

Education Wales

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How 'little' African languages can be written down for the first time

AFRICA has a billion people, about 15% of the world's population. Between them they speak 2,000 languages, about 30% of the total number of languages in the world.

This means that many of their languages have a relatively small number of speakers; many less than a million, some less than 50,000, less than the population of Bridgend for instance. Yet all these ethnic groups, even small ones like the 15,000 Fwe people of Zambia, are fiercely proud of their own special identity, their culture and their language.

Wales knows what it's like to be a small nation next to a large one and knows what it's like to feel a minority status within a larger political unit, but nevertheless to feel proud of its distinctive heritage and culture and, of course, its language. So it's not difficult to have a fellow-feeling with other people's awareness of their minority status in a much larger country.

But Welsh has a wonderfully rich literary heritage, with written records and documents dating back to the 900s. This is, however, not the case for most African peoples with a similar mother tongue population. Zambia with its 13 million people has 73 different ethnic groups and languages.

English is the official language, the language of government, the law, national media, big business and secondary education. And some Zambian languages have huge populations like the Bemba with 3.5 million, Tonga (one million) and Nyanja (800,000) which are also spoken by millions of others as second languages. These languages are used at home, at work, in church, for trading in the market, often in local government and in primary school.

But then there are the smaller languages, the minority languages, which are also used at home, at work, in church, for trading in the market, but in much more restricted areas. They have their own customs and traditions, their own sense of dress and architecture, and their own practices of work.

The Fwe people know they are different from their neighbours, the Shanjo people, who are different from the Makoma people and the Kwamashi people and the Kwangwa people, and so on and on. But none of these people have a written heritage; their languages are not taught in school like

Retired university lecturer Dr Paul Tench is at the forefront of a groundbreaking project to develop written alphabets in remote African communities where language is all in the mind. Here he describes how linguists in Zambia are helping to tease out spelling systems for the very first time

siLozi, the regional trade language. They are, nevertheless, vibrant languages which identify the people.

Now they want to change that. They see no reason why they should be left behind, and so I went to help them. We were a small team of linguists, funded by a charity called The Seed Company that responds to initiatives from local communities like these, by providing local workshops.

Language is all in the mind; what is written on the page reflects what is contained in the mind, and we linguists were there to tease this information out of their brains and facilitate the production of a spelling system that would be appropriate to their particular language.

The first task was to audio record a short story in their mother tongues, and then play it back bit by bit, with each member of the team attempting to write it down on their own.

Now, how could they do that, if their language had never been written down before? Well, all of these people were literate in siLozi and English; they knew from these languages the consonants and vowels of our (Roman) alphabet and what they stood for in those two languages. And they adapted that knowledge as best as they could in the first instance.

There were disagreements among the team members, but there was also a surprising amount of agreement. And then they discussed their differences with the linguist assigned to them, and gradually a greater degree of consensus emerged.

The second stage was then to use this very provisional attempt at spelling to work out the meaning of each word and each part of a word in the story. This would help to show up plurals from singulars, present tenses from past, pronouns from prepositions, and other grammatical information. The grammar of the language would have a

bearing on the spelling of the languages, of course, as it does in Welsh and English.

The third stage was to go back to all the consonants and vowels that were suggested in the story, and check them all. As linguists, we knew what to look out for, what the likelihoods were, and what unusual cases there might be. If there was a 'p' sound, then we might expect a 'b'. If there was a 'ng' sound, might it appear at the beginning of a word (like in Welsh, but not in English)?

Maybe one syllable of one of the words was pitched higher or lower, or was more prominent, like the insight/incite example in English. This can be quite tricky to sort out and is often very important; the difference between teaching and urinating in siLozi was one such example.

We then get the team members to think of as many words as they can that display all these features; this tests our emerging hypotheses and gives them practice in trying out their developing ability to spell.

The next stage was to work on another story using the same strategy as before, but this time



■ Zambia, with its 13 million people, has 73 different ethnic groups and languages

we expected a much greater deal of agreement – and lo and behold, that is what happened.

The team gained more confidence, and although there were disagreements, they were usually quickly resolved. But not always, because perhaps yet another sound had appeared, one that was rarer than most of the others (like the 'ge'

in the English word prestige).

We then took stock of all the sounds we had discovered and agreed on the most appropriate letter for each sound, so that each separate sound that made a difference to the meanings of words (known technically as a 'phoneme') had a separate letter, and that each letter represented that one 'phoneme' only. This is what is often called a phonetic alphabet; Welsh is an excellent example of one, and English about the worst in the world.

However, there is still another great problem to resolve and that is to determine what constitutes a word in the language. Now we are used to this concept because we are literate; we recognise words by the spaces either side of them. But it is not so obvious to someone who is trying to write their language for the first time. Imagine writing a word like helpful for the first time; you know there is a word help and a word full; how do you know that helpful should not be written as two words? And what about unhelpful! Is there a word unhelp?

At the end of all this hard work, we put a little booklet together, showing the alphabet

with examples of words, a little bit of the grammar to show how words are made up, a few other things like numbers and dates, and then the stories that we worked on. The booklets are taken back to the communities for comments and suggestions and hopefully with their eventual approval and blessing.

As often as not, it is the churches that jump at these opportunities to get bits of the Bible and hymns and songs into their languages, but the orthography is there for all the community, for schools, public signs and notices, newsletters, businesses, local government, dictionaries and so the list could go on, including story tellers and local historians who can record tales and other items of their oral cultural heritage. It has invariably generated huge enthusiasm, with great excitement that their 'little' language can be written and read just like any major international language – and the words are their words in their language.

■ Dr Paul Tench is a retired lecturer and associate researcher at Cardiff University's Centre for Language and Communication Research



■ One of the four language teams with their very first attempt at writing their own language



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