“Your Obedient Servant or Your friend”

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In the late 1800 Bechuanaland, now Botswana, and other less powerful nations neighboring South Africa were in danger of being annexed into South Africa by the powerful Boers who ruled it then. Bechuanaland asked for protection from the British government and in 1885 it was declared a British protectorate. However, before British protection the country was ruled by local chiefs who had a lot of power over the people, the land and were responsible for issuing mine prospecting permits. The advent of the British in 1885 called for a redefining and regulation of the powers of the chiefs, a step that naturally bred misunderstandings and strains in the relationship between local Batswana chiefs and British administrators.

Using a corpus of 150 letters written during the protectorate period (1885-1966) by and to the British administrators on one hand and letters written by and to Batswana chiefs on the other hand this paper aims to explore the type of relationship that existed between the British administrators and Batswana chiefs during the protectorate days. This relationship is assessed by examining the type of address forms used in the salutations and signatures of the letters. The paper argues that the two groups sought linguistic means of dealing with the strife between them by use of or failure to use certain address forms. For example the British administrators used the signature ‘your obedient servant’ when writing to fellow British administrators but rarely when writing to Batswana chiefs suggesting that a Briton could not be a servant of a Motswana chief. Similarly, the address term ‘friend’ which connotes equality and solidarity is only found in letters from British administrators to Batswana chiefs but is rare in British administrator to British administrator correspondence.