

Making African dictionaries African

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What is unique about African dictionaries? What makes an African dictionary African? These are fascinating questions which must engage designers and compilers of African dictionaries. Many African dictionaries largely mirror English or French dictionaries in the handling of the lexicon. They lemmatize singular headwords with their bracketed plurals. In general, they lemmatize and define the uninflected versions of the verb. In this presentation, I argue that African lexicographers need to walk away from an all-size-fits-all approach to dictionary making, and instead investigate features of their languages which demand special treatment, to shape a more definite language-specific microstructure of their dictionaries. In this presentation I will use Setswana, a morphologically rich language spoken in Botswana, South African, Namibia and Zimbabwe, to demonstrate how an African dictionary can present the lexicon. The morphology of many African languages is complex. African dictionaries must respond to the morphological peculiarities of African languages in dictionaries. Dealing with complex morphology can help users make connections between words and meanings. It can help learners and dictionary users develop a more nuanced understanding of the language. For instance, there needs to be a better marking and handling of deverbatives in dictionaries. Deverbatives are nouns derived from verbs whose source may be opaque to the user. These include nouns such as *boipuso* “independence, self-rule” derived from *busa* “govern, rule”; *boitumelo* “happiness” derived from *dumela* “believe, trust” and *kagiso* “peace” from *aga* “build”.

A link must also be created between multiple verbs which are derived from other base verbs such as *ipusolsetsa* “to revenge” which is derived *busa* “return”; *leseletsa* “carry a bucket head top without touching it” from *lesa* “leave”; *itshephisa* “make holy” from *tshepha* “trust”; *ikemisetsa* “purpose, intend” from *ema* “stand”; and *ikgolaganya* “connect yourself with” from *golaganya* “connect, link”. African dictionaries must also provide historical and etymological information about words, tracing their origins, migrations, and influences. This enriches the understanding of language evolution and its interconnectedness. African dictionaries must also expand their vocabulary to cover a wide range of terms related to African culture, traditions, flora, fauna, geography, and history. Including local expressions, proverbs, idioms, and other cultural nuances enriches the content.

Many African languages have a poor literary tradition. If materials are written in the language, this is usually within rather restricted domains of creative works such as novels, short stories, and poems. The language is usually excluded from science domains and law. This means that many African languages dictionaries cannot be compiled exclusively from corpora. The compilers must therefore adopt a more hybrid strategy of data collection and engage linguists, scholars, native speakers, and community members in the dictionary-making process to ensure a broader coverage of the lexicon. Collaborative efforts foster accuracy, inclusivity, and cultural relevance. African lexicographers must therefore use multiple strategies of data collection that reflect the unique contextual challenges of their communities so that the dictionaries account for regional and local variations within languages. Different dialects, and regional peculiarities should be documented to reflect the linguistic diversity across different regions.

With the advancement of technology, African dictionaries must be availed on digital formats and mobile applications to facilitate wider access and usability, especially for those with limited access to physical dictionaries. On a digital platform, African dictionaries can leverage multimedia elements such as audio pronunciations, video clips, and images to enhance the learning experience and provide a deeper understanding of the languages. African

lexicographers must also engage users, language enthusiasts, and native speakers in crowdsourcing initiatives or collecting feedback to ensure ongoing updates and improvements to the dictionary content, making it more relevant and accurate.

This presentation will also argue that the middle section of African dictionaries presents an excellent opportunity for lexicographers to capture, demonstrate, and preserve African cultures. The section must demonstrate that African communities have their own food (fruit, dishes, meats), attire, dances, unique ways of measuring time, cattle colour terminology – especially for pastoral communities, kinship terminology etc.

By implementing approaches set out here and many others, African dictionaries can become more representative, inclusive, and reflective of the diverse African languages, cultures, and contexts.