Community involvement in orthography development

Devising an orthography for Bunuba

by Matthew Wrigley

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This is a report on a three-day workshop run by the Kimberley Language Resource Center, in conjunction with Junjuwa Aboriginal Corporation, to devise a working orthography for Bunuba. The workshop took place at Junjuwa community in Fitzroy Crossing on the 13th, 14th, and 15th of November 1989. Bunuba is a language spoken by 50 to 100 people around Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley region of Western Australia (McGregor 1988a:25). The workshop attempted to involve as many Bunuba people as possible in the process of devising an orthography, thereby making greatest use of intuitions deriving from their English literacy, if any, and developing the strong impression that this was their orthography.

1. Orthography development in the Kimberley

In the survey of languages undertaken during the Kimberley Language Support program, Hudson and McConvell (1984) recommended two broad orthography types for use in the Kimberley. In fact, the KLRC has not adopted the recommended orthographies, but rather works with particular communities assisting them to develop their own orthographies. There are four main reasons for this change of policy:

1. People identify with an orthography which they had a hand in developing.

2. Intuitions based on English literacy are exploited to a greater extent.

3. Interference due to existing English literacy is reduced to a minimum.

4. People take responsibility for their own writing system and gain a better understanding of how it works.

There remains a problem, however. “How do you give nonliterate and semiliterate people a choice in writing a yet to be written language?”

2. The Bunuba situation

Bunuba people have had only intermittent contact with linguists since the late 1930’s when Arthur Capell collected a large corpus of sentences and text. Alan Rumsey has worked on Bunuba intermittently since 1976. In 1980, he produced a manuscript called A brief tentative description of Bunuba, and in 1984, in response to a request from the principal, left a word list, tape, and practical orthography (see appendix) with the Fitzroy Crossing school, which appears not to have been used. In 1987, he worked with June Oscar in particular commenting on her writing of Bunuba for the script of a movie about Jandamarra (Pidgin), a famous Bunuba warrior (Alan Rumsey—personal communication).

Joyce Hudson had some contact with June Oscar who continued to collect and write down Bunuba words, and Olive Bieundurry, with a view to establishing an orthography. There have been no sustained attempts to establish a school or literacy program in Bunuba.

Pressure increased through the late 1980s for a working orthography for Bunuba and a Bunuba literacy program. Barbara Jones of the KLRC and Joyce Hudson suggested an orthography workshop.

3. Structure of the workshop

The basic plan of the workshop was to team English literate Bunuba people with nonliterate, proficient speakers. This was so that older people who did not know how to read and write could be involved, and to allow younger literates to check their pronunciation and, in doing so, recognize the authority of the older speakers. As it turned out, the older people got much more involved than this. The younger, literate people assisted them in practicing writing each word and the workshop did not continue until everyone had made an attempt at writing the word in question.

The workshop was widely advertised to Bunuba people in Fitzroy Crossing. People present at the workshop were Therese Carr (KLRC linguist then working in Derby, assisting) and Matthew Wrigley (the writer), June Oscar, Patsy Bedford, Eric Bedford, Selina Middleton, Johnny Marr, Billy Oscar, Charlie Kadjibut, Ted Beharrell, Warambu, Jimmy Green, Mona Oscar, Rita Middleton, Jamie Marr, Molly Jalakbiya, George Leopold, and Susan Hode. We had visits from Ivan McPhee and Kevin Oscar on the Tuesday and the Wednesday. On Tuesday, Joyce Hudson brought Justin Overman and Pam Moss from the Ministry of Education for a short visit. Five of the Bunuba people present were literate in English, and some of these had been writing Bunuba for years, using a variety of systems.


Page 2.
The workshop proceeded, more or less, with the author suggesting a Bunuba word that every group should try to write down as they thought best. We then compared the various versions on the blackboard, discussed their pros and cons, and attempted to reach some consensus as to which was best. We then added the agreed-upon symbols to a tentative Bunuba phoneme chart hung on a wall next to complete charts of Jaru, Walmajarri, Kija, and Gooniyandi, to allow comparisons.

I anticipated that there might be some irreconcilable differences between groups, so I made a “language ballot box” and ballot papers to enable people to choose between competing versions. I also hoped that the ballot box would add a game-like quality to the workshop and give a strong impression of democracy in action. I would not use this ballot box for similar workshops in the future, and indeed it was discarded after its first use. This happened because the groups were good at coming to an agreement (dd versus rr was the only case where no compromise was reached) and because I wanted to restrict the voting to literates in each group, which would have caused unwanted divisions of privilege amongst the participants. So the ballot box was discontinued.

Everyone was provided with pencils, pads, and erasers. Later on, people made for themselves letter cards so they could study the options for writing a particular word more easily. I did not think of providing these, but I certainly will in other workshops of this type.

4. Conclusions

The KLRC would appreciate input from anyone with ideas on methods of giving people with little literacy choices in selecting and developing a writing system for their own language.

The Bunuba Wordbook was produced in draft form, using the new orthography. Copies are now circulating in Fitzroy Crossing for comment. Four Bunuba men who participated in the production of the Wordbook and in the Workshop have enrolled in Pundulmurra College’s Certificate in Aboriginal Language Work and are presently learning to use the system they designed.

Appendix. The Bunuba orthography

1. Vowels

   a or ar  Low front vowel. Like the u in bu or the ar in hard. This is the sound in the Bunuba words jawi ‘face’, limb a ‘police’ and giria ‘wind’.

   i or ee  Mid to high front vowel. Like the i in pit. The sound in the Bunuba words gili li ‘shoulder blade’ and nyanyi ‘mother’s brother’.

   u  High back vowel. Like the u in put and the oo in boot. The sound in the Bunuba words ga ‘lungs’, jugu ‘son’ and meu ‘camp’.

2. Consonants


Page 3.
Apico-alveolar stop. Like the English sound in  \textit{d} og and ba \textit{t}. The sound in the Bunuba words as in bu \textit{d} a ‘back of neck’ and \textit{d} iadia ‘mudlark’.

Apico-alveolar nasal. Like the English \textit{n} in \textit{n} ut. Like in the Bunuba words \textit{n} awa \textit{n} ‘cave’ and ji \textit{n} ali ‘spear’.

\textbf{rr} or \textbf{dd} Apico-alveolar trill or flap. Like the \textit{rrrrrr} in a cat’s pu \textit{rrrrr}. The sound in the Bunuba words gu \textit{rr} a ‘stone ax’ and ra \textit{rr} ga ‘stone, money’.

Apico-alveolar lateral. Like the English \textit{l} in \textit{l} ock. The sound in the Bunuba words \textit{l} imba ‘police’ and wi \textit{l} a ‘armband’.

Bilabial stop. Like the English \textit{b} in \textit{b} oat and \textit{b} ig. The sound in the Bunuba words lim \textit{b} a ‘police’ and \textit{b} uda ‘back of neck’.

Bilabial nasal. Like the English \textit{m} in \textit{m} eat. The sound in the Bunuba words \textit{m} ulu ‘eye’ and gura \textit{m} a ‘man’.

Bilabial glide. Like the English \textit{w} in \textit{w} ait. The sound in the Bunuba words ja \textit{w} i ‘face’ and \textit{w} auli ‘frilled neck lizard’.

Lamino-dental stop. A bit like the English \textit{th} in \textit{th} at. You put the tip of your tongue between your teeth. The sound in the Bunuba words th arra ‘dog’ and \textit{th} arru ‘upper back’.

Lamino-dental nasal. No sound like this in English. You put the tip of your tongue between your teeth and make a \textit{n} sound. The sound in the Bunuba words \textit{nh} i ‘his, hers’ and \textit{nh} a ‘sugar bag’.

Lamino-dental lateral. No sound like this in English. You put the tip of your tongue between your teeth and make an \textit{l} sound. The sound in the Bunuba words \textit{lh} a ‘meat’ and mirri \textit{lh} ini ‘rainbow’.

Lamino-palatal stop. Like the English \textit{j} in \textit{j} am or the Bunuba words j awi ‘face’ and \textit{j} inali ‘spear’.

Lamino-palatal nasal. Like the sound in the word o \textit{ni} on. The \textit{ny} sound in the Bunuba words ny aa \textit{ny} i ‘mother’s brother’ and wi \textit{ny} i ‘neck’.

Lamino-palatal lateral. Like the \textit{lli} sound in the English word mi \textit{lli} on and the \textit{ly} in the Bunuba words wa \textit{ly} arra ‘sand’ and jibi \textit{ly} ugu ‘duck’.

Apico-domal stop. Like the \textit{d} or the \textit{t} sound when a North American says ca \textit{rd} or ca \textit{rt}, the tongue curls back a little more. As in the Bunuba words maya \textit{d} a ‘pelican’ and gu \textit{d} a ‘guts’.

Apico-domal nasal. Like the \textit{rn} when a North American says ba \textit{rn}. As in the Bunuba words ma \textit{n} a ‘older brother’ and ba \textit{n} di ‘arm’.


Page 4.
Apico-domal lateral. Like the \textit{rl} when a North American says \textit{gi rl} or \textit{cu rl}. As in the Bunuba words \textit{g i l i y} ‘blood’ and \textit{ma l arri} ‘bark’.

Apico-domal rhotic. The same \textit{r} sound as in English \textit{r ed} and \textit{o r ange}. As in the Bunuba words in \textit{gu r ama} ‘man’ and \textit{wu r} a ‘nose’.

Velar stop. The same sound as the English \textit{g} in \textit{oat} or the \textit{k} in \textit{k ill}. The sound in the Bunuba words \textit{g urama} ‘man’ and \textit{ju g u} ‘son’.

\textit{ng} Velar nasal. The \textit{ng} sound in the English words \textit{si ng} and \textit{bo ng}. The sound in the Bunuba words \textit{yu ng gu} ‘scrub’ and \textit{ng ala} \textit{n} a ‘death adder’.