

Urban languages and urban myths: Tsotsi and other taals in South Africa

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This paper examines the status of an informal urban or township variety in Cape Town that goes by the name of Tsotsitaal. Similar varieties, going by a plethora of names, have been described in other South African cities, especially Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban, and in other parts of Africa (notably Sheng in Kenyan cities). This paper seeks to describe the essential characteristics of Cape Town Tsotsitaal and to show its continuity with similar varieties in other cities. The paper shows how a study of the Cape Town variety calls into question many of the previous assumptions about, and characteristics of, Tsotsitaal and similar varieties in the literature. For example, the thesis that these varieties necessarily involve code-switching, or that sociologically they are new “languages” and even lingua francas. Finally, the paper offers an account of the structural and pragmatic characteristics of Tsotsitaal and similar varieties that make it possible to view them as essentially one underlying phenomenon, a “stylect with many instantiations”, rather than an independent language.