



Tribute

Desmond T. Cole (1922—2018)

Andrew van der Spuy



Desmond Cole with Naureen Cole and Keith Green.
Photo: Keith Green

Desmond Thorne Cole passed away in 2018; his wife, Naureen, died in July 2023. Cole was professor of African Languages at the University of the Witwatersrand from 1954 to 1982, succeeding the long-serving Clement Doke, who founded the Department of Bantu Languages (as it was then) in 1922. Cole's speciality was Setswana: he had a near-mother-tongue command of the language, and an intimate knowledge of its dialects and varieties. The work which is undoubtedly his magnum opus in the field of Bantu languages is his *Introduction to Tswana Grammar* (1955), which is still today one of the leading reference grammars of Setswana. It is known for its comprehensiveness and depth of scholarship. This work also showcases another aspect of Desmond Cole's scholarship: his dissatisfaction with what he regarded as inaccuracy and inefficiency. In this grammar, he put forward a number of suggestions for the reform of Setswana orthography, one of which was that the language should be written conjunctively, following the model advocated by Clement Doke (1944). Cole also

criticised the use of orthographic <e> for the two phonemes /e/ and /ɪ/, and orthographic <o> for the two phonemes /o/ and /ʊ/. He suggested that /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ should be represented as <ɪ> and <u>. Needless to say, neither of these reforms was ever implemented, perhaps fortunately in the case of conjunctivism, as Doke's approach to wordhood was purely phonological rather than morphological or syntactic. The use of <ɪ> and <u> for the high lax vowels would have reduced a substantial amount of phonological ambiguity in Setswana orthography, but by 1955, the <e>/<o> convention was too well established to make such a change feasible.

Cole also took an interest in the Bantu languages of Sub-Saharan Africa generally, being particularly concerned with their history and relationships with one another. He wrote a series of articles on Ganda grammar and several important articles on the history of studies of the Bantu languages (e.g., "African Linguistic Studies, 1943–1960" and "Bantu linguistic studies in South Africa"). He concentrated on works that dealt with the more southerly Bantu languages, unfortunately neglecting the more northerly ones. Yet within these limits, his work is solid and comprehensive as always. It is a great pity that he did not continue this work beyond 1969, as his insights into more recent work would have been invaluable.

In the 1970s, Cole's interest in Bantu appears to have waned somewhat. Both he and Doke had worked very much from a descriptivist perspective. Neither of them paid much attention to their contemporaries, the American and European structuralists. This approach, it seems, left Cole unwilling to accommodate or respond to the highly theoretical approach taken by Chomsky and his followers, which dominated linguistics in the sixties and seventies. Furthermore, Cole served as dean of the Arts Faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand from 1972 to 1973, and thus had less time to devote to research. It was probably these factors that led him to concentrate on his other passion, namely botany. He published a distinguished series of works on plants of the genus *Lithops*, and is acknowledged as a world expert on the subject.

My personal acquaintance with Prof. Cole began at the end of his teaching career when I took his highly informative class on the historical linguistics of the Bantu languages in 1982. His manner of dressing, and his

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attitudes, harked back to a more formal era. He always wore a jacket and tie, the latter tucked into the top of his trousers. He did not like to have his authority challenged—when I met him again years later at the memorial for Prof. Tony Traill in 2007, he remembered me as a ‘cheeky student’ who asked too many questions. His Zulu colleagues referred to him as uChili (Pushing Away). Nevertheless, despite his professional standoffishness, I am glad of the opportunity to express my gratitude for what I learnt from him, and my regret that he did not do more to record his vast knowledge of the Bantu language family.

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