



PHONEMES, GRAPHEMES AND DEMOCRACY

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ACCURACY IN THE ORTHOGRAPHICAL
DEVELOPMENT OF ISIXHOSA**

Zandisile W. Saul and Rudolph Botha

Phonemes, Graphemes and Democracy
*The Significance of Accuracy
in the Orthographical Development of isiXhosa*

Zandisile W. Saul and Rudolph Botha

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Foreword

IsiXhosa was one of the first languages in sub-Saharan Africa to be reduced to writing. The first written texts in isiXhosa were produced by British missionaries in the Tyhume River valley as early as 1824. In spite of these early developments, there still remain today many inconsistencies and anomalies with regard to the standardisation of isiXhosa orthography that require attention.

The research presented in this book focuses on the status quo of the current orthography of isiXhosa as it is used in the writing of selected texts published from 2000 to the current date. Our research study investigates how these texts are written, that is, whether or not they are written according to the principles of the writing of this language as developed by the respective language boards over the years. The reason for undertaking this study is that isiXhosa has become one of the official languages of the Republic of South Africa.¹

Therefore, in order for it to be read and written without any difficulty by anyone, and as it is expected to be used as a medium of instruction even at tertiary level in the future, it should be written accurately and consistently.

The study analyses a number of isiXhosa written texts including the following:

1. selected literary texts published from 2000 to date;
2. selected publications by government departments;
3. selected translated texts;
4. some of the newspapers and magazines which are currently in circulation in this language;
5. some isiXhosa dictionaries;
6. the updated *Spelling and Orthography Rules for isiXhosa* as compiled by the Pan South African Language Board (Tyolwana et al. 2008b).

The aims of the study are outlined in Chapter 1. This chapter also sets out the theoretical framework within which the research is located. Chapter 2 is concerned with theoretical

1. See 'South Africa Languages and Culture', *SA-Venues.com*. https://www.sa-venues.com/sa_languages_and_culture.htm, accessed 6 September 2019.

perspectives on the development of the art of writing and orthography. The historical background, that is, the development of the art of writing and the general as well as the specific requirements of a good orthography are discussed. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 observe and analyse the orthographical features of some written isiXhosa documents, such as the use of capital letters, word division, concords, and so on. These three chapters also observe and analyse the various anomalies and inconsistencies in the spelling of isiXhosa words that were identified in the consulted texts. Chapter 6 is devoted to the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

IsaNdulelo

Ulwimi lwesiXhosa lolunye lweelwimi zokuqala kwi-Afrika eseMazantsi eSahara ezathi zaba nokubhalwa. Ubhalo lokuqala ngesiXhosa lwaphuhliswa ngabefundisi baseBhrithane kwingingqi yomlambo weTyhume mandulo phaya, ngomnyaka we-1824. Ngele kolu phuhliso lwangaphambili, kunanamhla kusekho amangingxi-gingxi amaninzi ngokubhekisele ekubekweni emgangathweni kobhalo-magama lwesiXhosa asafuna ingqwalaselo.

Lo msebenzi ugxile kubhalo-magama lwesiXhosa, olusetyenziswe ekubhalweni kobhalo olukhethiweyo, olwapapashwa ukususela kowama-2000 ukuza kuthi ga ngoku. Umsebenzi lo uphanda indlela, oku kubhaliweyo, okubhalwe ngayo, ukutsho oko, ingaba kubhalwe ngokwemigaqo yobhalo lolu lwimi olwaphuhliswa ngamaqumrhu ahloniphekileyo minyaka le, okanye hayi. Isizathu sokwenza oku, sesokuba olu lwimi, luye lwaba lolunye lweelwimi zaseburhulumenteni zeRiphabliki yoMzantsi-Afrika. Ngoko ke, ukuze lube nako ukuthi lufundwe ze lubhalwe ngaphandle kobunzima nangubani na, njengoko kulindeleke ukuba lusetyenziswe njengolwimi lokufundisa nkqu kumabanga aphezulu kwixesha elizayo, kufuneka lubhaleke ngokuchanekileyo nangokuthe ngqo.

Lo msebenzi uhlalutya iqela lokubhaliweyo, okubhalwe ngesiXhosa njengoku kulandelayo:

1. uncwadi olukhethiweyo olwapapashwa ukususela kowama-2000 ukuza kuthi ga ngoku;
2. upapasho olukhethiweyo ngamasebe karhulumente;
3. ubhalo olukhethiweyo oluguqulweyo;
4. amanye amaphepha-ndaba neemagazini ezijikelezayo kungoku nje kolu lwimi;
5. izichazi-magama zesiXhosa;
6. ubhalo-magama lwesiXhosa oluhlaziyweyo ngokuqulunqwa yi-PanSALB (2008).

Iinjongo zalo msebenzi zidakanciwe kwisaHluko soku-1. Esi sahluko sikwanika ingxelo-zimvo yophahla apho lo msebenzi wakhelwe khona. IsaHluko sesi-2 sona simalunga nengxelo-zimvo yengqikelelo-migama kuphuhliso lobuchule bokubhala nobobhalo-magama. Imvelaphi eyimbali, ukutsho oko, uphuhliso lobuchule bokubhala kwakunye neemfuno ngokubanzi nangokuthe ngqo bobhalo-magama olulungileyo, luxoxiwe.

IzaHluko zesi-3, ezesi-4 nezesi-5 zihlalutya iimpawu zobhalomagama zamanye amaxwebhu abhaliweyo esiXhosa, anjengobhalo loonobumba abakhulu, ulwahlulo lwegama, usetyenziso lwezivumelanisi, njalo-njalo. Ezi zahluko zibini kwakhona zihlalutya oko kungaqhelekanga nokungathanga ngqo kupelo lwamagama esiXhosa, athe achongwa kuluncwadi nakumaphepha-ndaba asetyenzisiweyo kolu phando. IsaHluko sesi-6 sona sijongene nesiqukumbelo kunye nomakwenziwe ngokubhekisele kubhalomagama olululo.



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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

It is a well-known fact that, before the colonisation of South Africa, isiXhosa did not exist in written form. Information was communicated orally from generation to generation. In the process, not all information was interpreted as accurately as it might have been, had this information been transmitted in the form of a written text.

Pahl, Pienaar and Ndungane (GDX3 1989: xxxiii) explain that the first serious attempt to devise an orthography for isiXhosa was made by the celebrated missionary, Rev. John Bennie of Lovedale, who was the pioneer in reducing isiXhosa to writing, and who in 1823 produced the first printed texts in the language. IsiXhosa was therefore converted into writing for the first time by John Bennie and others in the year 1823. His orthography consisted of a system of separate ‘words’, or sometimes mere syllables. This was an extremely disjunctive form of writing. The pioneers, in providing isiXhosa with a written form, faced significant challenges in the absence of reference materials other than those designed to suit the European languages. As Jafta (1987: 130) observes:

Xhosa was first reduced to writing in 1823 by the Scottish missionaries who brought a printing press to Tyhunie in Alice. Education for blacks was under the control of missionaries who were mainly of English extraction. English was declared the only official language in 1822 so that in all the schools it was the medium of instruction. It was not until 1922 that Xhosa was introduced as a compulsory subject in all primary schools. It was only examined as a matric subject in 1931.

This study focuses on the orthography of isiXhosa, whose speakers are found mostly in the Eastern and Western Cape. Today South Africa recognises eleven official languages. Of these, nine are African while the other two, English and Afrikaans, are referred to as European languages. However, Afrikaans is a hybrid language and may therefore also be regarded as an African language:

The basic vocabulary of Afrikaans is Dutch in origin, but the language is heavily anglicized due to widespread Afrikaans-English bilingualism in South Africa.

Spoken Afrikaans vocabulary also includes words from a variety of other languages, such as *ubuntu* ‘humanity’, *tsotsi* ‘gangster’ (from Zulu and Xhosa), *piesang* ‘banana’ (from Malay); *peri-peri* ‘chili pepper’ (from Portuguese).¹

Some of the African languages form part of the isiNguni language group, while others are part of the seSotho language group. The isiNguni group consists of isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiSwati and isiNdebele, while the seSotho group consists of seSotho, sePedi and seTswana. The remaining two languages are tshiVenda and xiTsonga and these do not belong to either of the two major groups.

At present, the respective National Language Boards, together with other role players who have an interest in the development of isiXhosa, are busy revisiting the so-called ‘standard’ orthography of this language. Furthermore, terminology in isiXhosa is being developed on a daily basis. Term creation is continually being evaluated to establish whether its written version is in agreement with the orthography of isiXhosa. This practice of term creation will, amongst other things, enable the language to become a fully-fledged medium of instruction at institutions of higher education.

The South African Language-in-Education Policy document released on 14 July 1997 (NDoE 1997) states that in terms of the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the government and the Department of Education recognise that cultural diversity is a valuable national asset, and hence the Department of Education is called upon, among other things, to promote multilingualism, oversee the development of the official languages, and foster respect for all languages used in the country (Department of Education 1997).

According to Foley (2004: 58–9), the question is whether South Africa’s indigenous languages can be developed as ‘academic/scientific languages’ fully capable of serving as ‘media of instruction in higher education’. Foley argues that, although bodies such as the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) and the various residual language bodies continue to have, as part of their brief, the facilitation of a fully multilingual education system, they have proven themselves to be generally unable, in terms of organisational capability or logistical expertise, to meet this brief. In 2003 the Department of Arts and Culture launched its ‘National Language Policy Framework’ (Department of Arts and Culture 2003b); this framework formed the basis for the promulgation of the Use of Official Languages Act (No. 12 of 2012), which enabled the establishment of a national Department of Language. However, while these may be welcome and apparently promising initiatives to promote the indigenous languages, much still needs to be done before the Ministry of Education’s goal of developing these languages into fully functional media of instruction in higher education can be realised.

A few years ago, the former Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, announced a set of measures aimed at the elevation of the status and use of African languages within the tertiary sector. In a speech made to a meeting of the African Languages Steering Committee on 16 September 2011, Dr Nzimande said that

the development of African languages as languages of scholarship is an imperative that we all need to commit ourselves to. It is not for government alone to see to it that African languages get their rightful place in our society, but indeed this is a responsibility for all of us. Academic institutions, language practitioners and broader society should all come on board to ensure that African languages are strengthened at universities and in society as a whole. (Nzimande 2011)

THE AREA OF STUDY OF THIS BOOK

One of several weaknesses in the existing ‘standardised’ orthographical system of isiXhosa is a lack of orthographic consistency. Preliminary investigations into this phenomenon have suggested the existence of a significant range of discrepancies in the writing of this language. These discrepancies are widely reflected in literary texts, press reports, government publications and educational materials published in isiXhosa.

Discrepancies commonly found include the following:

- ejection versus aspiration, for example /ukhuko/ versus /ukhukho/ (English: ‘mat’);
- capitalisation, for example /uMzantsi Afrika/ versus /umZantsi-Afrika/ (English: ‘South Africa’);
- word division, for example /baza kufika/ versus /bazakufika/ (English: ‘they will arrive’);
- the spelling of loan words, for example /ibrukhwe/ versus /ibhrukhwe/ Afrikaans: ‘broek’);
- representation of different sounds by one and the same symbol, for example /uhili/ (English: ‘dwarf’) versus /ihagu/ English: ‘pig’).

In some instances, these discrepancies are serious in that they reflect different semantic values; for example:

/tata/ versus /thatha/ (English: ‘father’ versus ‘take’)
/ukhoko/ versus /ukhokho/ (English: ‘crust’ versus ‘forefather’)

Such discrepancies are not conducive to accurate and effective written communication in isiXhosa.

In addition, there are clear indications that the existing level of standardisation of isiXhosa orthography is not satisfactory. Tyolwana et al. (2008b: 99) in the document *Spelling and Orthography Rules for isiXhosa* have made the point as follows:

It should be noted, however, that there are still quite a number of aspects of the orthography of isiXhosa that need more attention. This can be fulfilled by way of research that will entail verification by the knowledge as well as institutions of the speakers of the language and other isiXhosa language practitioners. That process should take place soon so that a comprehensive work on uniform ways of writing

this language should be produced, as a matter of urgency. This document suffices, for the moment, as a guide until the production of a more perfect orthography book.

This book, therefore, will address the phenomenon of inconsistency as well as inaccuracy in isiXhosa orthography. A more satisfactory degree of uniformity must be attained if isiXhosa texts are to be studied effectively by both mother-tongue and non-mother-tongue speakers.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this book is to analyse the existing standardised orthographical system of isiXhosa. The intention is to investigate the magnitude of the problem of inconsistency in the orthography of this language, by posing the following research questions as central to the enquiry:

- To what degree does the present standardised isiXhosa orthography succeed in faithfully representing all the phonetic aspects of the spoken language in an inclusive, accurate and consistent manner?
- To what extent is the standardised orthography of isiXhosa actively recognised and adhered to by all the users of written isiXhosa?
- To what extent does the standardised orthography of isiXhosa recognise and make provision for the accommodation of dialectal differences?

A further aim of this study is to propose measures that will lead to the improvement of the orthography of the language. This includes a critical analysis of some of the rules of isiXhosa orthography, and proposed measures to encourage writers of isiXhosa texts to adhere to its rule structure in a more disciplined and consistent manner.

During the course of this investigation, texts written in isiXhosa and published since 2000 will be analysed. The reason for the focus on documents published from 2000, rather than 1994 (as the book's title may lead one to expect), is merely to narrow down the field of study for practical purposes and to focus on documents published more recently. The orthography used in selected publications by government departments, in selected translated texts and in isiXhosa newspapers will be among the texts considered. The focus of the analysis will be on the representation of sounds by means of symbols, hyphen usage, subject concords, apostrophe usage, word division, capitalisation and tone marking.

THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The language structure of Rharhabe-Xhosa, traditionally considered to be the standard literary isiXhosa, serves as the main point of reference for this study. The term 'standard' in the context of this study follows the approach taken by the Xhosa Dictionary

Committee, which reads as follows: ‘The Xhosa Dictionary Committee decided that the work should not be confined to Tshiwo-Xhosa (the Xhosa spoken by the amaGcaleka and the amaRharhabe), until the mid-1950s regarded as the standard Literary Xhosa’ (GDX3 1989: xxxix).

While it is evident that all the earliest academic and literary texts were produced in Rharhabe-Xhosa, the language patterns of other language groups within the wider isiXhosa-speaking community, generally known as the dialects of isiXhosa, namely isiThembu, isiBomvana, isiMpondomise, isiMpondo, isiXesibe, isiRharhabe, isiBhaca, isiCele, isiHlubi and isiMfengu, will also be taken into consideration during the course of the study.

This study is based on a specific framework derived from the fields of general as well as applied linguistics. With respect to general linguistics, the theoretical models of recognised linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1964) and other more contemporary linguists will be considered. From applied linguistics, the concepts of scholars such as Smalley (1964) will play their part in the framework for this investigation.

Several data sources were utilised in the writing of this book. The various sites where lexicographical projects (also known as dictionary projects) are currently being undertaken were visited in order to obtain first-hand knowledge of the development of the orthography of isiXhosa. In addition, various role players directly or indirectly involved in the development of isiXhosa orthography were consulted to obtain first-hand information on the challenges confronting them. These role-players were selected from among the following categories:

- publishers;
- journalists;
- language practitioners in the private sector;
- relevant role players within the civil service, including parliamentary language units, and within national and provincial departments of education, arts and culture;
- language practitioners at universities where isiXhosa is being developed as part of the institutional language policy;
- members of PanSALB and the isiXhosa National Language Board.

This study is based upon recognition of the fact that the orthography of a language is an iterative, developmental phenomenon. As such, the authors have focused on the most recent developments in isiXhosa, and the study takes careful cognisance of work already in progress.

The orthographical features of isiXhosa publications produced by the various role players referred to above were analysed and interpreted in order to determine the correctness (or not) of particular orthographical items.