

# ‘The people divided by a common language’: The orthography of Sesotho in Lesotho, South Africa, and the implications for Bible translation

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The Basotho of Lesotho and South Africa speak the same language, namely Sesotho. However, the two countries do not use the same orthography when writing Sesotho. This orthographic representation and its variations pose a significant challenge when Bible translators translate it into Sesotho. It also presents difficulties to readers of the Bible in South Africa when they have to read the Bible written in Lesotho orthography for the first time or to Lesotho readers who encounter Sesotho written in South African orthography. The two orthographies are independent but complementary. The Lesotho orthography is older than the South African. It differs in the choice of letters and the marking of initial syllabic nasals and (to a much lesser extent) in written word division and the use of diacritics on vowels to distinguish some ambiguous spellings.

**Contribution:** This article provides a historical examination of the problem beginning with the first efforts by French missionaries to write the language in the 19th century, the separate but interrelated development of the two orthographies in Lesotho and South Africa and the current impasse concerning a unified orthography. The analysis will include an examination of the linguistic issues involved, the sociolinguistic topics (including politics, education and religion) and various possible scenarios for resolving the problem will be considered.

**Keywords:** Sesotho; Southern Sotho; Lesotho; South Africa; orthography; Bible translation; missionaries.

## Introduction

The Basotho of Lesotho and South Africa speak the same language, namely Sesotho (Southern Sotho). However, the two countries do not use the same orthography when writing Sesotho. These divergent orthographic representations pose a significant challenge for readers of the Bible into Sesotho. For instance, readers of the Bible in South Africa will find it challenging if they have to read their Bibles written in Lesotho orthography during church services, Bible study meetings or at their homes. On the other hand, this also happens for Lesotho readers who have to read their Bibles written in South African orthography. The two orthographies are independent but complementary. They are complementary in the sense that the meaning of words and so on is not affected by the orthographic differences. For instance, the names Modimo (written in South African orthography) and Molimo (written in Lesotho orthography) both mean God. Here the pronunciation and meaning are the same, but the difference is brought about by how the words are written. The Lesotho orthography is older than the South African. It differs from the South African in the choice of some letters, in the marking of syllable-initial nasal sounds (phonemes) and (to a much lesser extent) in word division and the use of diacritics on vowels to distinguish some ambiguous spellings. For more on this issue, please see section ‘sociolinguistic factors involved in the two orthographies’.

An overall objective of this article is to provide a historical and linguistic examination of the problem of Sesotho orthography, beginning with the first efforts when the orthography was first developed by Paris Evangelical Missionary Society in Lesotho. Regarding the question of whether the South African orthography received adequate attention during that time when the Lesotho orthography was developed, the answer is that attention was not given to South African orthography at the time when the Lesotho orthography was being developed, but it received more attention later from the authorities and the Department of Education of the Republic of South Africa. The current examination will also tap into issues such as the sociolinguistic aspects

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of the problem (including politics, education and religion), and the final goal will be to consider various possible scenarios for resolving the problem.

The article is outlined as follows: the history of Bible translation into Sesotho, the history and linguistic nature of Sesotho orthography, the sociolinguistic factors involved in the two orthographies, the implications of the two orthographies on Sesotho Bible translation and conclusions.

## The history of Bible translation into Sesotho

The issue of the history of Bible translation into Sesotho is extensively investigated in the study by Makutoane (2011). Apart from books and journals, the researcher in that study tapped into archival materials. These archival materials included, among others, minutes and reports that were compiled by various translation teams of missionaries during Bible translation and revision projects of the Bible into Sesotho. These materials were accessed by the researcher from the archives of the Bible Society of South Africa in Cape Town. It is crucially important to mention that most of the work in this study, especially on the issues of the history and linguistic nature of Sesotho orthography, the dynamics of shifting from the Lesotho to South African and so on, are drawn from that study.

The following paragraphs deals with Basutoland (Lesotho) as a country, how the missionaries were welcomed and how they participated in the development of the country in question by introducing Christianity, literacy and so on.

### Basutoland

Basutoland, currently known as Lesotho, is the home area of the Basuto, the Southern Sotho-speaking people. According to the Ethnologue on Sesotho (2022), Basu(o)tho is a nation of Sesotho speakers. Sesotho, a Niger–Congo language in the Nguni language family, is one of South Africa's official languages. It is spoken by Basotho in South Africa (11 750 000), Lesotho (1 760 000 speakers), Botswana (9300) and Eswatini (5400). The nation of Basotho came into existence from the remains of other nations who were running for their lives during the wars of King Tshaka during the 19th century. During the year 1822, King Lepoqo Moshoeshe, who was known as the founder of the Basotho nation, found some of these people who were running for their lives and assembled them at Thaba Bosiu. At Thaba Bosiu, Moshoeshe built a stronghold to defend and protect these people, who ultimately became a nation with strong identity and character. There were other nations who were trying to disturb the sanity and autonomy of this nation, but they did not succeed because the nation stood together (ed. Rosenthal 1970; see also Casalis 1997). At that time there were farmers, hunters and settlers who came to Lesotho through border crossings from other countries. These farmers had necessary skills in terms of farming and so on. Therefore, Moshoeshe welcomed and used their expertise to develop the nation of

Basotho in a huge way. There were also missionary groups who came to the country of Basotho to do mission work. These were, among others, the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, who were represented by Thomas Arbousset, Eugen Casalis and Constant Gosselin. The other group was the French Missionary Society. They were represented by Adolph Mabile, E. Rolland and D.F. Ellenberg, to mention only but a few. These missionary groups played vital roles in bringing Christianity to Basotho. They also introduced reading and writing programmes to enlighten the whole nation. They also built schools and churches.

King Lepoqo Moshoeshe saw this as a great opportunity for using Western education to empower his nation. He strongly believed that the whole nation and government of Lesotho must be able to read and write. As an attestation to this, more than half a million children in the country attended school (Reyneke 1983). Missionaries, most of whom were the sons of clergymen or church elders (Harries 2007), further did their best to educate adults in reading and writing. They respected, helped and even loved the king. In 1966, the country attained complete independence.

## The history and linguistic nature of Sesotho orthography

The history of orthography development in Sesotho is part and parcel of the history of the development of Bible translation in Sesotho by the missionaries during the 19th century. The Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, invited by King Moshoeshe I, started to develop the Sesotho orthography that is known as the Lesotho orthography. This is the oldest orthography in Sesotho, and it is currently used in Lesotho. In this article, when talking of old orthography, the author is referring to Lesotho orthography, and by new or standard orthography reference is made to the South African orthography or the orthography of the Republic. The first translation of the Bible in Sesotho was published in 1881 by the British and Foreign Bible Society in London in the old orthography of Lesotho, developed by the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (Coldham 1966; Smit 1970). The main revisions that followed this first translation were, among others, the one published in 1909, which was also written in Lesotho orthography. In other words, there was only one Bible translation in Sesotho with its long history of revisions written in Lesotho orthography. Regrettably, this had a detrimental effect for Bible readers in Sesotho, because the Sesotho-speaking people in South Africa had to read their Bible only in the Lesotho orthography that was developed by the missionaries.

It was only from 1961, after an announcement about a new orthography was made on 01 August 1959, that the Bible in Sesotho was for the first time published in two orthographies: the Lesotho (old orthography) and the South African (new or standard orthography). This was also the case with the 1989 translation, which will be discussed later on in this article.

Although efforts were made in introducing the new orthography of Sesotho in translating the Bible for Basotho, one would suggest that the problem of Sesotho readers of the Bible still persisted. This problem was not only the divergence of the orthographies but also the nature of Bible translations into Sesotho, being based on translation strategies which do not allow the Basotho to read the Bible with ease. Different translators resorted to different translation strategies. Among these translation strategies that were imposed in translating the Bible for Basotho were the word-for-word or structure-for-structure translations of the original texts; in other instances, missionaries used their own languages to translate into Sesotho. This created unfortunate inconsistencies and nonuniformity of the Bible translation into Sesotho, and that exacerbated the situation. Other factors that created these inconsistencies, according to the revision committee meeting that was held in Bloemfontein (in the Free State, one of the nine provinces of South Africa) on 08 November 1955, was that missionaries completely destroyed the meaning of the text by creating idiomatic translations (including idioms that do not exist in the source text), and sometimes other lexical words were often translated singly and out of context (cf. Revision Committee minutes [1955] 'Revision of Sesotho Bible translation' 08 November Bloemfontein, Bible Society of South Africa). This was indeed an obliteration of Basotho identity and dignity through colonial interferences in Bible translation into Sesotho.

In trying to sort out this mess created by missionaries in the name of empowering the Basotho as a nation, the committee made some suggestions. One of them was the introduction of the translation theory of Nida and Taber (1974). This was the theory of dynamic equivalence, which was introduced to design the translation of the Bible into Sesotho in a correct way. It focuses not only on form and structure of the source text in the target text but also on both form and meaning. That still was not the solution in terms of a Basotho understanding of the Bible that speaks to Basotho. This issue triggered the interest of the researcher to delve more into the question – how can the Basotho and other Africans understand their Bible translations better by using their embedded indigenous knowledge (forthcoming)? The other issue that transpired in that meeting for further deliberation was that of introducing the Sesotho orthography in South Africa, because the declaration of this orthography was made in 1959, which culminated in the first Bible translation into Sesotho to be published in that new orthography in 1961. This new orthography in collaboration with the departments of education of both countries (Lesotho and South Africa) was to be introduced in schools in South Africa and Lesotho. This led to a massive opposition by Lesotho authorities, and this did not materialise at all. This was a huge drawback for South African orthography to develop elsewhere, in Lesotho and in South Africa.

This meeting of 08 November 1955 was very critical in paving a way forward in terms of introduction of the South African orthography. Although the committee had suffered a huge blow because of the resistance from the Lesotho authorities

while trying to transform orthography for the better course, the members of the committee did not despair. In pursuing their struggle further of introducing the new orthography, the committee launched a suggestion that the letter *l* should be changed to *d*. These are allophones. They are written differently but pronounced exactly the same, and they both precede high vowels, *u* and *i*. Therefore, the suggestion was that only one letter instead of both be used, that is, the *d*. This was, however, set aside as it would open the door to other possible changes and misunderstandings (cf. Revision Committee minutes [1955] 'Revision of Bible translation' 08 November Bloemfontein, Bible Society of South Africa). At this point in time focus was not only on the development of South African Sesotho orthography but also on Sesotho as a language. On 17–18 November 1955, a meeting of a committee about developing Sesotho as a language was convened at Kroonstad (Free State, South Africa) to discuss the matter in details. The committee consisted of representatives from the Department of Education from Lesotho and South Africa. In that meeting, the issue of orthographic change from old Lesotho orthography to the new South African orthography came out, and partial agreement was reached that not all consonants and vowels would be changed, but alteration would only be on certain consonants and vowels. According to the minutes of a committee on developing Sesotho as a language (1955) entitled, 'Developing Sesotho as a language' 17–18 November, Kroonstad, Bible Society of South Africa, the following alterations and preservations from the old Lesotho orthography to the new orthography of South Africa on consonants and vowels, respectively, were shown as follows:

(1)

- */chl/* in nouns such as *sechaba* (the nation) to be changed to */tjhl/*, *setjhaba*. The pronunciation and meaning of the word remain the same; it is only how they are written.
- */ll/* in verbs such as *lumela* (hello) should be changed to */dl/* as in *dumela* (hello). Also, in words such as *lintho* (things), */ll/* should be changed to */dl/* as in *dintho* (things). The two letters */ll/* and */dl/* are allophones. The pronunciation and meaning remains the same.
- */tš/* in nouns such as *lefatsše* (the Earth or world) should be changed to */tsh/* as in *lefatshe* (the Earth or world). The pronunciation and meaning is the same, but the writing differs.
- */kh/* in nouns such as *khomo* (a cow) should be altered to */kg/* as in *kgomo* (a cow).

In summary, the letters */ch/*, */l/*, */tš/* and */kh/* are in Lesotho orthography, and they are currently being used in that orthography. The given changes in (1) applies to the new standard orthography of South Africa.

The consonants that were maintained in the South African orthography from the Lesotho orthography included the following, as in (2). These are still there in the respective orthography.

(2)

- The letter */b/* in verbs such as *baba* (bitter taste).

- /bj/ in verbs such as *bjabjaretsa* (break into pieces).
- /fl/ in verbs such as *fiela* (to sweep).
- /fsh/ in verbs such as *lefshoa* (to be paid).
- /pj/ in verbs such as *bopjoa* (made of clay or created by God).
- /psh/ in verbs such as *pshele* (became dry or no water in the river).
- /tj/ in nouns such as *tjotjo* (bribery).

One can also note a few changes in South African orthography on the given words in (2), because of a general rule in South African orthography that when /o/ occurs at the beginning of a syllable for a vowel, it should be represented as a /w/: oa > wa.

The illustrations are as follows:

- *Bopjoa* 'made of clay or created by God' (Lesotho) became *bopjwa*, 'made of clay or created by God' (South Africa).
- *Lefshoa* 'pay' (Lesotho) became *le(f)shwa* 'pay' in South African orthography.

The changes of vowels in (3) here had some influence in these given changes. Some vowels were to be altered from Lesotho to South African orthography. This included the following as in (3).

(3)

- /el/ in words such as *ea ka* (my), *ea hae* (his, hers) must be changed to *ya*, as in the sentence *nku ea ka* (my sheep) became *nku ya ka*; *nku ea hae* > *nku ya hae* (his, her sheep).
- /ol/ in words such as *oa* (my, his, hers) should be changed to *wa*, as in the sentence *ngoana oa ka* (my child) should be changed to *ngwana wa ka*.

The changes in (3) seem to relate to the principle that when there are two adjacent, nonidentical vowels, an initial o > w and initial e > y so that syllables effectively have a consonant-vowel (CV) structure.

It is important to note that *ea*, *oa* are vowels in the old Lesotho orthography, and they are still being used. The committee further agreed upon matters concerning, among others, the diacritical symbols on vowels and the integration of the three related languages, namely Sesotho, Sepedi and Setswana, into one language. This issue of language integration was a disgrace. If it had been allowed, it could have tarnished and belittled the integrity of African languages in a huge way, and it could have resulted in irreparable and irreversible damage. Fortunately, that did not happen. One must be grateful to the Language Councils of Lesotho and the Lesotho who vehemently stood against the notion (see Paragraph (4) of the minutes of the committee on developing Sesotho as a language (1955) '*Developing Sesotho as a language*' 17–18 November Kroonstad, Bible Society of South Africa).

On 31 January 1956, another meeting on Sesotho orthography was convened. From this meeting, the

committee on Sesotho orthography and the committee on the revision of the Bible in Sesotho anticipated that good progress would be made as far as the changing of the orthography was concerned. Regrettably, things did not go in their favour. The feedback that members of the committees received from Rev. G.A. Mabile (representing Sesotho), who was from the French Missionary Society, did not bring them good news at all. It stated clearly that the authorities of Lesotho objected to every attempt at changes that were to be made to their orthography. Rev. J.T.M. van Arkel of the Bible Society of South Africa humbly advised that it would be better if matters concerning changes in the Sesotho orthography not be rushed into and that every decision must be consciously made without enforcing anything. This advice was endorsed by other members of the committee who had to accept the status quo, but they were resilient and kept on fighting. (cf. Committee minutes of orthography meeting [1956] '*Sesotho Orthography*' 31 January Maseru, Bible Society of South Africa).

With the same spirit of resilience and patience, the committee on Bible revision met again at 46 Bastion Street, Bloemfontein. The meeting took place on 04 September 1956. The primary purpose of the meeting was to come up with immediate strategies to preserve ongoing projects on Bible translation and revision. This was, indeed, not an easy journey, because there were other decisions that were impediments towards progress in terms of completing some translations and revision on time, for instance, the decisions of the Lesotho authorities to turn down all the proposals made by the committee on Sesotho orthography. Therefore, the current meeting was very much conscious about revising the 1949 version of the New Testament into Sesotho. In this instance, they had to ask for permission from the authorities of Lesotho once more for the slight changes that they would be embarking on, not on the orthography per se but on the content of the text. Fortunately, permission was granted after long discussions.

Then, the British and Foreign Bible Society went on with the printing work of the New Testament in Sesotho using the 1949 text (cf. Minutes of the Sesotho Bible Revision Committee [1956] '*Sesotho Bible Revision*' 04 September, Bloemfontein, Bible Society of South Africa). This was indeed a groundbreaking attempt, because it stimulated the minds of many people to think more about what the future was going to look like in terms of the responses they would receive from the requests they had made especially to the Lesotho authorities. After the printing work of this New Testament version was completed, the first sample was presented before the revision committee by Mr J. Zurcher, who was a representative from Morija Printing Works in Lesotho. The sample version was approved by the committee and recommended that the final version be printed in South Africa.

After all these endeavours, revision work did not stop. Mr Zurcher suggested that also a revision on a special edition of the Epistle to Romans was imperative. The printing and the

publishing were to take place in Morija. The committee appointed Messrs Paroz, Mohapelo and Maile for final proofreading. Subsequent to these discussions on reports on the general situation of the revision work by the group of people who would work on the revision, correspondence with the Department of Bantu Affairs and a statement of policy continued.

One must be aware of the fact that the discussion around the change of Sesotho orthography and Bible translation in Sesotho went as far as the inception of the history of the second translation of the Bible into Sesotho. There were high hopes that things would be handled in a smoother way than before, and all stakeholders agreed to be tolerant of each other in moving forward. The bone of contention at this juncture was contemplating the possibility of another, different translation of the Bible into Sesotho, written in a new standardised orthography.

Moving forward, there were two remaining burning issues that needed to be attended and interrogated: (1) the total change of Sesotho orthography and (2) the unification of the three languages, namely Sepedi, Setswana and Sesotho, to be one language.

Concerning these two aspects, namely the change of Sesotho orthography and unification of Sepedi, Setswana and Sesotho, Rev. R.A. Paroz argued: 'It could be advantageous, because the examinations written in the same orthography would enable the possibility of literature interchange among the three languages'. On the other hand, he also mentioned the disadvantages of the above-stipulated proposals. He argued further:

The printed and published books would have to be reprinted. This would significantly affect the printers. People would start from scratch to learn how to read the new orthography, and those who had ended their formal education at lower standards would not be able to catch up with the new developments. (cf. Minutes of the Sesotho Bible Revision Committee [1956] 'Sesotho Bible Revision' 4 September Bloemfontein, Bible Society of South Africa)

With these explanations in mind, Paroz viewed the reasons for change as feeble. He was totally opposed to change.

Another revision meeting of the Bible into Sesotho was convened on 18 and 19 December 1958 at 46 Bastion Street in Bloemfontein, The members of the committee suffered another blow when Rev. Paroz reported that the Basutoland National Council had officially rejected the proposed changes to the Sesotho orthography, except the change of letters /'m/ for /mm/ as in *mme* (and) and /'n/ for /nn/ as in *nnete* (truth) (cf. Minutes of the Sesotho Bible Revision Committee, [1958] 'Sesotho Bible Revision Committee' 18–19 December, Bloemfontein, Bible Society of South Africa).

In the following year (1959), the printing of the New Testament and Psalms was concluded, and there was the

hope that a complete book would be ready by February 1960 (cf. minutes of the Revision Committee, [1959] 'Sesotho Bible Revision' 06 November Bloemfontein, Bible Society of South Africa). The other good news was that the new orthography was finally proclaimed to be used in the Union (The Republic of South Africa). The proclamation was also published in the Government Gazette on 01 August 1959. The orthography was used in schools by the Department of Education from the beginning of the following year, namely in 1960. The department also intended to distribute Bibles in the new orthography to all schools at a minimal cost per copy. This was indeed a turning point in the entire history of Bible translation into Sesotho, because more proposals of working or transcribing the new orthography into the Sesotho Bible were made.

In 1961, as requested by the meeting held on 06 November 1959 in Bloemfontein (cf. minutes of the Revision Committee, [1959], 'Sesotho Bible Revision' 06 November Bloemfontein, Bible Society of South Africa) a Bible into Sesotho with the title *Testamente ya Kgale le Testament e Ntjha* (The Old Testament and the New Testament) was published in Cape Town in the new orthography of the Republic of South Africa, and it had 1299 pages.

A year later, in 1962, an edition of the Gospel of St Mark was reprinted in the old orthography. It had 59 pages. In the same year, an edition of the New Testament titled *Testamente e Ncha ea Morena Jesu Kriste Molopolli oa rona* (New Testament of the Lord Jesus Christ and Our Saviour) was published in the Lesotho orthography. This edition was published by the Roman Catholic missionaries at the Catholic Centre, Mazenod, and had illustrations, footnotes and 384 pages.

From the given discussion, it is important to summarise the following critical points. Firstly, since 1961, the Sesotho Bible has been published in both Lesotho and South African orthography. Secondly, in 1967, at the Turfloop seminar, it became evident that the time was right for an entirely new translation of the Bible into Sesotho (Reyneke 1983). The translation was realised and published in 1989 in both Lesotho and South African orthographies. Thirdly, when one reads the history of the origin of Sesotho orthography, it is clear that it is intertwined with the history of the development of Bible translation in Sesotho and the considerable contribution that missionaries made in trying to enlighten Basotho by means of the writing system, which also assisted in the upliftment of their spirituality. This is highly commendable. However, the attempts to combine the two orthographies have been in vain.

The following discussions will focus on the aftermath, the continuation and the improvement of this memorable achievement in the history of orthography and Bible translation by looking at how these parallel orthographies are appropriated in day-to-day life.

## Sociolinguistic factors involved in the two orthographies

The biggest question that remains is why this parallel normalisation of orthographies? Firstly, one of the main reasons is the resistance of the Basotho nation to accept the alteration or discontinuation of their old orthography. Secondly, the resistance to change the colonial words was another reason, among others. This parallel normalisation of orthographies continues as a problem to this day. It results in the bifurcation of the Basotho as a nation in all spheres of life: education, religion, society, etc. The related works of Paquet (1958, 1965) discuss this issue extensively.

Although the two Sesotho orthographies tend to use the same written word divisions, they differ in some respects. The following differences have resonances in translation and reading problems in Sesotho.

1. When the consonants or vowels are omitted because of diachronic or synchronic contractions, Lesotho orthography uses apostrophes to indicate the missing sounds, for instance, in **Example 1**:

Lesotho:	South Africa:
Ha ke es'o'mone /	Ha ke eso mmone /
I have not seen him (her)	I have not seen him(her)

### Example 2:

ngoan'a ka / my child	ngwana (wa) ka / my child
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When looking at the given examples, it is vividly clear that the usage of apostrophes in the Lesotho orthography does not occur in the South African orthography.

2. Lesotho orthography uses *u/you* to represent phonetic *o* and *w* for the second-person singular.

### Example 3:

Lesotho:	South Africa:
<b>U</b> motle / you are beautiful	<b>O</b> motle / you are beautiful
Le <b>u</b> ena ke <b>u</b> elelitse / I did advise you too	Le <b>w</b> ena ke <b>o</b> eleditse / I did advise you too

3. In Lesotho, diacritics on vowels ð (for the two mid back vowels), ò (for the near-close back vowel), è (for the two mid front vowels) and ē (for the near-close front vowel) are sometimes used to avoid spelling ambiguities. This is never performed in South African writing.

A recent study to prevent these ambiguities in spelling Sesotho personal names has been conducted by Matlosa (2017). This study elaborates more on the difficulties brought by different Sesotho orthographies in writing and spelling personal names in Sesotho. The following examples are from the study.

### Example 4:

Lesotho:	South Africa:
Letšela / someone who crosses	Letshela / someone who crosses
Letšela / someone who pours	Letshela / someone who pours

The readers who do not know that the names can be pronounced in two different ways can be made aware of that fact, but if they are not made conscious of it, that could lead to confusion. The pronunciation difference between the two names is the tone brought by the marked vowels in Lesotho orthography. There is no marking (only the context counts and oral pronunciation) of vowels in South African orthography. This issue persistently creates problems in spelling and writing and even in Bible translations in Sesotho. The following infinitives are differentiated in the following example, and the elucidation is the same as in Example 4.

### Example 5:

Lesotho:	South Africa:
ho ròka / to sing a praise poem	ho roka / to sing a praise poem
ho rōka / to sew	ho roka / to sew

Related studies by Tucker (1949), Barnard and Wissing (2008), Wissing (2010) and Wissing and Roux (2017) on tone marking in Sesotho are critically important in this regard.

4. Compounds words written with dashes in Lesotho Sesotho are written as one word in South African Sesotho.

### Example 6:

Lesotho:	South Africa:
moeta-pele / leader	moetapele / leader
bo-ntate / fathers or father-and-them	ntate / father ⇒ bontate

5. The *focus marker -a-* between the subject concord and the verb stem is written differently in the two orthographies. This is probably the most commonly encountered difference concerning the word divisions of the two orthographies.

### Example 7:

Lesotho:	South Africa:
Likhomo lia fula / the cows are grazing	Dikgomo di a fula / the cows are grazing

South Africans with recent ancestors from Lesotho often have surnames written in Lesotho orthography, preserving the old spellings.

6. Although the spoken language has at least seven contrasting vowel phonemes, these are only written using the five vowel letters of the standard Latin alphabet. For instance, the letter *e* represents the vowels /ɪ/, /ɛ/ and /e/, and the letter *o* represents the vowels /ʊ/, /ɔ/ and /o/.

Matlosa (2017) argued that this makes it difficult for Sesotho speakers to read and pronounce some Sesotho words precisely. The other difficulty is when the speaker expands on the discrepancy brought by the orthography and the sound it represents. It is even worse for a non-Sesotho speaker. In terms of *o* representing the vowels /ʊ/, /ɔ/ and /o/, Matlosa (2017) argued:

The arbitrary use of *o* to represent the vowels /o/, /ɔ/, and /w/, violates the fundamental principle of IPA [the *International Phonetic Alphabet*] which advocates for the use of one symbol to

represent only one sound and one sound to be represented by only one symbol. The current Sesotho orthography continues to cause problems for both teachers who are teaching Sesotho and the students who are learning it. These problems continue up to tertiary level. (p. 55)

Matlosa (2017) further argued:

[T]his arbitrary usage of one vowel representing other vowels should be viewed as incorrect information that continues to be fed to learners even from early as pre-school. Similarly, many Basotho in Lesotho refuse to accept that the semi-vowels /w/ and /y/ exist in Sesotho. But, examples such as *Oena you wena* and *Eena he/her yena* prove otherwise. Here again, this refusal may result from the representation of *y*. (p. 55)

These two statements are very profound because they also exhibit the root cause of problems Bible translators face in translating or revising the Bible in Sesotho.

Machobane and Mokitimi (1998) argued:

As far as maximum representation of speech is concerned, it should be borne in mind that it must be phonemic for a writing system to be adequate. A phonemic speech sound is the one that brings about a difference in meanings of words and names of persons. (p. 207)

The following example of a word pair is drawn from Matlosa (2017):

Otla / *raise* and oṭla / *beat*.

Therefore, the difference in meaning is brought about by substituting /o/ for /ȯ/.

Similarly, in the names *Tele* and *Teḽe*, the difference between them is brought about by the substitution of /e/ for /ė/. This therefore means that in Sesotho, we have /o/ and /ȯ/ and /e/ and /ė/ as distinct sounds, which should not be represented with the same orthographic symbols *o* and *e*, respectively, as they are in the South African orthography. The old Lesotho orthography is thus in some ways more precise than the new South African orthography.

## The impact of Sesotho orthographies on Bible translation

Since its inception, the Sesotho orthography considerably impacted Bible translation in Sesotho. From the analysis of its history of development and also from the ongoing revision (1989) of the Bible in Sesotho, one can make the following deductions.

Firstly, one of the main problems of the Sesotho orthographies is that the old Lesotho orthography has the diacritical marks, while the new orthography of South Africa excludes the diacritical marks that are used to identify, among others, whether the reading tone should be high or low, because Sesotho is a tonal language. This has impacted the reader of the Bible in Sesotho in a negative way. The readers of the Bible find it challenging to write and pronounce two or more

words, names and many other linguistic items when they exhibit the same unmarked vowels. This issue affects the aspect of Sesotho's tone. One can take Psalm 24:4 and many other examples in the Sesotho Bible written in the new orthography where the concord *o* / *you* can be misleading to read as *he* because the readers do not recognise the shift from 3 ms to 2 ms because of the agreement that is not marked. When addressing such issues, the marked Lesotho orthography uses *u* / *you* to differentiate it from *o* / *he* (*she*).

Secondly, the issue of /o/ representing more than one vowel: /ȯ/, /ö/, and /w/.

Thirdly, double efforts: as a result of the inconsistency between these two orthographies, Bible Societies and translators find it difficult to administer the translation process easily. For every translation and review carried out in Sesotho, the Bible societies have to identify two native experts in orthographies. This has enormous financial implications for Bible societies.

## Conclusions

All written languages of the world have a system of rules for how to spell a spoken word. This is known as orthography. Muangi, Njoroge and Mose (2013) pointed out the need for adequately designed African orthographies, because the orthographies of individual African languages were based on European orthographies. In their view, such orthographies can play a pivotal role in promoting their use in all spheres of life and contributing immensely to African socio-economic development. There is no denying that African languages, Sesotho included, were reduced to writing by missionaries. On this, Msimang (1998) added:

Since the missionaries were dealing with foreign languages with little knowledge of their history, genesis, or several discrepancies marred linguistic or political boundaries, the transmutation, and codification of such languages. Despite the differences in the original representations, many African languages have retained the missionary designs. For instance, although the Sesotho spoken in South Africa is similar to that in Lesotho, these two countries use different orthographies. (pp. 165–172)

In addition to this, Mahlangu (2016) pointed out that individual African languages' orthographies were modelled on European orthographies.

Attempts to harmonise the two orthographies, which started in 1927, were always met with resistance, particularly from Lesotho (Machobane & Mokitimi 1998; Msimang 1998; Thamae 2007). According to Machobane and Mokitimi (1998), as far as Sesotho is concerned, from as early as 1906, when the issue of orthography was discussed, the bone of contention included: (1) the representation of vowels, (2) the use of semi-vowels (*w*, *y*) and (3) the use of <d>.

In taking this discussion about the harmonisation of orthographies in Africa further, Banda (n.d.) makes a profound statement:

One of the major problems in designing and implementing unified standard orthographies in Southern Africa is the lack of political cohesion and will among member states about how best to use African languages. (p. 46)

In this sense, politics is viewed as one of the significant detrimental factors when executing an effective design plan and developing orthographies globally (Cahill & Karan 2008; also see Banda 2015). In elucidating Banda's postulation, one can state that this statement has an appeal to make. This appeal is that African governments must play a leading role in reforming the orthographies and put their political differences and agendas aside. Another recent study similar to this is by Kosch (2015), which focuses on how to develop and understand the North Sesotho orthography by closely looking at its grammar.

In terms of dealing with the problem of two Sesotho orthographies and their implications on Sesotho literature and Bible translation in general, this author concurs with Matlosa (2017), who proposes that orthographies must accommodate change but still differs with her in the belief that language practitioners and Bible translators in Sesotho and other African languages who exhibit the same issue of orthographic differences need to learn and adopt the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols as a measure of solution.

In the author's view, the use of IPA is highly problematic. It will mean that vowels will change, and one will need to be able to type /ɪ/, /ɛ/, /ʊ/, /ɔ/, all of which are unusual and not known. Typewriters, which are still used in Africa, will not have these symbols either. This is going to create enormous resistance. Many older orthographies in Africa that initially used one or more IPA characters have since changed to a simplified orthography using just the Roman alphabet. For example, instead of the IPA symbol /ŋ/, many have adjusted to /ng/.

In dealing extensively with the issue of unifying orthographies for Sesotho and its related languages, two studies discuss this exhaustively: Chebanne (2003) and Demuth (1998). Demuth (1998) proposed general guidelines for a unified orthography. These guidelines make sense in attempting to rescue the current status quo by accommodating changes in Sesotho orthography. However, it is still a challenging undertaking when putting it in reality because of an experienced resistance and reluctance.

This article's suggestion in this whole debate of parallel orthographies in Sesotho is: why not work first on the areas with ambiguities and work for simple solutions that do not involve special characters and orthographical unifications? Also, compromise needs to be considered so that each side brings something to the table.

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