

Orality meets literacy in Manjaku of Guinea-Bissau

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Outline

Insights and queries at the orality/literacy interface

Perspectives from sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics

Personal journey: orthography - oral realities - orthography

Three urgent projects force me into re-thinking on literacy:

New Testament text to be revised before first printing; orthography decisions

Gambian primary school materials to be finalised for a new scheme

Adult Education materials to be revised

Literacy in a new culture raises queries (among others!) on:

Why write? What to write? Who will write it? How to write it?

Manjaku homeland centred on Canchungo in northern Guinea-Bissau: bordered by the sea and the Cacheu and Mansoa rivers, as far as Jolmete to the East and nearly to Bula; + half the island of Pecixe. Many long-term settlements north of the Cacheu river and in the Casamance.



Manjaku diaspora and languages of wider distribution



Numbers approx:
205,000 Guinea-Bissau
35,000 Gambia
85,000 Senegal
60,000 France



Primary oral cultures

(defined by Ong as cultures where literate communication is largely absent;
Ong 1982)

Some insights from Ong and others:

- Acquisition of literacy changes the thought processes.
Oral communication has its own techniques. (Ong, drawing on Labov, Parry)
- To remember what you have thought, you have to think memorable thoughts.
Story and comparison. Speakers have to use memorable phrasing. (Ong; Katan; Pinker; Cronin.)
- Remember and develop your thoughts through repetition and discussion
- Read-aloud material is not natural speech : a genre of its own
(Similarly recited material has its own genre.)

Barriers to vernacular literacy in Manjaku

- Three European languages of education.
Mature literate leaders struggle with transition to African language literacy: new symbols, or new values for symbols: c, ë, ŋ ñ w, k, y.
- Multilingual area, prevalence and prestige of multiple LWD's
- Few leaders learn to apply Manjaku spelling rules; governments and publishers change them. So they give up. Result: they do not produce meaningful written material for new literates to read.
- Multi-dialect: Which dialect will be used for the orthography?
How do other dialects cope? Imitate the pronunciation?
Proverb: Wund aci baloole. (*We are plural-one.*) But literacy divides.
- High cost of printing and photocopying; special characters

Some gaps to be bridged in materials-writing workshops when the writers themselves are not used to writing their language

- Language awareness: What is a word? Prefix or separate word?
 najuk (*a/the learner*) najukan (*a/the teacher*)
What are the natural rhythms of syntax? Coherence features?
- Phonology / politics → alphabet
- Morpho-phonology: Elision: can not, or cannot, or can't
Assimilation: rainbow or raimbow; bank or banjk.
Intrusion: law and order, or lawr and order
- Effective natural use of syntax and morphology: verbal art (Klem, Finnegan)
but programmes may use translated material (e.g. in shell books), which
forces unnatural “translationese”, unless well-managed.
- Team leader to recognise different linguistic/cognitive giftings among the writers:
composing stories, abridging stories, controlling vocab and syntax, spelling.

Resistance to literacy compared with the reef round an atoll:
few entrances through the barrier; most projects end up on the rocks



But Orality is not an isolated atoll. More like a continent surrounded by a barrier reef.



Why write the language? / What to write?

Preserve the culture

Manjaku as heritage language is an element among some city parents and teachers.
(But research suggests that formal education has not been very successful in preserving either language or culture in Gaelic, Irish and Welsh.)

A stepping stone to literacy in a Language of Wider Distribution

Manjaku literacy mainly functions this way in Adult Ed, and is the aim of the Gambian primary school programme. A historic Roman Catholic programme has been very successful in this respect, but Manjaku literacy drops off.

Raising language awareness

Although Manjaku literacy dropped off, childhood language awareness (in an orthography based on English) endured into adulthood: in middle age, some of them are the best Manjaku writers, even with a very different orthography. This suggests it's worth teaching writing skills even if we know the orthography may change.

Write what people want to read, or feel a need to read.

Write what they already know (Prof. Rogers, Univ. of Reading)

Finding a reason to read; finding a context for continuation: example from of a project to teach oral Biblical narratives in Guinea-Bissau

- non-readers wept with joy at finding that they could KNOW the Bible (bits of it) for themselves: internalised, not verbatim or rote learning
- their enthusiasm gave educated young people a reason to learn to read in their own language, to be able teach the stories to the non-readers;
+ a new role in church for themselves, as Bible story teacher.
- the non-readers found a purpose in learning to read; it also made it easier for them to learn, because they already knew the Bible story
- as the non-readers progress to become proficient readers, they have a context in which to develop their use of **Manjaku** reading, as against merely using it as a stepping stone to literacy in the LWD.

They will be able to access the whole Manjaku Bible in a church context in which they can use it; it opens up new roles for them to use their new skill in the same context, e.g. as Sunday school teachers etc; (apart from uses such as market trading)

BELifs research PROJECT

Becoming Literate in faith settings

Research in four London
faith communities:

Ghanaian Pentecostal, Polish RC

Bengali Muslim

South Indian / Sri Lankan Hindu

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/clcl/belifs/>



Through faith activities, children learn not only how to worship, but also many academic, social and cultural skills, important both in school and for life.

Academically, they learn complex language and literacy skills, often in two or more languages. Socially, they learn to become morally responsible and to care for others. Culturally, they learn about the history of their families' country of origin, as well as important rituals, festivals and the practices of their faith.

http://www.belifs.co.uk/publications/the_belifs_report.pdf

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