

Lexical Phonology and the Participatory Development of the Naba Orthography [oral]

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A provisional orthography was recently developed for the Naba (also known as Melbene) language, spoken by the Bilala, Kouka, and Medogo ethnic groups, a Central Sudanic (Sara-Bongo-Bagirmi) language of Chad. The orthography was developed in the language area by a team of eight representatives of the Naba-speaking community (mostly Bilala with one Kouka representative) with the assistance of two linguists, Mr. Sakine Ramat of the Fédération des Associations pour la Promotion des Langues Nationales (FAPLN) and myself.

The method used to develop the orthography involved four workshops over a period of two years in which the team met together to learn phonological and grammatical concepts, then applied the study of their own language to the development of a writing system. I gathered more data on my own with a Naba speaker in Bitkine. While my analysis informed the direction of our group work, the team made all orthography decisions. The provisional orthography statement for Naba was finalized in July 2020.

Early on, I realized that the Lexical Phonology concept of the lexical representation level and its correspondance to native speaker awareness proved in most cases to be an accurate indicator of the perceived relevance of sound changes. While I did not explicitly teach the theory to the team, I began to organize our discussions so that we discussed lexical and post-lexical processes separately and systematically, with lexical processes in their cyclic order and post-lexical processes at the end. As an example, discussing the lexical processes of final V drop, long V shortening, and the sonority assimilation of the suffix -*na* before the post-lexical process of fortition mentally separated these processes and led to different decisions about representation than may have been made if the processes had been discussed in another order:

eefe- <i>na</i>	eef- <i>na</i>	ef- <i>na</i>	ef- <i>ca</i>	ep-t ^h <i>fa</i>	< efca >	
surpass	-3sO	V-drop (Lex)	V-short (Lex)	<i>na</i> -Son (Lex)	Fort (PstL)	Written
<i>he surpasses him</i>						

This presentation begins with a very brief overview of the phonological system of Naba, including phonemic segments, syllable structure and tone (which is currently not represented in the orthography). The focus of the presentation is on the process of applying lexical phonology theory to participatory orthography development, but reference is made to the Naba phonology sketch which is currently in the process of revision. Examples of lexical and post-lexical phonological processes are described and the Naba team's orthography decisions for these processes are discussed. The presentation also looks at some exceptions, in which the native speakers showed preferences for writing the post-lexical output of a given process or for retaining the underlying form of a lexical process. I conclude that a lexical phonology analysis lends itself well to participatory orthography development, when combined with certain literacy principles, such as sound-symbol correspondance and word image retention.

References

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