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Ideology and Orthography

Dictionary Construction and Spelling Choice in the Comoro Islands

Harriet J. Ottenheimer

- 1 The Comoro Islands are located in the western Indian Ocean, at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel, midway between Mozambique and the Malagasy Republic. The archipelago is comprised of four islands: Ngazidja (or Grande Comore), Nzwani (or Anjouan), Mwali (or Mohéli), and Mayotte (or Maore). A referendum held in the Comoros in December 1974 led to the independence of three of the islands (Ngazidja, Nzwani and Mwali) from nearly a century of French colonial rule in July 1975, while Mayotte remained connected to France. Today, Ngazidja, Nzwani and Mwali form the Union of the Comoros. A referendum in 2009 called for the island of Mayotte to become a French *Département* although the Union's continuing claim of sovereignty over Mayotte continues to complicate the overall picture.
- 2 Located along Indian Ocean maritime trading routes, the Comoros have absorbed a wide variety of linguistic and cultural influences, most notably from Swahili, Arabic, Hindi, Malagasy, Portuguese, English and French. Each island exhibits a unique blend of lexical and grammatical materials and mutual intelligibility among the four islands cannot be taken for granted (Ottenheimer & Ottenheimer 1976, Nurse 1989, Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993). There are two clear linguistic groupings: a western Shingazidja-Shimwali group and an eastern Shinzwani-Shimaore group. Mutual intelligibility exists within (but not between) the two groups (Ahmed-Chamanga, Lafon & Sibertin-Blanc 1986). Nonetheless, it has become politically convenient nowadays to refer to all four varieties as "Comorian."
- 3 As a result, even the simple act of constructing a dictionary can have complex implications. Just singling out a language variety for such attention raises questions of identity and ideology. What is a language? What is a nation? How is language related to nationhood? Choosing an orthography for the project raises additional questions. Does a new nation require a new orthography? If so, what should it look like? And how will people learn it? Is it possible to develop a common orthography or should each language variety have its own orthography? My own work in creating a Shinzwani-English dictionary can be taken as a case in point.

- 4 This paper addresses these questions, with special reference to issues of literacy, identity, politics and linguistic ideology. From sixteenth century word lists to contemporary dictionaries, colonial, missionary and scholarly approaches, orthographic choices in the Comoros are examined and compared. After introducing the place of my own linguistic work in the Comoros which began the 1960s, I conclude with a discussion of the role of the linguistic anthropologist in orthographic choice, language documentation and dictionary construction. As the Comoros move into the 21st century, linguistic anthropologists are well-positioned to assist with questions of standardization, literacy and dictionary construction. The situation remains fluid, with considerations of tradition, modernity, nationalism, and representation to be taken into account.

Four Sounds, Four Spellings

- 5 To keep the discussion focused, I will concentrate on just four Shingwani sounds: [ʃ] [tʃ] [ʒ] and [dʒ]. Contemporary French, English, Swahili and Arabic orthographic systems approach these sounds very differently. French and English represent each of the four sounds individually, Shingazidja and KiSwahili do not represent the [ʒ] sound, and Arabic groups the two voiceless sounds ([ʃ] and [tʃ]) together under one character and the voiced sounds ([ʒ] and [dʒ]) together under a different character (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Four sounds, Four spellings

| | [ʃ] | [tʃ] | [ʒ] | [dʒ] |
|------------------|-----|--------|-----|------|
| French | ch | t(s)ch | j | dj |
| Swahili | sh | ch | ∅ | j |
| Ottenheimer 1966 | sh | ch | zh | j |
| Arabic | ش | ش | ج | ج |

- 6 In spite of the possibilities for confusion, Arabic script is widely used for Shingwani today, with a literacy rate over 90%. Here is how the Shingwani sentence [mahe amɔʒibu amba kaʒua] ‘His mother answered him that she didn’t know’ (‘Sa mère lui a répondu qu’elle ne savait pas’) looks in Arabic script: م م ح ا ح ج ب ا ب ق ج و .

Early European Spellings

- 7 Europeans began collecting Comorian wordlists as early as the 17th century (Payton 1613, Roe 1615, Herbert 1626). Dictionary construction began in the 19th century (Elliot 1821-22 [publ by Heepe 1926], Hildebrandt 1875, Last 1888, Ormières 1893) and continued into the early 20th century (Angot 1946/8, Fischer 1949). These attempts contained predictably varied approaches to spelling. Take the [ʃ] sound, for example. Roe spelled it <sch>, Elliot spelled it <sh>, and Ormières spelled it <ch> (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Early European spellings of [mʃe] ‘female’

| | |
|----------|--------------------|
| Roe 1615 | moschees (‘women’) |
|----------|--------------------|

| | |
|----------------|----------------|
| Elliot 1821-22 | <i>moo-sha</i> |
| Ormieres 1893 | <i>mouche</i> |

- 8 Spelling proposals in the first half of the 20th century (Angot 1946/48 and Fischer 1949) were almost as varied. Angot spelled the [ʃ] sound <ch>, for example, while Fischer spelled it <sh> (see Fig. 3.). Under French colonial influence, however, French spellings came to prevail on maps and official documents, and those who attended French schools learned to use French spellings as well as Arabic ones.

Fig. 3. Early Proposals

| | /ʃ/ | /tʃ/ | /ʒ/ | /dʒ/ |
|------------------|-----|------|-----|------|
| Angot 1946/48 | ch | tch | j | dj |
| Fischer 1949 | ch | tch | j | dj |
| Ottenheimer 1966 | š | č | ž | j |
| Ottenheimer 1967 | sh | ch | zh | j |

Linguistic Research in the 1960s

- 9 When anthropologist Martin Ottenheimer and I began our research in the Comoros in the 1960s, nearly all Comorians used Arabic spellings to write Comorian. Those who had been educated in French-speaking schools also used French spellings for Comorian. Although we learned both of these spelling systems, we used American Usage phonetic spellings (Pike 1947) for our own work. Phonetic spellings have the advantage of providing unique symbols for each sound, thus permitting a fine-tuned analysis of a language.
- 10 But our young Comorian research assistants needed something a little less technical, something that they could produce on a typewriter. So we developed an orthographic system that represented the major phonemic contrasts of Shinzwani without requiring special phonetic symbols and our assistants used it to type their transcriptions of recorded interviews and narratives. The system used <sh> for [ʃ], <ch> for [tʃ], <j> for [dʒ], and <zh> for [ʒ] (see Fig. 3).
- 11 As it turned out, it was precisely these four symbols that caused the most difficulty for our young assistants. Those who had been through the French-based public school system were used to using <ch>, not <sh> for [ʃ]. They were used to using either <tsh> or <tsch>, not <ch>, for [tʃ]. They were used to using <j>, not <zh>, for [dʒ] and <dj>, not <j>, for [dʒ]. The possibilities for confusion were high. In spite of this, our assistants learned to switch back and forth between their French-influenced sense of orthography and our phonemically based orthography.

Radical new proposals in the 1970s

- 12 Soon after Comorian independence in 1975, young Comorian intellectuals suggested that the Comoros needed a Latin-based orthography that would look more like Swahili than

like French (Abdushakur Aboud, personal communication; Ahmed-Chamanga 1976; Lafon & Sibertin-Blanc 1976). French spelling might be appropriate for French, they argued, but the Comoros should have their own orthography, and it should resemble that used in other independent African nations (Ahmed-Chamanga 1976).

- 13 Two different orthographies were proposed: one by Ali Soilihi, the country's new president (following a system said to have been proposed by French linguists Michel Lafon and Jean-Luc Sibertin-Blanc) and one by the Comorian linguist Mohamed Ahmed-Chamanga. Both orthographies were an interesting mix of Swahili, French and American phonetic influences. Soilihi adopted the KiSwahili <sh> and <j> but rejected the KiSwahili <ch> in favor of the more phonetic <c>. Ahmed-Chamanga adopted the KiSwahili <sh> and <ch> but rejected the KiSwahili <j> in favor of the French <dj> (see Fig. 4). Perhaps, the French use of <j> for [ʒ] was too well established among French-educated Comorians. In any case, both orthographies fell into disuse within a few years. Perhaps, they were too new or too different. Arabic script continued to be widely used and French spellings continued to be taught in schools. In other words, independence did not lead immediately to new orthography (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Recent Proposals

| | /ʃ/ | /tʃ/ | /ʒ/ | /dʒ/ |
|---------------------|-----|--------|-----|------|
| Ali Soilihi 1976 | sh | c | ? | j |
| Chamanga 1976 | sh | ch | j | dj |
| Cheikh 1986 | sh | tsh | j | dj |
| Chamanga 1986 | sh | ch/tsh | j | dj |
| Blanchy 1987 | sh | tsh | j | dj |
| Chamanga 1992 | sh | tsh | j | dj |
| Peace Corps 1994 | sh | ch | j | dj |
| Ottenheimer 2008/11 | sh | ch | j | dj |

Dictionaries and Orthographic Choice

- 14 In 1982, I brought a photocopy of the Shizwani-English dictionary that I was developing, along with a chart of noun classes and concords that I had developed. Although it was handwritten and used a phonemic orthography, I was stunned by the reaction. The most common comment I heard was something like "We really *do* have a language (or: a grammar)!" Comorian government officials (and others) urged me to consider publishing the dictionary. This request raised important questions regarding orthography.
- 15 There is a complex interrelationship between the publication of language materials and the development of national orthographies (see Tabouret-Keller *et al.* 1997). In choosing an orthography for a published dictionary, I wanted to be sensitive to these wider linguistic, cultural and political issues. The modified phonemic orthography I had developed in the 1960s was well-suited to my own needs, but I was not sure if it would work as well for a general Comorian audience. I wanted to balance my own academic

concern for linguistic correctness with the more practical concern for readability. I also wanted to balance the political implications of developing a dictionary and orthography for just one of the linguistic varieties in the Comoros with an oft-stated Comorian concern for national unification.

Negotiating standards in the 1980s

- 16 Soon after my 1982 visit to the Comoros, the Comorian government commissioned a linguistic study to develop an official Latin-based orthography for Comorian and to "increase literacy" in the Comoros. The resulting orthography published in 1986 by Moïnaecha Cheikh (1986a and 1986b) used the English-Swahili <sh> for [ʃ], a hybrid <tsh> for [tʃ], the French <j> for [ʒ], and the French <dj> for [dʒ] (see Fig. 5). Although the goal had been to emphasize the underlying unity between the different language varieties in the Comoros, the new orthography was better suited to Shingazidja than to Shinzwani. As a result, Wanzwani did not adopt it. They ignored her <pv>, for example, and continued using Ahmed-Chamanga's (and my) <ch> for [tʃ] rather than <tsh>.
- 17 The rejection of Moïnaecha Cheikh's orthography by Wanzwani may also reflect the deeper ethnic, historical and political divide that continues to exist between Shinzwani and Shingazidja speakers. One solution, proposed by Ahmed-Chamanga (also in 1986) suggested a more multi-layered approach with a common set of characters for those sounds which were the same in the two language groups, and different sets of unique but non-overlapping characters for sounds which were unique to each different language variety (see Fig. 5). Thus [tʃ] could be written <ch> in Shinzwani and <tsh> in Shingazidja, with no resulting confusion (Ahmed-Chamanga, Lafon, & Sibertin-Blanc 1986). From a linguistic standpoint, this made sense and this is what many Wanzwani have adopted when they write Shinzwani using Latin characters. It was surprising, therefore, when Ahmed-Chamanga published a Shinzwani-French dictionary in 1992 in which he used <tsh> rather than <ch> for [tʃ]. It is possible he was following Blanchy's 1987 model for Shimaore.

Making decisions in the 1990s

- 18 In 1995, I brought a printout of the (now computerized) Shinzwani-English dictionary to the Comoros for a new field test. I was still using the phonemic-derived <sh> <ch> <j> and <zh> orthography. By then nearly all Wanzwani in their 20s had completed at least eight years in local French-style schools, many had completed *lycée*, and some had studied abroad and I wanted to know how Wanzwani were now reading and writing these four sounds. An American Peace Corps worker had also just (1994) compiled a small dictionary using <sh>, <ch>, <j>, and <dj>.
- 19 Working with a range of individuals from young schoolchildren to forty and fifty year old adults and from housewives to fishermen to schoolteachers, I reviewed the four sounds in terms of their phonetic and graphic interrelationships. I drew phonetic charts, explained the voiced/voiceless and fricative/affricate distinctions and reviewed the phonetic, French and English symbols for the sounds.
- 20 The discussions were interesting. Most people responded by saying that it really didn't matter. They said that they were used to reading many different languages and spellings

and that, if I would just indicate somewhere what symbols were supposed to stand for what sounds, they would adjust as necessary. Pushed to think about what they would *really* want to see and use and how they would *really* want to have the language look on the printed page, most individuals decided that although they liked the English/Swahili <sh> for [ʃ] and <ch> for [tʃ], they also preferred the French <j> for [ʒ] and <dj> for [dʒ]. This is an interesting mix, resembling Ahmed-Chamanga's earlier (1986) orthography more than his later (1992) one.

- 21 I then queried an English-speaking Comorian listserv that was used by Comorians in the United States. With the exception of one individual who recalled having learned Soilihi's 1976 Swahili-based orthography and who still preferred using <j> for [dʒ], everyone who responded to me endorsed the use of the English/Swahili characters <sh> and <ch> for [ʃ] and [tʃ] and the French characters <j> and <dj> for [ʒ] and [dʒ]. The choice seems to symbolize connections to the colonial past as well as to a more global future identity. It suggests that, unlike the 1970s, a connection with France is no longer an issue against which contemporary Comorians feel the need to struggle. So this is what I chose for the dictionary (see Fig. 5).

Wider implications

- 22 As should be evident, much more is at stake in dictionary construction than simple spelling choices. Politics and identity are also involved. In this case, as perhaps in many more cases around the world than we are aware, the choice of orthography for a dictionary and the publication of that dictionary has political implications that go beyond straightforward linguistic choice. It is possible that my choice to follow contemporary Nzwani preference may help to emphasize the underlying linguistic differences between Shinzwani and Shingazidja. But it is also possible that small interisland variations in spelling may turn out to be irrelevant in the larger task of nation-building. Only time will tell.
- 23 In either case, working with Wanzwani speakers on the Comorian-English / English-Comorian (Shinzwani) dictionary has provided important insights into orthography and the politics of representation. The complex interplay of orthography, identity and choice in this small African nation are instructive and has wider implications for scholarship. Understanding the dynamics involved can provide us with a model for understanding similar choices on a broader scale. It can also help us to design and to predict the success of culturally and politically sensitive literacy programs.

*

- 24 Responsible linguists and linguistic anthropologists must fully understand these variables and their potential role in the process. Linguistic data will always need to be transcribed with as much accuracy as the ear permits and good phonetic data will always be essential to good phonemic analysis. Getting from phonemic to graphemic representation, however, is not as straightforward as it seems. Orthographic representation must go beyond linguistic analysis to take a much wider set of concerns into account, including history, cultural concerns and the politics of national and ethnic identity. As Bill Powers has said, "*any attempt to [impose linguistic rigor on native languages] should be seen as another form of patronization as well as linguistic hegemony The politics of orthography is not a*

theoretical idea, it is a reality, one which must be understood and assessed by all those involved with native languages" (Powers 1990:497). The decisions we make, as linguists and linguistic anthropologists, in representing individuals and their languages, have far-reaching implications. Understanding these implications is essential.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper surveys the history of dictionary construction and orthographic choice in the Comoros with special reference to issues of literacy, identity, politics and linguistic ideology. From sixteenth century word lists to contemporary bilingual bidirectional dictionaries, colonial, missionary, and scholarly approaches to lexicography and orthography in the Comoros are examined and compared. While Arabic-influenced writing systems have a long history in the Comoros, the experiences of colonialism and independence in the twentieth century introduced French and phonemically influenced systems. As the Comoros move into the 21st century, linguists and ethnographers are well-positioned to assist with questions of standardization, literacy, and dictionary construction. The situation remains fluid, with considerations of tradition, modernity, nationalism, and representation to be taken into account. This paper seeks to address the complex interrelationships between orthographic choice and ethnic identity in the Comoros, with special reference to the development of the first bilingual, bidirectional Comorian-English Dictionary.

I begin with a brief survey of attempts to collect word lists and to compile dictionaries of

Comorian in general and Shinzwani in particular from the 1600s to the present from explorers, missionaries, and colonists to linguists, ethnographers, and linguistic anthropologists, focusing on orthographic choice across the centuries. I then present an analysis of recent orthographic systems used and/or proposed by Comorians, including Arabic, French, English, and phonemic-style orthographies. I explore the linguistic and ideological advantages, disadvantages and implications of each and assess their impact on recent attempts to standardize Comorian orthography. Finally, I present the results of my own linguistic work in the Comoros, which began the 1960s, setting it into this larger context and discussing the role of the linguistic anthropologist in matters of orthographic choice, language documentation, and dictionary construction.

The complex interplay of orthography, identity, ideology and choice in this small African nation has wider implications for scholarship. Understanding the dynamics involved can provide us with a model for understanding similar choices on a broader scale as well as for contributing to the design of successful orthographic systems and literacy programs. The decisions we make, as linguists and linguistic anthropologists, in representing individuals and their languages, must take these dynamics of ideology, identity, and orthography into account.

Cet article passe en revue l'histoire de la construction des dictionnaires et les choix orthographiques aux Comores, considérant en particulier les questions d'alphabétisation, d'identité, de politique, et d'idéologie linguistique. Depuis les listes de mots du XVI^e siècle jusqu'aux dictionnaires bidirectionnels bilingues contemporains, les tentatives coloniales et missionnaires et les travaux scientifiques sur la lexicographie et l'orthographe aux Comores sont examinées et comparées. Après les systèmes graphiques d'influence arabe qui ont eu aux Comores une longue histoire, la colonisation et l'indépendance ont introduit au XX^e siècle des systèmes influencés par les modèles français et phonologique. Avec l'entrée des Comores dans le XXI^e siècle, les linguistes et ethnographes sont bien placés pour fournir une aide dans les domaines de la normalisation, de l'alphabétisation et de la construction des dictionnaires. La situation reste instable, devant tenir compte des traditions, de la modernité, du nationalisme et des représentations qui s'y rapportent. L'article considère les interrelations complexes entre les choix orthographiques et l'identité ethnique aux Comores, en particulier en ce qui concerne l'élaboration du premier dictionnaire comorien-anglais, à la fois bilingue et bidirectionnel.

Je commence par une brève revue des tentatives de collecte de listes de mots et d'élaboration de dictionnaires pour le comorien en général et le shinzwani en particulier, des années 1600 à nos jours, depuis les explorateurs, missionnaires et colons jusqu'aux linguistes, ethnographes et ethno-linguistes, en se concentrant sur les choix orthographiques à travers les siècles. Je présente ensuite une analyse des systèmes orthographiques utilisés et/ou proposés récemment par les Comoriens, nommément les systèmes à base arabe, française, anglaise, ou phonologique. J'explore les avantages, les inconvénients et les implications de chacun, et j'évalue leur impact sur les récentes tentatives visant à normaliser l'orthographe comorienne. Enfin, je présente les résultats de mon propre travail linguistique aux Comores, qui a commencé dans les années 1960, en le replaçant dans ce contexte général, et je discute le rôle de l'ethno-linguiste en matière de choix orthographiques, de documentation sur la langue et de construction de dictionnaires.

L'interaction complexe entre orthographe, identité, idéologie et options possibles dans ce petit pays d'Afrique a de larges implications pour la connaissance scientifique. Comprendre la dynamique en jeu peut nous fournir un modèle pour comprendre des options similaires à plus grande échelle, ainsi que pour contribuer à la conception des futurs systèmes orthographiques et programmes d'alphabétisation. Les décisions que nous prenons, en tant que linguistes et ethno-linguistes, de représenter les individus et leurs langues, doivent tenir compte de ces dynamiques de l'idéologie, de l'identité et de l'orthographe.

INDEX

Geographical index: Comores (archipel)

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