

61. Towards Leggbo Orthography¹

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1. Background

The Leggbo language is an Upper Cross language of the Benue-Congo family spoken by the Aggbo people of the Cross River State in the south-eastern axis of Nigeria by about 60,000 people. It is made up of six varieties : Letatama, spoken in Adadama; Lebamma, spoken in Itigidi; Lekuleku, spoken in Ekureku; Lemmabana, spoken in Immabana; Leyigha, spoken in Assigha; and Lenyima, spoken in Inyima. The variety described here is Letatama, spoken in Adadama.

Very little work has been done on the language. Apart from classifications such as Faraclas (1989), Crozier/Blench (1992) and Grimes (2000), there are just a few other works on the language. Spreda/Sprede (1966) is a phonological sketch of the language. Bendor-Samuel/Sprede (1969) treats the fortis and lenis prosody of the present continuous verb in the language. This is the first report of the fortis/lenis contrast in Leggbo. Dimmendaal (1978), is a reconstruction of Leggbo consonants, with a view to the classification of the Upper Cross languages as a whole.

The Leggbo language has not been described, and therefore, it has no orthography. The orthography proposed here is one of the first attempts at writing the language. They are procedures to follow in Nigeria before the orthography of a language can be approved. This proposal is one step towards such an approval for the Leggbo language.

Our arguments for the proposal are discussed in four sections. The background presented in this section is followed by an overview of the phonology of the Leggbo, on which the orthography is based. In section 3, we present the orthography, beginning with some special features in the language that need special attention in the proposal for specific symbols. Section 4 presents some text in the language showing how the orthography is related with the phonemic representation.

2. An Overview of Leggbo Phonology²

2.1 Vowels

Leggbo has seven vowels, with a distinctive length feature.

(1) Leggbo vowel phonemes

	front	central	back
high	i		u
mid	e ɛ		ɔ o
low		a	

2.2 Consonants

The language has the consonant phonemes given in (2). There is a restriction of coda consonants, and only laterals and nasals can occur in coda positions.

There are two sets of consonants – lenis and fortis consonants. Fortition and lenition are syllabic prosodies in Leggbo, and their distinction is significant enough to warrant its representation in the orthography. There are 25 phonemic consonants and 27 fortis consonants³. The velar fricative is an allophone of the voiced velar lenis stop, but we have included it in the orthography because it serves as a kind of ‘place holder’ of ‘ghost’ consonants in the language, besides occurring as a noun prefix (see Udoh, 2003 for more details on ‘ghost’ consonants in Leggbo).

(2) Leggbo Consonant Phonemes

	Stops	Nasals	Fricatives	Affricates	Approximants	Laterals
Bilabial	p b pp bb	m mm			w ww	
Dental			ff v vv			
Alveolar	t d tt dd	n nn	s z ss zz	ddz		l ll
Post Alveolar				tʃ tʃ ddʒ		
Palatal		ɲ ɲɲ			j jj	
Velar	k g kk gg	ŋ ŋŋ	[ɣ]			
Labial Velar	kp gb kkp ggb					
Labialized Velar	kw kkw ggw	ɲw ɲɲw				
Palatalized Bilabial	bj ppj bbj	mj				
Palatalized Dental			vj			

2.3 Tones

There are three level tones – (H)igh, (M)id and (L)ow tones generally. All tones combine to form contours. This three-way contrast operates in noun roots, although their prefixes may bear either mid or low tones.

(3a) MH ledzál ‘sacrifice’

		likól	'mat
b.	LH	lèttál	'stone'
		èdán	'yellow powder'
c.	MM	libul	'bow, arrow'
d.	LM	leval	'race'
e.	LM	lèttol	'head'
f.	ML	leggbàl	'time'
		ledùl	'bundle'
g.	LL	lèsàl	'teeth'
		lèkòl	'neck'

However, there is only a two way contrast in verb roots. M tone verbs and L tone verbs. There are two classes of verbs. The first has a M tone, while the second has either a H or L tone on the root, and its choice is determined by the grammar.

(4a)	M	du	'beat'
		tom	'send'
		mana	'catch'
b.	L	di	'say'
		nù	'take'
		fina	'touch'

The M tone verbs in the verbal paradigm are more stable than the L tone verbs which alternate with H. For instance

(5)	mana	'hold'	fina	'touch'
	ba mana	'they hold'	ba fina	'they touch'

The inflections of the verbs have different tone patterns which affect both the prefixes and suffixes depending on which categories are operating. This forms quite a complicated network with overrides where two or more categories compete. For more details on these overrides (see Hyman/Narrog/Paster/Udoh 2002).

3. The Orthography

For the Leggbo orthography, like the English orthography and other orthographies developed for Nigerian languages, we propose symbols to represent individual segments (consonants and vowels), the tones, as well as some linguistic processes in the language.

3.1 Special Features of the Orthography

a. Single Latin letters

We draw from the Roman alphabet like English and many other languages did. We use similar letters as English does like /t d p i a/ etc. However, we have tried as much as possible to establish a one-to-one relationship between the phonological segments and the symbols in order to avoid the problems that characterise the English orthography.

b. Digraphs and trigraphs

We also use digraphs and trigraphs to represent some sounds that have double articulations like the labial velars /kp gb/, and even the velar fricative /ɣ/ which we have represented with 'gh'. In addition to this, we use double consonants to represent fortis consonants since this feature is distinctive and plays an extremely important role in the grammar of the language. The fortis labial velars are therefore represented by a trigraph 'kkp', 'ggb', etc

c. Diacritics

Like some other Nigerian languages, we use sub-dots on both vowels and consonants to differentiate certain sounds in the attempt to provide as best as possible a close correspondence between the sounds and the letters. For instance, 'ẹ' is used to represent /ɛ/, and 'ŋ̣' to represent /ŋ/.⁴

d. Tones

Although there are three contrastive tones (at least in nouns), we mark only the high, low and contour tones. The mid tone is unmarked and the contour tones are also marked thus: H^ˊ, L^ˋ, HL^ˆ, and LH^ˋ.

e. Loan words

Loan words usually get adapted to the phonology of a language. Leggbo loan words are therefore written in their adapted forms. For instance 'bread' is written as 'bilêdì'.

f. Fortition

Fortition is a special feature of the language that requires special attention because it is distinctive, both lexically and grammatically, and it plays an important role in the grammar. We represent it with doubling of the consonant.

(6) na 'take'

na 'shine

g. Ghost Consonants

A ghost consonant is a consonant that has a phonological representation, but may surface as a null element. In Leggbo, it surfaces as either a null element or a velar fricative especially in intervocalic positions in verbs, and in initial positions in noun prefixes. We represent it with a dot when it occurs in intervocalic positions.

(7) bba.a ~ bbagha 'tie wrapper'

h. Compounds

Compounds are grammatical units involving at least two roots which may function grammatically as single words. Leggbo compounds are written with a hyphen.

(8) ekp-ittq 'umbrella'
asin-aden 'tears'

i. Reduplication

Reduplication is a very productive morphological process in Leggbo. All word classes are prone to reduplication. The language has both total reduplication and partial reduplication. Total reduplication is used grammatically. Such reduplication is written with space.

(9) lettol ggwene gwene 'white heads'

However, words with partial reduplication are written as an entity.

(10) kakaa 'really carry/carry for a long time'

Compounds can be reduplicated. Such compounds are written with a hyphen, like other compounds and the reduplicated part is written as an entity.

(11) ɛttottowɛ 'small house'
ekkpi-ttottowɛ 'small umbrella'

j. Concord

Concord is marked on the verbs with the personal pronouns (m=me, e=it/s/he, a=you/they/us). They are attached very closely to the verb and they occur even with the nouns they are supposed to replace (as in 12a). Categories like negation, question and mood are marked on them by tone. For instance negation is marked by ML, while question is marked by HLH tone patterns as shown in 12b,c. These should be written with a hyphen.

(12a) Etti sɛ ɛ-bɔi m 'the drug is healed me'
tree the it-healed me

b Mim nɔwɛɛ sɛ eè-ní 's/he/it did not give me the book'
me book the NEG-give

- c Mim ɲwɛɲ sɛ̃ êêé-ni? 'Won't s/he/it give me the book?'
Me book the Q-NEG-give

3.1.1 The Vowels

(13) Vowel Symbols

Phonetic	u	ɔ	o	i	ɛ	e	a
Orthographic	u	ɔ	o	i	ɛ	e	a

(14) Vowel Examples

Sounds		Words in which they appear	Orthographic Representation	
Phonetic	Phonemic		Small letters	Capital letters
u	u	dum 'bite'	u	U
ɔ	ɔ	ppɔ 'hatch'	o	O
o	o	bbo 'die'	ɔ	Ɔ
i	i	siɲ 'fight'	i	I
ɛ	ɛ	seɲ 'go'	e	E
e	e	bbe 'slice'	ɛ	Ɛ
a	a	nna 'shine'	a	A

3.1.2 The Consonants

(15) Lenis Consonant Symbols

Phonetic	p	b	t	d	k	g	ɣ	m	n	ɲ	ɳ	v	z	-	tʃ	dʒ	w	j	l
Orthographic	p	b	t	d	k	g	gh	m	n	ny	ɳ	v	z		ch	j	w	y	l

dz	kp	gb	vj	mj	ɳw	kw
dz	kp	gb	vy	my	ɳw	kw

(16) Lenis Consonant Examples

Sounds		Words in which they appear	Orthographic Representation	
Phonetic	Phonemic		Small letters	Capital letters
p	p	pɔom 'be early'	p	P
b	b	baa 'marry'	b	B

β	b	eβo	'cloud'		
t	t	tùma	'stop'	t	T
d	d	du	'beat'	d	D
k	k	koo	'smoothen'	k	K
g	g	ègidi	'beans'	g	G
γ	g	yetti	'stick, drugs'	gh	GH
m	m	mana	'hold'	m	M
n	n	num	'take'	n	N
ɲ	ɲ	ɲoo	'look'	ny	NY
ŋ	ŋ	vŋ	'want'	ŋ	Ŋ
v	v	vi	'reach, come out'	v	V
z	z	zo	'baby sit'	z	Z
s	s	so	'your'	s	S
tʃ	ch	tʃee	'divide'	ch	CH
dʒ	dʒ	édzŋóló	'rattle'	j	J
w	w	wòli	'take off'	w	W
j	j	ji.a	'pile up'	y	Y
l	l	laa	'tangle'	l	L
kp	kp	kpa	'be strict'	kp	KP
gb	gb	gba	'block'	gb	GB
bj	bj	gebja	'badness'	by	BY
vj	vj	vjà.i	'wash leaves'	vy	VY
mj	mj	mjelezi	'slippery'	my	MY
ŋw	ŋw	ŋwa	'wear, reach'	ŋw	ŊW
kw	kw	kwaal	'try'	kw	KW
gw	gw	gwògwòzi	'crawl (like a cripple)'	gw	GW

(17) Fortis Consonant Symbols

Phonetic	pp	bb	tt	dd	kk	gg	mm	nn	ɲɲ	ŋŋ	vv	zz	ss	tʃ	dʒ
Orthographic	pp	bb	tt	dd	kk	gg	mm	nn	nny	ŋŋ	vv	zz	ss	cch	-

ww	jj	ll	kkp	ddz	ggb	ppj	ŋŋw	kkw	ggw
ww	yy	ll	kkp	ddz	ggb	ppy	ŋŋw	kkw	ggw

(18) Fortis Consonant Examples

Sounds		Words in which they appear	Orthographic representation	
Phonetic	Phonemic		Small letters	Capital letters
pp	ppa	'pluck'	pp	PP
bb	bba	'block'	bb	BB
tt	ttui	'farm'	tt	TT
dd	ddu	'whisper'	dd	DD
kk	kkɔ	'hate'	kk	KK
gg	ggama	'perch'	gg	GG
mm	mmia	'squeeze'	mm	MM
nn	nnui	'push'	nn	NN
ɲɲ	ɲɲana	'scatter'	ɲɲy	NNY
ŋŋ	wŋŋɔ	'fly'	ŋŋ	NNG
vv	vvua	'heap'	vv	VV
ff	ffa	'rub'	ff	FF
zz	zzi	'shines'	zz	ZZ
ss	ssɔ	'menstruate'	ss	SS
ddz	ddzɔŋŋi	'keeping'	ddz	DDZ
ttʃ	ttʃe	'expect'	cch	CCH
ddʒ	ddʒa	'instigate'	jj	JJ
ww	wwei	'swimming'	ww	WW
jj	jjalli	'paddling'	yy	YY
ll	lli	'bury'	ll	LL
kkp	kkpa	'pay'	kkp	KKP
ggb	ggba	'sacrifice (verb)'	ggb	GGB
ppj	ppj̣a.a	'arrest'	ppj	PPY
bbj	bbj̣a.a	'press down'	bby	BBY
mmj	mmj̣i.a	'squeeze'	mmy	MMY
ŋŋw	ŋŋwai	'wearing'	ŋŋw	NNW
kkw	kkwɔɔ	'preach'	kkw	KKW
ggw	ggwɔɔ	'stay at home'	ggw	GGW

4. Text sample

4.1 Phonemic transcription

lìddàl letàtàmàl

mbèkum ètài lekkipànáál

ndàlì-ò-o

(greeting for a story from the story teller)

koto-o-o

(response by the listeners)

e-de-ò mbèkum ètài lekkipànáál bà fu bà ke leval.
 It-is-O^s tortoise and frog they come they planned race

ama mbekum é-neni àkkò rína sé,
 since tortoise he-has tricks like that

ède é-fú è-ggbayazi-ε na aw ε-zε e-ke nnàna leval sé
 then he-come he-think-him how he-walk he-use pass race the

amma lekkipànáál ne-è zài è-ggbo.
 since frog usually-he very he-jump

e-fu è-ggbayazi tutù è-fú è-dzéle vvòò a é-si.
 he-come he-think until he-come he-know something that he-do

amma mbèkum bá-nà ttjènnì nnà,
 since tortoise they-usually resemble like that

e-fú è-yèl bìì bakkà sé èkulì èkulì.
 he-come he-call them brothers the many

ède aw é-núm-i be è-zzòṅṅi nke eden áke leval sé ékón-i ε-zè
 then he-took them he-keeping on road that race the suppose-it it-follow

tà aw abé ke èbíní ba ta ba-zè leval sé.
 so that them in all they add they-join race the

èdèe bá ttòṅ leval sé, lekkipànáál e-kenemme è-ttòṅ è-èggboè.
 when they start race the frog he-just he-start he-jumping

ne númi é-ggbo kíkii ède nêè zèè mbèkum è-kpàlàzì ñké esovém.
usually-he take he-jump little then usually-he see tortoise he-schatching in front

ède né dde e-doni é-ggbo e-yoŋŋo mbèkum,
when usually-he again he-more he jump he-pass tortoise

ndòòzò ède nêè dde zèè mbèkum ñké lèsol.
soon when usually-he again see tortoise in front

nêè ggbo e-yoŋŋo ε, mme nà aw nêè zè e-zée-jε.
he-usually jump he-pass him that is how usually-he pass he-see-him

mme nà ba ka je mme tutù ba fú bà ŋwa ñke ikkpóno-nzàm leval sé.
that is how they carried it that until they came they reach in last race the

belé lèkkpànaál è-bòlò é-ggbo e-vii ke ikkpóno-nzàm sé,
before frog he-before he-jump he-reach in last the

wakkà mbèkúm áke è-kú ki ikkpóno-nzàm sé e-fémi ε-ennàna.
brother tortoise that he stayed last the he-first he-passed

ndàlí kotokoto ŋgwóm (~ŋwóm).
story (idiophone) is rolled out and swallowed

4.2 Orthographic version

liddàl letatàmàl

mbèkum ètài lèkkpànaál

ndàli-òo

kotooo

E-de-ò mbèkum ètài lèkkpànaál bà fu ba ke leval. Ama mbekum ènèni àkkò nna sé, ède é-fú è -ggbaghazi-ε na aw ε-zε e-ke nnàna leval sé amma lèkkpànaál nêè zài è-ggbo. E-fu èggbaghazi tutù è-fú è-dzélé vvòò a ési. Amma mbèkum bà nà cchènni nna, e-fú è-yèl bìi bakka sé èkuli èkuli. Ède aw é-núm-i bè è-zzòŋŋi ñké eden áké leval sé èkón-i èzè tà aw abé ke èbini ba ta ba zè leval sé. edèe bà ttoŋŋo leval sé, lèkkpànaál e-kenèmmé è-ttoŋŋo èggboè. ne númi é-ggbo kíkii ède nêè zèè mbèkum è-kpàlàzì ñké esovém. ède né dde e-doni é-ggbo e-yoŋŋo mbèkum, ndòòzò ède nêè dde zèè mbèkum ñké lèsol. Nêè-ggbo e-yoŋŋo ε, mme nà aw nêè zè e-zée-yε. Mmè nà ba ka yε mme tutù bà fú bà ŋwa ñke

ikkpóno-nzàm lẹval sẹ. elé lekkpànaál ẹ̀bòlò ẹ̀ggbọ e-vii kẹ íkpóno-nzàm sẹ, wákka mbékúm áke è-kú ki ikpóno-nzàm sẹ e-fẹmi ẹ ẹnàna.

Ndàlì kotokoto ńgwóm (~ńwóm).

4.3 The English version

Adadama Fable

The Tortoise and the Frog

Greeting!⁶

The tortoise and the frog planned a race. Since the tortoise is very cunning, he thought of how he will win the race, especially as the tortoise crawls and the frog jumps. The tortoise thought out a plan that will enable him win the race at all cost. He called many of his brother tortoise and stationed each at different points on the racing route. When the race started, the frog started jumping ahead, while the tortoise was crawling behind. But each time the frog looked ahead, he saw the tortoise ahead. He would then overtake him, and shortly after he would see the tortoise ahead of him. They continued like that until they got to the end of the race. Before the frog could jump to the end, the last brother tortoise passed through the final line.

End!⁷

¹ I am grateful for comments from the participants at the Emenanjo symposium held on the 26-27th of August 2003 at NINLAN, Aba.

² This is a result of current work on Leggbo by the members of the Field Methods course coordinated by Larry Hyman at UC Berkeley in the 2002/2003 session. The phonetic/phonological analyses were done in conjunction with Ian Maddieson and Julie Larson.

³ So far we have found contrasts between the two sets of consonants. However, /ɲj/ is the only consonant that has no fortis counterpart, and /ff ppj/ have no lenis counterpart.

⁴ The National Language Centre recommended 'n̄' for /n̄/ as the major languages use this symbol, but this appears to crowd syllabic nasals which have to mark both the high and low tones as well. For this reason therefore, we are adopting the sub dot.

⁵ This is a kind of phrase marker in Leggbo. It has been referred to as the O-intonation in other related languages in the region, like Ibibio, a Lower Cross language spoken in a neighbouring state, Akwa Ibom State (Essien 1990:61).

⁶ This greeting is the usual greeting that the story teller uses to call the audience to some kind of attention. It can be translated to mean, 'story, story' as is common in some other Nigerian traditions. It has a response from the audience signifying their attention.

⁷ This ending is some kind of expression which can best be translated literally to mean that 'the story rolls back into the speaker's stomach, or is swallowed'.

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