

October 1985, February 1987, August 1988, February 2000

Some issues in the establishment of an orthography for Akɔɔse

by Robert Hedinger

1.0 Introduction

In 1977 we produced a small guide to the Akɔɔse alphabet for people literate in English with the title *Dé tel, dé lâŋɛ akɔɔse*. In the meantime all the copies have been sold out and several requests have come for more copies. As we are thinking of a reprint it seems necessary to revise it first as there were some errors, but also as there are some orthography questions still to be resolved. One purpose of this paper therefore is to raise the various points where a decision is to be made.

2.0 Presentation of the sound system

Before going into various options in the choice of orthographic symbols and other orthography problems I will present the sound system of Akɔɔse as analysed and presented in the *Phonology of Akɔɔse* (Hedinger 1977a).

2.1 The consonants

p t c k '

b d j g

m n ny ŋ

mb nd ŋg

nz

s h

l y w

In addition, **f**, **v** and **r** occur in borrowed words or ideophones.

2.2 The vowels

i u

e ø o

ɛ ə ɔ

a ɑ

It should be noted that there are two different **o**-sounds and two different **a**-sounds. The problem involved in these sounds has been discussed in the Phonology. It will again be dealt with in section 3.2 below.

3.0 Problems and alternatives in orthography choices

3.1 Nasals before consonants

There is a question as to how the syllabic and non-syllabic nasals [m,n,ny,ŋ] should be written when occurring before another consonant. There are the following combinations of nasal plus consonant:

m+p n+t ny+c ŋ+k

m+b n+d ny+j ŋ+g

m+m n+n ny+ny

n+s ŋ+h

n+z

n+l ny+y ŋ+w

For the labials [p,b,m] and the alveolars [t, d, n, s, z, l] it is common, undisputed practice that **m** and **n** are written respectively: **mp, mb, mm**, and **nt, nd, ns, nz, nn** and **nl**. For the palatals [c,j,ny,y], although the nasal is palatal, it is common practice that **n** rather than **ny** is written: **nc, nj, nny, n-y**.

The case of the velars [k,g,h,w] is different. In practice the following two solutions appear to have been chosen in different languages:

a) ŋk, ŋg, ŋh, ŋw

b) nk, nk, nh, nw

For writing Akɔ̃se either a) or b) is a possible way of representing these sequences. The advantages and disadvantages of either are as follows:

The advantage of using ŋ is that the same sound is always written with the same symbol, e.g. **lány, a lánǵé, ŋgaŋ**. By writing **n** instead of **ŋ** the same root would be written in two different ways, e.g. **lány, a lánǵé. ngaŋ**.

3.2 One or two **a** and **o** vowels?

As described in the Phonology (pages 62-66) Akɔ̃se has clearly two **a** vowel sounds and two **o** vowel sounds: [a] and [ɑ] and [ø] and [o]. In some contexts it is predictable from the environments, which one in each pair of vowels is used. In other contexts, where the specific environment is absent due to historical changes the difference between the two

sounds in each pair is distinctive, that is, the difference between the two sounds is signalling a difference in meaning.

Compare the following pairs:

(1a) láá 'chew!' láǎ 'tell!'

(1b) a láádé 'he chewed' a láǎgé 'he told'

(2a) sǒód 'make to flow' soód 'make to spear'

(2b) a sǒóté 'he made to flow' a soǎté 'he made to spear'

In (1a) and (2a) the meaning difference is associated with a difference in vowel sound. In (1b) and (2b) the vowel quality is predictable from the presence or absence of the velar sound [ŋ].

In the first proposal for an alphabet (Dé tel, dé lâŋɛ akɔɔse) these distinctions were not made, in part because it appeared that some dialects do not differentiate them. However, by not distinguishing these vowels it is often necessary to guess from context which vocalic value is required. Also several people, who have seriously tried to write Akɔɔse agree that the distinction should be made.

The issues then are:

- 1) Should the distinction be made?
- 2) What orthographic symbols should be used to represent the four vowels?
- 3) If four distinct vowels are used, are they to be used consistently or only in those contexts where there would be confusion? It seems that the four vowels should be written in order to clearly distinguish the different words.

As to the symbols to be used, following the General Alphabet the following symbols as used in the examples seem to be best: **a, ɔ, ø, o**.

A compromise solution to always or never writing the four vowels would be to only write them in the context where they are distinctive, that is only where there are long vowels as in (1a) and (2a) above.

3.3 Palatal stops: **c** and **j**

Two palatal stops [c] and [j] occur in Akɔɔse. However, there is no phonemic contrast between them. In other words the difference between them does not indicate a meaning difference between different words. In some dialects all palatal stops are voiceless [c] (compare A below), in other dialects all are voiced [j] (compare B below), especially in older speakers. In still others palatals are voiceless [c] except in nouns beginning with a nasal prefix **n** where they are voiced (Phonology page 51). This may be illustrated as follows.

A	B	C	-----
ncîb	njîb	njîb	'thief'
becîb	bejîb	becîb	'thieves'
n cíbé	n jíbé	n cíbé	'I stole'
célé	jélé	célé	'call!'

Three issues arise from these facts:

- 1) What orthographic symbol should be used?
- 2) Should one or two symbols be used to represent these sounds?
- 3) Should A, B or C be taken as the reference point for a standard orthography?

Starting with an answer to the second question: From a theoretical point of view one symbol only would suffice to represent the two palatal stops since there is never any phonemic contrast or phonological opposition between [c] and [j]. Therefore one or the other sound could be taken as the canonical one to represent both. However, for the dialects which have both sounds the speakers are very aware of the difference between [c] and [j], probably because these sounds contrast in English, but perhaps also because there is a clear voice/voiceless contrast between all the other stops (e.g. p/b, t/d and k/g).

As to the third question: The options open are the three given as A, B and C. That is to always write the voiceless sound as in A, to always write the voiced sound as in B, or to write either of the two whenever appropriate as in C. As the situation in B is probably the most widespread it appears that to always write **j** would be an acceptable solution. This also would avoid the use of the letter **c** which is somewhat unusual for people who are used to the English *ch*. The **c** however is the letter required by the General Alphabet for the voiceless palatal sound.

3.4 The two **mb** sounds

Akɔɔse has two distinct **mb** sequences. Morphologically the difference can be explained in terms of the noun class.

class 9 and 10	class 3 and 4	
mbaŋ	mbaŋ	'facial markings' 'palm kernels'
mbón	mbón	'court witness' 'log'

There are phonetic differences distinguishing nouns of the two different noun class genders. However the differences are not the same for all speakers or dialects. In classes 9 and 10 the nasal is non-syllabic, whereas in classes 3 and 4 (and class 1) the nasal is syllabic. As for the voiced stop **b**: in classes 9 and 10 the **b** is explosive with, in some

dialects followed by (voiced) aspiration [bh]. In classes 3 and 4 the **b** is implosive [ɓ] except before the high vowels [i] and [u].

Psychologically there are differences as to how Akɔɔse speakers perceive the differences between the two **mb** sets. Some insist that the difference is carried by the **m**.

Others insist that it is the **b** which distinguishes such pairs.

The question to be asked is whether and how the distinction should be written in the orthography.

That it would be good to mark the distinction has become clear from people who have some experience in writing and have seriously reflected on this question.

There are three features which could be marked:

- a) indicate the fact that the nasal (in class 3 and 4 nouns) is syllabic, by marking the tone.
- b) mark the aspirated **bh**.
- c) mark the imploded **ɓ**.
- d) mark a combination of a) - c).

To do c) would introduce an extra symbol which is not otherwise necessary. Also it could not distinguish nouns in which a high vowel [i,u] follows the **b**.

mbaŋ	mɓaŋ
mbin	mbin

To do b) would not be useful because not every dialect has this feature.

mbhaŋ	mbaŋ
mbhin	mbin

What appears to be the simplest solution would be to mark the tone on the syllabic nasal. From this the pronunciation of the **b**'s and the **m**'s is predictable.

mbaŋ	ṁbaŋ
mbin	ṁbin

More details about questions of tone marking will be discussed below.

3.5 The marking of tone

A large number of African languages are tonal, that is distinctions of the height of the voice on each syllable indicate differences in meaning between different words or different grammatical categories. If these distinctions are ignored it becomes often very difficult to read and interpret a written text. So it is not so much a question of whether tone should be marked but how. There are many African languages which are difficult to read because tone marking has been omitted due to a desire to conform to European languages which do not have tone marks.

In Dé tel, dé lãnge Akɔɔse the following tone marking system was introduced:

	High	Low	Rising	Falling	Downstepped High
	----	----	----	----	-----
short vowel	á	a	ǎ	â	ā
long vowel	áá	aa	áá	áa	āā

In that system low tone was left unmarked as a statistical count of tone on lexical items indicated a high frequency of low tone, therefore making it the best candidate for it to be left unmarked. However recently a count of tone on continuous text suggested that high tones are more frequent by about 10 per cent which would make marking low tone more feasible. It also seems to have other advantages. For example, when marking high tone, if it were chosen to mark the syllabic nasal by marking the tone (see 3.4 above), then, besides all the high tones already being marked, marking the low tones on all the nasal prefixes would increase greatly the number of tone marks used in any one text.

In a system of marking low tone the marking of nasals would be a natural part of the system.

Also it would disambiguate **ny** versus **n** here one represents the palatal nasal [ny] and the other is a palatal semivowel preceded by a syllabic nasal [ɲy].

My proposal for a revised tone marking system is as follows:

	High	Low	Rising	Falling	Down-stepped high
	----	----	----	----	----
short vowel	a	à	ǎ	â	ā
long vowel	aa	àà	àa	aà	āā

4.0 Text

The following extract from a folk tale is written with the convention in which low tone is left unmarked.

Ngo bá mwãnyaŋ ebwéŋgo

Mbwε ñhóg ŋgo ǎ mē mó dé mod awé a wóó ŋgíne áte tóma bad bésyāā́l á ŋkǒŋsé.
 Mwãnyaŋ ebwéŋgo a lãnge mó nén ǎ bad bé dé, ǎ nzé nê dǎǎ á hóbé, â né móō kě wε mod
 alúmed awé a tómé wε ŋgíne. Ngəǎ ǎ mó kwenténé. Bé mádé bán sú saámbé, bó

mwǎnyàŋ bé kag á dyòn á Ɔgómbe, bán áhēdē dǎǎ bé nyēnnē mod awé a tómténé ŋgíne awóŋ.

Now follows the same text written with the convention in which high tone is not marked except the down-stepped high tone.

Ngò bə mwǎnyàŋ èbwɛŋgò

Mbwè ŋhɔg ŋgò ǎ mǎ mə de mòd àwè à woo ŋginè atè tomà bàd besyāǎl a ŋkǒŋse. Mwǎnyàŋ èbwɛŋgò à lǎŋgè mə nen ǎ bàd be de, ǎ nze nê dǎǎ a hɔbe, â ne mǎǎ kě wè mòd àlumèd àwè à tome wè ŋginè. Ngǎǎ ǎ mə kwèntène. Be made ban su sàambe, bə mwǎnyàŋ be kǎg a dyòn a Ɔgómbe, bán ahēdē dǎǎ be nyēnnē mòd àwè à tomtene ŋginè àwóŋ.

There are several possible modifications and simplifications which could be made. For example in a series of down-stepped highs instead of marking each one as in esūbāg the first one only could be marked as in esūbag. A further step in the direction of reducing tone marking would be not to mark down-stepped high tone at all. Even further reduction of tone marking would be to eliminate one or both of the contour tones (falling and rising). However, with each reduction in the marking of specific tone there will be an increase in potential for ambiguities in the written form as compared with the spoken form, thus increasing the difficulty of reading.

5.0 Conclusion

In this paper only some of the orthography questions have been touched on. There are still other issues which need to be dealt with especially in the area of word divisions. It is also hoped that agreement can be reached on the issues raised above.

6.0 References

Hedinger, Robert and Sylvia. 1977a. Phonology of Akɔɔse. Yaoundé: SIL.

Hedinger, Robert, Sylvia Hedinger and Roggy G. E. Metuge. 1977b. Dé tel, dé lǎŋge Akɔɔse. Yaoundé, SIL.

Tadadjeu, Maurice and Etienne Sadembouo. 1979, 1984. General Alphabet of Cameroon Languages. Yaoundé, Department of African Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences, University of Yaoundé.

2 August 1988 addition:

System of marking low, falling and rising tone and leaving high and downstepped high tone unmarked.

	High	Low	Rising	Falling	Down-stepped high
	----	----	----	----	----
short vowel	a	à	ǎ	â	a

long vowel aa àà àa aà aa

Now follows the same text written with the above convention.

Ngò bə mwǎnyàŋ èbwɛŋgò

M̀bwè ìhɔg ɲgò ǎ m̄ m̄ de m̀d àwè à woo ɲginè atè tomà bàd besyǎəl a ɲkǒŋse.
Mwǎnyàŋ èbwɛŋgò à l̄ɲgè m̄ n̄n ǎ bàd be de, ǎ nze n̄ê d̄d̄ a h̄be, â ne m̄ə k̄ě wè
m̀d àlumèd àwè à tome wè ɲginè. Ngòd̄ ǎ m̄ kwènt̄ene. Be made ban su s̄ambe, bə
mwǎnyàŋ be k̄ag a dỳn a ɲḡombe, ban ahede d̄d̄ be nyenne m̀d àwè à tomtene ɲginè
àwoŋ.