The role of terminology standardisation and harmonisation in SADC countries

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1. Introduction

Lexicographers, terminologists and terminographers work with standards – albeit the standard variety of a language or standards as such (i.e. ISO standards).

This presentation will deal with the following related aspects:

- Standardisation of languages
- Spelling and orthography
- ISO Standards
- Modernisation
- Harmonisation or unification
2. Standardisation

Crystal (1985) defines *standardisation* as a natural development of a standard language in a speech community or an attempt by a community to impose one dialect as a standard.

According to Hudson (1980) standardisation is a direct and deliberate intervention by society to create a standard language where before there were just ‘dialects’ (non-standard varieties).
Standardisation (cont.)

Standard languages are usually associated with prestige and cut across regional differences, providing a unified means of communication.

The standard language is an institutionalised norm which can be used in mass media, economic sector, education, science and technology.

Standardisation is necessary to facilitate communication, provide a uniform form for learning material and dictionaries, and the establishment of an agreed orthography and spelling rules.
Standardisation (cont.)

Various non-standard languages develop due to extensive contact between speakers of different languages and as a result of a changing environment.

The increasing use of non-standard language in the classroom often has dire consequences for learners and for the traditional language.
Standardisation (cont.)

It is important for the terminologist to consult with other dialects or languages to see whether a concept is already named.

It is much easier to coin a new term in the relevant language according to existing terms in other language(s).

In other words, make use of existing terms in the standard varieties of languages and their dialects.
Standardisation (cont.)

Terminologists document terminology with the aim of providing subject specialists and laypeople with standardised terms that denote the corresponding concepts.

It is of the utmost importance to use standardised terms in subject related work.

Standardised terms ensure exact communication among subject specialists themselves, but also between subject specialists and laypeople.
3. Spelling and orthography

New and unified spelling and orthography systems should be created for the languages selected for standardisation.

Establishing well standardised, efficient and practical spelling and orthography rules, is a crucial basis for developing a modern literacy tradition.

An efficient and practical spelling and orthography is a direct function of enabling educational, cultural, administrative and mass media system in the countries concerned (Abdulaziz, 1991).
Spelling and orthography (cont.)

- Lexicographers document the vocabulary of a standard language.
- Terminographers document the terminology of the standard variety of a language.
- Lexicographers and terminographers adhere to the spelling and orthography rules of the standard variety of a language when compiling dictionaries.
4. ISO Standards

South Africa established a national ISO/TC 37 committee in the field of Terminology and other language resources on 19 August 2002.

StanSA TC 37 is the local standardisation committee regarding terminology and other language resources.

StanSA TC 37 is a mirror committee of the international ISO/TC 37.
ISO Standards (cont.)

- Members of StanSA TC 37 represent South Africa at the annual international ISO/TC 37 meetings.

- The StanSA TC 37 team has a very valuable role to play in deliberating at international level when the standards dealing with terminology, lexicography and other language resources are discussed or under revision.

- The StanSA TC 37 team also gain valuable experience from the international scene, which they are able to share with their South African colleagues.
ISO Standards (cont.)

National standards are developed by consensus through technical committees (TCs).

The TCs consists of a balanced representation of user groups, interest groups, and government.

The TCs represent the needs of local stakeholders.

When dealing with standards the TCs should keep in mind aspects such as:

- Discipline, domain or subject area
- Modern technology
- Project management
- Cost effectiveness
ISO Standards (cont.)

- Developing new standards has the advantage that these standards could focus on addressing the needs of the users.

- Developing new standards is a time consuming and costly process.

- Adopting regional and international standards has the advantage of utilising standards that were well researched and relatively cheap.
ISO Standards (cont.)

- Standards can be incorporated into legislation by referring to them.
- Compulsory specifications can be redrafted as legislation.
- All standards are voluntary unless incorporated into legislation.
- Since standards are second to written law, they affect all aspects of human life.
ISO Standards (cont.)

ISO standardised terminology comprises of all terms and definitions occurring in ISO standards.

As such standards are important elements of the teaching and training of subject related topics.

The initiation phase into any specialised field or domain goes through the learning of its main concepts, the definitions describing these concepts and the terms denoting them.
5. Modernisation

No living language is static. A living language change and therefore it needs to be modernised.

Modernisation entails that the spelling and orthography rules of a language need to be revised on a regular basis.

An orthography is to literacy what numeration is to numeracy (EN Emenanjo, 1998)

Language modernisation is a co-operative venture between government agencies (i.e. language bureaux) and the speakers of the language.
6. Harmonisation

Nearly all the countries in the African continent are multilingual nations.

This plethora of languages in one country has posed formidable challenges to national development, national stability, socio-economic advancement, and sound educational policies.

Multilingualism has a vital influence on the creation of polythematic terminology for all SADC countries.
In language planning jargon, *harmonisation* is used synonymously with *unification* (T Msimang, 1998). (Unification) seeks to construct a common language for such a dialect-group by employing as much as possible, forms which are common to all of the variants in the group, and, where this is not possible, by the use of forms common to the predominant majority; or in previously-attained literary forms (Lestrade, 1935).
Harmonisation (cont.)

In harmonisation a number of dialects belonging to the same language group are unified so as to produce one common language.

In this process variant forms between dialects are neutralised or harmonised in the common language (e.g. Ngwato, Ngwaketsi, and Setswana to form Standard Setswana).

The phenomenon of harmonisation can also occur between languages (e.g. IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, SiSwati, IsiNdebele). They too could be harmonised to produce one common language (e.g. Standard Nguni).
Harmonisation (cont.)

- Nguni and Sotho cultural languages have a sizeable core of common vocabularies.
- It would be ideal if they also had a common pool of technical vocabularies.
- It will then not be necessary to coin a separate term for IsiNdebele, SiSwati, IsiXhosa and IsiZulu (Nguni group) or for Sesotho sa Leboa, Setswana, Sesotho (Sotho group).
- A team of terminologists for all the Nguni languages and another team for all the Sotho languages could work together when denoting concepts.
Terminology can be regarded as an artificial language.

To introduce harmonisation/unification in the terminology process will not be a foreign principle or practice.

Since terminology is mainly interested in written language the principles of harmonisation can be applied here (adhere to spelling and orthography rules of each language).

Terms will be nationally recognisable – it will consist of the basic stem with language specific adjustments, but with the same or similar phonemic shape.
Harmonisation (cont.)

In order to harmonise and standardise these dialects or languages the problem should be addressed at

- the political
- the socio-linguistic, and
- the linguistic levels
Harmonisation (cont.)

- Harmonisation is closely related to standardisation.

- By harmonising or unifying one is actually standardising.

- Standardisation and harmonisation both involve a direct and deliberate intervention by the linguistic society to create a neutral variety.
Harmonisation (cont.)

Harmonisation is a very sensitive issue in the South African context.

Linguistic Nguni nationalism will not affect the political status of a distinct Ndebele nation, Swazi nation, Xhosa nation or Zulu nation. As will Sotho nationalism not affect the political status of a distinct South Sotho nation, Northern Sotho nation or Tswana nation.

Linguistic stakeholders often fail to make a distinction between linguistic nationalism and political nationalism.
Harmonisation (cont.)

With the South African multilingual dispensation the rapid development of the separate Nguni and Sotho languages is such as to make harmonisation no longer possible.

The official South African languages are being developed into functional languages in all spheres of human activity.

Terminology development could, however, benefit from harmonisation efforts.
7. Conclusion

Standardisation comprises a whole world of activities in various spheres of life which helps creating benefits and sustainability for everyone in the global society.

The issue of standardisation of African languages over the whole African continent has been the central quest for the development of these languages as modern vehicles of science, technology, education, administration and literacy expansion.

The languages which have been selected as standards have already been committed to writing. To harmonise and standardise them, there is an urgent need for modernisation and spelling and orthography reform.
The terminologies of the official languages should be developed to enhance the multilingual heritage of a country.

When there are too many languages this might not be practical and economically viable.

In such a situation harmonisation could be beneficial to terminology.

The principles and practice of the harmonisation of terminologies should, however, be studied carefully.
To me harmonisation seems to be a natural process – it should not be enforced.

Language planners should make linguists aware of a phenomenon such as harmonisation/unification.

They could advocate the advantages or disadvantages of such a phenomenon.

The test of harmonisation, however, lies with the language users.
On the one hand you have an awakening of linguistic nationalism – renewed pride, dignity and appreciation of the mother-tongue (first language).

On the other hand there is a disquieting movement towards the eradication of linguistic differences since they enshrine ethnicity which could be regarded as a stumbling block in the way of nation building (Louwrens 1996).

The terminologist cannot turn a blind eye to these developments, since whatever course the future is going to take, it will directly affect the work of the terminologist.
Irrespective of how well trained and resourceful terminologists may be, and irrespective of how elegant and sophisticated the set of terms they create, large scale term creation will remain a wasteful endeavour unless the end-product is going to be appreciated and utilised fully by the subject specialists and language practitioners.

Appreciation for terminology should emanate from the language users themselves, since one can never succeed by forcing terminology, a language or language variety onto its speakers.
Harmonisation or unification means various things to various people:

- the merging of a number of dialects to form a single common language;
- the merging of a number of languages belonging to the same group to form one standard variety;
- harmonising only spelling and orthographies;
- harmonising scientific and technical terms (language for special purposes).

The latter is the most desirable and achievable possibility.
Thank you!

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