

Unifying Organizational Principles in the Development of Orthographic Conventions

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1.0 The importance of developing a set of unified orthographic principles.

As will undoubtedly be discussed by other speakers at this Workshop, there are several very important reasons for developing a set of unified orthographic principles. Firstly, when dealing with a closely related group of languages such as the Mozambican languages are, the use of a unified set of orthographic principles helps to capture the natural and systematic linguistic relatedness between languages and dialects. Second, the development of a principle based orthography establish a 'standard' orthographic system where many different systems may have previously been used. Third, a unified orthographic system facilitates the teaching of languages: If teachers know that language learners are literate in one language, they can build on what the learner already knows, showing that the same basic orthographic principles apply to the new language being learned. Finally, a unified orthography facilitates the promotion of literacy, language learning, multilingualism, and the preservation of cultural knowledge and tradition: If a language learner, whether young or old, understands some of the basic principles behind one orthographic system, it is easier to transfer those skills to another language. Thus, learning to read, write and speak a new language are all facilitated.

When talking about the development of a 'unified orthography', there are three different levels that need to be addressed. The first is that of an individual language or dialect. Anyone would agree that a given language should use the same orthography - to so otherwise would be a waste of time

and resources, besides being extremely confusing for both readers and teachers. Thus, the goal of establishing a unified orthography should try to work with the systems that are already in existence, while developing those that are not under a careful and conscientious plan. Second, it again makes sense to develop a unified orthography for closely related dialects of the same language group. Thus, an orthographic system should try to encompass dialectal variation. Third, an orthographic system should try to be consistent across closely related languages, utilizing the same set of basic organizational principles and, wherever possible, similar graphemes for the same sounds. Following such a program has not only the practical consequence already delineated above, but is also economically viable. One poignant example will suffice to illustrate this point: We often think of Chinese as a single language with several dialects. However, those 'dialects' are very different languages which are not even mutually intelligible. Yet, all the Chinese languages use the same 'logographic' (or 'ideographic') orthography, and thus can read newspapers and use textbooks from other parts of China. Thus, even with non-mutually intelligible languages, a unified Chinese orthography has had several practical consequences.

Not all countries have been so fortunate in their choice of orthography: The history of orthographic development in the Sotho group of languages (including Sesotho (Southern Sotho), Setswana dialects and Sepedi (Northern Sotho) has been both politically and emotionally charged since the early 1900's. I turn now to an examination of the Sesotho orthographic situation, and present it as an example of a problematic case which can hopefully be avoided in Mozambique.

2.0 Sesotho Orthographies

The Sotho languages, while different in several grammatical, lexical, phonological and tonological respects, are basically mutually intelligible dialects of the same language. As with Shona and Chinyanja, the Sotho languages cross different national boundaries: Sesotho is spoken in Lesotho and South Africa, and Setswana (which includes several dialects) is spoken in both Botswana and South Africa (though Sepedi is spoken largely in the Transvaal region of South Africa). Tucker (1969:15) notes that Sesotho and Setswana are more closely related than either is to Sepedi, though Sesotho

shows the greatest influence of lexical contact with Zulu, and the northern dialects of Setswana are most closely related phonologically and lexically to Sepedi.

The history of orthographic development for Sesotho goes back to 1841. During the next 60 years the orthography was experimented with until it became standardized in 1906. From that time on it was used for all educational and other materials produced in Lesotho (Basutoland at the time). It was decided at the 1906 Conference that the development of a unified orthography for Sesotho, Setswana and Sepedi was not yet possible.

Then, in 1947, South Africa imposed the Bantu Education Act and along with it came proposals for a revised Sesotho orthography (1959) that would accept a unified orthographic convention consistent with that of Setswana and Sepedi. For various political and practical reasons (see Paquet 1965), Sesotho experts in Lesotho were not receptive to South Africa's overtures for a change in the orthography used in Lesotho, and it has remained much as it was, though with continuing discussion about possible reform since that time (see Moletsane & Matsoso 1985). Thus, while South African today maintains a unified orthographic basis for the Sotho languages, Lesotho maintains her own Sesotho orthography. This results in two separate Sesotho orthographies, one as written in South Africa, and the other as written in Lesotho. As expected, this political and emotional issue has led to and continues to produce problems both for teachers and students of Sesotho, as well as for authors writing in Sesotho and their reading public.

A sample of the different Sesotho orthographies used today is provided below:

Sesotho (Lesotho)	Sesotho (South Africa)
disjunctive	conjunctive
h	g
kh	kg
tš	tsh
tj	tš

ch	tjh
fsh	fj
psh	pjh
l	l/d (before high vowels i/u)
o	w+vowel
e	y+vowel
'n	nn
'm	mm

Thus, there are two Sesotho orthographies which are used today, one in South African, and the other in Lesotho; there is no one accepted standard . Likewise, there is no one standard for the closely related dialects of the same language: 'dog' in Setswana and Sesotho is spelled *ntsa* and *ntja*. respectively (though notice that there are some different spellings for British and American English - e.g. centre/center, favour/favor) I suggest that, wherever possible, one orthographic system be used for the same language, and even across closely related dialects of the same language group.

There is, however, another sense in which there can be a 'unified orthography'. Tucker (1929:201) notes the etymological similarities between the collapsed Nguni 5-vowel and original Proto-Bantu Sotho 7-vowel systems (also paralleled in Swahili (5 vowels) and Kikuyu (7 vowels)), and recommends a unified set of orthographic conventions that would preserve the common etymologies between the Nguni and Sotho vowel systems. Thus, rather than the orthography representing 'person' as *umuntu* in Zulu and *motho* in Sesotho, he proposes that both be written with the high/close vowel *u* (though the Sesotho vowel is actually the semi-close vowel *u*). While this causes some other problems (Sesotho would have to distinguish *l* and *d* if the distinction between close and semi-close vowels is not maintained), it would facilitated a unified orthographic representation of Sotho and Nguni that would capture similarities between the two language groups which are currently masked. Thus, by stepping back and comparing phonemic analyses not only of dialects, but also of closely related languages, it is sometimes possible to develop a unified orthographic system which captures the close historical relationship of languages, facilitating teaching, reading, writing and the promotion of culture and literature in the process.

Thus, there are several reasons for maintaining a unified orthography not only for a given language, but also for closely related dialects of a given language group. Similarly, there are equally good reasons for trying to maintain orthographic consistency across closely related languages, wherever possible.

3.0 Guiding Principles for Development of a Unified Orthographic System

The history of competing orthographic systems for Sesotho, plus the different orthographic systems used for Sesotho, Setswana and Sepedi have resulted, in part, from geopolitical problems. As Moletsane & Matsoso (1985) note, the issue of orthography should not be based on emotional feelings that stem from nationalistic sentiments, but rather should be based, in both a linguistically and sociologically sensitive way, on what is best in the long term for teachers and students, for readers and writers of the language, and for the national development of the country.

Mozambique is in a unique position today to make the most of what other countries have had to learn by trial and error. With the exception of Portuguese, the languages spoken in Mozambique are closely related Bantu languages which lend themselves to the development of a unified orthographic system. In addition, a strong literary tradition is still to be developed for the majority of the 8 Mozambican language-groups identified in Katupha (1988). For the more developed Swahili, Shona and Chinyanja-Chichewa, it may be easiest to follow the orthographic systems that have already been developed. For the other Mozambican languages the door to developing a sound principle based unified orthography is open. The points outlined below offer some preliminary and practical suggestions for how this development might most effectively take place. I present them to you now in hopes that they will stimulate further discussion and help to identify the relevant issues.

A. General guidelines for a Unified Orthographic System:

- 1) Where an orthographic system has already been established in another country (Swahili - Tanzania, Shona - Zimbabwe, Chinyanja/Chichewa - Malawi), see if that system (and consequently that set of literature and educational materials) can be adapted as is. Focus the remaining time and resources on those languages for which there is no established written tradition.
- 2) Where not already available, carry out a phonemic analysis of the Mozambican languages.
- 3) Where needed, develop a set of common grammatical terminology (in the languages themselves) for characterizing the different grammatical features of the language.
- 4) Wherever possible, use the same orthographic system for closely related dialects, and, as far as is applicable, for closely related languages.

B. Design the orthographic system with special attention to:

- 5) Use a conjunctive orthography (this may facilitate reading and render phonologically similar morphemes unambiguous).
- 6) Where possible, represent phonemes in the orthography, not allophones (e.g. Sesotho *l* is always written *l*, though it is predictably pronounced as *d* before high vowels). The phonemic approach will maximize the possibility for one orthography to have greater relevance for several dialects and even (potentially) for more than one language (e.g. Sotho-Nguni vowel systems).
- 7) Wherever possible, use graphemes that are readily available on most typewriters rather than diacritics (note the problem that diacritics has caused in the orthographies of Sotho languages (t^ʰs)).
- 8) Leave out tone marking, if possible (this related to (7) above).

9) When possible use a one sound=one grapheme correspondence rather than consonant clusters (this facilitates simplicity).

10) Represent all phonemes with a separate grapheme - do not collapse two or more phonemes into one grapheme (i.e. Sesotho semi close i/u are confusingly written the same as the mid e/o rather than with separate graphemes).

11) Distinguish homophonous morphemes where there is potential ambiguity (e.g. second and third person present indicative subject pronouns are phonologically identical except for tone in Sotho and Nguni - in Lesotho δ and \acute{o} are distinguished as *o* and *u* respectively).

Though I am aware that there may be some debate over the issues presented here, I present these recommendations to the Workshop participants for further discussion as a set of potential guidelines for implementing a unified Mozambican orthography.

References

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