

The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS) Completes the Harmonization of the Principal Regional Languages in Southern Africa.

The CASAS Project, which is supported by the Ford Foundation Special Initiative for Africa (SIA) is making rapid progress towards the development of harmonized orthographic and spelling rules for the large trans-border and regional languages of Africa. The project, which is Africa-wide, has done work in all the major regions of the continent including the West, North, Eastern and Southern sub-regions of the continent. The latest of such work has recently been taken forward to a successful conclusion in Johannesburg, 11 – 14 June 2003, for the two principal languages which are spoken in Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique and Zambia. The focus of the work was the Nguni cluster, the Sotho/Tswana cluster and the Tsonga/Shangaan cluster.

The thinking behind this work is that if Africa is to develop, then culturally and linguistically, it needs to be able to use indigenous languages as languages of general social and educational intercourse, because these are the languages of the teeming masses. Reading materials in regional African languages would be most useful for the development of literacy skills and the empowerment of mass society with knowledge, which would serve as existentially enabling factors in improving the quality of every day life. This rationale and approach is best achieved if it is recognized that the principal languages of Africa are utilized as regional speech forms which show dialectal variation. Unfortunately, because these languages in their dialectal forms have been written up with different orthographies, there is a superficial semblance of difference, when in fact many of them are variations on common linguistic structural themes. The CASAS project is therefore a powerful instrument for achieving regional integration on a linguistic and cultural level. That is, the level of every day social life. Such integrative processes are crucial for the achievement of a successful African developmental trajectory.

Indeed, since the 1950s, in the continuing search for efficacious paradigms for African development, it has become increasingly clear to interested parties that the cultural factor in general and the language factor in particular are central to any serious attempt to engage the development problem. In a colloquium, which took place under the auspices of the German Foundation for International Development in July 1996 in Cape Town, the relevance and place of indigenous languages in African education was scrutinized. It was recommended that basic education, cultural empowerment, scientific and technological development in Africa, as integrative instruments will be more pragmatically realisable if

the mother tongue or home language is given greater primacy in African educational and developmental approaches.

Even when parties are convinced about the social benefits of mother tongue education, the economic, political and social hindrances to implementation appear to many to be rather daunting and inhibitory. But, above all, the basic educational materials necessary for this approach to be enabled are hardly available.

1997 saw the establishment of *The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society*, CASAS, mandated amongst other issues, to investigate *The Classification of African Languages on the Basis of Mutual Intelligibility*. This work was the first step towards the identification and development of speech-communities around common orthographical solutions. An instrument for the measurement of mutual intelligibility of 85% or more was developed for the purpose. It has so far served as a viable basis for clustering mutually intelligible speech forms. Five workshops were conducted between 1997-8. The research network involved has produced a classification for a good part of the whole continent. Much of these results were presented to a workshop which was held on the 1st-2nd October 1998. Since then many workshops and publications have resulted from the CASAS project and language clusters including the Mandenkan, Akan, Gbe, Nyanja/Chichewa, have been harmonized. There is on-going work on Gur, Luo, Runyakitara, Hausa and Fang. Work is supposed to commence on Yoruba and Igbo, Somali, Oromo, Bari, Nuer/Dinka and Kikongo.

Policy-makers, educational institutions and NGO's in African countries which have demonstrated interest in this work were contacted. The need to consolidate the progress that has been made suggests the importance of producing literature based on the advances made with the development of new orthographies. The language clusters are all cross-border languages. For this reason it is important to work regionally and not attempt to restrict the rationality and relevance of the work we do into state borders. This is the same rationality which makes this project a superb and requisite tool for the integration of Africa.

CASAS has done decisive work for the languages of Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia in November 2001. This successful exercise opened the way for the production of materials in that sub-region. In April 2001, a major Workshop was held in South Africa which consolidated further the harmonization and standardization of orthographies in the region. This immediately permitted the development of literature. We would need to workshop writers and teachers in the use of the new orthographies, so that, they produce manuscripts grounded in these new orthographies. The next important stage is to produce science dictionaries and glossaries.

The April 2001 Workshop also initiated work in the Khoisan languages. A scholarship scheme has been started to train a cohort of Khoisan-speaking linguists. This scheme is in its second year. Already, an effective network has been created to undertake this work. CASAS has undertaken a pilot study under the auspices of the IDRC Acacia Initiative for the production of CD Roms in African languages in HIV/AIDS, Soil Fertility and Agro-Forestry. A report of this pilot study has been successfully concluded.

The technical workshop on the harmonization and standardization of Southern African languages which took place from the 11 – 14 June 2003 managed to complete the harmonization of Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, Swati (Nguni cluster) and Sotho, Pedi, Tswana and Lozi (Sotho/Tswana cluster) and Shangaan/Tsonga. Linguists from academic institutions in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland and South Africa were participants at this technical meeting. This last meeting was the third in a series of three meetings focussing on the Southern African languages.

CASAS's approach and work has reached the point where with the production of new orthographies and spelling systems, it is possible to start producing educational and media materials on a large scale for any of the issues addressed by SIA partner organizations. Governmental agencies and NGOs in various parts of Africa are cooperating in this work.