



**In quest of a vernacular writing style for the
Rangi of Tanzania:
Assumptions, processes, challenges**

Oliver Stegen

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Abstract

Despite increased efforts by linguists and educationalists to facilitate literacy and literature development in minority languages, there are still many languages worldwide which do not have a written form. One area that needs attention in literature production for a newly written language is the question of writing style. As the features of good style are language-specific, writing style guidelines have to be developed for each language anew. It has been assumed that such vernacular writing style develops predominantly by mother tongue speaker intuition. However, very few studies have been carried out to verify this.

This research is set within the confines of the literacy project in the Rangi language of Northern Tanzania. As a contribution to the development of a natural writing style in Rangi, this research investigates what evidence for stylistic preferences can be found in texts that were produced by Rangi authors writing in their mother tongue for the first time. The main data of this study are 112 texts which were collected during a one-day writers workshop conducted between May 2005 and January 2006 in four different locations.

One way of observing stylistic preferences is through analysing the changes which authors make in successive versions of their text. Of the 112 texts in the database, 71 display stylistic changes between draft and revised versions. These texts are then investigated in more detail, e.g. with regard to text length, lexical density and story components. The subsequent comparative analysis of draft version versus revised version of each text operates at three levels: narrative elements at the text level, lexical choice at the word level, and word order, tense-aspect verb forms and participant reference at the clause level. At all three levels, stylistic conventions could be identified, e.g. formulaic introductions and codas, elimination of Swahili loanwords, or certain tense-aspect usages.

Despite such commonalities, this research suggests that, far from developing intuitively, vernacular writing style is influenced by a variety of factors, not least by previously available literature in languages of wider communication or in the target language itself. Among the concluding recommendations of this study for future vernacular writers workshops is the advice to employ guided editing which encourages multiple drafting and treats the different levels of editing separately, i.e. story structure, lexical choice and grammatical features.