

Zimbabwe's Kalanga Orthography: The Strengths and Shortcomings of the 2008 Writing System

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Abstract. This paper seeks to interrogate the strengths and shortcomings of the current Kalanga orthography of 2008. Finnegan (2011) articulates that an orthography is a writing system used to achieve a match between the sound system of language and the alphabet representing it. As such, orthographies that do provide a mismatch between the spoken and written are considered unfit. Although there are factors that are considered in developing a plausible writing system, it is vital to note that graphemes or signs that do not adequately correspond to phonemes/speech render an orthography inadequate or insufficient. This paper, therefore, seeks to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the current Kalanga orthography in comparison to the previous harmonized Shona orthography, which was crafted for use for all Shona language varieties in 2006 and also in light of what a plausible orthography should accomplish. It should be noted that the Europeans who introduced the writing system to Africans have some standards that render an orthography valid. However, even before colonization, Africans had various systems of writing like the pictographic. This study argues that the current orthography has a number of flaws that include non-treatment of loan words, numerals, Kalanga word division and unmarked pronunciation as compared to the harmonized Shona orthography that provide such. This is against the provision of the definition of orthography by Coulmas (2003) and Trudgill (2006) who attest that an orthography is a set of conventions for writing a language. The rules and guiding principles of correct spelling, hyphenation, capitalization, word division, emphasis, and punctuation are enshrined in an ideal orthography as posited by Trudgill (2006). Couched and guided by the principle of simplicity and relying on information from interviews and texts, this article addresses the shortcomings and strengths of the current orthography of TjiKalanga and ultimately propose the way forward.

Keywords: orthography, Shona, Zimbabwe, Bantu languages

Languages: Shona

How to Cite this Article:

Dube, Limukani T. 2021. "Zimbabwe's Kalanga Orthography: The Strengths and Shortcomings of the 2008 Writing System." *Arusha Working Papers in African Linguistics*, 3(1): 42-51.

1.0 Introduction and Background of the Kalanga language

Previous scholarship that appropriately identifies who the BaKalanga are in Zimbabwe is inadequate, hence making it difficult to trace the true history of the BaKalanga. Mazarire (2003), Nyathi (2006), and Msindo (2012) point out that the BaKalanga are largely found in southwestern parts of Zimbabwe and some northern parts of Botswana. Nyathi (2006) states that the BaKalanga's origins can be traced as linked to the eastern countries and that they moved and settled in present-day Zimbabwe as early as the fifteenth century. Hachipola (1998) notes that, by ethnology, the Kalanga are considered western Shona people. The BaKalanga are considered a "hybrid of the Shona and Ndebele." Moyo (2012) attests that this nullifies the correct history of the BaKalanga and renders the Kalanga people a by-product or a cross-breed of the Ndebele and Shona people. History tells that the rise of Mfecane in Zululand had negative consequences that affected the BaKalanga. Mzilikazi who was running away from the heartless Shaka conquered and weakened the Kalanga tribe so as to enlarge his new emerging state. This resulted in BaKalanga losing their linguistic, cultural and religious rights, as they were so much affected mostly by the Ndebele hegemony. The strategic and forceful imposition of Ndebele Chiefs in Bukalangaland, as noted by Moyo (2012), robbed the BaKalanga of their linguistic rights, as they were now forced to abandon Kalanga in public spheres in a bid to build and promote the new Ndebele state in present-day Zimbabwe. Against this background, Kalanga language was adversely affected both in speech and writing, since in the Kalanga community Ndebele became the lingua franca of Matabeleland region. Consequently, the BaKalanga ended up speaking and writing more in Ndebele language, thus, under developing the Kalanga language.

The history of writing Tjikalanga language is traced back to the Dokean era as early as the 1930s. However, oral tradition points that the BaKalanga made use of rock paintings to record their lifestyles. Basing on the European standard of developing a language as noted by Chabata (2001) is to reduce it to writing. Firstly, the language has to be standardized leading to the establishment of an alphabet, rules of spelling and word division. He goes on to state that once a language has a standard orthography, it can be documented hence, its status is raised. Doke, a Bantu linguist, established the first orthographic work for the Kalanga language. Having studied linguistics, Doke recommended that, even though Tjikalanga and Nambya were part of the Shona languages group, they were to be treated separately because of their close contact and influence from the rest of the languages found in Matabeleland, which are unrelated to Shona languages. The Nambya and Kalanga languages suffered linguistic imperialism, as they were suppressed by Ndebele language in Matabeleland, the presence of Ndebele sounds in Tjikalanga resulted in

TjiKalanga being excluded from the orthography, which was crafted for all Shona language varieties. Doke argues that the Kalanga dialect of the South-Western area where the London Missionary Society was operating was presumed to be part of Matabeleland and was to be excluded from Shona union partly for reasons of administrative convenience. Even though TjiKalanga is mutually intelligible with the Shona language, Doke recommended that it should be excluded from the Shona-language orthography, since TjiKalanga has too many features that are peculiar to itself.

Having said that, the missionaries pioneered the project of developing the writing system for the Kalanga language solely for the purposes of evangelism. Since they were not first speakers of the language they somehow distorted the written language from the spoken. Although missionary efforts have often been viewed as aimed at creating a literate group of individuals to use in spreading the gospel, the local languages ended up gaining in the process by having their orthographies developed.

The second attempt to develop a standard orthography for the Kalanga language was spearheaded by the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society after a workshop which was done with ALRI in 2006 in a bid to include all Shona language varieties that are mutually intelligible—including Lilima, Barwe, Hwesa, Ndau, Korekore, Zezuru, Manyika Nambya, Karanga and Kalanga—under one Shona-inclusive orthography. Chimhundu (2010) posits that Kalanga shares its phonetic characterization with the rest of the Shona languages and uses the conjunctive writing system. Chebanne (2010) concurs with Chimhundu in pointing out that Kalanga falls within the broad Shona dialectology. Linguists classified Shona language varieties into the following three classes:

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|------------------|------------------------------|
| a) Western Shona | Lilima/Kalanga and Nambya |
| b) Eastern Shona | Hwesa, Barwe, Manyika, Ndau |
| c) Central Shona | Karanga, Korekore and Zezuru |

Although Doke had proposed a separate orthography for Kalanga and Nambya, since the languages had developed differently due to their isolation, the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society came up with one orthography for these mutually intelligible Shona language varieties. The unified orthography for all Shona language varieties maintains the five vowel system (*a, e, i, o, u*). The following letters were noted to represent the single sounds or phonemes that are used in varieties of the Shona language that are spoken in Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Mozambique (*a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, n', o, p, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z*). Consonant combinations are given, and explanations for aspiration and voicing are explicit in the harmonized orthography. The harmonized orthography also explains that the Shona language varieties operate on morphosyntactic

grammatical rules that favor the conjunctive writing system. As such, the conjunctive writing system was adopted for all Shona language varieties; hence, word division is explicit, as in writing the demonstrative disjunctively *busebo gwangu* ('my relish') and writing copula-nominal phrases conjunctively as in *nditate babe* ('that's his father'). Furthermore, the harmonized orthography stipulates that reduplicated forms should be written without using a hyphen, as they represent single items, e.g. *lobaloba* ('to beat'). In the same vein, it is indicated that borrowed words must be written as they are pronounced in local languages. As a result, the adopted word has to be rephonologized, navigated, and standardized to fit into the syllabic structure of the Kalanga language. For instance, *wheelbarrow* has been adopted and adapted as *bhara*; *commission*, as *khomishini*.

Similarly, the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society Unified orthography notes that names of places and languages will be written as pronounced, as in *Tjaina* (China), *Ngilandi* (England), and *Tjivenda* (Venda). Whilst place names that have not been phonologized will be written as they are spelled, for example Athens, Greece, the same applies to personal names that are to be written as they are spelled within the source language as in Akela Dube and Anita Moyo.

The current 2008 Kalanga orthography, which is in use, was designed by a group of BaKalanga of Zimbabwe, albeit mostly speakers of the TjiNdongondo Kalanga variety. Even though the 2008 writing system uses the conjunctive system, the major concern is that the current orthography does not reflect the variations of the Tjikalanga, but rather upholds the supremacy of TjiNdongondo. As such this study unravels the inconsistencies that are found in the current orthography.

2.0 Methodology

This research study is qualitative in nature. A total of fourteen (14) research participants were consulted, including two teachers from schools, four lecturers from both colleges and universities that offer Kalanga, four students who study TjiKalanga at Joshua Mqabuko Polytechnic College and Midlands State University, and four individuals from the Kalanga Language and Cultural Development Association who were significantly involved in designing the 2008 Kalanga orthography. The research participants were purposely chosen from the Kalanga-speaking community. The key participants furnished the researcher with vital information on the strengths and weaknesses of the current orthography of 2008. Data from respondents and acquired from the 2008 Kalanga orthography was interpreted, analyzed and discussed in thematic form.

3.0 Kalanga Dialectical Variation

It is vital to assess firstly that the Kalanga dialectical variations that are found in Zimbabwe and Botswana before discussing the history of the development of the 2018 Kalanga orthography. Wentzel (1981) and Moyo (2012) discuss the Kalanga dialectical variations that are found within the same regions. Moyo asserts that the BaKalanga are a mixture of various ethnic groups (Bakalanga BaNambya, BaVhenda, BaBirwa, BaPfumbi, Balemba, BaloVhedu, Bakgalata, BaTwamando), including the majority of people who call themselves Ndebele today using animal names for their surnames, such as *Ndlovu*, *Sibanda*, *Mpala*, *Ngwenya*, *Nyathi*, *Nkomo*, etc. However, Nyathi's (2006) study reveals that using animal names and parts of the body as surnames is common to most ethnic groups in Southern Africa, so it is not a distinct identity marker for the BaKalanga. He goes on to mention that the BaBirwa are a subgroup of the Sotho tribe and also that the Nambya and Venda are also minority ethnic groups just like the Kalanga. TjiKalanga comprises TjiNdonondo or TjiLozwi, which is generally known as Kalanga proper, TjiTalaunda, TjiLilima, and TjiJaunda dialects (which comprise few speakers today), while some dialects of TjiKalanga are no longer spoken in Zimbabwe, including the Nyai dialect. Ndlovu (2017) concurs with Moyo in articulating the same Kalanga dialectical variations. In Bulilima, TjiNdonondo and TjiLilima are prevalent unlike in Mangwe where TjiTalaunda and in some places Kalanga proper is spoken.

4.0 Development of the 2008 Kalanga Orthography

The Kalanga orthography was first crafted by Professor Doke. The second attempt was spearheaded by the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society, where all mutually intelligible varieties of Shona were included. The Kalanga and Nambya languages were considered in the Unified Shona orthography, which was designed for all mutually intelligible Shona languages found in Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Mozambique. Sociopolitical and linguistic factors led the BaKalanga to abandon the Unified Standard orthography for Shona language varieties. When the previously marginalized languages like Kalanga and Nambya received recognition in the constitution of 2013 after the Nziramasanga Commission of 1999, Kalanga was put in the spotlight like the rest of the previously marginalized languages. In terms of status planning as noted by Kloss (1969), this was the first attempt by the government to accord official status to previous marginalized languages. The Kalanga Language and Cultural Development Association pushed for the production of the Kalanga orthography in 2008 as noted by Ndlovu (2017). In terms of corpus planning, producing an orthography became the first linguistic step to revive the Kalanga language in 2008. The efforts of corpus planning as noted by Kloss (1969) are aimed

at modernization and standardization of existing languages for communicative purposes. Thus, the preparation of the Kalanga orthography of 2008 was part-and-parcel of corpus planning.

There are linguistic and non-linguistic factors that are considered when designing an orthography. Since orthographies are language-specific, in order for them to be effective, they have to be linguistically sound, acceptable to all stakeholders, teachable, and even easy to reproduce, as stated by Cahill and Karan (2008). There are political, educational, scientific, and technical aspects that are considered when developing with a plausible orthography. TjiNdondondo or Kalanga proper being considered the high variety has more representation in the current orthography unlike the other variations although there was a fair representation of linguists who were drawn from both Bulilima and Mangwe districts as noted by Ndlovu (2017). The Kalanga orthography development followed a principle that the phonemic system of a widely spoken dialect becomes the basis for writing, as such TjiNdondondo was favored. Coulmas (1996) notes that an orthography whose written symbols do not correspond to speech is unfit. In this regard, the BaKalanga designed an orthography in consideration of such factors.

5.0 Strengths of the Current Kalanga Orthography

The current Kalanga orthography of 2008 was crafted to complement one which was submitted earlier in 2006. Soon after the constitutional declaration that afforded official recognition to marginalized languages, the BaKalanga—through their language and cultural board—pushed for the development of its first orthography. This was the first attempt of Kalanga to attain a unique and separate orthography from the rest of the Shona language varieties. As such most of the participants felt proud for owning an orthography of their own. The Kalanga Language and Cultural Development Association Chairperson stated that the first Kalanga textbooks Zwidiye TjiKalanga series from ECD up to Grade 7 were written using the 2008 Kalanga orthography. This became the second official work of reviving the Kalanga language after the production of the Kalanga orthography.

An orthography is a conventionalized form of the written language (Trudgill 2006) or a convention that a community adopts in writing a language (Chebanne and Schmidt 2010). The decisions adopted in an orthography are based on many social and practical considerations. In this regard, the BaKalanga are appraised for coming up with an orthography. The chosen members who crafted the orthography represented the interests of the majority of the BaKalanga, as Chebanne and Schimdt (2010) posit that the speech community must decide upon the orthography of their language.

6.0 Shortcomings of the Current Kalanga Orthography

The participants indicated that the shortcomings of the 2008 Kalanga orthography were mainly the lack of harmonization of all the Kalanga dialects, non-treatment of borrowed words and numerals, Kalanga word-division, aspiration and unmarked pronunciation to mention but a few. According to Ndlovu (2017), the inadequacies emanate from deliberate omissions and typographical errors. The authoritative language board prescribes how a language is to be written and how words are to be spelled through the process of standardization. As such, language users expect a language to be written “properly,” which includes correct spelling, appropriate punctuation, and effective language usage. These shortcomings are discussed in detail in the following section.

6.1 Non-Treatment of Borrowed Words and Word Division

Since an orthography is a system of representing a language in a written form, it is crucial that the process of word-borrowing is clearly defined. A borrowed word should follow a procedural pattern of adoption and adaption. In an ideal orthography, borrowed words are either rephonologized, navigated, or standardized to fit into the syllabic structure of the receiving language. As noted by Kalanga language speakers and students, the 2008 Kalanga orthography poses a challenge for the treatment of /l/ and /r/ in words like e.g. *bhara* (‘wheelbarrow’) and *reza* (‘razor’), which are borrowed and prevalent in everyday Kalanga speech. When it comes to writing, however, the BaKalanga are hesitant to accept the existence of such sounds; instead, they would rather replace the /r/ with /l/, rendering the words *bhala* and *leza* ungrammatical. In speech it is clear that the above mentioned examples have been rephonologized to suit the Kalanga grammar. Furthermore, the 2008 Kalanga orthography poses a challenge of failing to address borrowed words. A number of students hinted at that the challenges encountered by writers in using the 2008 Kalanga writing system. One faculty member also argued that it is at the writer’s discretion to decide the proper way of writing borrowed words in the contemporary Kalanga language, as in *Senathi* for Senate and *Phalamente* for Parliament.

The aforementioned examples have been used in the Zimbabwean Constitution of 2013, which was translated from English to Kalanga in 2018 by the National Constitution Translation Team. As such, the inadequacies prevalent in the current orthography render the orthography inappropriate, thus resulting in the need to revive it. Moreover, the way words are morphosyntactically organized in a language is crucial. Kalanga uses the conjunctive writing system, like most Bantu languages. The current Kalanga orthography of 2008 provides examples of words used out of context, i.e. not in a phrase, clause, or a sentence, thus making it difficult

for writers or learners to mark word division as in the following examples that are extracted from the orthography:

th-	thama	‘do’
ts-	tsatula	‘squeeze forcefully and suddenly’
zw-	zwedu	‘ours’
tj-	tjaba	‘nation’
	tjedu	‘ours’
pf-	pfa	‘spit’

The BaKalanga have adopted the conjunctive writing system for their language, but it is not explicit in the current orthography, as word division is unmarked.

6.2 Omission of Kalanga Dialects

Kalanga is a dialect continuum, as alluded to earlier. In Zimbabwe, TjiNdondondo, which is considered “Kalanga proper,” was standardized and has been accorded higher status than the rest of the Kalanga varieties. The process of standardization creates a variety that used for writing. A standard language, according to Swann (2004), is often regarded as a relatively uniform variety of a language designed for a wide range of communicative functions. It is in this language where regional or local variations are negated. Moreover, the principle of standardization does not marginalize the rest of the dialects. Ndlovu (2017) talks about the error of omission. A member of the KLCDA remarked that the orthographers decided deliberately to exclude some symbols that are used in the TjiLilima and TjiTalaunda varieties on the basis that TjiNdondondo was considered the proper Kalanga, while the other two were more frequently considered iKalanga of Botswana. An important case to note are symbols like *j/dl* in *ndoja* and *ndodla* and *zh/h* in *izhangeno* and *ihangeno*.

These examples indicate the double consonant *-dl-* and single consonant *-h-* represent the Tjindondo Kalanga variation that is used in the current orthography. On the other hand, the orthography is silent on the treatment of the Tjililima and TjiTalaunda Kalanga varieties. It is vital to review the Kalanga orthography, in order to unify and harmonize the rest of the inadequately represented Kalanga dialects, since the process of standardization can ultimately result in marginalization.

7.0 Conclusion

It is imperative to note that for a language to develop, its corpus has to be extended. The standardization of the Kalanga language will be more advanced if the current orthography is reviewed and revised to suit the current linguistic needs. Research advances made so far on Kalanga corpus

reflect the need to include the existing orthographic treatment of numerals, determine word pronunciation, and highlight punctuation. Furthermore, it is of paramount significance to standardize and harmonize all Kalanga language varieties. The current orthography should cater to all forms of Kalanga, including TjiLilima and TjiTalaunda. This would enable the orthography to be user-friendly for all speakers (and writers). Additionally, it is crucial for the Kalanga Language and Cultural Development Association to have trained personnel who deal with questions concerning language usage. The Kalanga Language and Cultural Development Association should liaise with national language research institutes of Zimbabwe, viz. the African Languages Research Institute and the Midlands State University Language Institute for guidance on language matters, as noted by Chabanne et al. (2006). The linguists who developed a unified, standard Shona orthography stated that the African Languages Research Institute should act as the “clearing house” for standardization and harmonization of borrowed words for all Shona language dialects and varieties. As such, associations should be guided by a research institute within their countries. However, it is unfortunate to note that various language associations in Zimbabwe remain unmonitored by African Languages Research Institute.

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