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# The Compilation of a Shona Children's Dictionary: Challenges and Solutions

Peniah Mabaso, *African Languages Research Institute (ALRI), University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe (penmabaso@arts.uz.ac.zw)*

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**Abstract:** This article outlines the challenges encountered by the African Languages Research Institute (ALRI) team members in the compilation of the monolingual Shona Children's Dictionary. The focus is mainly on the problems met in headword selection. Solutions by the team members when dealing with these problems are also presented.

**Keywords:** SHONA CHILDREN'S DICTIONARY, LOANWORDS, TABOO, HEADWORD SELECTION, SLANG, TONE MARKING, ILLUSTRATIONS, SYNONYMS, VARIANTS

**Opsomming: Die samestelling van 'n Sjonakinderwoordeboek: Uitdagings en oplossings.** Hierdie artikel skets die uitdagings waarvoor die spanlede van die African Languages Research Institute (ALRI) te staan gekom het by die samestelling van die eentalige Sjonakinderwoordeboek. Die fokus is hoofsaaklik op die probleme ondervind by die keuse van trefwoorde. Oplossings deur die spanlede by die benadering van hierdie probleme word ook aangebied.

**Slutelwoorde:** SJONAKINDERWOORDEBOEK, LEENWOORDE, TABOE, TREFWOORD-KEUSE, SLENG, TOONAANDUIDING, ILLUSTRASIES, SINONIEME, VARIANTE

## Introduction

This article outlines the challenges encountered by ALRI researchers in the compilation of the monolingual Shona Children's Dictionary (henceforth SCD) which is the first of its kind in Shona. The compilers adopted some of the techniques used in compiling the advanced Shona dictionary *Duramazwi Guru reChiShona* (henceforth DGC). Two of the SCD compilers and editors were also part of the compilers and editors of DGC. However, the dictionary is different from the DGC in many respects such as the target users, the structure and the contents. The SCD is mainly meant for primary school children, the seven to thirteen years age group and their teachers. Student teachers at teacher training colleges and their lecturers are also some of the potential target users. On the contrary, the DGC targeted high school learners and students at tertiary institutions like colleges and universities.

The main challenge of this project was what exactly such a specified dictionary should contain. Another challenge the compilers faced was the issue of

language dynamism. The question was if slang, colloquial and loanwords should be included in the dictionary. Should taboo or obscene words be given as well? Is it important to mark tone? It had to be decided which illustrations should be included in the dictionary, considering the different urban and rural backgrounds of the main target users. The compilers agreed on possible solutions to some of the challenges for the dictionary to be user-friendly, satisfying its users after publication.

### **Challenges encountered in headword selection**

Headword selection is an important stage in the compilation of any dictionary as it determines the lexical items to include in and exclude from a dictionary. Svensén (1993: 40) argues that the selection of headwords must be preceded by a number of decisions regarding the size and aim of the dictionary. For the SCD compilers, headword selection was difficult mainly because of the specified nature of the dictionary, which is meant for school children. As a result not all Shona words could find their way into the dictionary. Only words which the compilers and reference groups agreed were suitable for the targeted age group were entered as headwords.

In dictionary compilation, headwords have to be carefully selected and defined in a special way to satisfy the needs of the target users. This can only be achieved when the users can access lexical items which they anticipate and which are helpful to them. The selection process for the SCD headwords was designed according to well-informed principles. The compilers selected headwords specifically suited for children. In this case, the problem was how to determine whether a headword was commonly used by children.

The problem was partially solved when the compilers agreed that Shona primary school textbooks should be used as sources for headwords. However, from all the Shona textbooks, the compilers could not collect enough headwords for the dictionary. As a result, they decided that words from other primary school textbooks for subjects such as mathematics and general publications encompassing subjects such as science, biology, geography, religious studies and agriculture should also be used as headword sources. The headwords were then adopted in and adapted to Shona. This also implies that the dictionary incorporated loanwords to make provision for new concepts which previously did not exist in Shona.

### **Loanwords in Shona: Why are there so many?**

The use of loanwords is not unique to Shona speakers. Shona has not been immune to language contact and its resultant effect of cultural and language borrowing. In Zimbabwe, English has always enjoyed a prestigious position in both urban and rural areas, mainly because Zimbabwe is a former British col-

ony. Despite the fact that Zimbabwe has enjoyed political independence for 28 years, English has remained the official language. It is still obligatory for social promotion, being associated with prestige. Many children from well-to-do families are sent to Group A schools or former white-only schools where English is used as medium of instruction. In Zimbabwe where many Shona and Ndebele speakers find themselves in a diglossic situation with English in the most prominent position, borrowing therefore mainly occurs from English. Chitiga (1995: 6) who discusses the politics of language in Zimbabwe, asserts that English has assumed the most important position in the life of Zimbabweans in all formal sectors like education, commerce, media and technology. Owing to the prevailing socio-linguistic situation in Zimbabwe, the Shona lexicon largely contains loanwords from English.

Basing themselves on the above historical, social, technological and economic factors, the compilers included loanwords as headwords in the SCD. To exclude loanwords from the SCD was to ignore the actual language situation, as some loanwords have in fact become part of the Shona lexicon. All languages develop through borrowing, as Ndlovu (1998: 33) argues:

Language change is a universally accepted and attested principle that has long been established by historical linguistics. No language is fixed; all languages undergo constant change over time. New words are constantly coming into use and at the same time old words are gradually dropping out of use.

This assertion accentuates that the lexicons of all languages are continuously changing. These language changes are due to a number of factors, among others, multilingual interactions as well as the continued spreading of English and other languages inherited from former colonial powers. In Zimbabwe, literate Shona speakers use both English and Shona in general conversation causing English sounds, grammar and vocabulary to exercise a strong influence on Shona.

### **Criteria used for the selection of loanwords**

Kipfer (1984: 35) argues that lexicographers have to keep up with new words and meanings as well as the development of language in general. The SCD compilers saw it unwise to exclude loanwords since they now constitute a significant percentage of the Shona lexicon. They considered the historical, social, technological and economic factors to justify their selection of loanwords in the SCD. From the July 2005 outreach programme held by the SCD compilers, different views were received from target users on the issue of loanwords. There were some Shona language conservatives who were against the inclusion of loanwords, while 'modernists' argued for their inclusion. Svensén (1993: 47) asserts that one of the principal recommendations of publishers is that their new dictionaries contain the latest material. Taking Svensén's point of view

into consideration for the SCD to appeal to its target users, the latest material in the form of loanwords relating to science education and technology were included as headwords. Where there is an original Shona term for some words, that Shona term was used. However, there were some cases where it was found that loanwords were more popular, even though there were indigenous Shona terms. For example, it is now rare to hear speakers refer to mathematics/maths as *masvomhu* rather than *metsi*, bicycle as *bhizautare* rather than *bhasikoro*, and sugar as *tsvigiri* rather than *shuga*.

Faced with such a problem, the SCD compilers (and other ALRI team members) agreed that not every loanword should find its way into the dictionary. Systematic and well-defined ways were followed in selecting loanwords. The SCD compilers chose loanwords from the viewpoint of their stability and acceptance within the language. It was agreed that loanwords incorporated into the language and used in formal speech, showing that they have stood the test of time, should be included as headwords.

Another problem for the SCD compilers was their dealing with words containing letters or digraphs not recognised in Shona orthography. Some letters and digraphs like *q*, *x* and *hl* are prevalent in Shona speech, especially in the Karanga and Ndaou dialects. Although they are found in the major Shona dialects, they are not part of the standard Shona alphabet. Magwa (2002) notes:

From 1967 onwards, speakers of different dialects were experiencing certain difficulties arising from the defective alphabet and the spelling and word division system. The current orthography is linguistically constricting in a number of ways. For example, the standard alphabet does not have symbols representing the sounds [l] and [x], which are found in ChiKaranga, ChiNdaou and ChiKorekore dialects.

The compilers agreed that English loanwords should be adapted to conform to the Shona CV syllable structure. Most English loanwords are written as they are pronounced in Shona. Many technical terms such as *fax*, *diskette* and *computer* were entered respectively as **fakisi**, **dhisiketi** and **kombiyuta** in the SCD. Most Shona writers make sure that loanwords from English adhere to the Shona phonetic system. As has been mentioned earlier, in the Shona phonological alphabet, there is no lateral /l/. The closest equivalent of /l/ in Shona is the trill /r/. Loanwords like *loan* and *leave* were respectively rendered as **roni** and **rivhi** in Shona. However, the use of /r/ in place of /l/ does not apply to all English loanwords. There are exceptions such as **kukala** (to colour) and **yelo** (yellow) (Chitauro-Mawema 2000: 211). When *r* replaces *l*, the meaning of words changes, for example **kukala** (to colour) will become **kukara** (to be greedy). This shows that there is a limit to replacing loanwords with the letter *l* with those with the letter *r*. It seems that nowadays new words with *l* are incorporated into Shona. At present it is rare to hear someone using the accepted trill *r* in these loanwords. Shona speakers no longer say **raki** (luck), **rika** (leak) or **roni** (loan). In the SCD, all loanwords were included and represented

as they are pronounced using the letters, digraphs and trigraphs not recognised in standard Shona orthography. The compilers hope that these considerations will compel those responsible for changes in the Shona orthography, like the Shona Language and Culture Association (SLCA) and the Ministry of Education, to allow the use of some of the letters which are not recognised in the current Shona orthography.

### **Taboo, obscene and offensive words**

In Shona, it is a cultural taboo to use derogatory words, especially those describing excretory and sexual organs and acts publicly in spoken or written form. The compilers had problems in deciding whether to include these obscene and offensive words in the dictionary. A few examples of such words are **gongo** (clitoris), **jende** (testicle) and **beche** (vagina). Since it is a taboo in Shona culture to use these words in all public communication, the Shona people have developed euphemistic terms to refer to these organs or acts. The anus is referred to as **kushure** (the back) and the penis as **nhengo yomurume** (a man's private part). The use of such euphemistic terms and phrases when referring to human anatomy and sexual behaviour shows how sensitive the Shona people are to these obscene and offensive words. The biggest problem likely to be caused by the use of these euphemistic terms in the SCD is that the children would not understand them since they appear ambiguous. Including obscene and offensive words in a dictionary meant for such a young age group would be a matter of licensing their use in everyday speech. The dictionary would be the first-ever Shona publication meant for children to use obscene and offensive words. However, excluding them from the dictionary would have been to ignore the actual language situation. It would also have been to overlook the educational value that the correct reference to these human anatomical parts can have for teaching children about sexual diseases and abuse.

The SCD compilers also faced many problems in dealing with offensive words describing certain negative features of people, for instance cripples and albinos. Shona words like **zvirema** for cripples, **mukawu/musupe/murungudunhu** for albinos, **hure** for a prostitute and **ngomwa** for a barren woman are often avoided, especially in the presence of the affected people themselves, who might feel offended. The use of such terms is against the Shona culture that protects the socially disadvantaged. Nevertheless, some of these offensive words were entered into the dictionary.

### **Slang and colloquial words**

Shona speakers use many slang and colloquial words. According to Tullock (1994: 1454), slang refers to words, phrases and language use regarded as informal and often restricted to special contexts or peculiar to specific classes of

users. The use of slang and colloquial words varies with age groups. Among Shona speakers, children and youths seem to be the main age groups that often use slang. Some slang and colloquial words are only used for a short period while others are well established in the language. In Shona, slang words like **bhoo** (okay) are now part of everyday speech, especially among children. Some slang words like **chibhanzi** (money) and **shuzura** (to go) are transitory. Chimhundu (2001: xxxv) likens such transitory slang words to fashion which comes and goes, and therefore they were not included in the SCD.

The SCD compilers agreed that slang words that have become permanent in the Shona vocabulary should be treated as headwords and given the style marker "manje" (an abbreviation of "chimanjemanje") to show that they are colloquial words. Transitory slang words should not be included in the dictionary. The challenge for the SCD compilers was to distinguish between slang words that are established in Shona and those that are transitory.

### Tone marking

In the DGC, tone was marked. Tone marking in Shona is very important as it distinguishes between words spelt the same but pronounced differently. For example, if tone is not marked, there will be no difference between **nzara** *low tone* (hunger) and **nzara** *low, high tone* (finger nail). However, primary school teachers and lecturers consulted during outreach programmes argued that tone should not be marked in such a dictionary, as it will confuse children. The dictionary should be very simple and concentrate on the meaning of words.

### Linguistic details

The compilers agreed upon the marking of all parts of speech in the dictionary to give linguistic detail which was thought necessary for such a dictionary. It is indicated whether a headword is a noun, pronoun, adverb, adjective, preposition and so on.

### Synonyms and variants

Synonyms are lexical items which have the same meaning or are so close in meaning that they can be used interchangeably in certain contexts. In Shona the word *baboon* can be translated with **bveni**, **dede**, **diro**, **gudo** and **mutiro**, depending on one's dialect. According to Crystal (1997: 408), a variant can be defined as a set of alternatives in a given context. Shona has many variants, mainly because of its different dialects. For example, the Karanga people in some instances use *zh* and *gw* where the other dialects like Zezuru and Manyika use *nz* and *rw* respectively as can be seen in words like **zhara** and **nzara** (hunger), **-gwara** and **-rwara** (to be sick). The problem regarding synonyms and

variants is their treatment in the dictionary, whether to define them separately or not.

In this connection, the compilers followed the procedure of the DGC compilers. The synonym or variant that is commonly used, carries the definition and all the others that are less common are cross-referenced to it. For example, for the synonyms **bveni**, **dede**, **diro**, **gudo** and **mutiro**, **gudo** carries the definition to which the others are cross-referenced, as shown below:

**bveni** D- z 5. ONA gudo 5.

**gudo** D- z 5. Mhuka yemusango ine mahobi neuso hwakada kufanana nehwetsoko. FAN bveni 5, dede 5, diro 5, mutiro 3.

Variants are defined as follows:

**zhara** D- z 9. ONA nzara 9.

**nzara** [zhara] D- z 9. Kunzwa kuda kudya nokuti mudumbu munenge musisina chikafu.

The SCD like the DGC contains as much information on the grammar in the front matter as is necessary for the target users to understand the abbreviations used.

### **Idioms**

Idioms are also important in the SCD since they reflect the culture of the Shona speech community, so just like the DGC, the SCD includes and explains them. However, not all Shona idioms are included and explained in the SCD but only those suitable for children. To this purpose, the compilers used Shona primary school textbooks as sources for the idioms.

### **Illustrations**

Since the dictionary is meant for children in both rural and urban areas, it has to include illustrations to explain some unfamiliar headwords in the dictionary. The major problem was to determine which headwords are unfamiliar to the target users, especially considering their different backgrounds. Some things familiar to urban children might not be familiar to rural children. Trying to satisfy the expectations of both the rural and the urban target users might have caused the dictionary to become nothing more than a book of illustrations. The compilers therefore agreed to include group illustrations as part of the back matter of the dictionary.

## Conclusion

The article discussed some of the major problems unique to the SCD, when compared to other general dictionaries ALRI had compiled and published. Headword selection has proved to be the greatest challenge for the SCD compilers. Different word categories found in Shona like loanwords, offensive words, taboo or obscene words and slang words made headword selection difficult. Shona culture and the inadequacy of the Shona orthography caused a dilemma for the SCD compilers. Adhering to the current Shona orthography would have meant excluding some important headwords common in speech. The compilers explicitly state the challenges in the front matter and the compromises and solutions decided and agreed on.

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