

# Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

## **Modeling a new Guro orthography**

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## Modeling a new Guro orthography

The phonology of Guro, a South-Mande language of the Niger-Congo family, is not a trivial one, both on segmental and suprasegmental levels. One of the main peculiarities of the system is the utmost importance of the foot in the phonological system. In Guro, foot-based features are combined with a complicated tonal system. A syllable can carry a high, a middle, a low, a rising or a falling tone. Besides, Guro possesses a rich vowel system (3 series: oral/+ATR, oral/-ATR, nasal ones, 14 in total). Tone, vowel and consonant combinations within morphemes and wordforms are not restricted in terms of absolute phonetic laws. Though one can easily observe certain phono- and tonotactic tendencies that are foot-based. Thus, the most typical lexical morpheme in Guro has a structure CVLV (C – any consonant, L – a consonant *l*; both vowels are identical and carry contour tones in certain combinations). The second widespread structure (especially among pronouns, auxiliaries, grammatical morphemes) is a monosyllable (C)V.

Complicated Guro phonology offers challenges of several kinds to the one who would try to model a consistent and user-friendly orthography of the language. There already exists a version of the orthography created by SIL in the end of 90-ies. This orthography is based on the phonological analysis of Guro by J. Le Saout. Le Saout assumed that phonological foot-based rules are stricter than they are in reality. That's why the orthography based on his analysis can't cope adequately with some types of vowel and tone combinations, as many features there are marked only in the beginning of the foot. Besides, *b* and *β*, as well as some +/-ATR vowel oppositions are not distinguished by the SIL orthography

Our proposals for changes in the Guro orthography are based on the extensive ongoing field research (2005-2009) on the phonology, the tonal morphology, the syntax and the vocabulary of the language and have also been discussed with the members of Guro community. The necessity of the new orthography became clear from the high demand of the community for the literacy spreading among its members. Guro community is numerous and people want to write in their own language.

There were several problems especially challenging for us.

1) One should reconcile the new orthography with the old one so that to leave as many features of it as possible (as there are many Christian speakers who are already used to the old version taught to them by church).

2) For the practical purposes, the new system should not combine several diacritics on one vowel (e.g. tonal marking and nasality marking). The requirements 1) and 2) made nasality marking a complicated issue.

3) Past and present development of Guro manifests a powerful dynamic trend for overall reduction towards dissyllabic structures, especially to the above-mentioned CVLV. Furthermore, dissyllabic feet tend further to reduce their second and sometimes first syllable and turn into monosyllables. This overall reduction is not chaotic, it passes several stages following certain phonetic rules: 1) intervocalic clusters turn into *l*; 2) single consonants turn into *l*, *w* or drop out; 3) phoneme *l* undergoes phonetic assimilation with the vowels and consonants of the same foot; 4) nearby vowels assimilate and utterly merge into one vowel; 5) vowels divided by a consonant assimilate and utterly become identical. The reduction level of any word sequence correlates with its idiomaticity level. In synchrony, sequences at any stage of this 'footization' process are found in the language. Besides, there exists a considerable variation among individual speakers as to what extent any word or phrase has undergone 'footization'. Thus, there's no clear border between feet and non-feet in Guro. These processes create many puzzles for the modeling of the rules for word-writing and tone marking.