Writing in Cameroon pidgin English: begging the question[1]

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Both English and French are official languages in Cameroon, but no-one seems sure how to write Cameroon Pidgin English which is spoken by an increasing number of Cameroonians – as the author discovered when he tried to compile a dictionary of CPE.

Introduction

Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) is increasingly becoming an important language in the country, judging from its use in the media (both private and public), in literary texts, the Bible and other religious materials. The soaring of writing in CPE has been hailed by many as a positive signal for the spread and survival of the language, but this begs the question of how it should be written. Formal statements made so far on how CPE should be written are divergent (see Todd, 1986; Mbangwana, 1983; Ayafor, 1996 and Schröder, 2003) and in practice the present situation of CPE writing is marred by inconsistency, where the English- and the phonetically-based options compete (see Schneider, 1960 and Awah, 1981). For a full-blown literature (which standardises a language in many respects) to flourish, there is need for an agreed writing system that can make its literature better accessible to the public. We need to know what makes the one option superior to the other and why. Showcasing the literature in CPE as guarantee of viability, as Ayafor (2005) does, is not helpful if we do not pause to ask ourselves how it is, and should be, written. The purpose of this paper is to assess the controversies involved in talking about and conceiving a writing system for CPE. It is also to propose a writing system for CPE, based on linguistic and extra-linguistic parameters.[1]

Erstwhile commentaries on CPE writing

Awah (n.d.:3–9) carries out a discussion on the writing of CPE. As for words written phonetically, he agrees that, though they have the advantage of being exact, they pose two difficulties: many people are not used to them and many words in CPE have several phonological realisations depending on the speaker's origin. He cites the following examples:

> People: pipi, pipu, pipl, pipli, pipol
> Father: falla, fadda, pfara
> House: haas, hors, haus, etc. (Awah, p. 8)

As for the English-derived writing system, he remarks that it has the advantage of being familiar to the Cameroonian people, but poses a problem where English *water* is CPE *wàtá* and *come out* is *kòmót* (Awah, p. 8). He draws the following conclusion:



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doi:10.1017/S0266078409000133
English Today 98, Vol. 25, No. 2 (June 2009). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2009 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Let us make sure the reader gets the message. If he does, he will pass it on. We shall write the words as they already appear in English and we shall use Pidgin constructions. We shall write: *people, water, come out,* etc. The reader shall find it easier to understand what we are talking about, but he will be expected to say: *pipu, wata, komot* according as he sees fitting in his circumstances. (Awah, p. 9)

The important issue in Awah's discussion is that any true writing system for CPE should not treat vocabulary items as a single whole. It must take note of inherent variations and categorise them to good effect.

Ayafor (1996) proposes a writing system for CPE. She makes a critique of literary works in which CPE is used. She agrees that there is inconsistency in the way *Kamtok* (CPE) is used. However, her proposals are far from being consistent too. Her proposal that there is no need for a silent 'e' at the end of words needs reconsideration. For example, she proposes that diphthongs should be spelt using the equivalents of their vowel letters if they end in a consonant and using 'y' or 'w' if they end the word. But what do we gain from spelling 'house' as 'haus', 'how' as 'haw' and 'high' as 'hay', as she suggests? Someone used to the English tradition will need to be taught not to read 'haw' as /ho/ and 'hay' as /hɛ/. Hence, if CPE writing is to imitate the English system, we do not need to get into redundant innovations.

Mbangwana (1983:89) sees the importance of writing in the stabilisation of the use of CPE. To him, 'This could be possible by freeing it from Standard English orthographic convention.' He suggests that a different orthography should be recommended for CPE. He proposes that *answer, want, elephant, concour,* and *bonbon,* should be written as *ansa, wan, elefan, kongku,* and *bongbong*. From his arguments, it seems to follow that CPE should use the orthography of local languages. His suggestion is in line with a pure phonetic convention.

In a work that assesses the status, functions and prospects of CPE, Schröder (2003:220ff) also makes statements on the possibility of writing in CPE. She concludes, from a questionnaire administered to both Anglophones and Francophones, that all her informants claimed to be able to read in CPE and that 34.2% of Anglophones claim that they can write in CPE.[2] She remarks that the existing writing systems 'are themselves marked by a high degree of inconsistency' (ibid., p. 225). She then sees Ayafor's (1996) proposal as a compromise between both systems that should not be neglected in the debate on CPE writing. She sees Todd's (1986) orthography, which is phonetically based, as 'an accurate reflection of the phonological shape of CamP' (ibid., p. 226), but asserts that it is not 'a practical solution' because of its incomprehensibility to Cameroonians. Schröder's (2003) stand could be summarised as looking for an orthography that is practicable and representative.

The present CPE chaotic writing system

The value of documentation makes orthography very important for every burgeoning language. Yet, as far as CPE is concerned, various authors have created their own writing systems. Bellama et al (1983:viii) declare that 'it seems that no two people write Pidgin the same way.' Commenting on alphabetic writings, Bloomfield (1984:291) criticises what he calls 'the conservatism of people who write.' What he means is that a writer merely writes each word as he has seen it in the writings of his predecessors. CPE is trapped in this kind of situation, as a literary dialect may soon be established without a reasoned convention being put in place. But can a Cameroonian write an intelligible, consistent letter to a friend in CPE? The *God Nyus fo ol Pipul* [Good News for All People], the Bible translated by the Cameroon Bible Society, provides a writing system that looks like transcription. The title itself speaks for itself. *The Sunday Lectionary,* translated by Bishop Pius Awah, allows all words of English origin to maintain their spellings. This is the same system in Plissonneau's *Pidgin English Prayer Book.* The following two versions of The Lord's Prayer are found in religious books:

> Our Father whe you live for heaven, your name must be holy, make your commandia e come for we, how you want, so e must be for ground like for heaven. Give we chop whe enough for we for this day, and excuse we bad, like we too, we excuse the people whe them do we bad, no lef we go for bad road, but move we for bad thing. Amen.
>
> *Pidgin English Prayer Book,* p. 17

> **We** papa **weh** e **dei** heven, **meik** yua neim e get ono. Meik yua rul e **kam** fo yaa meik pipul dem du de ting weh yu want-am fo grong, as dem di du-am fo heven. Giv **wi** tudei chop **weh wi**

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nid-am. Chus **wi wi** bad. No gri meik eni ting trai **wi**, muv **wi** fo bad.

Gud Nyus fo ol Pipul, p. 10

The table summarises the inconsistencies in the use and spelling of words in the Lord's Prayer.

Variation in CPE orthography in the versions of the Lord's Prayer

English Word	Pidgin English Prayer Book	Gud Nyus fo ol Pipul
art	live	dei
be	make	meik
Come	come	kam
excuse	excuse	chus
Give	give	giv
ground	ground	grong
kingdom	commandia	rul
Lead us not	move we	muv wi
our father	our father	wi papa
this day	this day	tudei
when	when	tam weh
who, that	whe	weh
your name	your name	yua neim

Questions to animate the debate on CPE writing

The following questions need to be answered when dealing with a writing system for CPE: For whom is the system intended in the first step? What CPE will be submitted to writing? What do we do with the composite nature of CPE vocabulary? How do we account for secondary phonetic issues, which are also distinctive in CPE?

Finding out who needs writing in CPE is very important, as it tells us whether CPE needs a writing system at all. Writing is no advantage if it has no readership. Those who need CPE very badly are not the literates, who alternatively have Cameroon English (CamE) to use. Reading and writing are literate activities, which are accessible only to those who have had formal education. Hence, submitting CPE to the 'literate state' of writing has no value for the illiterate, who paradoxically need it most. From this perspective, therefore, CPE writing system is for the literate. It is easier for an illiterate to learn a new writing system than for a literate to deviate from the convention that he already masters.

The question of the variety to be codified is also important because, for a writing system to make sense, it has to be representative of a standard in the language. The problem with CPE is that it is fast evolving towards its status language, as shown in Sala and Ngefac (2006). At the level of phonology, the pronunciation of vocabulary items that were used in the 60s is changing. This is due to the relative increase in the level of education of Cameroonians. It is also due to the media and globalisation, which expose more and more Cameroonians to English speech. At the level of morphology, typical CPE morphological processes are giving way to the English norm (see Sala 2008). At the level of lexis, locally borrowed vocabulary items are used more rarely, even if new ones are still created. English words that were borrowed and pidginised morphologically and semantically, either by expansion, contraction, shifting, melioration, deterioration, etc. are being re-Anglicised. For example, we do not need to keep on writing *shidon, helep, mòtó* if current usage warrants *sit for don, hep* and *motor*. There will be a problem in future if we represent purely pidginised words phonetically, whereas the language is evolving towards English. This will make CPE writing to drift away from pronunciation in too short a time, as is the case with the English language orthography today.

Again, CPE has both regional and social varieties, which unfortunately have not earned serious attention from researchers. Regionally, we can distinguish Anglophone CPE from that of the Francophone, which is variation according to the first official language of the user. Socially, CPE varies according to age, level of education, place of use (e.g. the church, the market and the motor park). Ethnically, Bororo Pidgin is different from that of other Cameroonians. A writing system should represent the mainstream. Some reasons make one feel that the mainstream in CPE is the variety used by Anglophones in the Northwest and Southwest provinces in Cameroon. First, Anglophone pidgin is more spread than Francophone pidgin. Francophone pidgin is only used to bridge inter-ethnic language barriers in the market, in the car park and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

occasionally in church. It is also mostly used by illiterates. Second, Anglophone pidgin is more vastly spread as it is used in the media, in the law courts, for local administration, for political campaigns, on school/university campuses, and in mixed married homes. It is also generally the language of familiarity and intimacy, and is therefore used by both the literate and the illiterate. Third, francophones in Cameroon think that CPE is owned by Anglophones. This can be inferred from Simo-Bobda and Wolf (2003:111) who say: 'The feeling that PE is a hindrance to the acquisition of good English is more entrenched in the Francophone provinces than in the Anglophone provinces.' They also state that Francophone students refer to the English of a teacher who has a deep local accent as 'Kumba English, as Kumba [an Anglophone town] is the area where pidgin is said to be most widespread.' Though he uses CPE, the Francophone has, therefore, not laid claim to it yet. The Anglophone variety, from the above reasons, could be said to be the mainstream variety in Cameroon.

The question of the composite nature of CPE vocabulary raises another serious issue about the writing system for CPE. CPE is referred to as an English-based pidgin from a democratic perspective where most of its vocabulary items are from English. As early as 1960, Schneider (1960) could fix the percentage of English words in CPE as high as 80. CPE also draws heavily from local languages and even from non-local African languages like Yoruba in Nigeria. The vocabulary of CPE could be itemised into the following categories:

1 Directly borrowed English words pronounced the same as in English or at least as in CamE. These are mostly monosyllabic words like *man*, *poor*, *bag*, *park*, etc.
2 Borrowed English words pronounced differently from English, perhaps with the use of tone. For example, *mòní* (money), *jèlòsí* (jealousy), *wàtá* (water), *mònkí* (monkey), etc.
3 Remorphemised words, that is, those borrowed from English and pidginised by an alteration in morphology, e.g., *weikop* (get up, wake up), *lukot* (look out, be careful), *komot* (come out, get out), *krash* (scratch), *tori* (story), *trong* (strong), *mimba* (remember), etc.
4 Words from local languages, such as *nyati* (to walk on tiptoe), *leŋə* (to hang oneself), *nya'ah* (to be appalling), *kwarə* (to be completely destroyed), etc.
5 Words from French origin, such as *dentité* (identity), *pantalon* (trouser), *calé-calé* (general arrests by police), *touche* (attractive mannerism), *faché* (annoyed), *cinq* (five francs, football back-keeper), *sangalon* (non-commissioned officer in the army), *commissaire* (commissioner), *gros lot* (huge arrears), etc.
6 Tone-derived compound words, such as *sugár sugàr* (itches in a woman's vagina), *sugar sugar* (sugar all over); *big mop* (big mouth), *bìg-móp* (bragging).

These different categories of vocabulary items represent productive processes in CPE. Several words have different forms that are cohabiting due to the factors raised above. The problem to face CPE writing system is how categories of lexical items should be represented. The ideal solution is to deal with each category separately.

CPE uses both stress and tone, given that it borrows from both English and local languages. Sala (2009) shows that in the lexicology of CPE, tone is important and plays a distinctive, as well as a derivative, grammatical role in the language. A CPE writing system must therefore account for tone if it must be effective. We suggest that tone be indicated only when it is distinctive, when its neglect can affect meaning.

What writing system for CPE

In the face of the complexity, what writing system could be proposed for CPE? Here, we are faced with two options: a transcription-based orthography and one that is tailored along the English orthography. An orthography that is tailored to resemble English spelling has some advantages. First, English is the status language of CPE, and from empirical evidence, CPE is observing an upward movement towards English, as shown in Ngefac and Sala (2006) and in Sala and Ngefac (2006). Sala (2003) even prophesies, from a number of empirical facts, that there will come a time when both dialects will become one language. Second, from the point of view of convenience, we need to recognise the fact that a writing system presupposes a readership, and the only literate people now are used to the English

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orthography, so that CPE orthography will be easy to learn if it is tailored to look like that of English.

An English-derived orthography also has its weaknesses. Those in dire need to use CPE writing system for written communication are not the educated Cameroonians, who alternatively have English to use. CPE also has many distorted English words that affirm its peculiarity and distinguish it from English. Hence, the spelling of such words cannot, and should not, fit in the English spelling-system. For instance, *witi* (with), *helep* (help), *trobul* (trouble), *nova* (have/has not), and *truweh* (throw away) will not be spelt as *with, help, trouble, never,* and *throw away,* respectively, because such a move will deprive CPE of its distinctive dynamics. CPE vocabulary also comes from a variety of sources, so that an English spelling system will not even have equivalents for local language loans. Words like *wuna* (plural *you*), *za'ah* (eat greedily), *nya'ah* (nasty), *yi* (he, him), *ma* (my), *kitu'* (uniform officer), *nyanga* (pride), *nyati-nyati* (walk stealthily) and *mbutuku* (dunce) will not have English orthographic equivalents. These instances show the disadvantages of opting completely for an English-derived orthography.

A transcription-based orthography has the advantage of containing all words in CPE. Given the multi-linguistic sources of CPE vocabulary, it is bound to have sounds that do not exist in English and whose graphic representations and combinations would not be attested in English. If an ideal orthography is one where one sound is represented by one letter and where each letter always stands for one sound, then only transcription will handle this kind of situation, even though this has not been achieved for any language. At the same time, it is difficult to talk of a transcription-based orthography that will fully represent the various sound complexities in a language. The use of diacritics as in French and German will not solve the problem, but will rather complicate it.

What writing system should therefore be used in writing CPE? Baugh (1976:12) proposes that 'the most adequate system of spelling is that which best combines simplicity with consistency.' This means that the same sound should be regularly represented by the same grapheme. This is the meaning of consistency. Yet, given the constraints discussed above, we suggest that, in order to achieve simplicity, a writing system for CPE should not deviate very much from that of English, as it is the status language. It should not be restrictive for users of English, especially in Cameroon; who need to learn it, and should not be bothered with learning a completely different writing system. The native speakers of CPE will find no problem learning an English-based orthography. As to non-English derived words, and distorted (pidginised) English words in CPE, their spelling should reflect their pronunciation, and their writing convention should show some consistency. What is meant here is that sounds and sound combinations in non-English words should have the same representation as in English, where applicable. For example, /ŋ/ in CPE should be represented as 'ng' as it is the case in English. /ʃ/ should be represented as 'sh' as in English. /tʃ/ should be represented as 'ch' as in English. Hence, CPE /tʃoki/ will be written as 'choki'.

We do not need to use transcriptions to represent words whose pronunciations have not deviated much from English.[3] The following spellings seen in works on CPE are not well motivated. They have no particular segmental changes that justify their being spelt differently from English:

CPE	*English*
blesing	blessing
remein	remain
meik	make
liif	leave
shiip	sheep
sliip	sleep
sofa	suffer
sɔm	some
haus	house
mun	moon
skul	school

Conclusion

I suggest that a writing system for CPE should follow the English orthography as much as we lose nothing, and deviate from it as much as we gain something. For this to be achieved, linguistic considerations need to be made for individual sounds before we propose how they should be written. For example, we need to know whether the sound occurs word-initially, word-medially or word-finally. These considerations need to be made for non-English words and English words that have been distorted. We must take into consideration lexical processes involved in CPE word formation. We

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must consider the morpho-phonemic processes involved in the lexical items. We must categorise CPE vocabulary into English words and words from other languages. Under Englishloans, the following sub classes must be considered:

a those taken wholly (e.g. *sorry, woman, man, write, like, put, know*);
b those with syllabic adjustments (e.g. *komot, posa, gri, memba*);
c those with phonological adjustments, be they of stress or of tone patterning (e.g. *bròdá, mòní, márí, bètá*).

In what concerns words from other languages, we propose that partial phonological analyses of sound and syllable combinations be carried out to assess the distribution of sounds in such words. Such words include *pikin, kasengu, meyondo, nkang, za'ah, nya'ah, nya'ti,* etc. As far as CPE compound words are concerned, it is noted in Sala (2009) that compounding and reduplication in CPE affect word prosody significantly. The following categories should be taken into consideration:

1 Compound words that maintain no change in pronunciation; e.g, *chop die, woman rapa* etc. We should write them as separate words.
2 Compounds and reduplicated forms that change the tone in a predictable manner: *tìf-mán* (a thief), *sàn-sán* (sand), *pòtò-pótó* (mud), *wàkà-wáká* (vagabond). These words should be hyphenated.
3 Reduplicated forms with no prosodic changes: *sugarsugar (sugar all over), wàtáwàtá soup* (watery sauce), *sharpsharp morning* (very early in the morning), etc. They should be written as one word.
4 Phrasal compounds should be hyphenated: *kam-fo-kontri* (someone behaving like a villager), *chop-a-chop* (system where in order to get something, I must let you have something too), *kam-no-go* (migrant worker who would not go back to his own village, or rashes that do not heal), *chop-broke-pot* (greedy person).
5 We should not hyphenate the objective pronoun *-am*. It is not a bound morpheme, but is an objective pronoun as seen in *bring de chop/bring am.* Hyphenation, in this case, takes a phonetic value as in (2) above.

Notes

1 This paper has emanated from an unpublished work titled *A Dictionary of Contemporary Cameroon Pidgin.* A dictionary cannot exist without a writing convention. It was upon reflecting on how CPE could be written that some of the facts discussed here arose.
2 A simple survey conducted with 300 third-year English students of the University of Yaoundé I shows that these findings do not represent the situation on the ground in Cameroon. 98% of the informants said they have never seen a personal letter written in Pidgin English. Francophones in Cameroon consider Pidgin English as an Anglophone property and are not likely to write letters and notes in the idiom. This, however, is completely a different issue from that pursued here.
3 The English writing system may be chaotic, but it is usual and conventional, which explains why it can hardly be changed now.

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