

Tones as meaning making features in the orthography of Grassfields Bantu language spoken in Cameroon: The Case of Fe'efe'e

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One of the key challenges in analysing Grassfields languages is the exploration of their tonal patterns and their multiple functions in those languages. These challenges met in language analysis also influence the writing systems of such languages. This study particularly focuses on Fe'efe'e, a Bamileke Grassfields-East language spoken in the Southernmost part of the Bamileke area of Cameroon. Out of the controversy surrounding tone marking in the orthography of Cameroon tone languages, it builds on natural data collected from gradual fieldwork experiences coupled with classroom practices and group discussion to argue that tone marking in the orthography of Fe'efe'e has become a daily practice in the written form of the language. The practice has been strengthened and generalised with the introduction of Cameroon languages in formal education, and based on the General Alphabet of Cameroon Languages (GACL). Although the importance of tone marking in orthography has already been stressed by some scholars and has been combatted by others, notably those working on tone languages across Bantoid and Bantu languages and even non-African languages, we pay special attention on Fe'efe'e in this study to unveil what peculiarities the language exhibits with regard to tone behaviour in orthography. The proposal therefore questions the relevance of tone marking in the orthography of tone languages such as Fe'efe'e and the validity of the controversy around the issue. Building on traditional linguistic theoretical basis and autoethnography, the analysis exposes that at the level of the lexicon and grammar of the language, tones play both a distinctive and a grammatical function as already well-known in the literature. Hence, they can be associative markers coupled with segmental morphemes, part of tense, aspect or mood markers for some tenses. The distinctive and grammatical functions play a semantic role very relevant and useful in the orthography of the language. Though this is not new, illustrations from the Fe'efe'e language help expand knowledge on the relevance of tone marking in the orthography of Grassfields languages and in formal classroom and literacy teachings to ease the pace of acquisition of orthography principles.

Keywords: tones, Fe'efe'e, grammar, orthography, function