

BAKOKO ORTHOGRAPHY GUIDE

by

Njeck Mathaus M (CABTAL)

and

Stephen C. Anderson (SIL)

Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL)
B.P. 16550, Yaounde, Cameroon

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Abbreviations

CLB	Centre Linguistique Bakoko
EX	Exclamation
F1	Future Certain Tense
F2	Future Uncertain Tense
HAB	Habitual Aspect
IMP	Imperative Mood
INF	Infinitive Prefix
INT	Interrogative Mood
NEG	Negative Marker
NP	Noun Phrase
P1	Near Past Tense
P2	Far Past Tense
PERF	Perfect Tense
PRES	Present Tense
PROG	Progressive Aspect
1s	First Person Singular
2s	Second Person Singular
3s	Third Person Singular
1p	First Person Plural
2p	Second Person Plural
3p	Third Person Plural

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abbreviations	ii
Acknowledgments	ii
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 ALPHABET	3
2.1 Consonants.....	3
2.1.1 Nasal-Consonant complexes	4
2.1.2 Consonants plus ‘y’	5
2.1.3 Consonants plus ‘w’	5
2.1.4 Consonant orthography rules	5
2.2 Vowels	6
2.2.1 Vowel length.....	6
2.2.3 Vowel orthography rules	6
3 TONE.....	7
3.1 Lexical tone contrasts marked by diacritics.....	7
3.2 Grammatical meanings marked by diacritics	9
4 WORD DIVISION.....	9
5 ELISION	9
6 PUNCTUATION AND CAPITALISATION	10
6.1 Full stop.....	10
6.2 Question mark	10
6.3 Exclamation mark	10
6.4 Comma.....	11
6.5 Quotation marks	11
6.6 Capitalisation	11
6.7 Parentheses	12
7 SAMPLE TEXT.....	12
8 NEED FOR FURTHER TESTING OF THE ORTHOGRAPHY.....	13
References.....	13

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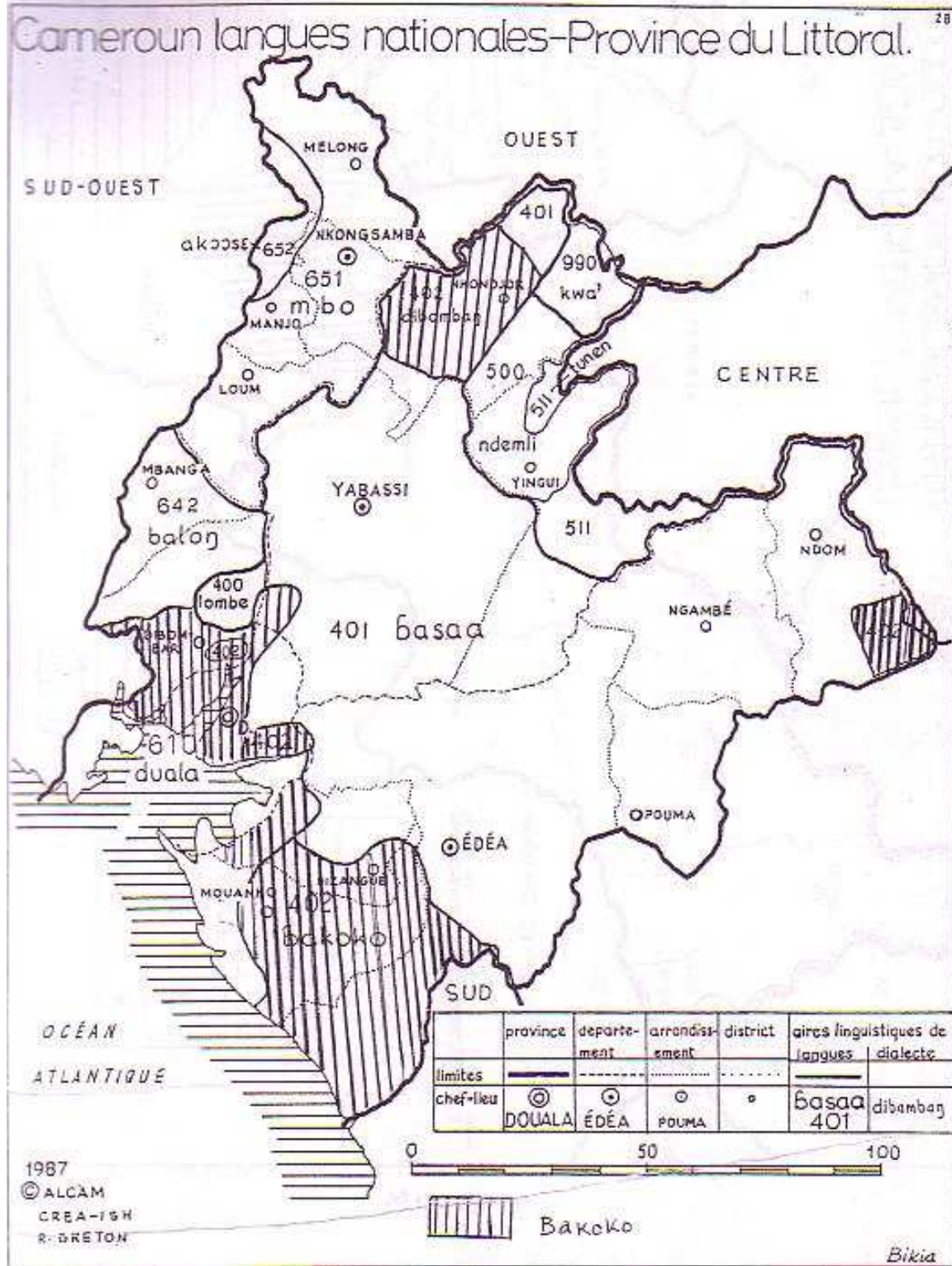
Njeck Mathaus & Stephen C. Anderson

1 Introduction

This paper proposes an orthography for Bakoko, a narrow Bantu language spoken by about 75,000 people scattered around the Littoral region, mostly in Wouri Division, south of Douala; Mounjo Division, south of Dibombari; Nkam Division, around Nkondjock; Sanaga-Maritime Division, south west of Edea and South region, north west of Ocean Division. ALCAM (1983:359) gives Bakoko the following classification: Niger-Kordofanien, Niger-Congo, Benue-Congo, Bantoide, Bantou, Equatorial-Bantou, Bassa-Beti, Bakoko. The Ethnologue (2005:57) on its part classifies Bakoko as follows: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Bantoid, Southern, Narrow Bantu, Northwest, A, Bassa (A40). Ethnologue also cited Adie, Bisoo, Mbang, Yabyang, Yakalak, Yapoma and Yasuku as the dialects of Bakoko.

This work is based on the Yakalak dialect which according to M. Bitjaa and M. Ndokobai (2004:04) is the reference speech form of Bakoko. There are three major linguistic research works that have been written on the language. S. Edika (1990) examined the sound system of the Yabyang speech form of Bakoko from a taxonomic perspective while M. Kenmongne (2000) researched the lexical phonology of Bakoko with data from the Yakalak speech form. Finally, M. Bitjaa and M. Ndokobai (2004) did a sociolinguistics study of Bakoko and postulated Yakalak as the standard speech form of Bakoko.

The following map showing the languages of the Sanaga Maritime Division and neighbouring languages is taken from ALCAM (1987:51). The shaded areas on the map are places where the different speech forms of Bakoko are spoken.



2 Alphabet

The Bakoko segmental alphabet is made up of 20 consonants and 7 vowels. They are represented below in upper and lower cases:

A a, B b, B ɓ, C c, D d, E e, E ɛ, F f, G g, H h, I i, J j, K k, L l, Mm, N n, Ŋ ŋ, O o, Ɔ ɔ, P p, S s, T t, U u, V v, W w, Y y, Z z.

2.1 Consonants

The consonant phonemes, their allophones and graphemes are presented in the table below. We also show their use in various positions in the word.

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/p/	[p]	P p	puh <i>few</i>	èpòmbò <i>ringworm</i>	—
/b/	[b]	B b	bumè <i>baobab tree</i>	àbi <i>excrement</i>	—
/ɓ/	[ɓ]	B ɓ	ɓèɓèè <i>near</i>	lìɓò <i>footstep</i>	—
/t/	[t]	T t	tònà <i>nail</i>	ètambi <i>shoe</i>	—
/d/	[d]	D d	dih <i>eye</i>	lìdi <i>to eat</i>	—
/l/	[l]	L l	lah <i>chin</i>	òkòla <i>mountain</i>	tol <i>chest</i>
/k/	[k]	K k	kòh <i>fish</i>	yalkà <i>finger nail</i>	èɓok <i>cripple</i>
/g/	[g] ¹	G g	—	ŋgeŋ <i>bell</i>	—
	[ɣ]		—	èkàgà <i>bed</i>	—
	[x]		—	sùgtèè <i>shake</i>	tog <i>spoon</i>
/h/	[h]	H h	—	mbàhè <i>corn</i>	likoh <i>to hoe</i>
/tʃ/	[tʃ]	C c	—	lìcì <i>egg</i>	—
/dʒ/	[dʒ]	J j	jol <i>nose</i>	èji <i>knowledge</i>	—
/s/	[s]	S s	siŋgì <i>cat</i>	àsù <i>face</i>	—
/z/	[z]	Z z	—	nzòg <i>elephant</i>	—
/f/	[f]	F f	—	difò <i>speech</i>	—
/v/	[v]	V v	vòŋ <i>hair</i>	èvèh <i>bone</i>	—

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/m/	[m]	M m	mìkwatè <i>machete</i>	èpùma <i>orange</i>	lisem <i>to cut</i>
/n/	[n]	N n	nàg <i>crevice</i>	anù <i>mouth</i>	mìvin <i>Cloud</i>
/ŋ/	[ŋ]	Ŋ ŋ	ŋmen <i>owner</i>	ètaŋè <i>father</i>	soŋ <i>moon</i>
/w/	[w]	W w	wò <i>hand</i>	liwanda <i>friend</i>	—
/j/	[j]	Y y	yife <i>shadow</i>	èyàŋ <i>grassland</i>	—

¹ The phones [g], [ɣ] and [x] are allophones of the same phonemes /g/. The [g] occurs only after a velar nasal, [ɣ] occurs only between vowels and [x] occurs only word finally or before voiceless consonants. Unusual is the fact that /g/ never occurs word initially.

2.1.1 Nasal-Consonant complexes

One kind of consonant complex found in Bakoko is where the first consonant is a syllabic nasal that is pronounced at the same place of articulation as the following consonant. Quite a few consonants may be preceded by such homorganic nasal consonants (symbolised as “N-” below).

Consonant complex	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final Position
/Np/	[mp]	Mp mp	mpemba <i>giant</i>	—	—
/Nb/	[mb]	Mb mb	mbèŋ <i>rain</i>	èpòmbò <i>ringworm</i>	òlemb <i>tongue</i>
/Nd/	[nd]	Nd nd	ndòò <i>mud</i>	ètìndi <i>heel</i>	likùnd <i>garbage dump</i>
/Nl/	[nl]	Nl nl	nle <i>house</i>	—	—
/Ndʒ/	[ndʒ]	Nj nj	njeŋ <i>when</i>	mìnjaŋ <i>balafon</i>	—
/Nk/	[ŋk]	Ŋk ŋk	ŋkòò <i>rope</i>	—	—
/Ng/	[ŋg]	Ŋg ŋg	ŋgeŋ <i>bell</i>	èbùŋga <i>stomach</i>	lìmaŋg <i>jaw</i>
/Nm/	[ŋm]	Ŋm ŋm	ŋmu <i>head</i>	—	—
/Ns/	[ns]	Ns ns	nsòn <i>flesh</i>	—	—
/Ny/	[ny]	Ny ny	nyò <i>snake</i>	ònyòŋ <i>mosquito</i>	—
/Nz/	[nz]	Nz nz	nzààn <i>fire</i>	—	—

2.1.2 Consonants plus ‘y’

Another kind of consonant complex is where the second element is the palatal glide [j], which is always written in Bakoko as "y". Only three voiced stops are followed by this glide, as in the following table:

Consonant complex	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final Position
/bj/	[bj] ¹	By by	—	<i>èbyaye</i> <i>womb</i>	—
/dj/	[dj] ¹	Dy dy	—	<i>èdìdyà</i> <i>wall</i>	—
/gj/	[gj] ¹	Gy gy	—	<i>livingye</i> <i>stalk(v)</i>	—

2.1.3 Consonants plus ‘w’

The last kind of consonant complex is where the second element is the labiovelar glide [w], which is always written in Bakoko as "w". Two velar stops and two nasals may be followed by this glide, as in the following table:

Consonant complex	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final Position
/kw/	[kw]	Kw kw	<i>kwètè</i> <i>sweet potato</i>	<i>èkwem</i> <i>box</i>	—
/gw/	[gw]	Gw gw	—	<i>ɲgwaag</i> <i>edge</i>	—
/mw/	[mw]	Mw mw	<i>mweh</i> <i>sprinkle</i>	—	—
/ɲw/	[ɲw]	ɲw ɲw	<i>ɲwen</i> <i>owner</i>	<i>lɲwàhè</i> <i>drop</i>	—

2.1.4 Consonant orthography rules

Various rules about which consonants can occur in which positions or which can occur before and after other consonants are important to learn. Here is a partial list of consonant orthography rules:

1. The only consonants that can be word-final are "t", "k" "m" "n" "ɲ" "g" and "l".
2. Never write an "x". If you hear an "x", write a "g".
3. Never write "gh". If you hear a "gh" sound, write a "g".

2.2 Vowels

The Bakoko language has 7 vowel phonemes, presented with their allophones and proposed graphemes in the table below. The sounds are shown as they occur in different positions of the word.

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/i/	[i] ~ [ə] ²	I i	—	èdìŋ <i>love</i>	si <i>ground</i>
/e/	[e]	E e	ètut <i>shoulder</i>	mbèlà <i>eagle</i>	ate <i>bottom</i>
/ɛ/	[ɛ]	Ɛ ɛ	ɛmɔn <i>fetus</i>	libɛl <i>breast</i>	ɔte <i>star</i>
/a/	[a]	A a	anù <i>mouth</i>	lah <i>chin</i>	ŋgilà <i>lion</i>
/u/	[u]	U u	—	ŋkùfà <i>waist</i>	mbù <i>dog</i>
/o/	[o]	O o	—	jol <i>nose</i>	lìsò <i>to wash</i>
/ɔ/	[ɔ]	Ɔ ɔ	—	livɔl <i>to sweep</i>	èlò <i>thorn</i>

² The vowel [ə] appears rarely in this language and when it does, it is always in free variation with [i].

2.2.1 Vowel length

Bakoko has both short and long vowels, written as a sequence of two vowels. Examples of these long vowels and the contrasting short vowels are given below:

licii	<i>to write</i>	liji	<i>to know</i>
pee	<i>puff adder</i>	pèg	<i>wisdom</i>
èpèele	<i>fan</i>	lilɛl	<i>jump</i>
likàà	<i>divide</i>	likan	<i>cut open</i>
lìsùu	<i>ashes</i>	ètut	<i>shoulder</i>
àkòò	<i>leg</i>	tol	<i>chest</i>
lìsòò	<i>hide (tr)</i>	lìsɔ	<i>come</i>

2.2.2 Vowel orthography rules

Various rules concerning which vowels can occur in which positions are important to learn. Here is a partial list of vowel orthography rules:

1. Never write "ə". If you hear "ə", write "i".

3 Tone

We have identified four surface tones in Bakoko: two level tones, high [á] and low [à], and 2 contour tones, rising [ǎ] and falling [â]. These tones may exist on short vowels or be spread over long vowels. It is not hard to find examples of tonal contrast, such as in the minimal pairs that follow:

High vs. Low:

[ló]	<i>vomit (tr)</i>	[tʃéx]	<i>hatch</i>
[lò]	<i>grow (of plants)</i>	[tʃèx]	<i>slice</i>
[lìvè:]	<i>fever</i>	[lìlò:]	<i>naked snail</i>
[lìvè:]	<i>reddish</i>	[lìlò:]	<i>destroy, spoil</i>

Falling vs. Low

[dǎh]	<i>spirit</i>
[dih]	<i>fireplace</i>

Rising vs. Low

[mbà:]	<i>side (body)</i>
[mbǎ:]	<i>yam</i>

We even find a minimal tone triplet, a set of three words in which three of the four phonetic tones are in direct contrast with each other, as below:

[ŋgó:]	<i>pity</i>
[ŋgô:]	<i>uncle</i>
[ŋgò:]	<i>catfish</i>

3.1 Lexical tone contrasts marked by diacritics

What is important about lexical tone in Bakoko is two things: first, the functional load of tone (as measured by the number of minimal tone pairs) is much lower than in other languages in the Southern half of Cameroon (especially, it is much lower than in Grassfields Bantu languages). This fact gives us the courage to propose a tone marking system that is not as complicated as some other languages. Just looking at the frequency of specific tones and their participation in tone pairs, one notices that contour tones (i.e. Rising and Falling) and minimal tone pairs involving these tones are very infrequent compared to the level tones (i.e. High and Low). Because of these facts, we believe that a tone marking system that does not mark these contour tones will not be overly difficult to read.

The second important factor in Bakoko is the fact that tonal contrasts (as measured by the number of minimal tone pairs) is not evenly distributed between all the various possible tone pairs. In fact, the overwhelming majority of tone contrasts in this language is between

the two level tones High and Low. We only occasionally find a minimal tone pair that involves one of the contour tones Rising or Falling. When we examine these minimal pairs in detail, we find that Low tone contrasts with both Rising and Falling in Bakoko while the High tone contrasts with only Falling tone. Since we would like to write only one tone diacritic to mark lexical tone in Bakoko, this restriction makes us favour marking Low tones and leaving all the other tones unmarked (instead of marking High tone and leaving all the other tones unmarked). This preference is reinforced by the apparent higher frequency of High tones over Low tones; if we only mark Low tones in Bakoko, we will have fewer tone diacritics on a page than if we mark High tones (something that is seen as desirable by many people making such decisions).

We therefore propose a marking system as found in the two charts below:

Short Vowels

Tone	Phonetic	Grapheme (Diacritic)	Examples	Frequency
Low	[à]	à	lèn <i>today</i>	e.g.: many verbs and some nouns
Rising	[ǎ]	a	mǎn <i>child</i>	e.g: few nouns
Falling	[â]		dih <i>spirit</i>	e.g: few nouns
High	[á]		tit <i>animal</i>	e.g.: very many nouns and verbs

Long Vowels

Low	[à:]	àà	nyùù <i>white hairs</i>	e.g: very many verbs and many nouns
Rising	[ǎ:]	àa	wii <i>theft</i>	e.g: few verbs and nouns
Falling	[â:]	aà	paàm <i>male</i>	e.g.: some nouns, few verbs
High	[á:]	aa	kɔɔ <i>monkey</i>	e.g: many nouns and few verbs

It is important to note at this point that our analysis this far is based on a “basic vocabulary” of just 1,266 Bakoko words (i.e. words with only one root with no ideophones or loan words included). If additional research is done that adds more basic words to this group, it is possible that additional tone pairs might show up and some of them might even be ambiguous. If the level of ambiguity becomes great enough, the language community may want to consider adding additional tone marks on short vowels to disambiguate key minimal pairs. If this becomes a desired outcome of the Bakoko community, one could write either/or both of the two tone glides (Rising and Falling). Because these two glides are so rare, the number of words with these marks would also be very small.

If on the other hand, the Bakoko community would like to simply even further the tone marking system shown above, there are a couple of things they could do:

1. They could decide not to write Low tone marks on any prefixes as there is no contrast between Bakoko tones on prefixes (all prefix tones are always Low). If this is decided, readers and writers would need to be educated to be able to identify the few prefixes found in Bakoko.

2. The Bakoko community could also decide not to write Low tone marks on any “grammatical words” (i.e. words other than nouns and verbs) as these words are never found in any minimal tone pairs. If this is decided, readers and writers would need to be educated to be able to identify which words are nouns and verbs (and thus need to have tone marks).

In conclusion, if both of the above decisions were made, you would end up with a system where Low tones are only marked when they occur on noun and verb roots and suffixes. Please note that these suggestions are not part of the present system but just modifications of this system if a simpler system is someday thought desirable.

3.2 Grammatical meanings marked by diacritics

Bakoko grammatical tone will be investigated at a later time. At this point, we have not found any grammatical tone that requires additional diacritics in the orthography. Since this type of discovery usually happens as the new orthography is used for writing texts, we may need to add additional rules later.

4 Word division

Bakoko word division will hopefully be examined further at some later point in time. It will be especially important to develop appropriate criteria for distinguishing compound nouns from associative noun phrases.

In the meantime, we mention that all the normal Bantu noun class prefixes will be written as part of the nouns. Our chart below follows Kenmogne (2000:49) with the exception that we have labelled his class 4 to be our class 6:

Class	Noun	Gloss
1	nchèn	<i>host</i>
2	ḃàchèn	<i>hosts</i>
3	ànù	<i>mouth</i>
5	jàm	<i>thing</i>
6	mìnù	<i>mouths</i>
7	èlḃlḃ	<i>duck</i>
8	bìlḃlḃ	<i>ducks</i>
9	kɔɔ	<i>monkey</i>
10	kɔɔ	<i>monkeys</i>
11	ḁsḁsḁn	<i>ant</i>
13	àsḁsḁn	<i>ants</i>

5 Elision

In Bakoko, when a word ending with a vowel is preceded by another word starting with a vowel, the second vowel is usually elided. However, in the orthography these elided vowels are always written as below:

mìkòò mi ekàgà [mìkò: mí kàghá]
 legs of bed
the legs of a bed

À kè a ndii. [á kè ndí:]
3ps go to farm
He is going to the farm.

6 Punctuation and capitalisation

The punctuation marks and the rules that govern the Bakoko language are the same as those for English. The punctuation marks used for Bakoko are therefore as follows:

1. Full stop (.)
2. Question mark (?)
3. Exclamation mark (!)
4. Comma (,)
5. Colon (:)
6. Semicolon (;)
7. Quotation marks (“ ... ”) and (‘ ... ’)
8. Parentheses (brackets)

6.1 Full stop

The full stop (.) in Bakoko marks the end of a declarative sentence.

Anda à kè a dii.
Anda PROG go to farm
Anda is going to the farm.

6.2 Question mark

The question mark (?) marks the end of an interrogative sentence.

Ye wa som a ɛbòm?
what 2s buy in market
What did you buy at the market?

6.3 Exclamation mark

The exclamation mark is written at the end of a command, or it is placed following exclamatory words or phrases. It functions to express interjections, surprises, excitement, and forceful comments as well as simple commands; as below.

Bogo!
leave.IMP
Leave!

Sɔ va!
come here
Come here!

6.4 Comma

Commas are used to separate clauses or parallel words within a clause, as below:

Ba nga ke mbi à εbom, ba ke à esùkùlù.

3p PROG go NEG to market, 3p go to school

They are not going to market, they are going to school.

Anda à bye singi ya, mbu ya, là kamàt enhàà à ndè.

Anda PT have cat one, dog one, and goat three to house

Anda has a cat, a dog and three goats in the house.

6.5 Quotation marks

Quotation marks (“ ... ”) occur at the beginning and end of direct speech, as below:

A laga, “Dg nga ke ve?”

3s P1. say 2s PROG go where

He said, “Where are you going?”

Note: In English and Bakoko, other punctuation marks always precede closing quotation marks when they occur next to each other.

6.6 Capitalisation

Capital letters are used at the beginning of sentences, for proper nouns, and sometimes after a colon.

First word in a sentence:

A bigi kè à εbom len.

3s FUT go to market today

He will go to the market today.

Proper nouns:

A yàja Ada, Nganga, Nkamba la Elembe.

3s P1.call Ada Nganga Nkamba and Elembe

He called Ada, Nganga, Nkamba and Elembe.

After a colon IF what follows the colon is a complete sentence:

Jàm ya lile mbale: A sebe à nle.

Thing one is true: 3s NEG in house

One thing is true: He is not in the house.

If what follows the colon is not a complete sentence, a capital is not used, as below;

But bibaa bile a nle: paam la mindiga.

persons two be in house man and woman

Two people are in the house: a man and a woman.

6.7 Parentheses

Parentheses (brackets) are used to insert background information into a text, as below:

Okolo à nùñu tit yè (siñgi ebaa la mbu ya) ɔ ke
Okolo PRES sell animals his cats two and dog one move away.
Okolo has sold his animals (two cats and a dog) and moved away.

7 Sample text

This text is part of a story written by Nkwan Oscar Mban, a native speaker of Oku, then translated into Bakoko.

Mìndiga wa à ɓee la ɓɔn ɓiŋhaa, àwanda aɓaa là ɲgɔn ya. Bi ɓee nyàghane a lèkè li ènèŋe a liaa li mindim.

Nyɔ mindiga ò som ndeg èsaamà, ò ti yɔ ɓɔn ɓee anyuu liaa li mindim.

Ène ɲoŋo vini, ɓa ɓɔn bu ke là ndeg yaba a liaa li mindim. Mɔn sig à ɓee là ndeg ebaa.

Bu ke bi ɓege ndeg yà a mu, nyiŋi ki a wɔ.

Nyiŋ kiti e ŋgi òŋ, ècèg bi ŋgi ke òsòò, Anda ah ɓègle ɓe ndeg yee mbèèŋ a mu: là yò yù ɓehan a si yù ɓoo.. Nyiŋi kiti ètam, ɔtiman ɔsòò, a misòà, kàsig à ŋgi nanŋa mbii, ndeg yee yu ɓehan a ɲgɔg yu ɓoo bipàh biɓaa.

Viŋ ɔlɔ, Anda ò timan a nlee la bipàh byee bi ndeg.

Nyàŋeɔ nyɔŋ eɓèŋga èceŋè ɔ teeyè, a bye là Anda ne a yahe yɔ la mindim a ɲga aa là èpàh e ndeg.

Anda ɔ ɓɔtle lyaa li mindim la yeŋ èpàh ndeg.

Ène mindim ma pam a mim a èɓeŋgà, nyàŋe ɔ yo la nye ne a ke a tɔɔ a si, là nye ɔke ɔ tɔɔ a si.

English Translation

A woman had three children: two boys and one girl. They had to fetch water from very far away. So this woman bought six calabashes to give to the children to use in fetching water.

In the evening, the children took the calabashes and went to fetch water. Each child had two calabashes. They went to fetch the water carrying one calabash on their head and holding the other one in their hand.

The next day when they went to the stream, Chung carried his calabash on his head without holding on, and it fell and broke. The following day they went again to the stream, and as they were coming back, Chung was running and dropped his calabash on a stone and it broke into two pieces. Chung went home that day with just pieces of his calabash. His mother gave him a beating.

His mother took a large pot, set it down, and told Chung that he had to carry water with the pieces of his calabash, until the pot was full. Chung started carrying water with his piece of calabash, filling up the pot.

When the pot was half full of water, his mother told him to come and sit down. He came and sat down.

8 Need for further testing of the orthography

Any new orthography needs people to use it for a time before potential problems reveal themselves. It is our hope that this proposal will be a significant first step in allowing people to start reading and writing the Bakoko language.

References

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