

## SPELLING ERRORS AND MEANING-MAKING IN MASTER'S DISSERTATION AT A RURAL SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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### Abstract

This study was aimed at investigating the impact of spelling errors in meaning-making in the master's dissertation written by university students. The researcher identified common spelling errors in dissertation writing within the department of language education in the School of Education at a rural university in South Africa. Six dissertations were selected from a sample of forty master's students, using the random sampling technique. Data were collected using a qualitative method. A descriptive case study design was employed in this study, as a specific case was identified and analysed through qualitative, narrative explanation. Data were gathered from dissertation documents and classroom observations. It was found that the majority of the spelling problems result from pronunciation during dialogue. The findings suggest that the spelling errors were as a result of omission, addition, substitution of letters, incorrect word spacing, dialects, and punctuation. The study will greatly contribute to post-graduate studies by providing guidance on dissertations and ensuring that meaning is achieved.

**Keywords:** *dialect; master's dissertation; meaning-making; omission; punctuation; university students*

### 1. Introduction

As a supervisor of master's students' dissertations, the researcher realised that the spelling errors found in dissertation writing have an impact on meaning-making. The meaning of the statement becomes distorted due to errors in spelling. According to Ludlow's (2014) theory of the dynamic lexicon, word meanings are radically underdetermined (a semantic claim), and this is to allow discourse partners to renegotiate the precise semantic properties of words from conversational context to conversational context (a foundational claim). In many cases, errors occur at the semantic level and must adhere to grammatical rules to be understood. The incorrect application of lexical semantics leads to spelling errors. This suggests that spelling errors often arise from students' limited attention to grammatical rules. This paper seeks to analyse the types of problems that occur in students' dissertation and to suggest a way to minimize the issues. Armanda, Nugraheni, Wulansari, and Imron (2022) indicate that students mostly make many errors in several aspects of writing, such as spelling, punctuation and grammar when writing. These errors affect the meaning of a sentence and thereby also the entire

dissertation. The lack of meaning and cohesion will have negative consequences for the students in that they will not successfully complete their master's degree. This is supported by Omar and Barzani (2022) when they say that writing errors must be considered and should not be overlooked as they help learners develop their writing abilities. This writing ability is required to deem students fit to pass and obtain their master's degree.

The researcher noticed that it is difficult for most master's students to complete a paragraph without writing an incorrectly spelled word. It is imperative for students to take heed of spelling when writing as this will mean the difference between a comprehensible dissertation and an incomprehensible one. Students must therefore employ adequate sound-spelling skills. Khan, Shahbaz, Kumar, and Khan (2020), indicate that without sound-spelling skills, learners cannot enhance their reading abilities effectively. Without these reading abilities, both learners and students will not be able to spell correctly. The commission of spelling errors occurs across all grades, from Primary level up to university level. For an individual to be able to spell correctly, they should be able to read first, and this skill is taught as early as the kindergarten stage. Padilla-Lambonao (2023) supports this view by stating that this implies that kindergarten learners require targeted reading interventions. The more they read, the better they can identify words and their meaning, which will ensure their ability to spell word correctly. Teaching spelling should be prioritised in the foundation phase. A child should know the letters of the alphabet and the sound of each alphabet so that he/she can correctly construct a word. Word construction will lead to the correct formulation of a sentence, and subsequently a paragraph or a text. Similarly, master's students need to know the sound of letters and thus words so that they can spell the words correctly. The researcher found that many students lack these foundational skills, which contributes to difficulties in writing their dissertations. This is the reason the researcher decided to do an in-depth study of this problem. This study expects that the results will be beneficial to students and provide guidance on dissertations by identifying where the students encounter the most challenges.

As previously mentioned, the researcher realized that spelling errors in dissertation writing negatively affect meaning-making. A misspelled word can distort or obscure the intended meaning at sentence level. Loss of meaning may reduce reader engagement and comprehension. In the case of master's students, spelling errors may negatively affect the evaluation of the dissertation. Yang, Cheng, Liu, and Sun (2019) state that when a word spelling error occur, erroneous translations are more likely to occur. Such errors may lead readers to draw incorrect conclusions. This paper aims to investigate the impact of spelling errors in meaning-making in university master's students' dissertation.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To identify and analyse the spelling errors most frequently committed by Sepedi master's students in their extended writing.
2. To examine the factors that contribute to students' spelling errors.
3. To propose strategies that can be used to address and correct spelling errors among students.

## 2. Literature Review

This study adopts constructivist theory. The basic premise of constructivist theories is that people create their own meaning through learning, (Piaget 1964). Learning is an active process whereby learners construct their own understanding based on what they already know or their experiences. In other words, knowledge is not just handed to them

but built inside their mind as they ideas with what they already know. Students have already acquired knowledge of the language and therefore use their prior knowledge to construct meaningful sentences. Sentence should be constructed in a meaningful way, with correctly spelled words. Hein and College, (1991) support Piaget (1964) by stating that constructivism refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves, each learner individually (and socially) constructs meaning as he or she learns. Instead of memorizing facts, learners build their own understanding based on their experiences and interactions.

According to Masruddin and Nasriandi (2022) the writing skill should take into account a person's spelling to avoid communication errors or breakdowns. Correct spelling is a crucial part of writing as it helps avoid misunderstanding. Spelling is usually described as the correct arrangement of letters to represent a word. It relates to the knowledge of the orthography (the system of symbols and rules used to represent spoken language in writing) of a particular language. Students who wish to write well should make a deliberate effort to understand and avoid spelling errors. In other words, correct spelling contributes to effective writing because it ensures accuracy and clarity. Alsolami (2019) states that spelling refers to producing the correct written representation of a word. It is, therefore, essential to identify effective strategies and apply them effectively when writing a text. Spelling is a linguistic skill that includes orthography, phonology, morphemes, and word meaning. The primary years are crucial for teaching spelling.

Tijms, Pavlidou, and Hoette, (2020) view spelling as a problem from a young age, therefore he states that it is difficult for a learner to grasp the language of teaching and learning because of lack of morphological knowledge, making it even harder for the learners to improve their language proficiency, particularly when spelling words. This indicates that students enter university with insufficient morphological knowledge. The students are then influenced by peers and proceed with the knowledge they pick up from their peers. Students who do not understand how words are formed often omit letters, misuse prefixes or suffixes, and misspell plural or past tense words. Additionally, Fitria (2020) states that "error refers to the use of a word, speech act, or grammatical items unit such as part of speech which seems imperfect and significant of incomplete learning. An error, therefore happens when a learner uses a word or phrase incorrectly, due to not having full knowledge or mastery of it yet. This lack of knowledge results in students breaking grammatical rules when writing. The rules of grammar are violated when students do not assemble the letters of a language in accordance with their correct sequence according to the official orthographical rules of that language otherwise; it is viewed as a spelling error (Altamimi & Rashid, 2019).

Furthermore, Huang, Li, Jiang, Zhang, Chen, Wang, and Xiao (2021) explain that error analysis is an important branch of research in second language acquisition. They recommended automated spelling error detection tools. In principle, spelling relies on the knowledge a person accumulates. The students' inability to analyse their errors leads to repeated spelling errors. Allocating adequate time to error analysis can prevent repeated mistakes. The use of spell-check tools eliminates human assumption and error. The challenge, however, is that the use of spell-check tools may be limited by unequal access to technology. Students can eliminate many spelling errors through consistent writing practice. Bell and Valley (2020) recommend writing practice and exercises that need to focus on a specific topic, context, or theme that allows students as much practice as possible with targeted, specific, and topic-centred vocabulary.

Cummings (2018) notes that many errors involve morpheme omission. Morpheme omission occurs when a part of a word that carries meaning is missing. An example of this omission is when a person omits the letter “s” when writing the word “books”, this omission will change the meaning of the word and ultimately the sentence. A similar omission occurs when writing in the past tense where someone omits the suffix “ed” and writes “walk” instead of “walked”, thereby affecting meaning. This has also been found to be the case with master's students at the university because students sometimes omit letters from words, which in turn affects meaning. Moro, (2019), states that morphology as part of grammar, is the part that describes changes within a word. It is a branch of linguistics that studies how words are formed. Omission is one of the factors that contribute to spelling errors, which in turn affect meaning. Many factors contribute to spelling errors that disrupt meaning.

Setaka (2018) states that the current African language lexicography is also heavily influenced by certain lexicographic traditions and global trends and changes – such as the user perspective and the emphasis on user-friendliness, a more functional approach, increased attention to dictionaries suitable for text production, corpus-based dictionaries superseding the traditional introspection-based dictionaries, etc. This means that African dictionaries today follow modern global methods. They are more focused on the user, easier to use, based on real language information, and designed to help people read, write and communicate more effectively. The dictionaries provide clear guidance on spelling, enable writers to check and confirm the correct spelling and show how words are actually used in a sentence. A good writer must pay attention to spelling to avoid communication breakdown. Students who wish to be good writers should therefore make effort to understand and avoid spelling mistakes/errors.

In conclusion, different factors contribute to spelling errors, such as morpheme omission. Students who are careful not to omit morphemes will reduce spelling errors and ensure that that sentence have meaning. The ability to analyse errors through use of automated spelling error detection tools will assist students in their writing. Similarly, by not writing frequently and practising excessively students will not be able to spell correctly. The problem of poor spelling appears to be generous. The challenge of spelling is prevalent in all grades through to university level, and can ultimately spill over into the workplace.

### **3. Research Methods**

An observational case study research design was used as a number of student essays were selected for observation and analysis. Research design refers to the plan that guides the researcher in answering the research questions. Thomas (2022) explains research design as the plan for the researcher which will guide the researcher in answering the fundamental questions that will make the research profitable. According to Ghanad (2023) regarding research design, he argues that it serves as the “blueprint” for the research investigation. The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events. This enables students to gain a deeper understanding of the cases by comparing similarities and differences.

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. Creswell & Creswell (2017), explain that the qualitative approach relies on text and image data and follows specific steps of analysis. The study adopted this approach as it analysed text. In qualitative research, as described by Gundumogula and Gundumogula (2020), qualitative method helps researchers to understand the thoughts, feelings and expressions of the participants. Observation

occurred during the supervision process as the researcher examined students' written work. The students' work gave an understanding of their thoughts, feelings and expressions. According to Roller (2019) qualitative research involves the examination of nuanced connections, along with the social and contextual dimensions, that give meaning to qualitative data. The investigation aims to analyse students' experiences with Sepedi spelling.

The participants are the master's students from the University of Limpopo in the School of Education. The total population of master's students in the School of Education is estimated at one hundred and sixty, forty of those are registered in the Department of Language Education, where the research was conducted. Lawrence, (2014) defines population as the complete set of people or elements you are interested in studying, or about which you want to draw conclusions. A sample of six students from the forty in the Sepedi Unit was selected. Dissertations from three male and three female students were purposively selected.

According to Taherdoost (2021) data collection is a main stage in research that can overshadow the quality of achieving results by decreasing the possible errors which may occur during a research project. Data were collected through observation and document review. The results were obtained through observation, which served as one of the data collection instruments. Data will be collected from students work, that is, the dissertation written by the students, and an essay test written in the lecture rooms. The students were given an activity in the form of an essay writing exercise. After writing, feedback was given. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer. O'Leary (2020) states that lesson observation plays an important role in teacher development. The lecturer observed the students while they wrote essays, and assessed their work in the form of dissertations.

Braun & Clarke (2023) explain thematic analysis as thematic coding involves the use of grounding theory coding procedures to develop themes from data. Documents, particularly students' written work, were organized into themes for analysis. A report and findings were then compiled. The packed written essays were analysed through thematic analysis technique. A thematic analysis approach was applied by examining students' essays.

The study adhered to ethical protocols during data collection. Some of the primary ethical considerations include: The researcher will seek ethical permission from the Turfloop Research and Ethics Committee (TREC) to perform the study.

Informed consent ensures that participants understand their rights and that their involvement is voluntary (Grant, 2021). Participants received consent forms indicating their voluntary participation. After ensuring that all participants understood the consent forms, the researcher requested that they sign them before continuing with data collection. Participants were entitled to withdraw from the study at any time.

According to Attarian and Hashemi (2021), privacy, anonymity and confidentiality are applied and ensure that data were separated from identifying information and the storage of the code linking data to individuals securely. Fictitious names were used to protect participants' identities.

According to Resneck (2024), in any research or study, ensuring that participants are treated with respect and dignity, and that they receive standard care, is paramount to ethical practice. These principles are vital not only for the well-being of participants, but also for the credibility and integrity of the research itself. The researcher respected participants, maintained their dignity, and treated them with care. The researcher safeguarded the

privacy of the participants and upheld their dignity while respecting their various religious beliefs.

Benefits refer to the positive outcomes or advantages that the participants may gain from the research (Pramod, 2022). The researcher informed the participants about the benefits of the study such as gaining and sharing of knowledge. The study ensured that participants were not exposed to physical, emotional, or social harm. The study protected participants from social harm such as embarrassment or stigma.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

The findings indicate that incorrectly spelled words change meaning. Alsolami (2019) states that spelling refers to producing the correct written representation of a word, therefore producing the incorrect representation will affect meaning. All the six sampled students had spelling errors in their dissertations. They had spelling errors that emanated from the following factors: Omission, addition, punctuations, word spacing, substitution, and dialects respectively. The errors identified and analysed from the Sepedi master's students' work are tabulated below:

| Kind of error | Wrong Spelling/ Correct Spelling (In Sepedi)                                             | Meaning (In English)                                                                                                |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Omission      | Ke nko mang? (omission)<br>Ke nako mang?                                                 | What kind of nose is this?<br>What time is it?                                                                      |
| Addition      | O na le mona.<br>O na le monna. (addition)                                               | He is jealous.<br>She has husband.                                                                                  |
| Punctuations  | Matome o ja nama.<br>Matome, o ja nama.                                                  | It is reported that Matome is eating meat.<br>The statement is direct speech telling Matome that he is eating meat. |
| Word spacing  | Go seka motho.<br>Go sekamotho.                                                          | A person is in court.<br>Humanoid/He is half a person.                                                              |
| Substitution  | Ba <b>swara</b> batho.<br>Ba <b>swere</b> batho.                                         | Present tense – they are arresting people.<br>Past tense – they arrested people.                                    |
| Dialects      | <b>Tšhipi</b> e a roba. (wrongly spelled)<br><b>Tshipi</b> e a roba. (Correctly spelled) | The iron ore is heavy.<br>The iron ore is heavy.                                                                    |

The researcher observed that there are various other factors that affect spelling in Sepedi for university students. The three most common are, the use of social media platforms, phonetic confusion/Sound click/articulation, and variations among Speakers of Sepedi and Northern Sotho Linguistic.

##### 1. The Use of Social Media Platforms

The use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has negatively influenced spelling. These social media platforms are meant for short messages. This does not mean that the words should be abbreviated but rather for communication to be through concise sentences. Students have become used to this manner of writing which negatively affects academic writing. An example of this influence is when they write 'Ska lebala' instead of 'O seke wa lebala' (Do not forget). This method of shortening words results in vowels or letters being omitted and only being left with consonants. The meaning can be distorted, especially if the reader cannot decode the SMS

language. This aligns with Cummings (2018) refers to this as morpheme omission, which occurs when a part of a word that carries meaning is missing

## 2. Phonetic confusion/Sound Click/Articulation

A single sound can be expressed by different combinations of letters, words can sound correct, but be spelled differently to how they sound. For example the word 'molemi' (farmer) sounds like 'molimi', 'mosepedi' (walker) sounds like 'mosipidi', 'phapošeng' (classroom) sounds like 'phapušing'. Such words cause confusion to language students who do not have adequate foundational knowledge of the language. Reading a lot of texts exposes students to different lexicon, which can help improve spelling. If students are able to recall words that they have previously come across, they can easily identify an incorrectly spelled word. This aligns with Piaget (1964)'s theory that Learning is an active process whereby learners construct their own understanding based on what they already know or their experiences.

## 3. Variations among Speakers of Sepedi and Northern Sotho Linguistic

Speakers of both languages reside in one province, namely Limpopo Province and speak different dialects which often influence one another. For example those speaking Northern Sotho refer to nature as 'hlogo' instead of 'tlhago'. The students find it difficult to identify official written version between the two versions. The students ended up not knowing which language is official and which one is not. Further examples include, "Labotlhano" instead of "Labohlano" (Friday), "tlhogo" for "hlogo" (topic/heading)". According to Warda (2023), spelling is important because it can influence the meaning of words. Dialect influences spelling and thereby the meaning of words. Similar trends were reported by Tijms, Pavlidou, and Hoette, (2020), who state that spelling is a problem from a young age, therefore it is difficult for a learner to grasp the language of teaching and learning because of lack of morphological knowledge, making it even harder for the learners to improve their language proficiency, particularly when spelling words.

There were many spellings as well as grammatical mistakes found in the students' essays which indicate that students were not taught how to edit their written work before submitting their final draft. The inability to edit work can result in sentences having a different meaning than what was intended. For example, a student wrote 'ke tša mošomong' which means 'they (things) are for work', instead of 'ke tšwa mošomong' which means 'I am from work'.

| Name or participant | Error         | Frequency | Percentage  | Error Pattern                                   |
|---------------------|---------------|-----------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Participant A       | Omission      | 15        | 30.6%       | Frequent omission of letters                    |
| Participant B       | Addition      | 7         | 14.3%       | Adding extra letters                            |
| Participant C       | Punctuation   | 8         | 16.3%       | Incorrect or missing punctuation marks          |
| Participant D       | Word Spacing  | 5         | 10.2%       | Incorrect spacing between words                 |
| Participant E       | Substitutions | 5         | 10.2%       | Replacing correct letters with incorrect ones   |
| Participant F       | Dialect       | 9         | 18.4%       | Using dialectal forms instead of standard forms |
| <b>TOTAL</b>        |               | <b>49</b> | <b>100%</b> |                                                 |

Frequency/Distribution

The findings of this study will inform curriculum and teaching strategies because the patterns of spelling errors will provide evidence to adjust teaching approaches. The most frequent spelling error found was omission of letters, therefore teaching should focus on phoneme awareness and syllable segmentation by clapping sounds and breaking words into syllables. Language teachers should also focus use word-building and word-expansion activities to help students see how missing letters change meaning. These findings can also strengthen assessment practices setting better placement tests and diagnostic evaluations, having fairer student writing evaluation, and rubrics that differentiate between surface and meaning-changing errors.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study found that many university students made numerous spelling mistakes influenced by several key factors. The use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter influenced spelling because of the short messages that inform sentences on these platforms. Students should differentiate between formal and informal writing. Another factor is errors caused by phonetic confusion or sound click where vowels are mistakenly interchanged, thereby affecting meaning. Furthermore, the variations among Sepedi and Northern Sotho language speakers results in incorrect spelling. Certain Words are pronounced and spelled differently in these languages. Word spacing, addition or omission of letters, punctuation, and substitution of letters have also been identified as major contributing factors to spelling errors. Correct spelling contributes is fundamental to sentences having meaning. This research contributes to the study of linguistics by enhancing understanding of language development in students, and also informs curriculum and teaching strategies. Future researchers can compare these results with other institutions, African language departments, or language backgrounds to identify whether the same error patterns occur elsewhere. Since social media usage is identified as a major factor, future studies can explore the relationship between digital writing habits and academic writing proficiency.

The study recommends a range of strategies to reduce spelling errors among students. Learners should approach their written work with greater care by reviewing and editing their assignments before submission. Spelling Bee competitions may be implemented across grade levels, as they motivate learners to master correct spelling through word memorization—an advantage that carries over into university studies. The excessive use of abbreviated forms in short messages should be discouraged to help students maintain the habit of writing words in full. Exposure to linguistic influences from other cultures should be managed carefully to ensure that students continue to use and apply their own language accurately. Peer influence should also be monitored to foster positive and accurate linguistic practices. In addition, the use of spell-check tools should be encouraged to minimize avoidable errors. Proofreading must be consistently performed before any submission. Weekly spelling tests conducted through dictation may further strengthen students' spelling skills. Finally, lecturers should cultivate strong, supportive relationships with their students both inside and outside the classroom, enabling them to serve as mentors and contribute positively to the university's academic environment.

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