

Dialect and Orthography in Kipende

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In earlier issues of *The Bible Translator* I discussed dialect differences and the problem of their investigation.¹ The situation in the Kipende-speaking area of southeastern Congo is simple enough to illustrate clearly many of the points which were made there, but yet difficult enough so that it has been a source of disagreement and confusion throughout the history of mission work in that language. In March 1957, at the invitation of the Congo Inland Mission (through Mr. James E. Bertsche, under whose responsibility the revision of the New Testament is being done), I had the opportunity to make an investigation of the present Kipende orthography in order to study its adequacy and the dialect problems involved.

The problem, as formulated by Mr. Bertsche and presented to me in advance, was as follows:

1. Kipende is clearly a so-called "phonetic language" (that is to say, the writing has been largely phonemic) and in reducing it to writing this fact has been recognized and observed in everything except the *g* sound, which has always been indicated as *k*. There is a distinct *k* and an equally distinct *g* in Kipende. Why not write them as such? To this day I cannot read a list of strange Kipende vocabulary correctly. I invariably pronounce the written *k*'s wrongly because there is no way of knowing which is which if you do not know the word. (Elsewhere in the letter Mr. Bertsche spoke of a "hard *k*" as against a "soft *k*" and of both being different from the *g*.)
2. The Africans are becoming aware of this problem and more and more of them are experimenting on their own...
3. Another factor which has called attention to the problem is the publication of a small Kipende-French booklet by a Mupende who is a Catholic Abbe. In this booklet the *g* sound in Kipende is always written as such...

As a linguist reading between the lines I realized that if there was trouble of this kind, as Mr. Bertsche seemed to feel, it likely extended to more than just the *k*'s. It was probable that the *p*'s and *t*'s at least were also affected. Without knowing anything about Kipende, I could not be sure, but on checking with Mr. Bertsche I found that he had some uneasiness about other sounds also.

¹ Smalley, William A.: "Finding Out How Close Related Dialects Are," *The Bible Translator*, Vol. 8, No. 2, April 1957, and Vol. 8, No. 3, July 1957.

Discoveries

The results of our investigation can be seen in the chart which follows and in the map to which it refers. The first three columns list the phonemes actually found in speech.

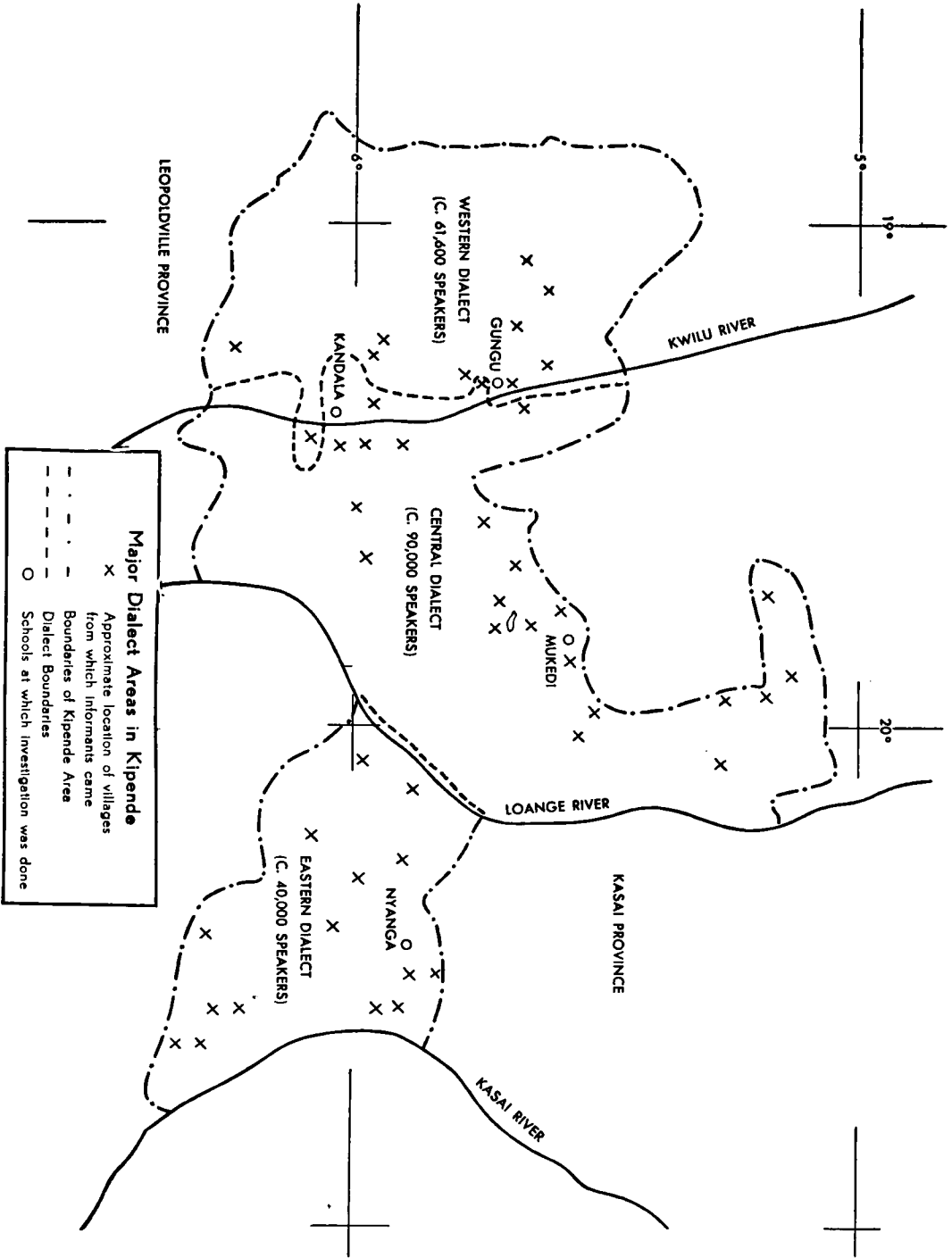
Western Dialect	Central Dialect	Eastern Dialect	Old Orthography	Suggested Orthography
{ k }	k	{ k }	k	k
{ — }	g	{ — }	k *	g
kh	kh	kh	k *	kh
{ t }	{ t }	{ t }	t	t
{ — }	{ — }	{ — }	d *	d
th	th	th	t *	th
b	b	b	b	b
ph	ph	ph	p *	p
c	c	c	tsh	tsh
j	j	j	j	j
ch	ch	ch	tsh *	tsh

* Points at which the old orthography showed some inconsistency. Not all of these were serious enough to warrant change, as may be seen by comparing the suggested orthography (column 5).

1. There are three major dialect areas in Kipende so far as the *k* problem is concerned. The one runs roughly from the Kwilu River westward (but not including Kandala and some other villages on the western side of that river). The second runs from the edge of the first dialect roughly to the Loange River. The third runs from the Loange eastward. We can call them the Western Dialect Area, the Central Dialect Area, and the Eastern Dialect Area. The Western Area and the Eastern Area are alike so far as the *k* problem is concerned. (They are not alike in some other ways.)

Part of the difficulty which the writing system presented lay in this dialect difference. Part of the disagreement also between missionaries as to what should be written resulted from the fact that they lived in different dialect areas and heard different speech patterns around them.

2. The Western Area and the Eastern Area have two different, distinct sounds which have been represented by *k* up to now. These are the "hard" and "soft" *k*'s Mr. Bertsche mentioned, or, in more technical language, *unaspirated* and *aspirated*. Unaspirated sounds are made without any puff of air after them, while the aspirated sounds



Major Dialect Areas in Kipende

- X Approximate location of villages from which informants came
- Boundaries of Kipende Area
- - - Dialect Boundaries
- O Schools at which investigation was done

do have a puff of air after them. They can be represented by [k] ² and [kh]. Most speakers of English use them both, but never to make a difference between words. *Kill*, for example, has [kh] and *skill* [k]. Because [k] in English is conditioned, most speakers are not aware of the difference, and this makes it difficult for them to hear it in another language where it may be significant.

3. The Central Area, in addition to the two kinds of *k*'s, has a distinct, separate /g/. In those words where the Central Dialect has a /g/ the other two dialects fluctuate between [k] and [g]. If they say the word *fast*, it is often a slight [g], but if they say it distinctly, it is [k]. In the Central district, however, a /g/ is always a [g]. It is a distinct phoneme in the Central Dialect, but not a distinct phoneme in the Eastern and Western Dialects, although it can occasionally be heard in them for the reason mentioned. The three-way contrast in the Central Dialect may be seen in the following words, all of which were written with a simple initial *k*: /kamba/ (a kind of tree), /khamba/ (a proper name), and /gamba/ (a particle used to indicate the beginning of a quotation). Some typical examples of the three phonemes follow, written in the suggested orthography:

/k/	/kh/	/g/
<i>mukuateshi</i> 'helper'	<i>khenji</i> 'not yet'	<i>gifula</i> 'hat'
<i>koko</i> 'hand'	<i>khombo</i> 'goat'	<i>gutunagela</i> 'to honor'
<i>mukundana</i> 'because of'	<i>gilakhua</i> 'bitter'	<i>gushiga</i> 'play (an instrument)'

The fact that the former writing system did not distinguish between /k/ and /kh/ is due to the fact that English-speaking people not trained in phonetics or not knowing some other language where this distinction is made, have difficulty in hearing it and tend to disregard it. Thus this deficiency in the writing system was not due to dialect, but to insufficient linguistic experience on the part of those who first developed the writing system. On the other hand, English speakers do not have trouble distinguishing between /g/ and /k/. The fact that the /g/ was overlooked is doubtless due to the writing system first being developed in the Eastern Area where it does not occur as a distinct phoneme.

Although I had expected the case for *t* and *p* to parallel that for *k*, it is obvious from the chart that Kipende is not fully regular in the treatment of these very similar sounds. There is no unaspirated /p/ in any of the data which we found in ten days' search. It is possible that rare words exist, but that is quite unlikely. There is no /d/ in any of the dialects, although that was to be expected, and in spite of the fact that a *d* is written in the orthography. The written *d*

² As in much linguistic writing, when a symbol represents a letter of the alphabet, it is in italics (*k*). When it represents the way the sound is pronounced, it is enclosed in brackets [k]. When it represents a phoneme (a distinctive sound) of a given language, it is enclosed in diagonal slant lines /k/.

represents a sound which is a variant of the /t/ as it occurs after /n/ and before /i/. The contrast between unaspirated and aspirated stops extends, however, to the /t/ and to the parallel stop /c/ which has traditionally been written *tsh* and which sounds something like *ch* in English, but is somewhat different in the way it is made in the mouth. The contrasts may be seen in such words as *wetu* 'ours' and *muthu* 'person'. The following words do not occur in all areas, but where they do they make a beautiful illustration: *tugutugu* 'wood-boring insect' and *thuguthugu* 'motorcycle'. An example of the contrast in /c/ (for which a change in spelling was not recommended): /muciši/ *mutshishi* (proper name) vs. /muchichi/ *mutshitshi* 'a doer'.

The Orthography in Use

A comparison of the fourth column in the chart with those which precede show the points at which the old orthography was technically incorrect. The representation of the /g/ of the Central Dialect by *k* is, of course, technically incorrect only for that dialect, and not for the others. An examination, however, of the final column in comparison with the fourth column will show at which point a change is recommended. The reasons for recommending that some changes be made and not others will be discussed below. It was very clear, however, that certain changes were absolutely necessary. This began to emerge immediately as the investigation started.

School children, for example, were confused. We found this to be true over and over again. The better readers would not have much trouble, because they would know by the context what the word meant and would read it correctly. However, if anyone read a *t* or *k* wrongly, he would not understand the word. Sometimes he would continue on in the sentence until he got the sense and then go back and change his pronunciation on the next repetition. Sometimes he would continue to read it wrongly, and then we would ask him what it meant. He would not know. Then Mr. Bertsche would describe the object and ask, "How do you say that?" The light would dawn, the word would be correctly pronounced, and the reader would go back to his sentence much relieved and read it correctly. I suppose this happened a dozen or more times on the one word *makala* 'charcoal', for example. If the student read it as /makhala/ (because these two different sounds were written the same way) he would not know what it meant. It is as though *g* and *k* in English were written the same way and we were asked to read: *I kot a bik kun* (I got a big gun).

Kipende-speaking people were searching for a way out of their writing problem. Schoolteachers and pastors were experimenting with writing the /g/ (in the Central Dialect) and the /th/ and /kh/ (everywhere) in various ways to solve their difficulties. The problem this posed for us was one of how much change was needed to provide proper representation of the language, but with as little change as possible that would require re-educating the readers. In addition to the orthography, there were other complicating factors like the fact

that there was some difference in vocabulary between the Eastern Dialect and the other dialects. A difference of less importance also was in the various pronunciations of /t/ before /u/. This was a mechanical, nonsignificant difference, but was not so understood by some missionaries and was considered by some to be a significant difference between dialects.

Recommendations

In making our recommendations for a change we kept in mind two basic principles. These were the principles of *writing the dialect of greatest diversity* and that of *functional load*. These two principles will be explained in turn.

It should be noted that the size of population was not a major consideration, although it entered into our thinking, of course. Because of the principle of writing the greatest diversity and the consideration of functional load, it was recommended that the /g/ of the Central Dialect be written (for all areas) in spite of the fact that more than half of the population does not have such a distinct phonemic /g/.

The principle of writing the greatest diversity is based on the assumption that we should strive for reading ease above spelling ease. If all three dialects are to use the same orthography (and they certainly should), the Central Dialect will have loss and confusion in its reading if the sounds /g/ and /k/, which are to it completely distinct, are written the same way. The other dialects, however, will have no trouble reading either *g* or *k* as /k/ if they are properly taught to do so. It is not until they have to spell words that they will become confused between *g* and *k*, because they do not make a pronunciation distinction. The Central Dialect is the dialect of greater diversity at this point, and it is that dialect which we represent, provided that the other principle, that of functional load, does not conflict.

The principle of functional load is the one upon which we decided not to recommend the change in the writing of *tsh*, for example. In this case there were so few examples of the unaspirated /c/ that there is very little likelihood of any confusion between it and the aspirated one, even though they are written alike. The context will usually suffice because of the low functional load. In cases like the /g/ and /k/ and aspirated /kh/ the functional load is very high. Scores of words of each kind occur within a few pages, several in the same sentence. Because the functional load is very high, if these phonemes are not distinguished, confusion constantly results, as we saw in working with the schoolboys.

We did not recommend any change in the *p* and *d* simply because the pattern already established created no confusion, since there was no conflicting phoneme. The *d* is superfluous but not confusing in relation to *t*. The writing of the aspiration on the *p* would be mere pedantry, since the contrasting unaspirate *p* does not occur. Actually, from a phonemic standpoint, the *b* should probably be interpreted as parallel to the /t/ and /k/, but there is certainly no reason for making any change in the orthography at this point.

Nothing has been said in this article about the vowels (which present no problem) or the tone (which is not written in the orthography, although it is phonemically pertinent). Ideally the tone should be written, in common with all of the languages of the area, but it again does not carry a high functional load, at least for differences between words. Its functional load in relation to grammar may be much higher, but I did not have an opportunity to investigate that. In common with other languages of the area, the resistance to the introduction of writing tone would probably be very great and the attempt might be self-defeating. In the light of the fact that the tone is not written, and that therefore a certain amount of the meaning of the sentences is thereby lost, it makes it all the more imperative that the other changes in orthography be made.

Conclusion

Any change of the scope suggested in this article is a big undertaking for a mission program which has been publishing for years. It will inevitably cause inconvenience (more to the missionaries than to the Mupende) for some time to come. A change of this kind should be undertaken gradually, starting with the literacy programs in the schools and elsewhere, and extending to each new item that is published or reprinted. Each book or pamphlet as it is reprinted should be revised for spelling. This is something that can be very easily done by Africans, once they have learned the new system. Materials for first and second grades, however, should be completely revised immediately. New learners should not be subjected to the additional problem of having two spelling systems to study.

“Weeding” the Translation

In a translations report for Bambara, French West Africa, there is the following delightful paragraph:

One of the most frequent questions asked us about the translation work is, “Just where are you in the job?” The answer is always the same, “Everywhere and nowhere.” It isn’t like hoeing a row of corn, where you can say, “I have hoed this far; that which is behind me is finished.” Every time we come to a new weed in the row ahead, it reminds us that there was something back there a way that must have been a weed too. Sometimes it takes quite a bit of hunting to find it again.