Orthography matters

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Originally published as:


[Topics: orthography]

A good orthography is one that reflects the intuition of the native speaker. It is based on sound phonological analysis. All the sounds pronounced in the language are analyzed to find the meaningful groups of sounds by which individual words are distinguished. These groups of sounds, or phonemes, are then symbolized with a letter each, in the alphabet. So the relationship is not to the pronunciation from the point of view of the phonetician, who carefully hears every sound uttered, but from the point of view of the native speaker of the language, who consciously distinguishes the groups of sounds that are in meaningful opposition to each other. Each of these groups must be represented in the alphabet by a symbol (either a single letter or a digraph), and in the whole language always by that same symbol.

1. Tone and accent orthography

[Topics: tone]

Not only vowels and consonants have to be studied carefully as to how they work together to make syllables. Most African languages are tone languages, some are accent languages, and for a few, neither tone nor accent is important. The question has to be studied for them all, before one can be sure that the language is being accurately written.

In tone languages, there is at least a difference between high tone and low tone, and there may be many other tones as well. The tone structure can usually be analyzed as a series of sequences of high and low tones in different combinations, phonetically realized as level or gliding tones on each syllable.

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Most tone languages have lexical tone, that is, individual words are distinguished, not only by the way they are put together with vowels and consonants, but by their melodies as well. Most languages will have what are called minimal pairs—pairs of words which differ solely in their melody. But even if such pairs cannot be found, a language might be a tone language. If the melodies of the words can be whistled and are constant in isolation, there is a good chance that the language is tonal—though it may be an accent language; more about that later.

If there are minimal tone pairs in a language, certainly it will be necessary to write some tone. If there are no minimal pairs, and yet the language is tonal, tone is a redundancy feature and still might need to be written for easy reading. If the minimal pairs involve verbs or pronouns, there is no way the language can be correctly interpreted without tone being written, since verbs and pronouns are the very center of the language. There is no context to interpret any sentence if the verb or the pronoun are not unambiguously indicated, if they can have more than one reading. If, on the other hand, two words are pronounced alike, there is no need to distinguish them in writing. They need to be written differently only if there is indeed a pronunciation difference between them.

Many tone languages have grammatical tone distinctions as well as lexical tone distinctions. Grammatical tones involve tone changes, observed when compared with the lexical or basic tone. They occur in certain constructions from which their grammatical meaning can be deduced. For the noun class languages, such tone changes occur frequently when two nouns are combined in a phrase, in such constructions as the chief’s hut. What is the “genitive -s” in English might be a syllable or a floating tone in a tone language. A floating tone is a tone which can be observed only by the change of tone that occurs on another word. It is floating because it does not have a syllable of its own and, therefore, has to be realized in the place of another tone which it might replace or change, depending on the situation.

Other constructions in which grammatical tones can be observed are nouns in combination with demonstratives, possessive pronouns, numerals, or adjectives, also nouns that are used like predicates in a sentence: it is a house or it is the chief might show tone changes which are grammatical tone.

Grammatical tone is most frequent in the verb constructions. The various verb forms: tenses, aspects, and moods are often accompanied by certain tone patterns or might consist of a change of melody only. All the possible combinations have to be researched in order to find the whole system of the tone structure: the basic tones, the tone combinations, and the tone changes due to floating tones. Some tone changes are not the result of new tones intervening, but of other phonological tone processes. Some tones might become similar or dissimilar to other tones, some tones (usually the high tone) might spread to following syllables, changing low tones to high or modifying them in some other way. This kind of rule also needs to be recognized.

What kind of tone needs to be written in an orthography that is easy to read and to write? By experience, we now know that if all the tone nuances were to be written, the result would be too difficult both to read and to write. If, on the other hand, tone is not part of the orthography at all, the result is guess work, since the words and sentences will not be unambiguously written. It is, therefore, necessary to discover a minimal way of writing tone. This minimal way has to be written systematically. In other words, a minimum of one, hopefully a maximum of three tones will have to be written. If more than three tones

(including tone glides) comprise the system, it certainly will not be necessary to write all the tones. Many languages have five and seven tones, and yet it is often enough to write only one tone.

It has been found that often low tone is the easiest tone to mark (usually by writing \(<^\prime>\) above the vowel). This is reasonable, since the high tone often is lowered to mid or shows other tone changes. When the low tone is changed, it is usually important to indicate it, whereas, the many changes of the high tone often are not minimally distinctive. Along with the low tone one of the tone glides might also need to be indicated (with \(<^\prime>\) above the vowel for a low-high glide or \(<^\prime>\) for a high-low glide). In rare cases two glides might need marking. The more tones that are marked, the harder it becomes to teach the system.

It should be mentioned here that a system which marks tone only where it is minimally different in individual words is not a good system. In such a system, for each word one must learn whether it carries a tone mark or not, a system close to the English orthography which has to be individually learned for each word. To mark low tones only on the words where there is a minimal tone pair makes the teaching of tone a matter of memory, rather than a matter of rules linked with the pronunciation. On the other hand, it is easy to mark systematically each low tone whenever it is pronounced.

So, a minimal way of marking tone will be a system which distinguishes all the minimal pairs (though it might skip over some noun pairs as being less important than pairs of verbs) and all the constructions that are minimally distinguished by tone. It marks these in such a way that the tone(s) chosen to be marked will always be written whenever it (they) is (are) pronounced.

In accent languages, the situation is somewhat simpler than in tone languages. In tone languages, each syllable has at least one, or even a whole string of tones, which are realized on that syllable by some kind of level or glided tone. In an accent language, there is one accentuated (or high tone-carrying) syllable per word. (Occasionally there might be more than one.) Once it is determined which syllable carries the accent, the tone of all the other syllables is predictable in relation to that accentuated syllable. Often, there is a basic form for the lexical items; a lexical accent. There might be minimal pairs, similar to the minimal pairs in tone languages. There are also grammatical changes of accent, where the accentuated syllable changes from first to second, from penult to antepenult or final, or whatever. The changes occur in the same environments as the grammatical tones. In addition, there might be special rules that accompany verb derivation, where verbs become nouns or other verbs by adding more syllables or changing the accent.

The rules of accentuation need to be researched, in order to know how to write the accent. Normally, the accentuated syllable should be indicated (probably by using \(<^\prime>\) over the vowel; if there is no vowel length, the accentuated vowel may be doubled in that it is usually lengthened anyway). If the accentuated syllable changes position, the writing rules should coincide with the pronunciation. In other words, it should always be the accentuated syllable that is marked in some way. The writing should be systematic: if accent needs to be written at all, it needs to be written whenever it is pronounced. If the research reveals that the language has neither tone nor phonemic accent, nothing special needs to be marked.

2. Reference dialect

[Topics: dialects]

Every language is spoken in several varieties or dialects. In developing a writing system, it is important to choose one of the several dialects as the “reference dialect,” the norm to be written. The speech variety chosen for this usually has some kind of prestige, be it because many people speak it, because it is used in the church or in administrative functions, because it is spoken in the city, or because an important person speaks it (see Sadembouo 1980).

Another reason why a special speech variety is chosen might be its intercomprehension with other speech varieties. Sometimes one dialect is easily understood by a large part of the speech community, whereas, other dialects might be less easily understood by many people. Or one variety might be “purer,” less changed, than the others; the origin of the whole group might be associated with it. If one dialect definitely has some prestige, by whatever criteria, so that it is easily accepted as the reference dialect, the question is easily resolved.

Once the reference dialect has been established, it can be studied in depth, in order to develop the writing system according to its structure. This writing system will be taught in reading classes. Any written material will preferably be published in that dialect, particularly in the early stages. The use of the reference dialect presents a problem of reading difficulty to the speakers of the other dialects: the writing system will not be keyed to their pronunciation but to that of the reference dialect. They will need to learn to recognize the differences in relation to their own dialect, which, hopefully, are regular and can be mastered without too much difficulty. The very first written materials will bear the characteristics of the reference dialect.

The speakers of the other dialects should learn the writing system that was developed for the reference dialect. But when they actually write their language, they should be allowed to write their own dialect. This then will mean that for a while, written material in more than one dialect will appear. The reference dialect will be reinforced by printed material, but in actual writing, anyone should have the freedom to express himself at will. This implies that there will be a way to write more than one dialect, though (mainly) with the alphabet developed for the reference dialect.

The standardization process for a writing system for any language takes a number of years (see Wiesemann 1987). The whole language group must be involved, that is, the speakers of all the dialects that comprise that particular language group need to learn to read and write. They need to use the written language, so that in time a standard form will naturally develop, a form that will be used by the speakers of all the dialects. Surely that form will contain certain adaptations from the dialect initially chosen as the reference dialect. Such adaptations are difficult to foresee, therefore, there needs to be some liberty so that the development can come about naturally.

For the purpose of standardizing there needs to be a body of people, a language committee, empowered by the language community to set the norms. A language committee decides on such questions as which dialect should be chosen as the reference dialect, which sounds should be represented by which letters, and which orthography rules apply and how. There are many other concerns for them, such as developing grammatical norms, dictionaries, the written literature for the language group, and the dissemination of such literature; maybe even questions of how to teach reading and writing in the language. It is important that all the dialects be represented on such a committee; the committee should include representatives of (1989). Notes on Literacy, 57.
all the other interest groups, including monolingual speakers and women. Out of such a united effort, a viable standardized form of the language can come, acceptable to and accepted by the whole language community.

3. Orthography revision

Some African languages have been written for a number of years. Not all of them have been standardized according to the ideal situation we have been trying to explain. Many lack a tone or accent orthography, and even vowels and consonants have not always been represented systematically and adequately. People in the past have learned to read, though not easily. Most writing systems can be mastered, given enough time to do so. However, the easier the writing system is, that is, the closer it is to the sound perception of the native speaker, the more quickly it can be learned and by more people. In fact, there is no good reason why anyone should have to spend more than two years of his life trying to master the orthography of his language. There is no virtue in a writing system so complicated that only the most intelligent and diligent can master it. A writing system is not an end in itself, but rather a means by which to express oneself, keep notes, enjoy books. So it should be as easy as possible.

Our knowledge of linguistics and pedagogy today permits us to develop an adequate, easy writing system for any language, and to accompany it by an adequate literacy program for the dissemination of such a system (see for example, Wiesemann 1988; Shell 1987). If the language has never been standardized (though individuals may have tried writing it), the sensible strategy would be to begin with the necessary linguistic analysis in order to initiate the standardization process in the best possible way.

But what of the languages in which some books have already been published in an orthography which is difficult, if not impossible, to read? Should this situation continue and new books use the same spelling? The best way for such languages would be to embark on a series of slowly applicable spelling reforms. Brazil has a long history of such reforms. Every five years, another simplifying rule is being incorporated into the orthography, so that today the spelling of words in Brazilian Portuguese is much closer to their pronunciation than is the spelling used in Portugal.

Education is costly, and not many African languages will ever have a full-fledged school program. Even where they do, it is important that the languages have an easy writing system. And easy is always defined as being in accordance with the intuition of the native speaker (without becoming phonetic, however, which would result in overdifferentiation).

The best investment any language group can make is to encourage some of its members to train as linguists. These can then closely scrutinize the phonological structure of their own language, in order to rethink the way it is being written and to discover any changes that would make reading and writing easier, even enjoyable. Such changes should then be transformed into a set of gradual reforms to be taught to those who have already mastered the old system. New students could be taught the new system, thus, giving an opportunity to try it out. Good reforms would make reading and writing so much easier that it would be well worth the effort and the pain it would cause to those who have to change.

References


