SOME SYNTACTICAL PATTERNS OF NORTHERN SOTHO IDIOMS

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  Rest in peace :

  > **Motaung oa ha boHlalele,**
  > **Oa boNthete le Morapeli;**
  > **Tau o jellang mahlatsa**
  > **Nama o itlhabetse;**
  > **Tau sebata se phelang ka lesapo.**

- Above all, **The Almighty God**, for making everything possible.

SUMMARY

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The idiom is defined in this chapter. Information gathered from different sources including books is used to differentiate the idiom from the proverb.

CHAPTER 2
THE ORIGIN OF IDIOMS

Some sources, from which Northern Sotho idioms originate are discussed. The semantic and grammatical characteristics of idioms are also examined in the second chapter.

CHAPTER 3
SOME SYNTACTICAL PATTERNS OF NORTHERN SOTHO IDIOMS

This chapter is based on the main aim of this study. Most informants from whom some idioms were gathered, could not give their syntactical patterns, nor differentiate them from proverbs. Special idiomatic patterns are formed with verb-stems in the infinitive mood followed by nouns, pronouns, adverbs etc. as adjuncts.

CHAPTER 4
THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF IDIOMS

In the fourth chapter, the content of idioms and experiences to which these idioms give expression, are treated comprehensively.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Idiomatic patterns in Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Tswana and Tsonga are compared in order to identify the similarities and differences.

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CHAPTER 1

THE IDIOM IN NORTHERN SOTHO

1. **INTRODUCTION**

1.1 **AIM OF STUDY**

Idioms have been collected and arranged alphabetically by many Northern Sotho authors and scholars. Seemingly none of them has attempted to discuss idioms linguistically until recently.

Rakoma (1962) has made a comprehensive collection of idioms and divided them into two sections, namely, verbal idioms with the leading verb determining the letter of the alphabet under which the idiom is placed and nominal idioms with the noun as a leading word.

The following is an example of a verbal idiom :

Go raga kgamelo 'to kick the bucket' i.e. to die, which is placed under the letter 'r' because of the verb-stem *raga* 'to kick' which is the leading word.

An example of a nominal idiom is :

Mollo wa poo 'the fire of a bull'
i.e. a big fire in a fire-place (at home)

The noun *mollo* 'fire', determines the letter of the alphabet under which it should be classified i.e. 'm'.

In Bushney's (1986) analysis, Northern Sotho idioms are not discussed in full because her study is mainly based on proverbs. She divides idioms into verbal and nominal idioms. Under these two headings, Bushney attempts to analyse some of the syntactical patterns of Northern Sotho idioms.

For example, verbal idioms consisting of a verb-stem plus a syntactical complement as in :

Go hwa pelo 'to have a dead heart'
i.e. to lack sympathy,

with the verb-stem '*go hwa*' plus a noun '*pelo*', and nominal idioms consisting of a noun plus a qualificative construction as in the following example :

Mogwera wa bohloko 'a friend of pain'
i.e. a true friend.

Seeing that idioms in Northern Sotho have not been treated in full, the aim of this study is to analyse them from a linguistical point of view. An analysis of idioms will be undertaken, giving special attention to their syntactical patterns and their grammatical construction. The study will be incomplete if the semantic features of these idioms are not discussed.

The method of research followed will be outlined in the first chapter. Definitions of the idiom by some authors and scholars will be recorded and discussed in order to differentiate the idiom from the proverb. The study will further examine the treatment of the idiom in a few related African languages. To sum up this first chapter, the characteristics of idioms will also be given in contrast with those of proverbs.

1.2 METHOD OF RESEARCH

The information used in this study was gathered from different sources including books. More than a hundred idioms based on different origins were obtained from Rakoma's (1962) 'Marema-ka-dika' and 'Mahube' series. Another source that assisted in the provision of a good number of idioms is Nokaneng's (1983) 'Segageso'. Young and elderly respondents were also used as sources of information.

Articles by different scholars such as Ntsanwisi (1985) and books from other related African languages were also used as sources of information and comparison. All of these sources are listed in the bibliography of this study.

1.3 DEFINITION OF THE IDIOM

The term idiom which is known as '*seka*' in Northern Sotho is defined by Collin's Cobuild Student's Dictionary (1995 : 265) as

'... a group of words which have a different meaning when used together from the one they would have if you took the meaning of the words individually'. The meaning cannot be understood from the ordinary meanings of the words composing the phrase. The meaning of the idiom becomes clear if studied as a whole unit. Thus Palmer (1976 :41) states, '... Semantically, idioms are single units.'

For example :   The Northern Sotho idiom **go ala dinala** 'to spread out nails', has the idiomatic meaning **go tšwafa** i.e. to be lazy, if understood as a single unit. This idiomatic meaning of the idiom **go ala dinala**, bears no relation to the individual components **go ala** 'to spread out' and **dinala** 'nails'.

The Little Oxford Dictionary (1994 : 248) defines an idiom as '... a phrase established by usage and not immediately comprehensible from the words used; form of expression peculiar to a language.'

Many authors and scholars have attempted to define the idiom. The following are some of their definitions :

Ntsanwisi (1985 : 2) states that an idiom is :

> ... a fixed structural form or fixed phrasal pattern of words which go together, peculiar to the genius of a language as regards grammatical structure accepted by usage; and the meaning of which cannot be logically or literally ascertained from its component parts.

According to Palmer (1976 : 41) an idiom is : "... a sequence of words whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meaning of the words themselves.' Palmer (p :98) regards this arrangement of words as very special when he remarks that 'Idioms involve collocation of a special kind."

This collocation is indeed exceptional because the meaning must be attached to it as a whole even if the sequence is not logical.

Guma (1983 :66) defines idioms as : "... characteristic indigenous expressions whose meanings cannot be ordinarily deduced or inferred from a knowledge of the individual words that make them up."

Smith (1925 : 167), unlike other authors, says that '... Idiom is sometimes used to describe the form of speech peculiar to a people or nation'. His main aim of using this definition was to deviate from the various meanings already given by other authors because he believes that the meaning of the idiom can be gathered from its use.

Smith further states :

> We also use idiom for the meaning expressed by the French word 'idiotisme' that is to say, those forms of expression, of grammatical construction, or of phrasing, which are peculiar to a language, and proved by its usage, although the meanings they convey are often different from their grammatical or logical signification.

With the foregoing statement, Smith implies that many authors use the word 'idiom' instead of 'idiotisme' since they do not have an appropriate word in English.

According to Earle (1890 : 254) an idiom is :

> ... a form of speech which is not common to all languages, but peculiar to some one language. The idioms of a language are those forms of expression which cannot be translated word for word into other languages.

The Northern Sotho idiom '***Go ba mmeleng***' becomes 'to be in the body' when translated word for word. It may not be easy for a non-native speaker to attach the meaning' to be pregnant' to the example given. Rather than translating the idiom word for word, the idiom may be rendered by some equivalent idiomatic phrase understood by that speaker. For example, the following idioms :

> Southern Sotho : ***Ho boela moraho*** 'to go back'
> Tsonga : ***Ku biha miri*** 'to be ugly of body'
> Both mean 'to be pregnant'.

Earle's definition of an idiom is expressed by Smith (1925: 246) when he says '... many of the expressions which are common to a language, are of transatlantic origin to another language' because they are peculiar to that one language or nation. He refers to an example of the expression '***right away***' for 'immediately' which puzzled Dickens, an Englishman, when he

arrived at an American hotel and was asked whether he would have his dinner *'right away'*. He replied, after some thought that he would prefer to have it where he was.

From the definitions recorded in this chapter, and of those other authors not discussed in this study, it is noteworthy to observe that, to a very large extent, many of these definitions are almost similar in both phraseology and meaning. Generally, the meaning of the term idiom, is circulated around two notions, namely :

1.3.1 Its origin i.e. being peculiar to a language, a people , or a nation, and

1.3.2 Its meaning i.e. being unpredictable from the words composing it.

1.4 STUDIES ON THE IDIOM IN A FEW RELATED AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Like in Northern Sotho, idioms have been collected and treated in different ways in other related African languages. The study will briefly examine the following languages : Xhosa, Southern Sotho, Tswana, Tsonga and Zulu.

Mesatywa (1993) made a comprehensive collection of Xhosa idioms and proverbs. He did not consider their syntactical patterns, their style or their grammatical features, but arranged them according to their origins, giving the meanings and the examples of sentences to show the application of these idioms and proverbs.

The first chapter of his book **'Izaqi Namaqhalo EsiXhosa'** consists of idioms. For example :

> *Ukuphatha ingwe emsileni* 'to hold a tiger with its tail' i.e. to bring trouble unto oneself.

Proverbs are listed under the second chapter. For example :

> *Ubuso bendoda ziinkomo* 'A man's face is his cattle (because he will be able to feed his family on meat, milk, cheese and butter obtained from them.) i.e. A good man is a hard-working man.

Guma (1983 : 65-81) made a study of Southern Sotho idioms

and analysed them linguistically. He places much emphasis on the structural patterns of idioms. He gives examples of idioms with verb-stems in their primitive forms and in their derivative forms. For example :

Ho ja hloho 'to eat a head'
i.e. to think.

Ho jewa ke hloho 'to be eaten by a head'
i.e. to suffer from head-ache.

Guma does not analyse their structural patterns only, but he even traces their origin.   He has attempted to make a comparison of Southern Sotho idioms with those of other related African languages and further states that in some cases, 'identical words are used for the same idiom' (1983 :80). For example :

Southern Sotho : *Ho ba* **mathe le leleme**
Xhosa : *Ukuba* **ngumtya nethunga**

Both examples with a literal meaning 'to be saliva and tongue' and the figurative meaning 'to be great friends'.

Sandilands (1953 : 352) gives a list of Tswana idioms but shows uncertainty in them when he states :

A list of idioms is therefore bound to be of a subjective one, ... It may include phrases which some would not call idioms and leave out many which they would include. The classification of idioms is also arbitrary, but may be useful as far as it goes.

The foregoing statement by Sandilands is a reminder of what is mentioned by Earle (1890 : 254) when he says an idiom is ' ... a form of speech not common to all languages' and by Smith (1925 : 246) when he states that '... they are common expressions to a language or people which are of transatlantic origin to another language or people'.

Sandilands (1953 : 352) divides idioms into different categories but warns against using them until their meaning and usage have been fully elicited.   He does not analyse their grammatical features.

The following are some of the phrases he records as idioms :

1.4.1 Noun phrases and adjectival phrases

For example :

bo-nka-ipaya 'the I can place myself' i.e. the squatters (people who occupy land illegally.)

mabélé-a-kgomo 'teats of a cow' i.e. four strokes of lashes.

1.4.2 Adverbial phrases

For example :

le ka moso 'even tomorrow' i.e. to continue doing favours for someone.

tadi e amusa 'while the mouse is suckling (its young)' i.e. in broad daylight, in public.

Ntsanwisi (1985) has done commendable research on Tsonga idioms. He applies almost all the methods and aspects in his analysis of Tsonga idioms. He collected 1189 Tsonga idioms and not only arranged them alphabetically but even gave their literal and figurative meanings. He gives their different tenses, their origin, their syntactical patterns and their content. Among many researchers of South African languages, Ntsanwisi has succeeded in his attempt at analysing idioms linguistically.

Theunissen (1959) also published a collection of Zulu proverbs and idioms without making an attempt at arranging them syntactically. He lists them in alphabetical order.

Doke (1955) concentrates on the idiomatic usage of words within phrases more than the syntactical structures of Zulu idioms. The following are some of his examples :

The idiomatic use of nouns such as ***isifuba*** 'chest' as in :

Isifuba *senkosi* 'the chief's chest' i.e. the chief's confidant.

Akanaso ***isifuba*** 'he does not have a chest' i.e. he cannot keep a secret,

and the idiomatic use of relative stems as qualificatives such as *-bomvu* 'red' as in :

*Ngithanda inyama **ebomvu*** 'I like red meat' i.e. I like animal meat (flesh) and not fish or chicken.

1.5 IDIOMS AND PROVERBS

Idioms and proverbs are expressions belonging to a language or a society. A proverb is a short wise saying that has been in use for a long time. In spite of the fact that both are figurative forms of language, there are definite linguistic differences that can be used to differentiate them.

Guma (1983 : 65) defines a proverb as :

... a pithy sentence with a general bearing on life. It serves to express 'some homely truth' or moral lesson in such an appropriate manner as to make one feel that no better words could have been used to describe the particular situation.

Giving the characteristics of idioms against the foregoing definition by Guma, idioms are based on a predicate, which is built on a particular verb-stem and which may be found in association with a large number of idioms. Proverbs, on the other hand, are based on a noun as a subject or a subject concord. Proverbs are usually short sentences consisting of a subject and a predicate which may be positive or negative.

For example, the formation of different idioms using the Northern Sotho verb-stem '***go swara*** i.e. to hold :

Go swara tau ka mariri 'to hold a lion by the mane' i.e. to be brave.

Go swara motho matsogo 'to hold someone's hands' i.e. to impede someone's progress.

The following are some Southern Sotho proverbs recorded by Guma (1983 : 81) :

Positive form :   ***Tsietsi e a ruta*** 'A problem teaches' i.e. to learn a lesson or to become wiser because of the problems someone has experienced.

Negative form :   ***Moloi ha a mele boya*** 'A witch does not grow fur' i.e. An evildoer has no distinguishing features.

Unlike proverbs, idioms are not instructive in the sense that they do not teach any moral lesson, neither do they express any fundamental truth or wisdom with a general bearing on life. Guma (1983 : 65) says, 'Proverbs cover a wide field. They extend over all the areas of the community's activities and daily persuits'. This means that proverbs can be used at home, at traditional courts, weddings or at any traditional gathering.

For example, at traditional courts, the chief has a final word in almost everything. His judgement has to be respected even if the defendant feels dissatisfied because it is said :

Lentšu la kgoši le agelwa lešaka 'the chief's word is fenced around (like a kraal) i.e. the chief's word has to be respected.

When a married woman encounters problems in her marriage, the proverb usually used to encourage her to respect her husband and her in-laws and not to give up on her marriage is the following :

Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi 'A woman's grave is at her in-laws' i.e. A married woman is expected to tolerate her in-laws, she is expected to accept that she belongs to them and no longer to her family.

As against what has been mentioned in the foregoing paragraph, idioms are merely used for the enrichment of a language instead of using ordinary language such as in the following example :

Go tšwafa i.e. to be lazy, the figurative meaning
Go ala dinala 'to spread out nails' may be used.

It is indecent for people to mention human sexual parts by name in the presence of children or their peers. As a form of respect, idiomatic forms in their euphemistic form will be used. For example :

Go ntšha meetse 'to release water' instead of *Go rota* i.e. to urinate.

Sandilands (1953 : 356) gives many examples of such idioms in Tswana :

for defecation : *Go kgaola* 'to cut off' i.e. to relieve oneself.

for menstruation : *Go bona mosese* 'to see a dress (as to make sure that blood did not mess it up)' i.e. to menstruate.

Guma (1983 : 67) states that ' ... it is probably due to such idiomatic forms that some Southern Sotho speakers tend to be prudish, and water down proverbs with swear words in them'. Instead of :

Kgomo ha e nye bolokwe kaofela : A cow *does not stool* all the dung (from its bowels)'
i.e. One does not say everything at the same time,

the same proverb is used as :

Kgomo ha e ntshe bolokwe kaofela 'A cow *does not extract* all the dung (from its bowels)'
i.e. One does not say everything at the same time.

There are some Northern Sotho proverbs which contain taboo words and are still in use. For example :

Moroto wa tšhuana o rarela le serope 'an orphan's urine winds around the thigh'
i.e. A poor person is always befallen by misfortune.

Mogolo o rongwa a eme, a phutholla mogwete mapota
'An elderly person is sent while standing, so as to unfold or spread out a wrinkled anus'
i.e. Young ones respect elderly people, they only send them when an opportunity avails itself.

Idioms depict and describe the various actions, states and behaviour of people under various circumstances. This is expressed by Doke (1955 : 202) when he says an idiom '... reflects the genius of the psychological workings of the speakers of such a language'.

For example, the Northern Sotho idiom **go hlatswa dinoka** 'to wash the loins', is used to describe an act whereby a woman that gives birth to girls only is given some potions and medicines to purify her. It is believed that after purification, this woman will be able to give birth to boys.

Some Africans believe that boys become men after entering the circumcision school. The idiom used to explain this process is the following:

> **Go ya thabeng** 'to go to the mountain' i.e. to attend a circumcision school.

Idioms and proverbs may have structural differences but both are idiomatic expressions sometimes used to bring peace where it is needed. When people are fighting, to calm them down, the following idiom and proverb may be used :

> **Go bea marumo fase** 'to lay down the spears'
> i.e. to stop fighting, to lay down arms.

> **Bana ba tau ga re jane, re moloko mong** 'Children of a lion, we do not eat each other (because) we are a family' i.e. people do not have to fight each other because they are believed to be of the same origin.

Idioms and proverbs expose the wisdom people have and are mostly used by adults.

1.6 TYPES OF IDIOMS

Bushney (1986 : 23) subdivides idioms into verbal idioms and nominal idioms when she states, 'Idiome in Noord-Sotho kan onderverdeel word in werkwoordelike idiome en naamwoordelike idiome.'

1.6.1 Verbal Idioms

In contrast with proverbs which are usually sentences consisting of a subject and a verb, idioms are mainly based on verb-stems. These verb-stems may be followed by a noun, an adverb or even a pronoun as a complement. The meaning of the combination is generally figurative.

The difference between proverbs and verbal idioms is expressed by Bushney (1986 : 23) when she says :

> In teenstelling met spreekwoorde wat altyd 'n volledige sintaktiese struktuur het, bestaan werkwoordelike idiome slegs uit 'n werkwoordstuk. So 'n werkwoordstuk kan onderverdeel word in 'n werkwoord en 'n naamwoordstuk.

The following is an example of a verbal idiom :

Go bea pelo 'to place a heart'
i.e. to satisfy someone.

The constituent parts are :

Verb-stem plus noun
i.e. *go bea* plus *pelo*
'to place' plus 'a heart'

1.6.2 Nominal Idioms

Bushney (1986 : 31) remarks, 'Sintakties bestaan naamwoordelike idiome uit slegs 'n naamwoordstuk. So 'n naamwoordstuk bestaan dan uit 'n naamwoord gevolg deur 'n kwalifikatiewe bepaling.'

According to Bushney, a nominal idiom refers to a combination of words with a noun as a leading word followed by a noun or a pronoun as a qualificative construction. The whole combination must have a figurative meaning.

Bushney (1986 : 31) gives the following example of a nominal idiom:

Batho ba nama le madi
'People of meat (flesh) and blood'
i.e.   real people,

with the component parts **Batho** 'People' a noun, followed by **ba nama le madi** 'of meat (flesh) and blood' as a qualificative.

In this study, nominal idioms are going to be treated differently because some of these phrases lose their idiomatic significations when used without a verb-stem as a key-word. For example :

monna le mosadi 'a man and a woman', can be interpreted with idiomatic meaning when based on the copulative Verb-stem **go ba** 'to be' as in :

Go ba monna le mosadi 'to be husband and wife' i.e. to be a married couple.

1.7   SUMMARY

This study consists of five chapters. In the first chapter, various definitions of the idiom are given and compared. The method of research is also discussed briefly. Ntsanwisi's (1985) 'Tsonga Idioms' has been of great influence in the organisation and the structuring of this study.

The origin of idioms, particularly those based on proverbs, mythology, superstitions and on animals is discussed in the second chapter. The semantic and grammatical features of idioms are also analysed in this chapter.

The third chapter consists of the main facts of this study. Some syntactical patterns of Northern Sotho idioms are treated comprehensively in this chapter.   Idioms incorporating predicates followed by nouns, adverbs, qualificative pronouns and other forms of adjuncts are examined linguistically.

The subject-matter or content of idioms, and the aspects of life and experiences to which these idioms give expression, are analysed in chapter four.

In the fifth chapter, some of the aspects and structural

patterns discussed in the foregoing chapters are compared with idioms in other related African languages such as Southern Sotho, Tsonga and Tswana. This chapter constitutes the conclusion of the study.

CHAPTER 2

THE ORIGIN OF IDIOMS

2.   INTRODUCTION

Idioms are indigenous expressions used by people in their everyday life situations. Idioms were used by the ancestors who were non-literate, and were handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth.

Nchabeleng (1967 : 76) defines an idiom as follows :

> Seka ke polelo ye nngwe ye e bego e šomišwa ke borrakgolokhukhu ge go be go rerwa melato kgorong ya banna, menyanyeng, matšemeng le mekgotheng ya motse. Ke lehumo leo batala ba re tlogeletšego lona.

> An idiom is a certain expression which was used by the ancestors when cases were heard in traditional courts, at festivals, at work parties and in the streets of the village. It is the wealth bequeathed to us by the ancestors.

Idioms are the wisdom of many and the wit of none because their actual originations are not known. They may be products of well-known artists in the language family. Other people could have used these utterances or expressions repeatedly in their conversations because they express different phases and experiences of life. This creation of idioms is emphasized by Ntsanwisi (1985 : 14) when he states :

> Some people are more imaginative and creative than others, and the expressions which they use to explain certain experiences and phases of life, may be so appealing, so picturesque and vivid that they are at once incorporated into the idiom-lore of the language as a means of effective communication.

In every living language, new idioms are constantly created; some occur only once or twice and are forgotten; others survive for a long time. According to Hocket (1970 : 304), someone :

> .... may react to conventional circumstances with a bit of speech which is somewhat unconventional - once again because of context. Given any such novelty, either of expression, or of circumstances or of both, the event bestows

special meaning on the linguistic form which is used, and the latter becomes idiomatic.

2.1 SOME SOURCES OF IDIOMS

Idioms have originated from many different sources but on the whole, designating many aspects of African tribal life and experiences. As a source of comparison, some sources analysed by Ntsanwisi (1985 : 13-43) are discussed in this chapter.

2.1.1 Idioms based on proverbs

Idioms and proverbs are a product of non-literate people. As unwritten forms of the artistic possessions of the past, Ntsanwisi (1985:18) states that "... it becomes a problem to determine which of the two gave rise to the other." Considering some of these idioms, it may be reasonable to assume that proverbs were probably produced before idioms. Like in Tsonga (ntsanwisi 1985:19), many Northern Sotho idioms seem to have originated from proverbs by means of eliminating some words composing the proverb or by the abbreviation of the proverb. The following are examples of idioms which have originated in this way :

The idiom *Go ipolaya* 'to kill oneself' i.e. to bring trouble unto oneself, and the proverb;

Moipolai ga a llelwe, sello sa gagwe ke moropa, ge o lla re a bina 'One who kills himself cannot be cried for, his cry is a drum, when it beats we dance' i.e. He who rejects advice, deserves no sympathy.

The idiom *Go lewa ke mahlale* 'to be eaten by cunningness' i.e. to suffer as a result of one's deeds, may have been abbreviated from the proverb :

Mahlale a ja mong, maaka a ja mmoledi 'Cunningness eats the owner, lies eat the speaker' i.e. to suffer as a result of one's deeds.

2.1.2 Idioms based on mythology

According to the Little Oxford Dictionary (1994: 332) mythology may be defined as '... a scientific collection and a study of stories presented as historical, dealing with the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a

people, their gods, culture, heroes, religious beliefs etc.'
These stories are of unknown origin.

Okphewho (1983 : 69) states that myth is :

> ... not really a particular type of tale as against
> another; it is neither the spoken counterpart of an
> antecedent ritual, nor is it a tale determined
> exclusively by a binary scheme of abstract ideas or
> a sequential order of elements. It is simply that
> quality of fancy which informs the creative or
> configurative powers of the human mind in
> varying degrees of intensity.

Most African people believe in the spirits of their
ancestors or gods known as *badimo* in Northern Sotho.
It is believed that there is another world underground
where the dead continue to live a much more pleasant
endless life than they had in this world. Africans believe
that the spirits of the dead have power and great
influence over the living. They believe that the
ancestors, as the creators of life and death, can give and
take life from the living, as a result there are many ritual
practices performed to satisfy the spirits.

There are special idiomatic expressions used as a means
of communication with the gods when these offerings
are made to them. Many of these expressions
incorporate the word *badimo* 'gods'. For example :

> *Go phasa badimo* 'to make an offering to the gods'
> i.e. to placate the gods. The idiom is used when
> things do not go as one wishes and because of the
> belief that the gods are angry.

When a child is born, an expression normally used is :

> *Go fiwa ngwana* 'to be given a child' i.e. to bear a
> child.

The word *badimo* 'gods' is usually not used in this
expression, but people belonging to this language
family, know that this idiom is originally:

> *Go fiwa ngwana ke badimo* 'to be given a child by
> the gods' i.e. to bear a child.

African people have been influenced by Christianity and sometimes use the foregoing idiom as :

> ***Go fiwa ngwana ke Modimo*** 'to be given a child by God' i.e. to bear a child.

Africans never accepted the idea of death as an end to life. When someone dies, it is believed that he goes to live with the ancestors in the underworld. An expression usually used is :

> ***Go ya badimong*** 'to go to the gods' i.e. to die.

An African ascribes all his good fortune or luck to his gods, and he ascribes most of his misfortune to the displeasure of the gods whom he has offended in some way or the other. If one loses his wife, a child or a parent, the idiom often used is :

> ***Go lahlwa ke badimo*** 'to be abandoned by the gods' i.e. to suffer great misfortune or tragedy.

2.1.3 Idioms based on superstition

Superstition is defined in the Little Oxford Dictionary (1994 : 522) as '... a belief or action that is not based on reason or evidence.'

According to Jahoda (1969 : 2) '... what is religion to someone is superstition to the other.' Jahoda further remarks, 'The label of 'superstition' merely shows that the user wishes to characterize given beliefs or opinions as false'.

There are beliefs and customs from which many Northern Sotho idioms have originated. The people believe in witchcraft and also believe that some of the misfortune they suffer is caused by their enemies. Some types of medicines and herbs are used for protection against witches.

It is believed that witches should not visit a patient, because they may cause his or her condition to worsen. Hence the Northern Sotho idiom :

> *Go gata molwetši* 'to tread on a patient' i.e. to cause a patient's condition to deteriorate.

A stick will be put across the door of a hut in which the patient is sleeping as a means of communication to visitors. An idiom used to explain this action is :

> *Go bea lepheko* 'to place a barrier' i.e. to warn visitors not to enter where a patient or a newly-born baby is sleeping.

A man must not have sexual intercourse with a woman whose husband has recently died, as it is believed that such intercourse leads to serious illness ending in death. A man who suffers from such illness, is said 'to have poison from a black scorpion', a literal meaning for the Northern Sotho idiom :

> *Go ba le makgome* i.e. to suffer from a disease caused by having sexual intercourse with a widow whose husband has just died.

When someone dies after a short illness or as a result of an accident, such death is blamed on witches. A traditional diviner will be called to identify the witch and to medicate the corpse so that the witch responsible must suffer the consequences. This action is defined by the Northern Sotho expression :

> *Go bea letšwa* 'to put a thong in order to catch the witch (the main aim being to revenge)'

It is strongly believed among African people that a homestead can be protected against witches. Hence the idiom :

> *Go tiiša motse* 'to strengthen a homestead' i.e. to protect a homestead with medicines against witches.

Witches who come to excercise their powers on such a homestead will be captured and exposed. The idiom used in this case is :

Go swarega 'to be caught'
i.e. to be captured and exposed.

2.1.4 Idioms based on habits

Stiller (1977) cited in Verville (1988 : 3) refers to habit as '.... a learned way of behaving : a pattern of acting, thinking or feeling that has become routine.'

As in Tsonga (Ntsanwisi 1985:25), a large number of Northern Sotho idioms is based on the ways and habits of people. Many of these idioms arise from different experiences such as the relationship between a child and a parent, subject and chief, friends, marriage, courts, happiness and love relationships. The following are Northern Sotho idioms which have originated in this way :

Go hlaba mokgolokwane 'to make shouts of joy (by women)' i.e. to show happiness.

Go tagwa ke lethabo 'to be intoxicated by joy' i.e. to be extremely happy.

Go pidinya moropa 'to beat a drum' i.e. to be very happy.

All these three idioms are used to signify happiness.

There are other idioms which are used to express sadness as in the following examples :

Go apara boso mahlong 'to wear black in the eyes' i.e. to be in great sorrow.

Go fifala pelo 'to be dark-hearted' i.e. to be very sad.

According to African custom, young men and women go through many stages before they can be recognised by their parents, the community and the ancestors as married couples. The following idiom is used as the first stage towards marriage :

Go loša kgarebe 'to court a young woman or a virgin'
i.e. to try to win the love of a young woman.

Once the young man and a woman are in love, engagement as a legal relation will result from an

agreement between the young man and his family on the one side, and the young woman and her family on the other side.

The young man's family will hand over a beast to the young woman's family to ensure the young man's intentions of marrying the girl. Once the beast is accepted by the girl's family, the engaged couple become free to visit each other without fear. The Northern Sotho idiom used in this case is :

> *Go ageletša motšhidi* 'to fence in a wild-plum tree' i.e. to engage a woman.

When a man dies, his younger brother takes over the position of husband of the widow and father of her children. Hence the expression :

> *Go tsenela* ' to enter for ' i.e. a custom by which a man, after his elder brother's death, takes over the widow as his wife.

When a married woman dies, her kin is expected to provide the husband with the unmarried younger sister of the deceased as wife and mother of his children. The expression used in this case is :

> *Go ya seyantlo* 'to be taken by the brother-in-law as wife' i.e. a custom by which a woman, after her elder sister's death, becomes her brother-in-law's wife.

2.1.5 Idioms based on animals

Northern Sotho idioms are of different origins. Some originate from animals, both wild and domestic. African people were great hunters in the past and as a result many idioms describing different aspects of animal behaviour, have found their way into the idiom-lore of Northern Sotho. A few examples of idioms based on wild animals will follow :

> **Go tšewa ke phiri** 'to be taken away by a hyena' i.e. to die.

Hyenas feed on young animals and hunt mainly at night when they come to the villages to steal animals from the kraals. Because of this action, when someone dies, it is usually said, 'he has been taken away by a hyena,' the whole idea being to avoid telling children about death.

The wild-cat, *tšhipa* or *phaga* in Northern Sotho, is larger and stronger than the domestic cat. It also hunts at night, preying on small mammals, birds, frogs and fish and thus it is always fatter than the domestic cat. People believe that milk from this big and round animal is more fattening than milk from the domestic cat. When someone is fat, people believe that he sucks milk from a wild-cat. The idiom used in this case is :

> *Go anya tšhipa* 'to suck from a wild-cat'
> i.e. to be fat.

The following are examples of idioms based on domestic animals :

> *Go ba mpša le katse* 'to be like a dog and a cat (because dogs are often seen chasing cats)'
> i.e. to be bitter enemies.

> *Go opa kgomo lenaka* 'to hit a cow on the horn'
> i.e. to strike a nail on the head, to say or do something correctly.

When boys are alone in the veld herding cattle, they play different games. One of the games is referred to as *maleba* 'to aim' in which each throws a stone at a cow aiming at its horn. Hence the idiom *Go opa kgomo lenaka* 'to hit a cow on the horn' is used when someone says or does something correctly.

2.2 SEMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF IDIOMS

According to Leech (1974 : i) semantics is '... the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning, and since meaning is part of language, semantics is part of linguistics'.

In the definition of the idiom in the first chapter of this study, it has been stated that the meaning of an idiom cannot be deduced logically from the words composing the phrase. Palmer (1986) emphasises that '... the meaning of an idiom is

opaque' and therefore treats it as a single word.

2.2.1 Non-idiomatic and idiomatic use of language

Lexical items or phrases may be interpreted literally or in an ordinary way using the primary meaning of the words, and the interpretation be referred to as non-idiomatic. When some of these lexical items or phrases are used in a particular context, their meanings become figurative and their interpretation become idiomatic. The Little Oxford Dictionary (1994 : 248) defines the term idiomatic as a language '... full of idioms'.

Doke (1955 : 202) points out that the idiom '... is strongly reflected in what are called figures of speech; these may be defined as a deviation from the plain and ordinary use of words with a view to increasing or specializing the effect'.

Idiomatic language is therefore used as an indirect comment or reference on what is being done or performed by someone or what is happening to someone in a life situation.

When the meaning of the phrase is logically ascertained from the primary meaning of the individual words in that phrase, non-idiomatic use of language is implied. The meaning in this sense, becomes literal.

To form idiomatic expressions, Ntsanwisi (1985:6) states that lexical items "... undergo a change of meaning i.e. the literal meaning of a word is shifted to a contextual sense or figurative meaning." Guma (1983 : 68) on the other hand, remarks that the verb-stem "...may be purely literal and there may be a gradual shift of meaning from the literal to the figurative." In the example :

> *Go ješa* 'to cause to eat' the literal meaning may be shifted to its idiomatic meaning.
> i.e. to bewitch by putting potions into somebody's food.

To sum up, it may be concluded that the semantic interpretation of idiomatic (figurative) and non-idiomatic (literal) use of language brings about the difference between the two concepts.

A semantic classification of idioms will also be analysed in this chapter to further clarify the difference between idiomatic and non-idiomatic use of language.

2.2.2 Semantic classification of idioms

Idioms will subsequently be classified into three types or forms based on differences in their semantic features.

2.2.2.1. Idioms with opaque meaning

The word opaque is defined as '... not clear, not transparent' in the Little Oxford Dictionary (1994 : 349). In this study the term 'opaque' has been used to refer to those idioms or expressions whose meanings cannot be established from any of the words composing it. Two idioms will be used as an illustration :

Go welwa ke phoka 'to be fallen by dew'
i.e.   to be fortunate. Dew falls during the night when people are sleeping, and early in the morning when the day breaks, it disappears. It is believed that people who see dew or on whom it falls, are fortunate.

Go ruruga 'to swell'
i.e.   to be angry. When some people get angry, their lips become projected as if they are swollen.

2.2.2.2. Partial Idioms

Palmer (1986 : 81) refers to partial idioms as '... those idioms where one of the words has its usual meaning, the other has a meaning that is peculiar to the particular sequence'. The following is an example of a partial idiom :

Go ba bana ba setsiba 'to be children of a drawer (which is being associated with men because it is worn by men)'

i.e.   to be children of the same father (either with the same mother or with different mothers).

The first part of this idiom, which is *Go ba bana* ... 'to be children...' remains literal or non-idiomatic even in the idiomatic interpretation of the idiom which is '**to be children** of one father', whereas the second part of this idiom, *... ba setsiba* becomes idiomatically interpreted as *... ba monna* '... of one father'

2.2.2.3.   Idioms with transparent meaning

This is the type of idiom whose idiomatic meaning can be established from the constituent parts.   The following are examples of such idioms :

Go ba ngwana wa mme 'to be the child of a mother'
i.e.   a child who is his mother's favourite.

Go lala le tlala 'to sleep with hunger'
i.e.   to go to bed hungry.

The two examples given in this third type, are idiomatic combinations whose literal or non-idiomatic meanings are still maintained and clear.

2.3   GRAMMATICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF IDIOMS

Doke (1935 : 113) defines grammar as '... the systematic study of the constituent elements of a language, its sounds, formative words, constructions, etc.'

Huddleston (1989 : 34) says '... the grammar will consist of rules saying how sentences or phrases are made up of smaller units and ultimately of the minimal units of the level of structure'.

Palmer (1986 : 80) states that semantically '... idioms are single units, but they are not single grammatical units like words because only the verb which constitutes the first part of the idiom may be placed in the past tense.'   He gives an example:

-      **kick the bucket** which may not be

-        **Kick-the-bucketed** but **-kicked** the bucket.

Northern Sotho idiom *Go raga kgamelo* 'to kick the bucket' i.e. to die, which may be *-ragile* kgamelo '*-kicked* the bucket' i.e. -died, in the perfect tense.

Idioms are built from familiar material or parts of speech and are arranged into familiar patterns as literal expressions. In the example :

>   *Go ntšha meetse* 'to release water'
>   i.e. to urinate,

the grammatical arrangements are :

>   Verb   plus   noun
>   *Go ntšha* plus *meetse* 'to release water', which has the same syntactical constructions as in the following literal expression :

>   Verb plus   noun
>   *O ja*   plus *bogobe* 'He eats porridge'

Idioms are abnormal phrases because they transgress the laws of grammar or of logic. Ntsanwisi (1985 : 44) refers to idioms as '... phrases which are verbal anomalies and ungrammatical phrases made acceptable by usage.'

The following idiom is an example of cases in which idioms infringe upon the laws of logic :

>   *Go hlatswa dirope* 'to wash the thighs'
>   i.e.   to cohabit with a brother-in-law, the reason being to bear children for him since his wife is barren.

The verb-stem **-hlatswa** 'to wash' which refers to the washing of non-living things is used in the foregoing idiom instead of *-hlapiša* 'to cause to wash' which refers to the washing of living things.

2.3.1 The Infinitive prefix *go-* 'to-'

According to Lombard (1988 : 30) nouns are '... subdivided into different noun classes. A class prefix is a morpheme which characterises a particular group of nouns as belonging to a particular noun class.' Therefore, the Northern Sotho infinitive prefix *go-* 'to-'

belongs to noun class fifteen.

Nouns belonging to noun class fifteen are nouns and infinitive verbs at the same time. As infinitive verbs, they do not indicate tense, number, singular of plural and even person.

Northern Sotho idioms in their basic forms are based on infinitive verb-stems as key-words in their constructions. For example, the idiom :

Go ja mpša 'to eat a dog'
i.e. to be poor,
is based on the infinitive verb-stem *Go ja* ... 'to eat ...'

2.3.2 Syntactical restrictions of idioms

Idioms are restricted in many ways and these restrictions vary from one idiom to another. Some few examples of grammatical restrictions will be examined in this chapter.

2.3.2.1. Grammatical restrictions

Although the verb may be used in the perfect tense, nouns following them cannot always be pluralized or singularized as in the following illustrations :

The noun *dinao* 'feet' in the idiom *Go akga dinao* 'to throw feet' i.e. to run, cannot be singularized as *lenao* 'foot' as in *Go akga lenao* 'to throw a foot'.

The noun *ngwaga* 'year' in the idiom *Go loma ngwaga* 'to bite a year' i.e. to eat the first fruits, cannot be pluralized as *mengwaga* 'years' as in : *Go loma mengwaga* 'to bite years'.

Some idioms have passive verb-stems but others do not. For example the following idiomatic expression with the infinitive verb-stem in the passive form :

Go tšewa ke phiri 'to be taken away by a hyena'
i.e.   to die,

maintains its idiomatic meaning when used in a sentence as in :

Motho **o tšerwe** ke phiri 'someone has been taken away by a hyena'
i.e.   someone has died.

The same idiom becomes literal when the verb-stem is used in its active form as in the following example :

Phiri **e tšere** motho 'A hyena took away someone'

There are idioms with active verb-stems that cannot be passivized. An example of such idioms is :

Go fodiša maoto 'to cool down the legs'
i.e.   to have a rest after a long walk, which cannot be passivized as :

Go fodišwa ke maoto 'to be cooled down by the legs'

2.4   **SUMMARY**

Only few sources of idioms have been discussed in this study. There are many other idioms based on insects, the human body, birds, and those of recent origin such as the following:

Go ja tšhelete 'to eat money'
i.e.   to spend money carelessly .

Go lewa ke dipere 'to be eaten by horses'
i.e.   to lose money through gambling on horses.

From the definitions and examples given in connection with the semantic characteristics of idioms, it is clear that semantics deals with meaning. The meaning of a sentence or phrase depends in part on the meanings of the lexical items it

contains and in part on the way they are put together grammatically.

The syntactical patterns of idioms will be analysed in the third chapter. The structure followed in this chapter is based on that of Ntsanwisi (1985 : 44-56).

CHAPTER 3

SOME SYNTACTICAL PATTERNS OF NORTHERN SOTHO IDIOMS

3. **INTRODUCTION**

The term syntactical, which is derived from syntax, refers to the way lexical items are arranged to form phrases and sentences, including idioms.

Idioms are not sentences, but phrases or groups of words accepted through usage. These phrases are designed by language and are peculiar to the genius of that language.

Most of the idioms in Northern Sotho are based on the infinitive form of a particular verb-stem which is the key-word in the particular construction. These verb-stems may be used in isolation or they may be followed by some adjuncts or extensions which may be nouns, pronouns or adverbs to express special idiomatic significations.

In this chapter an analysis will be made of certain syntactical patterns designed by Northern Sotho as a language in the creation of idioms.

3.1 **IDIOMS INCORPORATING A PREDICATE AND AN OBJECT**

Doke (1957 : 54) defines a predicate as '... a word or group of words that signifies an action connected with a substantive, or the state in which a substantive is.' It is that part of a sentence or a phrase which says something about the subject.

An idiomatic pattern which incorporates a predicate followed by an object, is formed from a collocation of an infinitive verb-stem followed by a noun functioning as an object.

The following are examples of idioms in this pattern :

Go swara ngwana to hold a child'
i.e. to give birth to a baby.

Go ala leleme 'to spread out a tongue'
i.e.   to speak too much.

In the preceding examples, the infinitive verb-stems *Go swara* 'to hold' and *Go ala* 'to spread out' as predicates, are followed

by the nouns ***ngwana*** 'a child' and ***leleme*** 'a tongue' as objects.

An object is defined by Hlongwane (1976 : 6) as '... that part of a clause which undergoes action of the predicate.' It is a noun acted upon by a transitive verb or a preposition.

3.2 IDIOMS INCORPORATING A PREDICATE AND AN ADVERBIAL ADJUNCT

Since idioms are based on verb-stems, many adverbs are used in combination with these verb-stems.

There are patterns found in Northern Sotho in which a predicate is followed by an adverbial subordinate which may be locative, associative or instrumental.

Doke (1990 : 231) refers to an adverb as '... a word which describes a qualificative, predicate or other adverb with respect to manner, place or time.' It tells how, when or where something takes place. According to Ziervogel (1988 : 28) an adverbial adjunct '... serves to modify the predicate.'

Lyons (1969 : 344) defines an adjunct as '... a 'modifier' attached to a 'head', upon which it can be 'detached' without any syntactic change in the sentence or phrase.'

3.2.1 A Predicate and a Locative adjunct

An idiomatic pattern is formed by a collocation of an infinitive verb-stem followed by a locative adverb indicating place brought into relationship with the verb.

According to Louwrens (1991 : 112) a locative '... is used in grammar to refer to linguistic structures which are employed to denote the position or 'location' of an object or objects within the confines of a particular area.' For example :

> ***Go ya thabeng*** 'to go to the mountain'
> i.e. to attend a circumcision school.

> ***Go tsena ntlong*** 'to enter the house'
> i.e. to be confined to a house in order to give birth.

3.2.2 A Predicate and an Associative Adjunct

An infinitive verb-stem may be followed by an associative adverb which is defined as a '... conjunctive adverb' by Guma (1983 :73).

Lombard (1988 : 128) states that the associative adjunct or extension '... indicates that more than one subject become associated with each other by means of the process or action.' The conjunctive formative *le* 'with', which Lombard (1988 : 169) refers to as '... a connective particle' is used. For example :

> *Go bolela le kota* 'to speak with a piece of wood'
> i.e. to speak with an obstinate person.

> *Go ema le motho* 'to stand with a person'
> i.e. to support a person.

3.2.3 A Predicate and an Instrumental Adjunct

This pattern is formed by the arrangement of an infinitive verb-stem followed by an instrumental adverb which according to Ziervogel (1988 : 28) is formed when '... *ka* 'with' or 'by means of' is placed before a noun. Such a noun expresses an instrument.' An instumental adverb may be a word serving as a means by which something is done. Two idioms will be given as examples in this pattern :

> *Go dula ka diatla* 'to sit with the hands'
> i.e. to idle.

> *Go ema ka maoto* 'to stand with the legs'
> i.e. to be in a hurry.

A quantitative, defined by Cole (1992 : 154) is '... a word which signifies number', may be placed after an instrumental adjunct even though this happens in a few instances. For example :

> *Go kwa ka ditsebe tše pedi* 'to hear with *two ears*'
> i.e. to listen attentively.

> *Go lla ka ihlo le tee* 'to cry with *one eye*'

i.e.   to pretend to be crying

3.3   IDIOMS INCORPORATING A PREDICATE PLUS AN OBJECT PLUS AN ADVERBIAL ADJUNCT

This idiomatic pattern consists of three elements i.e. a predicate plus an object followed by an adverbial adjunct which may be instrumental or locative.

3.3.1   A predicate plus an object plus an instrumental adjunct

To form this pattern, a collocation of an infinitive verb-stem plus a noun which functions as an object and finally followed by an instrumental adjunct is found as in :

Go swara tau ka mariri 'to hold a lion by the mane'
i.e.   to be brave.

Go ngwaya lefase ka lerago 'to scratch the ground with a buttock'
i.e. to be at ease, to relax or to be comfortable.

In some few instances, the pattern may be the same as the foregoing except that the adverb is followed by a quantitative adjunct. For example :

Go lebelela motho ka leihlo le tee 'to look at someone with *one eye*'
i.e. to show disapproval on what someone is doing.

Go bintšha motho ka oto le tee 'to cause someone dance with *one leg*'
i.e. to cause someone have a hard time.

3.3.2   A predicate plus an object plus a locative adjunct

A combination of an infinitive verb-stem plus a noun functioning as an object and a locative adverb forms this pattern.   The following idioms will be used as an illustration :

Go lahlela tšhelete bodibeng 'to throw money into a pool of water'
i.e. to waste money on buying useless items or articles.

Go apara boso mahlong
'To wear black in the eyes'
i.e. to be in great sorrow.

3.4 IDIOMS INCORPORATING A PREDICATE AND TWO OBJECTS

This idiomatic pattern is formed by an arrangement of an infinitive verb-stem plus a noun functioning as an indirect object and the final element being another noun functioning as a direct object. For example :

Go amuša motho monwana
'to make someone suckle a finger'
i.e. to deceive a person.

Go apola nku mosela 'to uncover a sheep's tail'
i.e. to reveal someone's secret.

3.5 IDIOMS INCORPORATING A PREDICATE AND AN AGENTIVE ADJUNCT

Doke (1957 : 57) defines an agentive as '... a word having the grammatical function of indicating a person or thing that performs an action'.

When an infinitive verb-stem is built on a passive verb-stem, the element following this passive verb-stem is always an agentive which is a copulative based on a noun. For example the following idioms :

Go bethwa ke moya 'to be hit by the air'
i.e. to inhale fresh air, to take a walk.

Go hlohlonwa ke ditsebe :to be irritated by the ears'
i.e. to be curious.

The passive form of the verb-stem used in this pattern indicates that the subject is acted upon or affected by some external force or agency.

3.6 IDIOMS INCORPORATING A PREDICATE AND AN OBJECTIVAL CONCORD

In some few instances a noun as the substantival object is not expressed at all, but it is represented by its object concord. An object concord is a concordial morpheme which is derived

from the class prefix of the object noun. Ziervogel (1988 : 18) states that the object concord '... links the object to the verb-stem, or to put it in another way; the object is brought into concordial agreement with the verb-stem'.

The predicate is formed by an infinitive verb with the object concord appearing immediately after the infinitive prefix '*Go-*' followed by the verb-stem. The following are examples of idioms in this pattern :

> *Go di fagola* 'to castrate them'
> i.e. to be in charge, to cause suffering.

> *Go di gama o sa di hlapela* 'to milk them not having washed'
> i.e. to be in trouble.

3.7 IDIOMS INCORPORATING A COPULATIVE PREDICATE AND A SUBSTANTIVE

Doke (1957 : 299) refers to a copulative as '... a word which does the work of a predicate, and which is formed directly from some other part of speech by modification of prefix or concord or by means of some formative addition.'

An idiomatic structural pattern is formed when the infinitive of this copulative verb-stem is followed by a noun as a substantive which Doke (1957 : 54) defines as '... a word signifying anything concrete or abstract, or any concept.' For example:

> *Go ba morwalo* 'to be a load'
> i.e. to be a burden, to be troublesome.

> *Go ba sebodu* 'to be a stink'
> i.e. to be very lazy, to be idle.

The infinitive verb-stem may be followed by a compound noun as in the following examples :

> *Go ba mogologolo* 'to be an elder'
> i.e. to be an ancestor, to be dead.

> *Go ba monnamolomo* 'to be a man-mouth'
> i.e. to act or behave like a woman (being a man).

3.8 IDIOMS INCORPORATING A COPULATIVE PREDICATE AND AN ADVERBIAL ADJUNCT

A copulative verb-stem may be combined with an associative or a locative adverbial adjunct.

3.8.1 A copulative predicate plus an associative adjunct

This pattern is formed by a collocation of an infinitive copulative verb-stem followed by an associative adverb which is formed by an associative particle *'le-'* followed by a noun. For example :

> *Go ba le pitša* 'to possess a pot'
> i.e. to have many children.

> *Go ba le hlogo* 'to possess a head'
> i.e. to be intelligent.

In some few instances, the predicate may be followed by an associative adjunct as in the foregoing examples, but with a qualificative complement. For example the following idioms :

> *Go ba le hlogo ye thata* 'to possess a tough head'
> i.e. to be stupid, to be very slow in understanding, to be stubborn.

> *Go ba le mahlo a mantšhi* 'to possess many eyes'
> i.e. to have many lovers.

3.8.2 A copulative predicate plus a locative adjunct

According to Doke (1957 : 317) locatives '... denote the place at, on, in, into, to, from or out of which the action takes place.' The infinitive copulative verb-stem may enter into an idiomatic combination with a locative to form this pattern. The following idioms will be used as examples :

> *Go ba lapeng* 'to be at home'
> i.e. to be comfortable, to relax.

> *Go ba leseding* 'to be in the light'
> i.e. to be in the know, to be informed.

3.9 IDIOMS INCORPORATING A PREDICATE AND A PARTICIPIAL PREDICATE

Doke (1990 : 341) defines a participial predicate as a word '... indicating concurrent action, describing the situation under which the main action is carried out.' A participial predicate is added to an infinitive verb-stem to indicate different actions performed by the subject at the same time.   For example :

> *Go swara o tlogela* 'to hold and then leave'
> i.e. to be unsuccessful in what is attempted.

> *Go šila o hlatlegile* 'to grind while the pot is on the fire'
> i.e. to be in a hurry.

3.10 IDIOMS INCORPORATING A PREDICATE AND A QUALIFICATIVE PRONOUN

The object of the infinitive verb-stem in this case is not a noun, but it is a qualificative pronoun as in the following examples :

> *Go ja tša magoši* 'to eat the food of kings'
> i.e. to lead a princely life.

> *Go ntšhana sa inong* 'to take out of each other what is in the tooth'
> i.e. to be great friends.

Doke (1957 : 116) indicates that qualificative pronouns are '... qualificatives (i.e. adjectives, relatives or possessives) used substantivally as subject or object of a sentence, or undergoing inflexion (possessive, copulative, locative or other adverbial) as a substantive.'

Sometimes the posessive noun following a possessive particle may be a compound noun composed of at least two parts of speech as in :

> *Go ja sa* ***mpanapalega*** 'to eat until the small belly cracks'
> i.e.   to over-eat

> *Go nwa la* ***mabeleešompolaye*** 'to drink as if to say grain kill me' i.e. to be too drunk.

The compound nouns **'mpanapalega'** and **'mabeleešompolaye'** consist of the following parts of speech:

mpana plus *palega*
noun   plus verb.

mabele plus *ešo* plus *mpolaye*
noun   plus pronoun plus verb.

3.11   IDIOMS INCORPORATING A NEGATIVE PREDICATE

Certain idioms have been noted in Northern Sotho which habitually incorporate a negative infinitive verb-stem as a predicate which can be followed by an object. For example :

Go se bone *motho* 'not to see a person'
i.e. to despise someone.

Go se orišane *mollo* 'not to make one another warm at the fireside'
i.e. not to be on friendly terms.

A negative predicate indicates that an action signified by the verb-stem expresses denial or refusal.

Some of these verb-stems are sometimes followed by an adverbial adjunct as in :

Go se di gape **ka moka** 'not to drive them all'
i.e.   to be mad.

Go se iketle **moyeng** 'not to relax spiritually'
i.e. to experience problems.

3.12   IDIOMS INCORPORATING SINGLE VERB FORMS

Doke (1957 : 145) regards a verb as '... a word which signifies an action connected with a substantive or the state in which a substantive is, and is brought into concordial agreement therewith by the subjectival concord'.

In Northern Sotho, there are certain verb-stems which can be used in isolation i.e. without extensions, to form idioms. When these infinitive verb-stems are used according to context to express different figurative meanings, they become idioms.

This syntactical pattern can be formed when these infinitive verb-stems are used in their simple forms as primitive verb-stems or in some of their derivative forms.

3.12.1 Idioms with primitive verb-stems

The verb in its simple form usually has the terminative vowel - a which may be replaced by various suffixal elements. Cole (1992 : 188) says primitive verb-stems '... do not have simpler forms and do not show derivation from any other part of speech'.

These verb-stems are used without any adjuncts to form idioms as in the following examples :

Go khora 'to be full up'
i.e.   to be drunk.

Go phophotha 'to pat' or 'to plead'
i.e.   to ask for pardon.

3.12.2 Idioms with derivative Verb-stems

Cole (1992 : 188) states that derivative verb-stems are '... derived from primitive verb-stems or from some other parts of speech by suffix inflexion and they usually have more than two syllables.'

3.12.2.1. *Idioms with reduplicated verb-stems*

According to Lombard (1988 : 135) reduplicated verb-stems are stems '... of which a part of the verbal root or the stem is reduplicated' or doubled. An idiomatic pattern can be formed when a verb-stem is repeated as in :

Go ragaraga 'to kick repeatedly'
i.e. to try without giving in easily.

Go swaraswara 'to hold repeatedly'
i.e. to thrash.

3.12.2.2. *Idioms with reflexive verb-stems*

Doke (1957 : 244) states that reflexive verb-stems '... get their reflexive force from the reflexive morpheme 'i-' which is used immediately before the verb-stem. Although this verb-stem is akin in use to the object concord, it is not a concord, but an invariable prefix for all persons and classes.'

The reflexible prefix expresses the idea of English '-self', and indicates that the action is reflected or directed back upon the subject of the verb. For example :

Go ipolaya 'to kill oneself'
i.e.   to commit suicide, to bring trouble unto oneself.

Go ipelega 'to bear oneself'
i.e.   to give birth to a child resembling the parent in all respects.

3.12.2.3. *Idioms with applied verb-stems*

Cole (1992 : 199) indicates that the applied form of the verb '... signifies that the action is carried out on behalf of, to the detriment of or with respect to some thing or place.' The following are examples of idioms in this pattern.

Go emela 'to stand for'
i.e.   to replace, to defend, to represent.

Go tsenela 'to enter for'
i.e.   a custom by which a man, after his elder brother's death, takes over the widow as his wife.

3.12.2.4. *Idioms with causative verb-stems*

Causative verb-stems with the suffix '-*iša*', may also be used intransitively in certain circumstances with specialised idiomatic meanings.

Cole (1992 : 203) specifies that the causative form of the verb '... indicates that the subject thereof causes or brings about the action signified by the simple stem, and therefore has the significance of 'cause to do' or 'make to do'.

> *Go ješa* 'to cause to eat'
> i.e. to bewitch by putting potion or herbs into someone's food.

> *Go hlobodiša* 'to cause to undress'
> i.e. to belittle.

3.12.2.5. *Idioms with reciprocal verb-stems*

A reciprocal suffix '-*ana*' in the verb-stem indicates mutual actions by two or more people or subjects. A special figurative usage of some of these reciprocal verb-stems can result in this idiomatic pattern. Two idioms are given as examples :

> *Go huetšana* 'to blow to each other'
> i.e.   to influence one another.

> *Go thulana* 'to butt each other'
> i.e. to clash, to disagree.

3.12.2.6. *Idioms with potential verb-stems*

This form of a verb is what Doke (1957 : 154) and Cole (1992 : 196) refer to as '... the neuter'. It signifies an intransitive state or condition without indicating the agent determining that action. The suffix used for the formation of this verb-stem is '-*ega*'. For example :

> *Go nyalega* 'to be married'

i.e. to be happily married.

Go senyega 'to be spoilt'
i.e. to have a damaged character by being allowed to have whatever one wishes.

3.13 IDIOMS INCORPORATING AN ANTONYMN FOR THE COPULATIVE PREDICATE 'GO BA LE-'

This pattern is formed when the infinitive verb-stem ***Go hloka*** 'to be without' which is a word opposite to the copulative verb-stem **Go ba le-** 'to possess' is used in its place. This verb-stem is always followed by a noun to round it off as in :

Go hloka *tsebe* 'To be without an ear'
i.e.   to be naughty.

Go hloka *mmele* 'to be without a body'
i.e.   to be slim.

3.14 IDIOMS INCORPORATING NOUNS

Nouns have been used in idiomatic combinations with verb-stems to form certain idiomatic expressions. In Northern Sotho certain nouns are found which go together to form special idiomatic patterns. When these nouns are used with figurative significations, their meanings become different from their literal meanings. In most instances antonyms are used as in the following :

*Go se tsebe **pele le morago*** 'not to know the front and the back'
i.e.   to be confused.

*Go ya **godimo le fase*** 'to go up and down'
i.e. to be all over.

Bushney (1986 : 31) does not include infinitive verb-stems and refers to them as 'nominal idioms.'

Nokaneng (1983 : 190) has also made a collection of these idioms with the noun as a leading word.

Sometimes nouns have been combined because of their

relationship whereby the conjunctive particle *le* 'and' is used:

> Go ba **monwana le lenala** 'To be like a finger and a nail'
> i.e. to be great friends, to be seen together often.

> Go ba **ntepa le lešago** 'to be like a skirt and a buttock'
> i.e. to be great friends, to be seen together often.

3.15 IDIOMS INCORPORATING NOUNS AND POSSESSIVE NOUNS

This pattern has a combination of nouns as the pattern discussed in the foregoing paragraph. The only difference is that the second noun in this pattern functions as a possessive. For example :

> Go ba le pelo **ya leswika** 'to possess a heart of stone'
> i.e. to be unsympathetic, to be cruel.

> Go ba monna **wa banna** 'to be a man of men'
> i.e. to be very brave and resolute.

3.16 SUMMARY

The study of Northen Sotho idiomatic patterns shows that use is made of several syntactic units in the construction of idioms. Verb-stems in the infinitive mood enter into idiomatic combinations with nouns, pronouns, adverbial or even quantitative adjuncts to form idioms. The subject-matter of some of these idioms will be discussed in Chapter four which is also based on Ntsanwisi (1985: 57-61).

CHAPTER 4

THE SUBJECT - MATTER OF IDIOMS

4.   **INTRODUCTION**

Sources and syntactical patterns of some Northern Sotho idioms
have been examined in the foregoing chapters. It will be interesting
to analyse their content and those aspects of life with which human
beings are confronted in their everyday existence, together with
experiences to which these idioms give expression.

Northern Sotho idioms incorporate concrete thought in them
because they describe human behaviour. This idea is emphasized by
Smith Pearsal (1925 : 258) when he remarks :

> The subject-matter of idioms is human life in its simpler
> aspects; prudent and foolish conduct, success and failure, and
> above all human relations - the vivid attitudes and feelings of
> people intensely interested in each other and mutual dealings
> ...

The following are some of the aspects of life and experiences
described by idioms :

4.1   **IDIOMS ON RESPECT**

According to African custom, people are expected to respect
one another.   Ordinary or direct expressions which are
considered vulgar, offending or disrespectful, are replaced by
mild or indirect expressions to express respect. The following
are examples of some of these idioms :

Go gapa dipudi 'to drive the goats'
i.e.   to be drunk, to stagger or reel from side to side
when trying to stand or walk from being drunk.
(This movement looks like that of someone who
drives the goats, trying to gather them whenever
they scatter.)

Go ithoma 'to send oneself'
i.e.   to relieve oneself, to go to stool.

There are certain idioms which are used to express
menstruation, pregnancy and child birth. Most of these
idioms are based on euphemism which is defined by Hornby

(1974 : 296) as '... a substitution of an offending word by a milder one.' For example :

Go ya kgweding 'to go to the moon'
i.e. to menstruate (Women used to look at the position of the moon in order to calculate their menstrual cycles. When a woman menstruates, it is believed she goes to the moon to ask for help in the calculation of her cycle.)

Go robega leoto 'To have one's leg broken
i.e. to be pregnant (A pregnant woman is restricted from going wherever she wishes. She is expected to stay home and take care of herself as it is believed that she may be bewitched and lose the expected baby.)

Go tsena ntlong 'to enter the house for confinement'
i.e. to be confined to a house in order to give birth

4.2 IDIOMS ON DEATH

Africans avoid discussing death in the presence of children. Idioms which express death are also based on euphemism. Instead of using the word 'to die' in its literal meaning, figurative expressions such as the following are used :

Go robala 'to fall asleep'
i.e. To die (When someone dies, his eyes are closed. To avoid telling children about death, adults say that someone is asleep).

Go ya badimong 'to go to the ancestors'
i.e. to die (When someone dies, it is believed he goes to live with the ancestors).

4.3 IDIOMS ON CONTEMPT

Contempt as one of the aspects of life, is represented by the following figurative expressions as examples :

Go hlobodiša 'to cause to undress'
i.e. to belittle.

Go bapala ka motho 'to play with someone'
i.e to make fun of someone.

4.4   IDIOMS ON LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

Love and friendship are also expressed by means of a number of idioms. For example :

Go ntšhana sa inong 'to take out of each other what is in the tooth'
i.e.   to be great friends.

Go forana 'to deceive each other'
i.e.   to be in love.

4.5   IDIOMS ON MATRIMONY

There are certain idiomatic phrases which are used to describe marriage as in :

Go tšea 'to take (possession of a wife)'
i.e.   to marry.

Go ba monna le mosadi 'to be husband and wife'
i.e.   to be a married couple.

4.6   IDIOMS ON CRUELTY, DISLIKE AND HOSTILITY

Some people are fond of causing pain to others and delight in their suffering. Such actions are represented by the following figurative expressions :

Go ba le pelo ya leswika 'to possess a heart of stone'
i.e.   to be unsympathetic, to be cruel.

Go bintšha motho ka'oto le tee 'to cause someone to dance with one leg'
i.e.   to cause someone have a hard time.

Some idioms such as the following are used to express enmity and unfriendliness :

Go hloka botho 'to be without humanity'
i.e.   to be unkind, to be unfriendly.

Go se nwešane meetse 'not to cause each other to drink water'
i.e.   to be enemies.

4.7   IDIOMS ON BOASTFULNESS, DECEPTION AND PRETENTIOUSNESS

People have different characteristics. Some like to praise themselves. The following examples are idioms used to represent such behaviour :

Go ikgodiša 'to talk big of oneself'
i.e.   to exalt oneself, to be proud.

Go ipona 'to see oneself'
i.e.   to be proud.

There are certain people who often make others believe as true something that is false. Such behaviour is described by the following idioms :

Go amuša motho monwana 'to make someone suckle a finger'
i.e.   to deceive someone.

Go robatša mmutla 'to put a hare to sleep'
i.e. to deceive someone.

4.8   IDIOMS ON LAZINESS

Laziness has also given rise to the following idioms :

Go dula ka diatla 'to sit with the hands'
i.e.   to idle

Go ba sebodu 'to be a stink'
i.e.   to idle, to be very lazy.

4.9   IDIOMS ON DETERMINATION

Life to African people has always been a struggle against difficulties. When someone is faced with some problems, idioms expressing courage and determination are used to show one's unwillingness to give up and not to admit defeat:

Go ragaraga 'to kick repeatedly'
i.e.   to try without giving in easily.

Go wa o tsoga 'to fall and then rise'
i.e.   to be courageous in a struggle.

4.10 IDIOMS ON SATISFACTION AND SUCCESS

Satisfaction and success are also represented by a number of idioms :

Go bolawa ke lehlabula 'to be killed by summer'
i.e.   to have food in abundance, especially food from the fields after good rains.

Go nwa a mokgako 'to drink water from a new clay-pot'
i.e.   to be satisfied.

4.11 IDIOMS ON POVERTY

Africans have experienced different conditions in life. They have lived through years of success and satisfaction, and years of poverty from which many idiomatic expressions such as the following have resulted :

Go ja mpša 'to eat a dog' (An expression used to exaggerate one's poverty because people do not eat dogs)
i.e.   to be very poor.

Go lala le tlala 'to sleep with hunger'
i.e.   to go to bed hungry, to suffer because of hunger.

4.12 IDIOMS ON SLEEP

A number of idioms that describe sleep are found; as in the following :

Go ya le boroko 'to go along with sleep'
i.e.   to fall asleep.

Go robala bja matlogadibešong 'to sleep the sleep of leaving the fire-place'
i.e.   to slumber.

4.13 IDIOMS ON ANGER AND EXASPERATION

People in their relation to one another make each other happy and sometimes angry. Anger and exasperation are expressed by a number of idioms such as the following :

Go bela madi 'to have one's blood boiling
i.e.   to be very angry, to be exasperated.

Go ruruga 'to swell'
i.e.   to be angry. When some people get angry, their lips become projected as if they are swollen.

4.14   IDIOMS ON BRAVERY

Northern Sotho has idiomatic expressions which are used to signify boldness and fearlessness. For example :

Go swara tau ka mariri 'to hold a lion by the mane'
i.e.   to be brave.

Go ba monna wa banna 'to be a man of men'
i.e.   to be brave and resolute.

4.15   IDIOMS ON LEADERSHIP

Leadership is also expressed by means of a number of idioms such as the following :

Go di swara pele 'to hold them in front'
i.e.   to have control over others, to hold the reigns, to lead.

Go goga motho ka nko 'to pull someone by the nose'
i.e.   to have control over someone, to deprive someone of his freedom.

4.16   SUMMARY

An analysis of idioms in this chapter makes one to conclude that Northern Sotho idioms cover almost the entire field of human experience and many aspects of life. The main subject-matter of idioms as stated by Smith (1925 : 260) is '... human beings and their relations to one another.'

All the afflictions and the world around human-kind, his fears and sorrows; his joys and happiness; his success and failure; his attempts and activities; his likes and dislikes and many more, are expressed by different idioms in Northern Sotho.

Some structural patterns of Northern Sotho idioms discussed in the foregoing chapters will be compared with idioms in a

few related African languages such as Southern Sotho, Tsonga and Tswana in chapter five.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.

5.1 This study was not intended to be all-embracing, but to focus on some specific aspects relating to Northern Sotho idioms.

In the first chapter, definitions of the idiom by different authors and scholars were examined. Studies on the idiom in a few related African languages were also compared.

From this comparison, it is evident that African languages such as Northern Sotho, Tswana, Zulu, Xhosa and Tsonga use special terms to distinguish the idiom from the proverb, whereas Southern Sotho refers to both idioms and proverbs as **maele.** In Northern Sotho **dika** refers to idioms and **diema** to proverbs. In Tswana idioms are known as **diane** and proverbs as **maele**, in Zulu idioms are **iziga** and proverbs **izaga**, Xhosa uses **izaci** for idioms and **amaqhalo** for proverbs. In Tsonga idioms are **swivuriso** and proverbs are **swivulavulelo**.

Characteristics of idioms in contrast with those of proverbs were identified. To sum up these features, it may be stated that idioms are not instructive, though figurative; they do not express a truism in symbolic language, but signify abstract ideas in a realistic manner.

5.2 Idioms are native to a language. They are products of speakers of the language and are constantly created. Idioms are as old as people because some idioms such as the following are of ancient origin :

Go ba leobu 'to be a chameleon'
i.e. to walk very slowly, to be slow in whatever one is doing. This idiom originates from the fable narrated by Beier (1972 : 57) that 'many years ago, the chameleon was sent by the gods to tell the people they were to live forever. The chameleon moved very slowly changing its colour to match its surroundings and whatever it came across. Before it could reach the people, the gods sent the blue-headed tree-lizard, to tell the people they could not live forever.'

Go latswa ka lerumo 'to lick with a spear' (Spears have always been used as weapons in fights and war) i.e. to kill people with a spear.

Some idioms are of recent origin. For example :

Go tia motato 'to beat a telephone' i.e. to speak to someone by telephone.

5.3 In chapter three attention was drawn to some of the syntactical patterns of Northern Sotho idioms. It was noted in this chapter that Northern Sotho idioms are based on infinitive verb-stems used either in their primitive or derivative forms as key-words. Nouns, pronouns, adverbs and adjectives are only incorporated as qualificatives. Some of the patterns treated in this chapter may be compared with idiomatic patterns in Southern Sotho, Tswana and Tsonga.

The following are the similarities and differences identified in this comparison :

5.3.1 *Identical words used for the same idiom*

There are some idioms in Northern Sotho, Tswana and Tsonga which use identical words and have the same idiomatic meaning. For example :

Northern Sotho : *Go dula ka matsogo*
Tswana   : *Go nna ka mabogo*
Tsonga   : *Ku tshama hi mavoko*

In all three languages, the idiom means 'to sit with one's hands', meaning **to idle**.

The idiomatic expression in the three languages has the following syntactical pattern, namely, a predicate followed by an instrumental adverb.

5.3.2 *Different words used for the same idiom*

Northern Sotho, Tswana and Southern Sotho may incorporate different words for the same idiom as in :

Northern Sotho : *Go ruta tšhwene manamelo*
                'to teach a monkey to climb'

Tswana : ***Go ruta tshwene mapalamo***
'to teach a monkey to climb'

Southern Sotho : ***Ho ruta mpshe lebelo***
'to teach an ostrich to run with speed'

The three idioms with the follwoing structural pattern, a predicate followed by two nouns as objects, have the same figurative meaning which is, to teach someone what he already knows.

The idiomatic meaning is the same even if the two objects ***mpshe*** 'an ostrich' and **lebelo** 'to run with speed' in Southern Sotho differ from **tšhwene** 'a monkey,' **manamelo** and **mapalamo** 'to climb' in Northern Sotho and Tswana respectively.

5.3.3 *Identical words used for different idioms*

Certain idioms are found in Northern Sotho, Tswana and Tsonga which use identical words and have different idiomatic meanings. For example :

Northern Sotho : ***'Go hlapa*** 'to wash or bathe'
i.e to menstuate.

One of the Tswana idioms recorded by Sandilands (1953: 356) is :

Go tlhapa 'to wash or bathe'
i.e. to pass water.

The same idiom in Tsonga incorporates an object as in the following example :

Ku hlamba n'hweti 'to wash the moon'
i.e. to menstruate.

5.4 The subject-matter of idioms discussed in chapter four emphasises what has been mentioned in chapter one, namely, that idioms are mainly concerned with actions, states and behaviour of people under various circumstances.

5.5 Idioms are mostly used by adults, but children may also be motivated by parents and even teachers to use them not only in writing but even orally.

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