Orthographic Developments and Grammatical Observations

Inge Kosch

1 Notes on Orthography and Spelling Conventions

1.1 Background to the Orthographical Development of Northern Sotho

Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa) is one of the three languages which constitute the Sotho group of languages in South Africa, the other two languages being Tswana (Setswana) and Southern Sotho (Sesotho). Northern Sotho is the term used to collectively denote a number of dialects spoken mainly in the Gauteng and Limpopo Provinces of South Africa and serves as the official language and standard written form of these dialects. Sepedi (also referred to as Pedi, without the grammatical class gender prefix se-) has impacted the written language the most, because this was the first dialect that was committed to writing by the missionaries who started working among the Bapedi people. Other dialects like Sekopa (Kopa) also partly influenced the standardised written form. Northern Sotho became an official language of South Africa in 1996 along with eight other Bantu languages, which were added to the existing two official languages, Afrikaans and English.

The texts that were documented by Hoffmann and which are the focus of our research in this publication, were written in the Semamabolo (Mamabolo) dialect, which is close to the standardised form. To make these texts more accessible they have been rendered in the current official orthography in accordance with the Northern Sotho Terminology and Orthography rules No. 4 (Department of Education and Training 1988).

In order to position Hoffmann’s contribution in its historical context, a brief background on the first documentations of Northern Sotho words and the earliest attempts at designing an orthography for the language is deemed appropriate at this point.

According to Esterhuyse (1975, 1) the first written Northern Sotho words appeared in an article by Alexander Merensky (1862). However, Beyers (1981, 697) avers that the laying of the foundation for Northern Sotho as a written language should be attributed to Rudolph F.G. Trümpelmann who first converted Biblical material and German hymns into Northern Sotho in the years 1868 to 1869. A missionary who produced monumental works in pursuit of a scientifically motivated orthography and spelling conventions, was Karl Endemann.
One would have thought that his grammar book (*Versuch einer Grammatik des Sotho*, 1876) and his dictionary (*Wörterbuch der Sotho Sprache*, 1911) in which he simultaneously catered for Northern Sotho, Tswana and Southern Sotho, would have had a significant impact on the writing system of the Sotho languages. On the contrary, however, his pioneering work enjoyed limited following as his proposed orthography was rendered user-unfriendly by the many diacritics and inclusion of some symbols from the Greek alphabet—a system targeted at experts in the field rather than the speakers of the language. Other orthographies that were developed were mostly the attempts of individuals who worked in isolation. As could be expected, the orthographies displayed discrepancies and inconsistencies, because travelling distances made it difficult for authors to communicate and to reach consensus about symbols and uniform spellings. For this reason the scientific texts of Hoffmann are particularly important, as they display a measure of consistency, having been written by the same person over a protracted time.

The development of the orthography of Northern Sotho was still in a state of flux just after the turn of the twentieth century when Hoffmann started to publish his texts. The inconsistency in the prevailing writing system is attested to by other authors who were also attempting to establish Northern Sotho as a written language, e.g. Beyer (1920). In the introductory part of his *Handbook of the Pedi-Transvaal Suto Language* Beyer writes (1920, 1): “There has been a great deal of difference of opinion as to how Pedi should be written.” He continues to explain the conventions adopted in his handbook: “The Orthography used in this booklet is that agreed upon by the Secwana and Suto1 Orthography Conference held at Johannesburg in February, 1910, under the auspices of the British and Foreign Bible Society.” For the benefit of the student he gives the list of symbols for the vowels and consonants with explanations of how they sound by way of comparison with similar sounds in English, French and Dutch. These symbols are also used by Hoffmann in his early publications (Phase 1 referred to below). Not all writers of Sepedi literature implemented the new recommendations, but rather followed their own conventions—this can be deduced from a remark by Tucker in his 1929 publication that there were even four conflicting spelling systems in existence for Sepedi.

What makes Hoffmann’s texts particularly valuable, is the fact that they spanned a period of almost fifty years (1913 to 1958), affording the researchers an extended window period to observe the development of the orthography and

---

1 The term ‘Suto’ refers to ‘Northern Sotho’. See n. 2 in Part 1 above on the application of the term ‘Sotho’.