

# A reflection on the Umbundu corpus planning for the Angola education system: towards the harmonization of the Catholic and the Protestant orthographies

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## Abstract

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Umbundu, a local language of Angola, is orthographically coded in two main versions: the catholic version and the protestant one (see Diarra 2003: 342). Meanwhile, the government wants to “impose” it in the education system without a careful, consensual *a priori* orthographic agreement resulting from specialist contribution. One question is ‘what social, historical and linguistic factors have contributed to the emergency of the two orthographic systems?’, and ‘how to harmonize and normalize these orthographic systems, towards implementation into the education system?’ This article attempts to (a) revisit the motivations and factors that made decision-makers embark on languages planning for education in Angola, (b) describe some of the attempts made by the Angolan government towards the integration of African languages into education, so far, (c) demonstrate with a few examples how the two written versions of Umbundu may constitute a serious pedagogical problem for both teachers and learners, and (d) suggest a thorough study of orthography-related publications which can help understand what advised approaches to take in solving the current problem. A revision of the available literature and an analysis of the protestant and the catholic bibles were the methods considered to produce this article, as they constitute the bases for the Umbundu orthographies in use today.

**Keywords:** Umbundu, local languages, language planning, orthography.

## 1. Introduction

The Angolan constitution guarantees the protection and support of African languages used by the Angolan populations (Article 19, point 2, p.10, promulgated in 2010).<sup>1</sup> Another important regulation is the Base Laws of the Educational System (Law 13/01 and Law 17/16),<sup>2</sup> which establish, under the principle of “Língua de Ensino” (Language of Instruction), that the state shall promote, secure and create conditions, be they human, technical, material and financial to spread and generalize the inclusion and use of native languages in the curriculum. Moreover, the above legal postulates harmonize with the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (Ouane 2003: xiii) which promotes the “revival, maintenance and use of local languages” in the educational systems in various countries of the world, namely the third world.

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1 The Article 19 of the Angolan Constitution of 2010, in its point 2, values and promotes the teaching of the main native Angolan languages together with the most important foreign languages such as English and French.

2 The Base Law of the Educational System promulgated on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2001 and the Base Law of the Educational System promulgated on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

However, my experience both as student and teacher has taught me that native Angolan languages have not been implemented as subjects in the education system. This neglect has, I believe, long threatened the maintenance of Umbundu – a native Angolan language - and the cultural values embodied in it. Most importantly, Umbundu is orthographically represented by two main different systems: the “catholic orthography”, on the one hand, and the “protestant” one, on the other (see Diarra 2003: 342), which would make it a challenge for the government to “impose” it in the education system without a cautiously met orthographic accord.

In this context, two questions come out: what social, historical and linguistic factors have contributed to the appearance and use of the two orthographic systems for Umbundu, and how to harmonize these apparently contradicting orthographic systems of Umbundu, considering the rule of the reference language alphabet, i.e. Portuguese, long “imposed” and learnt at schools, towards its implementation into the education system in Angola?

One would believe that the encoders may have not been language specialists as such, (e.g. José Francisco Valente, a priest, wrote a much-referenced grammar of Umbundu, called *Gramática Umbundu: A Língua do Centro de Angola*, published in 1964), which made them code Umbundu with the intellectual means under their disposal at the time of the colonial occupation. It is possible, though, that if we resort to the various orthographies available in the world languages’ systems, for example, the Czechoslovakian alphabet - which contains letters with more economic morpheme-phoneme features that Umbundu is perceived to need - the Portuguese alphabet does not - would facilitate the teaching/learning process of Umbundu language, process of which a rigorous planning at the level of the corpus will be necessary.

This article will (a) provide a historical background of the procedures underpinning the emergency, development and implementation of the Umbundu orthography, (b) study and describe the attempts made, so far, by the Angolan government towards the integration of African languages (Umbundu included) into the educational system, and (c) describe the current state of the Umbundu orthography, by analysing both catholic and protestant orthographic systems and identify aspects in which conflicts arise.

## **2. Sociolinguistic situation of Angola: a brief revision**

Angola is a multilingual and multi-ethnic country. Most of its population is of Bantu origin, about 90%. The official language is Portuguese (71%, according to the 2014 Census) (INE, 2016:51) which is used at all legal levels (economic, political, social, educational, diplomatic, etc.). The education sector moves based on Portuguese alone as a language of instruction.

Other ethnolinguistic groups speak different Angolan languages within the territory limits. The Ovimbundu, who speak Umbundu, comprise the largest African ethnolinguistic group in the country (of about 23%, according to the 2014 Census) (INE, 2016: 14) covering the provinces of Benguela, Huambo, Bié, and Namibe. The Ambundu constitute the second largest ethnolinguistic group (around 8% of the population). They inhabit the northern provinces of Luanda, Malange, Kwanza-Norte, Bengo and Kwanza-Sul, and the language they speak is Kimbundu. Another important group follows: the Bakongos, who speak Kikongo (about 8% of the Angolans). They inhabit the Northern provinces of Uige and Zaire. Farther north there is the Mbinda, another group which live in the Cabinda province and they speak Fiote (about

2%). The Eastern zone of the country is inhabited by the Luchaze or Chokwe, whose language is Chokwe (about 7%). They occupy the provinces of Lunda Norte, Lunda Sul and Moxico. In the Southern part of the country two important ethnolinguistic groups will be found: the Kwanhama (or Ovakwanyama) in Cunene province who speak Oshikwanyama (making 2% of the Angolans); and the Ovanyaneka who inhabit the Huila province and speak Olunyaneka (of about 3%). Still in the South-Eastern part of Angola one will find the Ovangangela who live the province of Cuando-Cubango and speak Nganguela (about 3%). The South-western part of Angola is inhabited by the Ovahelero, in Namibe province, who speak Oshihelero (less than 1%). Still in Namibe we will find the Hotentote (the Bushmen) who speak a monosyllabic click language. They are the minority and are well known as the Khoisan group, the only no-Bantu group (less than 1%) (Redinha 1969; Fernandes & Ntongo 2002). It is important to remind that the Bantu languages originated from the Northeast of Africa whereas the Khoisan languages originated from the Southern side of Africa. The Khoisan group is made of the Kohi and the San groups. The most important characteristic of their language is a prominence of clicks in their speech (Severo 2015: 7).

As it can be seen, there are various languages spoken in Angola. This aspect may mean that much investment will be necessary to deal with the implementation of native Angolan languages into the education system. This investment includes the training of teachers to deal with the methodological issues involving the teaching of mother tongue for some, and a second language for the others.

### **3. Efforts to maintain the native languages in Angola**

That there have not been any initiatives or intentions, whatsoever, from the former Portuguese colonial government to maintain the indigenous languages in Angola, it is widely known. In fact, the then Portuguese colonial regime banned native languages, and others, by law. As stated by David D. Laitin,

Once English and French were marginalized, however, Portugal challenged the growth of the vernaculars. Overriding the missionary tribal divisions [*sic.*] that gave each denomination the right to a specified language group, Portuguese-government education, once it got under way, emphasized immersion in Portuguese. Decree no. 77, published in 1921, prohibited the use of native languages in all schools and prohibited the publication of anything in the vernacular, except as a parallel text to Portuguese (Laitin 1982: 85).

Worse than that, the native languages used to be called “dogs’ languages” (MPLA 1980: 6).<sup>3</sup> However, in 1980, the National Institute of Languages published a book entitled *Histórico sobre a Criação dos Alfabetos em Línguas Nacionais* (*A Report about the Creation of the Alphabets in National Languages*) (MPLA 1980). Three years before that, in 1977 the first president, Dr António Agostinho Neto said in a speech that “[T]he exclusive use of Portuguese as an official language, used in our literature, cannot solve our problem” (MPLA 1980:8). Additionally, Agostinho Neto proposed that “be it in the primary education, or probably in the secondary education, our languages should be used.

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3 MPLA is the acronym for *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*, a liberation movement which has been ruling Angola since the proclamation of the political independence from Portugal.

And given their diversity in the country, sooner or later we must be inclined to agglutinate some dialects to facilitate the contacts” (MPLA *op.cit*:8). In these passages, the first president showed the desire to embark on the study of our own languages so that they could be used and implemented in the system of education as languages of instruction.

Since 2004, The Ministry of Education has made some effort, at the experimental level, to implement the “national” languages in schools, without considering the essential steps towards embarking onto a language planning process (see Holmes 2008; Wiley 1996). This effort from the Angolan Institute of Research and Education Development (INIDE) has aimed to introduce the teaching of Umbundu, Oxikwanyama, Nhaneka, Ngangela, Kimbundu, Kikongo and Cokwe (Ponso 2011:9). The idea is to promote national integration in which, as in South Africa, “different populations may remain distinguishable, but such distinctions do not necessarily mean one population group is more valuable than the other” (Madiba 1999: 66). This also would mean that “the recognition of ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity should not be seen as an impediment to the development of the educational schemes and actions that include such diversity” (Ponso 2011:9).

An important point is the fact that many Angolan children and young citizens have Portuguese as their mother-tongue (71%, according to the most recent Census referred to above). This may imply that many children will resist learning local languages as they are perceived to not determine their future life (at the economic, social, professional and academic levels). As Hartshorne (1987) puts it, for an effective language planning for education “Government policy [...] will be effective when it has the acceptance of “the user” and when the latter is involved and participates in the decisions about education, including those related to language. If this acceptance is not achieved [...] authority behind the system is questioned, challenged and ultimately rejected (Hartshorne 1987: 82). Along with the above disadvantage, comes the lack of well trained teachers in these languages, lack of course books, library facilities as well as helpful language equipment, as in most part of Africa (Omodiaogbe 1992:25).

This article is meant to look at one important aspect of language planning which constitutes evidence of conditions to consider a language as elective for the educational system: a coherent and agreed orthography of Umbundu, the *raison d’être* of this study, to facilitate uniformity of the written material at school, state agencies, churches and all other non-governmental agencies which are interested in the implementation and maintenance of indigenous languages in Angola.

#### **4. The maintenance of Umbundu in the colonial period**

Umbundu has been used for as long as before the colonization of the territory which is today called Angola. As a matter of fact, Umbundu was found by the Portuguese colonialists in the “Ovimbundu territories” when they penetrated the kingdom’s capital, Bailundu, in the year 1645 (Hambly, 1934: 113). However, Umbundu, in its written form, was maintained thanks to the work of renowned researchers – evangelic missionaries, in the main. Among others, László Magyar, a sailor, published important records of Umbundu in 1859 which are believed to have come to light after another important register on behalf of Koelle (purportedly, a missionary) who published in the *Polyglotta Africana* important data about the language of *Pangela* (supposedly

referring to Benguela region) (Fodor 1977: 63). Other important contributions to maintain the Umbundu language were made by Bleek, who wrote a *Comparative Grammar of the South-African Languages*, ten years after László Magyar, in 1869. Moreover, Reverends Sanders and Fay published their *Vocabulary of the Umbundu Language, Comprising Umbundu – English and English – English*, in 1885. In the same year, Stover published his *Observations upon the Grammatical Structure and Use of the Umbundu, or the Language of the Inhabitants of Bailundu and Bihe*. Two years later Stover published another important book *Otuikanda Tuokufetika Lokutanga Umbundu*, i.e. in 1887. Not least important was *A Comparative Grammar of the South-African Bantu Languages*, by J. Torrent in 1891. Not devaluing the previous works, but adding to them with additional substance and quality, a medical doctor, José Pereira do Nascimento brought to light the *Grammatica do Umbundu or Língua de Benguella*, in 1894, after a more careful revision of preceding works and, having found that the Portuguese coloniser had not paid enough credit to the development of the African languages of the territories under their domain. In his opinions,

Pena é que Portugal, ha séculos na posse de tão vastos e importantes territórios africanos, não possua grammaticas e dictionarios sobre as mais importantes linguas das suas colónias. Comparados com os numerosos trabalhos d'esta ordem realizados modernamente em França, Inglaterra e Allemanha, os nossos, triste é dizel-o, são poucos e difficientes, o que não justifica grande interesse pelas nossas colónias. (Do Nascimento, 1894: X).

The above quotation witnesses the concern of Do Nascimento in relation to the lack of interest of the Portuguese coloniser in the native cultural manifestations of their occupied territories. In fact, the other colonisers, such as English and German had approached the study of the culture of the people they colonised, and they considered these studies as a very important part of the process of colonisation.

Most recently, important additional studies related to the understanding and maintenance of the Umbundu language and the Ovimbundu culture were carried out by other contemporary scholars. Hence, in 1934, Wilfrid D. Hambly, an assistant curator of African Ethnology of the Field Museum of Natural History of Chicago in the USA, published his valuable *The Ovimbundu of Angola*, in which a detailed explanation is given about the Umbundu language at various levels: he looks at the “affinities of Umbundu”, “vocabulary”, “phonetics”, “grammar”, “transcriptions of folklore” “sign language”, “riddles and proverbs” and “folklore stories” (Hambly, 1934: 234 – 255). Hambly’s expeditionary work has contributed to a large extent to the understanding of how the correspondence of sounds to the scripts was approached at that period and how those approaches have influenced other researchers’ practices when it came to suggesting the orthographical representations of the sounds of Umbundu.

## **5. How is Umbundu written today, and what implementation challenges there are for scholars?**

The implementation of Umbundu as an eventual language of instruction in the Angolan education system is mainly challenged by the existence of two main orthographies as stated above: the catholic version, on the one hand, and the protestant one, on the other. These religious conflicting approaches, as said above, pose serious problems for the adoption of an orthographic norm for the education system. For example, for the term “truth”, the catholic orthographic representation

is “*otchili*” (Mathews 8:10, Umbundu Catholic Version), whereas the protestant version is “*ocili*” (Mathew 8:10, Portuguese and Umbundu Protestant Version). The question is whether the latter will surely be read [ɔ’sili] or [ɔ’tʃili]. In another example, we have the catholic word for “animal” which is “*otchinhama*” (Genesis 9:5, Umbundu Catholic Version) whereas the protestant version is “*ocinyama*” (Genesis 9:5, Portuguese and Umbundu Protestant Version). This fact constitutes an important pedagogical problem whose solution is urgent. Both words are to be pronounced [ɔtʃi’nama], but whereas the first one is written in a way that a reader whose first language of education is Portuguese (all Angolans) would read as it is pronounced, the second would need further training for a Portuguese reader (which is the case of a common Angolan young reader) to read it would sound [ɔsi ’niama]. This one would make it difficult for a person who already reads in Portuguese to learn it. An example of these difficulties could be experienced by Gomes (2007 *apud* Gomes 2014) when he was describing the variations in the pronunciations of “ki” and “Qui”, as follows:

a. em línguas planálticas ao sul de Angola a pronúncia «Ki» de «Kizamba» e a escrita «Qui», para o mesmo som, não existem salvo o «Ci», na escrita missionária protestante ou «Tchi», no texto formal missionário católico;

c. nesta lógica, sendo de origem local «Kizamba» seria dito «Cisamba», substituindo a pronúncia do «Ki» pelo «Ci» ou «Tchi» e o «za» pelo «sa» que por força da lógica, captaria o som de «ça» português. (Gomes 2014: 6)

The above quotation advises for the need to harmonise the Umbundu orthography so that its implementation in the education system does not constitute a burden for the users. This need demands an interdisciplinary effort to make the Umbundu language not only survive but also be made responsive to the development of science and technology today.

## 6. Conclusive comments

Looking at the way the Umbundu language is being included in the Angolan education system, written in two different ways, one fears that the process itself may fail in a short period of time for many reasons: a) for not being of the domain of most language teachers. For example, a teacher whose level of language proficiency in Umbundu is low, or even null, will probably not be able to inspire a student to learn and speak the language; b) for the fact that Umbundu has to rival with foreign languages such as English and French that have long been taught in public schools; c) for the fact that the two versions have most probably been influenced by the alphabetic systems of other languages such as English, French and Italian, apart from the Portuguese one, (d) considering as well that most of the prominent specialists who gave substantial contributions to the study of the Angolan languages are either from English or French speaking countries (see for example, Pedro *et al.* in the book *Harmonização Ortográfica das Línguas Bantu de Angola*, published in 2013 (Pedro *et al.*, 2013: ix – xi and 50), just to adduce some examples).

A rigorous literature review should consider various preceding studies on orthography to grasp how other researchers made it work for the languages of the world. References should be made of important contributions, such as Catach (1986) who wrote “*The grapheme: Its positions and its degree of autonomy with respect to the system of the language*”, Günther (1986) with his “*Was the alphabet discovered or invented on the alleged common processes in speech and writing?*” and Augst (1986) who edited a valuable selection of orthography-versed articles entitled) *New*

*trends in graphemics and orthography*, published by Walter de Gruyter in both New York and Berlin.

Put in that perspective, the main contribution of this article lies in the determined attempt toward the preservation of Umbundu, which runs the risk of disappearing as new generations of Portuguese language speakers come to exist without any kind of linguistic transference of cultural heritage from the Umbundu elderly speakers in a common coherent written form. A way of preserving Umbundu is to contribute to the harmonization of its orthography to avoid the existence of two written versions, and use it in writing the documents used for informative, educational and clerical purposes.

## 7. Recommendations

As a way of issuing a call, it is recommended that:

1. Policies should focus on the selection and training of teachers on the basis of their current knowledge and proficiency in the Umbundu language;
2. Status should be officially given to establish Umbundu, and other languages included, as a language to consider and promote in every sphere of life;
3. The Angolan government should not hesitate to officially encourage, promote and follow up a commission made of Umbundu-based linguists, sociolinguists, ethnographers, historians, language teachers and the like to work interdisciplinarily for the harmonization of the Umbundu orthography.

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