DEVELOPING or REVISING A WRITING SYSTEM

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Smalley’s “Maximums” for Orthography Development

Maximum acceptability
Maximum representation
Maximum ease of learning
Maximum transfer
Maximum reproduction
Malones’ Maximum

Maximum humility
Political factors to consider

Does the national government have a policy on minority language orthographies? If so, how will this affect decisions about your orthography?

Will your decisions about the orthography give preference to any group within the community advantage, giving them an advantage over other groups?

Will your decisions about the orthography threaten the status of any members of the community?
Linguistic factors to consider

What kind of writing system is best for this orthography (e.g., phonemic, syllabic, morphophonemic, morphemic)?

Do the symbols that you want to use represent the most important parts of the language (consonants, vowels and semi-vowels, stress, tone, etc.) consistently and clearly?
Sociolinguistic factors to consider

Who are all the people (age, gender, dialect groups, etc.) who will use this orthography? Will they be able to read it? Will they be able to write it? Will all of them agree this orthography represents their language well?

Who is concerned about the way this language is written: government officials, educators, politicians, linguists, religious leaders, the learners themselves? Have representatives of each of these groups had a part in developing the orthography?
Is there another orthography in the language that people are already using? If so, who developed it? Who values it? Who opposes it? If you develop a new orthography, will it cause trouble with the people who use the old one?

Will the orthography be pleasing to the users’ cultural sense of form and beauty?

Does the language have multiple dialects? If so, do some of the dialects have sounds that other dialects do not have? Will you need to develop additional symbols for those dialects?
Is the language community in contact with another, more powerful language group? If so, how do local people feel about the powerful language? Do they want their orthography to look like the orthography of the other language or do they want theirs to be different? Will your orthography help mother tongue speakers transfer back and forth between your language and the more powerful language?
Are there neighboring languages that are linguistically related to yours? How closely does your orthography correspond to the orthographies of these languages? Will your orthography make it as easy as possible for people to transfer back and forth between your language and neighboring languages?

Are there other scripts (e.g., religious, historical, classical) already in use in your language? If so, should the new orthography look like these older scripts or should it be different?
Psycholinguistic factors to consider

Will the orthography make it easy for people to learn to read and write in their language?

Does the new orthography have all the symbols that are needed but not too many symbols?

Note: Some orthographies use too few symbols (two different sounds are represented by only one symbol, e.g., city and cat in English.) Other orthographies use too many symbols (one sound is represented by more than one symbol, e.g., fish, phone and rough in English.) Usually, a good orthography has a one-to-one correspondence between sounds and symbols. But for people who are just learning to read it is often better to have too many rather than too few symbols.
Technological factors to consider

Will the community be able to produce reading materials in the language with the technology that is available to them?

Does the orthography require special characters (glyphs)? Will the people be able to form and print those characters using the technology that is available to them?