Cheke Holo orthography

Local tradition clashes with a linguist's concerns

by Freddy Boswell

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1. Introduction

Cheke Holo, referred to in shortened form as Holo, is an Austronesian language found primarily on Santa Isabel island of Solomon Islands and spoken by at least 8,000 people as their first language. Potentially a couple of thousand other folk from neighboring language groups speak Cheke Holo as a second or third language. As a language name, Cheke Holo means "language of the interior of the island." The two major dialects are Maringe and Hograno and are located in the southern half of Santa Isabel on the eastern and western sides of the island, respectively. Cheke Holo is classified as Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, Western Oceanic.

The major features of Cheke Holo phonology have been documented in Boswell (1999). As stated in that paper, linguists Geoffrey White (White, Kokhonigita, and Pulomana 1988) and David Bosma (1981a) both attempted to apply their phonological analyses to produce what they regarded as an improved

orthography, but these efforts were met with firm resistance. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries linguists and missionaries had helped the Holo people to write down their language, and the orthography used at that time has in turn been passed down to successive generations of Holo speakers. Before looking at the proposed revised orthography, a chart of the consonantal phonemes is presented followed by a historical representation of the orthography.

Chart of consonantal phonemes

		Labial	**Alveolar**	**Palato-alveolar**	**Velar**	**Glottal**
Stops and affricates	vl	p	t	tʃ	k	ʔ
	aspirated	ph	th		kh	
	vd	b	d	dʒ	g	
	vl prenasalisation	ᵐb̥			̥ᵑg	
Fricatives	vl	f	s		x	h
	vd	v	z		ɣ̥	
Nasals	vl	m̥	n̥	ñ̥	ŋ̊	
	vd	m	m	ñ	ŋ	

Lateral approximants	vl	l̥
	vd	l
Trill	vl	r̥
	vd	r

Historical representation of the orthography

Consonantal phoneme	Historical representation
p	p
pʰ	ph
t	t
tʰ	th
k	k

kʰ	kh
ʔ	ø
b	b
d	d
g	ḡ
ᵐ̥b	bh
ⁿ̥g	ḡh
tʃ	ch
dʒ	j
f	f
s	s
v	v

z	z
y̥	g
x	gh
h	h
m	m
m̥	mh
n	n
n̥	nh
ŋ	ñ
ŋ̊	ñh
ñ	gn
ñ̥	gnh
l	l

l̥		lh

r		r

r̥		rh

2. Bosma's suggested revised orthography: Reasons and representation

The basic revision, as described by Bosma (1981a) concerned the representation of two different type sound patterns:

(1) Those reflecting a range of voiceless consonants

(2) Those reflecting voiced velar stops and nasals

He suggested 11 changes in the orthography. These are noted in the chart at the end of this section.

For the range of voiceless consonants, the first problem concerns the representation of what he called "strengthened consonants." As noted in the phoneme chart above, all of the nasals, laterals, and trills have voiceless counterparts. The voiceless sound was described by Bosma (1981a) as the production of the consonantal sound preceded by a puff of air. He represented this sound in the language by the letter 'h' preceding the consonant. Thus, / m̥ata/ 'interior' was spelled as hmata (though historically spelled mhata) and / n̥anai/ 'eight' was spelled as hnanai (historically nhanai). Bosma felt that the placement of the h before the nasal stop represented what the people knew emically was happening in the production of the stop, and would thus be easier for new readers to grasp, rather than having the 'h' come after the sound, as was represented in the historically accepted orthography. Bill Palmer (1999) has recently analysed a similar type phenomenon in the Kokota language, which borders Cheke Holo on the north.

In the same type patterning, Bosma (1981a) felt another adjustment was needed with the representation of the voiceless continuants / l̥/ and / r̥/. Thus / l̥oti /'prevent' was spelled hloti, and / r̥ana/ 'startled' was hrana.

The representation of the voiced and voiceless velar fricative presented another type challenge, and the possible adjustment was thus different in that the 'h' took a position following rather than preceding the consonant. Bosma (1981a) represented the / ɣ/as 'gh'. For the voiceless counterpart, he applied the same

type principle of representing the 'puff of air preceding the sound,' and thus the / x/ became 'hgh'. In the latter, of course, the 'h' occurred both before and after the consonant.

The second type of sound patterns requiring orthographic adjustment concerned the occurrence of voiced velar stops and nasals. Bosma proposed an adjustment for the voiced velar stops when occurring before lateral or trill continuants. Thus, in the word / glimai/ 'five', the Holo people had always represented the velar stop with what they called a 'g bar' or ḡ, and spelled it ḡlimai. The same would hold for /gromno/ 'darkness', spelled as ḡromno. Bosma proposed doing away with the 'g bar' representation in these environments, because even though / g/and / ɣ/phonemically contrast, the voiced velar fricative / ɣ/ never occurs before / l/ or / r/,and thus the contrast is neutralized. Representing this / g/ sound simply as ' g' would in Bosma's proposal provide for (1) ease of typing for the local folk, and (2) ease of transfer to English, the national language, which has no diactrics. Regarding ease of typing, the 'g bar' required. Regarding ease of typing, the 'g bar' required

(1) typing the '_g'

(2) backspacing

(3) rolling the platen up one half turn

(4) hitting the shift key

(5) striking the underline key, and

(6) rolling down the platen one half turn before proceeding to the next letter.

Bosma reasoned that the people would embrace one step, typing the ' g', rather than six steps. Also, he felt that few people would modify their typewriters to make typing easier.

Bosma's same idea held for the representation of voiced velar nasal / ŋ/ and voiceless velar nasal / ŋ˚/. Considering the identical process surrounding the typewriter production of 'g bar', he felt that the / ŋ/ could be represented as 'ng' rather than as ñ, or 'n bar'. Unlike / g/, the / ŋ/ occurs in non-predictable environments. The use of 'ng' would also make for a smoother transition for new readers in English than ñ. Following the same pattern as other voiceless nasals, the / ŋ˚/would be written as 'hng'.

Neither the voiceless prenasalization of voiced stops or velars were identified by Bosma or White, and thus were never represented in their orthographies. The sound, however, was identified with native speakers as being emically present.

In order to help implement the extensive orthographical changes, Bosma asked for the assistance of Dr. Ernest W. Lee of SIL, a noted phonologist who had worked extensively in Northern Roglai, an Austronesian language of Vietnam which has a sound system very similar to Holo. Lee responded by going to Jejevo village, located at the heart of the Cheke Holo language group in Cenral Maringe district, and conducting a workshop on the theme of "How to Spell the Language." Lee tried to demonstrate how changing the orthography to account for the data in the way that Bosma suggested would be beneficial to the people in terms of ease of writing and reproduction of reading materials.

Bosma's major effort at demonstrating and promoting the new orthography was the publication of the book, *Life in our village: Short stories from Nareabu, Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands* (1981b). He also produced a spelling survey of Isabel languages in which he presented his proposed orthography, and early Bible translation materials were circulated with the changes. A few years later, Geoffrey White (White, Kokhonigita, and Pulomana 1988) prepared to publish his dictionary in this new orthography as outlined below. Phonemes that are affected by the revised orthography are marked by an asterisk before the phoneme.

	Consonantal phoneme	Historical representation	Linguist suggested representation
	p	p	p
	pʰ	ph	ph
	t	t	t
	tʰ	th	th
	k	k	k
	kʰ	kh	kh
*	ʔ	ø(null)	'
	b	b	b
	d	d	d

*	g	ḡ	g
	ᵐ̥b	bh	(nil—sound not identified)
	°ⁿg	gh	(nil—sound not identified)
	tʃ	ch	ch
	dʒ	j	j
	f	f	f
	s	s	s
	v	v	v
	z	z	z
*	v̥	g	gh
*	x	gh	hgh
	h	h	h

	m	m	m
*	m̥	mh	hm
	n	n	n
*	n̥	nh	hn
*	ŋ	ñ	ng
*	ŋ̊	ñh	hng
	ñ	gn	gn
	ñ̥	gnh	hgn
	l	l	l
*	l̥	lh	hl
	r	r	r
*	r̥	rh	hr

3. Retreat to tradition

Despite Bosma and White's best efforts at promoting the new orthography, the Cheke Holo speakers were not satisfied. Lee's studied approach was not accepted. They felt that the early orthographic rendering of their language was sufficient, and should not be modified. After all, if they could read and write in their orthography, why change it and try to learn a new system?

Bosma noticed that the Bible translators with whom he was working kept the original spelling, and so did the people when writing and corresponding in the language. He did not have enough momentum, despite the best efforts of outside help such as Dr. Ernie Lee, to change the system. Bosma was able to notify White, who was in Hawaii preparing his dictionary with the new orthography, that their efforts had indeed been rejected. White made the necessary changes to conform to the old orthography.

Whereas 'g bar' and 'n bar' could be represented on a standard typewriter, albeit the process was quite cumbersome as noted above, in printed materials the italic g and n were used. This was due to the inability of the Solomons typesetter to represent the bar.

Bosma ([1999](#)) noted that besides local rejection, he also later discovered a pattern in the language that went against his suggested spelling. The fricative   ɣ, when 'strengthened' (as generally defined by not having the 'puff of air' preceding the consonant) becomes the 'strong g sound' when marked with the [h]. He proposed that strong consonants (as the people understood them to be strong) be marked with the h following rather than preceding the consonant, which is the pattern of representation for 'non-strengthened', or voiceless consonantal counterparts. But in this case the orthographic symbol gh was intended by Bosma to be the fricative   ɣ,which was not the strengthened sound. Examples of contrast in the language where this is a factor include / ɣo̧ṛa/'to paddle' and / go̧ṛa/'a paddle'. Thus, the desired representation of / go̧ṛa/as gohra 'a paddle' was not discernible because the people were confused as to whether or not the first sound was strengthened.

Bosma acceded to the wishes of the people and the local translators and he encouraged publication with the long-standing orthography. All books published in the language since then have used the original orthography. These volumes include

*   White's dictionary ([White, Kokhonigita, and Pulomana 1988](#))

*   children's Bible story books ([Piaso 1992a](#), [1992b](#))

*   a book of stories published by the National Literacy Committee ([Boswell 1991](#))

*   pre-reading books ([Boswell 1991a](#), 1991b), and

*   the New Testament ([Cheke Holo Translation Committee 1993](#)).

Currently, people use the bar in letter writing and story writing, but it should be noted that use of the bar is not always accurate. For example, a bar might occur in the ' gn' orthographic sequence, and this reflects total lack of understanding of the use of the bar to represent [g],written incorrectly as * noḡna,

rather than no gna. Occasionally a bar is omitted over an 'n' such as in *ranhini when the 'n' in the text should represent [ŋ] rather than [n], and be written as ra ñhini. Or one might occasionally see an 'h' occur on the wrong side of the stop, such as *nahma instead of namhã. Nevertheless, tradition has won out over linguistic analysis, concerns for producing literacy materials on a manual typewriter, and assisting people with the literacy transfer to English from Cheke Holo.

4. Conclusion: Lessons learned

My summation is that Bosma followed a community-participative procedure in the final decisions of this attempt at orthography revision. His descriptive linguistic analysis gave him an understanding of the language that was foundational to his interaction with the local people in the decision-making process concerning proposed spelling changes. He wanted buy-in on a large scale, yet neither he nor White wanted to promote an orthography that would not be used.

Despite his lack of success in achieving his desired results, namely that of a consistent orthographic representation of the language, his model of engaging the community in such decisions is well noted. He functioned as an advisor to the language group, rather than as an unyielding expert. Linguists who are working to build capacity among vernacular language groups in the construction and use of practical alphabets would be wise to heed this approach.

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See also Bosma 1981 Bibliography (Literacy) Citations

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