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THE SHONA WRITING SYSTEM: AN ANALYSIS OF ITS PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

This article critically examines the Shona writing system, starting with an evaluation of the early efforts by the missionaries, Doke and the Shona Language Committee to establish a common writing system. The article seeks to identify weaknesses in Shona orthography and suggests ways of improving it. It concludes that the present writing system needs to be revised in order for it to be a tool for national development and that language experts need to work to improve the current alphabet, word division, and spelling so that the Shona language becomes a national asset in the new millennium.

INTRODUCTION

The Shona language is spoken in five dialectal clusters, which are ChiKaranga, ChiManyika, ChiNdau, ChiZezuru, and ChiKorekore. ChiKaranga is spoken in areas surrounding Masvingo town in the south, ChiManyika in areas around Mutare in the east, ChiNdau in Chipinge in the south east, ChiKorekore in Mutoko in the north east, and Chizezuru in north-central Zimbabwe. Outside Zimbabwe, the language is spoken in Botswana, Zambia, South Africa, and Mozambique. It should be noted that Shona dialects are mutually intelligible and are, thus, dialects of the same language. Indeed, 80 to 90 per cent of the vocabulary is common to the whole area of Shona speaking communities.

Despite this high degree of intelligibility in the spoken form, however, the written language is very problematic in a number of ways. For instance, there is no real standard way of writing the Shona language, as words in some dialects cannot be spelt using the current orthography and there are numerous problems with word division and spelling. Indeed, the writing system (alphabet, spelling and word division) cannot adequately represent the spoken form of the Shona language and is linguistically constricting, making it difficult for speaker-writers to write the spoken language correctly. Speakers of different dialects of ChiShona experience difficulties in spelling and word division because of a defective writing system, adopted in 1967, and known as the "standard" orthography that does not cater for dialectal variations and also does not allow speaker-writers to write their language the way they speak it.

For example, the spelling system in use bears little resemblance to the spoken language. An example is that, while the standard spelling of the verb "to eat" is <dya>, in Korekore, it is <dja>, while in Zezuru, Ndau, and Karanga, it is >djwa<; >dhla<; and >hla<, respectively. The writing system is, therefore, far from being standard, a situation that causes problems to students studying Shona in the country's education system. It is clear, therefore, that the system is in need of urgent revision.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE SHONA WRITING SYSTEM

Efforts to establish a common writing system can be divided into three distinct periods, namely: the period of early missionary efforts (1890-1928); the period of Doke's New Orthography (1932-1954), and the period of revisions (1955-2000). According to Chimhundu (1992, 97), attempts to write ChiShona were begun in different places mostly by missionaries whose linguistic backgrounds were Indo-European languages and who were working independently of each other. Thus, each dialectal cluster evolved its own writing system, often, different from those of the other dialects.

Concerns about the differences in the various dialectal orthographies led to a vigorous debate at the 1928 Missionary Conference whether efforts should be made to develop a single standard Shona writing system or whether there should be two writing systems in Mashonaland, representing the Zezuru and Karanga dialects, respectively. After failing to resolve the issue, the Conference issued the following statement:

This conference finds itself unable to decide at present between the alternative of standardising two dialects for Mashonaland viz. ChiKaranga and ChiZezuru or of standardising a unified language built on all the four existing dialects. We would respectively request the government to approach the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures with a view to obtaining a suitable expert to investigate and advise upon the matter (Doke, 1931, 5).

The result was the appointment of C. M. Doke, then Professor of Bantu languages at the University of Witwatersrand, to undertake the task, with the assistance of three priests, namely, Revs. Barnes, Burbridge, and Louw.

As noted, Doke was to study the language situation in the country and advise the government on the way forward. At the end of his tour, Doke made twelve recommendations pertaining to the alphabet, word division, grammatical standardisation, choice of vocabulary, and the development of literature. Doke recommended that a unified grammar be standardised based on ChiKaranga and ChiZezuru dialects, that the conjunctive method of word division be used in Shona writing, and that

the orthography be unified based on the principles set out by the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures. Consequently, Shona orthography was developed on the principle of one sound, one symbol (Doke, 1931, 83), and the following alphabet was recommended:

<a, b, _, c, d, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, m, n, _, o, p, r, s, _, ?, t, u, v, ?, w, x, y, z, ?, ?> (Fortune, 1972, 17).

Professor Doke's contribution to the development of a writing system among the Shona was enormous. The government accepted Doke's orthography, but many, including the Native Affairs Department, the Post Office, and the Press, for unclear reasons, opposed it and never adopted it.

Meanwhile, there was an increasing call for the introduction of the Roman alphabet to simplify printing, reading, and writing. Consequently, an orthography committee was set up and made its recommendations in a pamphlet entitled *A Guide to Standard Shona Spelling* in 1955. Among its recommendations was that the special characters introduced by Doke should be abolished, while only Roman letters should be used. The recommended alphabet was much simpler and contained only the following letters and diagraphs:

<a, b, ch, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, m, n, ny, ng, o, p, r, s, sh, sv, t, u, v, w, y, z, zh, zv> (Magwa, 1999, 18).

There was no longer a distinction between and <_>, <d> and <?>, <_> and <ng>, <v> and <?>. The symbols <_> and <z> were replaced by diagraphs <sv> and <zv>, respectively. The symbol <x>, a sound found in ChiKaranga and ChiNdau was removed from the alphabet.

The proposed alphabet was approved by government for general use and by the whole Shona writing community. However, the revisions were defective because, in writing, they did not reflect the distinctions made in speaking and so could be ambiguous. Although the new orthography was clearly retrogressive, it was received quite happily by the Shona people on the somewhat dubious grounds that the orthography was being designed for Shona speakers who would know from the context which of the two phonemes the ambiguous letter stood for. Dissatisfaction with this aspect of the 1955 orthography led to further revision in 1967.

In 1967, the 1955 orthography was brought into line with that of 1932 by a language committee whose membership included the Secretary for Education and a professor of African languages at the University of Rhodesia. The committee adopted all the phonetic distinctions made by Doke but pointed out that this did not involve the addition of new or

special symbols to the alphabet, which remained based on the Roman alphabet. The committee's objective was to make the spelling clearer and easier to understand. The Minister of Education approved these recommendations and the following alphabet was adopted:

<a, b, bh, ch, d, dh, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, m, mh, n, nh, ny, n', o, p, r, s, sh, sv, t, u, v, vh, w, y, z, zh, zv> (Fortune, 1972, 21).

This system of writing, which, unfortunately, makes it difficult for Shona speaker-writers to write their language correctly, is what is still in use today.

PROBLEMS WITH THE CURRENT ORTHOGRAPHY

From 1967 onwards, speakers of different Shona dialects were experiencing certain difficulties arising from the defective alphabet and the spelling and word division system. The current orthography is linguistically constricting in a number of ways. For example, the standard alphabet does not have symbols representing the sounds [l] and [x], which are found in ChiKaranga, ChiNdau, and ChiKoreore dialects. For example:

ChiNdau	—	muhlobo (type)
	—	kahle (good)
ChiKaranga	—	pxere (youngsters)
	—	maxeu (sweet beer)
ChiKorekore	—	xumbudzi (young goats)
	—	xurume (men)

The speakers of these dialects are, thus, compelled to write in a manner that is different from the way they speak because of the inadequacy of the standard alphabet. Under the standard spelling, writers are compelled to write as follows:

Muhoro	instead of	muxoro
Uswa	instead of	uxwa
humbudzi	instead of	xumbudzi
mutowo	instead of	muhlobo
pwere	instead of	pxere

Another problem with the standard orthography is the use of the breathy voice, which is very common in Shona dialects but which is not fully represented in the standard spelling. Apart from <bh, dh, mh, nh, vh, zh, hw>, the symbol <h> should also accompany <g> and <r> to

represent a breathy voice. In the following example, for instance, the letter >g< is pronounced differently:

Ngoro	(cart)
Nganunu	(gun)
Gokora	(elbow)
Goridhe	(gold)

The present alphabet does not distinguish between the different pronunciations of the letter <g> in the above examples and neither does it distinguish between:

<r>	in	roro (fruit)
<r>	in	rori (lorry)
<nd>	in	ndiro (plate)
<nd>	in	ndari (beer for sale)
<mb>	in	mbada (leopard)
<mb>	in	mbaura (brazier).

ChiNdau, in particular, has several sound combinations that are not represented in the present writing system. For example:

[hl]	—	hlobo (type)
[dhl]	—	kudhla (to eat)
[nth]	—	unthu (humanhood)
[nt]	—	ntunzi (fly)
[th]	—	thokosa (talk)
[thw]	—	kuthwa (to pound i.e. grain)
[kh]	—	khamba (leopard)

The current orthography is so inadequate that people with certain Ndau names find it almost impossible to write them, using the standard spelling since some Ndau sound combinations are not part of the standard alphabet. Examples are:

Dhliwayo (dhl)
Mlambo (ml)
Mhlanga (mhl)

In ChiManyika, the sound combination [psw] as in >pswaira< (sweep) is not represented in the alphabet and thus cannot be put in written form. The Korekore people make use of the [dj] sound combination, which again cannot be spelt using the current orthography, thus, instead of writing <tedja> (we eat), they are compelled to write <tedya>, simply

because the <dj> diagraph is not part of the standard alphabet. The Karanga, too, have certain sound combinations which have been excluded by the standard alphabet. Examples are:

Pxere (child)
Xarani (thread)
lbge (stone)

Speakers of the Zezuru dialect also have some sound combinations, which were rejected by the standard writing system, for example:

Nghanunu (gun)
Mbhaura (brazier)
Ndhari (beer for sale)
Rhori (lorry)
Ghandanga (savage)

According to Fortune (1972, 25), the Shona spelling system is purely conventional and bears very little relation to what people speak. The writing system does not represent what it said in most dialects but purely provides a common spelling, i.e. **kudya** (to eat). The above conventional spelling bears no relation to the actual utterances since there is such variety from one dialect to another in the way these letter combinations are pronounced. The syllable <dya> is realised as"

[dja]	—	Chikorekore
[dha]	—	ChiNdau
[hia]	—	ChiKaranga

Another demerit of the current writing system is that the rules of spelling and word division are all expressed in a foreign language — English. Magwa (1999, ix) argues that no language can be taught effectively using another language. This is a serious handicap, which militates against the relevancy and appropriateness of the current orthography.

According to Chimhundu (1992, 84), the statement of rules that explains how to and how not to use the alphabet is over-elaborate, unnecessarily complex, and sometimes inconsistent. There seems to be inconsistency between the statement of rules and their elaboration for the purposes of implementation. Rule VI, for example, reads:

Reduplicated substantive stems of more than two syllables are always separated by a hyphen e.g. **mangwanani-ngwanani** (Fortune, 1972, 50).

However, reduplicated stems of less than two syllables are written without a hyphen between them, e.g. **magwanangwana**. Complex nominal

instructions derived from ideophones are written in two parts without a hyphen, e.g. **chamusvetu musvetu**.

The above examples clearly show how difficult and confusing the word division rules are to the ordinary speaker-writer. One ends up not knowing when to use and when not to use the hyphen, given the fact that these rules are in a foreign language. The rules are too complicated for most Shona speakers. The restrictions are too many, making implementation of the rules very difficult. Furthermore, there is no linguistic justification for writing the word **mesomeso** as one word, while writing **kare kare** as two words.

The Shona spelling system restricts variations in speech and supplementary rules have been put forward to restrict a speaker-writer's options. The rule makers contrived to make standard forms those options they considered to be used by the majority of speakers. Thus, Class 2 prefix / V / is to be used although the Manyika and Korekore speakers use / W / e.g.

- vanhu** (people) — Karanga/Zezuru
wanhu (people) — Manyika/Korekore

The Karanga speakers have problems when they are required to write the enclitic <wo> when, in fact, they pronounce it as <vo> or when they are discouraged from using <sh, zh> as in <shuro, shanga, zhara, zhira> and told to use <tsuro, tsanga, nzara, nzira> (Chimhundu, 1972, 85).

Another weakness of the Shona spelling system is that it does not accommodate sounds that have come into the language as adoptives or downloads, such as:

- Thimomita** (thermometer)
Thiyori (theory),
Thisisi (thesis).

Although in 1982, the Ministry of Education removed these restrictions, the prevailing attitude in the same ministry and its institutions is that the 1967 orthography rules still apply and these may only be relaxed during examinations. In practice, all those forms that do not conform to the rules set out in 1967 are discouraged. According to Chimhundu (1972, 86),

removal of restrictions by the ministerial directive of 1982 is privileged information for use only by examiners . . . and that it was never intended that teachers should allow their students literally to write as they speak.

All these problems point to the fact that the Shona writing system is far from adequate and that there is a need to cater for dialectal variations in the orthography if the language is to be written correctly by all Shona speakers.

THE WAY FORWARD

It is contended here that the Shona orthography must be expanded to cater for the needs of different Shona dialects so that people can write their language as they speak it. For the orthography to improve, the Shona Language Committee must prescribe a new standard system of writing, which will permit people who speak dialects of ChiShona (ChiKaranga, ChiNdau, ChiManyika, ChiZezuru, and ChiKorekore) to write in the same way, while still allowing for variations in choice of vocabulary.

The first step that needs to be taken is to revise the 1967 Shona alphabet, which is the source of many orthography problems. The diagraphs <bh, ch, dh, mh, nh, ny, sh, sv, vh, zh, zv> should be removed from the Shona alphabet. There is no literary justification to have, for example, diagraph <sv> in the alphabet, while there is no <sw> in the alphabet. Similarly, it is not justifiable to have <bh, ch, dh, mh, nh, sh, vh, zh> in the alphabet but fail to include diagraphs <gh> and <rh> in the same alphabet.

The symbols in the 1967 alphabet should be reduced from 34 to only 26 letters. All symbols of the Roman alphabet, with the exception of <q>, should make up the new alphabet. The alphabet should consist of only single letters. Different dialect speakers could then combine these single letters to form acceptable sound combinations for each particular dialect. Such an all-inclusive alphabet would be more acceptable to all Shona speakers because they will be able to write their language the way it is spoken. It is proposed, therefore, that the new alphabet should be as follows:

<a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, n', o, p, r, t, u, v, w, x, y, z>

In addition, a set of recommended diagraphs and trigraphs should be provided to guide speaker-writers to spell Shona words correctly and consistently. These diagraphs and trigraphs should be used as the basis for building syllables, morphemes, and words in the different Shona dialects. The sound combinations to accompany the alphabet should be as follows:

- | | | | |
|----|---|----------------|-----------------|
| i) | — | <bh> (bhotoro) | <ch> (chikoro) |
| | | <dh> (dhora) | <mbh> (mbhaura) |

		<mh> (mhuru)	<ndh> (ndhari)
		<nh> (nhoro)	<nth> (anthu)
		<gh> (ghoridhe)	<ng> (nghanunu)
		<kh> (mukhumbi)	<ph> (kuphanga)
		<rh> (rhor)	<sh> (shumba)
		<vh> (vhiri)	<hw> (hwahwa)
		<th> (kuthokoza)	
ii) [w]	—	<bw> (bwato)	<chw> (-gochwa)
		<dw> (-budwa)	<dzw> (-dzwanyanya)
		<dyw> (dywaga)	<fw> (-gofwa)
		<gw> (-gwabvura)	<hw> (hwahwa)
		<jw> (-jwanya)	<kw> (-kwetera)
		<mw> (mwena)	<mbw> (mbwende)
		<mhw> (-fumhwa)	<nhw> (-denhwa)
		<nw> (-nwiwa)	<ngw> (ngwena)
		<ndw> (-kandwa)	<nzw> (nzwisiso)
		<nyw> (-menywa)	<pw> (-pwatika)
		<psw> (-pswaira)	<rw> (rwatata)
		<sw> (-swedera)	<shw> (shwiro)
		<svw> (-tesvwa)	<tw> (-twasudza)
		<thw> (-kuthwa)	<tsw> (tswanda)
		<tyw> (-tywakatira)	<zvw> (-rozvwa)
		<zhw> (zhwerere)	<zw> (-zuzwa)
iii) [v]	—	<bv> (bveni)	<vh> (-vhara)
		<mv> (mvura)	<sv> (svondo)
		<zv> (zvigaro)	<tsv> (-tsvaira)
		<dzv> (dzvinyu)	<nzv> (nzvidya)
iv) [z]	—	<dz> (dzimba)	<nz> (nzou)
v) [y]	—	<dy> (-dyunga)	<ndy> (ndyire)
		<ny> (nyama)	<ty> (tyava)
vi) [l]	—	<hl> (hlobo)	<dhl> (Dhliwayo)
		<ndhl> (ndhlandhlamo)	<mhl> (Mhlanga)
		<ml> (Mlambo)	
vii) [x]	—	<gx> (kugxoka)	<px> (pxere)
viii) [j]	—	<dj> (tedja)	
ix) [f]	—	<pf> (pfuma)	

x) [s]	—	<ts> (tsamba)	
xi) [b]	—	<mb> (mbuya)	
vii) [d]	—	<nd> (ndege)	
xiii) [g]	—	<ng> (ngoma)	<bg> (vobgo)

These diagraphs and trigraphs will enable the writing system to cater for variations in style and vocabulary. All the five dialects will be adequately represented by these sound combinations.

It is further recommended that there should be no tone marking in the writing system to help reduce differences found in the spoken form where tone patterns in actual speech may vary considerably from dialect to dialect. In addition, all the rules that govern word division and spelling should be written in Shona to enable the ordinary speaker to interpret them with ease as is suggested in Magwa's (1999) publication *Manyorerwo EchiShona*.

CONCLUSION

The article has highlighted the problems that Shona writers face with the use of the existing orthography, namely that they are not always able to write what they speak. It is not, however, being suggested here that there should be a uniform standard set for the spoken language as this would be an unrealistic and undesirable goal which "has never been and never will be realised anywhere in the world in respect of any natural language" (Chimhundu, 1992, 87). What has been strongly advocated in the article is the desirability and necessity of developing a common alphabet, spelling and word division system that will make it possible for writers to write what they speak and that this task should be undertaken as a matter of urgency in the interests of promoting the written Shona language.

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