

4 linked narratives

1 Languages in the world

Ethnologue, 16th ed, 2009; (next edition 2013)

6,909

Africa: 2,110 – approx 30% of world total; yet only 12.2% of world population: relatively small languages, with an average size of 1/3m (population of Cardiff!)

Compared to Asia 1 1/2 m; Europe 6 1/2 m

Only 40 languages in the whole continent with 3m speakers in a world total of 172

Median size: 25,200

Zambia: 43 indigenous languages; 26 with written form

Nigeria: 500 indigenous languages; approx 1/3 with written form = 2/3 with no written form, including languages like Anaang with 1+m speakers

% of world's languages with written form? Next edition of *Ethnologue*!

2 Reluctant phonetician

No flair for languages, but could use grammar + vocab “code” in traditional language learning exercises. Interest in language rather than literature. BA German. Dip Ling Sci. SIL. Wanted to teach grammar, but had to teach phonetics because they were short staffed. IPA.

Teaching responsibilities.

Research interests: phonology of intonation

learner language (interlanguage)

contrastive linguistics

universals

regional/national accents

orthographical systems

Publications

3 Systemic-Functional Linguistics

System = set of choices/options

Functions = reason for the sets and the items within the sets

Language is the way it is because of the functions it performs

Emphasis on meanings rather than forms and structures

Language as representative of the way we perceive the world and life = cognitive basis

Whole of language in the mind, including phonology and phonetics

- you know how to pronounce and spell words
- even allophonic variation – sounds right/odd
- regional/national/stylistic/generational variation – noticeable

Function of phonology: provide distinctive (unique?) forms for all the units of the lexico-grammar. *No lexico-grammar without phonology!* (or orthography in the written form)

Phonology in the mind: the case of children, the blind, and illiterates

4 Language of education

The mother tongue in early education enhances *cognitive* development, because it is the language of a child's thinking, understanding, knowing and learning; they learn best in the language they know best.

It has a *psychological* advantage in that it is the language that children are at ease in; there is no extra, special, effort in attention as there is when a less familiar language is used in school.

It has *social* advantages too; it is the language of the informal education within the community, of communication in ordinary daily life, the language of learning social relationships and responsibilities.

Similarly in *cultural* terms, as the language of identity – the sense of personal and family belonging to a community; it is the language of stories, poetry, entertainment, with their distinctive styles and forms; it acts as a safeguard against being wholly absorbed into the anomie of increased urbanization and global electronic communication.

There is also a *political* dimension to this: there is no reason why primary education should not reflect a nation's multilingual heritage; language policies can promote minority languages, as well as introduce the languages of wider communication (LWCs), and all this will help to integrate minority communities into the national consciousness – otherwise resentment might set in. Look at the cohesiveness of Switzerland with its multi-lingual policy, and the disintegration of Yugoslavia with its centralized policy of insisting on one language only.

There is also a kind of *ideological* reason for maintaining minority languages, in that they represent a way of observing the world with a distinctive perspective.

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Question: Why bother with literacy in a minority language?

- They ask for it
- Many have no or inadequate literate competence in the LWC
- Improves language vitality; language maintenance in a globalized world; guards against the threat of becoming an endangered language; balance of local v global
- Sense of identity: we are not our neighbours, especially our domineering neighbours with their cultural, political and economic power. Enhances awareness of cultural distinctives: language, dress, architecture, agricultural practices and equipment; also history, myths and legends
- Sense of dignity and ethnic pride: we have what others have, what the big communities have
- Sense of independence: not dependent on other people's written word – law, government, police; NGOs; multinationals: *Translators without Borders*.
- Local development: education in the mother tongue: *International Network for Development. Save the Children*. NGOs. Churches wanting Bibles, hymnbooks etc in the mother tongue: *Wycliffe Bible Translators, The Seed Company*.

Beginning of a response

No literacy without some kind of script: alphabet, syllabary, rebus writing, logographs/pictograms.

Alphabet based on phonology (in the mind)

5 basic principles:

- Accuracy: every distinctive phoneme represented
- Consistency: each phoneme represented by one letter or pair of letters; each letter or pair represents only one phoneme
- Conformity: need to take LWCs into consideration
- Convenience: ease of writing and typing
- Approval: need to have community acceptance and agreement

One Strategy

Ideal: to work with a team of 5 or 6 people who are literate in English and any other LWC and who represent different dialects

1. Select one member of the team to tell a short story and record it.
2. Replay the recording bit by bit and ask each member to try and write the story as best as they can independently. They have the orthography of languages they know in their minds and they will have to adapt it as best as they can to their own language.
3. Get the team to compare their efforts after about 10 “bits”; where there is consensus, that is a good indication of an emerging orthography; where there are alternatives, that is a clear indication of difficulties to resolve. Some differences might be resolved immediately. (Ignore differences over word divisions for the moment.)
4. Continue until the end of the story and take stock: what consonants and vowels proved to be non-problematic? List them according to their occurrence.
5. Explain a phonetic chart and plot the non-problematic letters/pairs appropriately. Note salient gaps in the chart. Suggest possible solutions to the problematic cases; eg *c/ch, zh, kh, gh, rr, tl/lh, dl/dlh, ghy ...*
6. Get a word for word translation as far as possible; it will be very rough for the first attempt as they will only be able to handle content words, but it will provide a basis for later lexical and grammatical work
7. Take another story and repeat the procedures. This will probably yield more consonants and vowels. Add to the list of consonants and vowels as they occur. Add new letters/pairs of letters to the phonetic chart.
8. Ask each team member for a list of words in various common topics: animals, parts of the body, furniture, crops and farming, etc. Get them to try and write them down in the emerging alphabet. Check all the words with the rest of the team and add any new consonants and vowels to the list and chart. Note any minimal pairs. Listen for minimal pairs with tone differences.
9. Take a third story and repeat the procedures. They will probably be able to transcribe the third story with greater speed than before as they get used to associating sounds with letters. It is very likely that all the phonemes of the language will have occurred by then.
10. Draw up a tentative alphabet in traditional alphabetical order.

Accompanying presentations:

- sessions on articulation of sounds
- sessions on vowel and consonant systems
- sessions on syllable structures and word phonology
- sessions on word divisions

We learn to read and write in languages where the word division is already fixed (apart from certain cases like *tea time*, *tea-time*, *teatime*). What about languages whose written form has not yet been fixed?

Need to look into the grammar, looking especially for potential word morphology in the form of affixes (inflections and derivations). Potential words and affixes will have to be referred to as “items” for the time being.

Main principles:

1. Items are joined together if one of them cannot stand (or be pronounced) alone, eg the *-ed* of *joined*.
2. Items are kept apart if any other item can come in between, unless that item is one that cannot stand by itself, eg *be (good) friends*, *friend+li+ness*.
3. Items that are joined together usually keep a strict order, eg *do+es+n't*; *non-re+charge+able*.
4. Items that are compounds are to be distinguished from items that are phrases, eg the compound *blackbird* cannot have anything between its two items, whereas the phrase *black bird* can be expanded (*a black little bird*)
5. Items that are reduplicated are usually hyphenated, eg *helter-skelter*.

However, for new readers of new orthographies, prefixes disguise head words; for that reason, hyphenation can be considered so that the head word is immediately recognizable, eg in English *de-ice*.

Resources

www.ethnologue.com

www.sil.org Summer Institute of Linguistics

translatorswithoutborders.com

www.infod.org.uk International Network for Development

www.savethechildren.org.uk

wycliffe.org.uk

www.theseedcompany.org

Dr Katy Barnwell, *Developing a writing system: a procedure for developing an orthography*, 2008. The Seed Company.

Bhola, H S (1994) *A Source Book for Literacy Work*. UNESCO.

Google:

“BBC News Shanjo farmers”

“Western Mail Paul Tench” (July 2005) (June 2011) (Sept 2011)