

Namia Orthography Paper (nrm)

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This paper is written in fulfillment of TSD requirements of the Papua New Guinea Branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. This paper summarizes the results of phonological analysis and dialect research and how these affect the acceptability and viability of an orthography.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Namia language is a Papuan language spoken in the West Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. Laycock (1975) classifies Namia as in the Sepik-Ramu Phylum, the Sepik Sub-Phylum, the Middle Sepik Super Stock, the Yellow River Stock, and the Yellow River Family.

There are over 5000 speakers of this language, living in approximately 20 villages in the Edwaki area of the Lumi Sub-District. The language area extends from the Sand River on the west to approximately 15 kilometers east of the Yellow River, and from just south of the Sepik River north to near Kweifteim and the southern border of the Bouye language area. Despite the large area, there are no dialect differences (see Dialect Survey of the Namia Language, 1998).

There is very little written on Namia (also spelled Namie).

None of the other languages in the Yellow River Family have any work being done at this time.

1.1 Conventions

- /data/ phonemic data
- [data] phonetic data
- <data> orthographic data
- [xx.xx] syllable breaks
- [xx+xx] morpheme breaks

2. PHONOLOGY

2.1 Consonant Phonemes

	Bilab	Alveo	Palatal	Velar
Plosive	p	t		k
Nasal	m	n		
Tap/Flap		r		
Approximate	w	l	j	

2.2 Vowel Phonemes

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		u
Close-mid			o
Open-mid	e	ə	
Open		a	

3. ORTHOGRAPHY DEVELOPMENT

There was no orthography for the Namia language before SIL began work in 1985. The local people had tried writing using the Tok Pisin alphabet.

The following orthography has been in use since 1996.

Consonant Phoneme	Namia grapheme
p	p
t	t, j
k	k
l	l
m	m
n	n
r	r
w	w

j	y
---	---

Vowel Phoneme	Namia grapheme
i	i
e	e
u	u
a	a
ə	a
o	o

3.1 Underdifferentiating the schwa phoneme

We have tried a number of different ways to represent the schwa phoneme in writing the Namia language. We tried completely omitting it for several small booklets, but this made many words difficult to pronounce because of too many consonants together or because the schwa was in the stressed syllable.

In May 1991, we began having meetings with the people about how to spell the language as a step before beginning vernacular schools for the Namia children. We talked specifically about how to write the schwa sound. A few of them had seen it written in the nearby Angor language as a barred ‘i’ and they did not like that. They said the schwa sound was related to the [a] sound. So we suggested using <ā> in pre-school materials and we also used it in Genesis, the first translated book which was printed in 1996. This symbol for the schwa was taught in the pre-schools for two years and used in all the first pre-school materials. But as more and more local people began writing stories, we noticed they didn’t use the diacritic, even after being instructed about the difference in sounds. And when given stories to read without the two sounds being differentiated, they read as well as when it was marked. So we began dropping the use of the diacritic and writing the schwa phoneme the same as the /a/ phoneme. The later pre-school primers with stories and translated materials we produced in 1996 and since have all underdifferentiated and it has been accepted. There are a few words that are minimal pairs:

- 1) [nəki] <naki> ‘vine’
- 2) [naki] /naki/ ‘new’

but these do not cause problems in reading since the context makes it clear which word is being used.

3.2 Overdifferentiating the /t/ phoneme

The /t/ phoneme has an affricate as an allophone, [tʃ], which occurs word medially after a high vowel (see insertion rule, 4.2). A few literates write it as <t> but most of them write it as a <j>, and so have we.

4. MORPHOPHONEMICS

The three types of morphophonemic processes are dealt with in the Phonology Essentials of the Namia Language (Feldpausch, 1993). In each of these processes, the people prefer to have it written as it sounds after the process has taken place i.e., the surface form. In this section we illustrate how these morphophonemic processes affect the orthography.

4.1 Vowel Assimilation and Deletion

Vowel assimilation occurs when prefixes are added to verb stems. (Phonology Essentials p. 20-21) (pə̃ is a sequential verbal prefix)

3) [pə + ikame] → [peikame] <peikame> ‘say’

4) [pə + ure] → [poure] <poure> ‘cut’

When the mid central vowel /ə/ in a prefix occurs before a verb stem with a mid vowel /e/ or /o/, it deletes. This occurs even with an intervening consonant (mə̃ is a deictic verbal prefix).

5) [mə + eole] → [meole] <meole> ‘go wash’

6) [pə + le] → [ple] <ple> ‘go’

The people prefer to have these verbs written as they sound after the assimilation or deletion.

4.2 Consonant Assimilation and Insertion

/t/ assimilates to the +hi [tʃ] within a word when it follows a plus high vowel or diphthong.

7) [itwaur] → [itʃwaur] <ijwaur> ‘crocodile’

Occasionally people will write these occurrences with /t/, but the trend seems to be to write it with a <j>.

[tʃ] is inserted between morpheme and word boundaries after a high vowel and before any other vowel.

8) [oloki] + [awe] → [oloki tʃawe] <olokijawe> ‘not heavy’

9) [pitʃou + we] → [pitʃou tʃwe] <pijoujwe> ‘steal’

People prefer to have these separate words and morphemes combined with the inserted <j> written. More have stumbled in reading when it was omitted (and the words read separately as in example 8 above). So we plan to continue writing this insertion as a <j>.

5. ORTHOGRAPHY ISSUES

The ongoing problems with the orthography are in the areas of where to split the longer words (usually verbs), and whether or not to write labialised consonants.

5.1 Long Words

Namia has 7 classes of verb prefixes and 5 classes of verb suffixes. (Namia Grammar Essentials p. 27, 32). This makes for affixed verb forms of 13 to 18 letters. The people react to words that long as being too hard to read. So we have experimented with separating either the prefixes and/or suffixes from the verb root (which is the bolded portion of examples below). This seems to be acceptable to them as long as there are not parts of words with less than 3 or 4 letters.

10) /arpa + nak + **yarar** + wal + e/ → <arpanak yarar wale> ‘return again with (them)’

- 11) /pe + yam + **kaki** + polpora + e/ → <peyam kaki polporae> ‘standing here to turn/put’

The usual length of combined suffixes is shorter than that of combined prefixes, and the people more easily read the suffixes which are split off into another word. We do not yet have rules regarding which prefixes can be combined, and which cannot.

The people generally do not like affixes separated from words in other classes. This is probably because the affixes are derivational, and so a pause before reading the affix can cause a confused meaning.

- 12) Unacceptable: <Meno laka> prefer <Menolaka> ‘Meno’s’
 13) Unacceptable: <ur maem> prefer <urmaem> ‘at the garden’
 14) Unacceptable: /ka.pou + əm.ta/ prefer <kapoumta> ‘very big’

5.2 Morphophonemic Changes Affecting Spelling

These morphophonemic processes occur infrequently compared to those processes described in Section 4. In example 15, when morphemes with the same final and initial phonemes join, deletion occurs. Occasionally, when morphemes that end and begin with vowels combine, the morpheme initial vowel will be deleted, as in example 16.

- 15) Deletion: /lommom+meyam/ → <lommomeyam> ‘them only’
 16) Deletion: /ka.pou+əm.ta/ → <kapoumta> ‘very big’

5.3 Labialized consonants

Namia has a number of labialised consonants and a few labialised consonant clusters. The younger men drop the labialization in their pronunciation and writing more than the older men do. We included example 22, because the labialization is always spoken and written with this word, by both young and old.

- 17) /polwae/ → <polae> ‘SEQ-carry.RL’
 18) /nwa+e/ → <nae> ‘sleep+RL’
 19) /m+wani+re/ → <manire> ‘there+sit+RL’
 20) /klwarta+e/ → <klartae> ‘alight+RL’
 21) /klwena+e/ → <klenae> ‘plant+RL’
 22) /p+wae/ → <pwae> ‘SEQ+go in.RL’

6. DIALECT CONSIDERATIONS

There are no dialects in the Namia language area. On a standard 106 item word list, the words from every area are 98% cognate. The changes that occurred were mainly in vowel backing and height, and also a change between diphthongs (vowel glides) and single vowel sounds (Dialect Survey, Feldpausch, 1998). People from the Lawo and Wiyari areas of the Namia language wrote some stories. We highlighted some of the differences in how they pronounced certain words. Then we encouraged them to write “their” way. They said they wanted to make reading materials for their pre-schools with their own spelling, but frequently they spelled words according to the central area. They seemed to be happy to write stories that had names of people from their own villages, etc. That was more important to them than spelling words in different ways.

There are strong regional identifications among the five areas of the language group that reflect social distinctions rather than dialect differences (Dialect Survey, p.4). If vernacular pre-schools started in these areas, the teachers would probably want the spelling of their area in the reading material.

7. CURRENT LITERACY SITUATION

7.1 Vernacular Prep-schools

The major thrust for literacy started in 1991, when the idea of starting vernacular pre-schools was promoted by a member of the education department who is married to a Namia speaker. For two years, meetings were held, spelling was discussed, and potential teachers wrote stories and were trained to teach. Three pre-schools started in 3 different villages in August 1993, and two schools continued until 1997. Through this process, approximately 12 adults became fluent through their training and teaching the vernacular, and about 150 children were exposed to vernacular literacy.

Because of the pre-schools, orthographic decisions were made about how to write the schwa, and an attempt made to standardize spelling.

The pre-schools quit in 1997 because of little community support or pay for the teachers. It was acknowledged by all that the children were learning to read and write.

7.2 Adult literacy

Beginning in 1992 and continuing until mid-1998, a number of short (once a week for several weeks or sometimes two hours/day for one week) literacy classes in the vernacular were held for various groups of adults (from 3 to 20 students each time) in the center of the language group. Most of the learners were those that were already literate in *Tok Pisin*. Approximately 60 adults (30 men and 30 women) have had some experience in reading in this way.

We have also had literacy classes or writer's workshops for approximately eight Namia adults from the farther reaches of the language group. Some came intending to start prep-schools in their areas, and so wrote stories in anticipation of that. Some came to help us determine if there were dialectic differences. Again, these adults were already literate in Tok Pisin.

Stories from village life were used in the earlier literacy classes, and translated Scripture portions have been the primary reading material for the more recent adult literacy classes. Selections from Genesis and Mark, parables and the Easter and Christmas stories have been used.

8. USAGE

All of the adults we have worked with have been able to read with a little practice. Those who have read on a regular basis (such as the prep-school teachers) became fairly fluent. The underdifferentiation in the vowels does not cause them problems in reading. Because the orthography is similar to *Tok Pisin*, they are also able to write stories and letters. When we observe them writing, the biggest problem is that they have to stop on occasion and say the words slowly under their breath to themselves in order to spell some of the words, especially the long verbs.

At this point, people do not read translated Scripture in church meetings unless they have practiced ahead of time on a particular passage. They do, however, read Scripture booklets on their own, and will teach translated verses to the children. When they write us letters, the letter is about half in the vernacular and half in *Tok Pisin*.

In 1989, we estimated that the literacy rate in the central part of the Namia language group (Edwaki area) was 65%, with most of that rate being literate in *Tok Pisin*, little in English, and possibly 5% in Namia. The Wiyari area would have the next highest literacy rate, 10% or so less than the Edwaki area. Again, most of those would be *Tok Pisin* literates. The other three areas would have a general literacy rate in the 40-50% range, mostly in *Tok Pisin*. Those rates would have gone up some in the last 11 years. More young people have had a chance to go on to high school in English; a number of adults have been in classes we have taught in Namia; and *Tok Pisin* "Kisim Save" classes ran for a year or two in the late 90s. Due to our experience with the adult reading classes, we feel that many of the *Tok Pisin* literates throughout the language group can transfer to reading Namia fairly easily, and achieve a degree of fluency with practice.

9. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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