# Orthography and Identity in Cameroon

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**Abstract**

The tone languages of sub-Saharan Africa raise challenging questions for the design of new writing systems. Marking too much or too little tone can have grave consequences for the usability of an orthography. Orthography development, past and present, rests on a raft of sociolinguistic issues having little to do with the technical phonological concerns that usually preoccupy orthographers. Some of these issues are familiar from the spelling reforms which have taken place in European languages. However, many of the issues faced in sub-Saharan Africa are different, being concerned with the creation of new writing systems in a multi-ethnic context: residual colonial influences, the construction of new nation-states, detribalization versus culture preservation and language reclamation, and so on. Language development projects which crucially rely on creating or revising orthographies may founder if they do not attend to the various layers of identity that are indexed by orthography: whether colonial, national, ethnic, local or individual identity. In this study, I review the history and politics of orthography in Cameroon, with a focus on tone marking. The paper concludes by calling present-day orthographers to a deeper and broader understanding of orthographic issues. (Indigenous languages, African languages, writing systems, tone-marking, language planning)[1]

# 1 Introduction

In the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, dozens of writing systems are being created or revised each year. Nowadays the bulk of the effort is focused on minority languages, and there is usually some connection with one or more external agencies (Fishman (1988: 274), Baker (1997: 114)). This paper is addressed to those linguists who, like the author, have taken it upon themselves to dabble with new writing systems without considering the attendant non-linguistic factors.

Just what does it take to devise a completely new orthography, or to diagnose an ailing orthography and prescribe a solution? For some time now, orthography has not enjoyed full status as an academic discipline (Basso, 1974). We can put our question to a range of well-qualified disciplines, and get a range of authoritative answers, all different. In general, though, linguistics – particularly phonology – has occupied a hegemonic position in orthography discussions. Once the usual scientific rationalizations are dispensed with, we are left with the following: linguistics provides the most expedient trade-off between "empirical" research and "scientific" results. In other words, a small empirical study is presumed to generate robust recommendations for a "scientific orthography." From a list of 500–1,000 words one can extract sets of minimal pairs, cook up some simple tabulations, and report unambiguous findings for the writing system. The other disciplines do not provide such off-the-shelf technology for the orthographer. For example, conducting a series of reading and writing experiments with several candidate orthographies is more time consuming, the analysis is more difficult, and the study often raises more questions than it answers. Similar points can be made in connection with other research methodologies, whether sociolinguistic, or ethnographic, or pedagogical, or developmental, etc (see §9 for a more complete list). The hardened linguist – according to this crude caricature – does not want to be held up with conclusions that are hedged around with caveats, but just wants to get on with applying the practical method. The solution "handed down" to literacy workers may be somewhat idealized, but they will be able to work out the details as part of implementing a "practical orthography."

Sometimes, things work out pretty much according to plan. Too often, however, the implementation process runs aground, and the reason is often closely tied to identity. Professional linguists point to their "scientific evidence" and get frustrated that the other parties to the decision-making process do not fully appreciate the merit of their research. This may lead in turn to conflict and to entrenched positions. Paradoxically, as self-appointed professional orthographer, the linguist may have to face the possibility that his or her own identity has got in the way.

The present paper reviews the history of orthography in Cameroon, paying special attention to the marking of tone. The relationship between orthography and colonial, national, local and individual identity is explored. The focus is on writing systems, as distinct from writing itself, which also takes place in a socio-political context (Clark and Ivanič, 1997). This discussion is important whether mother-tongue literacy is viewed simply as a route to literacy in a national language (Wagner, 1993: 171), or whether it is viewed as independently important in its own right (Hornberger, 1998). And it is important regardless of whether the agent for orthographic change is an individual or an agency, local or national, indigenous or external.[2] Since official language policy tends to differ from *de facto* policy (c.f. Schiffman, 1996), I have endeavored to consider all influences on orthography.

Today, orthography development continues apace in sub-Saharan Africa. This paper is intended as a cautionary tale for those who create or revise orthographies. Fishman aptly sums up my own thesis:

> A clearer realization of the complexity and conflict that characterize the real-life contexts in which writing systems function should also help make the writing system specialist more aware that cooperation with other social researchers outside the usual linguistic and psychoeducational specializations (e.g., with sociologists, political scientists, economists, anthropologists) is absolutely necessary if the creation and revision of writing systems is to be understood more completely or achieved more humanely in the future than it has been in the past. (Fishman, 1988: 284)

# 2 Tone and orthography in Cameroon

Cameroon is situated in the continental hinge between western and southern Africa. The country is linguistically diverse, with languages from three major families: Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Niger-Congo. Within Niger-Congo, three groups are represented: Adamawa-Ubangian, West-Atlantic and Benue-Congo (which includes the Grassfields and Bantu groups). In all, Cameroon has some 279 languages (Grimes, 2000), spoken by 15 million people (1998 est.), in an area slightly larger than California (about twice the size of the United Kingdom). Figure 1 shows the location of the main groups.

Most of Cameroon's languages are tonal. In a tone language, voice pitch on an individual syllable can differentiate lexical or grammatical meaning. The study of tone is mainly the province of phonology (Pike, 1948; Fromkin, 1978; van der Hulst and Snider, 1993; Odden, 1995). The linguistic function of tone will be illustrated using language data from Dschang [ʧɑŋ], a Bamileke language[3] from the Grassfields group, spoken by over 300,000 people in the Western Province of Cameroon.

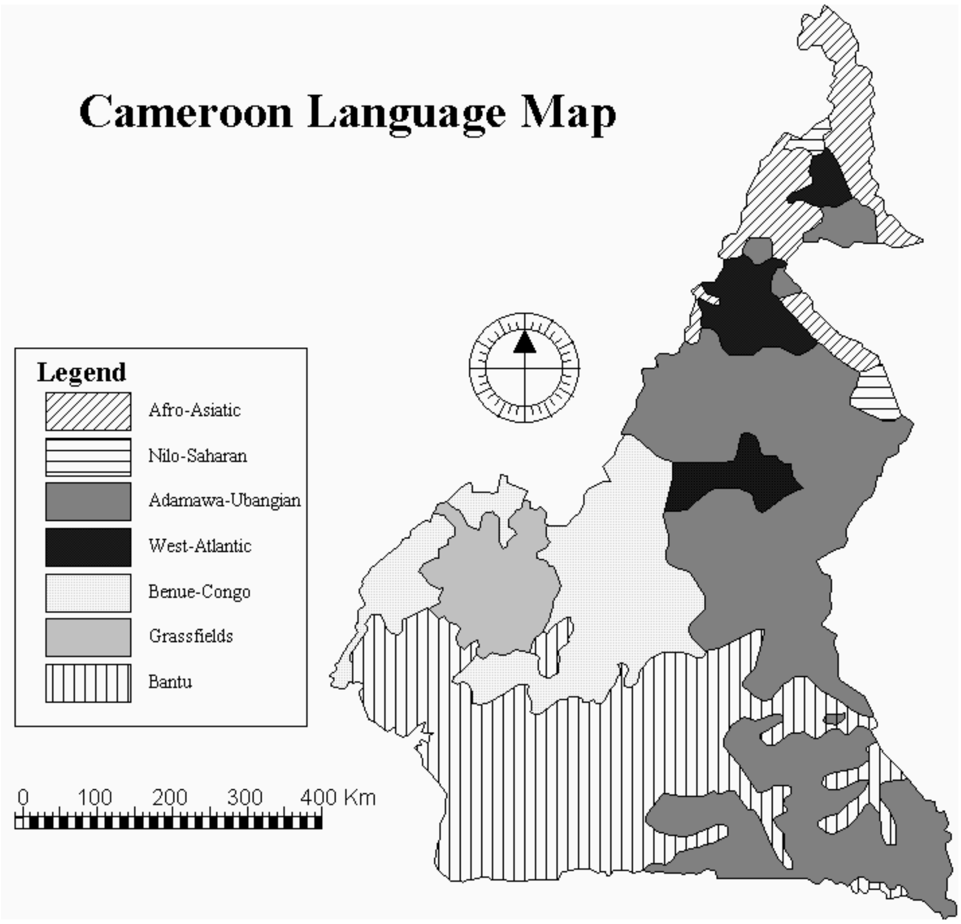


Figure 1: Cameroon Language Map Showing Principal Families (after Dieu and Renaud 1983)

An example of lexical contrast mediated by tone is given in (1). The transcriptions employ the International Phonetic Alphabet, and schematic pitch transcriptions give a visual representation for the intonation contour of each word.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) | a. | H | lə̀tɔ̌ŋ | [-ˊ] | *feather* |
| | b. | HL | lə̀t↓ɔ́ŋ | [-¯] | *reading* |
| | c. | LH | lə̀tɔ̀ŋ˚ | [--] | *navel* |
| | d. | L | lə̀tɔ̀ŋ | [-ˎ] | *finishing* |

Dschang also employs tone to distinguish grammatical meanings, as illustrated in (2). Here the segmental content is constant but the different tone melodies encode different tenses. The words used in the examples are: ə̀fɔ̀ *chief*, kə̀mtè *bury*, and mə̀mbh↓ʉ́ *dogs*. The word consisting of a single vowel is a grammatical "concord" marker. The correspondence between the lexical tones just given for these words, and the surface tones appearing in (2) is not very well understood, though it is primarily due to phrase-level tone-sandhi phenomena which fall outside the scope of the present paper.

(2) a. əfɔ̀ ɔ́ ↓kə̀mtè ↓mə́mbhʉ́ [--¯__--] *the chief buried dogs (immediate past)*
  b. əfɔ̀ ɔ̀ kə̀mtè mə̀mbh↓ʉ́ [------¯] *the chief buries dogs (simple present)*
  c. əfɔ̀ ɔ̀ ↓kə̀mtè ↓mə́mbhʉ́ [---__--] *the chief will bury dogs (immediate future)*

In the early 1970's, Maurice Tadadjeu brought this language to the attention of the world's linguists (Tadadjeu, 1974), and it has continued to receive much attention Hyman and Tadadjeu (1976); Stewart (1981, 1993); Hyman (1985); Pulleyblank (1986); Bird (1999a,b). The existing orthography for Dschang uses two diacritic symbols for representing tone, the acute accent (high tone) and the macron (mid tone), which are placed over the vowels and the nasal consonants. Low tone is unmarked. This "tone orthography" is phonemic, in the sense that an inventory of linguistically contrastive "tonemes" is identified and that tone is marked as it is pronounced in context (Pike, 1948). The system is taught using a manual which contains three brief lessons on tone (Harro et al., 1990). On average, 56% of the vowels and syllabic nasals in a Dschang text carry a tone mark. The following text illustrates the orthography:

(3) Kɑŋ pɔ́ mbhʉ̄ é lelɑ́' ŋ́gɔ̄ mésō, ḿbú ńzīŋɛ́ tɑ' enɔ. Pɔ́ lelɑ́' ńnɑ̄ŋ tɛ eshʉ̄' ɑmɔ̄' ɑ́lī'í, ḿbɛ́ ɑ́ ɑ́pɑ, ńdɔk ŋgʉ̄ɔ́ ɑ́ ŋ́kɑ̄' ŋiŋ njʉʉ́ ɑ ɑpumɑ̄. Pɔ́ le gē é tō ɑ́ ḿbɑ, ŋ́gɔ́ɔ mbɔŋ. Pɔ́ le gʉ̄ɔ́ tɛ ŋkó éwú, kɑŋ ɑ́ le mɛ́ mbhʉ̄ ŋ́gɛː ≪Esó, pɑ́' meŋ ŋkʉɔ́k ḿbiŋ nzéŋ ńzɑ̄ŋné lɑ̄, meŋ ɛ̄ kɔ́' ɑ́ ɑ́thʉ̄, é kɑ̄p, o gɔ́ ɑ́ ésī ńnɔŋ mbɛ́tɛ́ ńnéŋ ɑ́ ńtē ɑ́ ɑ́pɑ≫.

My first impressions of the tone marking system were gained by talking to local Cameroonians involved in literacy work. They reported that tone marking was difficult to teach, that it put people off writing the language, and that they had to add further diacritics to enable good public readings. Yet people were also quick to report how important it was to mark tone, readily reciting lists of minimal pairs, such as those given in (1) above. I discovered cases where a lexical tonal distinction could not be represented in the orthography. For example, the distinction between high and low tone verbs in the simple present continuous tense is only tonal, but it cannot be represented orthographically without introducing a third tone mark. This situation is fully explained in (Bird, 1999c).

The author's extensive study of the Dschang tone system confirmed Hyman's finding (Hyman, 1985) that the tonal alternations in this language are postlexical, *i.e.* part of the process of uttering words in the context of a phrase. In effect, the tone patterns serve to “glue” words together into phrases. (In this respect the system functions like English phrasal intonation, which is not marked orthographically but for the limited use of punctuation symbols such as the comma.) I suspected that the tone marks were not actually helping speakers of the language, for fluent reading aloud, for comprehension, and for writing. Formal experimentation later confirmed this suspicion (Bird, 1999d). In this study, mother-tongue speakers of the Dschang language having a variety of ages and educational backgrounds, and having different levels of exposure to the orthography, were tested on location in the Western Province of Cameroon. All but one had attended classes on tone marking. Participants read texts which were marked and unmarked for tone, then added tone marks to the unmarked texts. Analysis showed that the current phonemic tone marking system for the Dschang language degrades reading fluency and does not help to resolve tonally ambiguous words. Experienced writers attain an accuracy score of 83.5% in adding tone marks to a text, while inexperienced writers score a mere 53%, which is not much better than chance. The experiment raised serious doubts about the suitability of the phonemic method of marking tone for languages having pervasive phrase-level tone-sandhi effects, and lent support to the notion that a writing system should have “fixed word images.” However, my proposals for changing the tone orthography met a roadblock, despite my work in linguistic analysis, my evaluation of other approaches to tone orthography (Bird, 1999c), and my experimental work. It soon became evident that change would not be brought about through linguistic argumentation but by addressing issues surrounding identity.

In understanding these issues, it is helpful to consider the following questions. First, why did surface tone marking get adopted in Dschang and other languages when it appears to be so inefficient? Second, what role has the Cameroon orthography standard played, and how has this role changed over time? And third, when is any kind of orthographic change warranted and how can change be introduced? The ensuing discussion addresses these questions from the standpoint of the political, social, linguistic and individual identity which orthography both engenders and builds upon. As Dewees wrote:

> Questions of linguistic suitability of the orthography to the language are extremely important to the pedagogical and perhaps typographical implementation of the orthography, but the social, psychological, and political questions pertaining to how a writing system becomes established, matures, and finally reaches the stage where it begins to resist change are interesting questions on their own. (Dewees, 1977: 122)

In this paper I contend that these questions are not only interesting, but crucial for orthographers working in sub-Saharan Africa.

# 3 The Colonial Period

The Europeans who first penetrated Africa not only brought European inventions and ideas, but they also arrived with "linguistic cultural baggage" (Samarin, 1984: 436ff). Included with this baggage were European orthographic traditions:

> A random patchwork of colonial languages was superimposed on the already complex map of African languages, and the latter were exposed to the varying orthographic traditions of at least six different European languages. (Baker et al., 1982: 5)

Orthographic practice in Cameroon was no exception. For example, the affricate ʧ was transcribed as *ch*, *tch* or *tsch*, depending on whether the transcription was based on English, French or German, respectively. Douala, a major Bantu language of southern Cameroon, had three orthographies. These are illustrated in (4), where the columns show corresponding forms in each orthography.[4]

(4) **The Three Orthographies of Douala (Stoll, 1955: 7)**

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| British: | e̱ | o̱ | oa | ny | ma bola | mienge |
| German: | e̱ | o̱ | wa | ń | mabola | myenge |
| French: | e | o | oa | ñ | mabola | mienge |

In order to appreciate how this situation arose in Cameroon it is necessary to understand some details of colonial history. The colonial period began with growing European trading along the West African coast in the late 1700s and into the 1800s. By 1800, Britain dominated the Nigerian and Cameroonian coast, and Pidgin English was the primary language of commerce (Fonlon, 1969: 10f). The English Baptist Mission was established in Cameroon by Alfred Saker in 1845, and it was responsible for the first orthography for the Douala language. Germany narrowly beat Britain and France in the race to annexe "Kamerun" (1884), and began its conquest of the hinterland. The German explorers distributed flags, adopted traditional leaders into the colonial administration, and informed the locals that their land and people were now German.

The English missionaries, who were responsible for the majority of the schools, were expelled by the German administration and replaced by German-speaking missionaries (the Basel Mission). The American Presbyterian missionaries, established in SE Cameroon since the 1870s, were allowed to stay on condition that they replaced English with German (Fonlon, 1969: 15f). During this period, Douala and other languages were given German-based orthographies.

With the outbreak of World War I, Britain invaded Cameroon from the west and France invaded from the south. The territory was partitioned in 1916. By giving up its claims to

German East Africa, France won over 80% of Cameroon, thereby gaining control of an uninterrupted stretch of territory from Algiers on the Mediterranean to Brazzaville in the Congo (Fanso, 1989: 55). The German missions and their vernacular educational programs were now transferred to French missionaries.

The French administration tried to assimilate their new subjects and spread French civilization. "The policy aimed at assimilating or absorbing France's colonial subjects to the point where they would actually be Frenchmen linguistically, culturally, politically and legally" (Fanso, 1989: 65). Now French was taught in the schools, and "it was considered essential that instruction in the other subjects should be in French almost from the first day in school" (Fonlon, 1969: 20). As incentive to the independent mission schools, the administration offered a subsidy to raise staff salaries by two-thirds on condition that French be used as the medium of instruction (Fanso, 1989: 70).

All of the orthographies developed during the colonial period were inspired by colonial languages.[5] The fact that these orthographies adopted the sound distinctions, the characters, and the pronunciation rules of the successive colonial powers was symbolic of the subsidiary status ascribed to the languages. Tone was the most notable amongst the ignored sound distinctions; the colonial orthographers were completely naive about tone (Tucker, 1964: 610). These facts were later exploited in nationalist rhetoric.

By the end of the colonial period, orthographies were established for about a dozen languages (Bot Ba Njock, 1966: 10), including Douala, Ewondo, Fe'fe' and Basaa.

# 4 Linguistic identity in newly independent Cameroon

In 1960, the newborn nation state, the Federal Republic of Cameroon, was bequeathed a linguistic situation of bewildering complexity. Fonlon's prosaic summation of the situation leads to a striking conclusion:

> Cameroon, thanks to its geographical position, has the singular character of being the one spot on the black continent where all the African peoples meet: here you have the Bantu who claim kinship with peoples as far South as the Cape, you have Sudanese peoples, you have the Fulani whose kinsfolk are found as far West as Senegal and Mauritania, you have Hamito-Semitic peoples like the Shuwa Arabs, you have the pygmies of the equatorial jungle. Thus, it is in Cameroon that the *African Confusion of Tongues* is worse confounded; and it has become absolutely impossible to achieve, through an African language, that oneness of thought and feeling and will that is the heart's core and the soul of a nation. We are left with no choice but to strive to achieve this unity through non-African languages; and, to make things more difficult, the Federal

> Republic of Cameroon, being composed of the former Southern Cameroons, British administered, and the former French Cameroons, has inherited two of them – French and English; and has therefore been obliged to become, constitutionally, a bilingual State. (Fonlon, 1969: 9f, emphasis in original)

Thus, there was "no choice" but for Cameroon to become officially bilingual in English and French. Contrary to expectation, African identity would not be compromised but enhanced. In the words of President Ahmadou Ahidjo:

> As far as culture is concerned, we must in fact refrain from any blind and narrow nationalism and avoid any complex when absorbing the learning of other countries. When we consider the English language and culture and the French language and culture, we must regard them not as the property of such and such a race but as an acquirement of the universal civilization to which we belong. That is in fact why we have followed the path of bilingualism since we consider not only that it is in our interests to develop these two world-wide languages in our country but that furthermore it offers us the means to develop this new culture which I have just mentioned and which could transform our country into the catalyst of African unity. (Ahidjo, 1964)

In order to redirect and expand the education system, outside help was needed. Following the Ebolowa Conference of 1962, UNESCO funded a nationwide literacy program in English and French, which had 7,500 literacy centers ("l'Ecole sous l'Arbre") at its peak. The program ran until around 1969, when it declined due to the lack of external funding (SIL, 1987: 12). Apart from the reliance on external funding, the shortage of well-trained and well-motivated teachers was a key problem in these years (Bot Ba Njock, 1966: 7).

At the same time as French and English were receiving vigorous attention, literacy in the indigenous languages had been halted. Tribal identity had been a threat to the colonial administrations,[6] and now it was a threat to the state.[7] The promotion of literacy in the indigenous languages was based in the schools; the government now asserted tight control over the education system and stopped these programs. For example, in Dschang, the school established by chief Djoumessi was raided by the state authorities, and the books, typewriters, and duplicator were confiscated. The aim was to halt education in the local language. Gregoire Momo, Djoumessi's brother and director of the school from 1946–59, describes the seizure as "an act of vandalism in a period when the government did not take account of cultural treasure" (Momo, 1997: 13, my translation). Similar events were widespread, both in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa, such as in Ethiopia:

> Haile Selassie saw in ethnic languages, and particularly *afaan Oromoo*, an obstacle to his "nation-building" project. Hence, possession of Oromo literature was declared illegal, and existing works in the Oromo language were destroyed. (Bulcha, 1997)

Yet language policy and practice are frequently at odds, as Schiffman (1996) has extensively demonstrated. Fonlon made the same observation for Cameroon: "*de jure*, Cameroon has become a bilingual state; but, *de facto*, it is a highly diversified multilingual, multi-cultural country" (Fonlon, 1969: 28). Just how diverse was not known. Henri Bot Ba Njock, probably the most prominent Cameroonian linguist at the time, estimated Cameroon's stock of indigenous languages at 90 (Bot Ba Njock, 1966: 4). Thanks to extensive survey work by Dieu and Renaud (1983), Breton and Fohtung (1991), and SIL[8] Cameroon, we now know that Cameroon has at least three times this many languages [`www.sil.org/ethnologue/countries/Came.html`].

In those days, linguistic diversity was not something to be emphasized, much less acknowledged even. But at least it was possible to acknowledge the challenges that lay ahead. Two visionary articles written at this time had almost identical titles but rather different outlooks. In his piece, *The Language Problem in Cameroon*, Fonlon argued that "the target to aim at, for us, should be, not merely State bilingualism, but *individual bilingualism*: that every child that passes through our education system shall be able to speak and write both English and French" (Fonlon, 1969: 35, emphasis in original). Bot Ba Njock, in his piece *Le Problème Linguistique au Cameroun*, pointed out that, while Cameroon had chosen two official languages, it did not yet have any *national* languages. He argued for the selection of regional languages, one for each "linguistic zone" in the country (Bot Ba Njock, 1966: 12). To this day neither vision has been realized.

By the 1970s, a small group lead by Bot Ba Njock and François de Gastines began to re-assert the importance of indigenous languages. In order for their message to be heard by the post-colonial leadership, they tacitly adopted some of the same assumptions concerning linguistic identity. Jaffe (1996: 818) has called it the "European political ideology of language," which is grounded in the idea that "linguistic identity is a prerequisite for cultural identity and political stability." The group also argued that, for primary school education, literacy in the mother tongue was a better route to French and English literacy than using French and English from the start (Bot Ba Njock, 1966: 8f). Indigenous languages and literacy became safe topics once more. Although it was to take two generations of linguists, this group engineered a remarkable transition, from "preaching in the wilderness" (Bot Ba Njock, 1966: 3) to being employed by the government to coordinate language planning for the country. Just how this came about is described in the next two sections.

# 5 Revival of mother-tongue literacy

Henri Bot Ba Njock was head of the linguistics department at the then Federal University of Cameroon and former student of the eminent French linguist André Martinet. He had proposed a unified alphabet for the languages of central Africa at the UNESCO-sponsored conference on orthography in Yaoundé in 1970 (Tadadjeu (1975: 61); Baker et al. (1982: 26)). François de Gastines was a French Jesuit priest at Collège Libermann, a prestigious Jesuit secondary school in Douala. Since the late 1960s, Bot Ba Njock and de Gastines organized annual workshops on indigenous languages at the Federal University and at Collège Libermann. "The main purpose of the workshops was to train secondary and primary school teachers, as well as other well-motivated individuals, to use the phonemic alphabet for the transcription of the specific languages studied" (Tadadjeu, 1975: 61). Little information is available about these meetings except for the important collection of papers that came out of the 1974 meeting (de Gastines, 1974).

It was a daunting challenge to make the case for mother tongue education, as evidenced by the careful strategizing which had begun by the group. In the early days, members of the group placed themselves at personal risk, given the inherent dangers of encouraging tribal languages. At the political level, they sought to persuade the governing UNC (Cameroon National Union) that: "if the UNC really wants to be a party of the masses, it must reach the masses. And for that, there are no options but for the party to speak the [indigenous] languages spoken by Cameroonians" (Bot Ba Njock et al., 1974: 126f). In education, they pointed out that the government's emphasis on rural education could founder, since it had not taken the non-French, non-English environment of the child into consideration. Primary school children were deserting school in droves, partly because the teaching was not adapted to their needs, and subjected them to "psychological and cultural trauma" (Bot Ba Njock, 1966: 7). In the socio-economic arena, they argued that the people needed to be informed about health, agriculture and tourism for the greater interests of the country, and this could only be done effectively using indigenous languages. The conclusion, while apologetic, linked language development to national unity:

> Cameroonian languages can, despite what one might think, contribute to the harmonious development of our country and to national unity. (Bot Ba Njock et al., 1974: 128)
>
> Language planning [in Cameroon] should offer some means of maintaining and fostering national unity. This is a *sine qua non* condition for the acceptability of any proposed plan. (Tadadjeu, 1975: 72)
>
> The transcription of our languages has nothing to do with non-African languages. (Bot Ba Njock, 1974: 45)

From this point on, linguistic arguments for language development and for orthography creation and change had a rhetorical element which indirectly referenced national or African identity.

Similar situations are found elsewhere. Mary Beavon (pers. comm. 1996), an SIL linguist in southeast Cameroon, recounts that Bot Ba Njock told villagers in the Nzime language area that they should not consider themselves to be true Cameroonians unless they write using tone marks, since these are distinctively Cameroonian whereas writing without tone marks is European. This gives us a key insight to the first question that was posed at the outset. Although established on linguistic principles, tone marking owed its continued existence primarily to nationalism and scientism. For many languages, no one checked to see that tone marking actually helped reading and writing fluency and comprehension. There was no obvious reason to do so. Parallel cases abound; e.g., Hornberger reports the 3-vowel versus 5-vowel controversy for Quechua in Peru:

> The Peruvian linguists' defense of Quechua includes vigilance for its purity from the influence of Spanish. They argue that writing Quechua with five vowels imposes Spanish conventions on Quechua and makes Quechua subservient to Spanish, which they view as another form of colonialism. (Hornberger, 1995: 198)

Another situation is the tone and vowel-length marking in Navajo, where Fishman observes that "such insertions may, therefore, come to have a certain authenticity appeal which can be ideologically activated and cultivated" (Fishman, 1988: 275). Many parallel situations may be found. An early example, dating from the fourteenth century, is the Abur alphabet devised by St. Stefan of Perm. This alphabet was based on the Greek and Church Slavonic alphabets, but St. Stefan "deliberately made the forms of the letters sufficiently different from either so that the Komi could regard the writing system as distinctively theirs and not an alphabet for another language" (Ferguson, 1967: 206).

The logistical problem of choosing which languages to develop first, given limited resources, promised to wreak havoc. The process of choosing one language in preference to another would surely amount to tribalism. Here "linguistic science" promised some easy answers:

> Before resolving the problem, it is important to remember that linguistics is a science, and as such it wants to be objective. Linguistics is founded on impartial observations and the facts of language. It is not prescriptive or normative and its principles are neither aesthetic or moral. ... The choice between languages must operate on objective criteria, on a purely scientific basis. (Bot Ba Njock et al., 1974: 132)

"Linguistic science" could also remedy the confusion of incommensurate orthographies which had arisen during the colonial period. The IPA-based *Africa Script* (International African Institute, 1930), was an orthography standard for Africa developed by the phoneticians Westermann, Passy, Jones, Lloyd James and others (Tucker, 1971).[9] This laid the foundation for the *General Alphabet of Cameroon Languages* (Tadadjeu and Sadembouo, 1979). It is significant that the introduction to this historic document cited UNESCO and the regional orthography meetings (Bamako 1966, Yaoundé 1970, Niamey 1978) giving it an international dimension, effectively buttressing it against local criticism. Furthermore, the introduction carefully closed with an appeal to national identity once more:[10]

> Any Cameroonian can use [the General Alphabet] in his effort to learn to read and write his own language or any other Cameroon language. (Tadadjeu and Sadembouo, 1979: 2)

Linking a standard orthography to national unity is a valid strategy: "A common script is a strong tool for unification. Neither China nor Mesopotamia would have survived and prospered without it" (Gaur, 1984: 183). These ideographic scripts could be understood by all. In contrast, the shared IPA-based script of Cameroon has limited value for facilitating inter-ethnic communication, and so the link with national unity is rather tenuous. However, this misses the point. The purpose behind the above statement was to evoke national identity in support of a new orthography standard. The idea continues to be reiterated:

> ... any person who learns to read one Cameroonian language ... will already be able to read any other Cameroonian language, even if he doesn't understand what he reads... (Tadadjeu, in Hartell (1993: 58))

> ... perfect knowledge of the general principles of transcription permits us to read any language, even if we cannot understand what we read. (Sadembouo, in SIL (1987), my translation)

# 6 No longer on the defensive

By the early 1980s, the promoters of indigenous language development had gained confidence. The earlier argument for indigenous language development had been expressed in an in-house publication of Collège Libermann. Now, the *Science and Technology Review* of the government science agency DGRST – *Délégation générale à la Recherche Scientifique et Technique* – published Bot Ba Njock's paper which explicitly linked the mastering of indigenous languages now called *national* languages, to the mastering of socio-economic, cultural and political development (Bot Ba Njock, 1981). And national identity was not the only identity one could reference; orthography development in Cameroon was now linked to *African* linguistic integration (Tadadjeu, 1981).

Although the General Alphabet was not made official by the government at the time (Bot Ba Njock, 1981: 90) or subsequently, this did not prevent its adoption as a *de facto* standard in the country, marking the start of a new politics of orthography. The authors of the General Alphabet now worked for CREA – *Centre de Recherches et d'Etudes Anthropologiques*, the government body responsible for approving externally-funded anthropological and linguistic research in Cameroon, including all language development projects. The General Alphabet could be strictly enforced for these externally-funded projects, and these projects had the resources to publish pedagogical materials. The orthography standard was retro-actively enforced. For example, the SIL project on Lamnso was forced to replace the orthography developed a decade earlier with a new system which conformed to the national standard (Karl Grebe, pers. comm. 1996). Various digraphs were replaced with their IPA counterpart (e.g. ng $\rightarrow$ ŋ). Existing pedagogical materials had to be discarded and fresh materials had to be prepared, published and distributed, diverting limited resources away from other areas of language development. In stark contrast, major languages like Douala and Ewondo were immune to the standard; they did not depend on an inflow of external resources and so CREA had no control over them.

The distinction between the orthographies controlled by CREA and the orthographies that CREA could not touch was further buttressed by technological developments. The orthography standard could not be widely adopted for internally-resourced language development projects, since the "Central African Typewriter" – alluded to by Tadadjeu (1975: 61) – was never realized and since the cost of converting a conventional typewriter was prohibitive.[11] On the contrary, externally-resourced language development projects could make use of computer technology for handling special fonts within a few years of publication of the standard (Baer, 1984).

The new orthography standard also included specifications for tone marking. For example, SIL linguists working on Chadic languages in the north of Cameroon believed that tone marking was not necessary since the functional load of tone[12] was evidently very low. However, they were overruled by the standard. The minimal use of tone in these languages was enough for them to be classed as tone languages, and tone languages had to be written with tone marks, period. Accordingly, there are non-tonal languages with gratuitous tone marking (many Chadic languages) alongside tone languages without tone marking (Douala and Ewondo). According to Robert Hedinger (pers. comm. 1997), the situation among Chadic languages was heavily influenced by linguists who argued that expatriates should be able to read the texts without knowing the language in question, a task which is greatly assisted by tone marks. The same situation is found elsewhere:

> It is probable that the indication of vowel length and tone in modern Navajo orthography is primarily an aid to outside linguists and teachers whose mother tongue is English, rather than an aid for Navajo mother tongue readers and writers. (Fishman, 1988: 275)

The pattern of adoption of the new orthography standard in Cameroon described above added a new layer of complexity. In imposing an across-the-board solution to the tone-marking problem, substantive issues were swept under the rug, and a new kind of identity arrived on the scene, that of the language planning professional.

# 7 Devolution and pragmatism

Under pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to streamline the civil service in the late 1980s, the Cameroon government closed down CREA. Language development work continued, but was no longer under central control. This mirrored a more general climate change in the country towards democratization. Language development was now to be based around "language committees," small groups of interested individuals promoting literacy at the grassroots level, linked into a loose network called the *National Association of Cameroon Language Committees* (NACALCO).

Now that the teeth were removed from the orthography standard and the decision making process was devolved, the General Alphabet came to serve as an "ideal" rather than a restrictive standard. Now it is useful as a yardstick, permitting linguists to see how far an orthography deviates from the norm. According to Tadadjeu (pers. comm. 1997), deviations are acceptable provided they are properly justified.

Today, there is a small but stable base of institutional support for orthography development in Cameroon. Departments of linguistics foster the academic discussion, NACALCO ensures systematic application throughout the country, and language committees implement the orthographies in specific languages. With active projects in some 20 language areas, SIL has collaborative links at every level, as well as playing host to annual training courses in phonology, orthography and literacy for Cameroonians. The 1995 National Forum on Education and the 1996 Constitution represented a change in official policy, strongly favoring the development of Cameroonian languages.

# 8 Ethnic, local and individual identity

The speaker of an indigenous language of Cameroon (and Africa more generally) references two conflicting sets of identities, the official/national/imported versus the personal/local/indigenous (Robinson, 1996: §6). This "sociocultural dichotomy" plays out in many spheres: the use of local languages versus European languages;[13] reference to oral versus written tradition; working according to traditionally-defined gender roles versus salaried work; deriving personal status from one's predefined role in village affairs versus status through achievement, the structures which comprise traditional chiefdoms versus national administration, and so on. These two structures co-exist. "In Cameroon there is no group which is unaffected by this situation, no individual who is not in some way caught up in it" (Robinson, 1996: 244). Therefore, any discussion of orthography in terms of official, national and imported identity needs to be balanced by a discussion of personal, local and indigenous identity. For concreteness I shall focus on the situation that I observed in Dschang.

## Ethnic identity

Inspired by the orthography work of Njoya, Sultan of Bamum, chief Djoumessi of Foréké-Dschang commissioned Isaac Etia, the principal interpreter in Dschang, to create an orthography for the Dschang language in 1928. Originally from Douala, Etia had been exposed to the orthographies for Douala and borrowed from them. For example, 'e̱' [ɛ] came from German-Douala and 'ñ' [ŋ] came from French-Douala. (Tone marks were added much later, due to the influence of Father Stoll, author of (Stoll, 1955).) Djoumessi's visionary work on developing his language was linked to the preservation of local culture and identity, a view that has since become commonplace:

> You say that studying your mother tongue does not lead to professional employment. For you schooling simply serves to open the door to professional employment, but for me it is something else. It is the means of training for life... I would start with what I already possess [my language and culture] and add what is given me, rather than abandoning what I possess to look for what I might be given. (Translated and abridged from Momo, 1997: 10)

Now Djoumessi's work was limited to one dialect of the language. The villages comprising the Dschang cluster each speak a slightly different dialect (Haynes and Harro, 1985). Today, two particular dialects have come to dominate the scene, centering on the Bafou and Foréké-Dschang villages. Although these principal dialects have over 90% lexical similarity, the orthographies have developed independently and are different to this day. We find numerous cases of spurious differences, where the same spoken form is spelled differently, or where the same spelled form is pronounced differently in the two dialects. This has had the effect of making the dialects appear more different than they really are. Although this is a common practice elsewhere (cf. Malay/Indonesian) it was contrary to the intention of the designers of the orthographies. As Hyman has pointed out, "Tadadjeu's work on Dschang has attempted to unite the different dialects into one literary movement" (Hyman, 1985: 78). This desire is made explicit in Tadadjeu's sixth principle of African linguistic integration, which states that every language must have a unique written form (Tadadjeu, 1981: 80). In other words, dialect differences should not be reflected in the orthography. However, the adoption of an IPA-based orthography standard has made such integration difficult. The situation remains unresolved to this day, as is evident from the recently published dictionary for the language which avoids the issue of orthography standardization by simply listing both orthographic forms of all words (Bird and Tadadjeu, 1997).

The Dschang dialect group is part of a larger Bamileke group that is essentially coextensive with the Western Province of Cameroon. Tadadjeu reported the illusion of a single Bamileke language and, citing Sadembouo, traces this to a confusion between ethnicity and language (Tadadjeu, 1980: 47). Rather than disabuse people of this assumption, Tadadjeu views it as a positive factor which should be exploited in the interests of intercommunication and unity amongst the Bamileke people(s). A common alphabet would have a powerful unifying force (Tadadjeu, 1980: 49). While a single Bamileke alphabet has not been achieved, the ethnic significance of one of the orthographic symbols is quite striking. A ubiquitous orthographic trait of the Bamileke languages is the barred-u symbol 'ʉ'. Bamilekes who are literate in their mother tongue strongly identify with this symbol. It iconifies the strong cultural unity of the group with respect to the languages outside the group. These other languages, most notably the non-Bamileke Grassfields languages, also have this high central vowel and yet it is symbolized using 'ɨ'. Tadadjeu, co-author of the IPA-derived orthography standard (Tadadjeu and Sadembouo, 1979), guards the use of ʉ for Dschang, even though it violates both the letter and the spirit of the standard. This attachment to an orthographic symbol has been called "orthographic fetishism" (cf. Schiffman, 1996: 116).

In Ngyemboon, another Bamileke language, the sound was represented as 'yu' in the orthography, following Anderson's analysis of 'ʉ' as a palatalized 'u' (Anderson, 1977). Some years after Anderson's departure the Ngyemboon language committee wanted to switch to using 'ʉ' because this symbol was "more Bamileke" and this would facilitate wider acceptance of the written language. Before proceeding they wanted the approval of a linguist. With Anderson's approval I encouraged them to adopt the ʉ grapheme, knowing the indeterminacy of phonological analysis and the importance of ethnic identity in motivating mother-tongue literacy.

## Individual identity

Many individuals and small groups of individuals have played important roles in the Dschang orthography: literacy workers, prominent individuals in the language committee, and expatriate linguists. Each of these will be considered in turn.

First, the literacy workers are local villagers and primary school teachers who are literate in the language and have attended a six week teacher training course run jointly by NACALCO and SIL. They are a crucial group in the language development program, and derive some prestige from being able to write the language well, from their appreciation of the culture, from their broad knowledge of the oral literature which they are helping to preserve, and from their close association with an external authority (Fishman, 1988: 276). The language development work depends on them for its success.

The literacy workers were opposed to orthographic changes proposed by the author, claiming that the changes were too radical. They were unpersuaded by the experimental findings (Bird, 1999d). Having mastered such a complex tone orthography, it was not in their interest to make the task easier for others. Perhaps they thought that their status was at risk (Fishman, 1988: 277), or that the skill on which their livelihoods depended was under threat. Gregersen made a grander version of the same point in his critique of English orthography: “Any spelling that requires several years to master, perforce plays into whatever class struggle exists” (Gregersen, 1977: 427). Returning to Africa, Gregersen has this to say about the situation in Nigeria, Cameroon’s neighbor:

> Wolff, in his recommendations for practical orthographies for Nigerian languages, discusses the problem of writing tones and hopes that it can one day be solved. He believes that the problem can more easily be dealt with when everyone is literate. On the contrary, I believe the problem will be considerable greater then because once entrenched, *an orthography is apparently perpetuated by the vested interests of those who know it and are unwilling to learn another.* Also, there are various cultural reasons for maintaining what has become part of a heritage. (Gregersen, 1977: 435, emphasis mine)

The second group is the language committee, a self-appointed group of interested individuals, affiliated to NACALCO. This group is meant to carry out the local administration of a language development project, and are typically comprised of literacy workers, village elders, pastors, expatriate linguists and (occasionally) city-based élites. As with any such group which cuts across so many walks of life, the dynamics are complex. I am aware of cases when such groups have made important orthography decisions, where a key individual has either blocked or forced through a decision. While the social standing of these individuals was important, their ability to summon naive linguistic arguments to rationalize their case lent considerable weight to their position. The linguistic connection made by such arguments evidently served a sociolinguistic function, namely to reference a certain kind of identity. In some cases, Cameroonians had previously been equipped with linguistic knowledge in order to enhance their value as linguistic informants. In the context of an elicitation session, this knowledge was controlled by the expatriate linguist. When the context was switched from elicitation to language planning, this linguistic knowledge was no longer controlled. The orthography discussion became a site of contested identity, with implications for who would play the role of expert.

This brings us to the third category, the resident expatriate linguists, who typically have a special stake in the program. These are supremely dedicated individuals who have devoted years of their lives to the development of a language, and have provided crucial economic, logistical and technical support. In cases where they were primarily responsible for the creation of an orthography, it is easy for them to identify with it. In many situations, difficult decisions have had to be taken on such issues as which dialect to use as the principal basis of the writing system, which symbols to use for each sound, which morphemes to write as independent words, how words are to be spelled, how tone is marked, and so on. For tone-marking alone a bewildering variety of options is available (Bird, 1999c). Even in cases where such linguists were not responsible for the orthography, phonemic tone marking (the standard in Cameroon, cf. (3)), serves the needs of expatriate linguists admirably well. They can give fluent reading performances, with correct production of the tone, and these are highly motivational for mother-tongue literacy: "if those outsiders could do a perfect rendition of one of our traditional stories from a written text, then surely we can too." Speakers of the language regularly equate such fluent reading performances with mastery of the language, just so long as the correct tones are used, and the linguists can win much kudos as a result. It was not surprising that they see no pressing need for change. And besides, if an orthography change is introduced, who will revise the pedagogical materials, finance new print runs, and retrain the literacy teachers?

As an expatriate linguist myself, I was concerned to have tangible signs of my contribution. This went beyond the need to deliver concrete results and publish theoretical papers to satisfy the UK Economic and Social Research Council, who funded the work. I hoped that wide-ranging research on phonology would generate orthography recommendations. Moreover, I mistakenly assumed that the primary test for the merit of these recommendations was whether or not they were adopted and resulted in change that could be shown to be beneficial. They could have been just as useful in informing decisions yet to be made for the orthographies of related languages. When faced with the forces described above, I ceased making recommendations of simplified tone orthographies and embarked on the study reported here.

The foregoing discussion of ethnic and individual identity actually points to the existence of a complex dynamic between local and traditional structures on the one hand, and colonial and national institutions on the other hand. An expatriate orthographer needs to find ways to become closely integrated into this historical and socio-cultural milieu, or else stand apart and impose solutions from the outside. In many cases the latter approach has yielded success, as measured in terms of recognized orthographies and published literature. Yet in some cases the success is superficial, and the orthography and literature quickly falls out of use once its external supporter has left the scene.

# 9 Conclusion

At the outset I set myself three questions to answer. The first is to explain why surface tone marking was adopted in Dschang and other languages when it appears to be so inefficient. I pointed out that, for many languages, no one actually checked to see that tone marking helped reading fluency or comprehension. This was because issues of orthographic efficiency were not included in the discussion. Tadadjeu expresses reservations about this claim while simultaneously confirming it:

> It is not 100% accurate to say that no one checked to see that tone marking actually helped reading fluency.... The debate on the issue has never been closed. It is an open debate. But I believe that tone marking per se should not be questioned. The issue is only how to properly mark the tones. (Tadadjeu, pers. comm. 1997).

I believe that debate on the issue was indeed closed, from the time of publication of the General Alphabet in 1979 until the demise of CREA in the early 1990s. The debate on the issue is only now being reopened, and this is timely given the unexpected negative findings of Bernard et al. (1995) and Bird (1999d).

The second question concerned the role of the Cameroon orthography standard, and how this role has changed over time. The 1970s were a period of enlightenment. National identity was enhanced, not compromised, by promoting the indigenous languages. Using the technology of linguistics, the orthographies of indigenous languages could now be cut loose from their colonial past. In the words of Bot Ba Njock, this would be proof that speakers of these languages were truly Cameroonian. This was a period of immense fervor amongst a group of Catholic and Cameroonian scholars, whose agenda was viewed as potentially subversive by the political establishment. The climax of this period was the *General Alphabet of Cameroon Languages* (Tadadjeu and Sadembouo, 1979). The publication of this document marked the transition to a new period of orthographic history.

The 1980s can be viewed as a period of orthographic fundamentalism in Cameroon. The orthography standard was absolute, and it had linguistic science and the West African orthography conferences on its side (with regular reminders that these conferences were

UNESCO-sponsored). These were the highest authorities available. A tone language had to be given an orthography with tone marks, regardless of the functional load of tone in the language.

In recent years the official interpretation of the orthography standard has changed again. In the words of Tadadjeu himself, it now represents "an ideal." Deviation can be countenanced. Wide-ranging discussion of orthography options is now possible. Experimentation, like that described in (Bird, 1999d), is welcomed by Tadadjeu and NACALCO. In short, colonial naiveté, nationalistic suppression of tribalism, and linguistic scientism have all given way to a new climate of openness. Our third question, concerning when orthographic change is warranted and how it can be introduced, still requires a cautious answer.

# 10 Towards a deeper understanding

Contrary to widespread practice, linguistic analysis alone does not provide an adequate foundation for an orthography, nor does it provide adequate impetus for orthographic change. As Fishman pointed out (see §1), deeper and broader understanding are necessary. Concerning orthography and tone marking in Cameroon (and other central and west African countries), I believe there are opportunities for developing a deeper and broader understanding in the following areas.

**Linguistics.** It is almost universally assumed that phonological study alone is what informs orthography; other areas of linguistics are simply out of the picture. This is an unfortunate assumption. Strangely, while linguistics seldom speaks with one voice, the use of a linguistic argument often counts as incontrovertible support for a particular orthographic proposal. A better use of linguistics is as a source of insights about orthography options, and as a tool to probe the orthographic insights of native speakers.

**Phonology.** Phonological analysis is indeterminate in at least three ways, *vis-à-vis* orthography. First, phonology is a collection of theories evolving over time, and the study of tone systems is still in its infancy and the community of tone scholars is very small. There are no recent textbooks devoted to tone, even though the textbooks on phonology and on intonation number in the dozens. To the extent that phonology is viewed as a technology for creating writing systems, it is not a particularly stable or reliable technology. Second, the phonological studies that typically support a new orthography are often superficial, in terms of empirical coverage, level of analysis, and attention to morphology, and so their findings must necessarily be regarded as tentative. Third, while the application of phonemics to writing systems (Pike, 1947) is relatively well-understood, the suitability of this approach for writing tone is poorly understood. Recent experimental evidence supports this claim (Bird, 1999d). Given this threefold indeterminacy, it seems reasonable to expect that a strictly phonological approach ought to permit some latitude with an orthography.

**Reading.** The last 30 years has seen a burgeoning interest in the reading process and in psycholinguistic experiments that shed light on the process (Singer and Ruddell, 1985; Frost and Katz, 1992). There has been limited cross-linguistic study of the reading process (e.g. Frost et al., 1987), and this work clearly needs to be expanded in order to inform ongoing work on the creation and revision of orthographies. For a discussion of the "orthographic depth hypothesis" in relation to tone marking, see (Bird, 1999c).

**Evaluation.** Many of the tests that have been used to evaluate readers and to compare the success of different pedagogies can be applied to multiple candidate orthographies. My experiment on Dschang showed that readers of one tone language are generally more fluent when the tone marks are left out (Bird, 1999d). Bill Bright (pers. comm. 1999) reported the case of Southern Ute (Colorado) where the orthography created by the linguist was heavily laden with diacritics and the speakers of the language eventually gave up trying to master it. One wonders just how many other orthographies there are which subject readers to "diacritic overload." Rigorous testing of new orthographies is an excellent way to check for such problems, and to iron out any other wrinkles.

**Standardization.** For reasons of efficiency and impact, expatriate linguists regularly attach a higher value to standardization than is typical of the cultures in which they are immersed. While it has a useful function, "standardization should not be punitive" (Bright, pers. comm. 1997). Equally, disagreements between different communities concerning details of an orthography do not necessarily have to be viewed as conflicts which must be resolved before progress can continue (contra Hornberger, 1995).

**Pedagogy.** The existence of difficulties in learning to read and write tone is sometimes blamed on the orthography. In some cases, however, the pedagogy also causes problems. I have pointed out elsewhere that the teaching of tone orthography in Dschang focuses exclusively on words in isolation, but it is tone marks on words in phrasal context which causes most problems (Bird, 1999d). Just as L1 problems are not the sole responsibility of the orthography, L2 issues may also be better dealt with by pedagogical rather than orthographical solutions. For example, Kotey (1995) describes a "proficiency oriented strategy" which avoids the problems arising out of the "lexical tone preoccupation" which is engendered by more traditional L2 learning methods. The expatriate linguist learning an indigenous tone language at the same time as designing an orthography for the language must be at pains to improve L2 self-pedagogy in preference to skewing the orthography.

**Ethnography.** The development of writing systems takes place "within the total realm of intergenerational ethnic identity and continuity" (Fishman, 1988: 273). It connects to a network of readers, writers and texts that has been called the "discourse community" (Rafoth, 1988). And the multi-linguistic situation adds significant complexity to the task faced by writers (Fraser, 1986: 321). Schieffelin and Charlier Doucet (1992: 427) argue that "contested orthographies be viewed as sites of contested identities rather than as neutral academic or linguistic arguments without political, social or educational consequences." Those who work on orthography design or revision need to analyze the role and the needs of the different special interest groups who have an interest in the orthography, whether local language development committees, professional linguists working for the government or a local university, resident expatriate linguists, and the speakers of the language themselves (Hornberger, 1995). A useful set of methodologies is provided by research in ethnography of communication, a field which focuses on "the patterning of communicative behavior as it constitutes one of the systems of culture, as it functions within the holistic context of culture, and as it relates to patterns in other cultural systems" (Saville-Troike, 1996: 351). Since Basso wrote his plea in 1974 (Basso, 1974), some ethnographies of writing have been developed (Heath, 1983). This understanding of ethnographic issues provides a broader cultural awareness that is a prerequisite for field linguistics (Samarin, 1967§2).

**Development.** Nowadays, the introduction of new writing systems usually takes place in relatively small and isolated communities as the result of outside involvement (cf. Fishman, 1988: 274). In this context, literacy is closely associated with development.[14] Literacy presupposes the existence of a writing system, and formal orthography design often takes place in this context. A new orthography should not present unnecessary obstacles to the learner who may have severely limited access to basic pedagogical resources. A new or revised orthography, and the associated pedagogy, should maximally facilitate the widespread acquisition of literacy. Orthography creation and revision are special cases of "development intervention," and can be viewed in the context of empowerment. In particular, the ethnographic methodologies employed by Robinson (1996), and his "dynamic communication-centered development process" (p. 262) should be adapted to orthography.

**Policy.** Given the administrative arrangements by which expatriate linguists are permitted to be present in the country, they are typically well-aware of the *de jure* language policy but often naive about the *de facto* language policy of the country (cf. Schiffman, 1996). The official policy (if there is a policy at all) may be for full bilingualism in the mother tongue and a language of wider communication, but the unwritten policy may be for a complex diglossia between indigenous languages and official languages. Furthermore, as alluded to above, expatriate linguists may have the technological capability which makes them the primary implementers of official policy. Understanding the *de facto* policy, at both macro and micro levels, is critical to an understanding of the space of orthographic possibilities in a given situation.

**Change.** Both acceptance and rejection of orthographic change are socio-political statements (Fishman, 1988: 277). A completely orthogonal perspective from which to view orthographic innovation is that provided by the literature on "change" (e.g. Douglas, 1997). An outside linguist who wants to introduce change needs to understand the accepted change agents in the society, and what kind of leadership achieves consensus rather than division. Various groups may compete for authority: speakers of the language who cite their fluency in the language; national linguists who cite their scholarship of the language; expatriate linguists who cite their external training; the speakers themselves (Hornberger, 1995: 197, 203).

This call to deeper and broader understanding is a daunting challenge. A simpler way out is afforded a "linguists' gambit" which can be stated as: "We can no longer dictate orthography, but let's continue to hand down orthographies and let the best one win." A version of this approach was described by Bill Bright at the panel session "Orthography and the Politics of Identity Construction" at the 96th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (Washington DC, November 1997):

> Linguists should not impose solutions. The users of the orthography should be free to do what they want without having a linguist nagging them. The best system will win over time.

I believe this position excuses orthographers from dealing with the difficult questions whose answers demand understanding of the range of issues described above. It is a "live and let live" philosophy, whereby the sanguine linguist gets to continue to work in a vacuum, handing down idealized orthographies, while agreeing to let everyone else work out the practical details without further interference. I agree with Gregersen, who wrote the following in connection with his discussion of two orthographies for Hausa:

> How shall we evaluate the successes and failures of these systems? Unfortunately, a great deal of relevant information is lacking. We have no accurate data on literacy, on the time required to learn the different systems, or on the relative ease in reading the two orthographies. Of course we might simply wait and see, applying a kind of linguistic Darwinism and labeling that system as successful as that which survives. In so doing we could perhaps further argue that good orthographies drive out the bad, with the operationally impeccable implication that what we are left with is the good. But few scholars would long brook such foolishness... (Gregersen, 1977: 426)

If we are to learn anything from the history of orthographic innovation in Cameroon, it is that the enduring ideas were those which took account of the sociolinguistic and political realities, and the various layers of identity referenced by orthography, leveraging them in order to achieve the desired change. The result was not always a good orthography, particularly in the area of tone where under-representation and over-representation may well be major obstacles for the acquisition of reading fluency. The challenge is to manage the non-linguistic constraints while achieving beneficial change.

Finally, linguists must recognize the limitations of their craft, and be prepared to relinquish their identity as the sole professionals involved in orthographic decisions. The task is to facilitate and enable the users of the orthography. This, the linguist must see as the primary objective, even when it entails a loss of identity.

# Notes

[1] This paper is revised and expanded from a paper presented at the panel session "Orthography and the Politics of Identity Construction" at the 96th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington DC, November 1997. I am grateful to the following people for stimulating discussions, and for feedback on an earlier version of this paper: Firmin Ahoua, Sandra Barnes, Bill Bright, Mike Cahill, Bruce Connell, Katherine Demuth, Ellen Jackson, Robert Hedinger, Nancy Hornberger, Ken Pike, Patrick Renaud, Clinton Robinson, Bill Samarin, Hal Schiffman, Maurice Tadadjeu, Steve Walter, and David Weber. I take full responsibility for the opinions expressed here, including any inaccuracies or omissions. The research was covered by a grant from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (number R00023 5540) to Edinburgh University, and by research permits with the Ministry of Scientific and Technical Research of the Cameroon government. I am indebted to SIL Cameroon for providing me with the logistical support which made this research possible. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Gregoire Momo.

[2] Cf. Fishman's terms "endonormative" and "exonormative" (Fishman, 1988).

[3] Bamileke is a corruption of mbə ləkʉɔ which means "people of the ravine." Delaroziere (1949) discusses this and other corrupted Bamileke names in more detail. Watters and Leroy (1989: 435) list ten Bamileke languages, but Tadadjeu (1980: 48f) resists such a "simplification." Dschang is a place name and the main town where the Yemba language is spoken. Outside this area, the Yemba language is also called "Dschang."

[4] Since Stoll produced this summary, a fourth orthography has been developed which conforms to the *General Alphabet of Cameroon Languages* (Tadadjeu and Sadembouo, 1979).

[5] The non-roman Bamum orthography (Dugast and Jeffreys, 1993) is an apparent exception to this claim. However, the idea of writing language was inspired by the existence of orthographies for Arabic and for the languages of the colonizers, and a German missionary was also implicated.

[6] Key examples of the tribal resistance to the colonial administrations are the events surrounding the execution of King Bell (Rudolf Duala Manga) by the Germans in 1914 (Anon, 1956) and the exile and death in custody of Njoya, Sultan of Bamum under the French (1929–31).

[7] Bamgboṣe (1991§1) considers this issue in the broader context of sub-Saharan Africa.

[8] The Summer Institute of Linguistics `www.sil.org`.

[9] Baker (1997: 107) describes the Africa Script in more detail and sets it in historical context.

[10] Of course this is a simplistic invocation of national identity. As one reviewer pointed out, "Different orthographic choices cannot just be judged as efficient or deficient relative to national identity. Rather, they may support different notions of the nation (or any other form of identity)."

[11] Lux and Lux (1996: 18) report that the cost of converting a manual typewriter to handle the diacritics required for the Noni language costs approximately US$44.

[12] The functional load of an orthographic feature is the extent to which users of the orthography rely on that feature in reading and writing the language. The only way to be certain about issues of functional load is through actual experimentation. See (Bird, 1999c: 14) for a more extended discussion of this point.

[13] The existence of indigenous lingua-francas such as Fulfulde adds another layer of complexity.

[14] Bamgboṣe (1991: 38ff) has reviewed literacy and development across sub-Saharan Africa.

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