

The logo for Linguistique et Langues Africaines (LLA) features the letters 'L', 'L', and 'A' in a stylized, outlined font, arranged horizontally.

Linguistique
et Langues
Africaines



LLA
#2 (2016)

Compte-rendu / Book review

Jacques RONGIER, *Dictionnaire éwé-français*.
Paris, L'Harmattan, 2015, 858 p.

par Kofi YAKPO
The University of Hong Kong

pp. 135-139

Linguistique et Langues Africaines (LLA)

Revue internationale éditée par / *International Journal edited by* :
Laboratoire Langage, Langues et Cultures d'Afrique Noire (LLACAN)
(UMR 8135 CNRS / INALCO / PRES Sorbonne Paris Cité)

© Éditions Lambert-Lucas
ISSN 2429-2230

<http://llacan.vjf.cnrs.fr/lla>

Linguistique et Langues Africaines (LLA) est une revue internationale de linguistique africaine portant sur les langues subsahariennes tant vernaculaires que véhiculaires ainsi que sur les créoles de cette zone (à l'exclusion des langues d'origine européenne). Elle se veut un lieu privilégié d'élaboration et de diffusion des connaissances dans le domaine de la linguistique africaine, représentant diverses tendances, en particulier des écoles théoriques variées.

Linguistique et Langues Africaines (LLA) [African Languages and Linguistics] is an international journal for African linguistics, whose main goal is to contribute to a better knowledge of languages spoken in Sub-Saharan Africa, be they vernacular, vehicular or creole, with the exception of local varieties of European languages. We are open to recent trends and all theoretical approaches.



Jacques RONGIER, *Dictionnaire éwé-français*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2015, 858 p.

par Kofi YAKPO
The University of Hong Kong

Ewe has been the subject of some of the earliest work in African linguistics, it is one of the major languages along the West African littoral zone between Senegal and Nigeria, an important regional language in Ghana, and the most widely spoken language of Togo. Jacques Rongier's monumental and comprehensive *Dictionnaire éwé-français* narrows an existing gap. The only comprehensive Ewe dictionary to-date was Westermann's *Ewe-Deutsches Wörterbuch* written in German. We can only hope that the gap will be finally closed sometime in the future with the publication of an Ewe-English dictionary.

Rongier's *Dictionnaire éwé-français* complements his *Dictionnaire français-éwé* which appeared twenty years earlier (1995). The *Dictionnaire éwé-français* is even more ambitious in scope. Any modern dictionary of Ewe will invariably be measured against the yardstick of Westermann's lexicographic masterpiece of early African linguistics, the *Wörterbuch der Ewe-Sprache*. And indeed, my first reflex upon receipt of the review copy of the *Dictionnaire éwé-français* was to pick the 1905 edition of Westermann's book from my shelf, and page through it, with great curiosity as to the differences between the two works.

Take, for example, the entry, *àtikè*, for which Rongier's work provides the translation 'médicament, remède, drogue, fard' [medicine, remedy, drug, make-up]. Westermann's translation of *àtikè* has a slightly more sinister set of translations, namely 'Arznei, Medizin, Gift, Säure' [drug, medicine, poison, acid], providing as the only example to the entry *atike wuame* 'tödliches Gift' [deadly poison]. The different senses in Rongier's and Westermann's works are, of course, a consequence of cultural change. Where a 'medicine' may have had a much wider, multidimensional range of meanings in the holistic approaches of traditional medico-spiritual practice in Westermann's times, 'medicine' in contemporary Ewe tends towards the more one-dimensional sense it has acquired through curative medical practice of today. A similar proliferation of meanings as in Ewe traditional uses of *àtikè* can be found in Latin *medicamen* 'medicine, drug, remedy' but also 'cosmetic' and 'dye' and 'substance to treat seeds or plants' (Oxford Latin Dictionary 1982), as opposed to the modern meaning of German *Medikament* or French *médicament*.

Beyond that, the differences in the lexicographic approach between Rongier's and Westermann's work could not be greater. While the latter work contents itself with a single entry on *àtkè*, Rongier's work lists altogether forty-seven entries containing *àtkè*, including among others, endocentric compounds (*àtkètùkpá* 'flacon de médicament' [medicine vial], *àtkèmámá* 'dose' [dose] and *àtkè ñú núnya* 'pharmacologie' [pharmacology]), agent nouns (*àtkèwòlá* 'médecin, guérisseur' [doctor, healer] and *àtkèdzrálá* 'pharmacien'), action nouns (*àtkèqàdà* 'préparation de médicaments' [preparation of drugs]) and place nouns (*àtkèwòfé* 'laboratoire' [laboratory], *àtkèxò* 'depôt de médicaments' [drugstore]). How useful is such an exhaustive listing of compounds given the predominantly isolating and mildly agglutinative morphological type of Ewe? Or phrased differently, which of these complex expressions warrant separate headwords because they involve a certain degree of lexicalization, and which of them can be predicted via regular word formation processes, and could therefore have been omitted or treated differently in the dictionary?

The segmentation of *àtkèqàdà*, for example, reveals the following morphological structure: *àtkè* 'medicine' + *qàdà* 'preparation', which is in turn an action noun derived by reduplication from the mono-morphemic root *qà* 'prepare (by way of a process of physical transformation); cook'. For an Ewe speaker, the composite expression *àtkèqàdà* therefore has a predictable meaning and can be derived by regular word formation processes. In fact, the *Dictionnaire* already lists the action noun *qàdà* separately under the letter /Ð/. The same observation can be made with respect to a place noun like *àtkèwòfé* {*àtkè-wò-fé*} 'medicine-make-PLACE' or *àtkèwòlá* {*medicine-make-AGN*} 'medicine-maker'. An alternative approach would have been to list *àtkèqàdà* as a subentry under the headword *qàdà*, as one among other examples of collocations involving *qàdà*.

Another aspect worthy of note is that the *Dictionnaire* only lists nominal derivations or compounds containing *àtkè* and not a single verb-noun collocation. This can be problematic because contrary to many derived or compound nouns, verb-noun combinations are often less predictable in their meaning. For example, the *Ewe Encyclopedic Dictionary of Health*, a gem compiled by an editorial team at the University of Ghana, Legon, lists *dó àtkè* {put medicine} 'inhale/insert medicine' as a subentry to *àtkè*. The meaning 'inhale' cannot be regularly derived because *dó* is one of the many generic verbs of Ewe with a vague general sense similar to 'put' in English, and which acquires more specific senses in collocations, e.g. *dó gá* {put money} 'borrow money', *dó víví* {put sweetness} 'entertain; give relief'.

Decisions about the ordering of entries of course constitute one of the major challenges of dictionary making. Such decisions also depend on the author's intended audience and I assume, although this is not explicitly stated by the author, that the *Dictionnaire* is aimed at a lay and a specialist audience alike. For the former, a strictly alphabetical order is easier to handle than one which involves prior mental parsing. User-friendliness is also likely to have motivated Rongier to choose a different path from Westermann in the ordering of entries beginning with the letter /a/. The *Ewe-Deutsches Wörterbuch* contains a mere six entries under /a/, in contrast, Rongier's *Dictionnaire* contains a whopping 250 pages of words listed under /a/, constituting a third of the book. The enormous difference between the two is due to the fact that Westermann treats the initial vowel /a/ in nouns like *àmè* 'person' as a segmentable nominal prefix discernible from the root, hence **à-mè*. Rongier, however takes into account that the nominal "prefix" is not productive (any longer) in Ewe and is not subjected to allomorphy as in other Kwa languages. Akan, for example, features prefixal inflection for singular and plural number with nouns and adjectives, e.g. *o-nipa* 'person' *n-nipa* 'people'. The large number of entries under /a/ is, however, a bit unwieldy during look-up, and the question therefore does arise whether it might not have been useful for Rongier to follow Westermann's morphologically oriented approach instead.

Some observations are in order on the orthographic rendering of Ewe employed in the *Dictionnaire éwé-français*. The first relates to the representation of Ewe tones, a language with two phonemic tones, namely H(igh) and L(low). Ewe additionally features a phonetic M(id) tone and two phonetic contour tones (rising and falling). In his earlier work, the *Dictionnaire français-éwé*, Rongier opted for the full marking of tone on every syllable of an entry. In the *Dictionnaire éwé-français*, he opts for a shallow system of tone marking with the following orthographic conventions (i) an initial L-toned syllable of an entry remains unmarked, an initial H-toned syllable bears an acute accent; (ii) a non-initial syllable is only marked by an acute (H) or grave (L) accent when its tone differs from that of the preceding syllable. In this, Rongier follows the system employed by Westermann in his dictionary and his grammatical descriptions of Ewe (e.g. 1930), as well as the approach developed in other classical works, e.g. Christaller's *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language* (1881). The shallow system renders the following orthographic representations: *móẏẏẏmètétótó* [*móẏẏẏmètétótó*] 'ladder', and *yeḡótoemè* [*yèḡótoémè*] 'sunset'. Shallow and minimal systems of tone marking (or indeed no tone marking at all) are very common in African orthographies – Yoruba with its full tone-marking (M tone unmarked) as part of the regular orthography being one of the few

exceptions, e.g. *olódùmaré* [olódùmaré] ‘creator, supreme being’ (Abraham 1962). Given the scope of this work, it is regrettable that Rongier decided to shift from full tone marking in his *Dictionnaire français-éwé* to partial tone marking in the present *Dictionnaire éwé-français*. For users unfamiliar with reading tone languages, and indeed unfamiliar with Ewe, getting the tones right will constitute a challenge, since unmarked syllables can either be specified for H or L.

A second observation is that Rongier departs from the official Ewe orthography in his *Dictionnaire éwé-français* in the rendition of nasalized vowels, an approach already taken in the *Dictionnaire français-éwé*, which he justifies in the latter work with enhanced “readability”. Instead of writing the nasal tilde above the vowel as in *àtsỹ* ‘beauty’, he writes it below the vowel, i.e. *àtsŷ*. I disagree with this approach, which disregards established Ewe orthographic conventions that have been in use for decades and is equivalent to transcribing *Schönheit* ‘beauty’ in a dictionary of German as *Schõnheit* for the sake of expediency. A final note on form: in the font employed in this work, the grave accent (L tone) over the letter /i/ appears to the left of the dot on the *i*. This should not be the case if a Unicode font had been used, and it mildly tarnishes the otherwise very satisfactory typeset of the *Dictionnaire*.

These are, however, minor observations in view of the breath-taking scope of Rongier’s *Dictionnaire éwé-français*. This is a stupendous work, which is likely to serve generations of learners of Ewe and francophone linguists. The sheer coverage of the *Dictionnaire* and Rongier’s matter-of-factly presentation of the richness of this beautiful language also provide long-awaited relief from the racist pronouncements of Westermann in his introduction (see p. 16) to the first edition of his *Ewe-Deutsches Wörterbuch*, which will remain a perpetual stain on an otherwise timeless work.

References

- ABRAHAM, Roy Clive. 1962. *Dictionary of modern Yoruba*. 2nd ed. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- CHRISTALLER, Johann Gottlieb. 1881. *A dictionary of the Asante and Fante language called Tshi (Chwee, Twi), with a grammatical introduction and appendices on the geography of the Gold Coast and other subjects*. Basel: Evangelical Missionary Society.
- Department of Linguistics. 2011. *Ewe encyclopedic dictionary of health*. Accra: University of Ghana, Legon.
- GLARE, Peter G.W. 1982. *Oxford latin dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- RONGIER, Jacques. 1995. *Dictionnaire français-éwé: suivi d’un index français-éwé*. (Collection “Hommes et Sociétés”). Paris: ACCT - Karthala.
- WESTERMANN, Diedrich. 1905. *Wörterbuch der Ewe-Sprache. 1. Teil: Ewe-Deutsches Wörterbuch*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.

- WESTERMANN, Diedrich. 1930. *A study of the Ewe language*. Translated from German by A.L. Bickford-Smith. London: Oxford University Press.
- WESTERMANN, Diedrich. 1954. *Wörterbuch der Ewe-Sprache*. Redigierte Ausgabe. Vol. 8. (Veröff. Des Inst. Für Orientforschung Der Deutschen Akademie Der Wissenschaften Zu Berlin). Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.