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Alphabet and Orthography Statement for the Mambila Language

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ALPHABET AND ORTHOGRAPHY STATEMENT FOR THE MAMBILA LANGUAGE

by Mona Perrin

INTRODUCTION

This statement gives the alphabet and orthography principles used at present in writing Mambila.

THE ALPHABET

The Consonants

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Examples		
			Initial position	medial position	final position
/p/	[p]	p	pe 'to chop'		
/b/	[b]	b	bou 'hollow'	tàbè 'earth'	kèb 'side'
/f/	[f]	f	fà 'two'		
/v/	[bv]	v	vún 'hoe'		
/t/	[t]	t	tí 'hare'		
/d/	[d]	d	dàb 'long'		
	[r]	r		furú 'to bury'	car 'monkey'
/l/	[l]	l	leba 'tongue'	gule 'foot'	___ ¹
/s/	[s]	s	sér 'fufu'		
	[ʃ] ²		sie 'to seize'		

¹ /l/ does not occur word final in the reference dialect, that of Sonkolong, but is maintained by speakers in the Atta region: **bal** bag; **lèl** medicine.

² There is predictable palatalisation of /s/ in the context of /i/.

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Examples		
			Initial position	medial position	final position
/tʃ/	[tʃ]	c	cab 'attraper'		
/dʒ/	[dʒ]	j	jeré 'pity'		
/k/	[k]	k	kè 'mat'		
/g/	[g]	g	gi 'finish'		
	[ɣ]			lùgò 'hole'	
	[x]				mbòg 'axe'
/w/	[w]	w	we 'fire'		
/j/	[j]	y	yam 'to increase'		
/h/	[h]	h	ham 'fat'		
	[hʲ] ³		hin 'door'		
	[hʷ] ⁴		hùn 'très rouge'		
/m/	[m]	m	mè 'I'	nòmò 'water'	kam 'to squeeze'
/n/	[n]	n	non 'bird'	bené 'song'	kàn 'proverb'
/ɲ/	[ɲ]	ny	nyùm 'flour'		
/ŋ/	[ŋ]	ŋ	ŋam 'to suck'		dúŋ 'shelter'
/mb/	[mb]	mb	mbán 'breast'		
/mv/	[mbv]	mv	mvulú 'brain'		
/nd/	[nd]	nd	nde 'to go'		

³ There is predictable palatalisation when /h/ is followed by /i/.

⁴ There is predictable labialisation when /h/ is followed by /u/.

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Examples		
			Initial position	medial position	final position
/ndʒ/	[ndʒ]	ɲj	ɲjáɲ 'guitar'		
/ŋg/	[ŋg]	ŋg	ŋgàb 'calabash'		

The vowels

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Examples			
			CV	CVC	CVCV	CVCV
/i/	[i]	i	gi 'finish'	kìn 'stranger'	tibí 'short'	tibí 'short'
/e/	[e]	e	kè 'mat'			jeré 'pity'
	[ɛ]			seb 'to insult'		
	[ə]				tena 'to cut'	
/a/	[a]	a	ka 'always'	kam 'press'	salé 'hot'	nyaga 'to write'
/u/	[u]	u	dù 'repos'	tub 'lake'	dula 'to run'	fulu 'nest'
	[y] ⁵				dulí 'to smell'	
/o/	[o]	o	no 'spy'	nob 'bait'	kómó 'oil'	colo 'to weave'
/ɔ/	[ɔ]	ɔ	bó 'they'	tôn 'elephant'	cògò 'cloth'	sògò 'basket'

Long Vowels

Vowels are slightly lengthened when they bear a tone glide. See the section on tone below. In the orthography they are doubled in order to indicate the glide.

Labialisation

1. Initial in the word:

All word initial consonant phonemes may be labialised except /p/, /b/ and /mb/.

There are three phonetic realisations of labialisation in this position : [w], [u] and [y]:

[w] when the initial consonant is /k/, /g/ or /ŋg/ and the following vowel is /a/, /ɔ/, /o/ or /e/.⁶

[u] when following all other consonants that may be labialised and the following vowel is /a/, /ɔ/ or /o/.

[y] when following a non-labial consonant and the following vowel is /e/ or /i/.

⁵ /u/ is fronted in disyllabic words in the context of a following /i/.

⁶ [gye] - native carrot, instead of the expected [gwe] is a solitary exception, possibly a loan word.

Phonetic realisation	Grapheme	/a/	/ɔ/	/o/	/e/	/i/
[w]	w	kwa 'to find'	gwɔm 'to pay'	gwo 'to grind'	ngweé 'to hear'	—
[u]	u	sua 'to draw (a knife)'	fùɔb 'laziness'	wuo 'to leave'	fue ⁷ 'to treat alike'	—
		suaré 'to escape'	suóɔm 'to be immature'	yuóɔm 'to half-open'	ɲueé ⁷ 'to drink'	—
[y]	u	—	—	—	tueé 'to speak'	suíf 'to betray'
		—	—	—	cùè 'hunger'	ngù 'leopard'

2. Final in the word:

Phonetic realisation: [u]

Grapheme: u

Examples of minimal contrasts:

co	'(snake)'	gò	'journey'
cu	'to return'	gu	'to be infected'
cou	'to pull up reeds'	gòu	'(bird)'

Palatalisation

Palatalisation may occur word final following /e/:

Phonetic realization: [i]

Grapheme: i

Examples of minimal contrasts:

bi	'(fish)'	kì	'protector'
be	'to suspect'	ke	'mat'
bei	'older sibling'	kèi	'sort'

There is predictable palatalisation of /s/ and /h/ in the context of /i/. See the consonant chart with footnotes 2 and 3.

Tone

There are four level tones, tone 1 being the highest and tone 4 the lowest.

Toneme	Tonemark	Example	English gloss
1	´	bú	'to him'
2		kɔ	'to know'
3		cer	'to lie down'
4	`	dàb	'long'

⁷ Note that the presence of an initial labial consonant blocks the fronting of [u], as does the presence of an initial velar nasal.

There are also five tone glides, written as in the chart below:

Tone glide	Example	English Gloss
21	haá	'to give'
31	dóó (as in faá dóó)	'as'
24	naàn	'how'
14	sâ	'that'
214	veên	'evil'

ORTHOGRAPHY RULES

Word Divisions

The general rule is that words are monomorphemic. The suffixes still found in the Gembu dialect in Nigeria have been dropped but the tone remains, thus giving a tone glide on the root. There are, however, a few exceptions where a suffix persists :

1. The reiterative or plural form of certain verbs:

ber *'to pou'*

berré *'to pour several times or to water several objects'*

2. The locative suffix on nouns ending in a consonant :

tòr *'mountain'*

ké te tòre *'on the mountain'*

The loss of word final /l/

The Atta dialect has preserved the word final /l/ found on the Mambila plateau. The Sonkolong dialect no longer has it. When the root vowel is other than /e/ it remains the same in both dialects. When the root vowel is /e/, the Atta dialect has [ɛ] and the Sonkolong dialect [ə], as below:

'head' – Atta: [fɛl] and Sonkolong: [fə].

In order to accommodate both dialects in the orthography **h** was chosen as a consonant to represent the [l] of the one and the change in vowel quality in the other: i.e. **feh**.

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