Orthographies, language planning, and politics

Reflections of an SIL literacy muse

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1. Introduction

“The soldiers of literacy, as the writer Kazantzakis called the letters of the alphabet, are the most conspicuous part of the written languages in which they are employed. They may also be the most misunderstood.” Frank Smith, literacy theoretician and teacher, thus began his chapter, “What’s the use of the alphabet?” in his 1988 essays on education, Joining the literacy club (Smith 1988:32).

These words ring a familiar bell for the field linguist. Struggling through the intricacies of phonological analysis and consequent design of a practical orthography, the OWL (ordinary working linguist) pours his lifeblood into understanding the sound system of a little-known minority language. Then, after all is said and done, the “soldiers of literacy” seem to be shooting in the wrong direction. They are indeed conspicuous and often most misunderstood. Why should the innocent black marks on a page be so misunderstood? Aren’t these “soldiers of literacy” invading the territory of nonliterate or preliterate (1991). Notes on Literacy, 65.
societies to establish the sovereignty of the written word? Isn’t such a sovereign rule greatly to be desired?

2. Various perspectives on alphabets

[Topics: alphabets]

The linguist typically thinks of an alphabet as the scientific result of phonological analysis and as a practical tool for encoding a message. The message is intended to be decoded and understood. It is to be retained through interactive use (Brice-Heath 1987) and shared with others. Therefore, for the applied linguist, alphabets have, above all else, an instrumental or functional purpose (Kelman 1971).

Societies with a long or strong literary tradition use alphabets to reproduce words, which when strung together somewhat after the fashion of oral speech, produce books and other written materials. All kinds of information can be processed and shared. People are expected to follow directions from the printed page, interact with the text, come to conclusions, and change their behavior. We also expect the pages crowded with wiggly black marks to sing to us, to inspire in us an appreciation of beauty, and to infuse us with moral courage.

All of this is obvious, isn’t it? Or is it? Pablo Freire, the guru of adult literacy in the so-called “two-thirds world,” has wryly commented, “Experience teaches us not to assume that the obvious is clearly understood” (Freire 1970:40). World view vastly alters the obvious from one culture and language to another. When one is engaged in the process of developing an alphabet for a previously unwritten language, he cannot assume that everyone will view his efforts with the same set of values.

Even though he chooses linguistically and pedagogically sound symbols, he may be misjudging the social-political context of the “soldiers of literacy” in a given area. Consider, for example, the various perspectives on alphabets found in national governments and local communities.

National governments tend to think of alphabets as relatively uncomplicated and neutral tools serving their efforts to “nationize” (Fishman 1972), that is, to forge a sovereign nation in such practical areas as educating its citizens, developing a solid economy, providing basic health care, and building roads. Mass literacy is viewed as a natural and proper goal for all progressive countries. Such governments are not apt to be concerned about detailed arguments as to why a minority language should have thus and thus symbols. Their concern is that the alphabet serve to unite their country and serve its citizens in a practical way. The argument that vernacular alphabets will better help ethnic minorities to transfer reading skills to the national language(s) is what counts. What else would we expect from the highest governing body of the land?

At the other end of the spectrum is the local indigenous community. Initially, such communities, especially the isolated ones, think of orthographies as something quite foreign and unnecessary for their own spoken tongue which has never before needed to be written. What useful or even ritual place does a list of arbitrary marks on a piece of paper have for a hunter-gatherer group? Or a tribal society? Even peasant societies may not see the sense of having their expressed speech form represented on paper. The

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availability of a written medium such as the language of wider communication (LWC) may seem to them more than adequate for the legal and economic activities which affect them.

Many Mayan peasant communities in Guatemala see the **concrete** sound as vital, not the **abstract** representation. It is the voiced prayer of the pastor or shaman which carries authority. The public reading of sacred Scripture is important for a ritual proclamation. The Mayan cultures and languages reflect a preoccupation with the concrete. If a grapheme is a symbol of sound, then the grapheme is the sound itself. Symbol is reality. There is no definite line between the abstract and the concrete. Faith is an empty word, but “sitting your heart down on God’s back” (Quiché) is concrete, real. Therefore, the whole idea of an alphabet being the abstract representation of the utterances coming out of the mouth is very strange.

As societies change and there is a movement towards towns and cities, the domain of written language develops. In fact, Jack Goody, social anthropologist and investigator of the impact of writing on societies asserts that

… if language is inextricably associated with ‘culture’, it is writing that is linked with ‘civilization’, with the culture of cities, with complex social formations, though perhaps not quite in so direct a manner. Nor is this only a matter of the implications for social organization, radical as these were in the long run. It is not just a question of providing the means by which trade and administration can be extended, but of changes in the cognitive processes that man is heir to, that is, the ways in which he understands his universe (Goody 1987:3).

Minority groups can see writing, and thus alphabets, as a part of their culture in certain domains of use. Records of business transactions; historical events during a ruler’s reign; land titles; sacred writings; calendric calculations; the movement of the heavenly bodies; in the past all of these have been represented graphically.

Oral cultures have not needed writing and alphabets to keep track of their own oral literature. Amazing accuracy has been preserved in many of the African oral literatures. It is more our own Western value of writing that restricts us in understanding the different perspective of indigenous peoples who may keep the “soldiers of literacy” strictly confined to the base.

In the multilingual societies so prevalent in the two-thirds world, many **members of ethnic minorities become bilingual** and multilingual in a way it is hard for us to imagine. In most such countries, formal education is received in a language other than the local vernacular. While the individual may still feel that “broad and alien is the world” (Alegría 1980), nonetheless traditional language and cultural values are changing. Many of these bilinguals still esteem their mother tongue as a viable spoken language but allow no need for a written domain. From their point of view, alphabets should serve as practical “Peace Corps members” to facilitate intergroup communication instead of “soldiers of literacy.” Therefore, if vernacular languages are to be written at all, their graphemes should facilitate using the LWC.

After enough time passes for these bilinguals to become secure in a job or social class in a more urban center, there is sometimes a nostalgia for their cultural heritage. If they are now able to defend themselves in the “broad and alien world,” then it is possible to look with favor upon their roots and even participate


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in a revival movement. Such movements are documented in many parts of the world, for example, Peru, the Philippines, Nigeria, and Guatemala. Alphabets that represent the former mother tongue no longer need to be instrumental for carrying out certain business or practical functions. Rather, they can be representative of the sentiments one has towards his heritage. Kelman called this a sentimental use of language (1971). Language and the necessary graphemes to represent it become more a distinctive symbol of identity rather than a medium of practical communication.

In Guatemala, many such bilinguals with a reawakened appreciation for their own linguistic and cultural heritage are titled schoolteachers serving in the national bilingual education program. As they have prepared vernacular materials such as primers, school dictionaries, and grammars, they have discovered that their languages really could function in the written domain. Kindled by the international fires of rising ethnic consciousness, and joined by other indigenes who have become lawyers, psychologists, sociologists, and so forth, they have begun to see themselves as an elite group who could lead their own people toward a recovery of their glorious past. For this Guatemalan Mayan elite, the alphabet has become a great rallying point for ethnic identity. As such, they have moved away from the instrumental use of alphabets for preparing materials necessary to the bilingual education program. To better reflect their cultural identity, they are urging that alphabets “look more Mayan” and less like Spanish. In a more extreme instance, an alphabet has been proposed, based on elements borrowed from Mayan glyphs and excluding many Roman characters altogether. Clearly, such a proposal reflects a desire that their alphabet express their separateness from the mestizo culture. Primacy has moved from an instrumental to an affective criterion for developing an alphabet.

When the affective use of alphabets as an ethnic identity symbol is strong, the Westerner’s preoccupation with practical decoding and pedagogical issues appears irrelevant. How could it be otherwise?

Today, the Mayan elite are interested in all aspects of their traditional history, including religion. At present, a large body of literature exists in Spanish-like alphabets (more than 1,400 titles), linking Mayan people to the intellectual, economic, educated, and religious world of the West. One way to break this link is by removing or invalidating this entire literature—and replacing the alphabet may be the only way to do this.

Indian and mestizo educators hold a different viewpoint from the elite who have temporarily lost their interest in the preparation of corpus materials such as school dictionaries and grammars, primers and easy reading books. Many of the education professionals in Guatemala and elsewhere recognize the practical necessity for ethnic groups to “superarse” (try to do better), improving their lives socially, economically, and educationally. Although they may also have come to respect and value their own cultural-linguistic background, they want no alphabets that would hinder their own people in making appropriate gains in the mestizo world. If the graphemes make it hard to transfer from the vernacular to the LWC, they are not considered valuable in the long term. Educators who are motivated to value ethnic minorities are often pulled one direction and then another as they try to make both instrumental and affective choices at the same time. Two respected Mayan educators in Guatemala have been severely criticized by the ethnic elite for maintaining a functional instead of a sentimental viewpoint about alphabets.

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Since bilingual corpus writers for autochthonous languages are concerned with how to develop sufficient didactic materials for the school system, they may lack patience with those who are concerned only with enhanced status of these languages and their alphabets.

**Religious leaders** tend to preserve or build tradition fitting their systems. Depending on what that tradition is and the existence of religious books, these professionals will uphold the alphabetic forms of the past, or of the LWC, whichever they are accustomed to decoding and proclaiming.

**Poets, artists, and literary figures** regard language as a sacred vehicle for expressing beauty and truth. Writing systems and orthographic conventions are used to enhance and serve their art, certainly not vice versa. For these people, sentiment is primary, not function, and meaning can be communicated on other levels than through practical orthographies. Winged seraphim would be thought more appropriate than “soldiers of literacy.”

Thus, the seemingly innocent “soldiers of literacy,” are viewed with varying degrees of usefulness and sentiment depending on the segment of national life in focus. We in SIL appreciate various perspectives. Sometimes, however, we get caught between our desire for a linguistically sound communicative tool and the surges of ethnic sentiment which we support but which may run counter to our practical goals.

### 3. Language planning and the alphabet dilemma

Having reviewed the varying perspectives on alphabets which different sections of society espouse, I will now relate these perspectives to language planning.

Language planning may sound manipulative, even sinister! Usually, however, it is simply the attempt of national government agencies to **define and systematize the country’s linguistic situation**, so that all the functions of government can be contextualized in the various subgroups of its population.

History provides many examples of language planning attempts occurring long before the discipline of sociolinguistics and its subdivision of language policy and planning came into vogue. The ancient Romans allowed local languages to remain but instituted government, law, and education in their own tongue. The modern state of Israel mandated a rigorous program of development which succeeded in reviving Hebrew as the spoken and written language of the nation. King James I of England inadvertently succeeded in standardizing the language of religion through his sponsorship of the translation of the Authorized Version of the Bible. The Spanish conquerors, and later the *criollo* rulers of Guatemala and southern Mexico, systematically sought to stamp out the indigenous Mayan languages. They succeeded in the written domain but failed to crush the spoken flower of the indigenous spirit.

All national governments must respond to the **presence of pressure groups who lobby for their own interests**. As language planners seek to make decisions about the language(s) of schooling, they will meet head-on the perspectives of the various groups mentioned in Section Two, as well as others who represent economic and business interests such as labor and agriculture.

If a country has a complex linguistic situation like India, it may be possible to respond to only certain interest groups. Cultural religious factors weighed heavily in India’s decision to maintain two national languages, Hindi and Urdu (essentially the same linguistically), with their respective writing systems. (1991). *Notes on Literacy, 65.*
Hinduism and Islam could not be accommodated with the same alphabet or script for what they deemed to be two such divergent streams. India has such a big job of language planning and policy decisions that they can scarcely handle the educational demands of 18 different state languages, two national languages, one official (international) language, let alone 300 minority languages. Corpus development will continue indefinitely.

In Thailand, language planners must consider four different scripts (Thai, Chinese, Arabic, and Roman) when they consider the development of any of the tribal languages. Historical ethnic roots influence the approach to abstract representation of sounds. The Roman alphabet seems so manageable to us when compared with the problems of the Thai script. In China, the Chinese logographic traditional writing system covers all the variant dialects with no problems of sound-symbol correspondence. But think how few ever master the memory load. Modern Chinese bureaucrats are pushing the Roman alphabet as an aid to mass literacy. But how many sets of written materials will then need to be prepared in which of the Chinese dialects?

North and Latin America face the challenge of incorporating indigenous groups into the national education system without completely assimilating them and thus destroying their cultures and languages. At one time in history, SIL supported the introduction and continuation of avowedly transitional bilingual education programs in several Latin American countries. We understood that this token use of the vernacular would help students over the bridge from indigenous to mestizo culture. We purposely supported alphabets that would facilitate this transition. At the time it seemed better than no use of the autochthonous languages at all in schooling. Now, 25 years later in the Guatemala case, SIL is accused of supporting alphabets that have hastened the language shift to Spanish and death of indigenous cultures. We have been caught in our own tradition of supporting the national government. Now, with the ethnic elite espousing a new alphabet as their banner of Mayan identity, a whole new dimension has been introduced into the subject of language planning.

In many countries in the world, language planners must attempt to stretch their meager resources of money, people, equipment and time in myriad ways. It is no wonder that policies are made that exclude the development of small languages. The long process of investigating and responding to language attitudes, positive and negative, can discourage the most enthusiastic. SIL could assist language planners by means of our extensive experience and knowledge of minority languages. Some alphabet changes may be required as a result. Some languages may never enjoy a robust vernacular literature. (See David Bendor-Samuel’s thoughtful article, “The ongoing use of vernacular literature” 1988) Unnecessary multiplication of dialect-specific literature is something that, from the planners’ point of view, may need to be laid aside in some programs. Isolation from a nation’s language planning and policy decisions is not possible. As an expatriate organization, SIL is too visible, too prosperous, too independent, and has too many resources and trained personnel to neglect serious cooperation with government language planners. Nor is a polemic approach likely to help us in the long run.

National, regional, and local infrastructures are readily exploited by those delegated to implement official language policy decisions. Whether it be the “outback,” the “bush,” the “interior,” or the “boonies,” SIL is probably there working with some minority language. Local people may not be aware of or able to influence alphabet or language policy decisions that affect their area. We may not agree with some of the policies, but it seems to me that we must continue to feed information to the authorities and appear to be (1991). Notes on Literacy, 65.

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conciliatory, even when we would rather holler. As an organization, we see ourselves as championing the underdog, whether it be about alphabets, writing conventions, or the language of the church or schools. Since we can maintain ourselves by independent means, we might sometimes imagine ourselves as local language planners. We have the linguistic expertise and practical outlook to make appropriate decisions in the community. But our decisions, however technically correct they may seem, will in the end be only that—our decisions.

With the current emphasis on human rights and the rise of ethnic minorities, we will also have to make many alphabet and spelling decisions interdependently rather than independently. Some areas of the SIL world have been constrained to such partnership from the beginning. Others, like those of us in Latin America, have been moving slowly from a system which has been in effect benignly paternalistic to one of greater interdependence, with both indigenes and nationals. Although we have good advice to offer, it may not be received by language planners—whether indigenous, academic, or official—as fitting their nation’s goals.

At the level of the local community, one may find a great divergence of perspectives between the language policy makers and the local users of an alphabet. If we truly respect that difference we will need to find ways to work through it. It is not necessarily right to defend the local viewpoint always and at any cost. People out of the mainstream of national culture will soon have their world enlarged. We cannot, and should not, protect them from this but help in the transition if possible. The ever-present challenge is to find the right balance between understanding the local and national perspective.

Sometimes the very people we have come to serve are the ones who “plan” language use and manipulate alphabets in an unfortunate way, from our viewpoint. It will require great humility of spirit to work with antagonistic pressure groups and still salvage some workable policies which will help, rather than hinder, people in a local language community.

In the case of orthography changes, there are usually fewer problems in adapting to them than we have been willing to admit. In Guatemala, we have been quick to defend the neoliterates, insisting that it will be too difficult for them to adjust to some grapheme changes. Admittedly, it would not be our choice to have people who can barely decode a seemingly formidable page of print be required to change. But reports from around the world suggest that people can make the adjustment if they want to and have help. It has been claimed that most people do not want to, that they will give up reading instead. We certainly do not want anyone to give up the newfound skill of reading and lose the thrill of comprehending the message spelled out across the page.

In the Quiché area of Guatemala, we witnessed the effects of three orthography changes which were planned by others and instituted in Quiché literature. Neoliterates did struggle, but not unreasonably so. Referring to some of the old conventions, for example, using $gk$ to represent the voiceless glottalized velar stop, Quiché people now laugh and remark how odd that was. It must seem odd now, because Spanish never uses such a combination and the influence of it as a national language is more prevalent than 50 years ago. That symbol was changed to $c'$ and now to $k'$. Each time, readers adjusted. Of course, the newer the reader, the more he needs help to adapt.

The number of alphabet changes instituted all at once is another important factor to consider. If language planners on the national scene respond to a pressure group’s plea to make extensive changes, the (1991). Notes on Literacy, 65.
indigenous readers will likely come out of the woodwork and protest, or they will simply ignore the new policy and go on reading their old books.

Before laying all the credit or blame on language planners at a regional or national level, we in SIL must recognize our role as language planners. We are not even citizens of the countries where we work. We are foreigners. Yet the activities we engage in among ethnic groups promote the status of the language. Providing a translation of the Scriptures in a small vernacular language develops that tongue in vocabulary, especially with regard to loans and neologisms. Spelling conventions, punctuation, and capital letters are all introduced from an outside Western system. We analyze the vernacular, higher level phonology and discourse features, but the influence of the LWC often obliges us to follow its orthographic conventions instead. In the village situation, we function as an elite ourselves. In some places, we affect decisions through partnership with highly educated churchmen, university professors, or local cultural associations. Just our writing down the language assures some kind of future record of it, and that is language planning, too. It is inevitable that we perform this function at different junctures in a language program, and we need to admit it.

We naturally expect and respect the right of sovereign governments to assess their linguistic situations and plan for some order in their response. Reviewing the linguistic data may be a very minor part in that assessment; more crucial will be the review of resources. Pressure groups will need to be considered and sometimes bowed to, sometimes resisted. We, too, are an inadvertent pressure group. Our unwitting influence will be evident in one way or another. Once again it will not be just the linguistic and pedagogical contributions we make in offering suggestions for alphabet design. Matters of sound-symbol correspondence, overdifferentiation (representing allophones), underdifferentiation (representing two phonemes with only one symbol), word division, or script choices—all of these are of interest to language planners, but in the end the solutions may not follow our design. This is especially true in countries where there are national linguists who are expected to make these decisions, experienced or not.

4. The underlying issue: Politics

The word politics originally referred to the running of the public affairs of citizens in the Greek city states. Governments, of course, have tried to forge a unified nation out of smaller groups of people. War, economics, geography, and religion have all played a part in how a relatively small group of people can arrive at the position where they govern others. Many people, when thinking of politics, raise their eyebrows, clear their throats, and mumble something about how rotten it all is. Over the centuries, the connotation of the term has degenerated to mean the inappropriate maneuvering and manipulation done by some people to gain influence and power over others, through some organizational framework. Christians have often hesitated to become enmeshed in what has been called “dirty politics.” Even in our SIL entities, we are wary of maneuvering for positions of branch leadership. We say that it is too political. Yet, we defend some of our actions by saying we had to do it for branch political reasons.

All of the above reminds us that we too are involved in politics! Officially, the politics is intraorganizational. However, in the countries where we serve, our work influences and affects national governments. Alphabets are a classic example. Our esteemed colleague, Bob Longacre, once quipped that orthography design is more art than linguistic science. SIL’s former International Literacy Coordinator,


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Tom Crowell, judged that alphabet symbols are chosen for 30 percent linguistic reasons and 70 percent because of nonlinguistic motivations.

One of our Central America Branch members, Boris Ramirez, who is himself a native Guatemalan, once laughed at me when I said that SIL’s activities were not political. “Everything is political,” he insisted. As we talked, I realized that there is a mixture of motives and factors which affect everything that happens in the governing process. Any unit of people, however big or small, is affected. Even the lining up of the “soldiers of literacy” affects the future of a small unit of society which is, in turn, part of a sovereign nation.

Our choice of allocations for new teams affects the language politics of a country. If we choose to develop a vigorous program of linguistic analysis and Scripture translation and use, this implies that we will develop a written form for the language. Thus, its status is automatically elevated and the corpus of written literature begun. If the president of the country is from this language group, fine. But if he is from a neighboring one, we may have a political problem. Sometimes very small languages are elevated to national language status because the president or the army general decrees it. In this way, SIL could find itself developing a language program that might never have been considered necessary.

Alphabets are approved or disapproved mainly for political reasons. We categorize these under subdivisions with labels like religion, education, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics. When William Smalley wrote his now outdated, but classic article, “How shall I write this language?” (1963), he referred to the difficulty of balancing all the factors which impinge on grapheme choice. He labeled these factors as follows:

1. Maximum motivation for the learner and acceptance by his society and controlling groups such as the government
2. Maximum representation of speech
3. Maximum ease of learning
4. Maximum transfer
5. Maximum ease of reproduction (1963:33)

The order listed was Smalley’s perception of the weighted importance of each factor. Interestingly enough, his first point would fall under our psycho- and sociolinguistic rubric today. Later, others critiqued Smalley’s factors (Berry 1977; Venezky 1967, 1970; Chomsky 1970) but they all concluded that, despite the importance of each maxim, they were mutually conflicting. How was the decision to be made as to weighting the factors? Each situation called for an assessment of the history and present ambience. Different factors would be more weighty in different situations. A straight linguistic decision was rarely the most important. Political considerations concerning the acceptance of the alphabet by the language community, the educators, the elite, and so forth would decide the issue in the end.

About 10 years ago, when Margaret Wendell developed and taught the curriculum for Principles of Literacy at SIL in Dallas, she included a mock orthography conference in which various perspectives were represented. Students were to study one of the viewpoints and then act at the conference (1991). Notes on Literacy, 65.
accordingly. The local poet, the shaman, the schoolteacher, the farmer, the congressman, and the linguist—all were represented. It was a hilarious, vivid experience to see the impossible conflicts which arose because of people’s viewpoints. Each mock conference ended in a stalemate, unless some political maneuvering was accomplished. Most of us who have served in a field entity know now that the mock orthography conference was only too true a picture of what it is like in real life.

In Guatemala, a branch of about 130 adult members, we invest $500,000 a year in the country through our presence, programs, technology, and assets. This is a powerful influence to which some governments may respond with envy, fear, or gratefulness. In our recent alphabet saga, involving the independent formation of a Mayan Academy of Languages, we were acutely aware that we were labeled as an *organización pesada* ‘a heavyweight organization’. We protested, but it was the view of the elite Mayans who formed the Academy that we could wield great political influence.

Another political influence SIL has is through our home country associations with Protestantism. Sometimes, this is a negative political influence, as in Latin America or North Africa, but it can be positive, as in some sub-Saharan countries, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Australia, and Papua New Guinea. We assiduously strive to relate to all and to carry through on our wise nonsectarian stance. But, we cannot escape the political baggage we carry because of our logical association with evangelical Christianity. Our baggage has been so heavy in Guatemala that there has been a danger of a division between Catholics and Protestants over the alphabets. This type of experience is a sober reminder that we are painted by political pressure groups with their own brushes, not ours.

SIL’s association with the academic community is another political factor. In Guatemala, we cosponsor a School of Linguistics at a private university operated by four Protestant professionals. Although we have had some teaching opportunities in the national university and a private American-funded university, we have never been able to make a long-term contribution there or at the Catholic universities. Our influence on the 75 students enrolled in the University of Mariano Gálvez is considerable. Sixty of these students are Mayans and the majority are bilingual teachers. At the university, our SIL professors have been able to experiment in a neutral atmosphere with the Mayan Academy alphabet changes, now officially decreed by the President and Minister of Culture.

Studying the national scene in any country will reveal certain trends affecting our work in general and, in this case, orthography issues. I have chosen seven trends which have political spin-off in Guatemala but which I also perceive to be significant internationally.

### 4.1. Nationalism

Besides the rise of independent nations in the two-thirds world, there has been a rise of ethnic nationalism which strongly affects political rhetoric and the status assigned to minority languages. In Guatemala, Mayan languages, especially the four large groups, have a political visibility never seen before. Alphabet decisions are affected by this. Joshua Fishman (*1972*) talks about the task of “nationalizing” a country. This refers to the building of a strong national spirit and unifying the people around common symbols and heritage. The ethnic resurgence in Guatemala has become important to a government which wants to appear as pro-Mayan, although of mestizo background itself.


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4.2. Nationism

Previously, I referred to this concept of Fishman’s (1972) as the practical task of a government in providing services that are expected, for example, education, health care, and roads. This is a counterbalance to nationalism which focuses more on national pride. The great drive for the government to be successful in “nationizing” is hindered by a lack of monetary and personnel resources. Alphabet issues are shaded by various colors in this process.

4.3. Unity

Nations who need to build patriotism, as well as provide practical help to their citizens, cannot afford to allow ethnic languages and cultures to divide the country. SIL has been criticized in Guatemala about overdifferentiation of dialects, failure to standardize across large language groups, and undue focus on language variation. These three points, of course, heavily affect the formation and acceptance of a practical orthography.

4.4. Education for all and a striving for universal literacy

Around the world, people expect governments to deliver increasingly good educational services. More schools are built and more and more previously isolated areas are being touched. National literacy campaigns are regularly pushed. The international publicity received by Nicaragua and Cuba concerning their literacy campaigns (Arnowe 1973; Freire 1970) reveals the intensity of spirit and organization which two-thirds world countries can muster. Alphabets can be tested and propagated through these kinds of campaigns.

4.5. Communications media

The explosion of nonprint media in the world has influenced even very isolated groups. Radios are much more important in many rural settings than outhouses or home improvements. Video is moving to overtake television. Improvement of roads and transportation means that more people are exposed to the larger world. Whether or not conflict over orthographies will abort some literacy efforts in favor of mass media oral communication is not yet known. The integration of print and nonprint media (video and audio) can make SIL language programs more effective in many situations. This has been true, for example, in North America, Australia, Guatemala, and the Philippines.

4.6. The shrinking world, Marshall McLuhan’s global village

Geographical features no longer divide one language community from another so completely. The question is not if people will be exposed to the outside world, but when and how. The drive for international literacy could spread a Roman alphabet to areas which have always had their own literary tradition and script. English, as an international language, is a powerful influence.

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4.7. Spread of market economies

Although there are still many subsistence agriculture societies, the rise of other nontraditional exports and industrialization even at modest levels is bringing a market economy to more small indigenous communities. According to Goody (1987), this will increase the need for a written domain in previously oral cultures.

5. The challenge: Balance and service

Alphabets are an important vehicle to carry the printed word. Their composition seems crucial to us from our fieldwork viewpoint, especially when we can design them so nicely in a vacuum! When we take out the cork and the vacuum is gone with a pop, we begin to get confused ourselves. If we examine the counsel of Goody (1956, 1987), Smalley (1963), Berry (1977), Venezky (1970), and Carol Chomsky (1970) again, we will be reminded of how many factors are involved and how muddied the issues become.

In the recent Notes on Literacy issue on orthographies (1989), there are articles by Jean Dawson, Ursula Wiesemann, Pat Kelley, Roberta Hampton, and Dot Thomas, all experienced and competent in the field. The combination of articles illustrates again the complexity of interrelationships in orthography matters the world over. Looking at linguistic and sociolinguistic factors in tandem, we realize how bilingualism and diglossia will affect the psychological and auditory perception of phonemes and language variation. The social context of the indigenous language will also be impinged upon by other languages, including the national and any international language(s) present. Ease of learning will become more complex as we consider whether we want new readers to spend less time learning in the first place and more time transferring to the LWC or vice versa. How closely related are encoding (writing) and decoding (reading)? Should spelling and orthographic rules be affected by bilingualism, language contact, and language shift? What about the reproduction of written material? Shall we print in all the scripts? How many in one book? Will desktop publishing invade the jungles, the deserts, and the mountains? Will multidialect orthographies have a chance for survival when up against the LWC alphabet? Can we write underlying forms like some of the native Latin American linguists suggest? Questions! Questions! More questions, but few black and white answers.

In the final analysis, we are concerned with meaning more than symbol. But the selection of abstract symbols to represent real sounds becomes increasingly complex when factors to be considered are so mutually conflicting.

As an academic organization, SIL has made some significant contributions to orthography studies. For example, Pike analyzed tone and the Mexico Branch members struggled with assessing its functional load and graphic representation. Sarah Gudschinsky, of course, solved numerous tough orthographical problems around the world and contributed her no-nonsense, practical understanding from a teacher’s point of view. Ernie Lee systematized and elaborated on Gudschinsky’s contribution. Ray Gordon reformulated criteria for alphabet design and morphophonemic writing. Ursula Wiesemann applied her insights to standardization. Gary Simons led the way through the maze of multidialect orthographies.

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Yes, SIL as an organization can suggest; we can supply data; we can keep talking and negotiating; we can persevere when the present alphabet crises are forgotten. We can be conciliatory in the face of opposition and refuse to let our opponents divide us or invalidate our existing literature.

If our conciliatory stance seems only politically expedient, may it also be recognized as a prudent way to continue to serve in the countries where ethnic minorities are demanding attention, as well as in those where they are still hidden “behind the ranges.”

As David Weber poignantly commented in a letter (Weber 1989),

> The politically expedient thing for us [to do, of course,] is to toe the line of this [ethnic] elite. But this sometimes puts us into the position of working against the best interests of the people we are there to serve.

That is the challenge: be conciliatory and willing to supply data and manpower, even money at a national level; but also seek the best interests of the local people we long so much to serve. To neglect either strategy will be to blur our unique SIL vision.

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