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## DEVELOPING AN ORTHOGRAPHY FOR BARDI: SOME PROBLEMS

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"But that word wasn't written like that before!?"

If you work in a school which has an Aboriginal language program, you may have heard a new teacher **make** a comment similar to the one above. You may even remember making such a comment yourself! Teachers often become confused and frustrated when they try to use school resources, books and other teaching materials, only to find that the Aboriginal language has not always been written in the same way. The development of an orthography, a way of writing a language, is not a simple matter. Many, if not most, Aboriginal languages have been written in various ways over the years as linguists and others have revised the work of those before them. In this article I look at some of the problems encountered when developing an orthography for the Bardi language, in order to give teachers, and particularly new teachers, some understanding of the complications that can be involved. These include practical linguistic problems, as well as broader social issues that arise with such linguistic work.

### The Bardi Language and Orthography

Bardi is spoken by about 50-100 people, most of whom live in the One Arm Point and Djarindjin/Lombadina communities which are on traditional Bardi land north of Broome in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The children in the communities do not learn Bardi as their first language, but both communities have shown an interest in having some 'language' content in their schools. They have also decided that there would be advantages to both communities if they were to share the resources they develop.

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This meant that a suitable orthography had to be developed, one that was acceptable to people in both communities. As there is a difference in dialect between the Bardi spoken at Djarindjin/Lombadina, and the Bardi spoken at One Arm Point, this task has provided quite a challenge.

In mid-1990 members of the two Bardi communities met with linguists to decide upon a suitable orthography for their language. At this meeting a new orthography was agreed upon, and it was decided that the new orthography was to be used from that time. While it was very positive that the communities could get together and come to an agreement, the new orthography also introduced some problems.

## Some Practical Problems

The first problem is of course that old books and school materials were written in the previous orthography(ies). If they were *not* to be used, many useful resources would be lost. If they *were* still to be used, children would have to cope with different orthographies and may become confused, particularly in their own writing. Another option, that of rewriting old resources in the new orthography, is undesirable because it is very time consuming and expensive.

Apart from this, there were also practical problems with the orthography itself. Some of these problems arose because of a dialect difference in Bardi. There are a number of words which some speakers, mainly at One Arm Point, pronounce with a vowel at the end (word-final), while other speakers, mainly at Djarindjin/Lombadina, do not pronounce a vowel. For example, while the word for 'eye' is pronounced *niim* by some speakers, other pronounce it *niimi* with a final *i*.

For the new orthography it was decided that two sounds, previously written with *ly* and *ny*, would be written differently depending on their place in a word. At the beginning and in the middle of words these sounds would be written with *ly* and *ny* as before, but at the end of words they would be written with *yl* and *yn* respectively. This was because some people were influenced by English words like 'only' and 'many', where the letters stand for different sounds, and so pronounced the Bardi sounds incorrectly. However, the new orthography introduced some problems. For example, the

Bardi word for 'grasshopper' would now be written as *dinydiyn*, with the *yn* at the end hiding the fact that the word is a repetition of 'diny'. Also, because of the dialect difference, some words which are pronounced with a word-final *yl* or *yn* by certain speakers, are pronounced with a word-final vowel by other speakers. Those who pronounce these words with a final vowel would therefore have to write these two sounds with *ly* and *ny* as they do *not* occur word-finally. To give just one example, the Bardi word for 'reef' would be written *marmayn* by some speakers (*yn* because this sound is at the end of the word), and *marmanya* by other speakers (*ny* because of the word-final vowel)! Which spelling should be used?

There are also problems with *g* and *k*. In the past there had been some disagreement over *k* and *g*, so in the new Bardi orthography, it was agreed that *g* was to be used at the beginning of words, in the middle of words, and after *ng*, and *k* was to be used at the end of words, and after *rn* or *n*. However, it was also agreed that it would be acceptable for people to use *g* instead of *k* at the ends of words if they wished. With the dialect difference mentioned above, this meant that some words could be written *three* different ways! For example, the word for 'wild' or 'angry' could be written in as *bilik*, *bilig*, and *biligi*. In a word list it could be possible simply to list all three alternatives, but this would be very impractical for written stories, or many other teaching materials.

Word-endings (suffixes) cause yet another problem. Adding an ending to a word changes the sound which is word-final. This means that when an ending is added, what *was* a word-final *yl* or *yn* has to be written with *ly* or *ny*, and what was a word-final *k* must become a *g*. Those who write tree as *bardak*, would write 'in a tree' as *bardagon*, where *on* is a location ending and the previously word-final *k* has changed to a *g*.

If the orthography *is* to allow for variation in the way certain words are written, how should this be done in teaching resources? Perhaps brackets should be used? But what goes into the brackets? A whole word or just the varying part? Which/whose alternative should go into the brackets? Should it be *marmayn* (*marmanya*), or *marmanya* (*marmayn*), or *marmayn(nya)*, or *marmanya(yn)*? A text containing many words could become quite difficult to read.

In most cases it would simply be impractical to give all possible alternatives.

## Some Broader Issues to be Faced

We have seen that there are some problems with the new Bardi orthography. However, members of the Bardi communities feel that they have made their decision, and they would become confused if a linguist were to approach them yet again and suggest changes to be made. Many people in the communities may not fully understand the linguistic issues involved, and indeed it would be unfair to expect them to do so. However, this makes it difficult for them to make truly informed decisions. What then is the role of the linguist, who does not, and should not, want to make decisions independently? Yet the linguist does have specialist expertise which needs to be taken into account. To develop an orthography it is necessary to achieve an acceptable balance between the communities' preferences, and linguistic precision and elegance.

The problem of the two dialects is of course really no different to other language situations where there are different spoken dialects but the one standardising written dialect (English for example). However, we need to ask who should be responsible for standardising Bardi? The ideal orthography would not highlight the differences between the two dialects (as in the *marmayn/marmanya* example above), but there is still the problem of how to write Bardi words that are pronounced differently. As I said earlier, the development of an orthography is not a simple matter, but if teachers are aware of some of the problems which need to be overcome then they are less likely to be frustrated and will be in a better position to contribute their own expertise towards possible solutions.