences between the two languages, with almost a third of the Sepitori clauses (29.5%) not providing information related to the narrative events. Therefore, despite the similar number of clauses produced by Sepitori and Sesotho (see Table 2), further analysis confirmed these differences (see Table 3).

Table 3. Sepitori and Sesotho Clause Type.

Language	Non-Interactive Clauses		Interactive Clauses	
	Total # Non-Interactive Clauses	**%**	**Total # of Clauses**	**%**
Sepitori	194	70.3	82	29.7
Sesotho	255	92.7	20	7.3

The Sepitori language group had more interactive clauses than the Sesotho language group (see Table 3).

A Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to determine whether the type of clause varied by language.

The results showed no significant difference between the non-interactive clauses of the Sepitori and Sesotho language groups ($U = 25.5$, $p = 0.063$). However, the interactive clause variable differed by language. The Sepitori language group exhibited a significantly higher number of interactive clauses compared to the Sesotho language group ($U = 10.5$, $p = 0.003$).

This shows that both languages display significant similarities in the amount of information conveyed by the clause variable. However, it is noteworthy that Sepitori speakers not only produced a higher number of interactive clauses but also demonstrated comparable performance to Sesotho speakers in generating non-interactive clauses. This indicates an intriguing divergence in interaction styles, highlighting the dynamic nature of communication within these linguistic communities.

The following section provides a qualitative analysis of the lexical referents used by the two language groups.

3.2. Lexical Referents

From the individual words, we selected lexical referents produced in macro episode A and B, which produced the highest number of utterances. These were the linguistic expressions Sepitori and Sesotho narrators used, which referred to the nouns found in the macro episodes. The individual variation in the use of different lexical referents, e.g., Jerry the mouse could be referred to as "a mouse"; "that cartoon"; "that thingy", etc., did not allow us to run a quantitative analysis and we, therefore, conducted a qualitative analysis. We then selected lexical referents that had the highest frequency.

Our investigation focuses on understanding what it means to narrate in Sepitori and Sesotho. For this study, this also meant tracking specific noun words that were used during narration. Sepitori is a non-standard language variety characterised by language mixing, including code-switching, translanguaging and continuous neologism, and it draws from various grammatical frameworks. Therefore, our analysis of the vocabulary used by both language groups also involved identifying the diverse languages employed in the narratives of both the Sepitori and Sesotho groups. In order to recount the narrative, the main referents were the "mother bird", "the egg", "time", "cobweb", "flower" and "the bed" (see Table 4).

Table 4. Sepitori and Sesotho lexical referents.

Referent	Mother Bird		Egg		Time		Cobweb		Flower		Bed	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Sepitori	9	90	10	100	1	10	0	0	0	0	3	30
Sesotho	10	100	9	90	2	20	3	30	4	40	3	30

Table 4 shows that 90% of the Sepitori participants produced a word representing a "mother bird". All Sepitori speakers (100%) produced a corresponding term of the word "egg". With only 10% of Sepitori speakers producing a corresponding term for the word "time", 90% of Sepitori speakers did not reference any word equivalent to "time" in their narration. No Sepitori speakers referred to the words "cobweb" and "flower" in their narration. The word "bed" was referenced by 30% of Sepitori speakers.

On the other hand, 90% of Sesotho speakers produced a corresponding term of the word "egg". Moreover, only 20% of Sesotho speakers mentioned the lexical "time". Additionally, 80% of Sesotho speakers did not refer to the word or an equivalent word to "time" in their A and B micro episode narration. Only 30% of Sesotho speakers mentioned words referencing cobwebs, and only 40% of the speakers mentioned "flowers" in their narration. Like Sepitori speakers, 30% of speakers from the Sesotho language group mentioned the word "bed".

Sesotho speakers produced certain lexical referents that were absent in the oral narratives of Sepitori speakers.

In the subsequent section, we analyse the distinct references produced by each language group to understand the particular lexical elements employed and the number of speakers who utilised them concerning the designated lexical items. This detailed analysis includes the different variants of lexical items used to reference those selected from macro episodes A and B (as presented in Table 5).

Table 5. Frequency of lexical referents for mother bird.

Referent	Language	Lexical Variations	No. of Speakers	Source Language
Mother bird	Sepitori	mamazala	1	IsiZulu
		mama	1	
		Mma nonyane	1	Sesotho
		Mme	1	
		Nyonyane nyana	1	
		Nonyane	2	
		Tom	1	English
		Jerry	1	
	Sesotho	Nonyane yam me/mme nonyane	5	Sesotho
		Nonyane	3	
		Mofumahadi nonyana	1	
		Woodpecker	1	English

Linguistic Expressions and Variations

a. *Mother bird*

Further analysis shows that almost 90% of Sepitori speakers produced an equivalent word of mother bird; however, these equivalent words used to reference "mother bird" were different, meaning that 70% of the speakers produced a different word, and only 20% produced the same word (see Table 5). For Sepitori speakers, this started from "mother bird", meaning *mamazala* (an isiZulu word meaning mother-in-law), a word used to mean "mother" in Tsotsitaal. Then "mother bird" moved to mean *nyonyane nyana* (a Sesotho word meaning small bird, but, in this case, the narrators use it to mean some bird). The third reference was *mma nonyane* (meaning mother of a bird), followed by *mme* and *mama* (which simply means mother), and *nonyane* (which means bird). Lastly, Sepitori speakers continued to refer to the "mother bird" as *Tom* and, in some narratives, as *Jerry*, which is the name of the cartoon video clip. Only 10% of Sepitori speakers did not mention any word to refer to the mother bird but used anaphoric expressions such as "n*a* rokela lehe kobo" (she/he was knitting a blanket for an egg) and "a tsamaya" (she/he left), where she/he is a pronoun referring to the mother bird.

In Sesotho, all speakers (100%) produced a term equivalent to "mother bird", and unlike Sepitori, there are words produced by Sesotho speakers that were common amongst them (see Table 5), hence, the production of three different terms of "mother bird" by 10 Sesotho speakers, where 50% of the Sesotho speakers used the word *mme wa nonyane or nonyane ya mme* (mother/female bird) and another 30% just used the word *nonyane* (bird), and 10% referred to it as *mofumahadi nonyana* (Mrs bird) and the last 10% used the lexical term "woodpecker" to refer to it.

b. *Egg*

The referent egg had high frequency in both language groups. The lexical term *lehe* (egg) was used by both language groups to refer to the referent egg. All (100%) the Sepitori speakers used this referent in their narrative. Also, in the Sesotho narrative, 90% of the speakers mentioned the referent, whilst the remaining 10% of Sesotho speakers referred to the "egg" as *selo*, which means "something".

c. *Time*

Both Sepitori and Sesotho produced the word "time" at a low frequency; speakers from both language groups used the word *nako* (time) 10% in Sepitori and 20% in Sesotho.

d. *Cobweb*

Sepitori speakers produced no lexical term for "cobweb", whilst Sesotho had 30% of lexical terms referring to cobweb, meaning that 70% of the speakers did not refer to cobweb. The first 10% of Sesotho speakers used the word *ntlong ya spider* (house of the spider), the second 10% referred to it as spider web and the last 10% used the term *tepong ya sego* (house of the spider).

e. *Flower*

No lexical terms relating to "flower" were produced by Sepitori speakers; in contrast, Sesotho had a higher frequency, with 40% of speakers producing words equivalent to the referent "flower". In total, 20% of the Sesotho speakers used the word palesa (flower) while the other 20% used *leblomo* (borrowed from the Afrikaans word "blom" which means flower).

The referent bed had an equal frequency and production by both language groups, with the same number of speakers and lexical term used to refer to bed. This means that 30% of Sepitori speakers used the term *mpetong* to refer to bed and 30% of Sesotho speakers used the term *betheng* to refer to bed.

Sepitori and Sesotho speakers used different and similar terms to recall the narrative. Sepitori speakers used more varied terms for a single lexical item than Sesotho speakers. Some terms had no lexical items in Sepitori, whereas the Sesotho speakers managed to provide them. This difference in lexical items for referents could be because Sepitori speakers chose what was salient or what they considered essential to narrate; hence, there were lexical items that they could not retrieve easily during the task. However, since Sepitori is primarily a social language, some terms are infrequently used for their speech variety. On the other hand, Sesotho speakers could create associations with some of the terms, hence the several uses of synonyms in their narratives.

The greater number of clauses (non-interactive clauses) produced by Sesotho speakers compared to Sepitori corresponds with the frequency of lexical items produced by both language groups. Sesotho produced more clauses that correlate to the production of more lexical referents. Sepitori produced fewer lexical referents, which may be because some lexical referents were ignored and, therefore, not accounted for. Furthermore, we explored code-switching in the Sepitori and Sesotho clauses during narration. The results show that the alteration of linguistic elements by Sepitori speakers is enhanced by using various indigenous South African languages, Afrikaans and English, whilst Sesotho speakers only code-switch to English. Consider the examples below:

Example 3 (a) and (b) below show the narrative clauses of two Sepitori participants. The narrative proceeds from macro episode A to macro episode B, from the beginning of the narrative (in the nest) to the bed in the house (from nest to bed).

(3)	a.	Mola wa itse go iragalang? Ke bone mme ne	Mma nyonyane nyana engwe byana	entlek, mme o la nare o ya spaneng	wabo? so, le **shiya** lehe, le shebile	le ntshe ngwana wa bona?

	"There you know what is happening? I saw a mother okay"	"the mother of some other bird"	"in fact, that mother was going to work"	"You see? So, it left the egg, it watched"	"It took out a baby you see?"
b.	Eish! daai video e la pila pila ga ke e otlwisisi pila ne	mara ka mokho ke boneng, keng?	ke mamazala daar, nza le busy a roka	ho tlhaela ver phaz-ama lehe lela, le e ra eng?	o sa le tshwara mola, o sa le phuthela, yena o sa vaiya
	"Eish! that video that one, I don't understand it very well okay"	"but the way I saw it, what is it?"	"It's a mother there, she was busy knitting okay, I don't know"	"some disturbance comes, that egg, what does it do?"	"he grabs it there, he wraps it, he leaves"

In example 3 (a), the Sepitori speaker switches between the Sotho languages (Sesotho, Sepedi, Setswana), Afrikaans and isiZulu. This mixed version of the Sotho languages can be seen in this clause: mola wa itse go iragalang?, where the speaker starts with mola "there" which is commonly shared among the three Sotho languages, followed by wa itse "you know", which is both Sesotho and Setswana, go iragalang? "what is happening?" which is Sepedi. If this clause was solely Sesotho, it would be mola wa itse ho etsahalang? And if it was solely Sepedi, it would be: mola wa tseba go diregang?. The second clause: ke bone mme ne; is a denser mixture of the three Sotho languages, where it is hard to tease out parts of the sentence into any of the languages, partly because these languages are mutually intelligible. According to Makalela (2013, p. 119), in terms of everyday dialogues, speakers of "kasi-taal" concomitantly exploit these intelligibility patterns to transcend boundaries in the Sotho cluster.

Example 3 (a) also shows the use of Afrikaans by Sepitori speakers, consider this clause: entlek mme o la nare o ya spaneng "in fact that mother was going to work"; the speaker uses the connective marker entlek (Afrikaans), which means in fact, then continues narrating in Sesotho but switches again, to an Afrikaans modified and semantically extended noun, spaneng from the Afrikaans word span "team" or spane "paddles". But now this word has become a Tsotsitaal-related lexical spaneng which means work/job. This speaker also uses IsiZulu, consider the clause so le shiya lehe "so it leaves the egg"; starting the clause with the English conjunction so and switching to a Sesotho pronoun le "it" then switching to isiZulu shiya "leave" and finally back to Sesotho.

The Sepitori speaker in example 3 (b) also switches between numerous languages (Sesotho, Afrikaans, English and isiZulu) and within clauses. In just one clause, the speaker opens the story with the interjection eish, followed by Afrikaans; daai "that", then switched to English; video, the speaker then uses Sesotho; e la "that one", pila pila is a Sepitori coined word meaning "actually", then switching back to Sesotho; ga ke e otlwisisi "I don't understand it", and finally pila which a Sepitori form meaning "well". This clause employs three languages (Afrikaans, English and Sesotho) and a language variety (Sepitori). This nature of language switching continues where more Sepitori/tsotsitaal coined terms used in the narration also appear: nza "she/he" and vaya "leave".

The above examples 3 (a) and 3 (b) show that Sepitori speakers have an extended repertoire of languages that they pool together to fit their communication needs. This

linguistic flexibility suggests a versatile intermingling of language resources rather than static and separated linguistic codes (Makalela, 2013). Therefore, the ability of Sepitori speakers to shuttle between languages and treat the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system can be called translanguaging.

4. Discussion

This study sought to investigate how a non-standard language variety behaves (the execution of speech during storytelling) under a controlled environment compared to a standard language. More specifically, it investigates what it means to narrate in a non-standard language compared to a standard language. Consequently, the oral narratives of Sepitori and Sesotho adult speakers were solicited and analysed, on the one hand, to measure the oral narrative abilities and, on the other hand, to provide a systematic analysis of non-standard black urban languages. This section reports and discusses the conclusions that resulted from this study.

In our mixed analysis, we measured the informational quantity found in clauses. Our results indicate that, regarding clause production, both the Sesotho and Sepitori speakers generated an almost equivalent number of clauses. In a subsequent analysis examining the quality of information in relation to the storyline schema, we investigated two types of clauses: interactive and non-interactive clauses. Sepitori speakers produced more interactive clauses that did not include information on major narrative episodes, while Sesotho provided a more information-dense account of the oral narrative.

Analysis of the oral narrative reveals an intriguing distinction between the storytelling abilities of Sesotho and Sepitori speakers. Sesotho speakers crafted significantly more clauses in response to the stimuli than their Sepitori counterparts. A macrostructural analysis of the narrative—an approach that assesses coherence and the sequence of events in oral narratives—uncovered that Sepitori narratives contained less information related to the storyline than those of Sesotho speakers.

What is particularly captivating is the approach taken by Sepitori speakers. They actively engage with the researcher, posing a series of probing questions such as, "Do you see?", "Do you understand?" and "What is that thing again?" This inquisitive strategy suggests a different narrative style that emphasises interaction over mere detail. In stark contrast, Sesotho speakers provide a richly detailed narrative that encompasses nearly every pivotal event in the storyline schema, demonstrating their mastery of narrative depth and structure. This analysis not only highlights the differences in narrative complexity and engagement between the two groups but also encourages further exploration of how storytelling techniques influence comprehension and connection in oral storytelling traditions.

Previous research on oral narratives (Berman, 1997) has highlighted their pragmatic heterogeneity; we know that telling a story involves narrating the events and commenting on them or the narration itself. In this study, the two language groups did not perform the narrative task in the same way; our results revealed that Sepitori speakers used a narrative strategy that was different and novel compared to the Sesotho speakers and other standard languages, as seen in previous studies. This narrative strategy employed by Sepitori speakers is characterised by the high production of interactive clauses, which were not related to the narrative. As a result, Sepitori narratives exhibited a high use of interactive markers and questions in their narration compared to Sesotho. Thus, it suggests a close interaction between the interlocutor and the listener and emphasises the performance and stylistic nature of Sepitori.

Similar to the conversation strategies highlighted by Gumperz (1982), where participants engaged in the interaction are concerned more with the communicative effect of what they are saying to the listener, we see in the case of Sepitori that a different and

innovative narrative strategy was used. The speakers used more interactive clauses; it can be argued that the Sepitori speakers who were immersed in the interaction itself were more concerned with what they were narrating and not how they were narrating it. Hence, there is an increased rate of interactive clauses. These interactive clauses produced by Sepitori speakers can also be viewed in two ways; first, the Sepitori speakers used them when they were word searching because they wanted the narrative to continue but could not find the lexical items or speech to do so. Secondly, one can also argue that since Sepitori is a social language, the narrator does not feel obliged to provide a comprehensive narrative when it is used outside of the social setting. Also, Sepitori as a social language has constraints, and when put under a controlled environment, it breaks down, resulting in this interactive strategy where narrators also perform the speech. This also leads us to conclude that Sepitori speakers saw the task more as an invitation to conversational interaction with the researcher, as shown through more interactive clauses. Sesotho speakers, on the other hand, perceived the task as similar to the speakers of other standard languages such as isiZulu and French in previous studies.

Sepitori speakers were translanguaging, thus using a more complex language repertoire that breaks boundaries in ways that rendered them versatile speakers. Studies by Makalela (2013, 2015) have shown that this linguistic repertoire is considered one language, and the speakers select from it to communicate effectively. Hence, through their narrative behaviour, Sepitori speakers exhibited a more mobile and flexible discourse. This is compatible with the assumptions of the translanguaging theory since it builds flexibility in language practices. Furthermore, this phenomenon is a characteristic of most, if not all, NSLVs in multilingual societies around the country. Studies have shown that students in schools and universities also use it. According to Makalela (2018), these 21st-century multilingual and diverse settings have increasingly required classroom practices, curricula, and policies to not only build on the multiple repertoires of learners but also acknowledge the linguistic fluidities that overlap. The literature and local media show that translanguaging seems to be the new "in"; what does this mean for improving South African black non-standard languages using NSLVs?

The language behaviour of Sesotho (which is a standard language) under a controlled environment is more consistent with the many findings of other researchers who have looked at other standard languages such as isiZulu, French and Italian (Kunene Nicolas, 2015; Colletta et al., 2015; Graziano, 2010) following a similar narrative pattern. Whereas, under a controlled environment, a non-standard language such as Sepitori behaves differently from standard languages, the narrative pattern of Sepitori exhibited a different pattern in language behaviour.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study revealed significant differences in narrative behaviour between speakers of Sepitori, a non-standard language, and Sesotho, a standard language. Sepitori speakers exhibited a unique and innovative narrative strategy, distinguished by a less structured narrative and greater use of interactive sentences, indicating that conversational interaction rather than in-depth storytelling was the main focus. Through translanguaging, the Sepitori speakers also showed a more flexible and adaptable use of language, suggesting an intricate linguistic repertoire. In contrast, Sesotho speakers created more accurate and comprehensive narratives that followed the narrative patterns seen in other standard languages.

These findings underscore the distinct challenges and opportunities presented by non-standard languages like Sepitori in formal or controlled environments, emphasising the need for further investigation into their integration into educational and communicative

practices. In South Africa's increasingly diverse linguistic landscape, we must deepen our understanding of how multilingual individuals develop and refine their narrative skills, particularly speakers of non-standard languages. Future research should explore non-standard languages (NSLVs) from a psycholinguistic perspective, which could ultimately contribute to developing assessment tools for multilingual adults and children in social, clinical and academic contexts.

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Note

[1] ELAN (Version 6.9) [Computer software]. (2024). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive. Retrieved from https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan (accessed on 15 March 2025).

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