

XXVI. Waffa Phonemes

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1. INTRODUCTION

Waffa has heretofore received very little mention in discussions about New Guinea languages.¹ Preliminary lexicostatistical comparison indicates that Waffa is a member of the Eastern Family as defined by S. A. Wurm (1964; see also Chap. XXXV). It is more closely related to Tairora than to any other language in the family and no doubt is a member of the Tairora subfamily.

The unique feature of a contrast between sonorant and obstruent nasal phonemes distinguishes the Waffa system from the phonemic systems of the other languages in the Eastern Family and perhaps from all other Highland languages.² In other features the Waffa phoneme system could be regarded as a typical Eastern Highland system. The following description is presented as a basis for detailed comparison with other Highland systems and as a basis for establishing a practical orthography for Waffa.

¹This paper, in slightly different format, also appears in *Papers on Seven Languages of Papua-New Guinea* (in press), a publication of the Linguistic Society of New Zealand, and is published here by permission.

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²The contrast between an alveolar nasal sonorant and flap is also found in one dialect of the neighboring Tairora language.

2. PHONEMIC INVENTORY

Eighteen consonants, five vowels, and contrastive stress define the Waffa phonemic system. Table 65 shows the intersecting contrastive features which define the segmental phonemes.

TABLE 65
WAFFA PHONEMES

	Consonants			
	Bilabial	Alveolar	Velar	Glottal
Stops				
Prenasalized	<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>g</i>	
Nonprenasalized	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>q</i>
Oral Fricatives				
Voiced	<i>v</i>			
Voiceless	<i>f</i>	<i>s</i>		<i>h</i>
Nasals				
Sonorant	<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>ŋ</i>	
Obstruent	<i>mm</i>	<i>nn</i>		
Liquids				
Semivowel		<i>y</i>		
Vibrant		<i>r</i>		
	Vowels			
	Front	Central	Back	
High	<i>i</i>		<i>u</i>	
Low	<i>e</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>o</i>	

3. PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

Palatalization, labialization, and prenasalization of consonants; vowel length; and the consonant-vowel status of high vocoids present interpretational problems. The following are the interpretations chosen in the analysis presented in the following sections of this chapter.

3.1. *Palatalization and Labialization of Consonants*

Since vowel sequences are common in Waffa, but consonant sequences do not occur, the palatalization and labialization of consonant phonemes has been interpreted as a sequence of consonant plus high vowel. Two further disadvantages of interpreting them as consonant plus /w/ or /y/ are that this would increase the morphophonemic complexity of the verb morphology and it would require the postulation of a /w/ phoneme not otherwise

needed in this description of Waffa.³ For example: [pwáɾə] /puára/ 'pig', [ndwá:taino:] /duaátainoo/ 'rotting flesh', [pyé:no:] /pieénoo/ 'She is weaving', [ndyáuno:] /diáunoo/ 'I am standing'.

3.2. Prenasalization of Stops

The prenasalized voiced stops [mb], [nd], and [ŋg] function in single consonantal positions and have been interpreted as single unit phonemes /b/, /d/, and /g/, respectively, since there are no other consonantal clusters. For example: [sím báu] / [sím páu] /síbáu/ 'fly', [nda:tó:] /daátóo/ 'grandmother', [báindi] / [báinti] /vaídi/ 'man', [ŋgí:ŋgə] / [ŋgí:ŋkə] /gíga/ 'worm'.

3.3. Vowel Length

Phonetic vowel length has been interpreted as instances of geminate vowel sequences. For example: /tiínoo/ 'He is coming down', /tínóo/ 'He is saying', /kuáannú/ 'wild cane flowers', /kuáanúu/ 'spit', /nninnúuna/ 'vein', /ninúnna/ 'my sister', /yoópée/ bamboo pipe' /yópee/ 'able'. The distribution of stress justifies the interpretation of geminate sequences as two units rather than one in that either vowel may be stressed, both vowels may be stressed, or both may be unstressed, that is $\acute{V}V$, $V\acute{V}$, $\acute{V}\acute{V}$, or VV . For example: /mmáata/ 'bed', /mmaápu/ 'son', /mmáára/ 'revenge', /mmaimáura/ tree type.

3.4. Consonant-Vowel Status of High Vocoids

Syllabic high vocoids are interpreted as /i/ and /u/. Nonsyllabic high front vocoids are interpreted as /y/. Nonsyllabic high back vocoids do not occur apart from labialization. For example: [mímí] /mmímmí/ type of worm, [sáné:tu] /sánéetu/ 'lightning', [kópéyéyə] /kópéya/ type of fly, [bué:bá:bé:] /vuéévaávée/ 'quickly'.

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