

BEYOND MEANING IN GENERAL PURPOSE DICTIONARIES: TEACHING NDEBELE GRAMMAR USING *ISICHAZAMAZWI SESINDEBELE*

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ABSTRACT

This article calls for a user-oriented approach when lexicographers contemplate on the provision of information types in monolingual GPDs and then maximum utilisation of the dictionaries which is attained if users go beyond meaning, the primary information provided by GPDs. More emphasis is usually given to meaning such that users do not consider the importance of the other information types. In this article focus is given to the provision of grammar in dictionaries, with the article going on to propose the use of *Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele*, henceforth the ISN, in teaching Ndebele grammar at school level. There being no comprehensive grammar text book in Ndebele, the writer recommends the use of the dictionary which, however, should not be viewed as text book but a reference resource that can contribute in the teaching of Ndebele grammar and other language development exercises in the long term.

1. INTRODUCTION

People usually view a dictionary only as a book listing and defining words of a language. This narrows the function of dictionaries in societies to that of providing meaning of words. It is true that the chief purpose of dictionaries is explaining meaning of words, which is done by means of definitions in monolingual dictionaries or equivalents multilingual dictionaries. Lexicographers also provide some other information categories which, together with meaning of words, achieve the broader function of improving the acquisition and standard use of language.

Given the above, there is a notable need to go beyond meaning in dictionaries, especially general-purpose dictionaries (GPDs) if maximum utilisation of dictionaries is to be realised. Besides maximum utilisation, this article shows that taking such a step will help make up for some linguistic problems in undeveloped language communities in Africa like the Ndebele.

The focus of this article is on the provision and presentation of grammatical information in dictionaries. Bearing in mind that word meaning is central; the presentation of and need for grammatical information in dictionaries is explored. The ISN is then used as a case study to show how the community can go beyond meaning in the dictionary and make use of grammatical information in teaching Ndebele grammar at school level.

2. GRAMMATICAL INFORMATION IN DICTIONARIES

The provision of grammatical information in dictionaries has been a subject of debate for both practicing lexicographers and metalexicographers (Cowie 1983, Landau 1993, Bejoint 2000). Reviewing the first two decades of the publication of *Lexicographica Series Maior*, Hartmann (2004:362) also notes that: *Grammar in the dictionary* is another recurring theme, which embraces such specialties as morphology and syntax.

The recurrence of the theme of grammar in dictionaries has been partly due to the controversy over what should be the subject of grammarians as opposed to that of lexicographers. It is obvious knowledge that grammar has to do with the description of form of words and their stringing in phrases, clauses and sentences while lexicography deals with dictionaries, mainly focusing on meaning of words. In spite of this simplistic understanding, the dividing line between the lexicon and the grammar seems to be blurred. Some linguistic forms in many languages tend to overlap between the space occupied by grammar on one hand and lexis on the other. Let us consider the examples of Ndebele sentences given below.

- i. Umuntu omnyama. (A black person.)
- ii. Abantu abamnyama. (Black people.)
- iii. Ubuntu buyasiza. (Humanity helps.)
- iv. Isintu samaNdebele. (The culture of the Ndebele people.)

All nouns in the above examples share the same stem **-ntu**. The prefixes **umu-**, **aba-**, **ubu-** and **isi-** may be regarded as grammatical units in the sense that they determine the concords in their respective sentences. On the other hand, prefixing them to the same

stem yields words of different denotational meanings. Given such a scenario, how does one classify linguistic units like noun prefixes among other formatives and morphemes in Ndebele and other Nguni languages? A clear-cut distinction between grammar and lexis is therefore difficult.

In respect of the above, it is equally difficult to for lexicographers to avoid grammar in their dictionaries whilst focusing on words and their meanings. As a result “the dictionary contains many statements about form, and the grammar . . . cannot escape considerations of meaning” (Bejoint, 2000:28). Commenting on grammar and dictionaries, Bejoint therefore goes on to note that:

They are both metalinguistic descriptions with a didactic purpose, designed to facilitate linguistic communication . . . Both are necessary for the acquisition of a language (Ibid).

Perhaps one distinction between a grammar book and a dictionary is the primary focus and the starting points of the two in their view of language. While a grammar book focuses on the form, a dictionary centres on the meaning. Since the two cannot be totally detached from each other the endeavors of grammarians and lexicographers are therefore complementary. Bejoint also quotes Hudson who illustrates that:

Grammarians and lexicographers respective patches turn out to look like the north end and the south end of the same field, rather than like different fields separated by a hedge (Ibid).

Language is the same field on which both grammarians and lexicographers operate, albeit with different areas of focus. The areas of focus themselves tend to overlap. Grammarians describe the form of language while lexicographers explain the meaning of language given its form. As such, it would be difficult for lexicographers to totally avoid the form of language in their explanation of language. However, it would be noted that the way in which lexicographers handle grammatical information would be different from that which grammarians do.

The amount of grammatical information provided in dictionaries would vary with dictionary types and the purposes they are meant to serve. Language dictionaries usually provide more grammatical information than scientific or technical dictionaries. The former furnish users not only with the words, but with the rules that govern the form and use of the words while the latter basically equip users with the technical language needed for communication within specialised fields.

Target users of the dictionary also determine the amount and need for grammatical information in dictionaries. According to Landau (1993:88), “Grammatical information is more essential for a person who is trying to speak or understand a foreign language than for a native speaker.” Cowie (1983) also associates grammatical information with pedagogical dictionaries meant to assist foreign language learners. This goes along with the belief that mother-tongue speakers need little grammatical help which is meant to equip second language learners with the basic grammatical rules regarding compounding, derivation and word-order.

Bejoint (2000) notes that the move to lexicography for encoding has meant a shift towards more grammar in dictionaries, including the general-purpose dictionaries for first language speakers. Citing Sherman 1978:100, he notes that :

the so-called grammatical information in most GPDs is much too limited, and ... much linguistically important data finds its way neither into grammars nor into dictionaries . . . dictionaries have the greater capacity to absorb and organize . . . they are therefore proper archive for such information (Bejoint, Ibid:29).

The above view is likely to remain contestable as long as there is no collaboration between lexicographers and grammarians. Lexicographers should always know what types of grammatical information are expected from their dictionaries, in what amounts and in what forms of presentation considering their target users. In any case, the principle of space economy in dictionary-making will always affect the presentation of grammatical information among other information categories. While the lexicographer may be aware of the need for grammatical guidance in the dictionary considering the

dictionary culture and some linguistic needs in the community, space economy would limit the inclusion of information and maybe affect its explicit presentation due to the use of lexicographic symbols.

Nevertheless, the provision of grammatical information in dictionaries is totally unavoidable as meaning cannot be totally divorced from the form of words and the effects of rules that govern their combinations and use in communication. It remains at the dictionary-maker's discretion, considering the dictionary culture and linguistic needs of the community, to include this or exclude that type of grammatical information within the confines of lexicographic principles. In any case, whilst lexicography is an independent field in its own right, "it is an open science with a great interdisciplinary vocation" (Tarp, 2000:193). This being the case, there 'is need to move from mutual ignorance, neglect and distrust to deliberate collaboration' (Hartmann, 2005) on the part of practitioners from the concerned disciplines.

In such a spirit, lexicographers should opt for a user-oriented perspective; consider both the lexicographic and linguistic needs of their communities when contemplating on including this or that information in a dictionary. According to Tarp (2000:193) (after Wiegand) dictionaries are utility products produced in order to satisfy certain human needs of which their assessment with regards to their macrostructure, microstructure, access structure and so on, becomes an irrelevant discussion if it is done at the neglect of users. This applies to the provision of grammatical information in dictionaries.

3. THE CASE OF A NDEBELE DICTIONARY-THE ISN

3.1 A Brief Background to the ISN

The ISN is a medium-sized GPD which is also the first monolingual dictionary in Ndebele, coming long after Pelling (1966)'s bilingual Ndebele-English dictionary entitled *A Practical Ndebele Dictionary*. According to Bejoint (2000:41) monolingual GPDs are characterized by use of one language as the object of description and as a tool

for that description, a general word-list and a general microstructural programme giving at a least the meaning of each entry word which is part of a general macrostructure. The ISN is not restricted to any field of study in terms of its coverage of the Ndebele lexicon, neither is it restricted to any particular historical period. It attempts a general coverage of the Ndebele lexicon regardless of time or discipline in which the language is/was used. Its microstructure is not restricted to the provision of one information category, hence described as a general microstructure. As such the general Ndebele speakers are the target users of the dictionary, with particular focus being on students at secondary schools.

The background to the compilation of the ISN has been characterized by a number of problems related to low dictionary culture, language standardisation and lack of reference material among others in Ndebele. Low dictionary culture meant that the editors could get very limited and uninformed information concerning reference needs of the target users of their dictionary. The dictionary has no reliable predecessor from which the editors could benefit much guidance since it is the first monolingual dictionary in the language. Therefore, the inclusion of information types in the ISN, and their presentation was largely based on what the editors perceived to be the urgent reference needs and reference skills of the Ndebele. “What has now been described as user needs in Ndebele, are in fact assumptions by dictionary editors” (Hadebe, 2004:90) who had to rely on their experience and intuition as Ndebele speakers, teachers and linguists.

The aspects of language standardisation that have been problematic in Ndebele relate to orthography, vocabulary and terminology among others. This article will elaborate on terminology problems for the sake of focus. Ndebele has been suffering terminology problems in the sense that there has been no language body that coordinates and regulates term creation for various disciplines in Zimbabwe, leaving it up for the different institutions to create their own terms for communication at institutional levels. The teaching of Ndebele (literature and linguistic structure), just like other disciplines, has been affected in that English has continued to be the only language that can be effectively

used for creating and communicating ideas at higher levels of analysis due to lack of standard terminologies.

Lack of reference books on the language, especially grammar, is still a problem in Ndebele. Up to date, there is only one Ndebele grammar book, *An Introduction to Ndebele Grammar* by Khumalo (2004) which is written in English. There is therefore a serious need for grammar books written in Ndebele, the language that is mainly used in the teaching of Ndebele grammar at school level.

Given such a background, it would be noted that since the ISN is the first monolingual dictionary in Ndebele, the editors had to make serious considerations on the inclusion of certain information categories. The fact that the ISN is a GPD meant that they were at liberty, albeit within the principles of lexicography, to include or exclude some information types according to their prioritisation as the speakers, teachers and linguists in Ndebele. Given the serious standardisation problems and lack of reference books that can be used in various fields and linguistics in particular, the ISN editors rightfully realised the necessity of grammatical information in the dictionary.

3.2 Grammatical Information in the ISN

Three ways in which grammatical information is given in the ISN are explored:

- The grammatical outline of the language.
- Grammatical Terms in the metalanguage list.
- Grammar in the main text.

3.2.1 The Grammatical Outline

In the front-matter of the dictionary, a grammatical outline of Ndebele is presented. The outline covers the basic aspects of Ndebele morphology, posing itself as a mini-grammar

within the dictionary. Word categories that constitute the language are presented in a manner that presents the language as a system. The systematic approach is further used to show different morphemes like prefixes, stems, concords, suffixes and other formatives that combine in the formation of words of different categories. It is demonstrated how these different morphemes are combined in the construction of word categories in which they are involved. Through the mini-grammar, one is able to see the language as a system of rules governing the combination of different morphemes that form words which in turn combine to form sentences.

3.2.2 Grammatical Terms in the Metalanguage List

The metalanguage list in a dictionary is necessary as part of guide to dictionary use as it clarifies the specialised language employed in the dictionary. This is also true to the ISN whose metalanguage list contains terms that are not used in everyday language. Among those terms are grammatical terms and their formatives. These are listed against their contractions or abbreviations on one hand and their English equivalents on the other. Listing them against their abbreviations helps users understand the abbreviations used in the main text while listing them against their English equivalents is necessary since there are no standardised grammatical terms in Ndebele. The importance of the grammatical terms in the metalanguage list cannot be overemphasised. This is the language which is needed for technical understanding of the structure of the Ndebele, the rules that govern its structure and its use in writing or speech.

3.2.3 Grammar in the Main Text

The main text of the ISN provides grammatical information in a number of ways. All grammatical terms and formatives listed in the metalanguage are entered and defined as part of the ISN macrostructure. Listing the terms in the main text is a way of integrating them into the general language and making them accessible to any user who has interest in the study of Ndebele grammar. Defining them explains the concepts that they represent and clarifies their grammatical functions in the language as a system.

All headwords in the ISN are specified for word category belonging, i.e. whether a word is a noun, a verb, a copulative, an adverb, an idiophone, etc. This information identifies a headword with a category of words similar to it structurally and playing a similar syntagmatic role in the language. Abbreviations, eg. bz. for ibizo (noun) sz for isenzo (verb) and so on are used for grammatical specification in the ISN to economise on space. The abbreviations and their full forms are then listed as part of the metalanguage list as stated in 3.2.2 above.

Illustrative examples have been given in the ISN. Although their chief purpose is to elucidate the definitions of words, examples are important in that they show the contextual usage usages of words. This helps in showing the grammatical function of the words in relation to others.

Given the provision of all this information among other types, it may be noted that the users of the ISN have at their disposal a reference resource to which they may refer, not only to look up meaning, but other information types on their language to assist them in their language studies. Ramagoshi (2004) demonstrates well how the use of African language dictionaries could be used in the light of language teaching methods.

4 USING THE ISN TO TEACH NDEBELE GRAMMAR

4.1 Ndebele Grammar at School Level

Ndebele grammar is taught and examined at Ordinary and Advanced levels of secondary school education as a compulsory section of the syllabi. The syllabi require students' knowledge of the structure of the language as a system of rules and the use of the language as governed by those rules. Focus is mainly on various word categories, morphemes constituting them, phonological processes involved in word formations and their stringing together to form sentences.

Ndebele is the main medium of instruction in spite of serious shortage of teaching material in the language. *Ihawu Labafundi 3* and *Ihawu Labafundi 4* used at the ordinary level are mere adoption of Nyembezi's *Uhlelo LwesiZulu* (1991) when it comes to the author's description of Ndebele grammar. Nyembezi's text and Nkosi and Msomi's *Izikhali Zabaqeqeshi Nabafundi* (1992) are used at the advanced level. These being Zulu texts, their authors had no obligation whatsoever to provide for the teaching of Ndebele grammar. Given the desperate situation of Ndebele, the use of the Zulu texts is unavoidable but it should be done with great caution considering the differences between Ndebele and Zulu. Consider the morphology of the enumerative in Zulu according to Nkosi and Msomi (ibid) and then in Ndebele according to Hadebe et al. (2001).

Both Zulu scholars and the editors of the ISN list **-ni**, **-nye**, **-phi** and **-mbe** as stems for the enumerative. It is also shown in the case of Zulu that the concords for the enumerative are arrived at by removing initial vowels from the full prefixes (Nkosi and Msomi, 1992:89). This also appears unmodified in the *Ihawu Labafundi* series. This rule applies well to Ndebele but with the exception of classes 1, 1a and 6 where /w/ is used instead of /m/ (Hadebe et al., 2001:xxvii). In Zulu, the stem **-ni** goes well with all the class concords, but in Ndebele the concord becomes **ba-** is used as in the following examples:

- v. Ngumuntu **bani**? (What kind of person) instead of **muni**
- vi. Isihlahla **bani**? (What type of tree?) instead of **sini**

The examples illustrate another special case where the grammars of Zulu and Ndebele bear slight differences. The differences are notably minor, but the dogmatic use of the texts renders the grammar taught to Ndebele students, who are the speakers of the language, a grammar of the language they do not speak and hence difficult. While using Zulu texts teachers need to take note of these minor variations and explain them to their students. It still remains imperative to develop reference and teaching materials that can be used to teach Ndebele grammar in a way that will distinguish the language from Zulu. Considering the grammatical information in the ISN, the dictionary is therefore a positive step in that direction.

4.2 Relevance of Grammatical Information in the ISN

Given the background of lack of standard grammatical terminology, grammar textbooks and other reference books in Ndebele, the importance of the grammatical information in the ISN cannot be overemphasised. It is not a mere marketing strategy that Hadebe (2004:95) says: “This is very useful information for language teachers” in reference to grammatical information. The information presented meets the requirements of the school syllabi on Ndebele grammar. The grammatical outline, or the mini-grammar, in the ISN front matter is an attempt of what Nyembezi or Nkosi and Msomi have done for Zulu, however with dictionary space-economy denying detailed elaboration. Grammatical terms and formatives in the metalanguage are a representation of the grammatical concepts that the language realises. Entering and defining them in the main text goes a step further to clarify the concepts and their individual grammatical roles. The information is therefore relevant in presenting the language as a system of rules governing its structure and its use. All this is relevant in the study of Ndebele grammar at school level as part of the requirements of the school syllabi at the examinable ordinary and advanced levels.

4.3 Use of the ISN: Problems, Recommendations and Gains

Reviewing the ISN, J. Zondo (unpublished) asserts that “as much as it is not a grammar text book, reference to grammar must be accurate enough to complement the efforts of the teacher and the text book.” Zondo had this to say in reference to grammatical representations which, according to him, violate linguistic logic as “a word combines with an unseen formative to form a different word.” For instance, describing the morphology of the diminutive in Ndebele, the editors state that the suffix is **/-ana/** or **/-anyana/** and then show that the diminutive is **umuzana** (small home stead) for **umuzi** (homestead), **amabhukwana** (small or few books) for **amabhuku** (books) and **unyawana** (a small feet) for **unyawo** (feet) without demonstrating the phonological processes involved (Hadebe et al., ppxx).

It is interesting that the reviewer is aware that a dictionary should not be criticised as if it is a grammar text book, which unfortunately he does not escape so well. The need for accuracy in the presentation of any information type in any dictionary cannot be disputed, it is a must. Looking at the presentation of grammatical information in the ISN, accuracy is not an issue because it is there. It is accurate for instance that **/-ana/** and **/-anyana/** are the diminutive suffixes and that **umuzana** is the diminutive for the noun **umuzi** and so on. Perhaps what can be said is that the representations are not detailed and explicit as acknowledged by the editors (Ibid: xviii). Thus, in partial agreement with the reviewer, this article proposes the use of the ISN in teaching Ndebele grammar since the grammatical information provided is relevant. This should however be done in a clear light of the problems that may arise if the dictionary is treated as a grammar text book. Hence some recommendations are made in consideration of those problems.

While the grammatical outline does not give detailed information on the phonological processes involved in the construction of words, lemmatising and defining grammatical terms caters for this shortcoming in the ISN. However, the conventional alphabetical ordering of items in dictionaries makes the use of the dictionary for class-teaching purposes difficult since the presentation of information on one topic would be done according to the principles of dictionary-making that do not provide for its use as a text book.

Grammatical marking of dictionary entries answers the typical examination questions which ask students to identify the grammatical classes in which words fall. The ISN, like most dictionaries, does this using abbreviations. A separate study by the same writer presenter revealed that not all target users are conversant with the abbreviations and other conventions used (Nkomo, 2003). This again poses a problem highlighted in the preceding paragraph which implies that the user moves back and forth from one dictionary text or entry to the other to verify information that would be provided elsewhere. Bejoint has this to say about grammar in contrary to a dictionary:

A grammar has a running text that is not divided into unconnected paragraphs and it can be read, not only consulted, it does not have a coded arrangement of entry heads ... it is meant for a narrower public than a dictionary (Bejoint, 1994:28).

A related sentiment is expressed by Gouws and Prinsloo (1998) on the real problems experienced by dictionary users. The two maintain that the conventional dictionary structure is based on tearing concepts from different bodies of knowledge or linguistic items from their mother-contexts and re-arranging them which results in decontextualisation. In light of this, the mediostucture becomes a mechanism of re-establishing the natural relations among the concepts of knowledge or items of language.

The main problem with the use of the ISN in teaching Ndebele grammar at school level therefore lies with the general structure of dictionaries which dictates that it cannot be read like a book but rather be consulted. Consulting a dictionary requires reference skills which enable one to decode the information provided by in it. According to Hadebe:

As long as Ndebele dictionary users lack the requisite skills, current and possible future dictionaries in the language are likely to be underutilized until users have developed appropriate reference skills (Hadebe, 2004:90).

In the same vein, without the relevant reference skills, the ISN cannot be used in the teaching of Ndebele grammar. By looking at the mini-grammar in the front matter, teachers and students are likely to dismiss the dictionary thinking that it is too shallow to solve their problems as they lack reference skills. However, with adequate skills, they should be able to know that the dictionary contains all the relevant information by reading the front matter and manage to decode it for their use.

Hadebe (ibid) therefore proposes ways of improving dictionary skills in Ndebele so as to ensure that maximum utilisation of dictionary information and ultimately growth of dictionary using culture is attained. The teaching of Ndebele grammar at school level is also likely to benefit from some, if not all of them. For instance, workshops organised by language experts and researchers like those involved in lexicography work at the African

Languages Research Institute (ALRI) with Ndebele teachers across the country can promote awareness on how the dictionary could be used in the teaching of Ndebele grammar. Teachers can be trained during such workshops on how to decode grammatical information spread in the ISN and bring it together in preparing class notes rather than dogmatically copying Zulu scholars. Without funding specified for this purpose, this might be difficult for lexicographers but it can also contribute to the marketing of the dictionary.

It is notable that as a standard book, the ISN can be used maximally at schools only if approved by the relevant Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture in collaboration with the examination board, the Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC). If advised by the language experts on the contributions that the dictionary can make in the teaching of Ndebele grammar, these authorities can commission text book writers to write modules and comprehensive grammar text books based on it. The commissioned team can include dictionary editors themselves, university and college lecturers of Ndebele and linguistics, Ndebele teachers and publishers. With adequate funding, such people should be able to come up with a comprehensive grammar book written in Ndebele within a given time frame.

If such efforts could be made to make use of the ISN in the teaching of Ndebele grammar at school level, there are obvious gains that could be realised with regards to the development of the language. One primary gain would be the improvement of the teaching methods that are used at the present. Currently, with the use of Zulu texts and their copycats in *Ihawu Labafundi 3* and *Ihawu Labafundi 4*, incompetent teachers merely copy the texts when preparing notes for lessons, give students and repeat the given examples in their explanations. When consulting the texts on their own, students find nothing in addition to what they get in class and what they fail to understand in class remains unexplained. This has developed a negative attitude towards the course in students who eventually shun it when they proceed to universities and colleges in favour

of literature courses. However, when they graduate as teachers they go to teach Ndebele grammar with incompetence and attitude, thereby creating a vicious cycle.

The result of the current situation and methods used in the study of Ndebele grammar has long term and detrimental effects on language development. Research on Ndebele grammar and other aspects of linguistic studies continue to lag behind, affecting its documentation and development for advanced communication in the academic and other specialised domains. Improving the teaching of Ndebele grammar through the use of the ISN will therefore improve the production of reference material in the language like dictionaries, glossaries and textbooks.

5. CONCLUSION

The interdisciplinary nature of lexicography should not compromise its status as a scientific discipline with its distinct subject matter which is dictionaries. The user-perspective should guide lexicographers compiling dictionaries, especially monolingual GPDs on the inclusion or exclusion of other information types in addition to meaning. In this spirit dictionaries become real utility products serving a number of specific needs all of which depends on the linguistic and lexicographic community in which they are compiled. This being the case with the compilation of most monolingual GPDs, the ISN included, there is therefore need to go beyond meaning when consulting them. This article has demonstrated how grammatical information, being subsidiary dictionary information to meaning, has been presented in the ISN within the confines of lexicographic principles. Given some problems in the teaching of Ndebele grammar at school level, the article went on to propose the use of the dictionary as the available tool that can be employed to curb the problems. On this it was noted that as a dictionary, the ISN cannot be used, let alone be criticised as if it was a grammar text book for the good of dictionary criticism and development of lexicography. The problems that the structure of a dictionary could pose in the use of the ISN were highlighted and some recommendations were made in this regard. The gains that can be yielded from the use of the ISN in the teaching of Ndebele grammar were also highlighted.

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