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THE  
PRACTICAL  
ORTHOGRAPHY  
OF  
TŠWANA.

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RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TŠWANA DISTRICT  
ORTHOGRAPHY COMMITTEE.

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*Approved by the Union Advisory Committee on African Studies  
and Research.*

THE  
PRACTICAL  
ORTHOGRAPHY  
OF  
JAVANA.

By  
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## THE PRACTICAL ORTHOGRAPHY OF TŠWANA

*Recommendations of the Tšwana District Committee on Orthography,  
approved by the Central Orthography Committee, and by the Union  
Advisory Committee on African Studies and Research.*

The Tšwana District Committee on Orthography, a sub-committee of the Central Orthography Committee appointed by the Union Education Department's Advisory Committee on African Studies and Research, agreed, at its meeting of February 27th, 1936, to make the following recommendations with regard to the practical orthography of Tšwana.

### Representation of Sounds.

#### § 1. (a) VOWELS.

a	raša	to like
ɛ	ɛša	to stop
e	feša	to plough
	be	!
	šaberg	on the hill
ɛ	šipa	knife
ɔ	šwa	to dream
o	waša	river
	o	you
	šeršwag	in love
u	šwa	rain

#### (b) NOTES ON THE VOWELS.

1. *Length.*—In consequence of the rule that long vowels occur only (i) in the penultimate syllable of words of more than one syllable, (ii) in monosyllabic words followed by other monosyllabic words, and which therefore have anclitic stress, e.g., *fe ša: ša* (I shall come), (iii) in vividly emphasised speech, the Committee feels that it is not necessary, in ordinary transcription of normal texts, to mark length by any special means, such as doubling the vowel, which should be reserved for those cases where there is a distinct double vowel, with

a marked pause between the components, usually accompanied by change of tone, e.g., *waasta* (strength). It wishes, however, in those cases to leave elasticity especially with regard to dialectal differences, e.g., as between *wants* and *wash*, *wantsi* and *wetsi* (water), and is not opposed to the marking of length by the doubling of the vowel where this is felt to be necessary.

2. *a* and *o*.—It will be observed that these examples are given under each of these symbols. These three examples correspond to the normal, the raised and the lowered varieties of these sounds respectively. While these varieties are phonetically different from each other, they belong to the same phenomena, hence it has been decided to represent them with the same signs.

3. *Dialectal Interchange of e and i, a and o respectively.*—The Committee feels that these varieties should be given due place in transcription, e.g., *hwea* and *hwai* (crocodile), *mae* and *mai* (year).

4. *Pitch of Vowels.*—See below under *Intonation*.

#### § 2. (a) NON-SYLLABIC OR SEMI-VOWELS.

y	ya	to go
w	wa	you

#### (b) NOTES ON THE NON-SYLLABIC OR SEMI-VOWELS.

1. Each of these sounds has variants, both as between the various positions of the same sound in the same dialect, and as between the same position of the same sound in various dialects, the sound in some cases approaching nearer to the true vowel, in other cases approaching nearer to the true semi-vowel. But nowhere does it coincide exactly either with the true vowel or with the true semi-vowel, nor is it possible to ascertain rules of an etymological nature to determine what it might be advisable to write the sounds with vowel-symbols; and as the symbols *e* and *o* are already sufficiently burdened, it has been decided to write the semi-vowel symbol in all cases.

2. This practice brings *Tswana*, which has hitherto occupied a solecistic position in this regard with reference to the *e*-glide in all cases, and with reference to the *o*-glide in most systems of orthography, into complete uniformity with the practice in all the other Bantu languages in this respect.

## § 3. CONSONANTS (PLAIN).

## A. NASALS.

## (a) NON-SYLLABIC—

m	ma	to bite	ma	ma	mother
n	na	to die	na	na	I
ng	nga	to despise	ng	ng	despise me
ny	nya	to disobey	ny	ny	disobey me

## (b) SYLLABIC—

## (c) NOTES ON THE NASALS.

1. *Non-syllabic Nasals*.—The digraph *ny* to represent the voiced velar nasal is introduced in preference to the I.P.A. symbol, since the Committee felt it wiser to adopt special types, and in preference to the symbol *ŋ*, since it was felt that the number of diacritics adopted should be limited to the most necessary cases.

2. *Syllabic Nasals*.—Syllabic *m* occurs before non-syllabic *m* and also before all the voiceless labial explosives (see below). It is written *m*. Syllabic *n* occurs before non-syllabic *n*, and also before all the voiceless alveolar explosives (see below). It is written *n*. Syllabic *ng* occurs only before non-syllabic *ng*, and is written *m*, the combination appearing as *mng*. Syllabic *ny* occurs before non-syllabic *ny*, and also before all the voiceless velar explosives (see below), and is written *n*, the combinations appearing as *mng*, *né*, *ná*, *ná*, e.g., *nganya* (scratch me), *nú* (sheep), *náshwá* (gull me up), *náú* (water-pitcher).

3. The voiced velar explosive, internationally represented by *g*, does not occur in normal Tswana, nor does the combination of this sound with the voiced velar nasal (i.e., *ngg*). It has therefore been decided to abandon the use of the symbol *g* for the voiceless velar fricative, for which it has hitherto been used, and to substitute the symbol *x* therefor (see below). For the extremely few cases in which the voiced velar explosive may occur, either in archaic Tswana or in certain little-known dialects of modern Tswana, it is suggested that the symbol *g* be retained, and that for the combination of this sound with the voiced velar nasal the symbol *ngg* be adopted.

## B. EXPLOSIVES.

## (a) VOICELESS—

## (i) Labial:

p	pa	rain
pʰ	pá	sleeping-skin

pe	gula	rice (dialectal in Transvaal Tswana)
py	lopye	to be formed (dialectal in Transvaal Tswana)
pe	ipheine	to enjoy oneself (dialectal in Transvaal Tswana)
pe	pelele	to crash (dialectal in Transvaal Tswana)
pe	pepepepe	to clap hands (dialectal in Transvaal Tswana)

## (ii) NOTES ON THE VOICELESS LABIAL EXPLOSIVES.

1. The last five sounds and sound-combinations do not occur in any of the standard written Tswana dialects. They have been named here since they occur in Transvaal Tswana dialects, and especially outside.

2. The last five sounds and sound-combinations are, however, normal in Transvaal Sotho, and for an explanation of their selection reference may be made to the memorandum on the *Practical Orthography of Transvaal Sotho*, published in *South Studies*, Vol. IV., No. 1, pp. 1-9.

(iii) *Alveolar* :

t	tau	lion
th	thaga	red
ts	tsametsa	to go
th	thano	to answer
th	thello	to pour
th	theloko	little-axe
th	tho	to come
th	thothotho	to watch over

## (iv) NOTES ON THE VOICELESS ALVEOLAR EXPLOSIVES.

1. The combinations *th*, *th*, *th*, *th* represent the aspirated forms of the sounds *t*, *s*, *l*, *l*. For reasons connected with the representation of the hissing fricative (*h*) and the hushing fricative (*h*) and their combinations, into which the Committee went very fully, it has been decided to insert the *h* which marks aspiration between the explosive and the fricative symbol in all cases.

2. This step has been taken (i) to avoid the use of the digraph *sk*, which is ambiguous, (ii) to minimise the difference between Tswana and the other Sotho languages, (iii) to show that the whole sound-group, not only the last part of it, is aspirated.

8. Regarding the dialectal interchange of *h* and *ʃ*, *ʃh* and *ʃʃ* respectively, see below under *s* and *ʃ*.

(v) *Velar* :

<i>k</i>	<i>ʃh</i>	to buy
<i>kʰ</i>	<i>ʃhʷ</i>	tortoise
<i>kx</i>	<i>kʰ</i>	chief

(vi) *NOTES ON THE VOICELSS VELAR EXPLOSIVES.*

1. The combination *kx* is aspirated, and should more correctly have been written either *kʰk* or *kʰx*. But the unaspirated form does not occur, and so it has been found sufficient to write the sound in the way indicated, with the understanding that it is aspirated.

(vii) *Voiced* :—(i) *Labials* :

<i>b</i>	<i>ʃʃ</i>	to see
<i>bʷ</i>	<i>ʃʃʷ</i>	three (dialectal in Transvaal Tswana)

(ii) *NOTES ON THE VOICED LABIAL EXPLOSIVES.*

1. The phoneme represented by *b* has two members, the explosive and the fricative voiced labial respectively, of which the fricative form is very rare in Tswana, but does occur in certain Transvaal Tswana dialects.

2. *bʷ* represents a phoneme which has various members, the first element varying between true explosive and true fricative, the second varying between an alveolar semi-vowel glide (*y*) and a voiced latching fricative. For further notes on this type of sound, reference is made to the memorandum on the *Phonetic Orthography of Transvaal Setswana*, quoted above.

(iii) *NOTES ON THE VOICED ALVEOLAR AND VELAR EXPLOSIVES.*

1. There are no voiced alveolar explosives in normal Tswana. In some little-known dialects, however, true alveolar and velar voiced explosives (i.e. *d* and *g*) occur. The case of the velar voiced explosive has been dealt with above (see Note 3 on the Nasals); regarding the true alveolar explosive, this is found only as a phonemic variant of the normal half-dropped voiced alveolar fricative, for which the symbol *ʃ* is used (see below). In such cases, it may be understood that the symbol *d* represents this variety, where otherwise it represents the normal sound.

## C. FRICATIVE.

## (a) VOICELESS :—

## (i) Labial :

<i>f</i>	<i>fyfs</i>	to fly
<i>fs</i>	<i>fsyfsi</i>	darkness (Transvaal Tswana dialects)
<i>fy</i>	<i>fyfs</i>	to be first (Transvaal Tswana dialects)

## (ii) NOTES ON THE VOICELESS LABIAL FRICATIVES.

1. The phoneme represented by the symbol *f* has two members, the bilabial and the labio-dental varieties respectively. No one dialect contains both varieties. But see also Note 2 on the voiceless velar fricatives.

2. *fs* represents a phoneme which has three types of members in the different dialects of Tswana, viz., the combination of *f* [bilabial or labio-dental] with *s*; the voiceless whistling fricative represented in Venda by *ss*; in Shona by *ss* or *ʃ*; in Thonga ("Shangan") by *ʃ*; and the voiceless hushing fricative (*ʃ*). Thus, in the case of the word for *soar* *auk* we get such forms as *aukfs*, *aukʃ*, *aukss* and *aukʃ*, even *aukʃ*. It seems best to adopt the symbol *fs* to represent all these varieties, but the Committee did not wish to press any of the forms above named as being the standard for representation.

3. For *fy* reference is made to the memorandum on the *Practical Orthography of Transvaal Sotho*.

## (iii) Alveolar :

<i>s</i>	<i>sdi</i>	a thing
<i>ʃ</i>	<i>ʃapeta</i>	to show

## (iv) NOTES ON THE VOICELESS ALVEOLAR FRICATIVES.

1. The symbol *ʃ*, with its movable diacritic, was chosen by the Committee to represent the voiceless hushing fricative in preference to the I.P.A. symbol on the principle of avoiding new types, and to the symbol *ʃh* on account of the latter's ambiguity and the difficulties it creates in connection with the representation of the hushing and hushing fricative combinations. It was felt that the symbol *ʃ* possessed all the advantages of the I.P.A. symbol, without its disadvantage as a new type, and with the added advantage that its movable diacritic indicates, without exaggerating, the dialectal differences between various Tswana dialects among themselves and between Tswana and Transvaal Sotho and Basutoland Sotho in



general. Thus, we find *šepetse* and *šepetse* (to show), *ššewa* and *ššewa* (to hunt), *ššwera* and *ššwera* (to seize). There is a fairly regular interchange between these variants, but not sufficiently regular to allow the employment of a diaphora.

(c) *Felix* :

<i>x</i>	<i>xšwa</i>	to draw
<i>š</i>	<i>ššwā</i>	to become red

## (d) NOTES ON THE VOICELSS VELAR FRICATIVES.

1. The symbol *x* is chosen in preference to the symbol *g* hitherto used to represent this sound, since *g* has an almost international value as representing the voiced velar explosive. In some Tswana dialects this symbol represents a phoneme which has two members, the voiceless and the voiced variety respectively, but since no confusion can arise the same symbol is used to represent both.

2.—*š* occurs in most Tswana dialects in a certain limited number of words, chiefly before *u*, e.g. *ššwa* (to shoot), *ššewa* (to become rich), *ššwā* (to stir), *ššwā* (to become red). It also occurs in a certain very limited number of Tswana dialects, e.g. Tshaping, Tšaba Nthō Rolong, as a substitute for the *f* of other dialects. As the use of the *š*-sound in these latter cases (e.g. *ššwā* for *ššwā*, *ššwa* for *ššwa*) is confined to these few dialects only, it has been decided to reserve the use of the symbol *š* only for those cases where an actual *š*-sound occurs in the majority of dialects, as in the words quoted in the first sentence above, and in all other cases to write *f*; thus we write *ššwa*, *ššwā*, etc., but *ššwā*, *ššwa*, etc. Similarly, where the *š*-sound occurs as a substitute for *r* of other dialects e.g., Tshaping *ššwa* (to do), elsewhere *ššwa*, it seems advisable to confine the use of *š* in such cases to the writing of specifically Tshaping texts, retaining *ššwa* as the standard form. *š*, of course, also represents aspiration in the aspirate combinations *šš*, *šš*, *šš*, etc.

(e) *Vowels* :—(i) *Labial* :

The voiced labial fricatives occur only as variants of the voiced labial explosives (see above). They may without ambiguity be represented by *b* and *β*.

(ii) *Alveolar* :

<i>β</i>	<i>βa</i>	to eat
<i>β</i>	<i>βwa</i>	to teach
<i>β</i>	<i>βwa</i>	to leave
<i>β</i>	<i>βwa</i>	things

## (iii) NOTES ON THE VOICED ALVEOLAR FRICATIVES.

1. *j* represents a phoneme which has five members: (i) a voiced prepalatal explosive; (ii) *d* (see below) with (s) an alveolar semi-vowel glide, (s) a voiced alveolar hissing fricative, (c) a voiced alveolar hushing fricative; and (iii) a voiced alveolar hushing fricative; all of which varieties occur in one or other of the various dialects of *Tswana*. They may all be represented without confusion by the one symbol *j*, since no two of these varieties occur in the same dialect.

2. Syllabic *r* and *l* occur as well as non-syllabic, but respectively only before non-syllabic *r* and *l*. They are represented by *r* and *l* respectively, and the combinations appear respectively as *rr* and *ll*, as in *rra* (father), *lla* (to cry).

3. *ɺ* represents a phoneme which has different members in the various dialects and among various speakers of the same dialect. Generally, it is a semi-shaped alveolar lateral fricative, tending to become a true *d* in some cases. A true *d* is, however, very rare, except in foreign words or under foreign influence. As *l* before *j* and *x* does not normally occur, being replaced by one or other member of this phoneme, it might have been possible to write *l* to represent it, as has been done in some orthographies, were it not for the fact that a number of cases exists where true *l* occurs even before *j* and *x*. As it is, the symbol *ɺ* has had to be chosen.

## § 4. CONSONANTS (LABIALISED).

Back-labialisation is indicated by the insertion of *w* after the labialised consonant or consonant-group. The following are examples of labialised forms:—*aw* (*awa*, to drink), *agw* (*agwana*, to be sent), *tw* (*twa*, war), *ɺw* (*ɺwana*, to crack a whip), *sw* (*dial. swaga*, to mark), *ɺw* (*ɺwaka*, to begot), *ɺw* (*dial. ɺwama*, to seize), *kw* (*dial. kwela*, dead person), *kw* (*kwaa*, to come out), *kw* (*kwama*, to burn), *kw* (*kwaka*, arts), *kw* (*kwaka*, to hear), *kw* (*kwaka*, to make a noise), *kw* (*kwaka*, to write), *kw* (*kwaka*, bag), *kw* (*kwaka*, to carry), *kw* (*kwaka*, to fight).

**Length.**

See above under Note 1 on the Vowels.

**Stress.**

The Committee made no recommendation as to the marking of stress, which is subject to the general rule that the stressed syllable of a word of more than one syllable is the penultimate, except in some cases of vivid description.

**Pitch or Intonation.**

(a) The Committee did not feel it necessary to mark intonation as a general rule, though occasionally significant intonation is a marked feature of Tswana, as indeed of almost all Bantu languages, and though many sets of words are distinguished by the intonation, and by that alone. It was felt that, on the whole, however, the context would show the meaning of many such words.

(b) In cases where the context does not show the meaning, the Committee recommends, and in all other cases does not oppose, the marking of intonation. It recommends the adoption of the acute accent (´) for the high, and the grave accent (`) for the low tone, leaving the middle tone unmarked. Thus, in case of need, it would distinguish the following words in the way shown:—

ke	I	ke	It is
a	you	o	he, she, it
re	it	o'	do not
en	not	ad	still

(c) This method of distinguishing between words does away with the previous erroneous practice of distinguishing between such words by writing them with different vowel-signs, e.g., *ke* (I), *ke* (it is), *a* (you), *o* (he, she, it), etc. Such words are to be written alike, and distinguished in the way shown above under (b), when the context does not otherwise show their meaning.

**Word Division.**

The Committee recommends the retention of the disjunctive system of word-division hitherto followed in Tswana. Special problems in this connection should be legislated for as occasion arises. The only case on which the Committee felt it was at present necessary to pronounce a recommendation is the writing of the present tense of verbs. In this case the Committee recommends the writing of the forms *ke a rala*, *a a rala*, *o a rala*, etc., and not *ke a rala*, *wa rala*, *o rala*, etc., as has been done in the past.

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