NEW ORTHOGRAPHIES FOR GA AND DANGME

by E.O. Apronti *

This brief report covers attempts that have been made in recent months to revamp the current orthography of the Ga language and devise a fresh - and first - one for Dangme. I have served on the two committees appointed by the Ministry of Education to go into this matter and would like to discuss the progress made so far.

I propose to handle the two issues in turn, since the rate of progress made in, and the perspectives of, the two committees evince significant differences: these ultimately derive from the fact that Ga has had an orthography of fairly long duration, whereas Dangme had been served by individuals' more or less idiosyncratic adaptations of Ga Orthography. We shall deal with Ga first.

Ga Orthography - symbols, diacritics, spelling rules - has passed through many changes; from Dr. Lepsius's Africa Script, through Westermann's 1929 Ghana Script up to a few changes introduced in the late 1950s. When the Bible Translating Committee for Ga started working, the need was felt to regularize Ga Orthography so as both to get rid of inconsistencies in it and also to enable Ga-speakers who are literate in English to turn a little more easily to the reading of their own Ghanaian language.

Two schools of thought at once emerged. There were first what we may term the "preservationists" mainly composed of members of the Ga Society. They maintained that Ga scholarship would suffer disastrously from any further tampering with Ga Orthography. It was their considered opinion that, taking into account the number of books printed in the current orthography and the number of manuscripts ready for printing, no useful purpose would be served by any further orthographic changes.

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The other school of thought were the proponents of change; they varied considerably in how much change they were prepared to countenance. But it is still useful to consider them as one bloc since the bulk of the work done on orthography so far has been done by them, the Ga Society having, as it were, washed its hands off any project which was going to change the status quo.

The Ad Hoc Committee's first terms of reference concerned a decision on whether four symbols of the current Ga Orthography should be replaced by more familiar English - based ones. The four symbols and the prospective replacements were as follows: 'ʃ' and English 'sh', 'dz' and English 'j', 'ts' and English 'ch', 'ŋ' and English 'ng'.

After detailed discussion, the Committee recommended the first two changes for adoption, so that 'sh' replaced 'ʃ', and 'j' replaced 'dz'. It was felt that these changes would also reduce printing and typing costs.

In the case of the other two proposals - 'ch' for 'ts' and 'ng' for 'ŋ' - the Committee decided that the adoption of these two would pose more problems than it would solve. The adoption of 'ch' for instance would have meant that this would be the only diagraph in Ga of which one member namely 'c' did not occur elsewhere in the orthography. And the adoption of 'ng' for 'ŋ' would have resulted in some very awkward spellings since this letter often begins some words in which it is part of an initial consonant complex. "Sorrow", currently written as ŋkɔmɔ would have had to be spelt ngkɔmɔ; and "libation", now written as kpai would have had to be spelt ngkpai.

These two changes having been agreed upon by the proponents of change, it was decided to enlarge the Ad Hoc Committee's terms of reference and authorize it to put forward proposals for word division,

tone marking and the orthographic representation of vowel length.

The Committee has been meeting over a period of some fourteen months on these matters and has formulated some draft recommendations. Under word division, for instance, broad agreement has been reached that the following should be treated as single words:

(a) Actor nouns formed from verbs, e.g. tsɔɔlɔ.

(b) Geographical place names unless they have already been institutionized as multi-word structures, e.g. Kweimaŋ, Amuginaa; examples of multi-word place names are Kɔle Gɔnɔ and Abɔse Okai.

(c) Titles and nicknames, e.g. Kpakpotsɛ, Maŋtsɛbi, Ohifenane.

(d) Truncated expressions involved shi as in ŋmɔshi, nii as in niyenii, momo as in yoomo, awo as in Aateŋ, mli as in tsuŋ.

(e) Words incorporating tso in its meaning of "frame" but not "tree", examples being saatso, gbomɔtso, hiɛtso.

(f) Colligation of personal pronouns and verbs as in miye, oye etc.

(g) Colligation of possessive pronouns and nouns, as in mifai, ofai etc.

(h) Colligations of auxiliary verbs and main verbs as in baaye, miiya etc.

(i) Conjunctions such as beni, koni, kɛji.

(j) Reduplicated adjectives and adverbs, such as basabasa, voovoo.

Broad agreement has also been reached on the separation of words in structures such as noun subject plus

verb, e.g. Kofi tee, verb plus object e.g. Kofi le Ado, hɔmɔ gbeɔ mɔ, noun plus postposition, e.g. tso shishi, tsu sɛɛ, double verbs e.g. ye bua, verb plus noun collocations such as gbee shi and shi gbeemɔ.

On vowel length, the committee is inclined to feel that length in vowels should be reflected in doubling of vowels so that "to lend" should be written fa and "river" should be faa, but felt that where ambiguity is unlikely, single vowels should be retained, as in Odate, Ada and La.

The Committee dislikes tone marking and would like individual writers to insert as sparingly as possible those tone marks that they feel are ABSOLUTELY essential.

One of the avowed aims of the Committee was to device orthographic conventions that would be distinguished by their consistency and simplicity, rules that would be grammar-sensitive and therefore consistent with the known structure of Ga. No wonder then that controversies have been raging within the Committee as to, for instance, the logicality of separating subject nouns from the verbs with which they colligate but joining subject pronouns to verbs in exactly identical constructions.

It is true that the latter practice is used in the current Ga Orthography. But it appears to derive from Akan practice, where, of course, it is justifiable on the bases of regular phonological relationships that can be established between the pronouns and nouns concerned. The question is whether such an in-built irregularity of orthographic convention is going to endear itself to the reader and writer of Ga.

Work is progressing in this Committee where pressure of time in the Bible Translation Committee is leading to a quick decision on what to recommend.

Turning to the new Dangme Orthography, the situation is somewhat different. This language had

erroneously been lumped together with Ga for a long time, but its separate identity was established in the early 50's when Professor Berry and others turned the searchlight on it. Some publications have appeared in Dangme, for which adaptations of the Ga Orthography were used. These were so idiosyncratic and inconsistent (individual authors often violated their conventions on the same page of their printed texts) that the need for agreement on the broad outlines of an orthography have been obvious for a long time.

The occasion for deliberations on a Dangme Orthography was provided by the Ghana Government's decision to re-instate Dangme as a School subject in September 1968. When class one text-books were called for, one was submitted by Mr. A.N. Accam of the Dangme Bible Translation Committee and a second by the Dangme Staff of the Bureau of Ghana Languages. It was obvious that orthographic confusion reigned supreme between the two texts, so the exercise was suspended for a year while a Committee got to work on the matter.

Since this Committee was working from scratch (none of the previous Dangme publications offered a consistent or credible frame of reference!), its task was somewhat easier than that of the Ga Orthography Committee. The only authority that the Dangme Committee could invoke was the language itself - the way its various dialect forms are actually spoken, the grammatical systems and structures that are directly available for empirical observation etc.

The results of the deliberations of this Committee are discussed at length in my monograph THE WRITING OF DANGME, published by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana (1969, 50Np).

I shall content myself with highlighting the main recommendations. Single consonant symbols adopted are as follows: Bb, Dd, Ff, Gg, Hh, Jj, Kk, Ll, Mm, Nn, Pp, Ss, Tt, Vv, Ww, Yy, Zz. Multiple consonant symbols adopted are: NG ng, NGM ngm, KP kp, GB gb, NY ny, TS ts.

In the case of consonant clusters, since there is no phonemic clash between the 'l' and 'r' sounds that are used in such clusters it was decided to use the 'l' symbol only for all clusters, thus "way" will be written blɔ and "to share" will be written dla although the 'r' sound occurs in the latter.

Vowel symbols adopted are: a e ɛ i ɔ u. Although all but two - namely 'e' and 'o' - of these can occur in nasalized form the use of the nasal mark or tilde is to be avoided unless it is ABSOLUTELY essential.

On word division, the Dangme Committee was able to go farther than the Ga Committee: it separated from verbs both noun subjects and pronouns subjects therefore simplifying an important orthographic rule. It separated from possessed nouns both noun and pronoun possessor, again a victory for simplicity and consistency. Post-positions are also to be written separately, as in Ga. Auxiliary verbs are not be affixed to main verbs, since they are not inseparable from the latter.

Among words to be treated as single words are actor nouns e.g. nitsulɔ "worker", deyalɔ "hunter"; verbal nouns e.g. sɛumi "crucifixion"; Personal, Place, and Place-of-Origin names, e.g. Isuɔ, Adaa, Fanteno; titles, e.g. matsɛ "chief", wenyumu "old boy".

In a language such as Dangme with more than half a dozen dialects none of which has attained the status of a Standard Dialect, one big problem was how to get an orthography that accommodates the maximum number dialectal variations. In some negative verb forms, it was possible to reconcile the claims of the various dialects, but in a few others, allowance has had to be made for individual dialect forms to co-exist, at least for the time being.

The same expedient had to be applied in the case of vocabulary. In fact the view was taken that the

wealth of synonyms provided by the collection of lexical items in the various languages may turn out to be a blessing in disguise, so no tears were shed for the (peaceful) co-existence of anɔ, adadee, ati, wedetsɛ and ajlamua for "cat".

Some compromise spelling forms were also evolved to take care of some regular sound correspondences between dialects. For instance, "to grow old" is rendered as bɔ in some dialects and as buɔ in others. The recommended orthographic form is bwɔ. Consonant - plus - 'w' will serve the sole purpose of signalling compromise spelling forms so that the reader is alerted and is free to pronounce the word according to the norms of the Dangme dialect he speaks. Other examples are: kungwɔ "chicken" to take care of pronunciations such as kungɔ and kunguɔ; eywiɛ "four" to take care of ewiɛ eyuɛ.

Consonant - plus - 'y' will similarly be used to denote compromise orthographic forms: hyɛ "yam" takes care of hiɛ and yɛ, hyi "to be full" takes care of hi and yi.

The Dangme Orthography therefore has a semblance of finality and permanence; but it is now going to be put to the test of classroom use, private correspondence use and printers' workshop use. What is learnt of its practical application will no doubt be useful for any future review that may be called for. Work on the Ga Orthography points to a divergence in the conventions that will come to be applied in these two closely-related languages. Some interesting developments can be expected in these two realms.