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PAPER ON THE IMPACT OF UBC ON AFRICAN LANGUAGES IN SOUTH AFRICA

MAY 2012

ICEB GENERAL ASSEMBLY

1. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps we must start off with a cautionary remark. Notwithstanding the technicalities embedded in the UEB, this paper shall distance itself from entertaining technical matters of UEB, for we believe that has had sufficient time to address. We will be attempting to focus on the impact UEB has on the manner in which languages are written; neither shall we discuss languages as separate items from each other. We will try to collectively discuss them to as far an extent as possible.

This paper thus seeks to enlighten the Assembly of the impact posed on African languages in South Africa by the introduction of the UEB, which, according the South Africa’s set up, is known here as UBC (Unified Braille Code).

Delegates would know how blind people in the world were once discarded into utter nothingness – credits to everyone who, for time immemorial, played his/her part in inventing and improving on knots and thereafter, dots that were used, in one way or another, to communicate- but mention of the (great) Louis Braille who tried to systematise Braille under hostile conditions cannot be avoided.

Talking about Louis Braille, one can’t ignore what Mr. Guilie once said in 1821 about blind people, among other things, that they are "degraded beings, condemned to vegetate on the earth." This was a man who was utterly against the proper invention of Braille and was almost an impediment to this end.

For almost a century after the systemic invention of Braille in Europe, Africa was left in abject darkness. This was a condition unfortunately affecting, by large, one sector of society, and that was black blind people. Our white counterparts were lucky to have access to schools abroad and, their languages being first to adapt themselves to the system of Braille.

Pioneer printers started in the late 1800s, by then English Braille was the only medium and everyone was in a way compelled to read and write in English around until 1923 when Afrikaans Braille was ushered in.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
   1. Establishment

Follow up to the introduction of Braille in Afrikaans in 1923, African Braille was introduced in the 1970s. This was by far, a major stride towards the inclusion of the masses of Braille readers in South Africa.

Even though initially braille was manually produced for all languages by those who either volunteered or are experts within printing houses, light shown to all who, by nature of their blindness, read and wrote Braille, we have seen Braille growing very fast and, people working selflessly to ensure its affability by all.

Two notable individuals who volunteered were the late Monica and Ernest Kruger, both of whom were blind. This effort brought the current Louis Braille House (formerly known as Braille Services) of Blind SA to life.

Once more, it would be distorting our history if we do not acknowledge the fact that Afrikaans and English speakers assisted selflessly the introduction of Braille in African languages against the backdrop that they either were not fluent in those languages or they could not speak them at all but were determined by the love of Braille.

In the category of African languages, Nguni and Sotho languages were first to enjoy Braille with smaller languages like Tshivenda and Xitsonga only to be attended to in the 1980s.

Notably, individuals who architected this work were, among others, the late Mr. Ruben Radise, Mr. Edward Makhafola, Mr. Mandla Khwela (mtomhle), the late Dr. Walter Cohen, the late Mr. Antonie Zeelie and the late Mr. P.J du Plesis (Oom Doep).

* 1. Introduction of Braille to readers

The best form of material that would be easier to circulate ab initio, was biblical manuscripts. Because of manual work that had to be done in order to produce Braille, most of the material were produced on braillon sheet by means of photostating the original paper.

Even though reading on a braillon sheet was slow and fingers sticky, this process allowed for graphics to be included in the material. Xhosa speaking people were the first to have Braille material written and the first manuscript was St Luke.

The manual production of Braille, however, later changed for the use of electronic equipment that allowed for faster production of multiple documents in a short space of time. Thus, in the advent of electronic Braille, the other method that was used to introduce and encourage the use of Braille was supplements in magazines on the later years. These supplements contained contractions for various languages. To avoid unnecessary confusion or possible but unintended undermining of other languages, they were interchangeably included in the magazines.

Realising the need to augment reading of Braille amongst speakers of African languages, individuals like Oom Doep and Mtomhle Khwela were so instrumental in developing guides that assisted African language readers to better understand the manner in which their Braille was crafted – of these, Tshivenda guide was the first, championed by Oom Doep; seemingly in the 1990s, to be revised in 2000.

On the other hand, Mtomhle Khwela pioneered the development of the Xhosa-Zulu guide, which became the cornerstone for Braille of the two languages whereas before that, the Pioneer Printers did produce grade 1 literary braille material in those languages.

Chronologically, the following is a list of guides that were developed:

* A guide for the use of Zulu Braille – 1995;
* A guide for the use of Xhosa Braille – 1995;
* A guide for the use of Northern Sotho Braille – 1996;
* A guide for the use of Southern Sotho braile – 1996;
* A guide for the use of Tswana Braille – 1996;
* A guide for the use of Tsonga braile 1997;
* A guide for the use of Swati Braille – 1999; and
* A guide for the use of Ndebele Braille – 2000.

As indicated above, Venda Braille was, according to sources, the first to be developed in the early 1990s, to be revised in 2000.

Xitsonga was revised in 2006 and, for the second time, Tshivenda was once again revised in 2007. Reasons for these revisions were founded on the need to align these languages with the UBC, which had become a challenge on its own (to be discussed further below).

* 1. Reception of Braille by readers

Anything that brings change is commonly received in a very negative way.

For those whom the system found already exposed in other form of reading, i.e tape recorders, it was extremely hard to embrace. Although no real statistics can be placed here for record purposes, it is evident though that the generation in the 1960s and 1970s did not opt for this system hence many of them to date cannot read or write in their African languages.

In the 1980s, with teachers teaching in special schools encouraged by the then education system to know Braille irrespective of whether they are blind or not, many schools introduced Braille in African languages and sourced books to that effect.

For your convenience, we will list schools that catered for learners who spoke different African Languages and, after each name of the school, we will indicate which language is spoken.

* Bartimea School for Blind and Deaf – Setswana;
* Bosele School for the Blind – Sepedi;
* Efata School for the Blind and Deaf – IsiXhosa;
* Filadelfia Secondary School – all languages;
* Khanyisa School for the Blind – IsiXhosa;
* Letaba School for the Handicapped – Xitsonga;
* Rivoni School – Xitsonga and Tshivenda;
* Setotolwane LSEN School – Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga;
* Sibonile School – IsiZulu and Sesotho;
* Silindokuhle School – Swati;
* Siloe School – Sepedi;
* Thiboloha school for the Blind and Deaf – Sesotho;
* Tshilidzini Special School – Tshivenda;
* Vuleka School – Isizulu; and
* Zamokuhle School – IsiXhosa.

Of all these schools, one can safely claim that a number of old schools played a fulcrum role in ensuring that learners access reading material in their own languages in that time. The new schools, on the other hand, are fervently involved in helping so that there is a smooth transition from pre-unified Braille to the unified system.

We may also give credit to all proofreaders who were directly or otherwise involved in the process, especially at the Braille Services since it was the centre that produced volumes of work in eleven South African languages. Pioneer school will be setting up a proofreading team on IsiXhosa since it is located in an area where predominantly Xhosa speaking people are found.

* 1. DEVELOPMENT OF BRAILLE

Braille had developed through various stages until where it currently stands.

The first stage of development was that of migrating from very long and winding Braille system of uncontracted Braille to what is commonly known as Grade 2 (contracted) Braille. This was complex step since some of our languages used special signs for various reasons, and, for that reason, other languages like Xitsonga still prefer their Braille in grade 1 system. Contracted Braille obviated one thing positive – that the writing and reading would be easier, faster and would save space. However the setback was that the system had to be adaptable to the complexities embodied in the languages it had to be implemented in.

The best examples regarding these complexities are evidently embodied in Tshivenda and Xitsonga because they contain diacritic signs which needed to artistically be place in a reasonably meaningful and understandable positions. (More on this to be discussed below).

The second stage was the exodus from manual Braille to electronic, which, following the way in which different languages are written, templates had to be adapted in a manner that responds to the actual print. In those years, this seemed easier with less concentration on how actually do those signs look in real view – bearing in mind that all these had to be done using only six dots.

Following other languages such as English and Afrikaans, African languages fitted into electronic adaptation in the late 1980s.

In order to encourage readers to love Braille in their own languages, the South African National Council for the Blind, the umbrella body for all organisations of-and-for blind people in South Africa, introduced Braille examinations around 2005, with the IsiZulu and IsiXhosa examinations written in the same year.

Sesotho, in this category, including Setswana and Sepedi were all written in 2007 with Tshivenda and Xitsonga to be written in 2008.

It would be best to take note of persons who were involved in examining and moderating question papers and marking scripts. For IsiZulu and IsiXhosa, Mr Wellington Pike was responsible for setting question papers whereas Mr. J. Dube moderated. In Sotho languages, Mr. Dube Examined and Mr Pike moderated and, for Tshivenda and Xitsonga, Mr N Netshituni examined and Mr Pike and Mr Dube moderated. The trio was also intimately involved in the marking of the scripts of respective papers.

As and when a need arose, Xitsonga contractions were revised in 2007 and Tshivenda contractions in 2008; all as endeavours to commonise the languages with UBC.

1. UNIFIED BRAILLE CODE (UBC)
   1. Concept of UBC in South African perspective

The commonality purported by the International Council of English Braille (ICEB) was truly of importance since ambiguities would indeed be eroded; and it is also understandable that concentration was placed on English principles and dynamics – even though this posed challenges on other languages. This was aptly put by CJ De Klerk in his “The UBC, what and Why”, as follows: “The idea behind the Unified Braille Code (UBC) was to come up with a braille system that was unified, unambiguous, had representations for print characters for which no symbols existed in pre-unified braille, and should have as little impact as possible on the literary braille code that people knew and read everyday.” It goes without saying, therefore, that this primary objective was more than sufficiently met!

When the abbreviation UEB was recoined to UBC, it was for the sole reason that there are eleven languages in South Africa. Of these, nine are the so-called African languages and the two have European origin, and, for this reason, proper application of the code as it were conceptualised from other English speaking countries would have been immensely difficult since these languages differ respectively on how they are written and the way Braille could be aligned to their respective linguistic sophistication.

There would have been no way possible to uniformly respond to individual and isolated challenges posed on each language.

* 1. Introduction of UBC

Against all odds, the UBC was adopted by Braille SA in 2004, in Toronto. It was then introduced in 2005 and was successfully rolled-out in 2007. One can never claim that people received UBC with warm hands – it collided with older generations who felt it can never be easy to cope with. Some went to the extent of replacing Braille with electronic; something which we seriously condemn! This was acknowledged by de Klerk by saying: “People sometimes complain about the extra clutter introduced by the UBC. The reason for this clutter is because the UBC makes it possible to distinguish among typeforms such as underlining, boldface and italics ....”

In light of this, Braille SA resolved that Braille producers will have to use a gradual dispersion of the pre-unified Braille to UBC.

The first material that was used to gradually introduce the code to readers were magazines produced by Braille Services (Louis Braille House) of Blind SA. It was only in 2008 when it was also incorporated in the school textbooks for younger learners to adapt, and, only technical UBC was introduced to lower grades and, not to scare readers any further, literal UBC was only rolled out on higher grades.

Worth noting that this move did not include African languages since, in the true sense of the word, many of them had not upgraded their templates to accommodate UBC by then.

* 1. Challenges posed by UBC

As stated above, incorporating UBC in African languages in their diversity was a huge task. IsiZulu and IsiXhosa successfully revised their templates in 2006. For these languages, adaptation was a bit smooth since there were no serious complications in the manner their languages are written. However, some signs in the two languages had to fall away since they would confuse with punctuation signs – dl, for example, that was assigned to a full stop had to be discarded.

The other languages that followed with ease were Setswana and Sesotho. In the Sotho group, Sepedi had a serious challenge when it comes to the use of a diacritic with an s. The position of this sign in Braille, placed right before the s as a dot 4, was ambiguous since this combination stands for a dollar sign. Like IsiZulu and IsiXhosa, Sotho languages also had a problem with the sign used as both a punctuation and a contraction – ye which used a full stop sign.

Similarly, with Tshivenda and Xitsonga using diacritics, they posed challenges – In Tshivenda, there are two signs, namely:

The first, which before was assigned to a dot 4, is a circumflex standing underneath the letter. Letters affected are: d, l, n and a t. For this sign the committee used a dot 4 which stood before the letter in question. The second sign is the one in the shape of the very same circumflex, but this time standing above the letter. In this case, only one letter is affected – the n. For this sign, the committee then decided to use an apostrophe after the letter n. Xitsonga also has the same sign standing above the letter n, and for this, they use an apostrophe as well.

Without doubt, this was, and still is, a huge challenge that we cannot resolve easily. During the time when Tshivenda guide was revised, it was decided that instead of using a dot 3 – an apostrophe – as a sign, dots 4-5 are to be used and to be placed before the letter n. Again, this was a challenge when UBC was introduced because the combination represents a naira in the system.

Perhaps to spark interest to you, it would be appropriate to further explain the difference in how the letters in question affect sound when these signs are used.

Letters d, n and t, with diacritic, the front part of the tongue would be placed flat at the palate of the mouth, then the manner in which they sound would change. With the letter l, going with a circumflex, the tongue is placed at the palate flat from the middle part to the tip. Whereas without the sign, in all occasions, the tongue stands with its tip at the palate of the mouth thus giving a different sound. For the letter n with a diacritic above, it becomes a combination of nasal and glottal sound – thus the sound comes from the glottal accompanied by a nasal sound. Sepedi’s s with circumflex, it will be pronounced as sh – only on specific circumstances; and without, it remains a normal s - these are critical dynamics speakers cannot avoid!

Now, let us draw you back to our earlier point on complexities. Writing n with a circumflex required the sign to be placed above the letter – whereas in Braille one would apply an apostrophe after the n. It followed therefore that whenever the letter was written with a vowel – for example, a – and there is a contraction for the two letters as dots 1-2-3-5-6, the contraction then falls away!

On the other hand, when one writes the very same na, this time with a circumflex standing beneath the letter n, the contraction would be applicable because in Braille, dot 4 would stand before the letter n! All these needed proper adaptation of the system into the language – not language into the system.

Sorry, we think we may have to restrict our linguistic talk to this end, lest we frustrate you!

Perhaps you may be asking yourself (how all these come to play talking about UBC)?

The answer is simple! As de Klerk indicated in his (The UBC, what and why), ambiguity was of primary importance when conceptualising the UBC. Confusing Naira, Dollar, Yen etc, while reading Braille would be betraying the spirit and purports of the ICEB and, in the same vein, those diacritics form an integral part of the language.

* 1. Possible solutions

As you would depict, our talk seems to be solely restricted to nontechnical UBC. This is for the simple reason that there is no one who can pronounce that technical stuff is not adequately covered in UBC; hence we are turning out to be linguists! Besides, these problems are recurring and by giving necessary attention to them may help in coming up with possible permanent solutions.

In order to overcome these challenges, Braille Services, the largest Braille production house in Sub-Saharan Africa, decided to use a grade 1 indicator whenever these signs were to be confused with other signs already contained in the system of UBC. This would be tested against the prominence and frequency of the sign in question used in documents wrote in those languages.

This decision obviously was inevitably confronted with a challenge that, there need to be a guide that contains many rules, some in direct contradiction with the ICEB’s purpose to eliminate ambiguity in the braille system; thus, harnessing expertise of people around, we are still surging on for a more appropriate and permanent solution to the problem.

1. CONCLUSION

In wrapping our presentation, one would have wished to list recommendations which the General Assembly would have to discuss. However, since these matters affect languages in South Africa, we may have to admit that, as stated above, we will advice the General Assembly on what possible permanent solutions we have for the problems.

Secondly, we brought these issues to the assembly to share with delegates on how far UBC impacted on us as a country and within our respective linguistic streams. We hope, therefore, that having being an ostensible somewhat difficult topic to address, we equally enjoyed discussions around it.

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