

Draft proposal for a writing system for Idu Mishmi, a language of Arunachal Pradesh



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Please note

Writing systems are often known as ‘scripts’ in India. However, ‘scripts’ refer to systems of characters such as Devanagari, Chinese, Arabic or Cyrillic. Writing systems or orthographies are a series of conventions within a script, in this case Roman script. The term ‘script’ will not be used in this document.

The first part of the paper uses the special characters of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). These allow linguists to write down the sounds of the world’s languages. Learning to read your language *does not require* you to learn IPA characters, just to be able to pronounce the examples. Through this you can read the words in Idu using the conventions agreed.

MAJOR PRINCIPLES OF WRITING SYSTEMS

The objective is to write down an unwritten language in a way that can easily typed and read and is also easily taught to learners

The procedure is as follows;

- The language is analysed according to scientific linguistic principles
- The principles are set out in an orthography document [this document]
- The orthography document makes suggestions for ways of writing the sounds of the language
- It also sets out problems in writing and choices to be made

The community is responsible for;

- Forming a language development committee which is representative of speakers of the language
- Creating a ‘paper trail’, that is a document recording the decisions of the committee and the reasons for those decisions
- Discussing the options for a writing system and making choices, giving reasons for those choices

Then;

- The language development committee then forwards its decisions back to the author of the orthography document and the document is updated with this information
- The language development committee receives this revised document, reads and approves it

Next steps

- A trial primer must be created, a booklet which teaches new readers how to write their language
- This should *not* be printed until it has been tested
- When it has been tested, some problems will surely be found. The primer and possibly the orthography will need to be updated
- A final version of the primer can be printed and tested on a larger scale
- Preliminary books can be printed
- At the same time a first version of the dictionary can be circulated, to help new readers write their language

REMEMBER

Idu is not like any other language in the world, and especially unlike Hindi, Nepali or Assamese. It has quite different sounds and quite different grammar. Therefore there is no reason to write it in the same way. Idu must have its own writing system which reflects the language.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Idu and the term ‘Mishmi’

The term ‘Mishmi’ is used in the travel literature as far back as the early nineteenth century to refer to three distinct peoples, the Idu, Tawra [=Taraon] and the Kman [=Geman, Miju]. While Idu and Tawra are undoubtedly related, Kman is quite distinct and is not part of the same linguistic group. The Idu are known as ‘Luoba’ in China. The earliest reference to the Idu language is in Robinson (1856). Material can be found in Campbell (1874) and Konow (1902). The only significant publications on Idu from the Indian side are the pre-linguistic Jatan Pulu (1978) and Jimi Pulu (2002a,b). Idu has also been described from the Chinese side, notably in Sun et al. (1980, 1991), Sun (1983a,b, 1999) and Ouyang (1985).

1.2 Attempts to write Idu

There have been several attempts to write the Idu language. None have been widely adopted due to a lack of a good writing system or orthography. It has been proposed to use Devanagiri script, although this is very poorly adapted to Idu, which has extensive tones and nasalised vowels. This working paper first summarises the phonology of Idu from a linguistic point of view and then explores options to write the language in a practical way.

2. Phonology

2.1 Consonants

Idu consonants are shown in Table 1;

Table 1. Idu consonants

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Retro-flex	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p, p ^h	b	t, t ^h	d		ɬ, ɬ ^h	k, k ^h	g [ʔ]
Fricative			[s]	[z]	ʃ			h
Affricate			[ts]	[dz]	tʃ, tʃ ^h	dʒ		
Nasal	m		n			ɲ	ŋ	
Flapped			r					
Lateral			l	ɭ				
Approximants	w			ɽ		y		

Unusual are the retroflexes [ɽ] and [ɭ], which are contrastive but await further phonetic investigation.

/s/ and /ʃ/ appear to be in free variation in many words, and are probably not to be considered distinct phonemes. However, in loanwords, such as /sini/ ‘sugar’ it seems the original articulation is conserved.

The voiceless fricative /z/ appears in some words, for example *azu* cobra sp. or *ibizu* ‘pika’. However, these seem to be in free variation with both the affricate [dz] and the palatal affricate [dʒ]. Some speakers prefer [z] for particular words, so it may well be acceptable to write it as part of the alphabet, but it is unlikely to be a distinct phoneme.

The phonemic contrast between /ɬ/ and /tʃ/ is not fully established.

One of the more perplexing issues in Idu phonology is the variation in palatalisation, labialisation and rhoticisation, i.e. with a -y, -w or -r after a consonant. Many words seem to vary from one speaker to another and even within the speech of one individual. Although there are dialect differences between ‘Upper’ and ‘Lower’ Idu this is apparently not one of them. There is a definite tendency for younger speakers to drop these consonant modifications, for example, saying *nopu* instead of *nyopu* for ‘breast’. It is usual in writing systems to prefer the older, more conservative forms, but this is an issue for discussion,

Idu has homorganic prenasalised consonants. Thus n- precedes dentals, ŋ- velars and m- bilabials. These are marked as sounded though all are allophones of an underlying N-.

In contrast to Tawra and Kman, Idu has no true glottal stop /ʔ/. A slight glottalisation is heard when two similar vowels articulated separately are pronounced, but this does not seem to warrant phonemic status.

2.2 Vowels

The vowels of Idu are shown in Table 2;

Table 2. Idu vowels

Vowels	Front	Central	Back
Close	i	ɯ	u [ũ]
Close-Mid	e [ẽ] <u>e</u>		o [õ]
Open-Mid	ɛ [ê]	ə [ə̃], <u>ə</u>	ɔ [ɔ̃]
Open		a [ã]	

All vowels in Idu show long/short contrast except /ɯ/, which is anyway a marginal phoneme. Some vowels also show long/short contrast in nasalised vowels. Idu also permits sequences of similar vowels with contrastive tones, which could be analysed as sequences of short vowels. In addition, Idu allows two identical vowels to be articulated separately as in è.écè ‘dao’.

The most interesting vowels are the retracted schwa [ə̃] and [ẽ]. There appear to be examples of contrast. Retraction in IPA is represented by an underline, but a better convention will need to be devised for any practical script. Schwa seems to have only a single example of a nasalised counterpart and ɯ no example.

2.3 Tones

Like most regional languages, Idu has a relatively simple tone-system. There are two level tones, High and Low, falling and rising tones. Some examples of tonal contrast are;

shú sour
shǔ sweet
shù red

átà elephant
átá food
àtà to weave
àtá to swear

prá bird
prǎ salt
prâ good
prà flat

In a four-way contrast, such as pra, the second tone of a rising tone, in salt for example, is higher than the ‘high’ tone of *prá* ‘bird’.

3. Writing system proposal

3.1 Consonants

Table 3 shows the main consonants of Idu with the most usual way of writing them. The difficult consonants, where a writing solution is still under discussion, are marked with a shaded line.

Table 3. Idu consonants

IPA	as in	Gloss	Written	as in
p	pà	to cross	p	pa
p ^h	p ^h álá	tea	ph	phala
b	bùni	yesterday	b	bunyi
t	tiì	to cover	t	ti
t ^h	t ^h ù	bite	th	thu
d	dò	suck	d	do
te	teí	to rot	te, ts, cy	tein, tsin, cyin
k	kè	rice	k	kə
k ^h	k ^h ògá	dispute	kh	khoga
g	gè	to carry	g	gə
h	há	eat	h	ha
s	sá	bridge	s	sa
ʃ	ʃù	red	sh	shu
tʃ	tʃí	acquire	c	ci
tʃ ^h	tʃ ^h i	to walk	ch	chi
dʒ	dʒámì	yak	j	jami
z	ádzù	cobra sp.	z	azu
m	má	black	m	ma
n	ná	painful	n	na
ɲ	ɲà	dance	ny	nya
ŋ	ŋá	I, me	ng	nga
r	rò	arrest	r	ro
ɾ	ɾí	boil	rh	rhi
l	lò	white	l	lo
ɭ	ɭù	eight	lh	ilhu
w	wá	cancer	w	wa
y	yù	beer	y	yu

Idu also has long consonants, which are written as double consonants. These words show the contrast between long and short;

lló	warm	lò	to purchase
mmó	new	mò	old
mmò	to hide	móná	feathers

Some words have a doubled consonant in the middle of the word. These must be carefully distinguished from single consonants. Here are some examples;

èmmá	new moon	má	to bring up
állà	to lick	àlà	musk deer
átti	to kick	áti	village

3.2 Vowels

3.2.1 Cardinal vowels

Idu has many vowels and vowel types which must be carefully distinguished if it is to be written correctly. The plain vowels are single, then there are long vowels, double vowels. All of these can also be nasalised.

Five of the Idu vowels correspond to English vowels as in Table 4;

Table 4. Idu vowels

IPA	Example	Gloss	Written
a	à	child	a
e	è	to do	e
i	ì	to live	i
o	ò	to shoot	o
u	ù	to pluck	u

and can be written like that.

3.2.2 Additional vowels

However, Idu has four vowels which do not have a way to be written in the English alphabet. These are /ɔ/, /ɛ/, /ə/ and /ʉ/. We can see Idu distinguishes the first two from the following pairs.

rò	arrest	rò	to sew
dò	suck	dó	plural marker
thè	cold	thè	urine
pè?	to hit lightly	pé	to bridge s.t.

The question is how to write the extra vowels /ɛ/ and /ɔ/. Some Indian languages have used the convention of a double vowel, so ‘ee’ and ‘oo’. This is highly misleading and should not be considered. Idu and most other languages have long vowels, which we write with doubled vowels. So confusion would result.

Some possibilities found in other languages;

ɛ	e, eh, ε, e,
ɔ	o, oh, ɔ, ɔ,

The third extra vowel in Idu is what is known as schwa /ə/. This is a central vowel such as you hear in English ‘bird’. Some common Idu words with schwa include;

to step aside	hə
to carry	gə
rice	kə
new	mmə
flower	pə

Writing a schwa is more difficult. Some options that have been used in other languages are;

ə	i, ə, ah, a, a
---	----------------

These words would look as follows when written;

to step aside	hə	hi	hah	hə
to carry	gə	gi	gah	gə
rice	kə	ki	kah	kə
new	mmə	mmi	mmah	mma
flower	pə	pi	pah	pə

Some previous suggestions in Idu were @ and a^, neither of which are practical or useful. Any word with punctuation in the middle is likely to be read incorrectly. Also proposed was ‘eo’ which is found in Korean.

This is ignore the fact that Idu permits sequences of dissimilar vowels, such as *èlòú*, an type of bird. So ‘eo’ should not be used.

The vowel *u* is not common in Idu, but it shows up as clearly contrastive in the pairs;

hè to step aside
hú to scoop water

bó hole
bù to defend

gó wild potato
gù to carry

Possible writing solutions are;

u *uh, u, u, u*

hu would look as follows; *huh, hu, hu, hu*

gu would look as follows; *guh, gu, gu, gu*

3.2.3 Retracted vowels

Apart from ordinary and nasalised vowels, Idu also has retracted vowels. These are where the lower jaw is pulled inwards at the moment of articulation. Two vowels have been recorded with this special type of articulation, /ə/ and /e/. The phonemic status of the schwa is shown by the pair;

khé faeces *khə* to satisfy
íci^hkhè small

to swallow *àbrěy*

small *icikhə* *icikhì* *icikhah* *icikhà*

and the mid-front vowel /e/ by the pair;

dè to stand
dè make way!

At the moment these are symbolised by an underline. It would also be possible to find another way of marking these vowels, perhaps by -r following. So this example would look as follows;

de to stand
der make way!

3.2.4 Length

Most Idu vowels can be long or short;

a

sá dry *sàà* clear
à child *àà* to breed
dá to borrow *dáá* go far from me!
tá end *tàà* to weave

ə

àlibè but àmbèé flying ant

i

íkǐ bamboo tube prá kíi bird sp.
pì hole pìi quiet
mì green míi guest at Rě festival

o

(ŋ)gó classifier for fish gòò to bind
sò to cook sòó be quick!

ɔ

tò different tóó to paddle

u

hù liver hùù to beat
kù particles of rice with husk kùù to dry above the fire

But some Idu words have two vowels of the same type together which are pronounced separately. Examples are;

à.ágrà basket for baby
à.átò loom part
è.écè dao

These are separate from the long vowels and need to be marked in some way. One suggestion is to put a dot between them, but a dash is also possible. So;

a.ato *or* a-ato

3.2.5 Nasal and non nasal vowels

Nasal vowels are those where the vowel itself has a pronounced nasal sound, like the French words *vin* [vĩ] and *bon* [bõ]. This type of articulation is found in both Idu and Tawra but is most common in Idu. It should not be confused with the sounds /n/ or /ŋ/ at the end of a syllable.

a

dáyà catfish sp. dáyáná tobacco
áláprá ékómbò tripod àtáprá tongs

e

Rè festival réé in series
sé to whistle sè to murder
pè to catch fish in group pè to hit the target

NB. The Rê Festival is one of the most important cultural traditions of the Idu, celebrated every year in February. However, it has typically been spelt ‘Reh’, although Idu does not have syllables with final ‘h’. This may have been an attempt to represent nasalisation, but it is misleading. It hard to change established spelling, but it would be better if the festival were now spelt Ren.

i

shrew ápicǐ́ soup cìì

o

tǒ́ drink tò different

o

tǒ́ classifier for cane tò to pull

u

hù liver áhùhù bee sp.

One word has a sequence of non-nasal and nasal /u/;

fish sp. étùú

The question is how can nasal vowels be written? The most common solution is to put an -n after the vowels. This is used in French for example. If this were chosen, some common words would look like this;

hùù	ten	huun
trùù	louse	truun
áhùhù	bee sp.	ahunhun
dáyà	catfish sp.	danya

A previous solution that was tried in Idu was to mark a tilde before the vowel. This made the nasal letters look like this ~a, ~e etc. This is both more difficult to type and looks poor on the page.

3.3 Tones

Tones are marked throughout this document, but whether tone should be marked in the writing system is still under debate. There is cultural resistance to tone-marking, and some minimal pairs can be easily distinguished by context, but others can lead to confusion. In such a system minimal tone-marking is recommended, i.e. only marking tone where ambiguity can result.

How should tone be marked? Linguists mark tone with the type of accents, grave, acute and circumflex shown in this document. These are used in French and are thus easy to find on the computer. Low tones are by far the most common tonal pattern in Idu and are better left unmarked. The suggestion is that high tone can be marked where ambiguity is a problem.

4. Conclusion

This working paper is a preliminary attempt to develop a writing system for the Idu language. It gives examples of words as they are in phonetic [IPA] transcription and options for how they could be written in a practical system for Idu. Some issues are still very much open to discussion by the Language Development Committee, and when decisions are taken on these issues, the document can be revised and used as a basis for written publications in the Idu language.

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