

## **The acquisition of Setswana phonology in children aged 3;0 – 6;0 years: A cross-sectional study.**

**Background:** Setswana is a Southern Bantu language and is one of South Africa's (SA) eleven official languages, spoken by 8% of the country's population. Although there is some information available on the phonological development of some Southern Bantu languages (viz. Sesotho – Demuth, 2007; isiXhosa – Maphalala, Pascoe & Smouse, 2014; isiZulu – Naidoo, van der Merwe, Groenewald & Naude, 2005), very little is known about the typical development of Setswana phonology.

**Purpose:** This study aimed to describe the typical development of segmental phonology in first language Setswana-speaking children. The objectives of the study were to describe the acquisition of a) consonants and vowels; b) syllable structures; as well as c) the nature of phonological processes occurring at various ages.

**Method:** Thirty-six children aged 3;0 – 6;0 years, attending preschools in the North-West province of South Africa participated in this study. The study followed a cross-sectional design, with six children grouped into six month age bands (e.g. 3;0 – 3;5 years, 3;6 – 3;11 years). An assessment tool was devised to collect speech samples from participants as there is currently none available. An expert panel ensured that words and pictures included in this tool were culturally and linguistically appropriate for the study population.

**Results & Conclusion:** Findings indicate that Setswana consonants develop relatively early, although trill /r/ is among the phonemes which continue to develop after 6;0 years, particularly in the penultimate syllable. Phonological processes found in the speech of younger children mainly occurred in multisyllabic words and included deletion of syllables and simplifying complex words. The older group of children presented with fewer phonological processes. Knowledge of phonological development in Setswana will assist Speech-Language Therapists working in Southern Africa in identifying and managing developmental speech sound difficulties in children acquiring Setswana. The results of this study contribute to an increasing body of relevant information about the typical development of children's speech in the Southern African context.

**Key words:** Setswana, Bantu languages, segmental phonology, speech development, phonological processes

### **References**

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