

TOWARDS A PHONOLOGY OF NGWE

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Ngwe (ŋwé) is a language spoken in the Western and Eastern Cameroons. My informants come from the Western Cameroons group, which numbers approximately 20,000 speakers and is situated in and around Fontem. Fontem is to be found marked on the Ordnance Survey map, five miles from the border between Western and Eastern Cameroons, at latitude 5° 50' N. The tribe which speaks Ngwe is known as the Bangwa, and the area they occupy is about 600 sq. mls. around Fontem, where the paramount chief, the Fon of Fontem, lives. My main informant has been Mr. Bernard Foretia, whose family is closely related to that of the paramount chief. I have also had the help on occasions of a second informant, Mr. Ashu (a Bayange name).

This article provides a phonetic account of the sounds so far analysed, followed by a grouping of the consonantal items according to a tentative phonology and, finally, an illustrative word-list, selected from the data collected.

Below is a table of the total consonantal and vocalic occurrences so far noted in the material:

CONSONANTS	labio-				labio-			
	bilabial	dental	alveolar	palatal	velar	velar	glottal	
plosive	p b		t d	c j	k g	kp gb	ʔ	
fricative		β f v	s z			ɣ	ɣβ h	
affricate	pɸ		ts dz	tʃ dʒ	kx		ʔh	
roll	ʋ		r					
lateral			l					
nasal	m	ŋ	ɲ			ŋ	ŋm	
semi-vowel	w							

VOWELS	i	y	u	u
	e	ø	ə	o
	ɛ	œ	ɤ	ɔ
	æ		a	

ts represents an affricated voiceless alveolar plosive in medial positions, but in word-final position the affrication may be replaced by strong post-aspiration.

d, l and r are interchangeable, unless immediately following a nasal when only d can appear; and immediately following an alveolar plosive when only r can occur.

ʔh represents a glottal stop with strong fricative release.

ʋ and kx have only been observed in a few instances and will need further investigation.

ɣ represents a high front vowel with lip-rounding.

ɤ represents a low back vowel with lips close together.

u represents a high back vowel with spread lips.

The following vowels may occur long, but at the present stage I am treating them as disyllabic because of tonal factors: ii, ee, ɛɛ, aa, ɔɔ, ɣɣ, əə.

The consonantal items may be grouped as follows, the left hand column indicating the phonemic distinctions, the other columns the allophonic occurrences in different structural positions:

	following a syllabic nasal	initial	intervocalic	final
p	-	-	[p]	[pɸ]
b	[b]	[β]	[β]	-
*ɔ	[*ɔ]	-	-	-
m	[m]	[m]	[m]	[m]
w	[w]	-	[w]	-
f	[f]	[f]	[f]	-
v	[v]	[v]	[v]	-
t	[t]	[t]	[t]	[ts]
d	[d]	[d], [r], [l]	[d], [r], [l]	-
s	[ts]	[s]	[s]	-
z	[dz]	[z]	[z]	-
*ts	-	-	[*ts]	-
tr	[tr]	-	[tr]	-
r	[dr]	-	[r]	-
n	[n]	[n]	[n]	[n]
tʃ	[tʃ]	[tʃ], [c]	[tʃ]	-
dʒ	[dʒ], [j]	-	[dʒ]	-
ɲ	[ɲ]	[ɲ]	[ɲ]	-
k	[k]	[k]	[k]	-
g	[g]	[g]	[ɣ]	-
*kx	-	[*kx]	-	-
ŋ	[ŋ]	-	[ŋ]	[ŋ]
kp	[kp]	-	[kp]	-
gb	[gb]	-	[ɣβ]	-
ʔ	-	-	[ʔ]	[ʔ]
h	-	-	[h]	[h]

n a syllabic which occurs only in initial positions, before another consonant with which it is always homorganic, and can therefore be realized as m, ŋ, n, ɲ, ɳ, and ŋm. (n before w is realized as [ŋ].)

The following word-list illustrates the allophones given in the above phonological statement. Tones are marked in the following way: high tone ´; mid tone, unmarked; low tone `.

p	[p]	dépap	wing
	[pɸ]	nbap	flesh
b	[b]	ńbéʔ	to weave
	[β]	bàvet	grease
	[β]	dèbu	sky
ɔ	[ɔ]	NUʔʔ	tadpoles

* Further morphological analysis of the Ngwe word is needed to discover the precise nature of the phonemic allocation of these starred items.

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m	[m]	ńmè	mother
	[m]	máfɔ̀à	chieftainness
	[m]	ameè	neck
	[m]	ńbem	seed (OR grain)
w	[w]	ńwé	to become damp
	[w]	aruwɔ̀	cloud
f	[f]	ńfɔ̀ɔ̀	the dead
	[f]	fáŋ	big
	[f]	èfuət	slave
v	[v]	ńven	grass
	[v]	vená	struggle!
	[v]	deven	tortoise
t	[t]	ńtɔ̀ŋ	neck of a gourd
	[t]	tàtu	without a beginning
	[t]	bətý	sticks
	[ts]	ákìèt	ivory beads
d	[d]	nduŋ	husband
	[d], [l], [r]	dèdɔ̀h	nose
	[d], [l], [r]	adudi	stone
s	[ts]	ńsə	water
	[s]	saŋ	star
	[s]	èsɔ̀h	wickedness
z	[dz]	ńzé	to know
	[z]	zɔ̀ɔ̀a	shut it!
	[z]	àzóh	in the open
ts	[ts]	bàtsə	orphans
tr	[tr]	ńtrɔ̀ɔ̀	to be stuck
	[tr]	ètɔ̀ɔ̀	night
r	[dr]	ńrə́h	to fly
	[r]	arɔ̀ɔ̀	he fights
n	[n]	nnèt	as usual
	[n]	nóɔ̀á	drink!
	[n]	anà	farm
	[n]	ńten	straight
tʃ	[tʃ]	ńtʃɔ̀ɔ̀	to open
	[tʃ]	tʃábá	whip it!
	[c]	tʃýɔ̀á	lift it!
	[tʃ]	átʃèm	meeting
dʒ	[dʒ]	ńdʒə́h	to cork
	[j]	ńdʒi	leopard
	[dʒ]	adʒə́h	sweeping brush
ɲ	[ɲ]	ńɲét	to spit
	[ɲ]	ɲà	animal
	[ɲ]	bə́ɲà	animals
k	[k]	ńkèbé	to hold
	[k]	kèbé	hold it!
	[k]	akèm	stump of a tree

	[ʔh]	bètrɔʔ	nights
g	[g]	ngan	vein (OR root)
	[g]	gimɔʔ	the other
	[ɣ]	lègɛm	ten
kx	[kx]	kxá	pangolin
ŋ	[ŋ]	ńŋé	to thrive
	[ŋ]	ádèŋè	town
	[ŋ]	ńdúŋ	to bite
kp	[kp]	ńkpáat	to mention
	[kp]	akpèp	bark of a tree
gb	[gb]	ngbè	type of dance
	[ɣβ]	dègbw	death
ʔ	[ʔ]	tʃyʔá	shake it!
h	[h]	àzòhó	daytime
	[h]	ńdrəh	smoke

It appears that there are three tonemes in Ngwe, but this needs further investigation. The phonemicisation of the vowels of Ngwe must await further study. I hope to be able to describe the phonology of the vowels in a later article.*

* These notes were submitted in late 1961, at a comparatively early stage in an investigation which is now much further advanced. See "Conjugation in Ngwe" in the JOURNAL OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES, Vol 2, Part 3, 1963, pp. 235-243.