

‘The people divided by a common language’: The orthography of Sesotho in Lesotho, South Africa, and the implications for Bible translation

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The Basotho of Lesotho and South Africa speak the same language, namely Sesotho. However, the two countries do not use the same orthography when writing Sesotho. This orthographic representation and its variations pose a significant challenge when Bible translators translate it into Sesotho. It also presents difficulties to readers of the Bible in South Africa when they have to read the Bible written in Lesotho orthography for the first time or to Lesotho readers who encounter Sesotho written in South African orthography. The two orthographies are independent but complementary. The Lesotho orthography is older than the South African. It differs in the choice of letters and the marking of initial syllabic nasals and (to a much lesser extent) in written word division and the use of diacritics on vowels to distinguish some ambiguous spellings.

Contribution: This article provides a historical examination of the problem beginning with the first efforts by French missionaries to write the language in the 19th century, the separate but interrelated development of the two orthographies in Lesotho and South Africa and the current impasse concerning a unified orthography. The analysis will include an examination of the linguistic issues involved, the sociolinguistic topics (including politics, education and religion) and various possible scenarios for resolving the problem will be considered.

Keywords: Sesotho; Southern Sotho; Lesotho; South Africa; orthography; Bible translation; missionaries.

Introduction

The Basotho of Lesotho and South Africa speak the same language, namely Sesotho (Southern Sotho). However, the two countries do not use the same orthography when writing Sesotho. These divergent orthographic representations pose a significant challenge for readers of the Bible into Sesotho. For instance, readers of the Bible in South Africa will find it challenging if they have to read their Bibles written in Lesotho orthography during church services, Bible study meetings or at their homes. On the other hand, this also happens for Lesotho readers who have to read their Bibles written in South African orthography. The two orthographies are independent but complementary. They are complementary in the sense that the meaning of words and so on is not affected by the orthographic differences. For instance, the names Modimo (written in South African orthography) and Molimo (written in Lesotho orthography) both mean God. Here the pronunciation and meaning are the same, but the difference is brought about by how the words are written. The Lesotho orthography is older than the South African. It differs from the South African in the choice of some letters, in the marking of syllable-initial nasal sounds (phonemes) and (to a much lesser extent) in word division and the use of diacritics on vowels to distinguish some ambiguous spellings. For more on this issue, please see section ‘sociolinguistic factors involved in the two orthographies’.

An overall objective of this article is to provide a historical and linguistic examination of the problem of Sesotho orthography, beginning with the first efforts when the orthography was first developed by Paris Evangelical Missionary Society in Lesotho. Regarding the question of whether the South African orthography received adequate attention during that time when the Lesotho orthography was developed, the answer is that attention was not given to South African orthography at the time when the Lesotho orthography was being developed, but it received more attention later from the authorities and the Department of Education of the Republic of South Africa. The current examination will also tap into issues such as the sociolinguistic aspects

Note: Special Collection: Septuagint and Textual Studies, sub-edited by Johann Cook (Stellenbosch University).

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Table of Contents Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho

1. Understanding the eBook Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho User Reviews and Ratings
 - Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho Free and Paid eBooks
 - Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho Public Domain eBooks
 - Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho eBook Subscription Services
 - Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho Budget-Friendly Options
6. Navigating Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho eBook Formats

- ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
- Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho Compatibility with Devices
- Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Interactive Elements Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
- 8. Staying Engaged with Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Setting Reading Goals Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Grade 12 Revised Papers Lesotho
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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