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# Reflecting on Grammar Information in Some Tshivenda Bilingual Dictionaries: A Challenge to Vhavenḁa Lexicographers

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## **Abstract:**

Dictionaries are used by people of all types and all skills. The users consult them mainly for the meaning of words. In the case of bilingual and trilingual dictionaries, users search for both the meaning and equivalents in the target languages because they serve as learning tools. Therefore the entry definition in a bilingual dictionary should provide the equivalent, accompanied by grammatical information to provide credible meaning. Grammatical information is essential to learners of a foreign language. All dictionaries in Tshivenda are bilingual, except one monolingual dictionary and one trilingual dictionary. Users express concern that bilingual and trilingual dictionaries in Tshivenda do not provide enough information for the users. As a result, learners of Tshivenda struggle to learn the language due to the lack of the necessary information. This prompted the researcher to investigate the existence of grammatical information in some Tshivenda bilingual dictionaries. Three most used Tshivenda bilingual dictionaries have been selected for the purpose of investigation, i.e. *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda-English*, *Improved Trilingual Dictionary: Venda-Afrikaans-English*, and *Tshivenda/English: Ṱhalusamaipfi/Dictionary*.

**Keywords:** Tshivenda; bilingual dictionary; trilingual dictionary; grammatical information; lexicographers; foreign language; learners

## **1 Introduction**

Dictionaries record the vocabulary of a language, thus serving as tools of learning a language. Humblé (2001: 16) views them as an institutionalised tool, such as a telephone list or recipe book, which everybody expects to be able to use without any specific preparation. They serve as supporting material to learners of the language by, for example, providing grammatical information about the function of words. Hoengswald (1975: 109) argues that dictionaries carry a great deal of grammatical information. Users consult them to ascertain information about words, including grammatical information which is more essential to learners of a foreign language. They help learners to write and speak in a foreign language. Andersen and Leroyer (2008: 30) state:

... grammatical assistance can prove to be useful in a number of user situations in which the user punctually consults the dictionary to solve an actual communicative problem, or systematically in order to acquire the necessary knowledge on the language system and its usage as part of the language learning process.

Landau (1984: 88) asserts: “Grammatical information is more essential for the person who is trying to speak or understand a foreign language than for the native speaker”. We are used to the idea of consulting a dictionary for grammatical information in the strict sense (Hoengswald 1975: 104). Therefore, bilingual dictionaries are the relevant lexicographic works which can provide grammatical information in their definitions of headwords as they are better tools for learning a language. They make communication possible between two people who speak different languages. Grammatical information involves the aspects of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Al-Kasimi (1983: 48) cites Steger who states that there are five functions of modern dictionaries, i.e. to give the correct orthography, syllabification, pronunciation, derivations, and definitions for each word.

The first dictionaries produced in the African languages, Tshivenda in particular, are bilingual dictionaries. They were produced under the influence of missionaries who were foreigners in the communities in which they worked. The dictionaries were produced mainly to learn African languages, Tshivenda included, in order to preach the word of God on the one hand, and for the natives to learn a foreign language on the other. As a result, one would expect these dictionaries to contain more information on grammar to assist learners to be competent in the target language. There is a need for the inclusion of grammatical information in the dictionaries of African languages for the purposes of learners, both native and foreign to the languages. Salerno (1999: 209) cites Kromann (1991a) who states: “Much grammatical knowledge is necessary for translation. In recent years it has also been shown that the need for grammatical information in dictionaries, including bilingual dictionaries, is greater than one might immediately assume.” The main users of Tshivenda bilingual dictionaries are learners and academics of the language. Among the information searched for in these dictionaries is grammatical information. According to Mdee (1997: 99): “Language learners use a dictionary most when they read or write, and less when they speak or listen to someone. Language learners consult dictionaries in order to spell words correctly or to check their meanings when they write.” There is concern expressed by the users of Tshivenda bilingual dictionaries that they do not provide enough information. As a result, users find it difficult to master the language by means of these dictionaries. One may ask a question, which aspect of grammatical information is lacking in these bilingual dictionaries. After revisiting the entries of Tshivenda bilingual dictionaries, it can be noted that the problem lies in the amount of grammatical information provided in the definition of headwords, which is too little. This prompted the investigation of the existence of grammatical information in some Tshivenda bilingual dictionaries. These dictionaries are expected to include aspects related to grammatical information such as pronunciation, orthography, syllabification, structure, and illustrative examples. Tshivenda has a number of bilingual dictionaries; however, the investigation will be carried out using the three main bilingual/trilingual dictionaries, i.e. *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda-English* by NJ van Warmelo, *Improved Trilingual Dictionary: Venda-Afrikaans-English* by PJ Wentzel and TW Muloiwa, and *Tshivenda/English: Ṫhalusamaipfi/Dictionary* by Shumani Tshikota (Ed.). These three lexicographic works were chosen as they are the most frequently used dictionaries in Tshivenda.

## 2 Grammar Defined

Scholars define the concept of grammar in different ways. Grammar concerns the knowledge a person has of his language, i.e. the knowledge of the rules by which words are combined into sentences. Fromkin and Rodman (1998: 14) assert: “The sounds and sound patterns, the basic units of meaning, such as words, and the rules to combine them to form new sentences constitute the grammar of a language.” Each language has its specific rules which govern the usage of words. Svensén, cited by Salerno (1999: 216) states the following: “The grammatical information given in a dictionary can be taken as a description of how the headword functions in relation to the rules. Rules of grammar can be descriptive or prescriptive.” According to Ellison (199: 165), descriptive rules describe what happens in fact, and based on how people actually speak and write; whereas prescriptive rules set out how, in the opinion of experts and authorities, people ought to speak or write. Guralnik (1981: 412) on the other hand defines the word ‘grammar’ as “language study dealing with word forms (morphology), word order in sentences (syntax), and now often language sounds (phonology)”. It could be concluded that grammar involves the structuring and ordering of words. The grammar of words is the way in which the words change or order themselves when used together. It concerns linguistic competence involving morphology, syntax, semantics, phonetics and phonology. Baker (1992) states that grammar is organised along two main dimensions, which are, morphology and syntax. She further explains the two concepts, morphology and syntax as follows:

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Morphology covers the structure of words, the way in which the form of a word changes to indicate specific contrasts in the grammatical system. ... Syntax covers the grammatical structure of groups, clauses and sentences: the linear sequences of words such as noun, verb, adverb, and adjective, and functional elements such as subject, predicator, and object, which are allowed in a given language (Baker 1992: 83-84).

The above definitions of the concept 'grammar' reveal it as one of the important elements of a language for learners and researchers of a language. Ellison (1991: 165) argues that: "No one can write good letters, memorandums, or reports, or master word processing, let alone literary composition, without having first learned the basics of grammar." Although much has been written about the role of grammar in the dictionary, very little has been done for the indigenous African languages of South Africa in this regard.

### **3 Grammar information and Tshivenda Bilingual/Trilingual Dictionaries**

Tshivenda comprises of a number of bilingual dictionaries, one monolingual dictionary and one trilingual dictionary. The monolingual dictionary was produced by the Tshivenda National Lexicography Unit which was established after 1994. All national lexicography units in South Africa, especially those of the indigenous African languages, have been entrusted with the task by PanSALB (Pan South African Language Board) to work on monolingual dictionaries, as the lexicography units of these languages have predominantly focused on the publication of bilingual dictionaries. As indicated in the introduction, this paper will focus its discussion on two bilingual dictionaries and one trilingual dictionary, namely *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda-English, Improved Trilingual Dictionary: Venda-Afrikaans-English*, and *Tshivenda/English: Ṭhalusamaipfi / Dictionary*.

#### **3.1 Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda-English and grammatical information**

*Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda-English* was written by NJ van Warmelo and published in 1989. It is a monodirectional bilingual dictionary. The definition of headwords in this dictionary is more comprehensive than in the other Tshivenda dictionaries. It is made up of a detailed front matter, the main part and few notes in the back matter.

Generally, it is expected that grammatical information is included in the definition of headwords. However, van Warmelo uses both the front matter and the definition of entries to reflect on grammatical information. The whole front matter section of *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda-English* explains the grammatical information of Tshivenda. Most linguists probably agree that a dictionary should include a grammar of the foreign language in the front matter (Al-Kasimi 1983:50). Van Warmelo discusses this under the heading PREFACE, which stretches from page 5 until page 96. The grammatical topics under discussion include dialects, orthography, stress, tone, phonology, noun classes, adjectives, demonstratives, copulatives, verbs, copula, ideophones, adverbs, and conjunctions. All are discussed in detail, and illustrated with Tshivenda examples accompanied by the English equivalents. The provision of examples makes learners to comprehend the Tshivenda grammar quickly. Karchru and Kahane (1995: 335) see usage examples as example sentences that follow the definition. According to these scholars, usage examples are valuable because they provide extra denotative and connotative information that conveys or reinforces grammatical information by exemplifying its symbolic behaviour. Some examples are given in context, particularly in sentences. For example, Noun suffix *-ni*: the locative, is suffixed to the final vowel without changing it: *masimu* forms *masimuni* 'in/to/into/from/at/the gardens' (Van Warmelo 1989: 34 of the PREFACE). Hereunder are some of usage examples van Warmelo provides to make learners have a clear idea about the grammar:

Zwa tshikhuwani everything pertaining to (town) life amongst Europeans (Van Warmelo 1989: 34 of the PREFACE).

*Tshikhuwa* in the example above, means the European way of doing things. When the suffix **-ni** is affixed to the word, the meaning changes to refer to the place where the Europeans are found, i.e. urban areas. Obtaining grammatical information for specific words in the front matter can, at times, prove to be difficult as users might not be able to locate the word concerned in the front matter. In many instances, users are not interested in the front matter as they would just go straight to the entry where the word is defined.

Little grammatical information is provided in the definition of the headword in the main part. For each headword van Warmelo provides the noun class, sometimes the word category and etymology, the English equivalent and an illustrative example. Van Warmelo does not provide full grammatical information in the definition of the headword because he presumes learners and academics will access the full grammatical information in the front matter before looking for the meaning of words in the main matter. For example:

pani 9 (Afr. pan) frying pan (Van Warmelo 1989: 294).

9 in the example above represents the noun class which is class 9 (*Afr. pan*) and indicates that the headword *pani* was borrowed from Afrikaans word *pan*, and this is followed by the English equivalent *frying pan*. The provision of the noun class helps the learner to identify whether the word is in the singular or plural form. Very little grammatical information is given in the example above. Grammatical information such as word category, morphology, and phonology is not provided.

In some other instances, Van Warmelo provides usage examples in the form of proverbs, idioms, and riddles. Humblé (2001: 61) states that users see the function of examples as an aid to understanding the meaning of a headword. The author further cites Drysdale (1987) who sums up what he sees as the functions of examples as follows:

1. To supplement the information in a definition.
2. To show the entry word in context.
3. To distinguish one meaning from another.
4. To illustrate grammatical patterns.
5. To show other typical collocations.
6. To indicate appropriate registers or stylistic levels.

Below we provide the definition of a headword which is accompanied by a proverb as usage example in Van Warmelo's dictionary.

**mukwita** 3 narrow game path, as of wild pig, mice

Prov: Nwana wa mbevha ha hangwi mukwita "The mouse does not forget the mouse-track" used with the meaning "He has inherited this or that disposition".

The grammatical information provided in the definition of the headword **mukwita** is the noun class, which is noun class 3 and the usage example in a form of proverb. From the literal meaning of the proverb one learns that **mukwita** is a path for mice. The meaning of the proverb does not aid the learner to understand the usage of this headword as it could be understood by speakers of the language.

### 3.2 Improved Trilingual Dictionary: Venda-Afrikaans-English and grammatical information

*Improved Trilingual Dictionary: Venda-Afrikaans-English* was written by P J Wentzel and TW Muloiwa who were lecturers at the University of South Africa at the time. The target users of this dictionary are learners. Wentzel and Muloiwa (1982: viii) have this to say:

The original edition of the Trilingual dictionary was the result of the need to provide those students who follow the special Course in Venda with a practical work. After the publication it was found, however, that

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the interest in and need for such a work was much wider than anticipated and that the basic need pointed towards a small practical dictionary.

The dictionary consists of two parts, i.e. the front matter and the main part. The front matter is made up of the preface and the users' style guide. The users' style guide in this dictionary is about finding grammatical information in the main part using several aspects. Firstly the lexicographers provide the alphabetic order of dental speech sounds, for example, dental symbols ǀ, ǁ, ǂ and ǃ which precede the normal d, l, n, and t. Secondly they explain how certain verbs and nouns are identified in the main part, for example, nouns are identified by (n), and verb stems are identified by (vb). Furthermore, the lexicographers explain the singular and plural forms of certain nouns, i.e. nouns are entered under singular form whereas the plural prefix is given in brackets. Examples are **bango (mapango)** groot paal | big pole, **buvhi (ma-)** spinnekop | spider. Lastly they elaborate on how tone is indicated in the dictionary. As mentioned above, many users tend to overlook the front matter and go straight to the main part to look for words. Without reading the front matter, they might not find the information that they seek. For example, it could be difficult to locate headwords with dental speech sounds if the user is not aware that they precede the normal letters in the alphabetic order. The definition of the headword in this dictionary does not contain much grammatical information. Generally, the definition of headwords includes noun class and the equivalents in Afrikaans and English. For example:

**khakhisa** mislei | mislead (Wentzel and Muloiwa 1982: 23)

**aloe** tshikhopha (zwi-) (Wentzel and Muloiwa 1982: 154)

**lemoenboom** muswiri (mi-) (Wentzel and Muloiwa 1982: 114)

In the second example, *tshikhopha* is the Tshivenda equivalent of the English word *aloe*, whereas *zwi-* indicates the plural form, *zwickhopha* (aloes). The same applies to the third example, *muswiri* is the Tshivenda equivalent of the Afrikaans word *lemoenboom*, with *mi-* as the plural form i.e. *miswiri*. In the first example lexicographers provide the headword *khakhisa* and its accompanying equivalents in Afrikaans and English. No grammatical information is provided. The absence of pronunciation of the headwords, syllabification, morphological structure, and usage examples can be noticed.

The lack of grammatical information in the dictionary makes it difficult for learners of Tshivenda to learn the language - learners will only know the equivalents of the headword in Afrikaans and English without the knowledge of the structure and pronunciation of the word defined. They will lack the capability of choosing the appropriate word in any given speech situation. A dictionary designed with the special needs of learners in mind should try to give all the information necessary to enable them to make the right choices (Bogaards and Van der Kloot 2001).

### 3.3 Tshivenda-English: Bilingual and Explanatory Dictionary and grammatical information

*Tshivenda-English: Bilingual and Explanatory Dictionary* is the product of the initiatives of the Tshivenda National Lexicography Unit, edited by Shumani Tshikota. The dictionary was published in 2006 and is a bidirectional bilingual dictionary. Unlike the two dictionaries discussed above, *Tshivenda-English: Bilingual and Explanatory Dictionary* does not reflect much about grammatical information. Its front matter is more about the user's style guide which comments on how headwords are presented in the dictionary, the order of entries, and symbols and abbreviations of word categories. Mention is made about the lemma, speech category, definition, and usage examples in the order of entries; however, when a user consults the dictionary in the main part, one comes across three aspects of entry definition; namely, the word category, the equivalent and sometimes the usage example. Matters regarding pronunciation, syllabification and word structure, are not found. For example:

|           |             |            |                     |
|-----------|-------------|------------|---------------------|
| didingwe  | <i>dzin</i> | leopard    | (Tshikota 2006: 11) |
| dzekisa   | <i>ḽii</i>  | pay dowry  | (Tshikota 2006: 14) |
| marambo   | <i>dzin</i> | bone       | (Tshikota 2006: 43) |
| aloe      | <i>n</i>    | tshikhopha | (Tshikota 2006: 76) |
| alongside | <i>adv</i>  | tsini      | (Tshikota 2006: 95) |

In the examples above, *dzin* stands for *dzina* (noun), *ḽii* for *ḽiiti* (verb), *n* for *noun*, and *adv* for *adverb*. All these abbreviations indicate word categories. In all instances, the word category is followed by the English equivalent of the Tshivenda headword or the Tshivenda equivalent of the English headword. The headword such as *marambo* will need usage examples to discriminate between meanings because it has two meanings, i.e. bones and divining bones. Although these meanings are related, they do not refer to the same thing. From the example above, learners will regard the headword *marambo* as having one meaning and might use it incorrectly in a context. Usage examples have been used sparingly in this dictionary, mainly in instances where Tshivenda equivalents are borrowed from foreign languages. For example:

**albatross**    *n*    ḽiaḽibatrosi    albatross around the neck thaidzo ye wa tou ḽiḽoḽela  
(Tshikota 2006: 95)

The definition of the headword above displays the word category which is a noun and the target language translation. To make learners understand the meaning of the headword, lexicographers provide usage examples in both the source and target languages. Learners understand the meaning of the headword better if usage examples have been added. The headword *albatross* has two meanings, i.e. *something you have done that causes problems for you* and *a very large white bird*. One meaning of the headword is provided, while that of *a very large white bird* is not. Learners might misunderstand the word when using it in context, because they may conclude that it has only one meaning in the target language.

#### 4 Conclusion

The study above has revealed that all the Tshivenda dictionaries discussed are, in one way or another, lacking grammatical information. None of them includes aspects of pronunciation and structure of words. Al-Kasimi (1983: 35) comments about the need of the inclusion of the aspect of pronunciation in the definition of the headword:

The need for information about pronunciation in dictionaries has been increased by new attitudes about speech. The printed word is no longer the only means of mass communication; the spoken word has become as important in the age of radio, telephone, phonograph, television, tape recorder, video tape recorder, cinema, and telestar.

Without information about pronunciation, learners of the language will not be competent in spelling words according to the orthographic conventions of the language. As grammatical information is more essential for the person who is trying to speak or understand the language, the three Tshivenda dictionaries are not of any help in this regard. Dictionaries are created to respond to some obvious needs of a particular audience, such as communicate with people who speak a different language (Humblé 2001: 29).

The discussion has identified bilingual and trilingual dictionaries as the best sources to teach learners a foreign language. As a result, grammatical information should receive attention in the definition of headwords. *Tshivenda-English: Bilingual and Explanatory Dictionary* does not reflect much about grammatical information, both in the front matter and the main part. *Improved Trilingual Dictionary: Venda-Afrikaans-English* uses the users' style guide to comment on specific grammatical information, and includes little grammatical information in the entries. *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda-English* treats grammatical information extensively in the front matter. It

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should be noted that this is not the part of a dictionary which is frequently visited by dictionary users. Moreover, it would be difficult for dictionary users to look for the headword in the entry and link it with the discussion in the front matter. The treatment of grammatical information in this dictionary is better than in the other two dictionaries discussed. Vhavenḁa lexicographers should prioritise the inclusion of more grammatical information in their bilingual and trilingual dictionaries in order to transform them into the tools of learning a language.

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