

Writing your language

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with

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Introduction

Here in Sandaun province we are lucky to have over 100 languages, spoken by people from the coast inland as far as the highlands. For some of these languages a spelling system is already being used in schools and in books. For others, we still need to develop a writing system.

The best way to develop a writing system is for an expert to come and investigate the language, and after talking with the community to determine what their expectations and desires are, to develop a spelling system that can be tested in a variety of books, for both children and adults. Unfortunately, we do not have enough trained people to be able to use this method in all villages. Because of this the literacy office is helping people in villages to develop their own writing systems, and to use them in books that they make themselves, with help from the Education Department.

How do we develop a good spelling system? There are some principles that we should follow, and some principles that we must follow. These are:

- Don't write letters that have no sound
- Try to have a different letter for each sound
- Try not to write the same sound with different letters
- Try to have the letters that you use match the use of letters in English or Tok Pisin, or another important local language in the area
- Use a spelling system that has been agreed upon by the whole community, or a good representative group from different members of the community
- Use a spelling that is easy for literate adults to read; you should aim at fluent readers, not beginners
- Use a spelling that everyone agrees
- Use a spelling that everyone uses in the same way

We will discuss these different principles, and what they mean for developing a spelling system

1 Don't write letters that have no sound

In the spelling of English or Bahasa Indonesia, there are some letters that are written, but which have no sound. Some examples of this are:

English		Bahasa Indonesia		Meaning	
Writing	Sound	Writing	Sound		
<i>true</i>	tru	<i>marah</i>	mara	'angry'	
<i>knife</i>	nalf	<i>tahu</i>	tau	'know'	
<i>fire</i>	fala	<i>ckcak</i>	ch'icha'	'gecko'	

Was this booklet helpful? If there are some parts of it that were hard to understand, let your district education officers now, or the people in the Literacy Office in Vanimo, so that we can make a better booklet next time. With your help we can develop the education in the Province, but not without it.

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In Tok Pisin this is not so much of a problem, and the spelling is generally quite good: you can read the words and, if you know how the letters are pronounced, then reading the word is easy.

When we make spellings for our local languages, we should try to make the spelling easy to learn, and not write letters that do not have a sound.

Have a different letter for each sound

When there are two sounds in your language, and they sound different to you, then you should write them with a different letter.

When we make spellings for our local languages, we should try to make the spelling show the different sounds of the language as clearly as possible. Sometimes there are two sounds that are very close to each other; if the community wants to, then these can be written with the same letter. But, most of the time, it is better to write different sounds with different letters.

Don't write the same sound with different letters

If there is a sound that appears in two different words, and that sound is the same, it should be written in the same way in each word. We can see this principle in Tok Pisin, where the first sound in the words *boi*, *balis*, *binatang*, *bela*, and *buk* are all written with the letter *b*. In English this is not true: look at the following words, and say them, listening to the first letter in each word:

English		Tok Pisin	
Writing	Sound	Writing	Sound
<i>queen</i>	<i>kwin</i>	<i>kwin</i>	<i>kwin</i>
<i>call</i>	<i>kol</i>	<i>kolim</i>	<i>kolim</i>
<i>kill</i>	<i>kil</i>	<i>kilim</i>	<i>kilim</i>

We can see that where English uses *qu*, *c* and *k* to write the same sound, Tok Pisin has a better spelling system, because it only uses one letter, *k*. When you think about the spelling of your local language, you should try to use the smallest number of letters that you can, but not forgetting that each sound should have a separate letter.

Use letters like those in Tok Pisin or English, or other languages

If the language has a sound that is very much like the sound in Tok Pisin, then it makes sense to use the same letter to write it that you would in Tok Pisin. For instance, in Barupu the word for fish is *ba*. The first sound is the same as in the words *boi*, *balis*, *binatang*, *bela*, and *buk* in Tok Pisin, or in the English words *boy*, *bandage*, *big*, *bend*, and *book*. It makes sense to write this sound with the letter *b*, because then it will be easier for people who can read and write in one language to use their skills to read and write in the other language as well. If we wrote the Barupu word with the letter *x*, for example, we could teach people that the word *xa* is pronounced as *ba*, but it would be easier to write it with a *b*.

Work out your spelling system

Start to work out the letters that you need to write your language! Use the space below to try to decide which letters you need, writing words that use those letters. If you use the same letter for more than one sound, write examples of both of the sounds. When you've finished, show it to some other members of your community to see if they agree with you, and listen to their help. Don't be afraid to change your mind if everyone else wants a different spelling, because the language belongs to the whole community.

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

plo	p	star
wro	r	tree
ti	t	mother

Are we finished yet? Not quite. There is one sound in Puare that is not quite the same as any of the sounds in Tok Pisin. How should we write it? If we look at our alphabet worksheet again, it looks like this:

☒ ☒ c ☒ ☒ f ☒ ☒ j ☒ ☒ m ☒ ☒ n ☒ ☒ q ☒ ☒ x ☒ ☒ u ☒ ☒ v ☒ ☒ x ☒ ☒ y ☒ ☒ z

This means that any new sounds that we want to write can only use these letters:

c f j q v x y z

The sound that is left is more like the y in Tok Pisin than any of the other sounds. It is not exactly the same, and by writing it with a y we are not saying that it should be said in the same way, but that is the closest letter that the alphabet has for it.

This means that the letters c, f, j, q, v, x and z are not used in Puare. This is all right: you do not have to use all the letters of the alphabet to write the language. The letters that we do have are:

a b d e g h i k l m n o p r s t w y

Now we should start to write down as many words as we can, organising them according to what they are (parts of a house, kinds of birds) or what letter they begin with. This will help teacher trainers when they come to your village.

5 Use a community spelling system

A spelling system is meant to be used by the people who speak their language. This means that all the people who speak the language should be comfortable using the spelling, and not just one or two people.

6 Use a spelling for adults

All children have trouble learning how to read and write, that is why we spend so long at school teaching them. Just because they cannot spell words immediately does not mean that the spelling is not good. Similarly, if an adult who can read and write in Tok Pisin or English cannot easily read and write words in Tok Ples, it does not mean that the spelling is not good, it might just mean that the adult has not yet learned to write in Tok Ples.

7 Use a spelling that everyone agrees on

The spelling of a language should be something that members of the community all discuss together, and not something that a small group. All the people who are interested should work together to develop a good spelling system, and all of them should think carefully about the ideas in this booklet on how to design a good spelling system.

7 Agree on the spelling

This is not the same as the last point. This means that, once the spelling has been decided on, and a list of words have been written up following the principles that everyone agreed on, then everyone should try very hard to follow those principles when they write things down. If people have decided to write a sound with the letter h, for instance, then everyone should write that sound in that way, and the letter should not be used to write other sounds. Even if not everyone is happy with all of the decisions that the group has made about spelling, everyone must follow the same spelling for consistency, otherwise education using that spelling system will not succeed.

8 Other Issues

There are some sounds in languages that are not easy to write down with the alphabet that we have. If your language has some unusual sounds, then you three choices:

- invent a new letter
- write it with a combination of letters
- write it with a letter from the alphabet that you are not using already, and give it a new sound
- write it with the same letter as another sound in the language

If we invented a new letter, we would have trouble writing the language on a typewriter: we could use one of the letters on the typewriter that is not normally used for sounds, like @, #, \$, %, ^, &, or *. One problem with this would be that it would not be very easy for outsiders, like teachers, to read the language. It would also make the language very look very

unusual. This might be a good thing: some languages in Europe have chosen to use unusual letters in their spelling to make books written in their language easy to recognise. For example, in Sami, spoken in Norway, the sound t that we write with a t in Tok Pisin or English is written with the letter t̄. This has the same sound, t̄, as the letter t in our languages, but it makes words written in Sami easy to recognise, and people are proud to have their language written down and want to make sure that people can easily see that it is their language. So if they had a word that sounded like *tamas* in Tok Pisin, they would pronounce it the same way, but write it *t̄amas*.

A new sound can be written with a group of letters. This is common: in English the letter combinations *ch* and *ng* (and others) are used to write sounds that do not have their own letters. It is better to have just one letter for a sound, but we can use groups if they are easy to remember. In many languages the letters *n* and *g*, when they are written together as *ng*, have the sound that we know from Tok Pisin words like *singing*, but in some languages, like Samoan or Fijian, this sound is written with a *g*, because there is not true *g* sound in Samoan or Fijian.

If there are spare letters in the alphabet after you have already decided what letters the other sounds of the language will use, then you can use of them for the unusual sound. In the Fakmo language of Bewani there is a sound that comes at the start of the word for water, and at the end of the word for cockatoo, and in many other words. Tok Pisin and English do not have this sound: it sounds like flapping your lips and saying r at the same time, but not quite. In Fakmo this can be written with the letter *b*, since that letter is not used for any other sounds in the language. It is not the same sound as *b* in English or Tok Pisin, but it has a special sound in the Fakmo language. With this decision on the sound of the letter we can write the word for water as *bo*, and cockatoo as *yomb*.

If we write a sound with the same letter that is used for another sound we have to be able to tell which sound is meant each time we write the letter. This might not be so much of a problem, if the language has long words, or if one on the sounds only appears now and then. In English the letters *ng* are used for two sounds, the sound in *singer* (*siŋgə*) and the sound in *finger* (*fiŋgə*). You cannot tell which sound the letters stand for, but there are not a lot of words that this matters. In Bahasa Indonesia, in which the difference is more important, the sound in *singer* is written with *ng*, and the sound in *finger* is written with *ngg*, to make them more easy to tell apart.

Sometimes the sound is not one that is easy to write with letters: in the Lelire language of there is a different between the words for 'pig' and 'water' are nearly the same, they both have the sound that we should write with the letters *b* and *a*, but they are different in the way the tune of your voice goes when you say the words. In 'water' the sound goes straight and is pulled a bit, and in 'pig' the sound goes up. This difference can be written with marks above the word: *ba* 'water', and *bá* 'pig'. In some languages, like the Dummo language of Waromo and Yako, the community does not want to write the tune on the words. But they do show the difference between a word that is pronounced through the mouth and a word that is pronounced through the nose, like 'water' and 'hair'. In 'hair' the sound is the same *da* that is heard in the word for 'water', but it is said through the nose. In Dummo this is written *dang*.

The *ng* is not pronounced in the same way as the *ng* in Tok Pisin or English, but is used in Dummo just to show that you must use your nose when you pronounce this word.
In the next section we will see how to use these principles in a practical way.

Step-by-step to choosing a spelling system

A simple way to choose a spelling system is to work through the alphabet, thinking of words that use that letter in the local language. You can start by writing out the alphabet in a line, at the top of a page of paper:

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

When you have done this, start to think of words in your language. If there is one that uses the same sound that is written by a letter in Tok Pisin, then cross it off, and write the word. For example, in Puare the word for fish sounds like *ni*, so we can cross off the letters *n* and *i*, since we will need these to write the word 'fish' in the language.

a b c d e f g h X j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z
We keep going as we think of new words. In Puare, 'hand' or 'arm' is *ano*, so we can cross off the letters *a* and *o* as well.

a b c d e f g h X j k l m n p q r s t u v w x y z
Looking at more words, we find 'we' is *bi*, 'house' is *dla*, 'sago tanimi' is *e*, 'hot' is *hala*, 'wind' is *hu*, 'tulip' is *kaha*, and 'grass' is *ksa*. After we cross these letters off, we have these ones left:

a b c X d e f g h X j k X l m n p q r X s t X u v w x y z
Looking at even more words, we need a *g* for words like 'centipede', *mwangla*, an *m* in words like *mle* 'coconut', a *p* for *plo* 'star', *r* and *w* for *wro* 'tree', and a *t* for 'mother'. We now have a piece of paper that looks like this:

Word	New letters	Meaning
ni	n, i	fish
ano	a, o	hand
bi	b	we
dla	d, l	house
e	e	tanimi
hala	h	hot
hu	u	wind
kaha	k	tulip
ksa	s	grass
mwangla	m, w	centipede
mle		coconut