

3.3 THE CREOLE ORTHOGRAPHY

The development of a Creole orthography began in 1973 shortly after the Prime Minister of Australia announced the Government's new policy of bilingual education. A small amount of work had previously been done by Margaret Sharpe (then a member of SIL and a Research Fellow at the University of Queensland) and Mary Harris (of the Church Missionary Society) at Ngukurr in 1967. Nothing was done in the intervening period.

Work was carried out in 1973 initially by Sandefur, with an increasing amount of involvement by Sharpe. From 1973 until the end of 1975, the orthography was developed by Sandefur and Sharpe with Creole speaker involvement limited to testing.

In 1976, two Creole speakers, David Nangan:golod Jentian (school teacher from Bamyili) and his brother, Danny Marmina Jentian (head of literature production at Bamyili School), became involved in the orthography development. Nangan:golod had had some linguistic training as part of his teacher training, and Marmina was being taught to edit Creole texts for publication.

By mid 1976, several Creole speakers from Ngukurr School had also become involved in the orthography development under the direction of Warren Hastings (school teacher with some linguistic training). Sandefur and Hastings were encouraging Creole speaker involvement in the orthography development and coordination between the Bamyili and Ngukurr dialects.

In September of the same year, David Zorc of the School of Australian Linguistics became involved. During that month, ten Creole speakers from Ngukurr studied linguistics under Zorc and others, four of whom were working specifically on the Creole orthography.

In November 1976, a concerted effort was made to sort out some of the problems with the orthography and coordinate orthography development between Ngukurr and Bamyili. The School of Australian Linguistics and the Summer Institute of Linguistics cooperated with the Bamyili and Ngukurr Schools in holding a four-week Creole Writers Course. The course was held on site at Ngukurr under the direction of Zorc. Six Creole speakers from Bamyili, including Marmina, and six to nineteen from Ngukurr participated.

The majority decision of the Creole Writers Course was a Creole orthography that gives near maximum representation of significant sounds but allows for underdifferentiation in spelling.

There are 38 letters and diagraphs in the orthography: 27 consonants, 7 vowels, and 4 diphthongs.

There are 16 consonant letters: *b, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, w,* and *y*; and 11 consonant diagraphs: *ly, ng, ny, rd, rl, m, rr, rt, sh, th,* and *tj*. (See Chart 3.1 on page 62.)

There are 7 vowels represented in the orthography, 2 with diacritics.

Chart 3.2. Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e	e:	o
Low	e/a	a	o:

There are 4 diphthongs:

<i>ai</i>	low central to high front
<i>oi</i>	mid back to high front
<i>ei</i>	mid front to high front
<i>au</i>	low central to high back

In addition to the letters and diagraphs, five spelling conventions were decided upon:

1. Words are spelt the way one speaks, regardless of dialect, idiolect or range on the continuum: 'we' *mibala* at Bamyili, *melabat* at Ngukurr, and *mela* at Elsey; 'sleep' *jilib, jilip, silip, slip* heavy to light range on the continuum.

2. Proper nouns may be spelt as in the original language or as pronounced in Creole: *Roper River* ~ *Ropa Riba*; *Katherine* ~ *Gajarran*; *Injai* ~ *Hodgson River* ~ *Hadsan Riba*.

3. Words commonly used in forming compound words should be spelt consistently: *taim* 'time', *dinataim* 'lunchtime, noon',

Chart 3.1. Consonants

	Bi- labial	Labio- dental	Inter- dental	Alve- olar	Retro- flexed	Alveo- palatal	Lamino- palatal	Velar	Glottal
vcls	p			t	rt		tj	k	
Stops									
vcd	b			d	rd		j	g	
vcls							tj		
Affricates									
vcd							j		
vcls		f	th	s		sh			h
Fricatives									
vcd		b	th	s		s			
Nasals	m			n	rn	ny		ng	
Laterals				l	rl	ly			
Rhotic				rr	r				
Semi- Consonants	w				r	y			

(NB: 'vcls' means the sound is voiceless; 'vcd' means it is voiced.)

longtain 'a long time ago'; *dei* 'day', *deitain* 'day time', *tudeina* 'right now'.

4. Reduplication of a word may be indicated either by doubling the word or by placing a 2 at the end of the word: *olmen* 'old man', *olmenolmen* ~ *olmen2* 'old men'; *shabala* 'sharp', *shabalashabala* ~ *shabala2* 'very sharp'; *wok* 'to walk', *wokwok* ~ *wok2* 'walking'.

5. Capitalization and punctuation are basically as practiced in English.

3.4 EVALUATION OF THE ORTHOGRAPHY

The following evaluation of the Creole orthography is made in terms of the five basic criteria given in Section 3.1.

3.4.1 Maximum Motivation

Smalley's discussion of this criterion is limited to the question of whether or not the orthography being developed should be in the script of the national language. The Creole orthography utilizes the Roman script as does English. Though the Creole speakers involved in developing the Creole orthography were exposed to other types of script, none were given serious consideration. There was concern, however, that Creole not look like English, but that it have an identity of its own. Hence the rejection of an etymological orthography.

Maximum motivation should also arise out of the critical involvement of a number of Creole speakers in the development of the orthography. The Creole orthography has become an Aboriginal affair, not another European project.

3.4.2 Maximum Representation of Speech

It is in this area that Creole has its greatest problems. It is desirable for the orthography to symbolize every sound that is psychologically significant to Creole speakers. Creole speakers who are not sophisticated English speakers and readers tend to perceive Creole as having fewer significant sounds than do bilinguals, even though both speak overlapping ranges of the Creole continuum. Any orthography will inevitably overdifferentiate for the one group and underdifferentiate for the other.

Sounds in Creole that are overdifferentiated at the heavy end of the continuum include: /f, th, s, sh, h, e:, o:, ei, au/. For the extreme heavy end /p, t, rt, tj, k/ are also overdifferentiated.

Sounds that are underdifferentiated for the light end of the continuum include: /v, z/. For the extreme light end /ǣ, ž, ɪ, æ, ʌ/ are also underdifferentiated.

3.4.3 Maximum Ease of Learning

This criterion can really only be evaluated by applying the orthography in literacy classes. At the time of writing (August 1977), this had not yet been done on a full scale. There have been, however, several 'pilot' classes: a small group of semi-literate teaching assistants, several children with severe reading problems, and a grade 6 boy with no previous school experience. These projects have shown encouraging results.

Observation of English literates starting to read Creole in both formal and informal situations has also been positive. Fluent English readers have been able to transfer into Creole without assistance. Others, however, have needed some assistance, particularly with vowels.

The unique difference in the Creole orthography from other orthographies is the variability of spelling along the continuum. This certainly provides for a wide range of stylistic possibilities for Creole writers who have a literary feeling. In addition, the variability of spelling - which, it should be stressed, is consistent in sound-symbol relationship - allows for the development of initial reading materials geared to the idiolects of individual students. 'The material given for reading should approximate the reader's oral language as closely as possible' (Genat 1976:44).

The variability of spelling also eliminates the need to spend hours of time teaching spelling. Once a person learns the orthography with its consistent sound to symbol relationships, they spell the way they speak.

3.4.4 Maximum Transfer

Though the primary concern for maximum transfer is between Creole and English, consideration is also given for transfer between Creole and other Aboriginal languages. Where the sounds of Creole are common with other Aboriginal languages, the orthography is in line with the recommendations of Leeding and Gudschinsky (1974) for a uniform orthography for Aboriginal languages.


With regard to vowels, Leeding and Gudschinsky (1974:29) recommend that

the five symbols used in English [be used] . . . Problems in transition into English cannot be avoided because of the two distinctly different vowel systems. Use of the recommended symbols, however, will make reading in the vernacular as easy as possible and should help to keep problems to a minimum when transfer is made to English.

The problems Creole speakers may have in vowel transfer to English should be the same as those experienced by Aborigines elsewhere, and the solutions to the problems should be similar. A benefit for Creole speakers who know a traditional Aboriginal language should be vowel transfer to that language without difficulties.

With consonants, transfer to traditional languages should also be near automatic. The single letter consonants should transfer to English without difficulty except where English is inconsistent while the diagraphs are susceptible to being confused with English consonant clusters.

3.4.5 Maximum Ease of Reproduction

Though several characters which do not come on common typewriters were considered, all except one of them, the 'tail-n' (η), were dismissed. η was liked very much by Creole speakers, but because it is not available on common typewriters, *ng* is used in printing. η , however, is allowed in cursive writing: *ngarni* ~ *ngarni* 'What now?'. 

Several 'above the letter' diacritics were considered but not accepted because of the need to back space and hence slow down production. The one diacritic used (:) necessitates carriage shifting and hence is not ideal, but its frequency of occurrence is low.