

# **Users' style guides and bilingual dictionaries: the case of indigenous African languages**

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## **Abstract**

Almost all dictionaries comprise three parts, namely, the front matter, main part and the back matter. All the parts are equally important to dictionary users because they assist them in the interpretation of the meaning of the lexical entries. However, the front matter plays a dominant role in guiding users towards the use of a dictionary. The front matter is generally known as the users' style guide. It explains the structure and content of the different lexical entries such as pronunciation of words, use of prefixes and suffixes, use of diacritics (in those languages where these are used), formation of plural forms, derivation of words, finding idiomatic expressions and proverbs, and the identification of parts of speech. A style guide for users is a necessity in all types of dictionaries, but more so in bilingual dictionaries. Without a users' style guide, language learners may find it difficult to locate and interpret the meaning of some lexical entries in bilingual dictionaries, especially those involving indigenous African languages. Many dictionaries in the indigenous African languages of South Africa are bilingual because they are meant to be used by language learners. Unfortunately some of these dictionaries contain little information in the users' style guide, and some do not have a style guide for users at all. This makes it difficult for learners of South African indigenous languages to be on equal footing with their English counterparts in terms of information that they can access from these dictionaries. This paper therefore seeks to highlight the importance of the inclusion of a users' style guide in bilingual dictionaries written in indigenous African languages, with special reference to South Africa. Dictionaries in the different indigenous languages of South Africa were consulted with the aim of extracting examples to illustrate the arguments.

**Keywords:** Style guide, bilingual dictionary, indigenous African language, dialect, pronunciation, orthography

## **Introduction**

A good dictionary comprises three parts, namely, the front matter, the main matter and the back matter. All these parts are equally important to dictionary users because they assist them in the interpretation of meaning of a lexical entry. According to Jackson (2002, p. 76), the top two reasons for consulting a dictionary are to discover the meaning of a word and to check the spelling thereof. Jackson (2002, pp. 83-84) asserts that:

A learner, or indeed a native speaker, may consult a dictionary when engaged in one of two broad types of language tasks. On the one hand, a learner may be engaged in the task of reading or listening, and they encounter a word or phrase that makes no sense to them and whose meaning they cannot deduce from the context: the dictionary is used as an aid to 'decoding' the item read or heard. On the other hand, a learner may be engaged in a task of writing or preparing to speak, and they do not necessarily need to find an unknown word, but rather to discover how a known word may be used in the appropriate context: the dictionary is used to 'encode' acceptable sentences and texts. For a native speaker, spelling is the main encoding purpose that they might consult a dictionary for; whereas learners may need to find out about spelling, pronunciation, inflexions, how a word fits into grammatical structure, what other words can appropriately accompany it (its collocations), and whether there are any social and cultural restrictions on its usage.

Both the front matter and the main part directly or indirectly reflect on the meaning and spelling of lexical entries. However, a dictionary user will understand the meaning and spelling of lexical entries better if he/she can first consult the front matter before going to the main part. This is so because a dictionary contains a wide range of information types. Some dictionaries label informal items which sometimes confuse a regular user (Atkins and Rundell 2008). The confusion can be

avoided by including a style guide for users. Users' style guides vary from one dictionary to another. Whereas in some dictionaries it is included in a dictionary introduction, in some it is in the preface. According to Al-Ajmi (2000, pp.60), a dictionary introduction is widely regarded in lexicographic circles as an essential source of information in all types of dictionaries.

A users' style guide is therefore necessary in all types of dictionaries, but more so in bilingual dictionaries. Nielsen (2006) notes that in recent years lexicographic scholars argue that the user guide is the second most important component in a dictionary after the wordlist. A bilingual dictionary is mostly used by learners of a particular language. Without a users' style guide learners may find it difficult to find and interpret the meaning of lexical entries in bilingual dictionaries, especially those written in South African indigenous languages. Many dictionaries in the indigenous African languages of South Africa are bilingual. These dictionaries contain very little information in the users' style guide, and some do not have a style guide for users at all. However, bilingual dictionaries are important tools for learning a language. The absence of a users' style guide may render the dictionary not user-friendly to learners of the language. This paper seeks to reflect on the importance of incorporating a users' style guide in bilingual dictionaries for South African indigenous languages.

The discussion will commence with a general discussion of the importance of the *users' style guide*. This will be followed by background information on the indigenous African languages spoken in South Africa. The aspects of dialects, pronunciation and orthography, word class, prefix, and idiomatic expressions will comprise the main discussion, that of showing the importance of incorporating a users' style guide. Examples from the indigenous African languages of South Africa will be cited to illustrate some arguments.

## **The role of the users' style guide in a dictionary**

A users' style guide is a component in a dictionary that provide the user with information about the use of the dictionary (Nielsen 2006, p.7), which is important to dictionary users in many ways. Nielsen (2006, p.16) defines users' style guides as: "... texts with predominantly descriptive functions. The vast majority of user guides focus exclusively on the structure of entries and give the user a description of the composite elements of entries." Their main purpose is to provide dictionary users with the necessary guidance on how to retrieve the information effectively. Swanepoel (1984) writes that the main object of the users' style guide is to inform the user, as explicitly as possible, of the kind of information contained in the dictionary, how information should be interpreted and where the different kinds of information can be found. On this, Landau (1984, p. 116) adds that the users' style guide provides clues for locating, as quickly as possible, particular items of information. It explains the structure and content of the different lexical entries, such as pronunciation of words, use of prefixes and suffixes, use of diacritics, formation of plural forms, derivation of words, finding idiomatic expressions and proverbs, and identification of parts of speech. Landau (1984, p. 116) states that "Most guides describe every part of the dictionary article: entry word, syllabification, pronunciation, inflected forms, various kinds of labels, cross-references, variants, etymologies, synonyms, and usage of notes." As if not wanting to be left behind, Al-Ajmi (2001, p. 61) comments on the significance of the users' style guide, which he introduces as 'an introduction' as follows:

From a user perspective, one can determine the effectiveness of an introduction according to the extent to which it addresses the dictionary user's needs in relation to the information retrieval process. It may be of great importance when a user is new to dictionary look-up operations but it loses its significance gradually, as he/she becomes more familiar with the dictionary's conventions mostly through trial and error.

Although the style guide may be used by all dictionary users, one can safely conclude that it is mostly used mainly by learners of the language and users who are new to dictionary look-up operations in that language. The majority of users make use of the users' style guide when they find it difficult to access their lexicographic needs.

A bilingual dictionary can be useful and desirable for several kinds of people: students, travellers, translators and linguists (Swanson 1975, p. 63). It can be used in reading, writing or translating from or into a foreign language. Admittedly, there is an obvious need for lexicographers to pay particular attention to those aspects related to the user's capability of accessing the required dictionary information, and this can be achieved by a lexicographic re-examination of the role of the users' style guide to ensure that it provides simplified and sufficient information that may lead to profitable use of the dictionary (Al-Ajmi 2001, p. 61). The users' style guide in a bilingual dictionary will rule on such things as the provision of translations, in other words, headwords and meaning; on how to deal with items that have no direct target-language equivalence; and on how to deal with abbreviations and their full form (Atkins and Rundell 2008). Indigenous African language bilingual dictionaries which are characterised by little information in their style guide for users, and those which do not incorporate users' style guides at all, will make it difficult for learners of the language and users who are new to dictionary look-up operations to retrieve the required information as quickly as possible.

### **Users' style guides and bilingual dictionaries for indigenous African languages**

Unlike developed languages such as English, French, Spanish, Portuguese which are found almost all over the world; indigenous African languages are concentrated in certain parts of Africa. It is imperative for lexicographers to have information about the location of these languages in the users' style guide so that if one is learning them, one is able to get more information about them, before one has even gone any further with one's search of an important word. Knowing the location of the language that one is learning is important, as this knowledge is necessary for understanding the meaning of words. Although the indigenous African ethnic groups are scattered in most parts of Africa, each ethnic group is concentrated in a particular area; for example, in South Africa indigenous languages are distributed according to the distribution of the different ethnic groups. The indigenous African ethnic groups such as amaZulu, amaXhosa, Maswati, amaNdebele, Basotho, Basotho ba Leboa, Batswana, Vatsonga, and Vhavenda have particular places where they are mostly found. This is as a result of their painful past where people speaking a particular language were forced, through legislation, to be confined into a particular area. As a result, languages such as Tshivenda, Xitsonga, and Sesotho sa Leboa or Sepedi as some people prefer to call it, are spoken mainly in the Limpopo province, while isiZulu is predominantly spoken in KwaZulu-Natal and some parts of Gauteng, and isiXhosa in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape provinces. Sesotho is mostly spoken in the Free State province and it is also spoken in Lesotho, outside South Africa. Setswana is mostly used in North West province and also in Botswana, outside South Africa. Siswati and isiNdebele are chiefly spoken and used in Mpumalanga province, even though the former is also used mainly in Swaziland, outside the borders of South Africa.

All this therefore points to one thing: learners of the language need to know about the distribution of the population of the languages they intend to learn. This information, which serves as background information, should be provided in the users' style guide of the dictionary.

The users' style guide is indispensable in bilingual dictionaries for indigenous African languages for many reasons. Pronunciation and orthography in the indigenous African languages is

different from that in other language groups. Unlike in the languages of the west, indigenous African languages, especially South African languages, make use of prefixes and suffixes differently, and the formation of plural forms is different from that which exists in languages such as English. As learners of indigenous African languages are unfamiliar with the mechanisms, there is a need to explain these in the users' style guide. Indigenous languages are developing languages; as such they need to explain abbreviations and their full-form.

Some other South African indigenous languages make use of diacritics for the purposes of indicating a phonetic value, meaning and pronunciation. The use of diacritics should be explained to users in the users' style guide so that learners can have a better understanding of their use. Certain indigenous languages are characterised by dialects which sometimes use different orthography. This means that there are language variants which need to be explained in the users' style guide. The above-mentioned aspects should be explained in the users' style guide so that dictionary users can find it easy to find the entries and understand their meanings.

Hereunder, aspects such as dialects, pronunciation, noun class, and prefix will receive attention to illustrate the importance of incorporating a users' style guide in bilingual dictionaries for South African indigenous languages.

## **Dialects**

Like any other language in the world, indigenous South African languages comprise dialects. Dialects in some indigenous African languages may cause confusion on the part of dictionary users if not explained in the users' style guide. The various dialects in a language should be explained, and their distribution commented on in the users' style guide. This will help the learner to differentiate between the standard language and the dialects before looking for the information. This will further help the learner to know about the origin of the dialect. Further, a learner will be in a position to know how to identify a particular dialect in the dictionary. For example, regarding the dialect Tshiilafuri, Van Warmelo (1989, p. 2) states the following in the users' style guide, which in this dictionary is included in the preface:

Tshiilafuri of Dzanani in the West, exhibiting Sotho (Tlokwa) influence in vocabulary, e.g. *-nyaga* for *-toda*, (So. ge)

The above excerpt is included in the preface of the dictionary which serves as the users' style guide. Tshiilafuri is one of the dialects in Tshivenda and is spoken in a part of Venda (an area in which the ethnic Vhenda stay alongside with Basotho ba Leboa). This dialect exhibits the influence of the Sotho language, in this case, Sesotho sa Leboa. The lexicographer further indicates that in Tshiilafuri one can use a verb stem *-nyaga* (look for) which has been adopted from Sesotho sa Leboa, *nyaka* for a Tshivenda standard verb stem *-toda* (seek). Without this information in the users' style guide, users of the dictionary may find it difficult to differentiate between dialectal and standard words. The users' style guide further sheds light on the linguistic influence of the people who speak Tshiilafuri, in this case the Tlokwa, which is also a dialect of Sesotho sa Leboa. The *So.* in brackets stands for Sotho. Regarding variant forms, Atkins and Rundell (2008) state that users would like to know in what circumstances one word form can be shown as a variant under another headword.

## **Pronunciation and orthography**

Indigenous African languages' pronunciation of words and the orthography thereof are different from the ones used by languages such as English and French. It would be difficult for learners of an indigenous African language to understand the pronunciation of words and the orthography if this

aspect is not explained in the users' style guide of a dictionary. It is worthwhile for one to know the orthography of the language before one can start looking for words in the lexical entries. It is possible to find that not all letters of the alphabet are used in the language, whereas in other instances some words use diacritics. For example, in Tshivenda, there are letters such as *c*, *j*, and *q* which are not used, whereas letters such as *d*, *l*, *n* and *t* can be used with diacritics (*ḏ*, *ḑ*, *Ḓ*, *ḑ* and *ṭ*) or without. In this regard, Van Warmelo (1989:3) explains as follows:

Three letters (*c*, *j*, *q*) are not required to write the language itself. Four letters come with diacritics (*ḑ* & *Ḓ*, *ḑ*, *Ḓ*, *ṭ*) or without, and for other sounds digraphs (*sh*, *zh*, *vh*, *mw*, *ny*) are used.

All this information is explained in the users' style guide of the dictionary. In Tshivenda, letters with diacritics rank as separate letters in the alphabet in the order *ḑ*, *ḑ*, *Ḓ*, *ḑ* and *ṭ*. Before a dictionary user can begin looking for words starting with letters with diacritics, one has to know how to pronounce them. This information can be explained in the users' style guide. Further, the users' style guide will show how to find these words in the main matter.

In some Tshivenda dictionaries, lexical entries with letters without diacritics are mixed with those with diacritics, whereas in some they are treated as separate words and usually come before the corresponding letter without a diacritic; for example, the letter of alphabet *ḑ* will precede the letter of alphabet *d*. Wentzel and Muloiwa (1982, p. 149) state:

The dental symbols *ḑ*, *Ḓ*, *ḑ* and *ṭ* precede the normal *d*, *l*, *n* and *t*, while velar *ḑ* in its turn follows the normal *n*. This implies that words which, for example, commence with *ḑ* are listed first and separately from words commencing with *d*.

The users' style guide is very useful in explaining how to find words with or without diacritics in the dictionary.

### **Prefixes**

The use of prefixes is very common in South African indigenous languages. In these languages prefixes play a role in determining the meaning of the words; they indicate the plurality and the singularity forms of words. However, a prefix that indicates a singular form of a word is not the same as that which indicates a plural form. For example *motho* (person) in the Sotho languages, namely; Sesotho, Sesotho sa Leboa and Setswana, has its prefix as *mo-*; whereas the plural form of the word *motho* is *ba-* (*batho*). It is not difficult to find the plural form of the word *person* in English because one just has to add the suffix *-s*, although this is not always the case with other words. The prefix denoting the plural in this regard in the Sotho languages is *ba-*. In many dictionaries of indigenous languages the plural form of the word is given in the definition of the lexical entry. The listing of the word in the main entry is determined by the singular prefix form. The user should have background knowledge regarding the different prefixes provided in the definition of lexical entries in order to know the meaning of the word. In this regard, lexicographers do not always provide the full word, but the plural prefix only, shown in a particular format (*italics* or in *bold* or in *brackets*). It is important to know this format before one can use the dictionary. This information should be explained in the front matter so that dictionary users, especially learners of the language, may have the necessary knowledge to find words as these.

In Tshivenda, the prefix *vha-* which is *ba-* in Sotho languages is also used to denote honorific meaning, for example; *vhamusanda* (*chief*), *vahulwane* (*your highness*), *vhakoma* (*induna*), *vhashumi* (*a worker*). Van Warmelo (1989, p. 450) defines the lexical entry *vhamusanda* in his dictionary entry, as follows:

vha-musanda 2 (cf. musanda) respectful title: chief, which includes nduna of a mvhundu in appropriate context

Taken ordinarily, *vhamusanda* would mean many chiefs or people of the chief; but in the above instance it means one chief, with an emphasis on respect. The lexical entry *vhamusanda* is entered by Van Warmelo (1989) as *vha-musanda*. The hyphen in this regard does not change the meaning of the word. The word used to be written with a hyphen during the period in which Tshivenda was reduced to writing. With the revision of the orthography, the hyphen has been left out. Finding words with an honorific meaning in Tshivenda dictionaries follows the plural form *vha-*. In this case *vha-* is not necessarily used as a plural form, but as an expression that is used to show respect for a person of high nobility. This information should be reflected in the users' style guide to assist users to find the words quickly. *Vhamusanda* is therefore listed under *vha-*.

In other instances it is difficult to find words in the dictionary because the prefix is not reflected when the word is uttered or written. It would be native speakers only who would be aware of the presence of the prefix. For example, the prefix of the Tshivenda word *tombo* (stone) in the singular form is *li-*, where the word will read *litombo*. The plural form of this word is *matombo* with the visible plural prefix *ma-*. It would not be Tshivenda non-speakers only who would be confused and find it difficult to find the word in the dictionary; native speakers of the language may also be confused because they might try to look for the word under the prefix *li-*, and end up not finding it. This word, *tombo*, is listed as a lexical entry without both prefixes, i.e. the singular and the plural forms, as Wentzel and Muloiwa (1989, p. 383) define *tombo* as follows:

**tombo (ma-)** klip, grafsteen | stone, tombstone

The singular prefix is not reflected in the definition of the word, it is only the plural form which has been indicated in brackets as **(ma)** in the definition. The same applies to the word *kholomo* (head of cattle), for example:

**kholomo (dzi)** bees; koei | head of cattle; cow; beast (Wentzel & Muloiwa 1989, p. 24)

In their style guide for users, Wentzel and Muloiwa (1989, p. 149) state:

Instances where the prefix (dzi-) follows on entries need special attention. Here it does not imply that the plural form must necessarily commence with *dzi-*. Although *dzi-* may be used, it is normally left out, e.g. *kholomo (dzi-)* where *kholomo* may have both singular and plural meaning (although *dzikholomo* is also a possible plural form) and the *dzi-* only acts as a plural 'marker' showing to which class the specific noun belongs.

A dictionary user should be provided with information regarding the definition of lexical entries such as this.

Nguni languages such as isiZulu are characterised by pre-prefixing and prefixing of the nouns. A dictionary user may take it for granted that finding nouns which are characterised by pre-prefixes and prefixes in isiZulu would be determined by the pre-prefix and the prefix. Finding nouns in an isiZulu dictionary is different from finding nouns in other indigenous South African indigenous languages dictionaries. Whereas nouns in other indigenous languages dictionaries are listed according to the prefix, in isiZulu they are listed according to the basic root. For example, if a dictionary user wants to find a noun such as **umuntu** (person), he/she will never find it by making use of the pre-prefix *u-* or the prefix *-mu-*. Doke and Vilakazi (1972, p. 608) list the word *umuntu* under the basic root *-ntu* as follows:

**-ntu (umuntu, abantu)** n. [Ur-B. **Muntu.** >dim. Umntwana; unomuntu; ubuntu; isintu; u(lu)ntu; umuntukazana; bantu.]

From the example given above, we can see that finding lexical entries such as nouns is determined by the basic root. The basic root for *umuntu* is **-ntu**. The pre-prefix and the prefix, which are *u-* and *-mu-* respectively, are not used to list the lexical entry because the basic root *-ntu* can be affixed to different pre-prefixes and prefixes which bring about a different meaning; for example, *isintu* (culture, custom), *abantu* (plural form of *umuntu*), *uluntu* (diminutive form), etc. The pre-prefixes *i-*, *a-* and the prefixes *si-*, *ba*, and *lu-* bring in different meanings to the basic root *-ntu*. The pre-prefixes and the prefixes are not considered when some lexical entries are listed in isiZulu. An isiZulu dictionary user needs this information before starting to find the words. It is therefore important for lexicographers to show this information in the users' style guide so that users may find the words as quick as they possibly can. In other indigenous African languages this is not a problem because the lexical entries will be entered according to the singular form of the prefix.

As indicated in the above extract, prefixes are 'markers' that show to which class a specific noun belongs. Nouns in the indigenous African languages are classified according to classes; in some languages they can range from class 1 to class 21. The singular noun classes and the plural noun classes can be identified by the use of prefixes; for example:

<b>m</b> uthu (class 1)	<b>vh</b> athu (class 2)
<b>li</b> to (class 3)	<b>ma</b> to (class 4)
<b>tsh</b> ikolo (class 5)	<b>z</b> wikolo (class 6)

The classes are denoted by numbers. Without the knowledge of the different classes it might be difficult for the users to arrive at the correct meaning of the words.

### Idiomatic expressions

Idiomatic expressions are regarded highly in the African language communities because they are an important aspect of communication. As a result, members of the communities keep on searching for the meanings of idiomatic expressions. Lusimba (2002, p. 1) comments about the importance of including proverbs and idioms in dictionaries: "They will therefore have to form part of the composition of dictionaries. In fact, for lexicography as a discipline of linguistic science, the treatment of proverbs and idioms is of cardinal importance because they are the bearers of the culture and customs of a people."

The present generation keeps on turning to a dictionary in order to search for the meaning of idiomatic expressions such as proverbs, idioms and riddles. Few indigenous languages of South Africa have dictionaries of idiomatic expressions such as proverbs and idioms. However, some general dictionaries do have proverbs, idioms and riddles as part of the definition of lexical entries; but they are not entered as lexical entries. For example, in Van Warmelo (1989) proverbs, idioms and riddles have been included as illustrative examples.

*bulayo* 5 (cf. *-vhulaha*, *-vhulaya*) massacre, murder; a great killing, heavy mortality, as in epidemic of stock or people

Prov: Mutsinda ndi khwine, shaka ndi bulayo "A non-relative is better; a relative is murder".  
Relations cause more trouble than other people (Van Warmelo 1989, p. 16)

The proverb in the example above has been added to the definition of the lexical entry *bulayo* to further make the meaning of the lexical entry clear to a person who is learning Tshivenda. The problem lies in the fact that it is not easy for a dictionary user to find proverbs in this dictionary. A users' style guide would be useful in finding idiomatic expressions such as proverbs, idioms and

riddles. It is important for lexicographers to inform dictionary users about the order of arrangement of idiomatic expressions in a dictionary.

## Conclusion

The discussion above has shown that the incorporation of the users' style guide in a bilingual dictionary written in a South African indigenous language is necessary. Learners of the language need this information to help them learn the language quickly. Although speakers of the language rarely consult the users' style guide, they refer to it when they are confronted with a lexicographic challenge. A bilingual dictionary is used by both learners of the language and native speakers for various reasons; for example, for finding words, the meaning of words, the spelling of known words, and pronunciation of known words. Without the users' style guide, finding this information could be very confusing to the ordinary dictionary user. As Kahn (1991, p. 260), writes: "Almost all dictionaries come with a section at the beginning telling you how to use them, generally with detailed, annotated examples. They tell you a great deal about the kind of information you can get in your dictionary." A bilingual dictionary in a South African indigenous language should tell the user how to use the dictionary in order to avoid confusion. The discussion further revealed that even among the South African indigenous languages some grammatical aspects are treated differently, hence the importance of including a users' style guide. It cannot be taken for granted that grammatical aspects of indigenous African languages are all the same. It is hoped that future lexicographers would take this into consideration when they start their good work of writing bilingual dictionaries which are in very high demand in most, if not all, South African indigenous languages.

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