Liberian Krahn

Some notes on vowel orthography

by John Duitsman

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1. Vowel segments

All of the recently devised, Liberian vernacular alphabets use the symbols i, e, ɛ, a, u, o, ɔ and œ for the sounds that are equivalent or roughly equivalent to the sounds [i, e, ɛ, a, u, o, and ɔ]. To conform to this standard practice and to the recommendations of the Liberian Board of Geographic Names, ɛɛ and œœ were chosen over eh and or for the Krahn alphabet. eh and or have long been in use by Liberians and other West Africans in writing names like Grand Gedeh, Belleh, Lorma, and Zorzor.

The Krahn “constricted” vowels, /I/ and /U/ may be equated with vowel sounds that are normally represented by those symbols, in terms of tongue height. But an additional feature involving pharyngeal tightness and tongue root advancement is also required for the production of the vowels. These vowels are written as digraphs: ih and uh as in klihgb ɛ ‘all, everything’ and ʂ uh ‘only’. When two of these vowels occur together only one ʰ is used:

\[ bl \ ̄ih \quad [bl̄i] \quad \text{‘a red seed pod’} \]

Page 1.
To date, it has not been necessary to explain to new readers that the $h$, in these cases, indicates that both of the preceding vowels are from the constricted set. Apparently, the reader’s own innate knowledge of the vowel harmony rules, which prevent the occurrence of constricted vowels and $i$ and $u$ in the same stem enables him to read these words correctly.

### 2. Vowel length

Vowel length is interpreted and written as sequences of vowels. The following evidence from Sapo Krahn suggests that vowel combinations and long vowels are the result of lost intervocalic consonants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gbakɛsɔ dialect</th>
<th>Sapo dialect</th>
<th>Gbakɛsɔ dialect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bidi</td>
<td>$b \ddot{i}$</td>
<td>‘to turn’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peli</td>
<td>$p \ddot{e}\ddot{i}$</td>
<td>‘grass’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p\ob\ɔ$</td>
<td>$p\ob\ɔ$</td>
<td>‘wind’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jibo</td>
<td>$j\ddot{u}\ddot{o}$</td>
<td>‘to know’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is also a tendency among most Gbak ɛs ɔ speakers to drop intervocalic consonants from these words:

$gb\b\ddot{l}\ddot{u}$ ‘stalk’ (n.)

Page 2.
Even though these consonants are not always present in speech, they are always included in the written form.