

Developing an orthography for Kufa (Kadugli-Krongo): three axes of design

Oral

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Kufa is a language of the small Kadugli-Krongo (aka Kadu) group, spoken in the Nuba mountains of the Sudan. The broader affiliation of the Kadugli-Krongo group remain unclear – Greenberg (1955) classified it as a highly divergent group within the Kordofan branch of his Niger-Kordofanian; Schadeberg (1981) suggested an affiliation with Nilo-Saharan, a view repeated in Quint & Manfredi (2020); but it is also possible that Kadugli-Krongo is a small isolate family without demonstrable connections elsewhere (Hall & Hall 2004). Without more extensive work on the languages of the group it is premature to resolve these questions of affiliation. Leaving aside the relatively detailed work on Krongo by Reh (1983), there are no substantial studies of any language of the Kadugli-Krongo family, though there is a general discussion of orthographic issues and a unified proposal for all the languages of the group (though without treating tone) by Hall & Hall (2004).

In recent decades a national policy of forced Arabisation and Islamicisation, extended to many of Sudan's minorities including those in the Nuba mountains, has prevented the development of language resources or materials for use in bilingual education. However, the prospect of autonomy in the Nuba mountains has brought the possibility of bilingual education, in English and local languages, making it timely to develop a workable practical orthography – the subject of this talk.

Orthography development is never a purely linguistic matter (cf Seifart 2006) and our talk addresses this problem along three axes:

(a) phonological – we will focus here on the main problematic issues in the phonology of Kufa including issues of place and manner for consonants (particularly postalveolars, palatals, velars, and imploives), vowels (particularly ATR, including ATR vowel harmony) and tone (with the exact nature of tone still under investigation)

(b) practical – including

(i) the tension between typographic convenience (such as the proposal by Hall & Hall (2004) to represent the +ATR vowels by an x after the corresponding -ATR vowel, e.g. <e> for /ɛ/ but <ex> for /e/) and compatibility with English spelling conventions (with children learning English alongside Kufa in the education system);

(ii) compatibility with other diacritics (e.g. if an umlaut is used for the +ATR vowel, e.g. ë, this creates a crowded visual space if accents are to be used for tone; an Igbo-style system with dots under the vowels avoids this problem);

(iii) compatibility with readily-installed keyboards on mobile phones

(c) negotiation – who makes the decision? In the case we are discussing, this is rendered complex by the distribution of key participants over

- (i) diasporic community members in a small rural town in a western country, working in collaboration with university-based linguists in a Linguistic Field Methods course
- (ii) diasporic community members in Khartoum
- (iii) speakers in the language’s heartland in the Nuba mountains. This introduces extra complexity into the discussions of what system of orthography to use, even more so if there is to be a unified orthography with other languages of the same family.

In discussing these questions, we will not only illuminate the tensions between different axes of orthography design, but we hope in the process to give some initial and useful information about this little-studied language.

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