

Conclusion

A proper phonemic understanding of a language must always be the basis for an adequate system for writing it. However, as we have tried to show in this article, there are certain important practical factors which must be taken into account as well. These include a consideration of the feelings of speakers of the language about what they want and what is right in their situation, and what must be done to modify the strictly phonemic approach for the sake of making reading as simple and easy as it can be.

DAVID J. CLARK

SOME PROBLEMS IN WRITING KWARA'AE

Dr. David Clark is a UBS Translations Consultant based in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Kwara'ae is a language spoken in the northern part of the island of Malaita in the Solomon Islands, an independent nation in the south-western Pacific. It has about 15,000 speakers, and is thus by far the largest vernacular language, not only on Malaita, but in the whole of the Solomons.

This article describes some problems in developing a writing system for Kwara'ae. We shall first discuss particular problems, and then refer to some of the general principles involved in forming writing systems which are both efficient and acceptable to the people who speak the language concerned.

The situation of Kwara'ae

Kwara'ae is closely related to the other languages of northern Malaita, namely Kwaio, Langalanga, Gula'ala, Fataleka, Mbaenggu, Mbaelelea, To'abaita, and Lau. In fact, speakers of these languages can generally understand or speak one or more of the neighbouring languages. And often people from one group can hold conversations with those from another group, each person speaking his own language. However, because Kwara'ae is the largest language, there are probably more people who want to understand it than any of the smaller languages; and it has been used fairly widely in written form by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. The New Testament was published in 1961, but has not been very extensively used. This may be in part related to some unusual writing problems in Kwara'ae.

In general, the languages of northern Malaita do not have very complicated sound systems, and most of the sounds can easily be represented by letters taken from the alphabet of English. English is the national language of the Solomons, and has for a long time been the language of greatest influence in the work of government, missions and schools.

Even before linguists arrived at the principle of the phonemic writing system (that is, writing each distinct sound of a language with a separate letter), most of the writing systems used in Malaita were in fact phonemic, or at least nearly phonemic. The difficulties in writing were not so much in recognizing which sounds needed to be written as in choosing symbols for those sounds which did not match up easily with the sounds of English. The main problems in Kwara'ae are dealt with in the following sections.

Lengthened vowels

Kwara'ae has five vowels, and these can conveniently be written with the five vowel letters of the English alphabet. There is one problem, however, and this concerns lengthened vowels. These often contrast with normal vowels to make differences in meaning between words which are otherwise identical. For instance, the following words are identical except for the difference between normal and lengthened vowels:

<i>aba</i>	“to be surprised”	<i>ma'a</i>	“father”
<i>abaa</i>	“space, area”	<i>ma'aa</i>	“uncooked, raw”
<i>kuru</i>	“land snail”		
<i>kuruu</i>	“to sink”		

In the past, vowel length has often been ignored in writing Kwara'ae, and thus some distinctions between different words which are made in speech are lost in writing.

Where lengthened vowels have been written, it has usually been with a double letter, as in the examples above; but this practice can lead to another problem, since Kwara'ae has double vowels as well as lengthened vowels. Double vowels occur where a root is repeated or doubled to form a new word, such as *ooloo* “to swim”, from the root *olo*. Speakers of the language recognize double vowels as two sounds, and instinctively write the vowel twice. If lengthened vowels are also written with a vowel letter doubled, confusion could result, though it would probably not be very frequent.

Recently the proposal has been made that double vowels should be written with two vowel letters, while lengthened vowels should be written with a single vowel letter and a macron, or bar over the top, as \bar{a} , \bar{e} , \bar{i} , \bar{o} , \bar{u} . This solution is no doubt helpful for technical linguists, but it is doubtful whether it is very practical, as a macron is not found on a typewriter with a standard English keyboard. It can be produced by typing a hyphen over the vowel letter; but this means back-spacing and moving the paper down, and involves four finger movements for every macron. The possibility of making mistakes on such unfamiliar movements is high, and people would most likely just omit the macrons.

A simple solution to the problem would be to type the lengthened vowels with double letters, and to type the double vowels with a hyphen between them. This can be done on an ordinary typewriter, and it also has the advantage that it does not make the language look “strange” by comparison with the national language, English (which of course does not use macrons, but does use hyphens).

Another factor which should be considered here is how frequently double vowels and lengthened vowels occur. It will be easier to put in any extra mark for whichever is less frequent. This is in fact the double vowels, so that frequency is another pointer in favour of the hyphen solution.

To sum up, then: in deciding how to write vowels, we see a conflict between the need to record all the significant distinctions of the language, and the need to produce a system which is easy for people to master and use. All the while, it must be remembered that Kwara'ae speakers receive most of their education in English, and are accustomed to English practices as the main influence on their writing habits.

Consonants

Most consonants in Kwara'ae correspond readily with letters used in the English alphabet, and only a few present problems.

The letter f/h

There is a fluctuation between f and h sounds in speech. At normal speed, the pronunciation is h, but in slow speech and singing, f is heard instead. It is felt by Kwara'ae speakers themselves that the "correct" form of a word is the form with f. This feeling is supported by the fact that all the other languages of northern Malaita have an f sound in words related to those in Kwara'ae where an h appears. It is therefore in the interests of having the same spelling over a wider area that f should be written in Kwara'ae. Some Kwara'ae speakers have expressed the fear that if f is written, "We shall be forced to change our pronunciation." But since speech always takes precedence over writing, this fear is not well-founded, and it does not affect many people.

The velar nasal

This is the sound that occurs at the end of the English word *sing*, and is written ng in English. English uses this sound only at the end of a word or syllable, but in Kwara'ae and many other languages around the world, it can also occur at the beginning of a word or syllable. In such places, this sound has been a problem to those people (native speakers of English) who have written Kwara'ae down, and many different symbols have been used. These include *n* (italic n), n (n with an underline), ñ (n with a tilde), n (n with an overline), η (n with a tail on the right hand side), and ng. Of these, only the last, ng, has both of the following advantages: (a) it does not look different from the letters used in English; and (b) it can be produced by normal movements on an ordinary typewriter. It is therefore clearly the most practical solution. Words may then begin with ng; and though this may look hard to say to native speakers of English, it presents no problem to Kwara'ae speakers.

Labialisation

This means sounds which include a w sound. In Kwara'ae, the velar sounds g, k, and ng may occur labialised, or so to speak, compounded with a w. In the first two cases, the obvious solution is to write gw and kw, and this has been done without any problems. In the third case, however, a variety of written forms has been used, such as *nw* (italic n with a w), ñw (n with a tilde, and a w), nw (n with an overline, and a w), ngw, and just plain w. In order to keep the usage of the letter w in this sound parallel to that in gw and kw, it seems clear that the best solution is to write ngw. This again has the further advantage that it can be produced on an ordinary English typewriter keyboard.

The glottal stop

This sound is made by a momentary closing of the vocal chords, and sounds more like an interruption to a vowel or series of vowels than a sound in its own right. It does occur in speech in English, but it is not written, and does not function as a separate consonant. However, the glottal stop functions as a consonant in its own right in many languages, including Kwara'ae, and it should therefore be recorded in writing those languages. For instance, the following Kwara'ae words are identical except for the glottal stop, which is here represented by an apostrophe:

<i>ala</i>	“to agree”	<i>fai</i>	“four”
<i>'ala</i>	“to bite”	<i>fa'i</i>	“where?”
<i>uru</i>	“dew”	<i>rao</i>	“to work”
<i>'uru</i>	“widow”	<i>ra'o</i>	“tame”

In fact the glottal stop has sometimes been written, and in such cases, it has been represented by an apostrophe ('). Even in publications where the apostrophe has been used, however, the use has often been haphazard, and the glottal stop has very often been omitted at the beginning of a word. The real problem here is that because the apostrophe does not represent a consonant in English spelling, even native speakers of Kwara'ae seem to find it hard to remember to write it in their own language.

In similar situation in other languages, various solutions have been tried. One of these has been to take an English letter such as c, which is not needed for any other sound in the new language, and use it for the glottal stop. This solution is not popular or easy to teach, because the usage is so different from English, and probably the apostrophe is the best answer, despite its difficulties.

It will probably be a long time before people get used to using the apostrophe regularly to write the glottal stop. Meanwhile, people do not seem to have too much difficulty in understanding texts where the glottal stop is written only sometimes, even though this means that some distinctions between words are lost.

Metathesis

Metathesis simply means changing round the order in which certain sounds are pronounced. Of the Malaita languages, Kwara'ae is the only one which uses metathesis, but it does so on a large scale. Briefly, if the last syllable of a word of two or three syllables consists of a consonant followed by a vowel which is not lengthened, then the position of the vowel and consonant are changed round in normal speech. For example, the word for “bone” has the underlying and slow speech form *suli*, but in normal speech this is pronounced *suil*. The word for “ear”, which has the underlying and slow speech form *alinga*, is in normal speech pronounced *aliang*. Words with a diphthong (two vowels) or a lengthened vowel in the final syllable do not undergo this process. Words of four or more syllables of the right structure may have metathesis occurring at two or even three places in the word. For example, the underlying and slow speech form *alingaku* “my ear” is in normal speech pronounced *ailngauk* with two examples of metathesis. There are also other complications but there is no need to go into more detail than this here.

Enough has been said to show that the pronunciation of the language at normal speed is considerably different from that at slow speed. And the question therefore arises as to whether we should write the underlying forms of words, or the normal speech pronunciations. The vast majority of material printed in Kwara'ae has in fact used the underlying forms. This fits the Kwara'ae speaker's feeling about what the basic form of a word is, but will naturally make it a bit harder to read printed material in a way that sounds like normal speech. This objection would not apply in the case of hymn books and liturgical materials, since the underlying forms are used in singing and solemn speech; but it could be a factor in causing the Kwara'ae New Testament to be little used.

In the light of the problems experienced, and in particular the poor sales of the New Testament, in 1977 the Bible Society in the South Pacific experimented by printing New Reader Book 1 using the spoken rather than the underlying forms of Kwara'ae. These included h instead of f, and metathesised spellings of words. This book was received with considerable interest by the people; but though they could apparently read it without serious difficulty, there was some objection to the look of the page when the spoken form of the language appeared in print. It was certainly considerably different from what they were used to.

As a result of this response, and some further studies which were done on the writing systems of northern Malaita in general, it was decided to print New Reader Books 2-4 with the underlying unmetathesised forms of spelling. This is now being done, but at the time of writing, it is too early to assess reactions.

One possible advantage in writing Kwara'ae with the underlying forms is that the written language will then look much more like the other languages of the area. This would make it easier in theory for non-Kwara'ae people in northern Malaita to use Kwara'ae literature. Whether they would actually want to do so is another question. In the present situation in the Solomon Islands, there is something of a revival of interest in vernacular languages, and several language committees in northern Malaita are at present active in producing New Reader translations in their own languages. It does not seem very likely that such people would be enthusiastic about using Kwara'ae materials.

However, there may be changes in the situation arising from teaching in the schools. Instruction in the vernacular is often given during the first two years of primary school, and if teaching materials in vernacular languages are to be developed, clearly they will be developed in the larger languages first. Thus it may come about that Kwara'ae materials are used in non-Kwara'ae areas of northern Malaita; and if the speakers of other languages get used to reading Kwara'ae at an early stage in their education, they may have a greater desire to do so as adults.

For the Kwara'ae people, the best solution would be a concentrated literacy programme for both adults and children. This would teach the underlying form of the language as the basic written form, and clear rules for arriving at the spoken form from the written form. Though vernacular literacy will probably increase through the efforts of the primary schools, it does not seem very likely that resources for an adult literacy campaign will become available in the near future.

Some general principles

In discussing the particular problems of Kwara'ae, we have had to take account of some of the general principles of alphabet formation. These are based on both a scientific study of the sound system of a given language, and a practical consideration of certain important factors in the situation where the language is used.

Some of the principles which have been applied in the case of Kwara'ae are:

1. Ideally a writing system should represent each significant sound, or phoneme, of a language by single letter, and should do so consistently.
2. For practical purposes, a writing system should be made up as much as possible of letters available on a standard typewriter keyboard in the

national or other major language of the country. Thus for instance ñ (n with a tilde) could be a good letter to use for the ng sound in vernacular languages in countries where the national language is Spanish, since ñ is a standard letter in Spanish. It is not a good symbol in countries like the Solomon Islands where the national language is English. Rather than using such a letter in this situation, it is better to use a combination of two letters from the English alphabet, such as ng. This approach tends to make the vernacular language more like the national language in its appearance in print; and this is usually an advantage in countries where people receive most of their education in the national language.

3. There may be cases where in order to achieve principle 2, it is necessary to depart somewhat from principle 1.

In Kwara'ae, the way of writing the lengthened and double vowels and the glottal stop could be affected. If Kwara'ae speakers do not like to see a lot of apostrophes and hyphens or macrons, it might be advisable not to use them. (Final decisions have yet to be made about this; and before they are made, further investigation needs to be done to find out just how often real confusion would arise if glottal stops were not written, and if the differences between normal and lengthened vowels, or lengthened and double vowels were not marked.)

4. It is good to be consistent in the use of any particular letter within the writing system of any one language.

Thus in Kwara'ae it is good to write ngw along with gw and kw, since the w has the same value in each case. It would be theoretically possible to write the third of these sounds with just a w; but this is not as good, because the letter w would then have different values in different places.

5. If possible, it can be useful to have related languages in a given area spelling similar words in similar ways, especially when speakers of the related languages can understand each other.

For this reason, f is preferable to h in Kwara'ae, since all the related languages use f. For the same reason, it is preferable to write the underlying and slow speech forms of Kwara'ae words. But consistency between languages is less important than consistency within the one language. Thus, as suggested above, ngw is better than w for the Kwara'ae labialised velar nasal, even though several of the other languages of northern Malaita use w.

These are by no means all the principles involved in forming a good practical writing system, but they are some of those which have to be considered in the case of Kwara'ae.

In the preparation of this article use was made of the following papers:

- Simons, Gary. 1977a. Standardised Alphabets for Malaitan Languages. *Working Papers for the Language Variation and Limits to Communication Project, Number 5*. Cornell University.
- Simons, Gary. 1977b. A Kwara'ae Spelling List. *Working Papers for the Language Variation and Limits to Communication Project, Number 6*. Cornell University.
- Simons, Linda. 1977. A Listing of Publications in Solomon Islands Languages. *Workpapers in Solomon Island Languages, Number 1*. Summer Institute of Linguistics.

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