

The Ndebele spelling system: a missing link between phonology and orthography

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Abstract

The current spelling system for the Zimbabwean Ndebele language is characterized by numerous inconsistencies and inadequacies. Most of the glaring inadequacies can be noted in the absence of a ‘fit’ between the spelt versions of lexical items and their phonological forms. Some of the phonological items that pose spelling problems in Ndebele, and which are examined in this paper include the following sets of sounds: nasals /m̩ m, n̩ n, ɲ, j̩, ŋ, ij/; velar ejective and velar stop /kʼ/ and [k]; post-alveolar fricatives /tʃ/ and /tʃʰ/ as well as velar fricatives /x/ and /ɣ/. In normal speech each one of these sounds has distinct allophonic variations that are pronounced differently. However, in written form, they happen to be spelt in the same way, making it difficult to differentiate between the spelt forms of the words when they are not used in sentences. The intention of the paper is to describe some of the operational problems resultant from the absence of a ‘fit’ between spoken and written Ndebele. The paper concludes by suggesting some of the spelling reforms that are worth considering for future revisions of Ndebele orthography.

Keywords

orthography, spelling system, phonology, spelling reform.

1. Introduction

Ndebele is a Nguni language spoken by 16.5% of the total population of present day Zimbabwe (Central Statistical Office, 1982). Guthrie (1970) classified Ndebele under Zone S, Group 40, together with other Nguni languages that include Zulu, Xhosa and Swathi. All the Nguni languages are pre-eminently intonation languages and the inventory of their phonological system is characterized by an abundance of click phonemes such as /x, q, c, xh, qh, ch, gx, gq, gc, ngx, ngq and ngc/.

Ndebele orthography uses an alphabetic system that was compiled in 1863 by the London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries, namely John Smith Moffat, William Sykes and Thomas Morgan Thomas (Mahlangu, 1964 and Hadebe, 1994). Owing to the inconsistencies and inadequacies that bedevilled the missionaries' alphabet for Ndebele, the writing system was revised in the 1950s. However, the 1950s reforms notwithstanding, Ndebele orthography, especially the spelling system, still exhibits numerous disparities between certain sounds and their orthographic representations.

This article, therefore, examines some of the problems that characterize the spelt forms of selected Ndebele sounds. Of interest to the present study is the disparity between the phonological and orthographic representations of words that contain the following sets of sounds: breathy voiced and ordinary voiced nasals, the voiceless velar fricative [x] and the voiced velar fricative /ɣ/sounds, the velar ejective stop /k²/ and the velar plosive /k/ sounds as well as the voiceless post-alveolar fricative /tʃ/ and the aspirated post-alveolar fricative /tʃ^h/ sounds. The spelling problems posed by each one of these sounds are discussed in subsequent sections of the article.

2. Nasal sounds

There are four categories of nasal sounds in Ndebele. These are:

- i. m sounds: the breathy voiced bilabial nasal /m̤/ and the ordinary voiced bilabial nasal /m/
- ii. n sounds: the breathy voiced alveolar nasal /n̤/ and the ordinary voiced alveolar nasal /n/
- iii. ny sounds: the ordinary palatal nasal /ɲ/ and the breathy voiced palatal nasal /ɲ̤/ and
- iv. ng sounds: the velar nasal /ŋ/ and the breathy voiced velar nasal /ŋ̤/

2.1. m sounds

For this category of nasal sounds, the symbol m is currently used in the spelt forms of Ndebele words that contain both breathy voiced /m̥/ and ordinary voiced /m/ sounds as shown in the following minimal pairs:

<u>Breathy voiced /m̥/</u>	<u>Ordinary voiced /m/</u>
<i>m</i> ina (take)	<i>m</i> ina (me/myself)
<i>m</i> ana (stop)	<i>m</i> ana (just)
<i>m</i> a (calling one's mother)	<i>m</i> a (if)

The spelt forms of the above words fail to capture the phonological difference that exists between the breathy voiced /m̥/ and the ordinary voiced /m/ sounds as they are both orthographically represented by the same m symbol.

2.2. n sounds

As is the case with m, symbol n stands for two phonologically distinct sounds in Ndebele orthography. These are the breathy voiced alveolar nasal /n̥/ and the ordinary voiced alveolar nasal /n/. The following examples illustrate the problems resultant from lack of an orthographic distinction between the two sounds:

<u>Breathy voiced /n̥/</u>	<u>Ordinary voiced /n/</u>
<i>n</i> aka (mother of)	<i>n</i> aka (take care of)
<i>n</i> ina (mother of)	<i>n</i> ina (shoo away)
- <i>n</i> aba (African traditional leather bag)	<i>n</i> aba (of stretching one's legs)

The highlighted items in each pair words are pronounced differently but the current Ndebele spelling system represents them all with symbol n. This constitutes another glaring disparity between the phonology and orthography of the Ndebele language.

2.3. ny sounds

The sounds /ɲ/ and /jɲ/ constitute the third category of nasal sounds whose distinction is not clearly marked in Ndebele spelling. Both sounds are spelt using the same ny symbol as can be noted from the following words in which the two sounds occur:

<u>Breathy voiced palatal nasal /jɲ/</u>	<u>Ordinary voiced palatal nasal /ɲ/</u>
- <i>ny</i> elele (species of a locust)	<i>ny</i> elele (sudden disappearance)
<i>ny</i> oko (your mother)	<i>ny</i> oko (your mother – of insulting)

inyawuthi (type of cereal) inyathi (buffalo)

Therefore, while spoken Ndebele marks the phonological distinction between breathy voiced palatal nasal and the ordinary voiced palatal nasal sounds, the spelling system for the language disregards this as both sounds are orthographically represented by the symbol ny.

2.4. ng sounds

In the current Ndebele spelling system, the phonological difference between the velar nasal /ŋ/ and the breathy voiced velar nasal /ɲ/ is not marked. The two nasal sounds are spelt using the same /ng/ symbol as shown in the examples listed below:

Breathy voiced velar nasal /ɲ/

Ngamanga (they are lies)

Ngaka (this big)

Ngoma (song)

Ordinary voiced velar nasal /ŋ/

ngamanga (I kissed him/her)

ngaka (they belong to)

ngoma (I got thirsty)

In all these cases, it is difficult to differentiate between the written forms of words in each minimal pair because the spelt forms do not cater for the phonological or tone markings.

3. h sounds

Included in this group of sounds is the voiceless velar fricative /x/ and the voiced velar fricative /ɣ/ both of which are represented by the symbol h in written Ndebele. For example:

Voiced velar fricative /ɣ/

ihala (for nothing)

hatshi (no)

ihabha (hub)

Voiceless velar fricative /x/

ihala (thread)

-hatshi (pasture)

ihawu (shield)

The voicing in /ɣ/ is not captured in written Ndebele since this sound is spelt in the same way as its voiceless counterpart, /x/. This constitutes yet another missing link between Ndebele phonology and orthography.

4. k sounds

There are two variations of the /k/ sound, which are spelt the same in written Ndebele. These are the velar ejective stop /kʼ/ and the voiceless velar plosive /k/. The

pronunciation of the former has an aspiration element but this is not taken care of by the current Ndebele orthography. The following examples serve to illustrate this observation:

Velar ejective stop /k'/

kala (weigh)

kama (comb)

Voiceless velar plosive /k/

kala (he/she does not have)

kama (mother's)

While aspiration is an important prosodic feature in Ndebele phonology, the written version of the language in the above and related examples downplays it, resulting in the absence of a fit between the spoken and orthographic forms of Ndebele.

5. tsh sounds

In the current Ndebele spelling system, there are a number of words in which the voiceless post-alveolar fricative sound /tʃ/ and the aspirated post-alveolar fricative /tʃ^h/ are both represented by the same orthographic symbol tsh. For example:

Voiceless Post-alveolar fricative /tʃ/

Tshoko (ideophone for swift fall)

Tshoka (provoke)

Tshotshozela (of pain)

Tsheka (of diarrhoea)

Aspirated post-alveolar fricative /tʃ^h/

tshoko (very green)

tshoka (shoot out)

tshotshozela (urge)

tsheka (move to one side)

The phonological distinction between each pair of words in the above examples is not marked in Ndebele spelling, making it difficult to read out the words when they are not used in specific contexts. The Ndebele spelling system for these and related lexical items completely disregards the different tone patterns that distinguish /tʃ/ from /tʃ^h/.

6. Proposals for Spelling Reforms

According to the *Practical Orthography of African Languages* (1930: 12), an ideal writing system should have one symbol representing one sound. This means that whenever two words are distinguished in sound, they must also be distinguished in orthography. Notwithstanding this ideal, it is also important to observe that

writing can never be considered an exact counterpart of spoken language [because] such an ideal point-by-point equivalence in which one speech unit is expressed by one sign, and one sign expressing only one speech unit [can not be easily attained in writing] (Gelb, 1963: 150).

Therefore, in coming up with proposal for spelling reforms in Ndebele orthography, this article is not blinded to some of the constraints impacting on the process of attempting to fashion a flawless writing system. The suggested spelling reforms given in Table 1 below have been arrived at after considering the practical implications they entail.

Table 1: Proposed spelling reforms

<i>Phonological forms and current spelling</i>	<i>Proposals to mark phonological distinctions</i>
/m̄/ > m: <i>mina</i> (take) /m/ > m: <i>mina</i> (me)	/m̄/ > mh: <i>mhina</i> (take) /m/ > m: <i>mina</i> (me)
/n̄/ > n : <i>nina</i> (mother of) /n/ > n : <i>nina</i> (shoo away)	/n̄/ > nh: <i>nhina</i> (mother of) /n/ > n : <i>nina</i> (shoo away)
/ɲ̄/ > ny: <i>nyelele</i> (type of a locust) /ɲ/ > ny: <i>nyelele</i> (sudden disappearance)	/ɲ̄/ > nhy: <i>nhyelele</i> (type of a locust) /ɲ/ > ny: <i>nyelele</i> (sudden disappearance)
/ŋ̄/ > ng: <i>ngaka</i> (this big) /ŋ/ > ng: <i>ngaka</i> (they belong to)	/iŋ̄/ > ngh: <i>nghaka</i> (this big) /iŋ/ > ng: <i>ngaka</i> (they belong to)
/ɣ/ > h: <i>ihala</i> (for nothing) /x/ > h: <i>ihala</i> (thread)	/ɣ/ > hh: <i>ihhala</i> (for nothing) /x/ > h: <i>ihala</i> (thread)
/k/ > k: <i>kala</i> (weigh) /k/ > k: <i>kala</i> (does not have)	/k/ > k' or kk: <i>k'ala</i> or <i>kkala</i> (weigh) /k/ > k: <i>kala</i> (does not have)
/tʃ/ > tsh: <i>tshoka</i> (provoke) /tʃ ^h / > tsh: <i>tshoka</i> (shoot out)	/tʃ/ > tshw: <i>tshwoka</i> (provoke) /tʃ ^h / > tsh or tsh': <i>tshoka</i> or <i>tsh'oka</i> (provoke)

7. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide relevant phonological information that point to the need for plugging the gap that exists between the orthographic and spelt forms of selected Ndebele words. It has been observed that most Ndebele words containing nasal sounds, which are phonologically distinct, tend to share the same spelling. This situation causes some operational problems such as failure to distinguish between the words when they are not used in specific contexts. In the final analysis, the paper recommends that there is need to revise the Ndebele spelling system with the view to making it user-friendlier. A set of symbols, which are worth considering in reforming the Ndebele spelling system has been proposed.

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