13th International Workshop
Association for Written Language and Literacy
21-23 October 2021

Usability is not enough

The criticality of sociolinguistic factors in the establishment of new orthographies

Michael Cahill
mike_cahill@sil.org

Standardization correlates with stability of an orthography

- If there is an officially sanctioned orthography ("standardized"), it does not change much, and not very quickly.
- This is why orthography change in German, Dutch, and Kazakh was **newsworthy**.
- "German orthography reform of 1996" is a Wikipedia article
- Dutch also in 1996 and 2006 (but sadly, without an independent Wikipedia article).
- 2017, a Presidential Decree in Kazakhstan ordered that the transition from Cyrillic to Latin script be completed by 2025.
- Even French has had "suggested" reforms, that people are evidently free to use or ignore.

But mostly, these are stable orthographies ("no news" is the norm)

- Contrast that with an orthography which is recently created for a previously unwritten language, of which there are still many. These can be in major flux for years. Eventually a standard *may* be settled on.

- Who decides the standard, and what factors enter into the decisions?

WHO decides?

- Perhaps no one…
- There may be a local committee or other body appointed by local authorities. Often consulting with local or outside linguists. Their influence partly depends on the size and geographic dispersal of the language.
- Some countries have governmental policies on *new* orthographies (a bit of a foreign concept to many of us).
  - Ex: in Benin, <Vn> is preferred for nasalized vowels, per Beninese CENALA policy (*Centre National de la Linguistique Appliquée,* or National Center for Applied Linguistics)
  - But across the border in Togo, nasalized vowels have a tilde <ẽ>, like Ewe.

WHAT FACTORS enter into decisions?

"Usability" factors – that determine if people CAN use the orthography

- Bidirectional match of phonemes and graphemes
- Technological compatibility – what can be reproduced on cell phones, as well as other devices?

But often these "technical factors," the objective ones, are *not* the most crucial factors in whether an orthography is actually adopted and used.

More “human-related” sociolinguistic factors, can either aid an orthography’s acceptance, or in extreme cases, prevent its use. These are common globally today – and I would strongly suspect historically as well – and include:

1. Dialect representation
2. Resemblance to national or neighboring languages
3. Association with a specific religious group
4. Association with specific individuals
5. Government policies
6. Script choice

1. **Dialects** – different solutions in different places

- Nangurima dialect of Konni (Ghana)
- Ghana (Ring 1989):
  1) *teach* the Komba dialect to read the main Konkomba dialect,
  2) *extend* the Sisaala orthography to encompass more dialects,
  3) *develop* 5 orthographies for Mole "dialect cluster"

"The aim in each of these situations was to try to understand and respect the desires of the accepted authority structures in the community."

(Clifton 2013, worked in 2 divergent countries):

- Papua New Guinea – one set of dialects used orthography to show their *unity* as a group. Another set of dialects used orthography to show they are *different* from each other.
- Bangladesh – one set of dialects used orthography to show their *unity* as a group. Another set of dialects used orthography to show they are *different* from each other.
- No *linguistic* reason why some communities want to maintain unity and others want to emphasize distinctiveness. Social identity is key.

2. Resemblance to national or neighboring languages

- Guatemala: In several local languages, SIL linguists early on (1960s) proposed <qu> and <c> for /k/, to facilitate transition to Spanish. Years later (1980s), a Mayan identity resurgence reacted against that, advocating for <k>, as a distinguishing mark of identity, clearly distinct from Spanish. (Hull 2017 *inter alia*)

- Ghana: Konkomba has word-final nasalized <l> (as in autonym “Likpakpaln”), spelled <ln>. The related Komba people also have nasalized <l>, but refused to use <ln>. “We are not Konkombas.” So they use <nl>. (Cahill 2014)
- Mexico: In the rugged terrain of Oaxaca, each village may have its own speech, and often insists on its own orthography, not because of intelligibility, but for individual identity, resisting orthographic resemblances to neighbors (Hollenbach pc).
- Peru: Peruvian linguists argued that using 5 Quechua vowels made Quechua subservient to Spanish (i.e. colonialism) (Hornberger 1995:198)

3. Association with a specific religious group

The history of writing is intimately connected with the history of various religions (Gnanadesikan 2009). However, today, if an orthography is too closely connected with one religion, followers of other religions may resist using it.

- Togo: Kabiye Protestants will not use the Bible used by Catholics, for several reasons, but largely because they were not involved in the process (Roberts 2008)
- The Americas and Asia indicate that this can potentially disenfranchise some of the population (e.g. *evangelicos* and Catholics, Buddhists and Christians)

4. Association with specific individuals

- Cherokee, Hangeul, N'ko, other orthographies can be traced to specific people.
- When their reputation is good, the orthography has a better chance of being accepted, or even retained in adverse circumstances.
- For Touo (Solomon Islands) the late John Kari (formerly Paramount Chief of the Baniata Region, and a church leader) devised an orthography that is still highly respected. Two orthographies are therefore in use. (Terrill & Dunn 2003)
- (More research needed) – Mashi in Zambia. There have been some challenges with grapheme choice for dental fricatives because of the respect for a Catholic priest involved with the initial orthography.

5. Government policies

Even in one continent, countries differ:

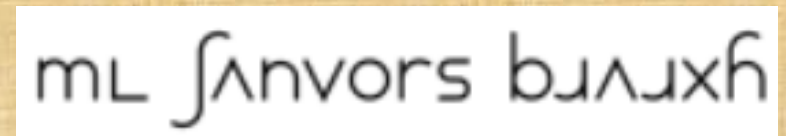
- Chad: list of approved symbols, both Latin and Arabic
- Cameroon: list of approved symbols, Latin but *not* Arabic
- Ethiopia: each orthography must be approved by government
- Benin: CENALA agency officially approves orthographies
- Ghana: previously tone marking forbidden, now relatively free

6. Script Choice

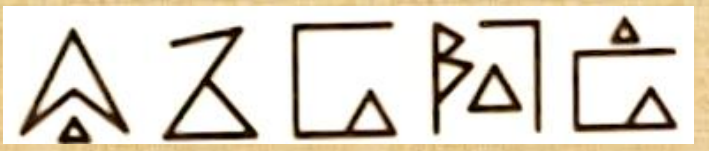
Besides the common Roman, Arabic, and Brahmi-based scripts, recent proposals include the innovative

Adlami, for Fulani, Unicode compliant
https://r12a.github.io/scripts/adlam/#writing_styles

Uniskript, Pangus Ho, a few languages
https://omniglot.com/conscripts/uniscript.htm



Hawaiian Creole, Sasaoka poster
at ICLDC 2019



Changing the script for an orthography is unusual, but possible:

- Turkish: Arabic → Latin
- Kazakh: Cyrillic → Latin
- Konso (Ethiopia): Ge'ez → Latin (Ahlberg 2020)
- Azeri (Azerbaijan): Arabic → Latin → Cyrillic → Latin (Hatcher 2008)

All the previous factors affect script decisions: dialects, resemblance to other languages, religious connections, personal connections, government policies (Unseth 2008 and the 12 articles in that issue)

This is now; what about “then”?

- These factors (and others) are not uncommon in today’s world.
- Since these have to do with human nature and its outworking, and human nature has presumably not changed in the last few thousand years, it is reasonable to expect that these same factors have had an influence in past orthographies.
- These are inherently harder to research, but 1) some examples exist, and 2) for a deeper understanding of orthography development and change, it would be appropriate and fruitful to try to discover these in past ages.

Past orthographies

- Korean Hangeul – personal influence of King Sejong (1444), official government sanction in 1894, religious influence of Bible (Silva 2008, Gnanadesikan 2009:191-207)
- Hurrian – ~1000 years in Mesopotamia, 2 main dialects - the diplomatic “Mitanni letter” and “Old Hurrian,” but also others. Texts span centuries, so separating synchronic from diachronic changes is a challenge. (Wilhelm 2004, Hutchens thesis in prep) Possible areas for research (given limited data…)
  - In the development of Hurrian (orthography), is it possible to determine the influence of other nearby languages?
  - Can we determine the prestige of the dialect that survived more than others?
  - *Some* Hurrian manuscripts use the Ugaritic script. Why?

- In this conference, I see some potential or actual sociolinguistic connections in several older languages (Mesoamerican, English, Egyptian, Latin, Italic, Pamphylian Greek, Korean).

- When researching orthography changes through history, it should be fruitful to keep the sociolinguistic factors in mind. This may mean connecting with the archeological and historical disciplines more than we are used to. Time will tell how rich an area of research this will be.

References

- Ahlberg, Aija Katriina. 2020. How Abugida Readers Learn Alphabetic Literacy Skills: The Role of Phonological Awareness in the Transfer Process in the Konso Language, Southwest Ethiopia. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Jyväskylä. [Finland] https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/70978
- Cahill, Michael. 2014. Non-linguistic factors. In Michael Cahill and Keren Rice (eds.) *Developing Orthographies for Unwritten languages*, 1–12. Dallas: SIL International.
- Clifton, John M. 2013. Dialects, Orthography and Society. *Work Papers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of North Dakota Session*: Vol. 53 , Article 1. DOI: 10.31356/silwp.vol53.01 Available at: https://commons.und.edu/sil-work-papers/vol53/iss1/1
- Hull, Kerry. 2017. When Letters Represent More Than Sounds: Ideology versus Practicality in the Development of a Standard Orthography for Ch'orti' Mayan. In Mari C. Jones and Damien Mooney (eds.), *Creating Orthographies for Endangered Languages*, 142-154. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gnanadesikan, Amelia. 2006. *The Writing Revolution: Cuneiform to the Internet*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

- Hatcher, Lynley. 2008. Script change in Azerbaijan: acts of identity. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 192:105-116.
- Hornberger, Nancy H. 1995. Five vowels or three? Linguistics and politics in Quechua language planning in Peru. In James W. Tollefson (editor) *Power and inequality in language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 187-205.
- Jones, Mari C. and Damien Mooney (eds.). 2017. *Creating Orthographies for Endangered Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ring, Andrew J. 1989. Three Case Studies Involving Dialect Standardization Strategies in Northern Ghana. In: Gloria E. Kindell (ed.). 1991. *Proceedings of the Summer Institute of Linguistics International Language Assessment Conference*, Horsleys Green, 23-31 May 1989. Dallas: SIL
- Roberts, David. 2008. The two Kabiye orthographies: a sociolinguistic and linguistic comparison. *Written Language & Literacy*, 11(1): 49-72.
- Silva, David, 2008. Missionary contributions toward the revaluation of Hangeul in late nineteenth-century Korea. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 192:57-74.

- Terrill, Angela, and Michael Dunn. 2003. Orthographic design in Solomon Islands: The social, historical, and linguistic situation of Touo (Baniata). *Written Language & Literacy* 6:2, 177–192.
- Unseth, Peter. 2008. The sociolinguistics of script choice: an introduction. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 192:1-4. https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/IJSL.2008.030/html (*see all the papers in that issue*)
- Wilhelm, Gernot. 2004. Hurrian. In Woodard, Roger D. (ed.) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World's Ancient Languages.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 95-118.