A group of West African dialects called “Krahn” (belonging to the KWA subgroup of the Niger-Congo family) is found in Liberia and Ivory Coast. Because of strong interest on the part of Krahn teachers, problems in the orthography have undergone serious consideration.

A workable solution to one such problem is presented here, that is, how to symbolize the plural form of nouns. We decided to test the principle of Constant Visual Image taught in current literacy courses, particularly those courses given by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in various parts of the world. According to this principle, an affix or other wordform (morpheme) should be spelled the same way every time it occurs—even though the pronunciation changes according to the other wordforms with which it is found.

1. The problem

Earlier versions of the orthography had various ways of symbolizing the plural form of nouns. The Krahn linguistic system required in some cases: (a) replacing the vowels of a noun stem, and in other cases (b), adding a vowel suffix. The following examples given in Table I are representative:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I</th>
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Since several phonological rules are in operation which transform nouns to the plural forms, Krahn readers were required to learn separate singular and plural spellings of nouns. At first, we tried spelling singulars and plurals, each according to its own pronunciation because Krahn people speak with different forms.

2. Attempted solution

At a teachers’ training workshop at the University of Liberia, in 1973, speakers from several Krahn clans were present. Some from Gbaabli and Gbo reported that their students were experiencing difficulty with plural spelling in the Gbak ɛson materials. (Most of the Krahn materials published so far are from the Gbak ɛson dialect.) Although both Gbaabli and Gbo are mutually intelligible with Gbak ɛson (Ingemann and others 1972), there are a considerable number of differences from dialect to dialect in the form of (1981). Notes on Literacy, 36.
plural nouns. One suggestion (which was later rejected) was to write -aɔ the most common suffix, as the plural marker for every plural noun. (Thus, the singular-plural forms were to be written as in Table II (a) below.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
<th>(a) Spelling</th>
<th>(b) Spelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘dog’</td>
<td>gbè</td>
<td>gbè</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gbè-aɔ</td>
<td>gbè+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘chimp’</td>
<td>wè</td>
<td>wè</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wè-aɔ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘table’</td>
<td>tèblé</td>
<td>tèblé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tèblé-aɔ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This solution had the effect of standardizing the written form of the plural for all Krahn dialects, but we soon found that students would try to pronounce the -aɔ even though they were given the instruction that -aɔ meant “pluralize the noun in the appropriate way.”

3. Successful method

In a later workshop, Josephus Bah suggested writing a plus (+) sign after the noun stem to indicate plural meaning because “it cannot be pronounced” and because “it contains the idea of plural,” at least for those who have had some arithmetic. The + is found on any standard typewriter keyboard and it also has the advantage of being two symbols shorter than the -aɔ. The result of using such a symbol is that the dialect problem, so far as pluralization is concerned, has disappeared. (See example in Table II (b), which represent the spellings now used.) An added benefit to the new readers (even those from Gbakɛɔn) is that they need to learn to read only the singular form of the noun, with the addition of only one symbol—which is always the same for all the various plural forms.

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According to Wisleh, the Gbaabli teacher, the plural lesson is among the easiest in the entire primer to teach.

New readers are enabled to memorize words faster, if each word has only one spelling which remains constant when affixes are attached. The principle of spelling “underlying forms” (rather than spelling out every phonetic variation that occurs in speech) especially benefits the advanced reader, who extracts meaning by scanning words and phrases instead of sounding out individual words syllable by syllable.

William Welmers and C. Hutchinson have argued (via personal communication) that writing the surface forms as they occur in various environments is an aid to the new reader. Our experience, however, has been that the reverse is true. The new reader reads so slowly, syllable by syllable, to begin with, that the words and even syllables are read and pronounced as they are in isolation. The effect of the phonetic environment on consonants and vowels and the tonal interaction processes that occur between syllables are minimized as the new reader calls out syllables and words one by one. It is true, in general (Gudschinsky 1973), that the isolation and slow speech forms are closer to the underlying forms and are the forms that should be represented in the orthography.

Those who have chosen to write “surface forms” (pronunciation spellings or “phonemes”), rather than underlying word-forms (morphophonemes), do so because they feel they are getting closer to “natural speech,” not realizing that transcribing natural speech and enabling the reader to produce it are two separate tasks. It is only as the reader memorizes words and groups of words and acquires reading skills that he approximates “natural speech.” As he sees words and syllables as part of the larger context, he supplies the rules that describe their interaction and he supplies the appropriate products (the “perturbed” form) of that interaction.

I say “appropriate,” because the rules are applied in varying degrees in different situations. The rules are not, as writers of phonological rules suggest, all like electricity, either on or off, to be applied or not. The degree of rule application is connected with rate of speech (slower speech more closely resembles the underlying, unperturbed forms) and sociolinguistic factors (speakers paying attention to their speech in more formal situations generally use fewer perturbations).

4. Possible exception

The above discussion, which supports the decision to follow the principle of Constant Visual Image (that is, to write underlying forms), applies to all beginning pedagogical materials and to most of the advanced materials as well.

We must keep in mind that there may well be occasions when writers will want to use surface forms (the more precise pronunciation forms) for reasons of style or for conveying sociological or dialectal information. To date, the one Krahn play that has been written (by Moses Jalurue) uses surface forms to portray peculiarities of characters. An attitude of flexibility exists among the Krahn teachers and writers, and is encouraging to others who may wish to break from the general principle of Constant Visual Image in order to express subtleties of pronunciation for special effects. This special use of surface forms can be effective only when the underlying forms are written as the general rule.


Page 4.
Reference

Ingemann, Francis J., John Duitsman, and John Doe. 1972. A survey of the Krahn dialects in Liberia. Unpublished manuscript. (Available from The Institute for Liberian Languages, PO Box 513, Monrovia, Liberia.)

Citations