

A new alphabet for just 20,000 Africans!

Africa has a population of about 1 billion people, and between them they speak 2,000 languages. Some of these are spoken by many millions of people, but the vast majority of them are spoken within small communities. These minority languages are often neglected by the powers that be, but the people themselves, obviously, value them highly, and they want the same advantages as the big languages – literacy. Paul Tench, a retired academic from Cardiff University's Centre for Language and Communication Research, has been involved in helping these small communities realize their ambition for an alphabet of their own.

“We can read English. We can read siLozi. But we can't read our own language.” Why ever not? Because it has never been written down. The testimony of five Shanjo farmers from the remote south western corner of the remote Western Province of Zambia. English is Zambia's official language. SiLozi is the main regional language of the Western Province, spoken by over 600,000 Lozi people as their mother tongue and by thousands of others as their second language.

But who are these others? They are small, local, but distinct, language communities scattered across this vast sparsely populated province. Like the 20,000 or so Shanjo people, they have their local language spoken at home, in the villages, out in their fields, the language of ordinary everyday life. If they are in touch with someone from another community, they can switch to siLozi, which they learnt in primary school, or for those who managed to pursue secondary school, they could use English. Imagine a pyramid with the lowest section representing monolingual Shanjo speakers, a middle section for bilingual speakers with siLozi, and a small pointed top section of trilingual people with English. That is, in fact, something of a simplification however, as many Shanjo people speak other local languages, even if they cannot communicate in English. The five farmers all speak at least three languages; it is not uncommon even for those who have received no education beyond (“basic”) primary to be able to speak four or five languages if their livelihood involves travel.

Back to the five Shanjo farmers. Do they really need to read in their own language? I imagine that is what many an English speaker asked when the demand for education in Welsh became insistent. A person from a dominant monolingual culture may find it difficult to comprehend the feelings of people from a minority language group when a dominant language is available. But a language is part of a person's identity; it is an expression of the way they think and talk; it is bound up with their upbringing and their experience of family and society. A person's first language, their ‘mother tongue’, is what they often feel most comfortable in; it is how they communicate with the greatest ease and confidence. They feel it right to use that language in most domestic and ordinary social situations in life; this is no different, of course, from what a monolingual English speaker would feel. There is usually a strong psychological, intellectual and emotional bond with the mother tongue. And that is true for the small Shanjo community too.

A few years ago, a Zambian policeman and a young South African couple with a missionary society travelled around that remote south western corner of the Western Province to find out about the languages of the area; they discovered an immense desire to have their languages written down and to become literate in them. They reported on

one occasion, “We learned that the people had been waiting months for our visit. The *indunas* (chiefs), school headmaster and clinic officer organized a community meeting, which more than 70 village elders attended. They were extremely happy and grateful to God, and chose six translators to send to a training workshop. They called this work a fulfilment of their people’s dreams.” Something similar happened in the Shanjo community earlier this year, and so I was invited to help, as a linguist, with the development of their alphabet.

I met the five farmers at the beginning of July. They travelled up to Mongu, the capital “city” of the Western Province, where there were facilities for them and me to stay, so that we could concentrate on the job in hand. Four of them were in their 50s, I would say, with one younger man of 25, who was the only person with secondary education. Two of the older men had received some training as church leaders, in English, and the other two struggled a bit at first in English, but quickly grew in confidence as the weeks passed by. They were all subsistence farmers; that is, they grew enough maize, millet and sorghum for their domestic use; they all kept a herd of cattle and they all managed a smallholding with chickens and so on and vegetable gardens to supply their family and neighbours.

And now here they were, seated at a table ready to do “academic” work on their language. And how they worked! These were men with a mission, appointed by their communities. Their neighbours in the area were a step ahead of them, with their little booklets on how to write and read their languages, and these Shanjo farmers did not want their own community to be left behind! I marvelled at all this; these men were hardy men, used to a daily outdoor life, physical hard labour, skilled in their various farming tasks, and now they were ready to confine themselves to a table indoors and for study.

I explained to them how we would proceed. They chose one man, a church pastor, to give a short explanation, in the Shanjo language, of the importance of training oxen for effective farming. And then each man wrote it down the best way they could. They did it individually, and then compared their efforts. There was, surprisingly, a great deal of agreement. How did they manage it? Well, language is all in the mind, including spelling and pronunciation. They knew the spelling of English and siLozi, and they applied this as best as they could to the sounds of the words in their own language. Then they discussed things together in their mother tongue, and came up with agreed solutions to any problems that arose. I kept a tally of the letters they used and arranged them in a chart that reflected phonetic patterns, which enabled me to check for other possibilities. Then we studied another little story. This yielded more sounds and letters. Then I got them to think of scores of words around different themes, to check for other sounds and, incidentally, give them practice in the new tentative spelling system that had begun to emerge. Next, I got one man to compose a brief account of the Shanjo people with the help of the others, which was a further way of testing out that developing spelling system – and what they produced was the first ever piece of original Shanjo literature!

And so on we went, adding hundreds of new words, until we were able to produce a mini dictionary of 500 words. I learnt that they called their language *ciShanjo*. You take the name of the people, and add a prefix to indicate the *language* of those people. *CiShanjo* is

a tone language; that is, some words are distinguished by high or low pitches on certain syllables. So, for instance, *ivu* with a low tone means “wasp”, but *ívu* with a high tone means “soil”; for that reason it is necessary to add an accent to indicate the high tone. Another, rather, ‘ticklish’ example involves a pair of words for “white people” and “insects” – got to get that one right! *Makuwa* for “insects”, *makúwa* for white people.

We began to examine the grammar of nouns and verbs, so that we could begin to determine where the spaces between words should come. Then, after two weeks I was able to put together a little 27 page booklet on how to write and read ciShanjo, with the tiny bit of grammar we had investigated, the three pieces we had studied – now in their final, approved, form – and the mini dictionary. This was very rapid progress, but I had had the advantage of spending time with similar languages at a workshop in Mongu earlier this year. The spelling of ciShanjo proved to be very similar to that of siLozi, which I had already studied. The group of men were outstanding in their commitment, initiative and skills of analysis – five good farmers who had *never* done *anything* like this before. They were full of enthusiasm, and then full of excitement, as the written form of their very own language began to take firm shape. A young Shanjo woman was able to read everything without much difficulty, which gave us confidence that the spelling proposals would succeed with the rest of the community.

It would be good for the Shanjo people’s sense of self-worth, their dignity, pride in their distinctive culture, their standing in the region, not only to be literate in their own language, but also to develop their own literature and to give visual expression in public signs, at school and in all their institutions. Just like Welsh in Wales.

Primary education in the mother tongue is a “commodity” that Wales can be proud of, and can export. The mother tongue in early education enhances *cognitive* development, because it is the language of a child’s thinking, understanding, knowing and learning. 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. It has *social* advantages too; it is the language of informal education in the family, of communication in ordinary daily life, the language of learning social relationships and responsibilities. Similarly in *cultural* terms, as the language of identity, of personal and family belonging to a community; it is the language of stories, poetry, entertainment, with distinctive styles and forms; it acts as a safeguard against increasing urbanization and global electronic communication. There is also a *national* 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, and all this will help to integrate minority communities into the national consciousness – otherwise resentment might set in. You could even argue for a kind of *philosophical* reason for maintaining minority languages, because they represent a way of observing the world with a distinctive perspective.

While politicians might consider such matters, the churches speed away with their aims of translating the Gospels, producing hymnbooks and other aids. Indeed, those five Shanjo farmers went back home not only with their 27 page booklet on their alphabet, but

also with their first attempt at translation – the story of the Good Samaritan. And how did the Shanjo people come to use *makúwa* for “white people”? Secularist friends might find this hard to swallow, but it refers to a small pink berry with a sweet taste – the missionaries who were the first to settle there, after David Livingstone, who brought a message that brought them peace.