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Kpelle-English dictionary, with accompanying English-Kpelle glossary

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KPELLE-ENGLISH DICTIONARY

with English-Kpelle glossary

by Dr. Elizabeth Grace Winkler
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Assisted by:
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Caldwell, Liberia
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2017

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Grace Winkler is an associate professor of Linguistics at Western Kentucky University. She received her MA in linguistics from Ohio University, Athens and her PhD from Indiana University at Bloomington. Her major interests are creole languages, gender, codeswitching, and language contact. She has published extensively on Costa Rica Limonese Creole and is the author of *Understanding Language: A Basic Course in Linguistics*, Continuum Publishing.

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Four years ago, Peter Curran, a Liberian who is dedicated to improving the lives of his fellow Liberians asked if I would consider expanding on the short dictionary that I had published more than fourteen years before. He understood intuitively not only that written communication in a people's language is key to development but also that children are more likely to learn to read if they can do so in their native language, especially when access to second language education, in this case English, is not readably available. We met several times and have corresponded a great deal since then not only about the dictionary, but the role of primary education and the training of teachers to increase literacy in a country in which literacy levels are quite low. This grass level important work will be his and the Liberians with whom he works to take the dictionary, revise and expand it and make it truly a Kpelle work after it has been in-country for awhile. They will have the difficult task of making Kpelle-language literacy in his community a reality.

Many people have been critical to this process, brothers Jonah and Nelson Foeday. Jonah is in the US serving the US Army; Nelson is in Liberia. I have spent countless hours working with them to create the entries that have been added to the original dictionary. Via the miracle of cell phone, Nelson has 'met' with us and provided his wisdom from Liberia itself. As a local person in place, he is a critical contact to the living language. Jonah has given up his free weekend days to spend many hours on end doing the tedious work of providing me sample words and phrases. His patience, his good humor, and willingness to repeat words to me, over and over until I get the subtle distinctions, has made this work possible.

The main Kpelle informant for the original dictionary, Clara Samba, reappeared in my life this past year, and she has continued to serve as an informant for this work. Many idioms in Kpelle come from the word heart (happy – the heart is sweet; angry - the heart is bitter; frustrated – the heart is wounded), and Clara is the heart of this project. Her love of ALL the Kpelle people, despite the tragedy of the civil war and its impact on her family, have taught me a great deal about mercy and kindness.

Thanks also go to Western Kentucky University, which provided two grants in support of this work. The grants made possible compensation for Jonah's time (some of which he spent to cover cell phone time for Nelson). The grants also provided me with an extraordinary graduate assistant, Jennifer Gorman. She

has typed in the entries and done a great deal of editing. As her time working with the dictionary increased, she became an invaluable assistant because she began to recognize linguistic patterns across like entries and could catch infelicities in the transcriptions. This is incredibly tedious work, but she came to it cheerfully every day. Her good humor and attention to detail made this a much easier project for me. She started as a typist and ended as a linguist.

My own role in this project is a strange one in many respects. I do not speak this language although I know hundreds of words. I am not Kpelle, nor Liberian. An accidental meeting in a linguistics class introduced me to the Kpelle and their language. Another accident was meeting Marcus Dahn, an important Liberian government official, at my parents' church who convinced me, when I was ready to give up, that this work was not linguistics research, but a tool for real people who would be able to make their voices heard thru writing if the written language became a reality. That is both frightening and humbling. What I bring to the table is a willingness to serve as the pen for the Kpelle people doing the hard work of developing a written language. However, any errors in this work are wholly mine. The next step is for this work to be fully in the hands of the Kpelle in Liberia to modify and change the written system to fit them best. My work was to get the ball rolling; only the Kpelle people can make it theirs.

Elizabeth Grace Winkler

17 April 1997

PREFACE

In the introduction to this dictionary, I offer a brief sketch of the Kpelle language. This is not intended as a comprehensive accounting of the structures of Kpelle. Those wishing a deeper understanding of the language may consult the works found in the reference list provided in the pages following the structural sketch.

The information found in this dictionary was collected over a four-year period, beginning in Jonni Kanerva's field methods class at Indiana University in 1993. I met often thru this time with Kpelle native Clara Samba. Countless hours were spent as I began to master the difficult (for me) sound system of her language. My understanding was facilitated by Clara's intuitive understanding of linguistic structures and her recognition of my weak areas. The velar fricative [ɣ] was a particularly difficult sound for me to distinguish, thus, Clara began to call it "the dog sound" because it was the first sound in the word 'dog' [ɣílà]. In addition, until I became more adept at transcribing them, Clara would sing and use hand movements to indicate tone.

I began the dictionary by making lists of words from the environment. Later, I culled words from articles on Kpelle and glossaries, including a list of Mende words provided by fellow student Bill Anderson. Only the words Clara was comfortable with were included in the dictionary. Therefore, omissions may be the result of dialectal differences or current word usage. In the end, all errors are the responsibility of the author, although my gratitude goes to all those who contributed to this work.

E.G.W.

INTRODUCTION

This is a dictionary of the Kpelle language as spoken in Bong County, Liberia. Kpelle is spoken throughout Liberia but primarily in the areas adjoining the St. Paul River, and it is also spoken in parts of Guinea adjacent to Liberia (Westerman & Melzian 1930).

The Kpelle are the largest ethnic group of Liberia. There are over 700,000 Kpelle in Liberia (Campbell 1991: 759), and Crystal (1997) reported a sizable (unspecified) population of Kpelle in Guinea. Katzner put the population figure higher, at 750,000, which is one-third of the total population of Liberia (1995: 295). Westerman and Melzian (1930) reported that many Kpelle work in other parts of Liberia and that Kpelle has become an important lingua franca in the country.

The independent country of Liberia was founded in 1822 by freed slaves from the United States who went to Liberia as part of Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement or with other colonization groups. African-Americans were the driving force in Liberian institutions for more than 150 years; in fact, it was only with the coup d'état in the late 1980s that a native African first acquired power. That African-American political dominance in Liberia contributed to the formation of significant political, economic, cultural, and military ties to the United States.

The Liberian constitution, justice system, and legislative bodies are based on their United States counterparts. Because of the political and economic stability of the country, many United States companies opened branches in Liberia. Until the civil war began in the late 1980s, citizens of the United States made up almost half of the foreigners living in Liberia. Many worked for Firestone Corporation and other rubber companies.

Various United States government agencies have played a part in the development of Liberia. For example, since the early 1960s, thousands of Peace Corps Volunteers have worked in education, rural development, and in the media. Development projects have also been supported by the United States Agency for International Development. In addition, there is a Voice of America radio station in Monrovia that broadcasts programs in Standard American English. Military support from the United States was also

significant. According to *Collier's Encyclopedia* (1991: 550-551) the Liberian Armed Forces received its principal support from the United States government.

Now that the political strife is coming to an end, Liberia will begin to rebuild its infrastructure, including its schools. My mother reported to me a conversation with one of the Liberians who has been involved with the recent negotiations for peace. He indicated that some officials are considering making Kpelle the co-national language with Liberian English (p.c. Margaret Winkler, May 1997). Thus, an official orthography will need to be developed and agreed upon and educational materials both for first and second language learners will need to be written. There is much work for those interested in Kpelle and in the rebuilding of Liberia.

THE KPELLE LANGUAGE

Kpelle, also called Pessy or Guerze, is part of the Mande branch of the Western Sudanic subgroup of the Niger Congo family (Katzner 1995: 6). Mano and Gio (in Liberia) and Mende (in Sierra Leon) are closely related languages (Westerman & Melzian 1930). The informant for this work, Clara Jimmy-Samba, of Bong County, is a native speaker of Kpelle, also fluent in Liberian Creole English and Standard English.

Kpelle is representative of Mande languages in many ways, including the absence of noun class markers and the presence of five tonal melodies (Welmers 1973). The fact that Mande languages have no system of noun classes distinguishes them from other Niger-Congo languages, though in some Mande languages remnants of such a system have been found. It has been argued that Kpelle is not part of the Niger-Congo family because attempts to find remnants of a noun class system have been unsuccessful.

According to my informant, Kpelle is not a written language. She reports that literacy is only in Liberian English, the language that is taught in the elementary schools. She claims that no one writes in Kpelle. Because the intent of this dictionary is linguistic and not pedagogic, I have chosen to provide phonetic transcriptions, as they offer linguists much information about the sound system and phonological processes of Kpelle.

THE SOUND SYSTEM

Vowels

On the phonemic level, Kpelle has a seven-vowel system, plus a series of nasal vowels, and a series of contrastively long vowels.

Oral Vowels		Nasal Vowels		Long Vowels	
i	u	ĩ	~ ũ	ii	uu
e	o	ẽ	õ	ee	oo
ɛ	ɔ	ɛ̃	ɔ̃	ɛɛ	ɔɔ
a		ã		aa	

The system becomes more complex on the phonetic level, however. The three non-low front vowels are nearly always realized as centralized allophones, unless they are geminated. For example, tí 'that' and tíi 'work', both contain the phoneme /i/. There is also the word tíi 'charcoal'. In addition, front vowels undergo regressive assimilation and centralize when they precede velars.

Furthermore, the mid-back vowels may undergo progressive derounding, that is, the feature rounding of the vowel becomes part of a new segment that has incorporated the point of articulation from a preceding velar. Therefore, a word which is phonemically /kɔli/ is phonetically realized as [kwʌli].

The ubiquitousness of these and other phonological processes contributed to the decision to provide phonetic transcriptions, and not phonemic ones.

Consonants

	bilabial	labiodental	alveolar	palatal	velar	labiovelar	glottal
stops	p, b		t, d		k, g	kp, gb	
implosives	ɓ						
nasals	m		n	ɲ	ŋ		
fricatives		f, v	s	ʃ	ɣ		h
affricates				tʃ, dʒ			
flaps/rhotic			ɾ, r				
laterals			l				
glides	(w)			j	w		

The consonant system is not significantly less complex on the phonetic level than the vowel system, although it is simple and orderly on the phonemic level. On the phonemic level there are voiceless and voiced stops at four points of articulation: bilabial, alveolar, velar, and labiovelar.

Labiovelars are doubly articulated stops with both labial and velar closure. These function as single unit phonemes, not consonant clusters. They are made when air is sucked into the mouth between the two articulators. There is much variety in the pronunciation of labiovelars. The variety in sound from speaker to speaker results from the difference in local aspiration and pressure in the space between the articulators. In Kpelle, there are two labiovelars, voiceless /kp/ and voiced /gb/.

Nasals occur in four places of articulation: bilabial /m/, alveolar /n/, palatal /ɲ/, and velar /ŋ/.

Kpelle has voiceless fricatives at two places of articulation: labiodental and alveolar; however, in the dialect of Bong county, the /s/ is always realized as /ʃ/; a variety of Kpelle called Jokole Kpelle has the /s/ in the same word context.

In addition, Kpelle has a series of resonants: /ɓ/, /l/, and a velar fricative /ɣ/. /j/ and /w/ are the only glides. Finally, a voiced flap /ɾ/, occurs solely intervocalically.

Phonological processes

Kpelle has a productive process of consonant mutation. The initial consonant in a word mutates in a predictable fashion in certain contexts, usually on the definite form of the noun and on verbs marked with a third person singular object pronoun prefixed to them. Welmers contended that the mutation is conditioned by a floating low tone preceding the consonant (1971: 71). The mutations follow three patterns as can be seen from the chart below.

1. Voiceless consonants become voiced:

   p -> b;   t -> d;   k -> g;   kp -> gb;   f -> v;   ʃ->dʒ

   tɛ́ɛ   'a chicken'   dɛ́ɛ   'the chicken'

   kʌ́   'do'   kʌ́   'do it'

2. Resonants become nasals at the same place of articulation:

   ɓ->m; l -> n; ɣ->ŋ; j -> ɲ; w -> w̃

   ɓá   'rice'   máj   'the rice'

3. word-initial nasals take on a low tone and become syllabic:

   ɲale   'cat'   ɲ̃ale   'the cat'

For those interested in a more detailed discussion of Kpelle phonology, I suggest *The Phonology of Kpelle*, by William Welmers (see reference section).

Tone

As in most sub-Saharan African languages, tone is both lexically and grammatically significant in Kpelle. Welmers (1973) described three distinct levels of tone for Kpelle: high, mid, and low, and a falling glide on single syllable words. This is borne out by the production of the informant for this dictionary,

except that the falling glide occurs also in polysyllabic words. In this work, the mid tones are left

unmarked, high tones are marked / ´/, low / `/, and the falling glide, /^/.

Tone is used lexically to distinguish separate lexemes; for example:

ɓolo	(n)	'father-in-law'
ɓòlò	(vi)	'grow up'
ɓòló(adj,sv)		'raw, green, unripe'

Tone also has a grammatical function in Kpelle. For example, tonal differences mark changes in tense

and aspect as can be seen in the chart in the verb section. For a more detailed accounting of tone in Kpelle,

see Welmers (1962, 1973).

Syllable Structure

Syllables in Kpelle are primarily CV, CVV, CVN, or N (a syllabic nasal). A velar nasal /ŋ/ may occur

in the coda of the syllable, but no other consonant segment may be found in that position. The number of

words beginning with a vowel is limited; of those that do, the great majority are loanwords, and the rest are

one-syllable words of grammatical importance, or they are interjections. Most Kpelle words are

monosyllabic or disyllabic. Words of three or four syllables tend to be either compounds or loanwords.

KPELLE GRAMMAR

Word order in Kpelle is SOV. The word order is generally preserved in more complex sentences,

although it is affected by the fronting of objects for focus, for example:

ʃùróŋ	e	kwʌ́nɨ	pílɨ́	
the boy pn		stone	lake	'The boy threw the stone in the lake.'

Verbs

The verbal system of Kpelle has tenses and aspects that express ongoing action, completed action,

future, and stative. Kpelle has constructions for conditionals, hortatives (*let's do something*), desideratives

(*if only he had done something*), customary actions, and a perfective aspect. There is no passive

construction. Passive voice is expressed through the use of an impersonal construction *núũ da* 'someone' or an unspecified third person singular as the subject.

The basic pattern used to mark Kpelle tense-aspect is a "construction marker" which immediately follows and combines with the subject pronoun in conjunction with either a suffix on the verb stem or replacement of the unmarked stem tones with other tones. Different combinations of construction markers and suffixes or tone changes on the verb yield a variety of different tenses and aspects. Welmers provides an excellent chart of these in his book *African Language Structures* (1973: 402].

Adverbs

Most adverbs can only be placed after the verb. However, there are some adverbs, such as *wá´´* 'yesterday', that can appear in a variety of places in the sentence.

nòwáj dà flómó dì wɛ́ɛ málɑ́'	'Nowai and Flomo danced yesterday'.
e wɛ̀ɛ ʃéiʃʌ̀ŋ bʌ́tʌ	'She made the chair yesterday'.
ŋwɛ́ɛ é wɛ́ɛ pà	'A guest came yesterday'.

Nouns

All nouns in Kpelle are either free or relational nouns. This division is also referred to as alienable and inalienable possession. Alienable and unalienable nouns are distinguished grammatically.

A free noun is one whose stem alone may constitute a complete noun phrase. When a free noun appears with a possessive pronoun, the first and third person singular forms differ from that of relational nouns. Generally, free nouns are what may be obtained or disposed of at will. For example:

    ŋa pɛ́ɾɛ 'my house'   nɔ pɛ́ɾɛ   'his house'   bɛ́ɾɛ́i   'the house'

Relational nouns are bound morphemes that may only be used with an expressed possessor. Relational nouns are a semantic class of things that cannot be gotten rid of easily, for example: kinship terms, words for parts of the body, place relationships, names, footprints, odor, etc. The possessive pronouns used with

relational nouns differ in the first and third person singular forms from the forms used with free nouns. Otherwise, they are identical.

dʒíŋ	'the tooth'	ńdʒíŋ	'my tooth'
índʒíŋ	'your tooth'	ǹdʒíŋ	'his tooth'

In some cases, a free noun can be made into a relational noun by adding the word *núu* 'person', for example: *lée núu* which means 'mother'.

Pronouns

Westerman & Melzian pointed out that copy pronouns are common in Kpelle. "A noun subject is in most cases followed by its corresponding personal pronoun" (1930: 3).

vãj	e	ŋwúɾii	ɓúlə̀ŋ	
wind	it	tree	uproot	'The wind uprooted the tree'
def	pn	def	past	

Pronouns

Subject pronouns:			
ŋá	I	kú	we
bá or í	you (sg)	ká	you (pl)
é	she, he, it	tí	they

Possessive pronouns:			
ŋá	my	ku	our
í	your (sg)	ka	your (pl.)
ŋɔ̀	his, hers, its	dɨ	their

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Plural Marking

The basic form of the Kpelle noun is neither singular nor plural; the form can express either concept. If it is important to the speaker to emphasize plurality, then a morpheme marking plurality /°a/ is added to the end of the noun phrase, rather than to the end of the noun. Campbell noted that plural marking is "largely optional" in Kpelle (1991: 760).

tɛ́ɛ ŋá	'chickens'
tɛ́ɛ kʌ́tʌ́	'a big chicken'
tɛ́ɛ kʌ́tʌ́ ŋá	'big chickens'

When a noun is followed by a numeral, the plural marker is not used.

pɛ́ɾɛ lɔ́ɔlú	'five houses'
pɛ́ɾɛ kʌ́tʌ́ lɔ́ɔlú	'five big houses'

Definiteness

Kpelle marks definiteness by a circumfix on the entire noun phrase. The prefix consists of a low tone before the noun, with accompanying consonant mutation, and the suffix portion of the definite marking is -ái attached to the last constituent in the noun phrase.

tɛ́ɛ	'a chicken'	dɛ́ɛi	'the chicken'
dɛ́ɛi kʌ́tɛ́i	'the big chicken'	dɛ́ɛi kʌ́tʌ́ ŋái	'the big chickens'

Noun Compounds

To express the idea of an 'x' of 'y' such as, 'a basket of rice,' the nouns are simply placed together with the head noun appearing in final position.

mɔ̀lɔ̀ŋ kpɔ́lɔ́ [rice basket]   'a basket of raw rice'

Possession

When one noun possesses another, this is expressed by a possessor plus third person possessive pronoun, plus the noun.

Flómó ŋo pɛ́rɛ	'Flomo's house' [Flomo his house]
Flómó nòwáj dɨ pɛ́rɛ	'Flomo and Nowai's house' [Flomo and Nowai their house]

Adjectives

There seems to be a wide variety of forms that function as adjectives. Many of what may be adjectives behave like verbs, at least when the sentence is in the present tense. In other tenses, however, they do not behave as ordinary verbs do. Other adjectives pattern as nouns.

wuŋ leɣa tɛi jèi [hair black has]   "My hair is black".

In addition, many adjectives have corresponding verbal forms; for example:

kʌ́tʌ́   'getting big'

The issue of verbal adjectives is greatly complicated by the existence of a suffix realized either as /ɔ/ or /ɛ/, which is added to an adjective to form a verb.

Some adjectives are compounds of a noun and an adjective (or verbal adjective). When these expressions are used in sentences, they behave not as adjectives but as a noun and a separate verbal adjective.

líi wʌ́nʌ   [heart + bitter] 'angry'

Following are a few examples of *adjectives* and how they are used.

fãà	'hot'	ʃá kaa ɣɘ́lɘ́ fãà]	Today is a hot day.
feeda	'two'	níàpɛ́li feeda kaa ŋé	I have two children.
kpɔlu	'red'	ŋa jɘkaj kpɔlúè	The shirt is red.
líi wʌ́nʌ	'angry'	níiwʌ́nai	I'm angry.
		níi fɘ̀ wʌnʌ́nʌ	I'm not angry.

Postpositions

As is common in SOV languages, Kpelle has postpositions rather than prepositions. Postpositions in Kpelle may in fact be relational nouns, and in any case, they are most likely grammaticalizations of certain relational nouns, such as 'the inside', 'the outside', and 'the underside'. Thus, the expression, daaí ʃú 'in town' may be analyzed in two ways. It could be seen as either a postpositional phrase consisting of the postposition *ʃú* 'inside' and the noun phrase *daaí* 'the town'. The alternative is to see it as a noun phrase made up of a relational noun *ʃú* 'the inside of something' and its possessor, *daaí* 'the town' making the phrase, 'the town's inside'.

Ideophones

Ideophones are also called interjections, descriptive adverbs, picture words, and onomatopoetic adverbials. It is not clear how ideophones are distinguished from regular adverbs. According to Newman, "It should be emphasized that the phonological distinctiveness of ideophones is a property of the set as a whole and not necessarily of each member of that set" (1968:107). It is really hard to identify ideophones by semantic properties, except in some vague way. Welmers argues that both phonological and grammatical criteria may be necessary to define them. Here follow two examples from Kpelle:

pɛlɛ pɛlɛ 'very small'   wɔlɔ wɔlɔ   'forever'

Loanwords

Many loanwords are English-based. These may be derived from two sources: Liberian English, learned in the schools, heard on television, and read in newspapers. Words may also be borrowed from Liberian Pidgin English, commonly spoken in the capital and as a lingua franca in the country. Arabic is another source language for loan words. A large and historical Muslim presence accounts for the fact that some Kpelle words, especially those concerning religion, are derived from Arabic.

According to the informants for this work, the loanwords have varied usage. Some loanwords have Kpelle counterparts and are only used by bilingual English-Kpelle speakers. Other loanwords are only used by young people going to school where English is the medium of instruction. Older speakers would not

recognize these words, like the informant's mother or other monolingual Kpelle speakers. In addition, some loanwords are commonly used words that would not even be recognized by the general populace as loan words because there are no Kpelle equivalents for them (p. c. Clara Samba).

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