

Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation

# Kenswey Nsey (Bamessing): Orthography Guide

Aaron DeVries

SIL Cameroon  
B.P. 1299, Yaoundé, Cameroon  
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## Abbreviations

[...]	Phonetic Transcription (International Phonetic Alphabet)
/.../	Phonemic Transcription (International Phonet Alphabet)
1SG	First-Person, Singular
1PLI	First-Person, Plural, Inclusive
2PL	Second-Person, Plural
PROG	Progressive Aspect
IMP	Imperative
NEG	Negative Marker
P	Past-tense Marker
FUT	Future-tense Marker

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# 1 Introduction

This paper proposes an orthography for Kenswey Nsey, a Grassfields Bantu language from the South Ring group. It is spoken by about 12, 500 people in the village of Bamessing, North-West Province, Republic of Cameroon. The language has no dialect differences, however the Ethnologue (Gordon, 2005) lists the languages of Babungo, Wushi (spoken in Babessi), and Bamunka as close relatives to Kenswey Nsey. The closest of these is Babungo. The people of Bamessing recognize this, and when asked about the language of Babungo they say that it “rhymes” with that of Bamessing. The two languages, while very similar, are not considered to be mutually intelligible. A very thorough linguistic analysis of Babungo was completed by Willi Schaub from 1974 to 1984. Schaub also did some work on Kenswey Nsey, producing a provisional sketch orthography in 1979. This orthography was used to produce a book of Bamessing folk stories entitled “ŋwa'nə məbo' nsey” in 1982. At the time, Kenswey Nsey was not given sufficient phonological analysis to produce a full orthography statement. Since then, there have been two phonological analyses of the language. The first was completed in 2000 as a Masters thesis at the University of Yaoundé (Akeriweh, 2000). The second phonological analysis (DeVries, 2008) was completed in conjunction with this new orthography statement, and it is based on the findings of that analysis that this paper is written.

The alphabet proposed in this paper has been designed to be in accordance with the General Alphabet of Cameroonian Languages (Tadadjeu and Sadembouo 1979).

## 2 Alphabet

The Kenswey Nsey segmental alphabet is made up of 21 consonants and 10 vowels. They are represented below in upper and lower case:

A a, Æ æ, B b, Ch ch, D d, E e, ɛ ɛ, ɐ ɐ, F f, G g, Gh gh, H h, I i, I i, J j, K k, L l, M m, N n, Ny ny, ŋ ŋ, O o, ɔ ɔ, 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	Allophones	Grapheme	Initial Position	Medial Position	Final Position
/t/	[t]	<b>T t</b>	<b>taŋ</b> <i>begin</i>	<b>nyite</b> <i>prepare (food)</i>	_____
/k/	[k]	<b>K k</b>	<b>kətɛŋ</b> <i>calabash</i>	<b>ŋkaaʔ</b> <i>wood</i>	_____
/b/	[b]	<b>B b</b>	<b>ba</b> <i>carry on back</i>	<b>kibi</b> <i>dust (n)</i>	_____
/d/	[d]	<b>D d</b>	<b>di</b> <i>(be) heavy</i>	<b>ndwe</b> <i>clothing</i>	_____
/g/	[g]	<b>G g</b>	<b>gege'</b> <i>chin</i>	<b>ŋgɔ'</b> <i>year</i>	_____
/tʃ/	[tʃ]	<b>Ch ch</b>	<b>che</b> <i> dwell, inhabit</i>	<b>kəchɔŋ</b> <i>chimpanzee</i>	_____
/dʒ/	[dʒ]	<b>J j</b>	<b>je</b> <i>come</i>	<b>njaan</b> <i>axe</i>	_____
/f/	[f]	<b>F f</b>	<b>fe</b> <i>heart</i>	<b>təŋkɔ'fo</b> <i>morning</i>	_____
/s/	[s]	<b>S s</b>	<b>see</b> <i>slice</i>	<b>fəsɪŋ</b> <i>truth</i>	_____

Phoneme	Allophones	Grapheme	Initial Position	Medial Position	Final Position
/v/	[v]	V v	vo <i>keep/save</i>	_____	_____
/z/	[z]	Z z	zee <i>eat</i>	_____	_____
/ɣ/	[ɣ]	Gh gh	ghaa' <i>(be) rich</i>	beghə' <i>hundred</i>	_____
	[ɰ] <sup>1</sup>		ghɔɔ <i>spear (n)</i>	ghuŋ <i>ten</i>	_____
/h/	[h]	H h	huŋ <i>here</i>	_____	_____
/ʔ/	[ʔ]	'	N/A	la'a <i>choke</i>	bi' <i>fold (v)</i>
/m/	[m]	M m	mii <i>finish</i>	tumɔŋɔŋ <i>kingfisher</i>	_____
/n/	[n]	N n	nəŋ <i>lie down</i>	bəneŋ <i>abstain</i>	_____
/ɲ/	[ɲ]	Ny ny	nyi <i>animal</i>	mənyɔ' <i>pain</i>	_____
/ŋ/	[ŋ]	Ŋ ŋ	ŋuŋ <i>breast</i>	biŋu <i>body</i>	biŋ <i>accept</i>
/l/	[l]	L l	li' <i>refuse (v)</i>	yele <i>strain (food)</i>	_____
/w/	[w]	W w	wi <i>fire</i>	kəwɔ <i>footprint</i>	tɔw <i>throat</i>

Phoneme	Allophones	Grapheme	Initial Position	Medial Position	Final Position
/j/	[j] ~ [ɟ] <sup>2</sup>	Y y	yi'i <i>persuade</i>	fəyiaə <i>vein</i>	kwey <i>arm</i>

<sup>1</sup>/y/ is realized as [ɥ] before back vowels.

<sup>2</sup>[ɟ] is in free variation with [j].

### 2.1.1 Nasal-Consonant clusters

One kind of consonant cluster found in Kenswey Nsey consists of clusters where the first consonant is a nasal consonant 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, as in the following table:

Consonant cluster	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/Nt/	[nt]	Nt nt	ntɔ <i>six</i>	kəntɔ'ɔ <i>storage room</i>	_____
/Nk/	[ŋk]	ŋk ŋk	ŋkunyaŋ <i>pig</i>	nəŋkə <i>(be)</i> <i>different</i>	_____
/Nb/	[mb]	Mb mb	mbe <i>world</i>	kwəmbə' <i>shoulder</i>	_____
/Nd/	[nd]	Nd nd	ndɔ <i>cup</i>	mindɔw <i>blood</i>	_____
/Ng/	[ŋg]	ŋg ŋg	ŋgɔ' <i>mouse</i>	kəŋgwɔ <i>stupid</i> <i>person</i>	_____
/Ntʃ/	[ntʃ]	Nch nch	nche <i>mother</i>	fəŋchi' <i>soldier</i>	_____

Consonant cluster	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/Ndʒ/	[ndʒ]	<b>Nj nj</b>	<b>nje'</b> <i>outside</i>	<b>fənjej</b> <i>star</i>	_____
/Nf/	[ɱf]	<b>Mf mf</b>	<b>mfe</b> <i>prophecy</i>	<b>kəmfɪŋ</b> <i>lock (n)</i>	_____
/Ns/	[ns]	<b>Ns ns</b>	<b>nsæ</b> <i>tail</i>	<b>kənsɛj</b> <i>language<sup>1</sup></i>	_____

<sup>1</sup>*language* can also be translated as **kənswey**.

### 2.1.2 Labialised consonants

Another kind of consonant cluster is where the second consonant is the labiovelar glide [w], which is always written in Kenswey Nsey as "w". Quite a few consonants may also be followed by this glide, as in the following table:

Consonant cluster	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/tw/	[tw]	<b>Tw tw</b>	<b>twa</b> <i>burst</i>	<b>ntwaa</b> <i>shoot (plant)</i>	_____
/kw/	[kw]	<b>Kw kw</b>	<b>kwe'</b> <i>limp</i>	<b>bəkwe</b> <i>tribute</i>	_____
/bw/	[bw]	<b>Bw bw</b>	<b>bwə</b> <i>(be) tired</i>	<b>bwəbwə</b> <i>lung</i>	_____
/dw/	[dw]	<b>Dw dw</b>	<b>dwedwe</b> <i>black ants</i>	<b>kəndwa</b> <i>the act of going</i>	_____
/gw/	[gw]	<b>Gw gw</b>	<b>gwə</b> <i>war</i>	<b>ŋgwə</b> <i>(be) stupid</i>	_____
/tʃw/	[tʃw]	<b>Chw chw</b>	<b>chwə</b> <i>(be) sharp</i>	<b>kəchwite</b> <i>tattoo</i>	_____

Consonant cluster	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/dʒw/	[dʒw]	<b>Jw jw</b>	<b>jwa'</b> <i>cut open</i>	<b>ᵿᵿᵿᵿᵿᵿᵿ</b> <i>seventeen</i>	
/sw/	[sw]	<b>Sw sw</b>	<b>swæ</b> <i>(be) deep</i>	<b>kiswɛ</b> <i>sand</i>	_____
/zw/	[zw]	<b>Zw zw</b>	<b>zwe</b> <i>wife</i>	N/A	_____
/ɲw/	[ɲw]	<b>Nyw nyw</b>	<b>Nywe</b> <i>God</i>	<b>bənywe</b> <i>gods</i>	_____
/ɳw/	[ɳw]	<b>ᵿw ᵿw</b>	<b>ᵿwa</b> <i>self</i>	<b>bəᵿwi</b> <i>(be) selfish</i>	_____
/lw/	[lw]	<b>Lw lw</b>	<b>lwa</b> <i>leave</i>	<b>kelwɛ</b> <i>army ant</i>	_____
/jw/	[jw]~[ʒw] <sup>1</sup>	<b>Yw yw</b>	<b>ywa</b> <i>snake</i>	<b>kəywi</b> <i>breath</i>	_____

<sup>1</sup>[ʒw] and [jw] are in free variation.

### 2.1.3 Consonant orthography rules

Various rules on 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. Never write “c” without an “h” after it.
2. Never write " ' " word-initially.
3. Never write “h” word-finally.
4. The only consonants that can be word-final are " ' ", “ᵿ”, “w”, and "y".
5. Never write "ng". If you hear an "ng" as it is in English, write "ᵿ".
6. If you hear a nasal consonant before "k" or "g", always write "ᵿ".
7. Except for in the case of “ny”, never write a “y” directly after another consonant.

## 2.2 Vowels

The Kenswey Nsey language has ten 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]	<b>I i</b>	_____	<b>bi'</b> <i>hem</i>	<b>bi</b> <i>ask, request</i>
/e/	[e]	<b>E e</b>	_____	<b>me'</b> <i>meaning</i>	N/A
	[ɪ] <sup>1</sup>		_____	<b>yele</b> <i>strain</i> <i>(food)</i>	<b>be</b> <i>cola nut</i>
/ɛ/	[ɛ]	<b>Ɛ ɛ</b>	_____	<b>bɛ'e</b> <i>sell</i>	<b>bɛ</b> <i>pick up</i>
/æ/	[æ]	<b>Æ æ</b>	_____	<b>wæ</b> <i>beat</i>	<b>bæ</b> <i>ripe</i>
/ɨ/	[ɨ]	<b>I i</b>	_____	<b>fi</b> <i>(be) blind</i>	<b>fifi</b> <i>(be) new</i>
	[i] <sup>2</sup>		_____	<b>liŋ</b> <i>cultivate</i>	_____
/ə/	[ə]	<b>Ɖ ə</b>	_____	<b>ləŋ</b> <i>hide (tr)</i>	<b>yotə</b> <i>listen</i>
/a/	[a]	<b>A a</b>	<b>akə</b> <i>father</i>	<b>laŋ</b> <i>marry</i>	<b>ba</b> <i>pack (v)</i>
	[ɒ] <sup>3</sup>			<b>taw</b> <i>blow (horn)</i>	
/u/	[u]	<b>U u</b>	_____	<b>kuŋ</b> <i>enter</i>	<b>fuu</b> <i>fellow-wife</i>

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/o/	[o]	O o		bo' <i>slave</i>	too <i>dig</i>
/ɔ/	[ɔ]	ɔ ɔ	_____	ŋgɔ' <i>year</i>	mbɔ <i>ox</i>

<sup>1</sup>[e] is realised as [ɪ] in short, open syllables.

<sup>2</sup>[i] is realised as [i] before [ŋ].

<sup>3</sup>[a] is realised as [ɒ] before [w].

### 2.2.1 Vowel Diphthongs

Of all possible combinations of vowels, only four are possible in Kenswey Nsey, as shown in the following table.

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/ie/	[ie]	Ie ie	_____	kiese <i>change</i>	kəchie <i>mud</i>
/iæ/	[iæ]	Iæ iæ	_____	_____	njiæ <i>xylophone</i>
/iɛ/	[iɛ]	Iɛ iɛ	_____	ndiɛ' <i>poison</i>	chiɛ <i>clear</i> <i>(land)(v)</i>
/iɑ/	[iɑ]	Iɑ iɑ	_____	biɑ' <i>trap (insect)</i>	yiɑ <i>young</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 “u” directly after another vowel. If you hear “u”, write “w”.
2. Never write “i” directly after another vowel. If you hear “i”, write “y”

## 3 Tone

We have identified four surface tones in Kenswey Nsey: 2 level tones, high [á] and low [à]; and 2 contour tones, rising [ǎ] and falling [â].

### 3.1 Lexical tone contrasts marked by diacritics

As of this point in time, we have discovered minimal tone pairs for words that contrast high tone, low tone, rising tone and falling tone with each other. Whether or not the tone needs to be marked is ultimately up to the discretion of the Nsey language committee. At this point in time, the decision to hold off on marking any tone, other than doubling of vowels. Double-vowels should be used to mark any contour tone in order to contrast with level tones. If cases of ambiguity between words arise beyond this distinction, the recommendation is to adopt the following system for those cases.

We propose a system which will only use the high tone diacritic ( ´). Vowels with high tone can be given this tone marking. Vowels with low tone will not receive any marking. Instances of rising or falling contour tones are to be represented by the double vowel marked with high tone on the second or first vowel respectively. Doubling the vowel will not be a problem because length has not been found to be a contrastive element in Kenswey Nsey. Low tones will not be marked, as they will be the default status of the vowel (See the table on the following page).

Tone	Phonetic	Grapheme (Diacritic)	Examples	Hypothetical tone marking	Frequency
High	[á]	á	<b>be</b> <i>cola nut</i>	<i>bé</i>	very common
Low	[à]	a	<b>fe</b> <i>jaw</i>	<i>fe</i>	very common
Rising	[ǎ]	áá	<b>fuu</b> <i>take out</i>	<i>fuú</i>	fairly common
Falling	[â]	áa	<b>baa</b> <i>we (incl.)</i>	<i>báa</i>	fairly common

Our proposal is to write all Kenswey Nsey words as they occur in isolation (i.e. as they occur when pronounced by themselves). Kenswey Nsey speakers should have no problem reading or pronouncing the actual phonetic pitch of entire sentences once they recognize the meanings of the individual words that make up that sentence. It is fairly easy to find Kenswey Nsey words where the only difference between them is tone. Ambiguity in writing without tone marking may propose a problem for minimal pairs that are of the same class (i.e. both words are nouns). In such cases, the above tone marking system is suggested. For example, note the minimal tone pairs below between the four contrasted tones :

**potentially ambiguous**

**bé** [bé] *cola nut (noun)*  
**be** [bè] *goat (noun)*

**non-ambiguous**

**kuŋ** [kúŋ] *enter (verb)*  
**kuŋ** [kùŋ] *bean (noun)*

**potentially ambiguous**

**bée** [bê] *goats (noun)*  
**beé** [bě] *you (pl) (pronoun)*

**non-ambiguous**

**fuu** [fû] *white (noun)*  
**fuu** [fǔ] *take out (verb)*

### 3.2 Grammatical meanings marked by diacritics

There is a need for further research which should study the possible need for additional diacritics to indicate grammatical categories. For the moment, Kenswey Nsey speakers can use the proposed lexical tone marking rules and see if any further grammatical ambiguity arises.

## 4 Word division

Kenswey Nsey 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, as for the examples shown below:

<b>Noun</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
ketɛŋ	<i>calabash</i>
mənyɔ'	<i>pain</i>
kənyɑ'	<i>word</i>
fəsɪŋ	<i>truth</i>
kəchɔŋ	<i>chimpanzee</i>
kəchie	<i>mud</i>
kətɔɔ	<i>head</i>

## 5. Elision

Because we are proposing to write all Kenswey Nsey words as they occur in isolation, any instances of elision that occur when combining words into sentences should not be represented in the written form.

## 6. Punctuation and capitalisation

The punctuation marks and the rules that govern Kenswey Nsey are basically the same as those for English. The punctuation marks used for Kenswey Nsey are therefore as follows:

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

### 6.1 Full stop

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

**Mə jeje.**

1SG come.PROG

*I am coming.*

### 6.2 Question mark

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

**Bey ye kə?**

2PL do what

*What are you doing?*

### 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.

**Bey lia!**

2PL (be)quiet.IMP

*Be quiet!*

### 6.4 Comma

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

**Baa ye gə fə bey, baa gə wey.**

1PLI FT go compound NEG 1PLI go market

*We are not going home, we are going to the market.*

**Baa ye yuŋ be, fenya' ba'a ŋgəsæ.**

1PLI FT buy cola nuts tomatoes and corn

*We will buy cola nuts, tomatoes and corn.*

### 6.5 Quotation marks

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

**Wə la' lɛ, “Bey ye kə?”**

3SG P.say that 2PL do what

*He said, “What are you doing?”*

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

## 6.7 Capitalisation

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

First word in a sentence:

**Bəloŋ kɔw bəkə.**

men love women

*Men love women.*

Proper nouns:

**Ti Bibi swɛ nə Ti Nekia.**

Mr. Bibi P.talk to Mr. Nekia

*Mr. Bibi talked to Mr. Nekia.*

After a colon:

**Ma kə nə kənɔ mɔ': Bo yəsei bey.**

1SG know only thing one dogs talk NEG

*I am sure of one thing: Dogs cannot talk.*

## 7. Sample text

This text is from the story "*Kəno kə kə nə ye ŋguu nɛ chwii nchia ye'kə bəghij*", written by Kwongho Clement Ŋkaŋmbe, a native speaker of Kenswey Nsey.

**Mbe nə bow mo naa kəghaa diə, ŋkə' lwa nə ncheŋgu nə tɔ'tə, ŋkə' gə mæ'æ ncheŋgu gə yey mo nə le no no. Fəka' go mə haan wə ko. Ncheŋgu je la' le wə ye ghisə chwii nchia bo no mo. Taŋ fə nche haa ŋguu nə chwii nchia ye'kə sənə no mo. Kə nə də' nə baan le baan nə ti wo yaan ley.**

(English translation on the following page)

**English Translation:**

The world lacked water for a long time. The cock and the hen were taking a walk. The cock left the hen behind, went and saw water and began to drink. A stick fell on his neck and he died. The hen came and said, "You ought to look up before drinking." From that day all birds look up when drinking. It teaches us that we must look before we take a step.

**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 language.

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