

# The Relevance of the General Alphabet of Cameroonian Languages in Contest: The Engwo Perspective

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## Abstract

Since colonial days when Cameroonians in particular and Africans in general came in contact with the use of pen and paper for communication, the effect of first contact captured the psychology of the natives who to this day see the alphabets of western languages (English and French) as sacred or God given for the writing of all languages. This misconception partly explains the initial opposition and rejection of the introduction of new symbols for the proper writing of native Cameroonian languages. The development and introduction of the General Alphabet of Cameroonian Languages has faced common questions like: Why not simply use the English alphabet to write our local languages as a global and unifying system? Why introduce new unnecessary symbols or letters which are strange or unfamiliar and difficult to write, read or understand? It is in the light of this research problem that we use the Ngwo language to examine the place, role, importance and necessity of the General Alphabet of Cameroonian languages to clear doubts about the question of whether it is redundant or appropriate.

**Keywords:** Writing system, alphabet, distinctive features, segmental, suprasegmental.

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## Location of Engwo

Ngwo (also called Engwo) is a Bantu Western-Grassfield Momo language unit. It is said to be a language unit because it is composed of different dialects, spoken in Njikwa Sub-Division, Momo Division of the North-West Region of Cameroon. This language unit comprises of some nine dialects with varying levels of mutual intelligibility. These dialects as listed in the Cameroon Linguistic Atlas (ALCAM), Ethnologue, Brye (1999) and by Eyoh (2015) include Bako, Bakwa (Okorobi), Banya, Basa, Ekwebo, Ikweri, Konda, Ngwo and Amasi which is spoken in neighbouring Akwaya Sub Division in Manyu Division of the South-West Region.

## Introduction and Problem Statement

The introduction of a new writing system for Engwo adapted from the General Alphabet of Cameroonian Languages (GACL) has not gone without some resistance. Such resistance cannot be limited only to the Ngwo language community but reflects the Cameroonian society at large that has been faced with the introduction of a general alphabet or writing system that came to the lamplight in 1979. It is obvious and normal that from human nature, the introduction of a new system may always face some resistance especially

from the layman. This is moreso in situations where an old system had existed, thus demanding a change of habits. Apart from the layman, of recent some linguists have also expressed similar feelings against the new Cameroonian writing system, propagating the adoption of the colonial alphabet of English and French, with relevant segmental adaptations in letter combinations in the writing of Cameroonian languages (Ngue and Makasso 2014:28). This calls for a rethink of the situation. Besides the claim that the alphabet of colonial English can be used in writing Cameroonian languages making the GACL unnecessary, another complaint is that the new alphabet is complicated especially with the use of strange letters not found in the English alphabet and tones which they claim slow down fluency and reading speed. Considering that the Ngwo community had initially used the English alphabet in the writing of the language, this article seeks to answer the question as to whether the development of a new writing system from the GACL was necessary: a situation that applies to other Cameroonian languages.

## Scope of Study

In this article we use the Engwo experience to analyse a situation experienced by many Cameroonian languages that have had to move from their colonial

writing system to the new Cameroonian writing system introduced through the General Alphabet of Cameroonian Languages (GACL). We try to probe into the relevance of the new alphabet. At the same time we try to examine the reasons for resistance so as to make recommendations. We first do an appraisal of the historical evolution of written communication in the language up to the moment of the introduction of the new GACL, then we examine the contribution of this new writing system to the language as opposed to the old. This is to enable us better judge its relevance. We make an appraisal of attitudes and propose recommendations for the way forward.

### Historical Evolution

The passing of time in Cameroon has seen the light of the evolution of the system of written communication, especially under colonial rule. This evolution is mirrored here in the Engwo experience from the pre-colonial period to the German rule, then the British rule before the adaptation of the Engwo alphabet from the General Alphabet of Cameroonian languages.

### Pre-Colonial Period

The settlement of the Ngwo people in the territory which they occupy today as part of the Widikum tribe is traced back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. There have been no archeological excavations or any existing antiquities of the people from which studies attribute to graphic communication. Nonetheless, oral literature says that the people kept record of their transactions using counting sticks of different lengths to represent each transaction in order of duration. Apart from the use of counting sticks, they communicated basically orally (through verbal speech) and what Crystal (2008:447) calls speech surrogate (drum language and whistle-speech known in Engwo as “gô”).

### German Influence

The coming in contact with the German colonial forces after 1884 is certainly the first time the Ngwo people came in contact with graphic representation of speech. Unfortunately, the German colonial rule was short-lived as they were ousted by the British and French forces from 1916-1918 when the First World War ended. The brief duration of the German colonial rule and the absence of written documents in the community in German is proof of the fact that the German writing system had very little or no impact in the Ngwo community. However, the fact that the German writing system was the first to be known to the people was certainly going to have an influence on the people. The following Bible text (Romans 13:9-10 and 1 Corinthians 13:4-7) shows the German writing system.

**German:** Römerbrief 13, 9-10. ... 1. Korintherbrief 13, 4-7 (Luther 1912) <sup>9</sup>Denn was da gesagt ist: "Du sollst nicht ehebrechen; du sollst nicht

töten; du sollst nicht stehlen; du sollst nicht falsch Zeugnis geben; dich soll nichts gelüsten", und so ein anderes Gebot mehr ist, das wird in diesen Worten zusammengefaßt: "Du sollst deinen Nächsten lieben wie dich selbst." <sup>10</sup>Denn Liebe tut dem Nächsten nichts Böses. So ist nun die Liebe des Gesetzes Erfüllung. ... <sup>4</sup>Die Liebe ist langmütig und freundlich, die Liebe eifert nicht, die Liebe treibt nicht Mutwillen, sie blähet sich nicht, <sup>5</sup>sie stellet sich nicht ungebärdig, sie sucht nicht das Ihre, sie läßt sich nicht erbittern, sie rechnet das Böse nicht zu, <sup>6</sup>sie freut sich nicht der Ungerechtigkeit, sie freut sich aber der Wahrheit; <sup>7</sup>sie verträgt alles, sie glaubet alles, sie hoffet alles, sie duldet alles. ..."

The Germans are accredited with the development of a writing system for Mungaka (a Grassfield Cameroonian language) used by the missionaries to evangelise across the entire Grassfields Zone after they had used it to translate the Bible. The Mungaka language accompanied by the translated Bible became tools of evangelisation across the entire Northwest region. The development of another writing system for Mungaka by the Germans, different from the German writing system is indicative of the fact that the German missionaries could not successfully use the German alphabet to write Mungaka. They saw the two languages as two distinct systems that needed each its own writing system. Though both systems are adapted from the Roman alphabet, there was need for certain signs and symbols to be added to the Mungaka alphabet to clear many ambiguities and to safeguard its peculiarities. The following text is a preview of the Mungaka writing system used in the translation of the Bible and for evangelisation across the entire Grassfield area.

**Mungaka:** Ba-Roma 13:9-10 ... 1 Ba-Korinto 13:4-7

... <sup>9</sup>mbi' nu, Níkòb ka suñ ñga, "Má mfuñ mụngwi bọ, má ñño' mun bọ, má ndzọ ɣan bọ, má ñgo'ni kē mfad u bọ", ke ila' ntụ', i ka tų' a, foti bọ ni ta' tsu le, i ka ɣa, "Tī ñkoñ mfad u ndzọ mbum u" a. <sup>10</sup>Mun, i ni ñkoñ mfad i a, ma ni ndze nu mbụkad ndu i bọ; ale ñgañ-koñ-bun ni ndze nu, Níkòb ka no'ụ a. ... <sup>4</sup>Ñgañ-koñ-bun ni nsam ntụ i ni bunu bun, ni nsañni se; ñgañ-koñ-bun ma ni ntañni wu' bọ; ñgañ-koñ-bun ma ni ndzanman bọ, kụ mụ nsa mbum i bọ, <sup>5</sup>kụ mụ ndze nu nsun bọ, kụ mụ nta' bọ yi boñ bọ, kụ mụ ntsọ'ni bọ, kụ mụ ñko'ụ nu mbụkad, mun ni ndze ndu i a, mbo mun le bọ, <sup>6</sup>kụ mụ ntsañti mbi' nu mbumbu bọ, ni ntsañti bọ mbi' nu, a bī a. <sup>7</sup>I ni mbòn ñgoñ nu [mbụkad] me'; ni mbim ñgoñ nu me'; ni mbeg ñgoñ nu mboñkad me'; ni nsam ntụ i mbi' ñgoñ mbom ñgo' me'). ..."

### British Influence

Though the British started their colonial rule in the Southern Cameroons in 1919 (which became West Cameroon in 1961), the people became more familiar with written communication in 1927 which Nduawa (2011) says is the year which actually marks the start of Christian missionaries evangelisation in the Ngwo

society. Coming in contact with Bible study meant coming in contact with reading and writing in English and subsequently predominantly in Mungaka. From the Christian Missionary Sunday School (for Bible study, reading and writing), the first formal missionary school – Presbyterian School (P.S.) Ngwo was opened in 1943 at Nkon-Ngebenge (Eyoh 2007). There, the people were taught the English alphabet in order to enable them read and write English, an alphabet they have used till present date where literacy rate has skyrocketed from 0 to more than 60%. Here we insert the same text in the English language to show the English writing system.

**English:** Romans 13:9-10 ... 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (Good News Bible)

<sup>9</sup>The commandments, “Do not commit adultery; do not commit murder; do not steal; do not desire what belongs to someone else” - all these, and any others besides, are summed up in the one command, “Love your neighbour as you love yourself.” <sup>10</sup>If you love someone, you will never do them wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole Law. ... <sup>4</sup>Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; <sup>5</sup>love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; <sup>6</sup>love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. <sup>7</sup>Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail. ...”

Since the Ngwo people came in contact with graphic representation of speech through the colonial masters, they have used the Roman alphabet which was adapted to write Mungaka, and which is used predominantly in the writing of European languages like German, English and French (which are colonial languages of Cameroon). This Roman alphabet is used widely in Europe, America and Africa (Wiesemann and co 1979). Though the Ngwo people were taught in church to read and write Mungaka and in school to read and write English, they had the desire to read and write their own mother tongue Engwo to serve their communication needs. For instance, some tried to write letters to friends and relatives, they made almanacs (like the NSA Almanac 1993/94), wrote calendars and diaries (like Akonji 2001) to keep track of their weekly activities and tried to keep record of their transactions at individual levels and as groups. Brye (1999:12) reports that they found a calendar with the days of the week and a translation of the National Anthem but we note here on the contrary that in 1996, the native speaker Serika Lucas composed a song to honour the Ngwo land and ancestors. This song became popularly known as the Ngwo Anthem. The linguist and native speaker Julius A. Eyoh wrote down the song in December 2008 following the alphabet which he had produced. Verse 1 of the Cameroon National Anthem was translated by Julius A. Eyoh in 2005 (see Eyoh 2011:43). So, no Engwo translation of the Cameroon National Anthem existed before 1999 as mentioned by Brye. Though there was no ongoing literacy programme for any of the varieties, including Ngwo, Brye reports that the Ngwo

Cultural and Development Association (NCUDA) identified the need to start one. All those interviewed indicated they would be willing to participate in a Mother tongue literacy programme. The Ngwo people had the desire to write peculiar things in their language and culture like their local names. From this imposing need for written communication and the keeping of records in their mother tongue, they were forced to use the only alphabet and orthography at their disposal, which was the English alphabet of 26 letters. For some of the people, a background of the Mungaka alphabet was a plus. We insert the Bible text written in Engwo using the English alphabet as follows:

**Engwo Old Writing System:** Bo Rom 13:9-10 ... 1 Bo Korin 13:4-7

<sup>9</sup>Achere ye a me ga kpe “Ke ji andom bo; ke zudu gho bo; ka ji; ke ku agho ene ala gho chere bo” - abwa zono agimkpah mani abwa chere, yi bumu nwo efuo echere ye me ga kpe, “Doh ghobara ngwe anu ngwo me doh awe ngwombuo nge.” <sup>10</sup>Mala ngwo me doh gho deh, ngwo ke ne ya le ebwa bobo ekwa ngo bo; e doh ne shi Achere gimkpah ... <sup>4</sup>Edoh yi le eklinita mani enchuo, e ke ma ku agho bo, ka ma kama aghe, ka ma beh ekwa bo; <sup>5</sup>edoh ke ma le ezoro bobo ka ma munji ka ma tuoro entara bo bo; edoh ke ma zunu anyimabua a shi bo; <sup>6</sup>edoh ke ma gene amo ene abwa bobo bo, e na gene amo me ene enwah. <sup>7</sup>Edoh ke ma kie amo bo; ebereta ngo, ezunu koh ngo mani eklinita ngo gere ne ma go anji deh bo..”

Unfortunately the English alphabet and even the Mungaka alphabet were not developed for the Ngwo language and so, using them to write Engwo encountered a lot of irregularities and approximations, an observation also generally made by Tadadjeu and co. (2004:145). This necessitated the development of a writing system for Engwo to appropriately serve the community in written communication

### A New Alphabet for Engwo

Following the development of the science of linguistics since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the growing consciousness in the development, preservation and promotion of the linguistic and cultural identity of minority groups, modern linguists began to develop alphabets of minority languages especially African languages. Since the choice of the type of alphabet to be used depends on the predominant environment of the language in question, a series of studies and deliberations were carried out on what would be suitable to use for the languages in Africa. Wiesemann and co. (1979) give as examples discussions held in Bamako in 1966 on the writing system of major African languages spoken in West Africa. In 1970 in Yaounde, the Bantu languages of Central Africa were deliberated upon and in June 1978 in Niamey, the possibility of establishing a reference alphabet for Africa was explored. Similarly, in March 1978 in Yaounde, a commission for the unification and

harmonisation of alphabets for Cameroonian languages produced a Proposition of a General Alphabet for Cameroonian Languages. This proposition was subsequently tested by more than 50 specialists working in all parts of Cameroon on a diversity of languages. The following year March 7-9, 1979, most of the specialists including other persons interested in the development of Cameroonian languages assembled in Yaounde and worked in plenary and in individual sessions and finally agreed on a synthesis of their findings, which resulted in the production of the General Alphabet for Cameroonian Languages (Tadadjou and co 1979). This general alphabet is used in the development of alphabets for individual Cameroonian languages, each language using a limited number of sound contrasts that are relevant to indicate differences in meaning.

In January 2004, the linguist and native speaker Julius A. Eyoh produced an alphabet for the Ngwo language (Eyoh 2004). This Engwo alphabet was produced in line with the General Alphabet of Cameroonian Languages. The book *Ntsò Dwe're Engwo* (Let us Write Engwo) was circulated among the elite group of the community but the alphabet became highly popularised in the entire community through the circulation of alphabet charts. Many other documents like letters and translated portions of the Bible were written using the alphabet. On Saturday July 7<sup>th</sup> 2007, the Ngwo community assembled in the Ngwo hall (Etsam) at Sabli and adopted the alphabet for general use by the Ngwo public. More documents like the Orthography Guide were produced and in 2011, a lexicon of more than 6000 words was produced (Eyoh 2011). A language committee was formed and projects like Bible translation into Engwo were initiated subsequently for the general development of the language and culture. Here is the Bible text written using the new Engwo alphabet:

**Engwo Present Writing System: Bô Rom 13:9-10 ...**  
1 Bô Kôrin 13:4-7

<sup>9</sup>Àtsere ye a me ga kpe “Ke ji andôm bo; ke zhudu ghô bo; kâ ji; ke ku ághò’ ene ala ghô tsêre bo” - àbwa zônò àgîmkpa’ manî àbwa tsere, ye buumu ñwò efwò ètsere ye me ga kpe, “Do’ ghôbara ngwê aṅu ngwò me do’ awê ngwòmbwo nge.” <sup>10</sup>Mala ngwò me do’ ghô dè’, ngwò ke ne yà lè ebwa bôbô ekwa ngò bo; é do’ ne é shi Atsere gîmkpa’ ... <sup>4</sup>Edo’ ye le eklinitaa manî ñchwò, e ke ma ku ághò’ bo, kâ mà kâma aghê, kâ mà bè’ ekwa bo; <sup>5</sup>edo’ ke ma lè ezôrô bôbô kâ mà munji kâ mà twôrô ntara bô bo; edo’ ke ma zhùñù anyimabwa à shi bo; <sup>6</sup>edo’ ke ma gènè àmó ene abwa bôbô bo, e na gènè àmó me ene eṅwà’â. <sup>7</sup>Edo’ ke ma kyee amò bo; eberetaa ngò, ezhuṅu kò’ò ngò manî eklinitaa ngò gere ne ma gò anji dè’ bo..”

From the old Roman alphabet and writing system mirrored through the English alphabet of 26 letters, the Ngwo people were now faced with a new

alphabet and writing system, suitable for the writing of the Ngwo language. An alphabet adapted from the General Alphabet of Cameroonian Languages (GACL). This new alphabet was intended to contribute to the effectiveness of written communication in the language in several domains. We regroup these salient distinctions into two major domains: (i) the distinction between segmental features and (ii) the distinction from suprasegmental features.

### Distinction between Segmental Features

Some of the segmental disparities encountered by Ngwo people between the old writing system and the present writing system can be noted as follows:

- The old system used the letter [o] to write both [o] and [ɔ] but the new system distinguishes the two [o, ɔ] as separate letters as in the words [ató] “head” and [ató] “branches.”
- The old system used the letter [e] to write both [e] and [ɛ] but the new system distinguishes the two [e, ɛ] as separate letters as in the words [ebé] “procreation” and [ebé] “nations.” This distinction clarifies the difference between two sentences written as follows:
  - (a) Aṅu ayé má bē bwo nge “The way women carry children on their backs”
  - (b) Aṅu ayé má bē bwo nge “The way women give birth to children”
- The old system did not make any differentiation for vowel length but the new system makes a difference between long and short vowels where the long vowels are written by doubling the vowel as in [atóo] “stomach” versus [ató] “head.” This distinction in vowel length is able to disambiguate two similar sentences as follows:
  - (a) ànkâm ye na àké nge “The bucket is the big one”
  - (b) ànkâm ye na àkéε nge “The bucket is the empty one”
- With the old writing system the grapheme [ch] was used to write both [ch] and [ts] but the new system distinguishes the two [ch, ts] as separate graphemes. For instance the name [Atsa] was wrongly written as [Acha] and it did not reflect local pronunciation.
- With the old writing system the grapheme [j] was used to write both [j] and [dz] but the new system distinguishes the two [j, dz] as separate graphemes. For instance, the name [Edza] was wrongly written as [Ejah] and it did not reflect local pronunciation.
- The old writing system used the grapheme [z] to write both [z] and [zh] but the new system distinguishes the two [z, zh] as separate graphemes. Days of the week like [azhiingwè] were wrongly written as [azingwe] and many found it difficult to pronounce.



- With the old writing system, the vowel [i] was used for palatalisation as in [ebie] “cutlass,” [ekie] “medicine” but with the new system, the glide [y] is used for palatalisation as in [ebyé] “cutlass” and [ékye] “medicine.”
- The old writing system used the vowel [u] for labialisation as in [ebue] “tadpoles,” [ekua] “skin” but with the new system, the glide [w] is used for labialisation as in [ebwe] “tadpoles” and [ekwa] “skin.”
- The old writing system did not distinguish vowel nasalisation but the new alphabet distinguishes nasalised vowels with the use of a cedilla. The new system is therefore capable of differentiating words like [ewú] “market/business” from [ewú] “death.” This distinction in vowel nasalisation also helps to clarify the difference between two sentences like the following:
  - (a) ewu ye ndè’ε ngo’ efwò ànjí bónô  
“Death has given trouble these days”
  - (a) ewu ye ndè’ε ngo’ efwò ànjí bónô  
“Business has given trouble these days”
- The cedilla is also used in syllabic nasal consonants that should bear a mid tone since the mid tone is indicated with the absence of the tone as in [mfóm] “marrow” and [ngúd] “oil.”

Apart from the distinction between the segmental features discussed above, the new Engwo alphabet also makes several distinctions through suprasegmental features.

### Distinctions from Suprasegmental Features

By suprasegmental features here we refer basically to the use of tones. With the old system, there was virtually no use of tones. There is the use of tones

(2)	Noun (M-H)	Phrase (M-M)
	ēgú “hill”	ēgū “on the hill”
	ēwú “market”	ēwū “at the market”
	ātó “head”	ātō “on the head”
	ābwó “hand”	ābwō “at hand”

### (iii) Marking of the Possessor

A change of tone on a noun from high to rising may refer to the owner (possessor) of the noun as in these examples:

(3)	Noun (M-H-M)	Noun (L-LH-M)
	ādīzhū “dirty nose”	àdīzhū “one with a dirty nose”
	ābóomōm “bad wine”	àbóomōm “tapper of bad wine”

### (iv) Indicating the Diminutive

Another contrastive value of tone in Engwo is that of diminution. Tone serves as a diminutive marker in Engwo nouns. Here are examples:

with the new system. Several domains of tonal contrast can be used to illustrate the distinctive role of tones in the language to show the relevance of the new alphabet adapted from the GACL. This has to do with contrast between lexical items and grammatical functions in the language like in marking tenses. In Engwo, the contrastive function of tones can be illustrated in six different areas. These include (i) contrast between lexical items, (ii) marking of preposition, (iii) indicating the agent or possessor, (iv) marking the diminutive, (v) marking tenses, and (vi) making distinctions between pronouns as follows:

### (i) Contrast between Lexical Items

Generally, some tone languages have few minimal pairs while others have many (Hyman 2010:204). In Engwo as in most Grassfield languages with prefixes and suffixes, it is uncommon to have many monosyllabic words. Below are pairs of lexical items distinguished mainly by tone.

(1)	ēbyé “cutlass”	āwúu “bone”
	ébyé “knife”	àwùu “car”

The distinction can be between singular and plural forms

ńglí “vein”	ēblâ “shoe”
ñglí “veins”	éblâ “shoes”

Tonal alterations often result from adjacent elements in post morphemic and post lexical constructions or from the introduction of a new element. In the following Engwo examples, we see tonal alterations that help in marking prepositions and those that indicate the possessor.

### (ii) Marking of Preposition

The high tone on the root syllable is changed to a mid tone to mark the presence of a preposition in Engwo as below:

(4)	ādwó	“neck”	âdwǒ	“small neck”
	ābyé	“wound”	âbyě	“small wound”
	ēkwá	“skin”	êkwǎ	“small skin”
	ēwá	“log”	êwǎ	“small log”

The diminutive prefix is a high tone vowel [á] or [é] suspected to be followed by a floating low tone [á̀] or [é̀] which is inserted to the noun. The language does not tolerate vowel fusion, so in case the noun already has a vowel prefix, the diminutive prefix gets deleted, leaving its tone floating. This tone docks on the existing mid tone prefix and creates a contour (HL). The floating low affects the root tones to change from H to LH. This low-high root tone is split onto the two root syllables in case of trisyllabic nouns as follows:

(5)	ēbírí	“war”	êbírí	“small war”
	ētírí	“waist”	êtírí	“small waist”
	ākúbú	“cover”	âkúbú	“small cover”
	ápégé	“hat”	âpégé	“small hat”

Root tones that are low are not affected by the diminutive prefix tone. The existing low tone neutralises the effect of the floating low as we can see in the following examples:

(6)	ànkàm	“basket”	ânkàm	“small basket”
	àsè’	“comb”	âsè’	“small comb”
	àwùu	“car”	âwùu	“small car”
	àchwò	“handbag”	âchwò	“small handbag”

#### (v) Marking of Tenses

Tone also marks grammatical contrast in the orthography of a language. Here we are basically involved with tenses. Tone plays a vital role in marking past tenses in Engwo. This can be illustrated using pairs of clauses in which tone will be the only difference, marking tense. This implies that the subject and the verb will be the same. Bird (1996:15) uses an example from Chichewa (Bantu Malawi) to justify that tone is responsible for conveying grammatical information such as verb tense:

(7)	a)	ndímāfōtōkózá	“I explain (present habitual)”
	b)	ndīmāfótókōzā	“I explain (past habitual)”

Creissels (1999:109) confirms this as he says that the importance of the morphological function of tone in Setwana is particularly obvious when two different grammatical forms of the same verb differ in tone only. In the following Engwo clauses with the subject [ēngō] “he” and the verb [zo] “hear,” the difference in the tenses is marked by tone only.

(8)	Engō	á	zō	“He heard”	P2	same day past (this morning)
	Engō	à	zō	“He heard”	P3	yesterday past
	Engō	à	zó	“He heard”	P4	remote past

#### (vi) Distinguishing between Pronouns

Tone also helps to indicate change in pronoun in Engwo. The 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun [a] needs a tone to distinguish between its singular form and its plural form as follows.

(9)	<b>This Morning (P2)</b>			
	<i>Mid tone verbs</i>		<i>Low tone verbs</i>	
	ā zō	“he heard”	ā kàa	“he cancelled”
	á zō	“they heard”	á kàa	“they cancelled”
	ā kàarā	“he chased”	ā ndèerè	“he made”
	á kàarā	“they chased”	á ndèerè	“they made”

(10)	<b>Yesterday (P3)</b>			
	<i>Mid tone verbs</i>	<i>Low tone verbs</i>		
	à zō	“he heard”	à kàa	“he cancelled”
	á zō	“they heard”	á kàa	“they cancelled”

The third person singular pronoun uses the mid tone vowel [ā] for P2 whereas the plural pronoun is a high tone vowel [á]. As for P3, the third person singular pronoun uses the low tone vowel [à] and the plural pronoun uses the high-low tone vowel [â].

Apart from the above differences between the old writing system (English alphabet) and the new, both the English alphabet and the Engwo alphabet do not mark intonation patterns but use the same capitalisation rules and punctuation marks like the question mark, exclamation mark, full stop and comma. From the above segmental and suprasegmental distinctions between the old writing system and the new, it is evident that the old writing system (or the English alphabet) did not appropriately serve speakers of Engwo in written communication. The new system had to come therefore to cover the lapses. This new innovation has however had a bumpy ride to its receiving audience through the criticisms encountered emanating from different angles.

### Background to Criticisms

In life, the one who comes with a new innovation must be ready to face criticisms, resistance and other forms of rejection. These are however the resources that make our human endeavours get better and move us towards perfection. Even when the colonial masters came with the culture of pen and paper communication, they used force to make their colonies to accept this culture and practice it as many were forced to go to school against their own will for their own good. This is not to blind us to the constructive ideas that should help us improve on our efforts. The introduction of a new writing system must be accompanied by strategies to make it find a comfortable place among the natives. Local criticisms of the new writing system of Cameroonian languages are influenced by the different schools of thoughts such as from the linguistic laity with a low level of reading culture, from indulgent persons to innovations, from pro-colonialists and from very objective observers.

### Linguistic Laity

Linguistic laity is persons with no knowledge or prior studies in languages and linguistics despite studies in other fields but who will obviously share their opinions as regards the alphabet that is presented for public use. To such persons, an alphabet refers to the 26 letters of the English writing system which has to be manipulated at all cost to write words in any other language. Philip Davidson (2009:1) reports that when he first presented the Weh alphabet to the people, a young man looked at it and cried out in embarrassment "It is all linguistics!" Another young man, a degree holder with whom he had earlier worked to collect data came up to him to express some worries about the alphabet which to him was not properly done. He had just realised that the letters "x" and "q" were missing and the alphabet needed to be corrected. Similarly in

Ngwo, many lay persons came up to advise on letters and tones they knew nothing about. Many condemned the alphabet that it was wrong. Some interpreted the letter "o" as the inability to write the "o." The tones were seen as wrong accent marks from a poor mastery of the French accents which made the alphabet very confusing. Many literate elite members said that the alphabet was for specialists and not for the public. Some accused the language developer of wanting to force lay people to learn things of his academic discipline.

### A Low Level Reading Culture and Colonial Comfort

A low level reading culture and the many decades of colonial domination has made some Africans to feel lazy and to be contented with western civilisation (education and technology) and have no thoughts of innovation. Many have adopted a defeatist or better still an indulgent attitude and even tend to condemn local attempts to innovate, especially innovations that will call them to the task of learning a new skill. The creation of a new alphabet for Cameroonian languages means that the natives are called to learn new symbols to use for writing, different from the usual letters of colonial alphabets, in a culture where reading and writing is timid and practiced mostly in carrier oriented circumstances. The task to convince the public to see the Engwo alphabet as developed for the public to meet the written communication needs of the language was very challenging. Even as the locals were shifting much of their attention to studying western languages, our native languages have continued to serve us in our day to day living as our linguistic and cultural identity. As the years have gone by with persistence, it is becoming obvious that victory has been recorded in the Ngwo language new alphabet through community acceptance, participation and ownership.

Within the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods, post-colonialism (the observance of colonial ideologies in the absence of the colonial master) is practiced more by natives here referred to as pro-colonialists. These are persons who seek to remain completely loyal and dependent on colonial teachings, innovations, practices and reasoning even where many of such practices do not fit in the African post-colonial cultural and linguistic context. These post-colonialists or neo-colonialists believe that Africa has nothing to offer where western cultures tread and should remain at the consuming end. This has bred negativism in African values, where the promotion of African languages and cultures is seen as sources of tribalism and conflict. Everything African is seen as black ugly and no sense of seeing the gold hidden in the African black mud. Among African linguists in general and Cameroonian linguists in particular, are the descriptivists who propagate that African languages should simply be described and kept in bookshelves like museum objects to show that they existed and were spoken by blacks but were extinct and that western languages be used in our

day to day activities. The other school of thought among African linguists are revitalisationists who propagate that Africans are living beings with currently used languages and cultures among other values. Their languages should be developed and made to serve the native speakers in their day to day life. Since Africans are living, their languages and cultures should be kept alive for the world is a world of variety, a world of identity preservation and a world of diversity.

### Objective Criticisms

Alphabets are developed for public consumption and we cannot dismiss all related comments and complaints from the very public for whom the alphabets are intended. We must acknowledge all the criticisms and look into them for a way forward, especially the very constructive criticisms from linguists and from other natives who have tried to use the new alphabet.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

If colonial missionaries took time to work out a writing system for some of our languages before engaging in Bible translation for evangelisation, it is to acknowledge the fact that our Cameroonian languages in particular and African languages in general have distinct features and need a distinct writing system to preserve their peculiarities. The creation of the general alphabet of Cameroonian languages was indeed a necessity. Considering the different observations made on the new writing system for Cameroonian languages in general and for Engwo in particular, we can make some recommendations here. Every new innovation comes with its own challenges.

The complaint that the new writing system for Engwo and for all other Cameroonian languages is too congested with details and slows down reading and writing speed as well as fluency is an obvious experience that we encounter with any new system. However, it is important to note here that the purpose of an alphabet is to facilitate reading and writing in particular, and graphic communication in general. When an alphabet becomes too congested with many details, it becomes cumbersome and consequently faces rejection by the targeted community of users. When an alphabet is used only by linguists or language specialists and not by the laity, it is a sign of rejection for reasons of its complicated nature. All situations of ambiguity cannot be handled in a language using linguistic units such as letters of the alphabet and tones. Context of usage also contributes enormously to clear linguistic ambiguity. This takes language standardisation agents to task, to simplify the alphabet as much as possible. Much work has been done on the Ngwo language to cut down the number of tones used in writing as much as possible and maintain just the most relevant/indispensable. It is true that letters of the new alphabet not present in the English alphabet like e,

o, ŋ among others in other Cameroonian languages are not found on the keyboards that were designed for colonial languages (such as English, French), but today, these letters have been made available on the SIL key boards and we just have to go through the inconveniences to download and install them in our android phones and computers. We also need to help the rest of our community members to guide them to download and install the new keyboard into their phones and computers to promote usage and the popularisation of the new writing system. The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. Considering that from childhood school days to adulthood, we have been learning the English alphabet but continue to commit spelling errors as non-natives, and considering the short time native speakers take to distinguish the role of symbols in the new writing system of our local languages, it is evident that with time reading speed and fluency will be guaranteed. Practice makes perfect. The long stay of the new alphabet among the people will cultivate in them a habit favourable for the system.

Lack of linguistic awareness is widespread even among educated native speakers. When an alphabet is developed in any Cameroonian language, it must be taught to the natives irrespective of their level of education in English. Most native speakers think that by virtue of their high level of education, they should be able to read anything in their local languages without being taught and as soon as they feel challenged, they tend to abandon and condemn. This lack of linguistic awareness must be handled through explanations to the native speaking public from someone with linguistic awareness.

Linguists and local language educators are called to develop good pedagogic approaches to teach the different aspects of our languages in order to ease learning.

Study materials should be made very attractive to the targeted learners to inculcate in them the thoughts that local languages have a high value to their speakers and learners like every other language that has ever been written. Human beings are quick to judge from appearance.

Linguists and local language educators are called upon to educate the public persistently on the relevance of the new alphabet by presenting to them the distinctions brought in by this alphabet to disambiguate many elements in the language.

Texts written in the old system should be rewritten in the new system in order to suppress the old system and valorise the new system. With this, we therefore conclude these discussions as follows:



## CONCLUSION

The importance of a unifying writing system for world languages cannot be undermined. That is why the Roman alphabet is widely used in Europe, America and Africa. However, the diversity in the linguistic features between languages must be specified for effective written communication. Lexical contrastive features like vowel length, vowel nasalisation and grammatical distinctions like tense which are marked by tone need to be distinguished in Cameroonian languages like Engwo. Since such contrastive features present mainly as segmental morphemes (separate letters or syllables) or stress patterns in European languages, new symbols were not necessary in their alphabets. These disparities between Cameroonian languages and European languages therefore made the use of the alphabets of European languages very inappropriate to write Cameroonian languages. The English alphabet could not therefore effectively serve the Ngwo people since it was not designed for the Ngwo language like the other Cameroonian languages. This necessitated the elaboration of an appropriate alphabet and writing system for Cameroonian languages. With the coming of the new alphabet designed for Cameroonian languages, the Ngwo people are now effectively served in written communication. However, every new system needs time for people to adapt to and use it with ease. Criticisms are therefore obvious since full acceptance is a matter of time.

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