

‘The people divided by a common language’: The orthography of Sesotho in Lesotho, South Africa, and the implications for Bible translation



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The Basotho of Lesotho and South Africa speak the same language, namely Sesotho. However, the two countries do not use the same orthography when writing Sesotho. This orthographic representation and its variations pose a significant challenge when Bible translators translate it into Sesotho. It also presents difficulties to readers of the Bible in South Africa when they have to read the Bible written in Lesotho orthography for the first time or to Lesotho readers who encounter Sesotho written in South African orthography. The two orthographies are independent but complementary. The Lesotho orthography is older than the South African. It differs in the choice of letters and the marking of initial syllabic nasals and (to a much lesser extent) in written word division and the use of diacritics on vowels to distinguish some ambiguous spellings.

Contribution: This article provides a historical examination of the problem beginning with the first efforts by French missionaries to write the language in the 19th century, the separate but interrelated development of the two orthographies in Lesotho and South Africa and the current impasse concerning a unified orthography. The analysis will include an examination of the linguistic issues involved, the sociolinguistic topics (including politics, education and religion) and various possible scenarios for resolving the problem will be considered.

Keywords: Sesotho; Southern Sotho; Lesotho; South Africa; orthography; Bible translation; missionaries.

Introduction

The Basotho of Lesotho and South Africa speak the same language, namely Sesotho (Southern Sotho). However, the two countries do not use the same orthography when writing Sesotho. These divergent orthographic representations pose a significant challenge for readers of the Bible into Sesotho. For instance, readers of the Bible in South Africa will find it challenging if they have to read their Bibles written in Lesotho orthography during church services, Bible study meetings or at their homes. On the other hand, this also happens for Lesotho readers who have to read their Bibles written in South African orthography. The two orthographies are independent but complementary. They are complementary in the sense that the meaning of words and so on is not affected by the orthographic differences. For instance, the names Modimo (written in South African orthography) and Molimo (written in Lesotho orthography) both mean God. Here the pronunciation and meaning are the same, but the difference is brought about by how the words are written. The Lesotho orthography is older than the South African. It differs from the South African in the choice of some letters, in the marking of syllable-initial nasal sounds (phonemes) and (to a much lesser extent) in word division and the use of diacritics on vowels to distinguish some ambiguous spellings. For more on this issue, please see section ‘sociolinguistic factors involved in the two orthographies’.

An overall objective of this article is to provide a historical and linguistic examination of the problem of Sesotho orthography, beginning with the first efforts when the orthography was first developed by Paris Evangelical Missionary Society in Lesotho. Regarding the question of whether the South African orthography received adequate attention during that time when the Lesotho orthography was developed, the answer is that attention was not given to South African orthography at the time when the Lesotho orthography was being developed, but it received more attention later from the authorities and the Department of Education of the Republic of South Africa. The current examination will also tap into issues such as the sociolinguistic aspects

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