

English Version

L'Orthographe du Ton en Kabiyè au Banc d'Essai by David Roberts. Institut National des Langues et Civilisation Orientales (INALCO). Ecole Doctoral « Langues, Littérature et Société Orientales », n° 265. INALCO – 2 rue de Lille-75343 Paris. Thèse de Doctorat sous la Direction de Bernard Caron. Committee Members: Salem Chaker, Ettien N. Koffi, Véronique Rey. Tomes 1 et 2, pp. 601. Tome 3: Annexes, Pp. 308.

David Roberts is a linguist serving with SIL in Togo, West Africa. His doctoral dissertation focuses on finding a remedy for the difficulties that the Kabiyè people of northern Togo experience when reading and writing their language. Though this language was reduced to writing in 1930, though it has been taught in some high schools since 1982, and though its New Testament was published in 1997, fluency in reading and writing is hard to achieve. The numerous reading errors made by literate Kabiyès can be partly explained by the fact that the standard orthography does not indicate tone. Consequently, homographs and spelling-induced ambiguities clog up the deciphering process, leading readers to make frequent repairs during oral reading. Roberts devotes a little over 600 pages of his dissertation (and 200 pages of notes in the appendix) analyzing the phonological, morphological, morphophonological, and morphosyntactic tokens that are responsible for most of the reading and writing failures. As a result of this exhaustive and detailed investigation, he proposes two experimental orthographies: an “experimental tone orthography” and “an experimental grammatical orthography” to see which one of the two can solve the reading problems more effectively. In the former, high tone is indicated by an acute accent whereas in the latter, no tone is written at all. Instead, the author introduces five semiographic diacritics which are meant to signal to the reader the nature of the grammatical structure that he/she is about to read.

One of the semiographic solutions proposed by Roberts is the use of capitalization to signal, among other things, the distinction between the perfective form of verbs and certain negated forms. He proposes to capitalize the initial consonant of the root of verbs in the past tense whereas the negative form of the initial letter of the same verb is written in lower case, as in « εTalaá (*she/he has arrived*) » vs. « εtalaá (*he/she didn't perform any sacrifice*), » p. A197. This punctuation device proves to help Kabiyè readers assigning the correct tone to the verb. Kabiyè readers often failed to assign the correct tone on Yes/No questions and on some declarative sentences. To remedy this situation, Roberts borrows the Spanish convention ¿ ... ? and places the inverted question mark ¿ at the very beginning of the sentence signals to the reader that a question is coming. This, in turn, helps him/her to read these sentences with the proper intonation. The author adopts a similar strategy (¡ ... !) to help reduce the ambiguity between declarative and exclamative sentences. He also proposes the symbol ± at the beginning of sentences in the conditional mood so as to distinguish it from other moods. Furthermore, he superscripts the bilabial consonants <^{b, m, w}> to verb roots such as <s^b>, <s^m>, et <s^w> to reflect the fact that the underlying forms of such verbs have /b/, /m/ and /w/ as syllable codas even though they are later deleted in the derivational process. Last but not least, the diacritic ˘ is used to indicate the deletion of the initial /k/ of the coordinating conjunction <kεlε>.

Roberts tested both orthographies with fifty-five native speakers of Kabiyè during a weeklong workshop to determine which of the two orthographies facilitated fluency in

reading and writing. The participants were divided into two groups: one group was trained exclusively in “the experimental tone orthography” while the other was taught only in “the experimental grammatical orthography.” The result of the experiment was mixed for the reading task, that is, there was not a statistically significant difference between the performance of the two groups in the oral reading test. However, for both writing tasks, the results were highly significant statistically. This suggests that writers have an innate awareness of the morphological structure of their language, and more so than they have of its tone system. It should be noted here that irrespective of the experimental group in which they found themselves, the participants overwhelmingly favored a revision of the standard Kabiye orthography.

In my considered opinion, Roberts’ dissertation is an important contribution to the theory and practice of orthography research. Several reasons can be invoked to support this claim. First, the dissertation is methodologically sound. It is based on a large corpus of Kabiye texts that were ably analyzed linguistically and statistically. Second, Roberts draws insights from cognitive psychology, graphophonology, and various theories of reading to support his conclusions and recommendations. His decision to strategically place most of the conventions in the “experimental grammatical orthography” at the beginning of the sentences is theoretically informed. Third, though the author states openly and forcefully his desire to free orthography from “the tyranny of phonology,” pp. 531-2, he provides a solid phonological analysis of the data before opting for a grammatical orthography of tone. In so doing Roberts has shown that tonal information can be encoded in more ways than just using accentual diacritics. Given the unsatisfactory results that we have had with using tonal diacritics alone, maybe the solution to this orthographic dilemma can be found by combining aspects of Roberts’ grammatical orthography with the traditional reliance on accentual diacritics. Symbols similar to those proposed by Roberts can be used to convey tone-induced grammatical information while traditional diacritics such as the acute and/or grave accent are used to differentiate tone-induced lexical minimal pairs.