

Latin Based Mursi Orthography

Moges Yigezu and David Turton

Abstract

Mursi is linguistically classified as a member of the Surmic group of languages within the East Sudanic subdivision of the Nilo-Saharan Phylum (Turton and Bender 1976). The present contribution gives a brief phonological analysis of the Mursi language with the aim of designing a Latin-based orthography. This orthography is primarily designed for the transliteration of Mursi texts in order to enable the reader to reproduce the sounds of Mursi speech with reasonable accuracy. It might also be useful for conducting literacy programs in the Mursi language, hitherto unwritten language and one of the less-known languages of Ethiopia. In the preparation of the orthography an attempt has been made to maximize the transfer of skills between Mursi and English so that students could make interlingual identifications of familiar letters in learning English as a second language, which reduces the amount of time needed to encode and decode written symbols.

1. Introduction

Mursi is a language spoken in the southwest corner of Ethiopia in the lower Omo valley. Linguistically it is classified as a member of the Surmic group of languages within the Nilo-Saharan phylum. In the preparation of Latin-based Mursi orthography in addition to the basic descriptions made by Turton and Bender (1976), Turton (1981) and Moges (2001), additional linguistic data were elicited from native speakers in Jinka in August 2003, namely Uli Koro Uli Bişeni (Ruguatori), Uli Koro Konyonamora, Mоторо Rabikabanya and Zinabu Bichaga. Ato Eyassu Bassa has also helped us in the translation of Mursi texts. We acknowledge with sincere gratitude the cooperation and assistance of all our Mursi language assistants in the preparation of this orthography.

This orthography is primarily designed for the transliteration of Mursi texts in order to enable the reader to reproduce the sounds of Mursi speech with reasonable accuracy. Currently, the same orthography is also being used for the *Trilingual Dictionary: Mursi-English-Amharic*, a project in progress. The dictionary is being compiled by both authors and funded by the Christensen Foundation. The orthography might also be useful for conducting literacy programs in the Mursi language, hitherto unwritten language and one of the less-known languages of Ethiopia.

2. A Brief Description of the Phonology

2.1. Vowels

Mursi has a seven-vowel system like the rest of the southeast Surmic languages such as Bodi-Tishena, Koegu and Chai-Tirma. The vowels are: i, e, ε, a, ɔ, o, and u. All the vowels occur at all positions within a word, i.e. word-initially, word-medially and word-finally (see also Moges 2001).

The vowels [ɪ], [ʊ], [ɛ], [ɔ] and [ə] are listed as allophones by Turton & Bender (1976:539) but the distribution of these vowels has not been stated. The vowel [ə] is not attested in our data, however. In closed syllables, [i] and [u] are realized as [ɪ] and [ʊ] respectively: Some examples: tirtir > [tɪtɪr] 'fingernail'; murmuri > [mʊrmʊri] 'straight'.

The following are some examples* illustrating the contrasts between the vowels phonemes:

(1)	ɛva	'send (2sg. imp.)'	elle	'there are'
	ava	'cook! (2sg. imp.)'	elli	'call (2sg. imp.)'
	ɔvɔ	'go! (2sg. imp.)'	ille	'six'
	adi	'warm'	kolu	'charcoal (burned place)'
	ido	'cloud'	kola	'neck'
	od3d3o	'put! (2sg. imp.)'	luwa	'preparing a fence for cows'
	ed3d3o	'shoot! (2sg. imp.)'	liwa	'millet'
	rom	'ostrich'	ori	'village'
	rum	'cloth'	uro	'milk'
	huli	'just'	iba	'grab, take hold of'
	holi	'waterbuck'	ebo	'debt'
	holi	'white'		
	hali	'later'		

Vowel length is also apparent in Mursi but there are few contrastive examples attested between short and long vowels. There are, however, many words occurring with long vowels. Consider the following examples:

(2)	ŋo	'neck'
	ŋoo	'descend (2sg. imp.)'
	dir	'sleeping place for young boys'
	diir	'clay'
	baaga	'eat! (2sg. imp.)'
	baga	'live! (2sg. imp.)'
	tɔɔɗa	'kill! (2sg. imp.)'
	tɔɗa	'climb! (2sg. imp.)'
(3)	ree	'body'
	ʃee	'all'
	d3uu	'cooking pot'
	eeero	'children'

In contrast to Chai-Tirma, in Mursi diphthongs are very rare in the system.

2.2. Consonants

Mursi has 22 consonant phonemes, as given in Table 1 below. Turton & Bender (1976:539) and Turton (1981:335) identified the same consonant phonemes, but were not clear about the status of the glottal stop. The 22 distinct consonant phonemes are given below in IPA symbols.

Table 1: Consonants phonemes of Mursi

	biabials	alveolars	post alveolars	palatals	velars	Glottals
voiceless stops		t			k	ʔ
voiced stops	b	d			g	
implosives	ɓ		ɗ			
voiceless fricatives		s		ʃ		h
voiced fricatives		z				
voiceless affricates				tʃ		
voiced affricates				dʒ		
nasals	m	n		ɲ	ŋ	
laterals		l				
trills		r				
approximants	w			j		

The following are some examples illustrating the occurrence of consonant phonemes in the language.

(4)

na	'and'	ʔojo	'rainy season'
ŋa	'here'	kojo	'he travels(moves around'
ma	'water'	ŋoŋ	'blood vein (for cows)'
gara	'stomach'	noŋ	'he/she'
karra	'I see'	hini	'heart'
tala	'buy(imp.2sg)'	hiri	'man'
tara	'taste (imp.2sg)'	ʃura	'to be offended'
ɗira	'to anoint'	tʃura	'washing clothes'
diira	'to sweep'	dori	'house'
buso	'witch craft, female'	ɗori	'build (imp.2sg.)'
basso	'to be cured'	ifo	'uphill, above'
wɔhu	'salty soil'	ibo	'look after, for cattle'
ʔuhu	'to anoint oil'	bari	'yesterday'
nebi	'buffalo'	baji	'under, beneath'
nebi	'ear'	boɗa	'up root'
ɗiɗa	'forget'	boɗa	'turn over'
ɗija	'fill, cause to be full'	aha	'things'
bele	'create, reproduce'	aga	'cook'
bele?	'bald'		
tʃoba	'kiss! (2sg. imp.)'		
taba	'cheat! (2sg. imp.)'		

3. Mursi Orthography

3.1. Vowels

The following are the graphemes suggested for writing the vowel phonemes of Mursi.

Phonemes in IPA

Graphemes

/i/

[i]

/e/

[e]

/ɛ/

[ɛ]

/a/

[a]

/ɔ/

[ɔ]

/o/

[o]

/u/

[u]

In the orthography the vowels are represented with the same symbols used for the linguistic transcription of the phonemes, i.e. symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Since Mursi has a relatively simple seven-vowel system as compared to English it is assumed that adopting the same IPA symbols would allow readers to reproduce the Mursi text more accurately. The only new symbols, as compared to English orthography, are the open [ɛ] and [ɔ] vowels. In order to reproduce Mursi texts more accurately it would be useful to make distinct the open vowels from their closed counterparts [e] and [o]. Vowel length is apparent in Mursi and is represented by doubling the symbol for the short vowel.

3.2. Consonants

For practical purposes, the consonants are divided into two categories: The first category consists of those similar or identical sounds to English. These are represented by using the same symbols as in English and are given below.

Category I

Phonemes in IPA Symbols

Graphemes

/t/	[t]
/b/	[b]
/d/	[d]
/k/	[k]
/g/	[g]
/s/	[s]
/z/	[z]
/ʃ/	[sh]
/h/	[h]
/tʃ/	[oh]
/dʒ/	[j]
/m/	[m]
/n/	[n]
/ɲ/	[ny]
/ŋ/	[ng]
/l/	[l]
/r/	[r]
/w/	[w]
/j/	[y]

In this first category of graphemes, the [h] grapheme is used to represent the glotta' fricative /h/, which is an independent phoneme in Mursi. The same grapheme has also been used to represent another feature, the palatal place of

articulation, as in [ch] and [sh]. As will be shown below, the same grapheme has been used to represent implosives as in [bh] and [dh]. Hence, the [h] grapheme is used inconsistently representing various features. The graphemes [y] and [g] are also used in the same way, each of them representing two different features. The symbol [y] represents the phoneme [j] and the palatal feature in [ny] while the grapheme [g] is used to represent the phoneme [g] and the velar feature in [ng].

Despite these inconsistencies in the representations of some sounds, keeping the similar graphemes between Mursi and English will have a pedagogical advantage if we consider the transfer of skills students may apply in learning English as a second language. Focusing on the similarities between Mursi and English orthographies will, therefore, enable students to transfer their reading and writing skills in Mursi to learn English as a second language. Odlin (1989:125-126) notes that when students learn an alphabet having some similarities with the one they have mastered, they make interlingual identifications of familiar letters which reduces the amount of time needed to learn to encode and decode written symbols.

Category II

The second category consists of consonant sounds that require new symbols or graphemes:

Phonemes in IPA symbols

/ʀ/

/β/

Graphemes

[ʀ]

[bh]

The representation of the above three sounds requires some explanation. The representation of the glottal stop /ʔ/ and the glottalized (implosive) consonants /b/ and /d/ is probably the most unfortunate feature of Latin script as observed in many Cushitic languages of Ethiopia such as Oromo, Sidamo, Kembatta, and many others. In many cases, these consonants are represented in two different ways: (1) the glottal stop is represented by an apostrophe, as suggested above, and (2) the same apostrophe is used after /b/ or /d/, as in /bʔ/ and /dʔ/ respectively, to represent the implosives. Note that in these languages, like in Mursi, gemination of consonants is phonemic. If we consider the simplex and geminate version of the glottal stop consonant, the simplex may be represented by an apostrophe, as shown above, while the geminate has to be represented by a single quotation mark, i.e. ("). One of the consequences of this choice is that the orthography gives the impression that the clusters /ʔl/, /ʔn/, /ʔm/ have the same phonological status as /b/ and /d/, where /bʔ/ and /dʔ/ graphemes are used respectively. It might be confusing to differentiate between <'l, 'n, 'm> and <b', d'>. In the former, the apostrophe is representing the glottal stop /ʔ/ and in the latter the implosive consonant such as /b/ and /d/. This representation makes the relationship between simplex and geminate consonants rather opaque.

Another practice used to represent the implosives is by using capital letters. This too can be confusing since the use of a capital letter in English has a different function. The above suggestion, i.e. writing implosives with a sequence of two symbols as in /bh/ and /dh/, is, therefore, made in order to avoid or minimize the problems mentioned above.

The use of an apostrophe for the glottal stop sound may not be the best solution given the fact that an apostrophe is a punctuation mark.

4. Pronunciation Guide

4.1. Vowels

[i] As in the English he /hi/

[e] As in the English men /men/

[ɛ] As in the French cher /ʃɛʁ/ 'dear, expensive', similar to the English pet, but the lips are slightly further apart.

[a] Pronounced more or less as in English pat

[ɔ] As in the French homme /ɔm/ 'man'

[o] As in the French mot /mɔ/ 'road'

[u] As in the French route /rut/ 'road'

4.2. Consonants

[t] As in English tea /ti:/

[b] " " " bee /bi:/

[d] " " " doe /dɔu/

[k] " " " cap /kæp/

[g] " " " gap /gæp/

[s] " " " sip /sɪp/

[z] " " " zip /zɪp/

[sh] " " " ship /ʃɪp/

[h] " " " hat /hæt/

[ch] " " " chin /tʃɪn/

[j]	” ” ”	<u>gin</u> /dʒɪn/
[m]	” ” ”	<u>map</u> /mæp/
[n]	” ” ”	<u>nap</u> /næp/
[ny]	As in French	<u>vigne</u> /viɲ/ ‘wine plantation’
[ŋg]	As in English	<u>hang</u> /hæŋ/
[l]	” ” ”	<u>led</u> /led/
[r]	” ” ”	<u>red</u> /red/
[w]	” ” ”	<u>wet</u> /wet/
[y]	” ” ”	<u>yet</u> /jet/

The following three consonant sounds are not heard in English

[ʔ] Apostrophe is used to represent a glottal stop sound

[bh] represent the bilabial implosive sound

[dh] represent the apical implosive sound

The glottal stop sound is used in some English dialects accompanying final voiceless stops, as in cap [kæʔp], hat [hæʔt], hack [hæʔk], etc. Both implosives, [bh] and [dh], are produced by sucking a puff of air into the mouth while at the same time trying to say [b] and [d] sounds respectively. It is helpful to think of ‘sucking with the larynx’ and produce unreleased voiced glottalic stops.

5. Transliterated Texts

5.1. Mursi Text Written in Latin-based Orthography with a free translation into English (How the Buma clan claimed Dirka by means of a trick)

zugoo ojono rəs bai chuk jinka bhuyo. when nga irrese ma warriny tuno. ɲa h
ey ne ibe

The dog put the people down behind Jinka. They moved on and crossed the
Omo upstream. They

hashaL na ibe mjaajil na hey na hey gegoloL na hey na hey ðirkayeL na
bage baa. ^hu

went on and passed Kasha; and passed Maji; and reached Gegol; then they went
on to Dirka; and

li bage bai, çhai el bai. ɲa çhai whenø na mjun nise bi. ɲa bɛ:əsene mɔrr na c
hibesene

there they stopped. The Chai were living there. The Chai came and the Mursi
killed a cow. They cut the stomach lining (peritoneum) into strips and tied them
round the necks of the Chai.

çhaiL gia chibesene rehi a ge.

The Chai did the same to the Mursi.

Komoru se ke (Komoru a konyonamora song),
The priest said (the priest was Konyonamora),

“Chai a gwɔdinaanano, a zugaganyo; Kasha a zugaganyo; Sioy (Dolkamo) a
zuga-ganyo; a

“The Chai are my brothers, they are my people; the Kasha are my people; the
Sioy (of Dolkamo)

nyi bare kebelesen mɔrr”. Bume wheno; belesen mɔrr; a zugaganyo”; se k
ɔnyamɔrai.

are my people; I have cut up the stomach lining”. The Bume came; they cut up
the stomach lining; “they are my people”; that is what Konyonamora said.

Na Buma ibane shogai na 'ɔjɔsene ra tui. Na ibane chalai (chalai 'a
gal, gal a komoruiny) na lome ngoŋe.

The Buma took a sharpening stone and put it in hot spring. They took a
necklace (it was a 'gal', a priests necklace) and wore it around his neck.

"inye gal lomi kiang" se Komoroo, "ani komoru?"
"The priest said "why are you wearing a 'gal'? Are you a priest?"

"anyi kolomi hung"
"I am just wearing it"

"a galanaano, na tolom na hale 'aino"
"It is my 'gal' you can wear it and later give it back to me"

morra baag chalai na oku kiango tui na gara.
The calves swallow the necklace and it went into their stomachs and was lost.

"chalai wa-garra". Bumai se nganga. "oku morragwi kiango tui".
"The necklace is lost" said the Bumai. "It has gone into the calves stomachs"

"na hale kemeeneng' a barari hang hang; a barari; hale kemeeneng'"
na
And the priest said "what shall I do? It is a powerful necklace".

Buma ib morra na bel kiango. baa, gwini i hololoi; ongɔn gasho. bel ngaina;
baag
The Buma opened a calf's stomach and looked inside. It was empty; they threw
it away. They cut open another;

wini i-hololoi. bel ngaina; gwini i hololoi. bel ngaina arru chalai iba na aj
e 'ena.
It was empty. They cut open another; they looked and it was empty. They cut
open another and they saw the necklace. They gave it to its owner.

Konyɔnamora se ke "a baanano".
The priest said "it is my land"

nɔng Bumai se ke "a baanano"
The Bumai said "it is my land"

"a baanunu' inye bemesi ɔng'"

"anyi ba tui ahi tinano tui ihe."
"There is something of mine buried in the earth"

"a 'ong"
"What?"

"Ihe; kau ra na kodolaino"
"Let's go to the hot spring and I will show you"

na hey kare. Shoraana Shogai
They went together. The Bumai unearthed the sharpening stone.

"ga gonya: anyi bikinging a baanano"
The Bumai said "Look it has been my land for ages"

"ee a banunu chirr". konyonamora se nganga. "a baanunu chirr"
"Ok! It is your land" said Konyonamoro. "It is certainly your land".

yok teli bai.
They stayed there.

5.2. Text recorded from Uli Koro Uli Biseni (principal informant) on Mursi Marriage with a morpheme-by-morpheme translation

1.ee achchali. agge huli ki hinoyo dholette sabbo keho .kal neno.
Ok! It is good. we just I-want-impf. daughter-the before I-go-perf.
talk to her.

2.kadhole na inynye nga-hoyte kihinino?
the daughter you-sg. girl I-covet-impf.

3.ee ko anynye kihinino chirr
yes and I I-love/like indeed

4. ee ko-ggonina kaldhiyo kə shunuko junu
yes I-go-Impf I-speak-impf. and your father and your mother
5. na huli koye tehenanyoye anynye kotto bio
just both if they believe/accept I I-drive cattle
6. keho kalineno dhaay kə junu kə shune.
I-go I-talk? every thing and your mother and your father
7. ee sedhake kihini enyare hoyitanga.
yes if she likes? I love/want it is you girl-the
8. kajji inynye te kotto bio huli kotto biəke bia kaggamchcha
I-give you ? I drive cattle well I drive cattle-the cattle I-marry-Inst.
9. dhole ameri hang hirkon kotomon koisse kag ga
manà nganggi.
daughter many there are twenty ten eight I-marry-? wife.
10. hoyanga kolombai nga iridhono hoyne
daughter-this I return? ? give birth baby
11. huli iridhono hoyne angaha ajiwo nyidda nganyi nyingena lo
mimi dhangadhai
just after birth boy baby little tooth yet doesn't exist ? gum
12. lo dhangadhai dirrr..... ngani da ramman wujjena ngattana ramma
n wujjen bho nga
gum ? yet two ? lower two
? upper ?
13. logo song kajjebba dirr 'ahuny maddi
this only I-give always suck breast
14. na huli bhoy chinyi te bhuy-tte nyidda shila shila shila te bhui

? just upper small big tooth grown grown grown ?
big

15.rono bhure 'okku ke hoyaye bussusi ko alledhiya ko
mayene chuwane
tomorrow morning ? ? ? become big? ? talk-?
? husband again

16. kottokto bio-ye shune bio-ye ko junu-ye
I-drive cattle-the your father cattle-the and your mother

17. nga zuga bekku oyigge koye bhaaga bio-yi .
? people old daughter-the father eat cattle –

18.koggine kihine bhaaga bio-yi shuhune kabhaaga bio-ye ang
anga aye mune:
grandfather I-love- eat cattle- father I-pay bride
wealth like this this is Mursi.

References

- Moges, Yigezu. 2001. *A comparative study of the phonetics and phonology of Surmic languages*. PhD thesis. Universite Libre de Bruxelles.
- Odlin, Terence. 1989. *Language Transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language teachin*. Oxford.: Oxford University Press.
- Turton, David A. & M. Lionel Bender. 1976. Mursi. In *The non-Semitic Languages of Ethiopia*, ed. M. Lionel Bender, 533–561. [Occasional Papers Series, Committee on Ethiopian Studies, 5.] East Lansing, MI: African Studies Center, Michigan State University.
- Turton, David A. 1981. Le Mun (Mursi). In *Les langues dans le monde ancien et moderne*, ed. Jean Perrot, vol. 1, 335–349. Paris: CNRS.