

THE PINYIN ORTHOGRAPHY GUIDE

by

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Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|--|
| 3s | Third person singular |
| BASAL | Basic standardization of all unwritten African languages |
| COMP | Complement |
| EX | Exclamation |
| F1 | Future (certain) Tense |
| HAB | Habitual Aspects |
| INT | Interrogative |
| NACALCO | National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees |
| NEG | Negation |

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1. Introduction

This paper* presents an orthography guide for Pinyin, a Grassfield Bantu language spoken in Santa Subdivision, Mezam Division of the Northwest Province, Republic of Cameroon. The Pinyin language has no significant differences in pronunciation or vocabulary within what is known as the Pinyin language and therefore no difficulties in inter-comprehension. This language can therefore be described as being quite homogeneous.

Pinyin is classified as Grassfield, Ngemba in Ayuk (1993:10) along with Bafut, Mundum, Mankon, Bambili, Nkwen, and Awing. It is further classified in the Ethnologue (Grimes, 2000) as Bantoid, Southern, Wide Grassfields, Narrow Grassfield, Mbam-Nkam, Ngemba. According to Tasi (1996:2), the area where Pinyin is spoken has a surface area estimated at about 721 square kilometers and a population of over 27,000 inhabitants.

2. Alphabet

The Pinyin segmental alphabet is made up of 25 consonants and 8 vowels. They are represented below in upper and lower cases:

A a, B b, Ch ch, D d, E e, Ə ə, F f, G g, Gh gh, I i, ɪ i, J j, K k, L l, Mm, N n, Ny ny, ŋ ŋ, O o, P p, R r, S s, Sh sh, T t, Ts ts, U u, ʉ ʉ, W w, Ẁ ẁ, Y y, Z z, Zh zh, ʔ.

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. Because of the frequency of word-final /ə/ in Pinyin, the only word-initial consonant is glottal stop.

| Phoneme | Allophone | Grapheme | Initial Position | Medial Position | Final Position |
|---------|--------------------------------|----------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|
| /b/ | [p] | P p | pátê <i>near</i> | apô <i>hand</i> | — |
| | [p ^h] ¹ | | púúkê <i>(be) stupid</i> | nîpu'ú <i>bundle</i> | — |
| | [b] ² | B b | — | mbāārə <i>mountain</i> | — |
| | [β] ³ | | — | atabē <i>shoe</i> | — |
| /d/ | [d] ² | D d | — | ndóŋə <i>horn</i> | — |
| | [l] | L l | lánê <i>clean</i> | alāēmə <i>blood</i> | — |

* The authors want to thank Nji Peter, Nyah John and Muluh Alice for the work they did laying the groundwork for this orthography with their participation in the Foundations for Writing courses held by SIL Cameroon. We also want to thank Tening Mongwa for his help with certain tone problems.

| | | | | | |
|------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| | [r] ⁴ | R r | — | fərə <i>wind</i> | — |
| /g/ | [g] ² | G g | — | ngu'u <i>year</i> | — |
| | [ɣ] | Gh gh ⁵ | ghaŋə <i>chest</i> | nɪghúmə <i>ten</i> | — |
| /t/ | [t] | T t | tǎ <i>father</i> | atighə <i>tree</i> | — |
| /k/ | [k] | K k | kumnə <i>cover</i> | akiə <i>ring(finger)</i> | — |
| | [ʔ] ⁶ | ' | — | apu'u <i>slave</i> | zo' <i>swim</i> |
| /z/ | [z] | Z z | zobə <i>sing</i> | azə <i>broom</i> | — |
| | [dz] ² | | — | nzaŋə <i>balafon</i> | — |
| /ʒ/ | [ʒ] | Zh zh ⁵ | zhá'kə <i>vomit</i> | azhi'tə <i>wisdom</i> | — |
| | [dʒ] ² | J j | — | njumə <i>back</i> | — |
| /f/ | [f] | F f | fa'a <i>razor</i> | afuə <i>leaf</i> | — |
| /s/ | [s] | S s | saŋə <i>star</i> | nisoŋə <i>tooth</i> | — |
| /ʃ/ | [ʃ] | Sh sh | sháŋə <i>count</i> | ashabə <i>comb</i> | — |
| /ts/ | [ts] | Ts ts | tso'o <i>partridge</i> | atsə'ə <i>cloth</i> | — |
| /tʃ/ | [tʃ] | Ch ch | cha'tə <i>greet</i> | nchiə <i>song</i> | — |
| /m/ | [m] | M m | mǎ <i>mother</i> | amə'ə <i>dew</i> | — |
| /n/ | [n] | N n | nô <i>drink</i> | tínə <i>push</i> | — |
| /ɲ/ | [ɲ] | Ny ny | nyaamə <i>animal</i> | anyarə <i>buffalo</i> | — |
| /ŋ/ | [ŋ] | Ŋ ŋ | ŋuə <i>person</i> | síŋə <i>bird</i> | — |
| /w/ | [w] | W w | wighə <i>fail (v)</i> | awə'ə <i>valley</i> | — |
| /w̃/ | [w̃] | W̃ w̃ | w̃arə <i>sew(seeds)</i> | iw̃inə <i>thorn tree</i> | — |
| /j/ | [j] | Y y | yinə <i>walk</i> | akiyio <i>weaver</i> | — |

Notes:

- ¹ The aspirated consonant phone [p^h] occurs only before [u] in open syllables.
- ² Consonant phones [b, d, g, dz, dʒ] occur only after nasal consonants while alternate consonant phones [p, l, ɸ, z, ʒ] occur in other positions.
- ³ The bilabial fricative [β] occurs only between two vowels inside a root.
- ⁴ The consonant phones [l] and [r] are allophones of the phoneme /d/. The flapped [r] occurs only in suffixes of words while /l/ occurs in roots. While the flapped [r] could be written as "d" in Pinyin, as it is written in some dialects of English and in some other Grassfields Bantu languages, the Pinyin speakers who worked on this orthography statement want to write it as "r" because of their acquaintance with Mungaka orthography as well as the fact that /r/ in Pidgin English is pronounced as a flap [r].
- ⁵ Because of the complementary distribution between [g] and [ɣ] and between [dʒ] and [ʒ], these four sounds could have been written with just the letters 'g' and 'j'. The Pinyin Language Committee, however, decided on October 23, 2005 that they wanted to also write the extra letters 'gh' and 'zh' for the predictable allophones.
- ⁶ The consonant phone [k] only occurs at the beginning of roots while glottal stop [ʔ] occurs elsewhere.

2.1.1 Homorganic Nasal Consonants

One kind of consonant found in Pinyin is characterised by a nasal consonant that is always pronounced at the same point of articulation as the following consonant. Most of these homorganic nasal consonants are also syllabic, meaning that they have both consonantal and vocalic features. These syllabic consonants are consonantal because they are pronounced like normal nasal consonants, but they are syllabic in that like vowels they can carry tone. These homorganic nasal consonants (symbolised by (N) is realised phonetically by four different nasal consonants as it assimilates to the point of articulation of the following consonant. Nevertheless, we write it as either **n** or **m**, as in the following chart:

| Homorganic Nasals | Allophone | Grapheme | Initial position | Medial position | Final position |
|-------------------|-----------|----------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|
| /N/ | [m] | M m | mbo <i>hands</i> | sambǎ <i>seven</i> | — |
| | [n] | N n | nda <i>house</i> | ísǎndá <i>walls</i> | — |
| | | | ntaŋǝ <i>room</i> | andanǝ <i>boundary</i> | — |
| | | | ntsəŋǝ <i>bottle</i> | kantǝ <i>chase</i> | — |
| | | | nzaŋǝ <i>balafon</i> | — | — |
| | | | nchiǝ <i>water</i> | kontǝ <i>trip</i> | — |
| | | | njumǝ <i>back</i> | yentǝ <i>take a walk</i> | — |
| | | | nnyoro <i>snake</i> | — | — |
| | [ŋ] | | nkû <i>hen</i> | mǐnkōŋ <i>pistle</i> | — |
| | | | ngiǝ'ó <i>suffer</i> | tsankǝ <i>to lavish</i> | — |

In the chart above, all the word-initial homorganic nasals are syllabic and carry tone while the word-medial homorganic nasals are not syllabic.

2.1.2 Palatalized Consonants

Another kind of consonant cluster found in Pinyin is where a second consonant is the palatal glide [j], which is always written in Pinyin as "y". Quite a few consonants may be followed by this glide, as in the following chart:

| Phoneme | Allophone | Grapheme | Initial position | Medial position | Final position |
|---------|-----------|----------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|
| /bj/ | [pj] | Py py | pyábə <i>wait (v)</i> | apyinə <i>outside</i> | — |
| | [bj] | By by | — | mbyiə <i>in front of</i> | — |
| /dj/ | [dj] | Dy dy | — | ndyárə <i>late</i> | — |
| | [lj] | Ly ly | lyámpə <i>mosquito</i> | pyábə <i>wait (v)</i> | — |
| /tj/ | [tj] | Ty ty | tyánkə <i>arrange</i> | atyáŋə <i>gift</i> | — |
| /kj/ | [kj] | Ky ky | kyaa <i>untie</i> | nkyérə <i>arrow</i> | — |
| /gj/ | [gj] | Gy gy | — | məngyiə <i>woman</i> | — |
| /mj/ | [mj] | My my | myanə <i>finish</i> | — | — |
| /nj/ | [nj] | Ny ny | nyaamə <i>animal</i> | inyuŋə <i>hair</i> | — |

2.1.3 Labialized Consonants

Yet another kind of consonant cluster is where the second consonant is the labiovelar glide [w], which is always written in Pinyin as "w". Quite a number of consonants may also be followed by this glide, as in the following chart:

| Consonant Cluster | Allophone | Grapheme | Initial position | Medial position | Final position |
|-------------------|-----------|----------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|
| /pw/ | [pw] | Pw pw | — | nǐpwunə <i>beside</i> | — |
| | [bw] | Bw bw | — | mbwu'ə <i>cave</i> | — |
| /dw/ | [dw] | Dw dw | — | ndwinə <i>end</i> | — |
| | [lw] | Lw lw | lwənə <i>fill</i> | alwumə <i>dry season</i> | — |
| /gw/ | [gw] | Gw gw | — | ngwaŋə <i>salt</i> | — |

| | | | | | |
|-------|-------|---------|----------------------------------|--|---|
| /kw/ | [kw] | Kw kw | kwirə <i>pour</i> | akwuə <i>foot</i> | — |
| /tw/ | [tw] | Tw tw | twumə <i>cross</i> | atwuə <i>head</i> | — |
| /tsw/ | [tsw] | Tsw tsw | tswiʔə <i>fish v</i> | nitswirə <i>account</i> | — |
| /tʃw/ | [tʃw] | Chw chw | chwirə <i>lie</i> | achwiitə <i>announcement</i> | — |
| /ʃw/ | [ʃw] | Shw shw | shwəŋnə <i>say</i> | ishwinə <i>ankle ring</i> | — |
| /sw/ | [sw] | Sw sw | swāpə <i>pack</i> | aswuə <i>baboon</i> | — |
| /zw/ | [zw] | Zw zw | zwuunə <i>buy</i> | aswumə <i>thing</i> | — |
| /ʒw/ | [ʒw] | Jw jw | zhwiʔə <i>taste</i> | azhwəbə <i>spirit</i> | — |
| /nw/ | [nw] | Nw nw | nwúʔə <i>porcupine</i> | — | — |
| /ɲw/ | [ɲw] | Nw nw | nywaʔə <i>crush</i> | inywiə <i>cutlass</i> | — |
| /ŋw/ | [ŋw] | ŋw ŋw | ŋwaʔə <i>beehive</i> | — | — |

2.1.4 Labio-palatalized Consonants

The last kind of consonant cluster is where the second consonant is the labio-palatalised glide [ɥ], which is always written in Pinyin as "w". Only velar consonants are followed by this glide, as in the following chart:

| Consonant Cluster | Allophone | Grapheme | Initial position | Medial position | Final position |
|-------------------|-----------|----------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| /gɥ/ | [gɥ] | Gw gw | — | ngwərə <i>family</i> | — |
| /kɥ/ | [kɥ] | Kw kw | kwaʔə <i>wink (eye)</i> | akwərə <i>coward</i> | — |

2.1.5 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 "d" without an "n" in front of it.
2. Never write "d" between "n" and "z".
3. Never write "d" between "n" and "j".
4. Never write "b" word-initially.
5. If you hear a nasal consonant before "k" or "g", always write "n".
6. Never write a "v" in the language.
7. Never write an "x" in the language.
8. Always write an "h" after a "c".
9. Glottal stop is the only consonant that can be written at the end of a word.

2.2 Vowels

The Pinyin language has 8 vowels, 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] | I i | — | pinə <i>dance</i> | akiyi <i>weaverbird</i> |
| /y/ | [y] | ʉ u | — | lʉə <i>gall bladder</i> | — |
| /ɛ/ | [ɛ] | E e | — | lerə <i>go</i> | nchie <i>in-law</i> |
| /a/ | [a] | A a | a <i>he/she/it</i> | kabə <i>pluck(pear)</i> | tâ <i>kick</i> |
| /ɔ/ | [ɔ] | O o | — | monə <i>child</i> | po <i>hand</i> |
| /u/ | [u] | U u | — | kúnə <i>fall (v)</i> | su <i>wash</i> |
| /ə/ | [ə] | Ə ə | — | támə <i>stand</i> | azə <i>broom</i> |
| /i/ | [i] | I i | ifə <i>blind person</i> | mifâ <i>twins</i> | — |

Note: While all of the above vowels can occur in the roots of words, only ‘a’, and ‘i’ can occur in prefixes and only ‘ə’ in suffixes. Since all noun and verb roots begin with consonants, any vowel at the beginning of a noun or a verb is necessarily a prefix. Since about 63% of verbs end in suffixes and an additional 25% without suffixes end with schwa, fully 88% of verbs end with schwa. Though nouns have a greater variety of vowels at the end of the word, they also are strongly biased towards schwa. The final result is that schwa is by far the most frequent vowel at the end of Pinyin words.

2.2.1 Long Vowels

There are also long vowels in the Pinyin language. The short vowels that have long counterparts in Pinyin are shown below. The phonemes are 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 |
|---------|-----------|----------|------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| /a/ | [aa] | Aa aa | — | apaárə <i>mad person</i> | alaá <i>wound</i> |
| /ə/ | [ɛə] | Əə əə | — | alḡḡmə <i>blood</i> | fəə <i>blow</i> |
| /i/ | [ii] | Ii ii | — | síitə <i>tear</i> | píi <i>disappear</i> |
| /i/ | [īi] | Īi īi | — | kīitə <i>harden</i> | ip̄i <i>(be) wicket</i> |
| /ɔ/ | [ɔ̄ɔ] | Oo oo | — | n̄joomə <i>insult</i> | ntso <i>war</i> |
| /u/ | [uu] | Uu uu | — | zwúúnə <i>buy</i> | atuú <i>stomach</i> |

Note: [uu] and [oo] have not been found in our limited data. They may turn up later.

2.2.2 Vowel Diphthongs

In Pinyin certain, vowels occur next to each other as diphthongs. Some examples are presented in the table below;

| Phoneme | Allophone | Grapheme | Initial position | Medial position | Final position |
|---------|-----------|----------|------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| /iɛ/ | [iɛ] | Ie ie | — | — | shié <i>(be)black</i> |
| /yə/ | [yə] | Ƴə Ƴə | — | — | luə <i>gall bladder</i> |
| /iə/ | [iə] | Iə iə | — | — | mbíə <i>goat</i> |
| /iə/ | [iə] | Iə iə | — | nikianə <i>date palm</i> | akíə <i>ring (finger)</i> |
| /uə/ | [uə] | Uə uə | — | — | swúə <i>fish</i> |

2.2.3 Vowel Orthography Rules

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

1. Never write "ɔ". If you hear "ɔ", write "o".
2. Never write "ɛ". If you hear "ɛ", write "e".
3. Only "a" and "i" can be written word-initial.

3. Tone

We have identified five surface tones in Pinyin: three level tones, high [á], mid [ā] and low [à]; and two 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 the three level tones with each other and the two contour tones with some of the other tones. Since low tone is the most frequent tone, we are proposing an orthography where high, mid, rising and falling tones are marked by diacritics and the low tone is not marked. This proposal follows the conventions of the Cameroon Alphabet as well as the common orthographic practice of indicating one of the most frequent tones by omitting to mark a diacritic over the vowel. See the summary chart below:

| Tone | Phonetic | Grapheme (Diacritic) | Examples | Frequency |
|---------|----------|----------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| High | [á] | á | lóŋó <i>neck</i> | very many verbs and nouns. |
| Mid | [ā] | ā | shābə <i>comb (n)</i> | many nouns (roots and suffixes) and verb roots |
| Low | [à] | a | azə <i>broom</i> | very many nouns and verbs |
| Rising | [ǎ] | ǎ | tǎ <i>father</i> | rare – a few nouns |
| Falling | [â] | â | karâ <i>travel (v)</i> | many verb suffixes, few noun suffixes |

As with many recent orthographies in Cameroon, our proposal is to write all Pinyin words as they occur in isolation (i.e. as they occur when pronounced by themselves), and it is these forms that will be written in the lexicon. Pinyin 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 the sentence.

It is fairly easy to find Pinyin words where the only difference between them is tone. For example, note the minimal tone pairs (or triplets) below:

| | | | | | |
|--------------|----------|---------------------|--------------|----------|------------------------|
| kóŋə | [kóŋə̃] | <i>crawl</i> | páŋə | [páŋə̃] | <i>leer</i> |
| kōŋə | [kōŋə̃] | <i>love</i> | pāŋə | [pāŋə̃] | <i>ripe</i> |
| kəŋə | [kəŋə̃] | <i>hill</i> | pəŋə | [pəŋə̃] | <i>ripe thing</i> |
| akúə | [àkúə̃] | <i>corpse</i> | akuə | [àkùə̃] | <i>leg</i> |
| akuə | [àkùə̃] | <i>leg</i> | akúó | [àkúó̃] | <i>fulani (person)</i> |
| ndumə | [ñdùmə̃] | <i>groom</i> | nipiə | [nìpiè̃] | <i>liver</i> |
| ndūmə | [ñdūmə̃] | <i>wire</i> | nipiā | [nìpiā̃] | <i>cola nut</i> |
| ifǎ | [ifǎ̃] | <i>bamboo</i> | kárə | [kárə̃] | <i>wander</i> |
| ifǎ | [ifǎ̃] | <i>cold</i> | kátê | [kárễ] | <i>wrap up</i> |
| ifə | [ifə̃] | <i>blind person</i> | | | |

3.2 Grammatical Meanings Marked by Diacritics

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

4. Word Division

For the most part, we expect that words will be written as they appear in isolation. We do hope to research the difficult subject of distinguishing compound nouns from associative noun phrases at a later time and, at that time, propose rules for when two words would be written with spaces between them and when they would be written with no space between them because they are functioning as a single compound noun.

5. Elision

Occasionally, certain vowels can elide in Pinyin. For example, the phrase *Turn the book!* is written **Pighrə awanə!** but is pronounced in normal speech a [pighrə wanə]. The vowel prefix on the noun has been elided following a word which ends in a vowel.

There is quite a bit of vowel elision in Pinyin, mostly due to the fact that most words end in vowels and most words, especially nouns, begin with vowels. In Pinyin, the vowel shwa (ə) is extremely frequent in word-final position and the central vowel **i** in word-initial position. When elision is possible, it does not change the way we write the words. For example, the sentence “What is your name?” is written **Nilinə tsə wə?** but is pronounced without the final shwa (ə) of the first word thus [nilin tsə wə]. By always writing the non-elided “full” forms, the same word is always written the same way and this helps the fluent reader who recognizes words as meaningful units rather than as made up of separate letters.

6. Punctuation and Capitalisation

The punctuation marks and the rules that govern the Pinyin language are the same as those for English. The punctuation marks used for Pinyin 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 Pinyin marks the end of a declarative sentence.

Sinə njiə mítánó.
today day market
Today is a market day.

6.2 Question Mark

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

Wə ta’a kə?
you want INT
What do you want?

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, surprise, excitement, and forceful comments as well as simple command; as below:

Lerə!
go
Go!

Ko lerə!
NEG go
Do not go!

6.4 Comma

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

Kan twu’tó iləŋ tárə, mikunə mítáro ni paamə.
Kan has chairs three, beds three and bag
Khan has three chairs, three beds and a bag.

Awa kâ mîndéré nda ɣwa’nə, a wə ndéré mítánó.
Awa NEG go house book 3s go market
Awa is not going to school, he is going to the market.

6.5 Quotation Marks

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

A pyitə lə, “A lerə ghə?”
3S ask COMP 3s go INT
He asked, “Where is he going?”

Note: In English and Pinyin, other punctuation marks always precede final 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 after a colon.

First word in a sentence:

Tă wə ə to sinə.
father my F1 come today
My father will come today.

Proper nouns:

Milinə mobə, Awa, Asobo ni Achu’u
names their Awa Asobo and Achu
Their names are Awa, Asobo and Achu.

After a colon:

Nkunkuṇə achilo: Kâ nkoṇə mə.
truth is that: NEG like me
The truth is: I don’t like it.

7. Need for further testing of the orthography

This orthography guide is realised with the able contribution of members of the Pinyin Foundation team in Bamenda (Mr Nji Peter, Madam Alice Muluh and Mr Nyah John). The author also acknowledged the contribution of Mr Tening Mongwa (Pinyin Language Consultant), Mr Kenneth Kan Asobo of CRTV and Madame Mbotu Precillia all in Yaounde. This proposed orthography for writing the Pinyin language is provisional. 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 the Pinyin people to start reading and writing their language.

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