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## Neither Sepedi nor Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa is onomastically correct: a colonial imposition

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**Abstract:** The primary aim of the article is to assess the appropriateness of the names Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa, determining which should be officially used based on onomastic principles. Decoloniality and critical discourse analysis theories were used to inform and shape the argument. Employing a mixed-methods research approach, the article utilised survey questionnaires, face-to-face interviews and content analysis for data collection. Quota sampling was applied, selecting 267 participants from South African universities and relevant language authorities. The findings reveal linguistic and historical connections between Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa names and colonialism and the apartheid regime. It was further established that these names retain colonial vestiges, associated with a period of oppression that undermines authentic naming practices of African languages. The article concluded that neither Sepedi nor Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa accurately represent the official standard language, as their naming does not reflect indigenous linguistic traditions, being influenced by colonial power dynamics and other colonial forces.

### Introduction

According to the minutes of the Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee (2011; 2016; 2017; 2020), there is ample evidence that several submissions were done to the committee to look into the matter of the inclusion of the Sepedi name in the South African Constitution. The main argument at stake was that Sepedi must be substituted with the Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa. This contention is motivated by the view that Sepedi is being considered as a dialect that is associated with the Sekhukhune ethnic group, whereas Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa is perceived as an umbrella and inclusive name that accommodates 27 dialects such as Sepedi, Setau, Seroka, Sekone, Semphahlele, Setšhwene, Semathabatha, Sematlala, Sedikgale, Semothiba, Senkwana, Semolepo, Semamabolo, Setlokwa, Sebirwa, Sekwena, Semoletši, Sehananwa, Khelobedu, Sephalaborwa, Senareng, Semaake, Semametša, Setlhabine, Sepulana, Sepai and Sekutswe.

In light of this, scholars such as Mojela (1997; 1999; 2007), Molepo (2014), Kretzer (2016), Rakgogo (2016; 2019), Rakgogo and Van Huyssteen (2018; 2019) and Rakgogo and Zungu (2021; 2022a; 2022b) critique the replacement process of the Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa name with the Sepedi name in the final version of the South African Constitution (1996). They argue that this change was not adequately consultative, lacking transparency in engaging with the native speakers of the language undergoing onomastic scrutiny. Given these factors, I note that there was a lack of understanding regarding the reasons behind the language name change during the finalisation of the 1996 Constitution.

There was also an ad hoc committee instituted by the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) to conduct research to settle the onomastic dilemma of Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa as official names in 2011. The survey results showed that 64% of the respondents opted for Sesotho sa Leboa, 34% of them opted for Sepedi, while 5% of them were uncertain. This was after public hearings were held with the relevant speech communities to settle the onomastic dilemma of Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as official languages names that are constantly used to refer to one and the same language.

Similarly, Molepo (2014) revealed that many people prefer the name Sepedi to be used to denote the language under research. It was also revealed that when the language was named, proper

procedure was not followed. In a 2016 study titled *Sepedi or Sesotho sa Leboa: A Sociolinguistic Perspective of First Language Speakers from Selected South African Universities*, Rakgogo found that most participants, including students and lecturers who identified as first language speakers, preferred the name 'Sesotho sa Leboa' over 'Sepedi'. This preference stemmed from the perception that the name 'Sesotho sa Leboa' is more inclusive and accommodating, while the 'Sepedi' one is seen as representing primarily the Sekhukhune ethnic group. Specifically, 57% of these participants felt that 'Sesotho sa Leboa' better encompassed the broader community of speakers.

For this reason, Rakgogo (2019: 285), in a study examining the naming principles for official languages, particularly the case of the Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa/Northern Sotho language names, makes the following recommendations regarding official language naming conventions:

- A language should be named by its L1 speakers;
- The proposed and suggested name should be inclusive, not exclusive;
- The suggested name should be approved by L1 speakers after thoroughly consultative and transparent public hearings;
- The name of the language should be free from confusion; and
- The name of the language should be free from influence and the power of politics.

A critical analysis of the onomastic principles of naming an official language suggest that the two language names under attention (Sepedi or Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa) seem to be onomastically obscure and questionable. This was after Rakgogo (2019) had a closer look at the principles in comparison with the language names. In this study, a significant majority of the participants articulated that the language under investigation should be renamed with a new neutral name, which is also more inclusive. This was after the participants strongly agreed that the onomastic controversy under study may take time to come to an end, especially due to the influence of politics and ethnic pride.

### **Research problem**

The central focus of this article stems from the persistent onomastic dilemma regarding the inclusion of either Sepedi or Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa in Section 6(1) of South African Constitution (1996). The primary research focus revolves around the co-existence and utilisation of these two distinct language names, both competing for recognition as the rightful designation. Molepo (2014) underscores this issue, highlighting the lack of thorough procedural adherence during the naming process of the language in question. This problem further underscores the influence of political power and dynamics on language designation.

The aims and objectives of the article are to:

- explain the qualitative variables linked to the dismissal of Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as official language names;
- ascertain the onomastic distinctiveness, opacity and questionability inherent in both Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa; and
- offer a historiographic analysis of the interplay between the language names Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa and their historical connection to political influence and power during colonialism.

### **Theoretical framework**

For the purpose of this article, decoloniality and critical discourse analysis (CDA) theories were used to inform, shape and guide the argument.

### **Decoloniality**

Decoloniality is defined by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) as an epistemological and political movement that advances decoloniality as a necessary liberatory language of the future for Africa. Decoloniality speaks to the deepening and widening of decolonisation movements in those spaces that experienced the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism and underdevelopment.

The significance of decoloniality as a theory in the current article lies in its focus on promoting equal recognition and democratic inclusion of diverse epistemologies worldwide. In a practical sense, this

theory underscores the necessity to reassess the colonial practice of naming, which can undermine the principles of onomastics when naming languages and other geographical entities.

The perspective on the relevance of decoloniality theory is corroborated by Madlome (2022), who highlights its role in addressing inequalities stemming from historical injustices such as the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism and the marginalisation of African languages. It is further argued that this theory primarily aims at liberating various aspects, including the psyche, language and culture. Consequently, the topic under examination in this article cannot be examined without considering decoloniality theory.

In the context of this article, it is conceivable to argue that the naming of the language under scrutiny was essentially imposed by colonial powers. Consequently, I maintain that the matter of naming cannot be divorced from the impact exerted by the collaboration between missionaries, the colonial government and their informants. Therefore, decoloniality is regarded as one of the pertinent theories applicable to any discourse addressing linguistic and naming injustices as inherent components of colonialism.

### **Critical discourse analysis (CDA)**

According to Yule (2010), the word *discourse* is usually defined as language beyond the sentence and so the analysis of discourse is typically concerned with the study of language in texts and conversations. Van Dijk (1995; as cited by Rakgogo and Zungu 2021) postulates that critical discourse analysis is all about the expression of social power, position, status, dominance, culture, politics and race. Similarly, Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000; in Popela 2021) add that critical discourse analysis indicates that discourse is a non-transparent societal power which consists of social aspects and conditions. They further indicate that the purpose of CDA is to bring the opaque power dynamics of society into the open. Emphasising the issue of non-transparent societal power object, the minutes of the Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee (2011) confirms that the perspective that nobody knew what caused the change from Sesotho sa Leboa in the Interim Constitution to Sepedi in the Final Constitution, primarily because the Northern Sotho language speakers were not consulted.

Similarly, Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) add that CDA as a theory reveals that discourse is a non-transparent societal power object composed of social characteristics and conditions. They say that the goal of CDA is to expose society's opaque power dynamics. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) provides that critical discourse analysis constitutes the social reality and is made up of other social practices, preserving the duality of discursive and non-discursive practices.

Rakgogo and Zungu (2021) argue that in onomastics, critics may contend that most names are bestowed by those in positions of authority, and the chosen names often mirror the perspectives of those wielding power. Building on this premise, Van Dijk (1995) asserts that discourse analysis is inseparable from the power dynamics inherent in any society. Makoni et al. (2005) further note that, in certain instances, the names attributed to African languages and speech forms were introduced by Europeans. Mandende (2009) explains that the history of the African continent is marked by colonisation; upon the Europeans' arrival, they imported their cultural values and aimed to compel the indigenous people to forsake their cultural systems in favour of those imposed by their new rulers, against the wishes of the indigenous people.

In the context of this article, CDA is construed as a qualitative analytical approach that critically delineates, interprets and explains how discourses construct, perpetuate and legitimise social inequalities. Its relevance in this article lies in its ability to explore the intersection between language, power and national discourse regarding the sociolinguistic and onomastic controversy arising from the simultaneous use of Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa language names to denote the same language. The scholars cited above affirm that CDA, as a theoretical framework, is inherently intertwined with societal power dynamics and cannot be divorced from such considerations. Therefore, I contend that this theory will effectively shape and guide the argument, offering a framework to reposition and reaffirm the significance of naming in African societies.

Furthermore, I show that the intersection between CDA and naming injustices imposed on African languages lies in the examination of power dynamics, ideologies and sociopolitical structures embedded in language use and naming practices. Therefore, CDA provides a framework for

analysing how language is used to perpetuate or challenge power relations, social hierarchies and dominant ideologies.

In the context of naming injustices imposed on African languages, CDA can help uncover how colonial powers and their agents manipulated language to assert dominance, erase indigenous identities and marginalise local cultures. It further analyses how naming practices were used as a tool of colonial control, often imposing European names and erasing indigenous ones. Moreover, CDA can reveal how these naming practices continue to influence perceptions, representations and sociopolitical realities in postcolonial African societies.

By employing CDA, I can deconstruct the discourses surrounding language naming, examining the underlying power structures, historical contexts and ideological biases that shape them. This approach allows for a critical examination of the linguistic and cultural implications of naming injustices, highlighting their role in perpetuating colonial legacies and advocating for linguistic justice and decolonisation efforts.

In essence, the interconnectedness between CDA and naming injustices imposed on African languages provides a means to understand the complex interplay between language, power and identity in the context of colonial and postcolonial dynamics, ultimately contributing to the pursuit of social justice and linguistic equality.

### **Literature review**

The primary focus of this article is to clarify the qualitative factors associated with my rejection of Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as official language names. Concurrently, the article aims to explore the onomastic distinctiveness, opacity and questionability inherent in both names Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa. An additional objective is to provide a historiographic analysis, examining the historical relationship between the language names Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa and their connection to political influence and power during the colonial era. In this context, I will delve into the influence of missionaries on these names under onomastic scrutiny. The literature will also critically assess the distinction between Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as separate names for the same language. Finally, the literature review will encompass linguistic and historical considerations related to both names.

### ***The role of missionaries on language standardisation of South (African) languages***

Rakgogo (2016) mentions that many scholars point to the major problems that the missionaries created regarding Bantu languages. My submission is confirmed by Webb (2010; as cited by Rakgogo and Zungu 2022a) when postulating that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 'standardisation' of Bantu languages in South Africa was handled by missionaries: French missionaries in the case of the Sesotho cluster (from 1833); German missionaries for Sepedi and Tshivenda; and Swiss for Xitsonga (from 1883). In addition, Rammala (2002) believes that the role of missionaries regarding the Sotho languages cannot be ignored.

In terms of this article, I argue that while missionaries played a pivotal role in introducing writing systems and formal education in South African languages, their standardisation efforts with Bantu languages have also contributed to linguistic inequalities, a legacy of linguistic hegemony, cultural assimilation, influences on naming and challenges in language revitalisation. Recognising and addressing these historical legacies is crucial for promoting linguistic diversity, cultural heritage and social justice in contemporary South Africa.

It is for this reason that the current article aims to assess the appropriateness of the names Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa, determining which should be officially used based on onomastic principles to be observed when naming an official language. It can also be observed that there is a gap between the historical injustices and the scope of the current article.

### ***Historical background of the Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa names***

According to Mönig (1967), the term 'Pedi' is used to describe only the people and tribal groups directly descendant from the original Pedi tribe which settled in Sekhukhuneland and eventually became the paramount tribe of that region; they are the only people who call themselves primarily

and solely Pedi. The Pedi area, or heartland, is known as Sekhukhuneland, and is situated between the Olifants and Steelpoort Rivers, which is also known as the Lepelle and the Tubatse, in northern South Africa. This area is named after Chief Sekhukhune I, the son of Sekwati. He adds that *Mopedi* is a Pedi person and *Bapedi* the Pedi people, also *Sepedi* is the Pedi language and *Bopedi* the Pedi lands. *Bapedi ba dula Bopedi ba bolela Sepedi* (the Pedi people live in the Pedi lands where they speak the Pedi language) (Mönnig 1967: viii).

The default position of this submission is that the language name Sepedi is only relevant to those speakers who are originally from what is now the Sekhukhune District Municipality. However, this is a contradiction of Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa (1996) since it declares Sepedi as one of the official languages. In terms of this article, it may be interpreted that the following ethnic tribes: Kopa, Setebele-Sotho, Molepo, Mamabolo, Mothiba, Mothapo, Makgoba, Kone, Tau, Roka, Molelane, Hananwa, Tlokwa, Matlala, Moletši, Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Kgaga, Tswapo, Pai, Pulana and Kutswe, are linguistically classified as the dialects of Sepedi.

The work of Mönnig (1967), alongside Section 6(1) of the Constitution, sparks a debate concerning the relationship between language, culture, identity, and ethnicity. The tribes in question are seen as functioning under the Bapedi kingship and its language Sepedi. However, Mönnig (1967) contends that Sepedi is specifically the language of the Bapedi people residing in Ga-Sekhukhune. It is against this background that Rakgogo and van Huyssteen (2018: 86) state that

[t]he majority of scholars expressed that Sepedi is a dialect associated with the Sekhukhune ethnic group, emphasising that Sepedi is spoken by Bapedi (Sepedi speakers) in Bopedi (Sekhukhune area). The Sepedi first language speakers, as it surfaced in the interview responses of lecturers, tended to be more exclusive since they saw their language as the officially elevated, appropriate one (which it now is), excluding the other dialects.

Considering that Sepedi is listed as one of South Africa's official languages according to Section 6(1) of the Constitution, an argument could be made that this designation potentially infringes upon the linguistic rights of ethnic groups and language varieties classified as dialects of Sepedi. Mönnig (1967) emphasises that Bapedi are individuals belonging to the Sekhukhune ethnic group. This article contends that the constitutional mandate does not align with the socio-linguistic realities of the South African context, as far as politics of languages and dialects is concerned. In terms of the Constitution, the expectation is that the afore-mentioned tribes should identify themselves as Bapedi while Mönnig argues that one cannot be Mopedi without belonging to the Sekhukhune ethnic group. Consequently, it could be argued that there is a disconnection between Sepedi as the designated official language and the group identity of those expected to identify with the Sepedi name.

### ***The translation of the Bible and other religious texts into the Sepedi dialect***

Ditsele (2014) articulates that the colonial British government supported the missionaries' efforts to teach black people in their first languages, an activity that started off with the teaching of the Bible and that was later extended to include formal education. Heugh (2015) adds that missionary orthographies and the translation of biblical and educational texts contributed to a partnership of convenience between the missionaries and colonial governments. Rakgogo and Zungu (2022b) aver that these missionaries developed orthographic systems (based on the Roman script of 26 letters and introducing diacritics), wrote grammatical rules, compiled dictionaries, translated the Bible and other religious texts into these languages and taught these languages in the schools they established (Webb 2010).

Rakgogo and Zungu (2022a) state that Sepedi, among the other 26 dialects of the same language was the first dialect that

- the German missionaries learned to speak and write;
- was codified; and
- had translated Bible and other religious texts.

Drawing from the preceding discussion, the promotion of Sepedi to the status of an official standard language appears to have been influenced by historical factors driven by missionaries acting as colonial

agents. In line with the theoretical framework employed in this article, decoloniality was identified as one of the key theories informing and shaping the argument. This underscores the significance of decolonial perspectives in analysing and understanding the complexities surrounding language standardisation and its implications for identity and power dynamics in postcolonial contexts. Thus, the name 'Sepedi' becomes onomastically incorrect to serve as the name of the standard language simply because it tends to exclude those who do not originate from the Sekhukhune ethnic group.

Focusing on the Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa language name, Mokgokong (1966) mentions that the Northern Sotho-speaking tribes lived in several districts of the Northern and North-eastern Transvaal (old name of a province before 1994), such as Lydenberg, Pilgrim's Rest, Middleburg, Letaba and Leydsdorp. The most important Northern Sotho groups are those formed by the Pedi (Bapedi), Tau (Batau), Roka (Baroka) and Kone (Bakone), who are concentrated in Sekhukhuneland and adjoining areas. He further explains that Sesotho sa Leboa is a term which is used to refer collectively to several dialects which are concentrated in Limpopo, Gauteng and Mpumalanga provinces. This is confirmed by Da Costa et al. (2014) that the term is also commonly used today to refer to what is known as the 'official' language, and which is primarily based on the Sepedi variety of the Sekhukhune District Municipality.

### ***The Bantu Authorities Act of 1951***

When pondering the contributing factors in the current onomastic controversy surrounding Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa language names, Rakgogo (2019) avers that it is essential to explore the implementation of the Bantu Authorities Act that was officially passed in 1951 and its implications for the topic under debate. According to *South African History Online*, Limpopo just like other provinces in apartheid South Africa, was divided into three homelands, viz. Venda (independent), Lebowa (non-independent) and Gazankulu (non-independent). Rammala (2002) mentions that each of these homelands had its own language even though they all used English and Afrikaans as official languages. The languages were Tshivenda for the Venda homeland, Xitsonga for Gazankulu, and Northern Sotho for the Lebowa homeland.

In the parameters of this article, it can be noted from this Act that the name of the language designated to the speakers in Lebowa was referred to as Northern Sotho, literally translated as Sesotho sa Leboa, not as Sepedi. Therefore, critics may support that there is a noticeable relationship between the Bantu Authorities Act's wording with *lebowa* which means 'north' as the name designated to one of the homelands, and Northern Sotho as the name of the language.

Rakgogo (2019) reveals that the majority of the participants in his onomastics study strictly considered Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as a label that was created by the previous regime to suit the administrative purposes of that time. The participants separated themselves from language names such as Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho and Western Sotho as they held the view that these names have strong ties with apartheid eras in South Africa.

Still on the colonial influence, it is contended that there is an interrelatedness between the two language names (Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa) under attention and the influence of colonialism. It is for this reason that Mojela (2008) criticised that the development of the Northern Sotho orthography and the origin of its standard form were influenced by the work of the German missionaries in Sekhukhuneland. He further submits that the Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) dialects that the German missionaries first learned to speak and write were Sekopa and Sepedi. In addition, he laments that the missionaries promoted the dialects in the areas where they resided and operated.

Mojela (2008) argues that the Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) orthography by the German missionaries was first performed in Sepedi, which conferred Sepedi a superior status, thereby side-lining and stigmatising other Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) dialects that did not have these missionary orthographies. Msimang (1992; in Heugh 2015) avers that 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries did not recognise linguistic proximities of communities. A third view is that the missionaries' own languages influenced how they represented different vowels found in African languages. Cluver (1992) confirms that missionaries simply transcribed, the best they could, the language/s of the communities with which they were in closest proximity.

Webb (2010; in Rakgogo 2019) argues that the Bantu languages (Nguni, Sotho, Tsonga and Venda) have also been used as political instruments in South Africa – firstly by the colonial powers, leading to the inferiorisation of the indigenous people of South Africa, and then through the work of the missionaries, who constructed different languages from the existing dialect continua in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and finally, by politicians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to strengthen the separateness between these communities as part of the policy of apartheid. Scholars such as Mashige (2004), Mandende (2009) and Manatsha (2014) lament that colonialism played a major role in ‘erasing’ the identities of the conquered and colonised communities in many ways.

In the Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee in 2011, Mojalefa contended that in 1969, there was a study of ‘Bantu’ languages initiated by the apartheid regime, where Van Wyk divided the languages into Nguni and Sotho groups, with Sotho then being subdivided further into ‘Southern Sotho/Sesotho’, ‘Western Sotho/Setswana’ and ‘Northern Sotho/Sepedi’. He further supports that those groupings were not widely accepted by those they were meant to classify, as they were perceived as an imposition from the apartheid regime. According to this view, the concepts of Northern, Southern and Western Sotho did not formally exist before 1969. Mesthrie (2002) and Snail (2011) argue that language names such as Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa), Southern Sotho (Sesotho) and Western Sotho (Setswana) were instructive and were demonstrably created by the apartheid regime to suit administrative purposes. Thus, the use of the Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as an official standard name is not a suitable onomastic descriptor.

Based on the literature reviewed in this article, it is contended that the designation ‘Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa’ is a colonial construct. In the framework employed here, it is argued that this term is inadequate to serve as the name for the official standard language. Both decoloniality and CDA as theoretical perspectives support the notion that this naming convention is rooted in colonial terminology, designed to enforce divisions among South Africans in separate ‘homelands’. Therefore, proponents of Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as the legitimate language name are essentially perpetuating the colonial classification system. This highlights the importance of critically examining language terminology and its historical contexts to address linguistic and naming injustices and to promote decolonial language practices.

### **Research methodology**

This article employed a mixed-methods research approach, including both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. In implementing the outlined research methodology, the primary data collection methods consisted of closed-ended and open-ended survey questionnaires, along with face-to-face interviews as qualitative approaches. To complement these methods, text analysis was employed, with a specific focus on constitutional documentation and minutes from the Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee spanning the years 2011, 2016, 2017 and 2020. These varied methods were chosen to gather a comprehensive set of data, incorporating both structured survey responses and in-depth qualitative insights, along with the analysis of official constitutional records and committee proceedings.

For population and sampling purposes, Creswell and Creswell (2017) caution that participants for a research study should be purposively selected based on their proficiency and knowledge about the researched phenomenon. It is for this reason that the article employed a quota sampling to select 267 participants from five South African universities: University of Johannesburg, University of South Africa, University of Limpopo, University of Venda and Tshwane University of Technology. Moreover, language experts (practitioners) at the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) and its sub-structures and the National Department of Arts and Culture, including Limpopo and Gauteng Department of Sport, Arts, Culture and Recreation, were also involved in the study.

The sample was chosen as all participants possessed qualifications in African languages, linguistics, or language practice, with Sepedi/Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa being a major module in their studies. Participants were knowledgeable on the sociolinguistic and onomastic controversies central to the topic in their own capacity prior to the study. Additionally, the selection of universities was primarily based on their offering of Sepedi/Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as a first language

module. Furthermore, the inclusion of entities such as PanSALB, the national Department of Sport, Arts and Culture and provincial Departments of Sport, Arts, Culture, and Recreation in Limpopo and Gauteng was based on their roles as language regulators. This diverse selection of participants and institutions contributes to a comprehensive exploration of the sociolinguistic and onomastic dimensions associated with the subject matter at hand.

In terms of ethics, the main study that formed the basis of this article received ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Witwatersrand (No. H17/06/46) and the Research Ethics Committee at the Tshwane University of Technology (No. REC/2015/03/007). In addition, written approval was also secured from all other institutions and organisations involved in the researcher's study.

## Discussion

### *Analysis of Section B of the survey questionnaire: A Likert scale questionnaire*

In the main study that led to this article, 267 custom-designed survey questionnaires were completed by L1 speakers of the language under onomastic examination. The questionnaire begins with a section on biographical information, which includes the following qualitative variables: gender, age, dialect spoken, language spoken, district of origin, province of origin, and educational qualifications. The second section consists of a Likert scale questionnaire, while the final section addresses research questions. Notably, the final section contains both quantitative and qualitative data, as it includes both open-ended and closed-ended questions. For the purpose of this article, only Sections B and C of the questionnaire will be analysed since they are relevant to the topic under attention.

## SECTION B. A LIKERT SCALE QUESTIONNAIRE

**Instruction:** Read the statements below carefully in order to respond accordingly. Please indicate to which degree each of the statements numbered 1 up to 4 applies to you, by making a cross (X) in the appropriate block according to the following key:

5. Strongly agree	4. Agree	3. Not sure	2. Disagree	1. Strongly disagree
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STATEMENT	5	4	3	2	1
STATEMENT 1	MEAN				
1. Both Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as language names cause onomastic confusion to the first language speakers and also to the speakers of other languages.	4.6				
STATEMENT 2	MEAN				
2. Onomastically speaking, the Sepedi name is more specific, while the Sesotho sa Leboa one is more generic (general).	3.5				
STATEMENT 3	MEAN				
3. A language cannot be named according to a cardinal point/direction (north, east, west and south).	4.0				
STATEMENT 4	MEAN				
4. Due to ethnic pride and dialectal classification, both names (Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa) should be replaced with a new neutral name that cannot be associated with any dialect or government in the Apartheid eras.	4.6				

The respondents were requested to carefully read the statements below to select the statement that best represents their opinions, by making a cross (X) in the appropriate block according to the following five key options: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = not sure; 4 = agree; or 5 = strongly agree. The choices of the total sample population of 267 respondents were collated and expressed as means to determine the participants' attitudinal positional tendencies.

### Statement 1 (S1)

Regarding this statement, the participants responded with a mean score of 4.6 which shows that the Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa first language speakers *strongly agreed* that the existing two different language names under attention that are used to refer to one and the same language cause immense onomastic and sociolinguistic confusion to the users of the language in question. In this article, it can be argued that the confusion is found in the lack of certainty on which name is perceived as the correct one.

The literature reviewed in this article affirms the existence of a division among speakers of this language into two distinct groups. One faction advocates for the use of 'Sepedi' as the language name, while the other supports 'Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa'. Additionally, there is a subset of individuals who express uncertainty about which name is more suitable for the language. This indicates a diverse range of opinions and perspectives in the speaker community regarding the most appropriate designation for their language.

### Statement 2 (S2)

The respondents to this statement were not sure whether the Sepedi name was more specific, and that Sesotho sa Leboa seems to be an exclusive and generic language name. This was after a mean score of 3.5 was reached and it indicates an attitude of *unsure*. However, Mokgokong (1966), Mönnig (1967), Mojela (2008) and Rakgogo (2016, 2019) argue that Sepedi is considered a specific and exclusive language name since it only accommodates the speakers who originate from the Sekhukhune District Municipality. It is for this reason that Mönnig (1967) emphasises that the term 'Pedi' is used to describe only the people and tribal groups directly descendant from the original Pedi tribe which settled in Sekhukhuneland.

### Statement 3 (S3)

Statement 3 has a mean score of 4.0 which shows that the respondents in this regard *agree* with the interpretation that a language (official) cannot be named according to a cardinal or geographic region. If we consider this response, it can be argued that Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) as a language name is being rejected since the cardinal direction, 'north or northern', was used as a key word in naming the language. The literature reviewed in this article highlights that the term 'Northern Sotho,' literally translated as 'Sesotho sa Leboa,' meaning Sesotho spoken in the north, is somewhat problematic. According to onomastic principles to be taken into account when naming official languages, a language should not be named after a cardinal direction. The findings of this article establish that this naming practice appears inconsistent with the standard guidelines for naming an official language.

### Statement 4 (S4)

A significant majority of the participants agreed that both Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as language names that mean one and the same thing should be replaced with a new neutral name that cannot be associated with any dialectal classification or the Apartheid regime. This was after a mean score of 4.6 was reached which shows participants *agreed*, inclining towards *strongly agree*.

In terms of this article, it can be seen that a majority of the participants rejected Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as the names of the official standard language. In Statement 1, the respondents agreed that the concurrent use of Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as the same thing causes confusion to the first language speakers of the language under onomastic scrutiny. It is interesting to note that there is a correlation between Statement 1 and 4. The very same respondents who cited confusion are the ones who are advocating for the renaming of the language.

In Rakgogo and Zungu (2021), the respondents strongly agreed that because of ethnic pride and the misuse of political power and influence, the onomastic controversy of Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa will not end any time soon. In this article, it is clear that the respondents are rejecting both Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as language names. The contestation is that Sepedi is an exclusive language name, while Northern Sotho is considered a colonial name.

### **Analysis of the qualitative data**

Section C of the self-designed survey questionnaire was completed by 267 participants who all were L1 speakers of the language under attention. The answers are thus presented as part of the qualitative findings and the following is the extract of the questionnaire.

#### **SECTION C. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Research question 1: Sociolinguistically speaking, do you consider yourself as Mopedi (Sepedi speaker) or Mosotho wa Leboa (Sesotho sa Leboa speaker)? Motivate your choice.

Research question 2: Do you accept Sepedi as a symbol of your identity? Motivate your answer.

Research question 3: Do you accept Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as a symbol of your identity? Motivate your answer.

Research question 4: Do you think the use of Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa language names undermine the integrity of this speech community?

Research question 5: Do you associate the onomastic controversy of Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa language names with influence and the power of politics? Motivate your answer.

#### **Presentation and discussion of the data**

Research question 1: Sociolinguistically speaking, do you consider yourself as Mopedi (Sepedi speaker) or Mosotho wa Leboa (Sesotho sa Leboa speaker)? Motivate your choice.

In this article, this question forms a crucial research question, as it is the one that has to determine if the L1 speakers accept what is stipulated in Section 6(1) of the Constitution. The question also aimed at determining if the first language speakers of the language in question prefer Sepedi or Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as the name of the official standard language. Most of the participants (56%) in this article sociolinguistically identified themselves as speakers of the Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa language, not Sepedi. On the other hand, 44% of the participants identified themselves as speakers of the Sepedi language, not Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa. It can be deduced that the majority of the participants sociolinguistically identify themselves as Basotho ba Leboa speakers, while 44% regard themselves as Bapedi.

The 2017 minutes of the Parliamentary Joint Constitutional Review Committee, titled *Status of Sepedi, Sesotho sa Leboa, Xhosa, Ndebele, and Sign Language of South Africa and Khoi, Nama, and San Languages*, reveal that the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) once established an ad hoc committee to conduct research aimed at resolving the naming debate between Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa as official language names. The survey findings indicated that 64% of respondents preferred Sesotho sa Leboa, 34% chose Sepedi, and 5% were undecided. Molepo (2014), in her language planning study, opined that the designation of a language naming Sepedi/Sesotho sa Leboa is also aimed to resolve the onomastic controversy under attention.

Molepo (2014) found that many people favour the use of the name *Sepedi* to refer to the language under study. Similarly, Rakgogo (2016) discovered that while a majority (57%) of respondents preferred *Sesotho sa Leboa* as the language name, a significant minority (43%) favoured *Sepedi*.

This article aims to address ongoing debates through a historiographic analysis, examining the complex historical and political influences shaping the use of *Sepedi* and *Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa* as language names. It explores the ties between these names and the colonial era's power dynamics, investigating how colonial perspectives on knowledge and authority have affected both *Sepedi* and *Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa*.

This inquiry follows a sociolinguistic survey that aimed to identify the preferred language name between Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa from the two selected South African universities in which 57% of students and lecturers, who identified as native speakers of the language, suggested that *Sesotho sa Leboa* is a more inclusive and encompassing language name compared to *Sepedi*, which they felt represents primarily the Sekhukhune ethnic group. However, 43% of respondents

argued that *Sepedi* is the rightful language name and should remain in the South African Constitution (1996), viewing *Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa* as a colonial imposition.

In view of *Sesotho sa Leboa* as the rightful language name, a majority of the participants agreed with Participant 212 (P212) who mentioned that:

I sociolinguistically consider myself as a speaker of the Northern Sotho language, not a speaker of the Sepedi language. To me, Sepedi is an insult, because I speak Khelobedu, since I originally come from Bolobedu. I cannot be Molobedu (Khelobedu speaker) and Mopedi (Sepedi speaker) at the same time. However, on official occasions, I will then consider myself as a Northern Sotho speaker because this is an umbrella name that has been used for quite some time.

On the other hand, one of the participants (P171) who is in support of *Sepedi*, sociolinguistically speaking, shared that:

I am Mopedi and I speak Sepedi because I am from Bopedi in Ga-Sekhukhune. If I say I speak *Sesotho sa Leboa*, I am not saying anything because this name does not specify, but it only generalises all the speakers. What about the speakers of the language who are in Gauteng? Should they call the same language with another cardinal direction? Furthermore, it is important for people to know that *Sesotho sa Leboa* came from the apartheid regime, for this reason, I will never consider myself as *Mosotho wa Leboa* (*Sesotho sa Leboa* speaker) since this is considered a colonial name.

Based on this, it is clear that the participant is rejecting the Northern Sotho/*Sesotho sa Leboa* language name, citing some of the colonial impositions made on African languages. It is also noted that Northern Sotho/*Sesotho sa Leboa* is considered a colonial name. Thus, it does not qualify to be the name of the official standard name. Equally important, it needs to be mentioned that the participant declares their ethnic affiliation with the *Sekhukhune* group.

Research question 2: Do you accept *Sepedi* as a symbol of your identity? Motivate your answer.

It can be seen that there is a clear correlation between the previous question and this one. For argument's sake, if speakers sociolinguistically identify themselves as a *Sepedi* or *Sesotho sa Leboa* speaker, those persons are consciously or unconsciously accepting that particular name as a symbol of their identity. It is also essential to provide that the concept of identity may mean different things to different people. However, the current article reveals what identity is according to the participants who took part in the survey questionnaire.

In this article, the concept of identity seems to be perceived as an important aspect that cannot be undermined when coming to the naming of entities. This is after a significant majority of the participants, which is 61%, rejected *Sepedi* as a symbol of their identity. This rejection indirectly implies that they also rejected *Sepedi* as their language. On the other hand, 39% of participants accepted *Sepedi* as a symbol of their identity.

The participants' response in this regard proves the complexity of the current onomastic subject. Only 44% of participants sociolinguistically identified themselves as *Bapedi*. However, it can be noted that 61% of the participants in this question rejected *Sepedi* as a symbol of their identity. It can be interpreted that some participants regarded themselves as *Bapedi* for constitutional and legislation purposes. However, ethnic identity is preferred when it comes to identity-related matters.

When directly quoting those rejecting *Sepedi* as a symbol of their identity, P75 articulated:

*Sepedi* is just like the dialect that I speak at home (*Sehananwa*). It only happens to be considered as the main language because it was favoured over other dialects during the time of the missionaries as they were translating the Bible. It was spoken in the area of *Sekhukhune* and it will never be my symbol of identity.

On the other hand, the views of the 39% of participants who accepted Sepedi as a symbol of their identity cannot be ignored and undermined. In this context, P13 shared:

This language was standardised on the basis of the dominant dialect. As a result of successful standardisation, it was also named after the chosen dialect as it is the case in some of the South (African) indigenous languages. Furthermore, people need to understand that the orthography of this language is also basically grounded on the Pedi dialect, and this has influences on the writing and speaking characteristics over years.

The literature consulted in this article argued that the term 'Pedi' is used to describe only the people and tribal groups directly descendant from the original Pedi tribe who settled in Sekhukhuneland and eventually became the paramount tribe of that region; they are the only people who call themselves primarily, and only, Pedi. The literature also proved that Sepedi is the only and first dialect to be codified among the 27 dialects of the language under attention. It was for this reason that the Bible and other religious texts were also translated into this dialect.

Research question 3: Do you accept Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as a symbol of your identity? Motivate your answer.

When considering the name *Northern Sotho* for the language, the literature in this article examined the impact of the Bantu Authorities Act No. 68, officially enacted in 1951, on this topic. According to South African History Online, like other South African provinces, Limpopo was divided into three homelands: Venda (independent), Lebowa (non-independent), and Gazankulu (non-independent). Rammala (2002:1) notes that each of these homelands had its own language, although English and Afrikaans were also official languages. The languages were Tshivenda for Venda, Xitsonga for Gazankulu, and Northern Sotho for Lebowa.

Within the scope of this article, it can be argued that the language designated to speakers in the Lebowa homeland was referred to as *Northern Sotho* (Sesotho sa Leboa) rather than *Sepedi*. Critics, therefore, might assert that there is a clear connection between the following: the Bantu Authorities Act No. 68 of 1951, the designation of *Lebowa* (meaning "North") as a homeland, and the naming of the language as *Northern Sotho*.

When the participants answered this question, a slight majority (52%) of the participants pointed out that Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa cannot be accepted as a symbol of their identity since the name was an imposition from the colonisers. Participant 44 in this regard articulated:

According to me, most South Africans are now sensitive and conscious in using the English personal names with the argument that they were imposed by colonialists. Therefore, the name Northern Sotho has colonial connotations on my side.

Similarly, P118 articulated that:

In the contemporary South Africa, people seem to be more comfortable with African names than European names.

It is thus clear that most of the participants in this study considered Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as a label that was created by the previous regime to suit the administrative purposes of that time. The speakers of the language under scrutiny and also the ones of the other languages are separating themselves from those names they think have strong ties with the apartheid regime.

Research question 4: Do you think the use of Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa language names undermine the integrity of this speech community?

Different responses were recorded regarding this question. A majority of the participants (42%) were of the view that the use of both Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa indeed undermines the integrity of the speech communities. Their reasons were that speakers of the other South African languages do not experience an onomastic problem that affects their group identity. They expressed that speakers of the other South African official languages are addressed and known by one unique name, unlike speech communities of the language under onomastic scrutiny.

On the other hand, 36% of participants opined that the use of these language names undermines only the integrity of speakers of the other Northern Sotho dialects, as they are not entirely represented in the naming of the language as Sepedi. Their argument was based on the exclusivity of the name of the standard language since it only accommodates a specific ethnic group.

Lastly, 22% of the participants hold the perspective that the use of the language names undermines the integrity of those speakers who promote and support Sepedi as the official language name. In this case, the justification was that Sesotho sa Leboa is not the official language, according to the Constitution. However, it is the commonly used name in official documentation.

Research question 5: Do you associate the onomastic controversy of Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa language names with influence and the power of politics? Motivate your answer.

A significant majority (71%) of the participants in this context mentioned that they associate the politics surrounding Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa names with the influence of power and politics. On the other hand, 29% of the participants held a different perspective and they opined that the controversy surrounding these names has nothing to do with power and politics. The response of 71% indicate that most participants linked the onomastic debate surrounding Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa to the influence of political power. When participants asked whether they sociolinguistically identify themselves as Bapedi (Sepedi speakers) or Basotho ba Leboa (Sesotho sa Leboa speakers), 56% identified themselves as Basotho ba Leboa, while 44% identified themselves as Bapedi. It can therefore be implied that the 71% response involved both participants in favour Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa language names. This suggests that both groups recognise how the dual use of these names has been complicated by political influence and power dynamics. Similarly, the 29% response compromised of both participants in favour of Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa language names. In the field of language planning and standardisation, languages have always been politicised and used to entrench the ruling regimes (Rakgogo, 2019). In this study, it is interesting to see 71% of the participants shared a similar point of view with literature when discussing language issues in many countries, including South Africa.

In this regard, P176 revealed that:

South Africa is a very good example when it comes to the influence of power and politics on language issues. For example, a study like this was initiated by the misuse of power in politics when the apartheid regime divided the languages as Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho and Western Sotho. The division created by colonialism has caused so many divisions that I doubt it will ever be resolved, since some of the speakers of the Sepedi language are still perpetuating and promoting names that were imposed on them. In my humble opinion, the controversy that you are investigating originated from petty tribalistic politics coupled with power hunger aimed at achieving personal, greedy goals.

Another participant added that:

The naming of the official language as 'Sepedi' was influenced by the power of politics. This kind of decision was purely motivated by economic and political powers, since the Sekhukhune people were perceived as the powerful ethnic group. I think you as the researcher should also try to check the background of people who were involved when the language was named 'Sepedi'. You could find out that representatives from the other dialects were not included in that committee as they are perceived as inferior.

Based on these responses, it is noted that there are those scholars who criticise the one-sided process of standardisation that gave only Sepedi the official recognition, while others criticised the influence of colonialism on this language. It is quite impressive to record that both language names are not free from power and politics, according to the participants who were also the L1 speakers of this language.

In terms of this article, literature confirms that the sociolinguistic history of the language under investigation as revealed by the participants is heavily marked with the influence of power and politics. I further confirm that in contemporary South Africa, the most telling example of the influence of power and politics on language-related matters can be detected in the replacement of Sesotho sa Leboa with Sepedi in the final Constitution without proper and transparent justifications.

The literature reviewed also supports that language planning in South Africa is heavily influenced by politics. It points out that the Bantu languages—such as Nguni, Sotho, Tsonga, and Venda—have historically been leveraged as political tools. This began with colonial powers, who used language to undermine indigenous South Africans, followed by missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who structured separate languages out of continuous dialects. Finally, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, politicians used these distinctions to deepen divides between communities in line with apartheid policies.

### **Qualitative themes**

The following are the qualitative themes that have emerged from the qualitative data.

#### *Qualitative Theme One: Sepedi is considered an exclusive language name*

A significant majority of participants argued that Sepedi as a language name cannot be accepted as a symbol of identity and also as the name of the official standard language due to its exclusivity. The participants argued that the name Sepedi has strong ties with the Sekhukhune ethnic group, which is the major contributing factor why it is rejected by other ethnic groups such as Balobedu, Batlokwa, Bakgaga, Bapulana, Bahananwa, Batlhabine, Baphalaborwa, Batebelesotho, Baroka, etc. In terms of this article, it is noted that though Sepedi is listed as one of the official languages in the South African Constitution, it is not onomastically correct to serve as the name of the official standard language. Literature was consulted in this article touching on the arrival of the German missionaries in Ga-Sekhukhune in 1860 who later learned to speak and write the Sepedi dialect. That the Bible and other religious texts were translated into Sepedi supports what is articulated by the participants.

#### *Qualitative Theme Two: Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa is regarded a colonial name*

In this article, a significant majority of the participants who rejected Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa as a language name expressed that language names such as Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa), Southern Sotho (Sesotho) and Western Sotho (Setswana) were all created during the colonial period, as these English names suited the administrative system of the apartheid regime. The participants in this regard refused to be identified by a language name that came as an imposition from the colonisers. The participants further advocated that this language name is associated with the previous regime. The literature consulted in this article that focused on the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 that gave birth to the homelands, validates the participants' views and perspectives on these matters.

#### *Qualitative Theme 3: Both Sepedi and Northern Sotho resemble colonial vestiges*

The literature examined in this article indicates that both Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa exhibit characteristics reminiscent of colonial vestiges. This assertion is rooted in the historical development of Sepedi as a prominent language name, shaped significantly by missionary activities that focused primarily on the Sepedi dialect, often neglecting the other 26 dialects. The missionaries' attention resulted in the translation of religious texts, including the Bible, into Sepedi, ultimately influencing the standardised version of the language. In contrast, the Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa language name is associated with the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, a legislative measure aimed at the division of the country's people. This historical context suggests a connection between the language name and a political agenda, further emphasising the colonial influences present in the nomenclature.

## Conclusion

This article is focused on an onomastic-sociolinguistic PhD study that concerned itself with the investigation of the onomastic principles that should be taken into consideration when naming a language (official), with special reference to Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa language names. The main objective of the study was to consider the two names *Sepedi* and *Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa* and decide which one should be used and to also determine which name is supported by the investigated onomastic principles of naming a language officially. The article found that the language under scrutiny was not properly named in the first place, since both Sepedi and Sesotho sa Leboa were found to have strong ties with the apartheid regime as a concomitant part of colonialism.

This article makes a valuable contribution to scientific knowledge by highlighting the connection between the process of renaming and broader transformation agendas. The argument put forth suggests that adopting an Afrocentric approach to renaming is essential. This approach aims to ensure that the newly chosen names resonate with a decolonial history, offering a perspective that aligns with the experiences and heritage of the speakers of the language in question. In emphasising this Afrocentric lens, the article advocates for names that better reflect the cultural and historical context, fostering a sense of identity and decolonial narrative. The article further exposes that both Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa are not onomastically appropriate to be designated as the name of the official standard language. This conclusion arises from the acknowledgment that both names carry connotations of power and political influence, suggesting that their usage may not accurately reflect the authentic linguistic and cultural identity of the language in question.

## Recommendations

The article puts forth a recommendation based on the premise that neither Sepedi nor Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa is onomastically appropriate. It suggests that the speakers of the language should adhere to the constitutional imperatives outlined in Section 6(1) of the Constitution. Following compliance with these constitutional provisions, the article advocates for a national discourse on renaming Sepedi and Northern Sotho/Sesotho sa Leboa. The proposed renaming should involve selecting a more neutral name that avoids associations with colonial vestiges, ensuring a language identity that aligns with contemporary values and perspectives.

Regarding a neutral name, I suggest the name 'Seleboa'. The rationale behind this proposal is that the prefix *se* would represent the Sesotho cluster, while *leboa* would denote the cardinal/geographical region where the language is predominantly spoken. This combination is seen as a potential compromise stance for both factions, as it incorporates elements from both preferences – those in favour of Sepedi and those in favour of Sesotho sa Leboa. The proposed name aims to strike a balance and foster a sense of inclusivity among the speakers of the language.

## Implications for future research

The implication for future research is that sociolinguists, dialectologists, anthropologists and onomasticians are encouraged to engage in further research. This research should involve consultation with first language speakers of the language to determine whether the suggested name, 'Seleboa', can effectively serve as an inclusive and neutral designation suitable for adoption in Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa. This collaborative research can aim to gather insights from the community to ensure that any potential renaming aligns with their linguistic and cultural identity, fostering a sense of inclusivity and appropriateness in the constitutional framework.

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