

The role of linguistics in the USAID Partnership For Education: *Learning Activity* in Ghana

Barbara Trudell, SIL Africa
CIES 2018



The linguistic issues arising

- Language analysis tools for developing scope/sequence and monitoring decodable stories
- Orthographic features and linguistic scope and sequence
- Teaching grammar
- Language policy environment

Primer Pro language software

- Helps validate the orthography of a language
- Helps the developer decide which graphemes should be taught
- Generates a recommended teaching order for the graphemes being taught
- Generates frequency counts of graphemes, syllables and words
- Generates decodable word lists with indicated graphemes
- Monitors the decodability of written texts

- *Input required*
 - At least a 4000-word lexicon/dictionary/word list (word, gloss, parts of speech) and at least 4000 words in natural text
 - Grammatical and phonological features of the language
- *Alert!*
 - The output is only as good as the language input.
 - Works best when there is a 1-1 correspondence between grapheme and sound (transparent orthographies)

- Ghanaian languages are too rich for English orthography!
- Unmarked tone and nasality are particular challenges.

At the word level (Dangme example)

Seven meanings of **ma**

- town
- fish
- bread dough
solidified
- on the way
- to plant
- the future aspect

At the grammatical level (Dangme example)

/mi/ “swallow”

/mí/ “not swallow”

Current spelling: **mi**

/si/ “fry”

/sí/ “not fry”

Current spelling: **si**

- Letters, syllables, and many words are not decodable
- Word meaning is ambiguous
- Ga language example: *ɔɔ*
 - *ɔɔ* exist somewhere. “I **live** here.” Or “You **are** the best, the first and foremost, the greatest.” V.
 - *ɔɔ* **beans**; cowpea, Congo pea, dahl, pigeon pea. N.
 - *ɔɔ* a type of **antelope**, Maxwell's Crowned duiker, also gray duiker. N.
 - *ɔɔ* teasing, **pretended sympathy**. “He teased you by pretending to be sympathetic”. N.
 - *ɔɔ* **dejected**, forlorn. “Why do you look so dejected?” ADJ.
 - *ɔɔ* **smoothly**, sluggishly. “The water flowed smoothly.” ADV.

Sentence meaning is also ambiguous without sufficient context (Dangme example)

Modu gave his mother the **ma** (*fish*) for supper.

Modu gave his mother the **ma** (*dough*) for supper.

Providing context:

Modu gave the **ma** to his mother, and she made bread for supper.

- Pros and cons
 - Linguistically indicated, pedagogically helpful
 - Sociolinguistic context is crucial
- Stakeholder input
 - University linguists do not “own” the orthographies to change them
 - Local-language authors: No support for changes
 - Guidance from key Ghanaian institutions
- Outcome
 - Agreement by *Learning* and the MoE: No changes to be made to the official orthographies in *Learning* materials
 - Reading method must compensate

- Phonics methods alone are not sufficient when the graphemes are not all decodable
- Readers need to learn context-based guessing, and allowing for more than one correct meaning of words and sentences
- Recommendation
 - Start with phonics teaching until the unambiguous graphemes are learned
 - For the remaining graphemes, use learning activities that build experience in the use of context

Dagaare singular-plural (human nouns)	(English gloss)	(Pictures of each)
Pɔgebilii banaare	four girls	<p><i>Teacher:</i> “What letters are the same in all of these phrases? They tell us there is more than one person.”</p>
Dɔɔbilii bayoɔbo	six boys	
Polisiri bayi	two policemen	
<i>(Contrast)</i>		<p><i>Teacher:</i> “What is different in these two phrases?”</p>
Polisiri bayi	two policemen	
Polisi bunyeni	one policeman	

10 policy changes in 27 years

- English as Lol from grade 1
- Ghanaian language* as Lol through grade 1 or grade 3, English as Lol afterwards

Current policy

- Ghanaian language* as Lol through grade 3, English as Lol afterwards

Proposed policy modifications under consideration

- late-exit transition bilingual education model
- Ghanaian languages and English as “two pillars of successful learning”

**11 Ghanaian languages have been approved for use as Lol in primary classrooms*

Summary

- When implementing a reading program in African languages, attention to the linguistic features of each language is crucial.
- Linguistic features such as grapheme inventory, orthography and grammatical features must be attended to in the reading method.
- Program decisions should always align with existing language policy; leadership by key national institutions is crucial.
- Deciding that a language is “enough like English” to ignore its unique linguistic features is never a good idea!



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



Ministry of Education
REPUBLIC OF GHANA

