

Improving Dictionary Skills in Ndebele

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Abstract: This article proposes ways of improving dictionary skills amongst the Ndebele. One way of accomplishing this is incorporating the teaching of dictionary skills into teacher training syllabi. Teachers can impart their knowledge to students and a dictionary culture can develop for enhancing effective use of current dictionaries and helping in the compilation of future ones. In general lexicographers are aiming at producing dictionaries that are 'user-friendly', that is, accessible to their users. Current and future Ndebele dictionaries are likely to remain underutilised unless users develop requisite skills for dictionary use. This article outlines some aspects of dictionary studies that could be incorporated in the training syllabi for potential Ndebele language teachers. Anticipated problems of implementation and possible solutions to these problems are also discussed.

Keywords: DICTIONARY, DICTIONARY CULTURE, DICTIONARY SKILLS, REFERENCE NEEDS, REFERENCE SKILLS, USERS, USER-FRIENDLY, NDEBELE, LEXICOGRAPHY, CHANGE OF ATTITUDE

Opsomming: Verbetering van woordeboekvaardighede in Ndebele. Hierdie artikel stel maniere voor vir die verbetering van woordeboekvaardighede onder die Ndebeles. Een manier om dit te bewerkstellig is om die onderrig van woordeboekvaardighede in die opleidingsillabusse vir onderwysers in te sluit. Onderwysers kan hul kennis aan studente oordra, en 'n woordeboekkultuur kan ontwikkel om die doeltreffende gebruik van huidige woordeboeke te verbeter en by die samestelling van toekomstiges te help. In die algemeen streef leksikograwe daarna om woordeboeke te lewer wat "gebruikersvriendelik", d.w.s., toeganklik vir hul gebruikers is. Huidige en toekomstige Ndebelewoordeboeke sal waarskynlik onderbenut bly mits gebruikers die nodige vaardighede vir woordeboekgebruik ontwikkel. Hierdie artikel skets 'n aantal aspekte van woordeboekstudie wat in die opleidingsillabusse vir toekomstige Ndebeletaalonderwysers ingesluit kan word. Verwagte probleme by die instelling en moontlike oplossings vir hierdie probleme word ook bespreek.

Slutelwoorde: WOORDEBOEK, WOORDEBOEKKULTUUR, WOORDEBOEKVAARDIGHEDE, NASLAANBEHOEFTE, NASLAANVAARDIGHEDE, GEBRUIKERS, GEBRUIKERSVRIENDELIK, NDEBELE, LEKSIKOGRAFIE, VERANDERING VAN HOUDING

1. Introduction

This paper is on teaching dictionary-using skills with the long-term aim to developing *dictionary culture* amongst the Ndebele¹ of Zimbabwe. By dictionary culture is meant; 'The critical awareness of the value and limitations of dictionaries and other reference works in a particular community' (Hartmann and James 1998:41). The focus is on the '*user perspective*' that investigates *reference skills* and *reference needs* of dictionary users (Hartmann 2000:11, 2001:81, Béjoint 2000:140, Svensén 1993:13). The user perspective in lexicography is a user-driven approach to dictionary-making and research. Reference skills are 'the abilities required on the part of the dictionary user to find the information being sought' (Hartmann and James 1998:117), while reference needs are 'the circumstances that drive individuals to seek information in reference works such as dictionaries...' (ibid:116).

Research on lexicography in the Ndebele language is still at its early stages of development. Actually, until the establishment of the African Languages Lexical Project

¹ This is the Ndebele language spoken in Zimbabwe as opposed to that spoken in South Africa.

known by the acronym ALLEX², now African Languages Research Institute (ALRI) at the University of Zimbabwe, there has been no research on Ndebele lexicography. Researchers in Ndebele lexicography are taking into cognisance the dictionary user needs and user perspective in dictionary studies.

Lexicographers in general are attempting to produce dictionaries that are said to be ‘user-friendly’ that is, dictionaries that are accessible to the users. Similarly, publishers of dictionaries also want products that are attractive and appealing to their markets. Thus the expression ‘user-friendly’ has become a catchword for lexicographers, publishers and critics alike. According to Béjoint,

Lexicographers in many countries have recently felt the need to go beyond empirical observations on the use of the general-purpose dictionary, seeking to find out what the users really do, as opposed to what they are believed to do, in order to make sure that the dictionary really corresponds to the needs of the public (Béjoint 2000:140).

Similarly, lexicographers compiling Ndebele-language dictionaries, especially at ALRI, are concerned with fulfilling the users’ expectations and needs. What has been described as user needs in Ndebele now, are in fact assumptions by dictionary editors. User-friendliness is difficult to attain let alone to measure in a community where reference skills are relatively low and the dictionary culture is non-existent.

As long as the Ndebele dictionary users lack the requisite skills, the current dictionaries in the language and the possible future ones are likely to be under-utilised until the users develop appropriate reference skills. There is a need to develop dictionary skills among the Ndebele to higher levels than present one. Only after the community has a certain level of competence in dictionary use, can there be talk of user-friendliness and user needs. It is significant, therefore, to establish user needs and user perspectives in Ndebele if the production of dictionaries is going to be of use. Such skills cannot be developed fully through informal learning and individual experience. The skills have to be taught formally and the dictionary makers have to know and not only assume what they think users know.

Writing on the significance of teaching dictionary skills in pedagogical lexicography, Dolezal and McCreary state that: “Thus, as we look to the future development of this area, the mutual concerns of the teacher, the lexicographer and the learner/dictionary user could be the focus of pedagogical lexicography” (Dolezal & McCreary 1999:IX).

The production of dictionaries is very expensive, time-consuming and

² The ALLEX Project is Lexical project of cooperation involving University of Zimbabwe, University of Oslo and University of Gothenburg funded by NUFU (Norwegian Universities’ Committee for Development Research and Education)

labour- intensive. Taking these factors into consideration it would be uneconomic to continue producing reference works if such works will never be fully utilised beyond their function as cultural artefacts. Therefore, I suggest that there is a need for *user education* in Ndebele, especially for teacher training. ‘User education is the training of users in the reference skills in response to reference needs’ (Hartmann and James 1998:152). By training teachers to be good users themselves, it is envisaged that they could pass these skills to students and eventually to the society in general.

2. The importance of teaching dictionary skills

In Zimbabwe, books in indigenous languages are produced for the school market and dictionaries are no exception. The cultivation of the dictionary culture would be enhanced in the Ndebele community, especially to pupils through targeting teachers first. However, the students cannot acquire dictionary skills by themselves without assistance from teachers. The initial focus should then be on teacher training. According to Hartmann, ‘Teachers have rarely been offered the training needed to judge the benefits and limitations of particular dictionaries, or to instruct their students in the reference skills appropriate to guarantee successful consultation. Hardly ever are they in touch with lexicographers or dictionary researchers’ (Hartmann 2001:26). The problem of lack of teaching of reference skills is not peculiar to Ndebele but is common in most languages. Landau notes that, “This is a pity, because the habit of using a dictionary is formed early in life, and if the skills to use it are neglected, the student may never be comfortable using dictionaries” (Landau 2001:26). This observation is true for Ndebele dictionary users as well.

Writing on the possible solutions to this problem in general Dolezal and McCreary identified the following:

- 1) make a more so-called ‘user-friendly’ dictionary (which in positive connotations must mean to develop a more readable format, better examples, better organization, etc., and in negative connotations must mean to dumb-it-down)
- 2) teach students reference skills (Dolezal & McCreary 1999:XVIII).

As already mentioned above, the effectiveness of a user-friendly dictionary is partly dependent on the reference skills of the user (Svensén 1993:16). Therefore, point number (1) in the above quotation becomes secondary to point (2), that urges the teaching of reference skills to students. The need to teach student about dictionaries is also noted by McKean, ‘school dictionary lexicographers have been trying to encourage the teaching of dictionary activities and dictionary use in the classroom’ (McKean 2000:82).

To improve the lexicographic situation in Zimbabwe in general and Ndebele language in particular, the teaching of reference skills should first target the teachers themselves. The teachers should be taught the reference skills as part of teacher training in order to enable them to make maximum use of dictionary and reference books and impart this knowledge to their students. The teachers are in a better position than other researchers or even lexicographers to assess the students' lexicographic needs. If the teachers gain competence in dictionary skills and pass on the skills to students, the dictionary culture would grow in the community.

The teachers and pupils being the main users of dictionaries in the Ndebele community can in the long run give better evaluation of existing dictionaries and give views on shortcomings and needs in Ndebele lexicography. According to McKean, 'The biggest area of improvement does not seem to be in the dictionary, but teacher training' (McKean 2000:87). It is through improving the teachers' competence that dictionary culture could be taught to students and in turn produce more informed dictionary users in general. McKean further states that, 'Better teacher training would, in time, lead to better dictionary consumers – a boon, not only for makers of school dictionaries, but for makers of commercial adult dictionaries as well (McKean 2000:87). Therefore, the choice to focus on teacher training is justified here.

The majority of Ndebele teachers live and work in the countryside and the few in the urban areas are mostly in the poor schools in the high-density suburbs. The common feature of schools in these circumstances is the lack of textbooks and other essential teaching aids. There are schools that have no library and thousands others that are far from acquiring their first computer. There is still a bias in Zimbabwe towards the science subjects, which are perceived to be more important. This bias has implications on resource allocation. The little resources that the school is allocated firstly goes to purchasing science books and materials that are perceived by both parents and educationists as priority. When it comes to the arts subjects, English is given top priority both in terms of staffing, time and resource allocation. Therefore, in this general scarcity of resources in the schools, the Ndebele teacher finds her situation even more critical.

Teacher training in Zimbabwean colleges can be considered good by Third World standards. Teacher training colleges are satisfactorily equipped and staffed to produce in average well-trained teachers. That is, with reference to the conventional colleges for secondary school teachers, the focus of our discussion. If the teacher is equipped with the necessary reference skills and knowledge of the school conditions in the country, the teacher

can be more useful and helpful with the little resources at her disposal, which could be a few textbooks and a handful of copies of the Ndebele dictionary.

Murphy poses the question, ‘How can dictionary skills be applied and encouraged in grades in which “dictionary skills” are not listed in the official in the curriculum?...How can we lexicographers reach out to teachers, teachers-in-training, and teacher trainers?’ (Murphy 2000:80). The same questions can be asked about Ndebele in Zimbabwe and the education system. The language syllabi of the two main teacher-training colleges in Ndebele-speaking provinces of Zimbabwe do not have dictionary skills as part of the skills to be taught. The Ndebele syllabi from Hillside Teachers’ College and United College of Education respectively for 2002 do not mention the teaching of reference skills³. Similarly, the school curricula are silent or assume that dictionary skills are acquired along the way.

In this paper, I will show that there is no need for separate courses specifically on dictionary skills. The teaching of dictionary skills can be incorporated in courses on research skills and the use of learning aids, which are already a core part of the teacher training syllabi for Ndebele language teachers. As part of the research skills that are taught to student teachers in general, several aspects of lexicography could be taught as well to complement research skills of the student teachers.

3. Teaching aspects of lexicography

I propose the following areas: general lexicography, history of Nguni⁴ and Ndebele language lexicography, dictionary typology, lemmatisation in Nguni/Ndebele and dictionary structure. Let us discuss each of these areas and elaborate on what could be covered under each.

3.1 Lexicography in general

There is a need to initiate teachers to reference books of various types; dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopaedias and others. As there are not many types of reference works in Ndebele or any African language for that matter, it is inevitable to study some aspects of English lexicography as the reference point. Dictionaries in the Ndebele language are, in any case, largely relying on general trends and traditions acquired from English language lexicography.

³ Hillside Teachers’ College trains secondary school teachers while the United College of Education trains primary school ones.

⁴ Nguni refers to the sister languages Ndebele, Zulu, Xhosa and Swati. As these languages share a high percentage of their lexicon, speakers can refer to any of the language dictionaries and Ndebele has used Zulu dictionaries for instance.

Some problems in dictionary use in the English language could be highlighted in order to prepare the ground for discussion of problems likely to face the Ndebele language student.

The alphabet ordering in dictionaries should be discussed as well as its purported advantages and disadvantages. As stated earlier, teaching dictionary skills is part of language teaching. Alphabetic ordering is an important element in most dictionaries. It would also give background to the discussion on lemmatisation in Nguni discussed below. Teachers should be taught that other methods of ordering than the alphabetic system are also used, for instance the thematic ordering.

3.2 History of Nguni/Ndebele language lexicography

The first dictionaries and wordlists in Ndebele and other Nguni languages, especially Zulu, were bilingual, mainly targeted at missionaries who wanted to learn African languages. There was a bias towards Christian religion as noted by this researcher in another publication that: “Pelling’s *A Practical Ndebele Dictionary*, has most of the terms relating to Christian religion and hardly any on African religion” (Hadebe 2000:226). A similar bias is observed in Shona (Mpofu 2001: 244) and in Fan spoken in Gabon (Mavoungou 2001:123). With time the bilingual dictionaries were also meant to assist Ndebele people who were learning English.

The monolingual dictionary has different issues to address compared to the bilingual one. For the Ndebele language various things can be learnt from such dictionaries. The role of the general-purpose monolingual dictionary for the native speaker is very important. The compilation of monolingual dictionaries in African languages is itself an important indicator of the status of that particular language in society. The compilation of the first monolingual Ndebele dictionary has a number of interesting implications on the Ndebele language in as far as its standardisation is concerned. For instance, a number of orthographic problems were addressed in the process of making the monolingual Ndebele dictionary. Some of these include word division of compounds and spelling of loanwords.

A historical background of Nguni lexicography in general and of Ndebele in particular, will be useful for teachers. It would enhance their understanding of different types of dictionaries and why a particular type dominates the Ndebele and Nguni languages. It could also be useful in the teachers’ understanding of dictionary typology and dictionary structure. It would also give a background to the understanding of particular problems in Ndebele and Nguni lexicography, for instance the lack of consistency in lemmatisation and alphabetic ordering (see 3.5 below).

3.3 Dictionary typology

Teachers have to know the differences between types of dictionaries. This is not only important for them to guide students appropriately, but also to advise their schools in purchasing the right kind of dictionaries. Knowledge of dictionary types enables the user to know what to expect and what not to in a particular type of dictionary. Knowledge of dictionary typology may assist in the understanding of dictionary structure.

Unless this knowledge is given to teachers to pass on to students, dictionary users will continue to think that all dictionaries are the same and one can look up anything from any dictionary. According to Dolezal & McCreary:

Results of empirical studies suggest that dictionary users do not distinguish among types of dictionaries; moreover, no matter how lexicographers might classify a 'thesaurus', students do not necessarily consider a thesaurus a text belonging to a separate category of reference book (Dolezal & McCreary 1999:XIII).

As shown in the above quotation many users of dictionaries even of established languages like English, still have problems of distinguishing types of dictionaries. Acquisition of knowledge about basic distinctions in dictionaries could enhance greatly the use of dictionaries both as teaching and learning resources and as general reference works. Students in Ndebele are unlikely to master this basic distinction in dictionary types beyond that dictionaries are of different languages. They will need to be taught about different dictionary types.

3.4 Dictionary structure

The ability to use any dictionary, no matter how casual, presupposes and requires some basic knowledge of the structure of dictionaries. One such basic knowledge, for instance, is the alphabetic ordering. According to Gouws;

Modern-day lexicography is dominated by the user-perspective and the access structure of any new dictionary has to be user-driven, i.e. it has to be planned in accordance with the user profile of the dictionary and the needs and reference skills of a well-defined target user (Gouws 2001:110).

A comparative study of Ndebele, Zulu, Xhosa and Swazi dictionaries would be relevant here focussing on dictionary structure. There is a generally expected structure but each dictionary has its peculiarity as far as structure is concerned. Through study of dictionary structure, teachers can learn how to use the dictionary as a tool for teaching in the classroom. Here are some areas that could be helpful to a Ndebele language teacher:

3.4.1 Grammatical information

For the Ndebele language that has no comprehensive grammar book, the dictionary, for instance the recently published *Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele* (2001), could be useful for studying grammar. Information on aspects of grammar is usually given in the front matter of the dictionary. The *Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele* for instance, apart from a brief grammatical outline of the language in the front matter, word category is also marked for each entry. Entries are marked as verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, ideophones, pronouns, copulatives and conjunctives. Nouns classes⁵ are also marked while for verbs it is stated that they are either transitive or intransitive. Different types of morphemes, like tense morphemes, aspect morphemes, suffixes and reflexive morphemes are marked and defined. This is very useful information for language teachers.

3.4.2 Spelling

Any general-purpose standard dictionary is assumed to reflect standard spelling. Teachers have to insist on correct spelling to their students and the use of dictionaries is very important for this. Ndebele spelling still has outstanding problems that might call for spelling reform. It is crucial for language users to be familiar with spelling conventions in the language, especially word division for compounds and spelling of loanwords.

3.4.3 Pronunciation

Along with spelling is the importance of pronunciation in dictionaries. Speakers need to spell words correctly and pronounce them correctly too. Most dictionaries in African languages mark tone because varying one's tone changes the meaning of a particular word.

3.4.4 Meaning

Studies in general have shown that meaning is the first thing that users use a dictionary for. I should assume the same applies for Ndebele users. Teachers have to be made familiar with types of meanings and the various possible senses that a word can have. Most senses are usually excluded from a general-purpose dictionary to save space. The use of synonyms in dictionaries could be taught as well.

Meaning is usually found in the context in which the particular word is used. Dictionary users have to be familiar with dictionary meanings and how to use them in getting meanings of words and expressions, as they would be occurring in texts. Commenting on dictionary meanings in general Moon states that 'Dictionaries traditionally record vocabulary as if meaning is something independent, inherent and unique to an item, and serving to distinguish it from all others' (Moon 1987:86). Teaching some basics about types of meanings

⁵ Ndebele nouns fall roughly within classes 1 to 18 following the noun classification of Bantu languages by Carl Meinhof.

would be adequate for dictionary users to enable them to make full use of dictionaries as guides in deriving meanings of words in their various contexts.

3.4.5 Vocabulary

Vocabulary acquisition is important for all language teachers. Teachers have to help their students acquire as wide a vocabulary as possible. Students with good command of their language would reflect it in their use of synonyms and antonyms for instance. The dictionary is one of the more reliable sources for enhancing vocabulary growth in students. For the teaching of Ndebele to non-mother tongue speakers the appropriate vocabulary is very essential. A significant number of both teachers and students come from minority language communities and learn and speak Ndebele at school⁶.

In addition to teaching aspects like meaning or vocabulary, teachers need to cultivate in their students the ability to use the dictionary beyond meaning, spelling and pronunciation. Teachers have to learn as well the importance of the front matter and the back matter. It is now a commonly acknowledged fact in lexicography that users do not care to read instructions given in the dictionary front matter. Such attitudes should be changed in users if they are to find dictionaries informative. Different ways of accessing information in dictionaries should be taught to teachers so that such knowledge can be taught to students at early ages.

As noted above, the objective to produce more user-friendly dictionaries has led to various innovations by lexicographers, innovations that go unnoticed except perhaps by fellow reviewers. According to Dolezal & McCreary:

Lexicographers painstakingly introduce more discrete definitions, examples, and grammatical information: many critiques of their work call for yet more nuanced information (Aarts, 1991a; Herbst, 1996; Nesi, 1987; Olofsson, 1996; Patzold, 1994, 1987; Piotrowski, 1997), while the learner, according to some studies, doggedly resists being a user of any type of dictionary (Dolezal & McCreary 1999:XVIII).

My view in this paper is that the user perspective in lexicography cannot attain its objective unless the user is efficient in dictionary use. For instance, children's dictionaries usually have large font, coloured pictorial illustrations and all techniques designed for easy access of information. However, all this could be wasted effort on the part of the lexicographer and publisher unless the children have basic reference skills.

3.5 Lemmatisation and alphabetic ordering in Nguni/Ndebele

⁶ Ndebele language is the officially sanctioned national language in the Matabeleland provinces of Zimbabwe where about five minority languages are also spoken. Speakers of these minorities learn Ndebele at school as if it was their first language and have difficulties in vocabulary and pronunciation of Ndebele.

It is important to prepare teachers for potential problems that students in Ndebele might face in using Nguni language dictionaries. The lemmatisation problem, inconsistencies in alphabetic ordering of nouns by stem, prefix proper or initial vowel. For the lemmatisation of verbs and adjectives, the alphabetic ordering is based on the first letter of their respective stems.

The particular emphasis on lemmatisation problems in Ndebele would complement the study of dictionary structure. The lemmatisation by noun stem obviously makes access to entries more complicated than when lemmatisation is based on the initial letter of the noun, which in Ndebele is always a vowel. Traditionally, nouns in Nguni have largely been lemmatised according to noun stems. This presupposes that users have a certain level of understanding of grammar and know the morphology of every word to identify the stems.

3.6 A case study of a monolingual Ndebele dictionary

Teachers should as consumers of dictionaries, be able to evaluate the effectiveness of dictionaries in fulfilling the objectives they purport to achieve. This is the essential part that teachers have to play in assessing the usefulness of a dictionary to students and how best it could be improved. By understanding the dictionary structure, teachers could easily assess students' needs and students' inadequacies in dictionary skills. This knowledge would be valuable for lexicographers and other researchers in language teaching, textbook writing and teaching methods.

A monolingual Ndebele dictionary, for instance, *Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele*, could be used as a case study in dictionary criticism. This would enable them to know what is contained in the dictionary and what else they think could have been included but was not. The dictionary criticism should cover broadly the text structure, macro structure, microstructure, medio structure and access structure.

4. Anticipated problems in implementation

Notwithstanding the expected advantages for teaching reference skills, there are some foreseeable problems. Some of the anticipated problems are societal attitudes, lack of competence and lack of training of lecturers.

4.1. Attitude problems

These are attitude problems that have a long history. Some sections of the population, especially the middle class, have negative attitudes towards all African languages in general.

These are the people who send their children to school where these are not taught or are taught as optional subjects. Their negative attitude towards their own mother tongue is likely to transfer to dictionaries in the languages as well. Although this could be said to be a relatively small minority, they are the most influential people in the community. They tend to be the better educated and the well employed. Due to the colonially designed education system, these people still believe, falsely of course, that English or other Languages of Wider Communication are the only languages worth learning. They believe that their children should start primary school in English, which is their second language.

Such negative attitudes held by people in strategic positions in society like teachers, doctors, education officers, and the like have implications on the money spent on dictionaries. There is a tendency in Zimbabwean schools to give Ndebele as a subject fewer hours than subjects like English, Maths or Science. Similarly, the money the schools spend on books is unequal with Ndebele usually getting the least. That may mean that less reference books and dictionaries in the language are bought for schools. Actually, even as to staffing Ndebele as a subject is disadvantaged. Teachers who are trained to teach it are made to teach other subjects like Maths and English where there is a general shortage of staff in the country. Ndebele is then given to untrained teachers because there is a false belief that any mother tongue speaker who has passed the school leaving examinations is competent enough to teach it. There are cases of teachers who trained and qualified as language teachers but who never taught the subject for the rest of their careers. Therefore, some people with knowledge of Ndebele lexicography might never pass on that knowledge to students, as they would be teaching other subjects like Mathematics for instance.

These negative attitudes ultimately lead to less investment of resources in Ndebele-language dictionaries by both researchers and publishers. Parents would buy dictionaries for their children if they think that the language is an important school subject. The negative attitudes towards the language might make few parents to purchase the dictionaries. This has double implications. Firstly, there would be few users with access to dictionaries and that affects negatively on enhancing dictionary skills. Secondly, if less dictionaries are bought, publishers would in future shun publishing dictionaries. That also has negative impact on the growth of Ndebele lexicography and consequently dictionary culture.

4.2. Problem of incompetence

There is a general dislike of Ndebele grammar as a subject amongst many students. Students at both secondary and tertiary colleges prefer literature and poetry to grammar. The problem

of incompetence is further compounded by some of the teachers who even avoid the teaching grammar at all. A number of reasons could be advanced for this situation, which of course is not peculiar to Ndebele. One reason is that the language lacks grammar textbooks. Zulu textbooks are used and some students have problems with terminology in the Zulu text *Uhlelo LwesiZulu*. Secondly, most teachers are not confident in handling grammar because they were not properly taught themselves.

4.3. Lack of teacher trainers

Lastly, this question could be posed: *'Who will teach the teachers?'* There is a very big possibility that even lecturers in teachers' colleges and universities in Zimbabwe have not acquired these reference skills adequately.

Change, even if it is for the good, is sometimes resisted because people are not keen to change what they are used to. As the syllabi in teachers' colleges are an internal college or departmental affair, there can be no way of enforcing or ensuring that the appropriate skills are taught at all. One lecturer might teach it this year and the following year, another might abandon it. It all therefore hinges on the people on the ground realising the present deficiency and taking responsibility for improving the situation.

5. Possible solutions to problems of implementation

5.1 Changing attitudes

Attitude change should be focussed on specific groups within the community, that is, politicians, teachers, parents and students. Each group has to be approached with a different strategy for attitude change and the priority groups need first attention. First to win over are the politicians who make language and educational policies for the country. Once the policy is favourable to indigenous languages in education in general then what follows would be to convince those charged with implementation. The desired policy changes are in giving Ndebele a meaningful role in education, preferably as a language of instruction for some subjects. It must be made law that only appropriately qualified teachers should teach the language. Also, it should be allotted adequate time in the school timetables just like English or mathematics.

Teachers and other professional people need research evidence to convince them of the importance of mother tongue instruction and consequently dictionary skills in Ndebele. A pilot study could be made maybe with two or three different secondary schools. In each, two classes in the same stream could be used for experimentation. One class is taught in Ndebele

and dictionary skills taught while the other is left with the current teaching methods and content. Then, a test should be given at the end of a term to assess whether those who received instruction on dictionary skills would perform better than the control group. If results of the experiment show (which presumably will) that those students who received instruction in Ndebele and dictionary skills tend to perform better, then teachers will be motivated to adopt the method too. The good results from adopting the new strategy may engender positive attitudes in teachers towards the language in education. Parents generally want the best for their children and the best is what enables them to pass at school. With teachers convinced and changing their attitudes, parents would easily follow, especially if the government policy is already favourable. Students would consequently acquire positive attitudes towards the language from their teachers, parents and from society in general.

5.2. Addressing problems of incompetence

The level of competence in grammar must generally be raised in teachers as well as students if they are to find using dictionaries easy and profitable. As noted earlier, the problem is also found elsewhere, including amongst English-language students as noted by Dolezal and McCreary:

The unfortunate lack of language analysis skills among the current student population can only hinder their ability to comprehend and read dictionaries as reference texts: students who do not know the basic terminology of traditional or descriptive grammars will be hard pressed to decipher even the newest and best formatted information that is founded upon the latest theories of reading comprehension, grammatical theory and lexicology (Dolezal & McCreary 1999:XVII).

As mentioned earlier, most dictionaries that teachers and students have been using prior to the publication of the monolingual Ndebele dictionary have noun entries entered by the first letter of the noun stem. To access a word, it implied that one had to know the morphological structure of that word. Furthermore, there is no consistency in the dictionaries on the structure of certain nouns, especially loanwords. The metalanguage in the Ndebele dictionary and other Nguni dictionaries is a language, which is particular to grammar studies. If students cannot identify word categories correctly, then the dictionary would be of little use as a language-learning tool. Therefore, the general lack of competence in grammar has to be changed, especially language teachers.

5.3. Addressing the problem of teacher trainers

Ndebele language lecturers in colleges and universities are still a handful that does not go beyond thirty at most. These could have a workshop conducted by lexicographers from ALRI who have received training and have done practical dictionary-making. That could be starting point. In fact, these college lecturers have been invited periodically to ALRI seminars. There is already a good working relationship between the colleges and ALRI. The publishers could jointly fund the seminar as they have always been part of the ALRI annual seminars, too.

6. Advantages for Ndebele lexicography

If the above proposals could be incorporated in the teacher-training syllabus for language teachers, a number of possible outcomes are expected. First, the teachers would be more knowledgeable and confident in the use of reference works. This ability would enable them not only to effectively use dictionaries in their teaching but also teach reference skills to students. Once the students and the teachers acquire the reference skills and develop positive attitudes towards dictionaries, then dictionary culture would be growing amongst the Ndebele. As noted earlier, the Ndebele community, like most African communities, is generally poor and schools have very limited resources. Those limited resources should be used to the maximum. At the present moment, with poorly developed research skills even amongst teachers, the students are not putting the available resources to full use.

For the foreseeable future, dictionaries in Ndebele will be mainly for students or, let me say, would be used mostly by students. It is the general trend in publishing in African languages in Zimbabwe that the school is the targeted market. That does not mean that dictionaries in Ndebele cater for a limited section of society. Actually, one could take primary school pupils to university students as potential market for dictionaries. The teachers of all these various levels of students are similarly potential regular users of dictionaries. Once students develop the habit of using dictionaries, parents would have to acquire the skills too, as they would be required to assist their children with homework.

Creative writers, who also target the school market, would also have to rely on the dictionaries for standard vocabulary and spelling, so would textbook writers and publishers in general. Should there be such developments, interest in researching on dictionaries is bound to grow.

Teachers would be interested in better dictionaries for their teaching purposes, and textbook writers to produce better works too. Publishers generally want to keep their market happy with the best that can possibly be produced. All these factors combine to enhance research and work in dictionary-making in Ndebele.

Lexicographers in Ndebele and publishers are at present guessing as to what the dictionary users want. Ndebele dictionaries compiled in the past and being compiled t present, have not been and are not based on prior research on user needs and reference skills. Such research to establish user needs would not yield much, considering the low standards of reference skills amongst speakers. Once teachers have basic knowledge of dictionaries and how they can best be utilised, there would be users who could give reliable feedback about particular dictionaries and user needs. There is no point now for finding out the extent of development of reference skills in Ndebele because these skills are not being taught at all. Once they begin to be taught, then research to evaluate the appropriateness of what is taught would be relevant.

The publication of the first monolingual Ndebele dictionary, in 2001 was received with great excitement, especially in the city of Bulawayo. For many Ndebele-speaking people, the publication of the dictionary marked the revival of their language and culture from what is perceived as cultural oppression. The dictionary is considered as a national pride, and rightly so. However, the dictionaries must go beyond just being artefacts and symbols of national pride, to become tools to improve communication.

The teaching of the relevant dictionary skills should develop dictionary culture amongst the Ndebele. The conditions for such development are ripe, if judge from the excitement people have about the dictionary, that is, considering newspaper articles, letters to editors and phone-in on radio after the dictionary launch. In other words the *linguistic climate*⁷ is now conducive for decisive changes in the teaching and promotion of Ndebele in Zimbabwe. The motivation is already there among potential users, what now remains is to give them the requisite skills to make full use of dictionaries.

7. Conclusion

It is therefore possible to improve the reference skills of the Ndebele dictionary users through teaching the appropriate dictionary skills. By focussing firstly on teacher-training the knowledge would easily reach the school pupils and eventually the generality of the Ndebele community. In that way a dictionary culture could be enhanced which in turn would be instrumental in directing future lexicographic work based on actual reference needs of the dictionary users. Once the teachers have acquired the appropriate skills and the teaching of reference skills is incorporated in the school syllabus then other additional means of

⁷ According to Vikør (1993:179) linguistic climate refers to ‘the ideological climate with regard to language use, language correctness and language planning.

enhancing dictionary skills could be employed as well. Some of these could be seminars and workshops on dictionaries for teachers, writers and other dictionary users. Even policy decisions can be made from an informed position, as most stakeholders would be more knowledgeable on dictionaries than they are currently. User-friendly dictionaries in Ndebele can be compiled when reference needs and reference skills of the dictionary users are known.

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