

#07

décembre 2021



# ILLA

Linguistique  
et Langues  
Africaines



- \_ Floating tone noun class prefixes in Mada (Nigeria)
- \_ Le nom du souverain dans les parlers « kotoko » du Cameroun
- \_ Comptes rendus / Book reviews



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**Comptes rendus de lecture**

**Book reviews**



**Mari C. JONES & Damien MOONEY (eds.), *Creating orthographies for endangered languages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Paperback edition 2020 [2017], 333 p.**

By David Roberts

Three years after it originally appeared, the volume *Creating orthographies for endangered languages* edited by Mari C. Jones and Damien Mooney has now been published in paperback.<sup>1</sup> This book takes its place as the most recent in a line of edited volumes about orthography development that began with Smalley (1963), and it is the first to narrow the focus of the lens onto critically endangered languages.

The first two chapters are overviews. Chapter 1 is a general introduction in which Jones & Mooney outline best practices in orthography development, liberally referencing landmark publications (e.g. Cahill & Rice 2014; Fishman 1977; Grenoble & Whaley 2006; Lüpke 2011; Seifart 2006), which then reverberate throughout the book. Trainers, take note: this chapter would make an excellent starting point for students who need to familiarise themselves with the existing literature in a condensed format. In Chapter 2, Moseley addresses issues of ownership and sustainability, presenting responses to a survey among linguists and missionaries engaged in creating Roman-script orthographies for 30 unwritten languages worldwide.

The second part (chapters 3-8) presents a series of case studies showcasing participatory approaches to orthography development in Sama, Yakan, Mapun, Sangil, Iranun (Philippines), Náayeri (Mexico), Tsakhur (Azerbaijan), N|uu (South Africa), Kala (Papua New Guinea), and Ch'orti' Mayan (Guatemala).

The third part (chapters 9-12) extracts lessons that can be learned from orthographies in Sioux (USA, Canada), Sardinian (Italy), Breton (France), Guernesiais (Channel Islands), Romani (Europe), Rama (Nicaragua), Franco-Provençal (France), and, in a final chapter that adds time depth to the volume, Oscan in Italy of the 1st century BC.

As Jones & Mooney remind us from the outset (23),<sup>2</sup> four of Smalley's (1963) five maximums for an adequate orthography are extra-linguistic. Accordingly, this review, which highlights six of the most important topics addressed in Jones & Mooney's book, will focus largely on the social issues behind the numerous linguistic analyses of phonographic correspondences.

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1. I would like to thank Christina Schrader for her helpful comments on a draft of this review.

2. References to the book under review are cited with the contributing author and page number only.

### Approaches to orthography development

Several of the case studies in this volume exemplify a top-down approach to orthography development. The 1975 Breton *orthographe interdialectale* was published without consultation, with the unsurprising consequence that stakeholders reverted to inflexible positions and it never gained wide acceptance (Hewitt, 227). Previous orthographies for Náayeri were rejected because they were developed with no direct participation of community members between proposals and finalisation (Valdovinos, 69, 80f.).

Such examples are in contrast to the numerous positive examples of community level decision making. Valdovinos (69, 82) does not conceive of Náayeri orthography development as the imposed end product of linguistic analysis, but as a social process that involves “mediating actors”, so she implemented her participatory approach even though her phonological analysis was incomplete. Similarly, SIL International has developed and run Alphabet Design Workshops in over one hundred Papua New Guinean languages (Schreyer, 13f.). This method relies on speakers’ perceptions of their language rather than formal phonological analysis, with the aim that members of the language community will own the final product because they participated in the process.

This approach has also been exported to the Philippines where participatory workshops were run under the auspices of the Ministry of Education with the aim of empowering and integrating “local voices” in decision-making (Casquite & Young, 59f. and 66). However, the authors are not unaware of the pitfalls: if the delicate balance of power between the facilitator and the local participants is not handled well, the workshop approach just becomes a mask for outsiders continuing to exercise power (Casquite & Young, 67f.).

Leggio & Matras (274) describe a rather different bottom-up approach for Romani. The social dynamic is still speaker-focussed, but is also polycentric and spontaneous. Plurality of contributions is actively encouraged, an approach that fits the social context of a highly dispersed language community whose members are harnessing the power of social media to communicate with each other remotely. Similarly, Sallabank & Marquis (251f.) advocate crowd-sourced spellings on social media for Guernesiais.

What is the role of governments in such a dynamic? They are arguably at their best when they provide a nurturing environment for orthography development without imposing decisions. The Mexican government promotes written vernaculars, only stipulating that the orthographies be simple and unifying across dialects (Moseley, 47). Authorities in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu have always seen linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a problem (Moseley, 41; Schreyer, 133f.). In 2009, the Phil-

ippines institutionalised mother-tongue based multilingual education in all private and public schools, and now provides institutional support for 19 languages from kindergarten to grade 6 (Casquite & Young, 60).

As for individual linguists, they sometimes find themselves impotent despite their best endeavours. Esteban (171) is conscious that, because of the turbulent historical relationship between Sioux and white settlers, any attempt by an outsider to give advice is regarded as an imposition and an attack on sovereignty. Among Breton stakeholders, the atmosphere is so tense and acrimonious that Hewitt (227) has never actively promoted his own orthography, regarding it simply as an intellectual exercise to show the potential of an etymological approach. In Australia, over-protective community council members who were semi-speakers of the moribund Kimberley languages banned the publication of a dictionary for fear that others might get access to the language (Moseley, 48).

But in many contexts worldwide, an outside linguist can have a role as midwife to the birth of an orthography. A shining example of this is Sackett (91), who explains: “I gave linguistic input to the [Tsakhur language] committee when it was needed, but my greater contribution in the process was helping the community think through a series of questions related to their sociolinguistic, socio-political and socio-economic situation in order to help them make informed decisions”.

In the past generation, we have thankfully moved well beyond a world in which orthographies for minority languages were often established by a lone ranger expatriate linguist. However, with the new and welcome emphasis on participatory processes, which are amply illustrated in this book, we need to avoid giving the impression that phonological analysis has become irrelevant. For most orthographies being developed, the phonemic principle will still provide a solid foundation, and it takes a linguist to identify contrast and variation. Where possible, we should be aiming to nurture participation to a sufficiently advanced level that a local stakeholder can intelligently respond to a proposal by saying, “I’ve heard and understood the linguistic arguments, but in this particular case, I think that social considerations need to be ranked more highly”.

### **Sustainability and vitality**

When it comes to issues of sustainability and vitality, it is interesting to note a difference between the priorities of secular linguists and missionaries. The former are often concerned with preservation of languages in an accessible format after the death of the last L1 speaker, so they may be amenable to devoting resources to languages with a dwindling, elderly remnant; indeed, languages with the fewest remaining speakers are often

the highest priorities for grant-making authorities. Such contexts are a major focus of this book. Only 20% of children in the town of Jesús María still use Náayeri, as most have shifted to Spanish (Valdovinos, 73). N|uu has only 3 remaining L2 speakers, all sisters in their 80s who are not in regular contact with each other (Shah & Brenzinger 109, 123). Franco-Provençal has not been transmitted as an L1 in France for several generations; anyone with any knowledge of it is generally over sixty and even they doubt whether it should be taught in schools (Pivot & Bert, 276f.). By 2013, only one monolingual couple of Rama remained and many young adults only learned of the existence of the language through an organised workshop (Pivot & Bert, 278). Revitalisation in such languages does not generally aim to reverse language shift. Rather, they participate in what McDonald and Zair (277) term a “post-vernacular dynamic” where the language’s symbolic function as an emblem of identity takes precedence over its communicative function. The aim in these contexts is not to pass the oral language on, but to keep its memory alive in written form (281, 288).

Mission agencies engaged in Bible translation, on the other hand, would not generally assign resources to a moribund language that was assessed as having little chance of survival or revitalisation. Their focus is more likely to be on the middle belt of minority languages that have populations in the relatively healthy tens or hundreds of thousands, and while certainly threatened by outside forces, are not critically endangered. The nascent church in such contexts has been one of the most consistent and vigorous promoters of L1 literacy, as illustrated by Rotuma (Fiji) which is the exclusive language of the home and church, and has no written materials except the Bible in spite of having had an orthography for a century (Moseley, 50-51). In Vanuatu, people attach little importance to reading Tanna except for the Bible (Moseley, 43). Hull (148), in spite of voicing some concerns about the goals of missionaries, concedes that they do often have a highly positive impact on the expansion of literacy and that Bible translation agencies are often the first to publish substantial texts. As Moseley (44) reminds us, in such contexts, the aim should be to arrive at a critical mass of self-sustainability and for literacy to gain enough momentum in the hands of the community that it can continue without outside assistance. Sustainability in such languages is possible when those with national and regional institutional responsibility for education and local community groups are equipped to function independently (Casquite & Young, 68).

### **Standardisation**

Multiple spellings for a single language are by no means uncommon. Hull (147) gives 13 spellings for selected Ch’orti’ Mayan phonemes over the

last century. Esteban (157, 164) lists 26 ways of spelling Sioux spanning 180 years. Hewitt (190, 229) describes seven Breton orthographies developed over four centuries. Guernesiais has at least six spellings for the name of language (Sallabank & Marquis, 236).

In other contexts, two opposing groups take entrenched positions. Hull (149) recounts tensions between missionaries and revitalisation groups as to whose Ch'orti' Mayan orthography could be regarded as the standard. Missionaries defended their orthography on the basis of time depth and having the most published literature. Revitalisation groups, on the other hand, defended theirs on the basis of ownership, power and identity, arguing "it's not their language or their decision...". Tellingly, the two orthographies do not differ extensively – it appears to be largely a question of how to represent velar consonants – so it is likely that competent readers could easily transfer from one orthography to the other. But users are unlikely to choose that option when they are preoccupied with the more fundamental question of who has the right to establish a standard.

In such a context, there are various ways forward. Either one group concedes to the other, which is rare, or a compromise is reached between the two groups, as was the case with the unification of competing Catholic and Protestant orthographies for Rotuma (Fiji) in the 1920s (Moseley, 50). A third solution is acceptance of variability. For two decades (1970s-1990s) the *Bulletin of the Guernesiais assembly* stated "spelling [...] has been left to the discretion of the contributors" (Sallabank & Marquis, 247). Franco-Provençal has no written standard, in spite of two recommendations. The few members of local focus groups who can write it use idiosyncratic spellings, valuing the freedom from pressure and insecurity generated by the wider French culture of "*orthographe sans faute*" (Pivot & Bert, 284ff.). This laissez-faire strategy is proving particularly appropriate for the ephemeral domain of social media, but is less helpful in a context where there is a drive to generate an extensive body of published literature.

### **Dialect variation**

The process of standardisation can present various linguistic and ideological challenges if the language has dialect variants. Kala has four dialects but literacy stakeholders have always stressed the need for unity in diversity, as testified by the name of their project which translates as "Kala one mouth" (Schreyer, 131). They therefore opted for a parallel dialect approach, developing a single shared alphabet (which includes the letter <z> even though not all dialects have this phoneme), but allowing writers to spell according to their own pronunciation.

Sardinian has two main dialects, northern and southern. Differences largely affect syllable structure: consonant clusters, metathesis, liquid deletion, epenthesis, and syncope, but can also be noted in loanwords many of which are from Catalan in the south. Successive attempts to standardise the orthography in 2001 and 2006 caused outcries, partly because neither took the south into account, in spite of it being the political and economic hub of the island. The 2006 orthography was officially adopted, but not without a counterproposal stressing that both dialects “must have the same dignity” because southerners felt unrepresented (Lai, 176ff., 186f.).

Hewitt (223-227) provides no fewer than 25 maps of Brittany showing the percentage of Breton speakers in each region, delineating the four major dialect zones, and charting the geographical distribution of grapheme-phoneme correspondences. The thread of emotive adjectives (“acrimonious, disastrous, dubious, confusing...”) woven into the fabric of the author’s detailed linguistic analysis is a constant reminder of the highly charged atmosphere among stakeholders in this language.

The Romani form a dispersed and geographically fragmented dialect continuum spread across Europe (Leggio & Matras, 255). Dialects are mutually intelligible, although code switching into local dominant contact languages may impede this. The authors identify five variable phonological and morphological structures in YouTube comments written in Romani. A high degree of spelling consistency suggests membership of a single Romani community, while a low degree suggests that the commenter either has a mixed background, or lacks the motivation to accommodate to a single form.

### **Ease of transfer**

One of the most important considerations when developing an orthography for an endangered language is the extent to which stakeholders wish to imitate or distance themselves from a dominant or neighbouring language. In some cases, they are keen to adopt the spelling conventions from another language to facilitate ease of transfer. The Tsakhur language committee wanted to prioritise ease of transfer to and from Azerbaijani, although this proved challenging because Tsakhur has 34 phonemes and Azerbaijani only 24 (Sackett, 99ff.). N|uu orthography developers chose not to deviate from national standards set by larger South African languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa and Sesotho (Shah & Brenzinger, 109). Kala stakeholders considered it important for their orthography to transfer well to Tok Pisin and English (Schreyer, 138). Sioux speakers consider ease of transfer to English to be a high priority, which is surprising given the historical tensions with white settlers and the feeling that English is used to exert

political control (Esteban, 169, 172). The influence of contact languages on Romani is apparent in YouTube commenters' spontaneous choice of graphemes. The phoneme /tʃ/ is represented by <c, č, ch, tch, cz> following Italian, Slavonic languages, English, German and Polish respectively, depending on the location of the commenter (Leggio & Matras, 268).

However, applying the principle of ease of transfer can be self-defeating if it merely mimics the orthographic irregularities of the dominant language. Sardinian perpetuates Italian over-representation in the series <ca, che, chi, co, cu> instead of <ka, ke, ki, ko, ku> (Lai, 184). Guernesiais is being developed against the background of two competing dominant languages – English and French – both of which have irregular phonographic correspondences, so it is impossible to apply the principle of ease of transfer to everyone's satisfaction. Some purists consider that standard French spelling should dictate how Guernesiais is written, on the basis that French influence was strong in the 19th century. Yet Guernesiais has diphthongs and affricates that French does not have, and in any case, most islanders, educated in English, are unfamiliar with French spelling conventions (Sallabank & Marquis, 237ff.).

### **Ideological distancing**

In other cases, stakeholders purposely choose spellings that are distinct from their neighbours for either linguistic or ideological reasons. Náayeri speakers chose <u> rather than <w> to represent rounded consonants to distinguish their orthography from their Huichol neighbours (Valdovinos, 85), and <k> in place of Spanish <c> to avoid the /s/ pronunciation triggered by presence of /e, i/ after <c> (77). Activists in Ch'orti' Mayan during the 1980s movement for Mayan identity intentionally distanced themselves from Spanish, in order – note the emotive language again – “to purge [...] to take back control [...] to cleanse” (Hull 142f.). This attitude went as far as to spell the coordinating conjunction /i/ as <yi> or <yi'>, merely to distinguish it from the exact Spanish equivalent <y> (153). In Sardinian, the use of the interpunct <·> to signal boundaries in members of enclitic clusters looks suspiciously like an emblematic choice since Italian does not do this (Lai, 185), whereas other minority Romance languages such as Catalan, Occitan and Franco-Provençal do.

It is the job of a diligent reviewer to look for what is unsaid as well as what is said, and this book does indeed have a few surprising gaps. The geographical scope is impressive, but some representation from mainland Asia, where script choice is a major issue, would have been welcome. The lack of emphasis on tone is vexing given that such a large proportion of the world's endangered languages are tonal. And one might also have hoped

for more than just a few passing references to orthography testing. In the editors' defence, however, a collection of case studies is not necessarily expected to provide exhaustive treatment, and by and large this book does exactly what it sets out to do: illustrating a range of topics pertinent to orthography development in their real-life contexts and undergirded by a robust theoretical framework.

It is striking, given the diverse range of contexts surveyed in this volume, how similar many of the issues are that orthography developers worldwide are grappling with: the perennial tensions between linguistic and social considerations; the uneasy dynamics of ownership, identity and power; issues of sustainability and revitalisation; and adaptation of literacy to new media, to name but a few. There is ample scope to learn from one another, whichever corner of the globe we work in, and that is why a volume of this kind is so timely and welcome.

Overall, the reader – or this one at least – is left with a sense of optimism. We are far better placed than preceding generations to engage in the process of developing orthographies for minority languages. Writing systems research is by now a well-established sub-domain of linguistics. The Unicode standard ensures the consistent representation of characters in most of the world's writing systems. The internet facilitates instant communication and remote collaboration. And, thanks to the appearance of this book and others like it, we now have a growing stock of fascinating case studies that will inform, influence and inspire a new generation.

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