10

Dictionaries and language policy

Dion Nkomo

10.1 Introduction

The references listed at the end of this contribution, especially those recommended for further reading, indicate that the topic of dictionaries and language policy is not new. Earlier publications (Noyes 1943; Litto 1963; Haugen 1985) suggest that the relationship between dictionaries and language policy might be as old as lexicography. Publications dealing with African contexts (Bergenholtz and Gouws 2006; Gouws 2005, 2007; Gouws and Potgieter 2010; Hadebe 2007; Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2005; Tarp and Gouws 2008) indicate a symbiotic relationship which presents lexicography and language planning as part-whole, if not twin processes, in language development. A two-pronged argument is therefore made: (1) lexicography has been largely influenced by language policy, regardless of whether such policies are in place or prospective, overt or covert; and (2) lexicography has significantly influenced language policy in terms of status and functions of specific languages.

Wiegand (1984) argues that lexicography is neither linguistics nor applied linguistics, indicating that certain types of dictionaries need extra-linguistic theoretical and methodological procedures. Tarp (2008) is even more affirmative as he regards lexicography an independent discipline. As Hartmann (2005) shows, linguistics is just one of the disciplines from which lexicography draws in its interdisciplinary vocation. Based on this premise, a more nuanced understanding of dictionaries as utility products needs to prevail in any critical engagement with dictionaries, including their relationship with language policy.

Language policy may be difficult to fully conceptualise without evoking language planning. The terms language policy and language planning are sometimes used interchangeably, although the latter seems to mainly refer to practice and field of study (Cluver 1993; Haugen 1959). This makes language policy a product or object of language planning. Fettes (1997: 14) suggests Language Policy and Planning as the name for the field, which to him is a discipline in its own right, despite its origins in sociolinguistics (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997) or linguistics generally.
Definitions of both *Language Policy* and *Language Planning* (Bamgbose 1991; Cluver 1993; Spolsky 2005) place emphasis on the following:

- Governments, government-authorised agencies or other such authoritative bodies as language planners or policy-makers.
- Language policy as an authoritative document or pronouncement with respect to language usage.
- Language planning as problem-solving.

These issues have been singled out for restricting the concepts of language policy and planning. First, recognising only governments or their agencies as language planners excludes lexicographers whose works have had language policy motivations and implications. Among other components, definitions of *corpus planning* refer to dictionary-making as an important component. Cooper (1989) acknowledges the enormous language planning contributions of language academies and lexicographers. Second, Bamgbose (1991) notes that either overt or covert, language policy is always present. For the present topic, even undeclared or hidden policies may influence lexicography. Third, whereas problem-solving is commonly expressed as the ultimate motivation for language policy, Cooper (1989) underlines language regulation a major goal. Dictionaries also perform language regulation, with long-term repercussions for language policy.

### 10.2 Historical perspectives

Although it is tempting to suggest that the relationship between dictionaries and language policy may be as old as lexicography, it is easier to trace it back to the transformation of European vernaculars into modern national languages during the Renaissance period when language became a major rallying point in the emerging nation states. As part of the rebirth processes, patriotic elites aspired for their vernaculars to supplant Latin, which dominated all prestigious domains. The new languages had to be recorded and regulated in order to provide a firm basis for language use. Vogl (2012) regards this as the emergence of a “standard language culture”. Mugglestone (2015: 28) acknowledges the convictions about the influential role of lexicography in the language standardisation process.

During that period, bilingual dictionaries pairing Latin with the respective vernaculars existed to facilitate access to the language that was knowledge incarnate. Latin was the gateway to knowledge that dictionaries such as William Bathe’s (1611) *Ianua Languarum* (The Gate of Tongues) and Amos Komensky’s (1631) *Ianua Linguarum Reserata* (The Gate of Tongues Unlocked) had to unlock “so that unskilful persons could gain access to knowledge” (Gouws and Potgieter 2010: 236). Campaigns for shifting onto vernaculars set the right tone for language planning-oriented lexicography.

The establishment and work of language academies in Europe was historic for both lexicography and language policy/planning. Together with grammars, dictionaries would be pivotal in codification of prospective national languages. Mugglestone (2015: 27) writes:

Language academies . . . easily integrated lexicography into intended processes of standardisation and linguistic reform. Dictionary-making on this model was a means by which language would not merely be codified but also corrected and refined.
Language planning-oriented lexicography effectively began with the founding of the Accademia della Crusca, formally constituted in 1583 by a group protesting the stringent rules of the original academy, the Accademia fiorentina, which had successfully set the stage for developing the Tuscan dialect into standard Italian (Sherberg 2003). The protestant group, which named itself ‘brigata dei crusconi’ (brigade of coarse bran) was, however, aggrieved by the Accademia fiorentina’s rejection of vulgar poetry (Accademia della Crusca 2011) from the Italian linguistic, literary and cultural heritage. This group espoused a more flexible approach. Ironically, their organisation became quite normative under the leadership of Lionardo Salviati, as captured by its name which translates into “The Academy of the bran”, that is, referring to the sifting process of separating chaff from the bran (Accademia della Crusca 2011). Nevertheless, the academy would become the vanguard of the development of Italian into a modern language.

Lexicography became an integral component of the work of the Accademia della Crusca. Work on the Vocabolario degli Accademici (henceforth the Vocabolario) commenced in 1590, and became “fundamental in the difficult path towards the establishment of Italian as a national language” (Accademia della Crusca 2011). The academy’s normative approach prevailed as the project endeavoured “to demonstrate and preserve the beauty of the Florentine language in the 14th century” (Accademia della Crusca 2011). Consequently, the lexicographers prioritised fourteenth-century authors when establishing the dictionary basis, only resorting to contemporary writings as sources for current usage. The Vocabolario was published in 1612, becoming the first dictionary to affirm Italian as a standard language and the symbol of good Italian that inspired lexicographers in other languages.

Despite the pioneering status of the Accademia della Crusca, it is the Académie française of France, established in 1635, that has become a classic example of the interface between dictionaries and language policy. The Académie française became the pre-eminent authoritative body on the French language which became the “world’s diplomatic and cultural language” (Litto 1963: 134). Even today, Deumert and Vandenbussche (2003: 8) note the “on-going purification efforts of the Académie française”, which remains responsible for regulating French vocabulary, grammar, spelling and usage. From the outset, its purist approach comprised a strict stance against Anglicisms and Latinisms. Likewise, the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française, which has been at the core of implementing the language policy, is still considered the official dictionary in France (Wikipedia online). Its different editions are available from the Classiques Garnier Numérique online database.

Apart from language academies, some individual lexicographers distinguished themselves by expressing language policy ideals in their dictionaries. In English, several patriots such as Richard Mulcaster, a schoolmaster by profession, expressed concerns about the limited functional reach of English and a strong conviction that an English academy and dictionary in the model of the Vocabolario and the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française would address the concerns (Crystal 1997: 73; Mugglestone 2015: 28; Noyes 1943). The idea of the academy did not materialise, but it was ultimately Samuel Johnson who wielded the responsibility by compiling A Dictionary of the English Language. This was by no means the first English dictionary, but it was a very special one (Litto 1963; Gouws and Potgieter 2010). Johnson articulated the idea of the dictionary unequivocally in the Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language presented to the Earl of Chesterfield:

This, my Lord, is my idea of an English dictionary; a dictionary by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated; by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained, and its duration lengthened.

(Johnson 1755: 32)
The state and status of English did not inspire Johnson’s pride, confidence and optimism as an English patriot prior to his work. He recalls in the preface of his dictionary that:

When I took the first survey of my undertaking, I found our speech copious without order, and energetic without rules: wherever I turned my view, there was perplexity to be disentangled, and confusion to be regulated; choice was to be made out of boundless variety, without any established principle of selection; adulterations were to be detected, without the sufferages of any writers of classical reputation or acknowledged authority.

(Crystal 2005: 21)

This compared unfavourably to French, in which Johnson marvelled the speakers’ accuracy of “stating sounds their letters”, and Italian, whose guidance regarding spelling he found exemplary (Mugglestone 2015: 31). Therefore, much more than a harmless drudge, as he defined the lexicographer in his dictionary, Johnson clearly conceived his role from the conceptualisation of his dictionary as that of a “linguistic legislator” (Mugglestone 2015: 31) with national responsibility. His dictionary remains influential as the basis for the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), including Johnson’s authoritarianism such as his ridiculing, “rubbishing” and ultimate dismissal of certain words and senses of meaning from the first volume (Mugglestone 2005).

Another special mention regarding language policy-oriented lexicography is Noah Webster, author of An American Dictionary of English (Webster 1828). Webster occupies an important place in American history not only for his dictionary but his overall contribution to nationalist reforms. Generally, he sought to forge national solidarity through language, school and government as key national institutions (Litto 1963: 135). Regarding language, he occupied himself with idiosyncratic features of American usage of English, including spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary. Litto (1963: 139) lists the benefits that Webster envisaged from his linguistic reform work, as outlined in a letter that he wrote in 1736:

1. It will render the acquisition of the language easy for both natives and foreigners.
2. All the trouble of learning to spell will be saved. When no character has more sounds than one, every man, woman, and child who knows his alphabet can spell words, even by the sound without ever seeing them.
3. Pronunciation must necessarily be uniform.
4. The orthography of the language will be fixed.
5. The necessity of encouraging printing in this country and of manufacturing all our own books, is a political advantage, obvious and immense.
6. A national language is a national tie, and what country wants it more than America?

Accordingly, he used his dictionary as a platform of fostering some of his main ideas about language with a bigger picture in mind. English, as used in prestigious literary works held in high esteem in England and defined in Samuel Johnson’s dictionary, struck Webster as inadequate in expressing American experience and dream. He was convinced that America needed a system of her own, “in language as well as government” (Litto 1963: 139). An American Dictionary of English was meant to pay particular attention to spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary usage prevalent in America. By redefining English from America, Webster sought to establish America’s national language, thereby weaning the nation from England.
In Africa, colonialism was accompanied by European linguistic imperialism, according to Phillipson (1992), in the form of language policies that favoured European languages. This generally restricted African languages to the home, the church and elementary education. They were not part of the civilisation that colonialism purported to usher, making their development for modern roles less of an investment priority. Bergenholtz and Gouws (2006) cite funding discrepancies favouring Afrikaans, and to some extent, English lexicography in apartheid South Africa. It was missionaries who generally became the major role-players in African lexicography as they valued African languages for evangelical activities. Early dictionaries set initial standards for African languages, although developing the languages and supporting local speech communities was not their objective. The promotion of African languages and multilingualism after the independence of some African countries established a new language policy framework with implications for lexicography in ways that are parallel to the lexicographic activities of the European language academies and the works of prominent lexicographers discussed above.

10.3 Core issues and topics

Within the historical framework outlined in the previous section, the interface between lexicography and language policy seems to be characterised by mutual influences and impacts. Language policy motivations of regulating and influencing language usage and development have been pivotal in the conceptualisation and compilation of many dictionaries in different societies. Such motivations have had implications for the decisions made by lexicographers in terms of lexicographic methods and approaches. Conversely, many dictionaries have had far-reaching implications on the affirmation of existing language policies or formulation of new policies. This has been due to the lexicographic methods and choices adopted by lexicographers during the lexicographic process, raising pertinent issues at both macro- and micro-levels.

10.3.1 Macro-level issues

According to Tarp and Gouws (2008: 234), “only very few contributions dealing theoretically with the complex relation between language policy at a macro level and the conception of lexicographic works can be found in the existing literature”. Within the historical framework outlined earlier, the question of how language policy has influenced lexicography by enabling or restricting the production of certain types of dictionaries in different languages will be addressed. At the same time, it will be shown how lexicography, in a reversal role, has influenced language policy by entrenching a particular policy or heralding reforms that lead to languages to assume or change statuses.

History shows that the production of dictionaries in general, or certain types of dictionaries in some cases, is influenced by current or prospective functional roles of languages and their level of development. In other words, language policies may provide necessary conditions for the production of certain dictionaries. More prestigious languages in terms of status and functions tend to have a variety of dictionaries supporting the various functions served by particular languages. On the other hand, certain dictionary types or dictionaries in general may not be a priority within particular language policy frameworks, leading to dictionaries being sparse or absent in certain languages. Dictionaries are thus products of language policies or policy-making processes. However, on the flipside, lexicography may play a crucial role in the redress of linguistic inequalities within language policies by contributing towards
the development of previously marginalised languages for more prestigious functions. That way, dictionaries also become relevant tools for the conferment of language status.

Writing on the history of English lexicography, Landau (2001: 37) observes that “[t]he earliest word reference books for English-speaking people were bilingual glossaries that provided English equivalents for Latin or French words”. A similar trend is reported regarding the history of Scandinavian languages (Haugen 1959; Malmgren and Sköldberg 2013), reflecting the erstwhile policies within which Latin dominated as Europe’s lengua franca outlined above. Gallardo (1980: 61) considers bilingual dictionaries as the best one can find in non-standardised languages, emphasising that they may not even exist. Before a certain level of rigour and sophistication of mother-tongue scholarship, it is only through bilingual lexicography that lexicographers can viably codify and describe languages, which they do in the function of more established languages. The linguistic hierarchy prevalent in bilingual dictionaries also prevails in language policies, while standardised languages whose “lexicon can be organized in monolingual dictionaries” (Gallardo 1980: 61) serve more prestigious functions.

Similarly, the dominance of bilingual dictionaries in Africa is linked to language policies which favoured European languages at the expense of indigenous languages. Bilingual dictionaries in African languages were compiled to assist foreigners like missionaries and colonial administrators in their interactions with local speech communities (Awak 1990; Busane 1990; Gouws 2005; 2007; Mavoungou 2013). The subtitle of Weale’s (1903) Matebele and Makalaka Vocabulary: Intended for the use of Prospectors and Farmers in Mashonaland, a Zimbabwean dictionary with two sections each pairing English with Shona and Ndebele, is self-telling. Mother-tongue speakers of Shona and Ndebele did not feature in the user profile of this dictionary. As merely mine and farm labourers who were incompetent in English, the language of lexicographical description, they could not benefit from the dictionary. Another example is a bilingual isiXhosa-English dictionary entitled A Kafir-English Dictionary. This dictionary was first published in 1899 by Albert Kropf, a German missionary who, having successfully learnt the language, albeit with struggles associated with paucity of reference works, endeavoured to provide a reference tool for fellow Europeans coming to work among amaXhosa in South Africa (Kropf 1915). Similar examples also exist in Francophone Africa such as Gabon where bilingual dictionaries pairing French, the country’s official language, with indigenous Gabonese languages had a clear bias towards French (Mavoungou 2013). Accordingly, although acknowledging their role in the standardisation of African languages and their use as platforms for future dictionaries, Gouws (2005; 2007) classifies such dictionaries as externally motivated.

The emergence of the monolingual general-purpose dictionary in different communities, be it a comprehensive historical one or standard-size one, has always signalled new language policy directions. Monolingual lexicography was fundamental in the pursuit of linguistic and cultural affirmation through the extension of European vernaculars into formal spheres of life previously reserved for Latin. This would become the case in America where Noah Webster regarded unreformed English a British colonial relic and in Africa where English, French and other European languages are hegemonic. Monolingual lexicography typically becomes a corrective procedure, with the dictionary becoming a symbol of political and cultural independence, issues that are pertinent in language policies. Béjoint (2000: 138) writes:

The emblematic power of the general-purpose dictionary is so strong, so real in a way, that the dictionary is felt necessary to any nation that wants to be recognized as an independent entity.
It is on this account that the production of comprehensive multivolume monolingual dictionaries in South Africa’s official languages became the line function of NLUs (National Lexicographic Units) upon their establishment under the guidance of the Pan-South African Language Board (PanSALB). Lexicography was conceived as part of language planning as it was the case in England, France, Italy, etc.

Apart from the prestigious monolingual general-purpose dictionaries, languages that have been bestowed with a prestigious status in terms of language policy require other types of dictionaries to support new functions. South Africa’s language policy does not only promote indigenous languages for their own sake but to foster multilingualism among the citizenry. It is desirable that South Africans are competent in more than one language and also that the different official languages can be used effectively in different functional domains for purposes of social transformation and national cohesion. The role of the education sector is crucial in this endeavour, as indicated by the Language-in-Education Policy which provides for the study of languages as Home Languages, First-Additional Languages and Second-Additional Languages, as well as their use as languages of teaching alongside English and Afrikaans. For the purposes of language learning, bilingual school dictionaries such as the Longman Foundation Phase Dictionaries, the Oxford First Bilingual Dictionaries and Oxford Bilingual School Dictionaries have been produced by commercial publishers. A number of bilingual or multilingual specialised dictionaries have also become available on the South African dictionary market to support the use of different languages as languages of teaching and learning in the aftermath of the post-apartheid multilingual policy.

10.3.2 Microlevel issues

What has been shown at a macro-level is how dictionaries are broadly conceived within the framework of language policy and the impact that particular dictionaries may have on specific languages and language policy in general. When it comes to the micro level, the concern is on lexicographic decisions regarding specific aspects of a language such as pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, terminology, etc. in the context of a specific lexicographic project. These are typically matters of language variation which metalexicographers have engaged with under the topics of prescription, description and proscription (Bergenholtz 2003). The implications of such decisions are also important, and while lexicographers grapple with these issues in relation to specific dictionary projects, the implications may extend to the macro level in the long term.

Lemma selection normally contends with competition between orthographical variants, synonyms, indigenous coinages versus loanwords, formal versus informal forms such as slang, offensive words, etc. Choices may also have to be made regarding pronunciation, meaning, usage, etc. Authoritative language bodies, as is the case in South Africa where each official language has a national language body working under PanSALB, and language academies discussed earlier, preside on these matters as standardising agents. In prescriptive lexicography, the lexicographer may include in the dictionary only those forms that have been endorsed as standard by the relevant authority (Bergenholtz 2003), thereby making the dictionary an extension of language policy. In this regard, the French and Italian dictionaries produced by the respective academies are classic examples given that academies wielded language policy responsibilities. On the other hand, the lexicographer may include forms that he or she approves even in opposition not only to empirical evidence of language usage but also the relevant authorities. Samuel Johnson’s intention of fixing and purifying English spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary (usage from low-class
members of the English community, obsolete words and French borrowings) makes him an epitome of prescriptive lexicography. Without an academy to refer to, he was the language law unto himself.

Prescription has been criticised essentially for presenting linguistic judgements and tastes of the minority elite, that is, lexicographers and language policy authorities, as standards of appropriate usage (Trench 1860). However, Bergenholtz (2003), Gouws and Potgieter (2010) and Tarp and Gouws (2008), among others, engage with it from the view of dictionaries as utility products. Bergenholtz (2003) identifies and illustrates different forms of prescription, together with their implications for dictionary functions (Tarp and Gouws 2008). Those forms will not be discussed here. Instead, insight into an opposite approach, descriptive lexicography, will be given in order to put perspective into a brief critical engagement of how dictionaries have interacted with language policy at a micro-level.

Unlike prescription which purports to give dictionary users access only to good language, description entails providing “a comprehensive account of actual language use by presenting a variety of forms, whether orthographic, morphological or pronunciation variants, or, for example, words representing dialectal, sociolectal or chronolecral variants” (Tarp and Gouws 2008: 237). This implies going beyond the standards or recommendations of relevant authorities that regulate language usage. At its extreme (see Bergenholtz 2003; Tarp and Gouws 2008 for different forms of description), it amounts to the ideas that question the nobility of language planning in general (Rubin and Jernudd 1971). It is the approach Richard Chenevix Trench seems to advocate when he writes:

A Dictionary . . . is an inventory of the language . . . It is no task of the maker of it to select the good words of the language. If he fancies that it is so and begins to pick and choose, to leave this and to take that, he will at once go astray. The business which he has undertaken is to collect and arrange all words, whether good or bad . . . He is an historian of it, not a critic.

(Trench 1860: 5–6)

Specifically, he makes reference to the French and Italian academies, which he criticises for setting the precedence especially for Johnson. Despite being imposed as the official dictionary because of the powerful position of the academy in France, the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française has been criticised for containing “shocking words” (Béjoint 2000: 125). For Trench, by sanctioning words and their usage, prescriptive lexicography represents linguistic dictatorship. He prefers a situation in which language speakers decide how to use language, having been presented with its full spectrum in a dictionary (Trench 1860: 8).

However, the rhetorical question “Does Johnson’s prescriptive approach still have a role to play in modern-day dictionaries?” (Gouws and Potgieter 2010) suggests that modern lexicography should be guided by dictionary functions rather than the approaches. The Faroe Islands case discussed by Tarp and Gouws (2008: 240–242) illustrates an uncritically extreme case of projecting language policy in dictionaries to the detriment of lexicography, resulting in some users resorting to a bilingual Danish-Faroese dictionary from Denmark. This would be a case of “strong prescription” (Bergenholtz and Gouws 2006: 75). On the other hand, the descriptive approach is also not without problems. Gouws and Potgieter (2010: 236) remind us that “the typical dictionary user regards . . . the dictionary, as an authoritative source of data from which they want to retrieve the information needed to solve those specific problems that prompted the consultation process”. A free-for-all
descriptive approach is not only burdensome, but may also be unhelpful to some users, especially for text production purposes for which they need definite answers on what to use in a particular context.

Having illustrated different forms, extents and implications of both prescription and description as lexicographic approaches, Bergenholtz (2003) introduces proscription (see Tarp and Gouws 2008). Gouws and Potgieter (2010: 239) describe it as “the best of both worlds of prescription and description” since it informs the user about language usage, be it good or bad, before advising on forms recommended by either the lexicographer or relevant language regulator. Depending on the different forms of proscription (Bergenholtz 2003), users may benefit immensely not only in terms of broad information regarding language use and variation but also in connection with text reception and text production. This means that in producing the dictionary, the lexicographer would have critically utilised evidence from linguistic research on language usage and language policy recommendations to the benefit of the user.

Besides implications for the satisfaction of user needs, micro-level issues associated with prescription, description or proscription may also have implications for specific languages in terms of their development and ultimately their position within language policy even at national level and international levels. The cases of English, both in England and America, French in France and the rest of the French-speaking world, Italian, Afrikaans in South Africa and African languages indicate how lexicography has become a factor in their development and status. The Afrikaans case is even more interesting. Gouws (2007) outlines the antagonistic agendas of two pioneer Afrikaans lexicographers, Changuin who was determined to preserve Dutch and Mansvelt who intended to foster the position of Afrikaans as a developing language. Although Changuin's prescriptive approach upheld the standards of Dutch, Afrikaans would have not flourished without Mansvelt's intervention. Similarly, although Gouws (2007: 319) regrets the purist approach of successive lexicographers who excluded natural borrowings from English in favour of artificial forms, the approach might have fostered the independent identity of Afrikaans and fast-tracked its development, making it more prestigious than isiXhosa, an African language with a longer literary tradition.

10.4 Looking to the future

The role of language in national and international affairs, as well as the ideology towards it, which constitute the most important premises for language planning, mean that the relationship between dictionaries and language policy will remain a relevant topic. However, at a macro-level, the topic will remain more pronounced in linguistic communities like those of Africa where language planning remains an outstanding matter on the decolonisation agenda. African countries are still dealing with the marginalisation of indigenous languages and dominance of ex-colonial languages. Also, some indigenous languages have been promoted arbitrarily at the expense of others. On the contrary, languages in developed countries have become fully standardised and now operate efficiently as national and official languages. The production of dictionaries that will contribute to the establishment of a standard language culture and general intellectualisation of indigenous languages remains a priority in Africa; however, developed communities need to update, revise or compile rival dictionaries for existing ones. Besides that, possibilities for language policy-oriented lexicography may come in the form of bilingual dictionaries which facilitate language learning across languages. Bilingual lexicography is more likely to increase in languages like Mandarin,
Dictionaries and language policy

which has become attractive for second-language learning in the wake of the rapid growth of the Chinese economy.

Although African lexicography now has a history of more than a century, it is only recent that it started transitioning from externally motivated to internally motivated processes (see Chapter 30 of this Handbook). Language policies prioritising multilingualism in general and the promotion of African languages in particular have provided conditions for such a necessary transition. The South African context has been inspiring in that the ambitious internally motivated lexicographic processes evolved with legislative, financial and infrastructural commitment at government level. Universities began to offer academic courses in lexicography, with the Programme for Lexicography at Stellenbosch University attracting students even from other African countries. Sooner, it was felt that the academic needs for African lexicography were not being sufficiently addressed in the existing associations dedicated to language issues, leading to the establishment of African Association for Lexicography (AFRILEX) in 1995. Coupled with developments in Gabon, from where a collaboration was forged with Stellenbosch University for training purposes, and Zimbabwe, where mother-tongue lexicography was thriving, this led to the celebration of the period from the 1990s as the golden age of African lexicography (Gouws 2007; Chabata and Nkomo 2010).

The NLUs in South Africa have been in operation for at least fifteen years now. Indigenous languages, namely isiXhosa and isiZulu, now have medium-sized monolingual dictionaries while all the others have at least one small bilingual dictionary pairing each language with English. These are milestones but frustration, fear and scepticism has overtaken the optimism of the past two decades. Alberts (2011) feels that the NLUs have misdirected their efforts by engaging in smaller projects instead of focusing on their line function. Gouws (2007) is equally concerned, although he understands how those challenges are consequences of previous marginalisation. He fears that the opportunity to produce the prestigious dictionaries provided by the post-apartheid language policy environment might be missed, as bilingual lexicography might further entrench the already dominant English. However, this should not be seen as the failure of lexicography per se but generally a language policy implementation problem for South Africa. PanSALB has been embroiled in administrative challenges which have crippled the NLUs especially from a financial point of view. With the comprehensive multi-volume monolingual dictionary being a target for each language from a language policy perspective, measures are urgently required at a policy level to rescue the situation.

With South Africa having been the leader regarding both language policy and lexicography, the glory of the golden age of lexicography on the continent is also waning. Zimbabwe’s recent achievements were realised in the framework of a covert policy through a collaborative project with the University of Oslo and University of Gothenburg which came with financial and infrastructural support. Neither the University of Zimbabwe, which housed the project, nor the government made significant commitments for the sustainability of lexicographic practice on any of Zimbabwe’s languages. Instead, what followed at language policy level was the listing of sixteen languages as “officially recognised” in the new constitution which was adopted in 2013. Future language policy-oriented lexicography in Zimbabwe will have to contend with all those languages, with even possibilities for bi- or multilingual dictionaries in which the newly recognised languages may be treated with the major languages, namely Ndebele, Shona and English. Such a procedure may be necessary for the teaching of the new officially recognised languages, given that most of their teachers would have learnt the major languages at school and teacher-training level. Furthermore, if multilingualism proves to be a genuine priority at government level, internally motivated
dictionaries pairing English with either Ndebele or Shona, as well as Shona-Ndebele dictionaries, would become worthwhile.

At a macro-level, language-policy oriented lexicography in Africa may appear gloomy looking into the future based on the earlier reflections. However, the milestones achieved in terms of policy, the role of commercial publishers, developments in technology, lexicographic training and research make the future better than the past. Despite financial challenges which cripple effective language policy implementation, including lexicographic practice, all those factors may modestly influence language policy directions in a manner that may eventually give lead to another upsurge of lexicographic practice.

One major positive outcome of South Africa’s enabling language policy network was the production of bilingual school dictionaries pairing indigenous languages with English by commercial publishers such as Oxford University Press and Maskew Miller Longman. Some of the dictionaries target learners at the elementary stages and others focus on higher grades. For its own series of elementary dictionaries, namely the Oxford First bilingual dictionaries, Oxford University Press has extended the scope to cater for neighbouring countries such as Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe. These efforts bear a positive impact for the development of a dictionary culture.

The Internet also offers opportunities that may be exploited in line with language policy or even to offset some language policy problems. The talking dictionaries project of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages is one such initiative. Online talking dictionaries are part of the broader language documentation activities which have covered over 100 languages in Africa, India and South America. The project coordinators are buoyed by the possibilities offered by the Internet which allows them to produce inexpensive, interactive and organic dictionaries working with community members who are able to continuously upload data onto the dictionaries. In Zimbabwe, eight languages were covered, six of which are the new officially recognised languages which had been barely catered for before 2013 in terms of languages. However, in reality this may be acknowledged as more of prospects rather than achievements. The criteria used in lemma selection and provision of other data types seems arbitrary, as some of the dictionaries only have fewer than a thousand entries. The overall quality of the dictionaries and the practice leave a lot to desire from a lexicographic point of view. This shows that lexicographic training and planning remain critical even in an era when the Internet seems to offer expanded possibilities. In the case of Zimbabwe, the language policy injustices remain apparent from the distribution of lexicographic resources, and this may remain so for some time.

The level of development with respect to lexicographic traditions and metalexicographical research will also have different implications at micro-levels when it comes to lexicographic approaches that revolve around the relationship between dictionaries and language policies. Among other factors, this relationship will be affected in different contexts by developments in national and international affairs, as well as technology, including the use of corpora.

10.5 Conclusion

Given their engagement with language, dictionaries and language policies appear to influence each other in various ways. At a macro-level, the language policy environment tends to influence lexicographic practice, determining the availability of dictionaries and types. This becomes unfortunate as it may perpetuate the marginalisation of certain languages and deny their speakers tools that may solve various communication problems even within the
restricted spaces of language use. It is on such an account that lexicographic practice may go contrary to language policy by making certain dictionaries that may contribute to language policy reform available. This requires resources and becomes a problem for developing countries. At a micro-level, the key issues revolve around prescription, description and proscription. Bergenholtz and Tarp (2006) stress the far-reaching implications of lexicographic decisions when it comes to choices in the context of variation, ranging from user access to data to political implications regarding the status and future of languages. In all this, the lexicographer needs to remain cognisant of the fundamental role of lexicography, which implies a critical engagement with language policy.

Related topics

Lexicography as an independent science; lexicography and interdisciplinarity; lexicography and applied linguistics; dictionaries to assist teaching and learning; African lexicography in the Internet era.

Further reading

This article discusses ways in which dictionaries participate in the implementation of language policy and highlight the implications of decisions made by lexicographers even beyond issues of access to lexicographic data.

This article outlines a mutual influence between language policy and bilingual lexicography from apartheid to democratic South Africa, highlighting how early dictionaries influenced the standardisation of Afrikaans and how bilingual lexicography may respond to the country’s democratic language policy.

This article investigates prescription, description and proscription in modern-day dictionaries and argues for a considered approach in order to satisfy the needs of users who regard dictionaries as prescriptive references.

This book deals with Johnson’s ideas about language and dictionaries which influenced him in the conception of his Plan (1747) and the actual compilation of dictionary (1755). His ideas constitute the core of the nexus between dictionaries and language policy.

Note


References


