Standardizing an Informal Orthography: Problems in Orthography Development

Solos Language

ISO Code [sol]

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1. Introduction

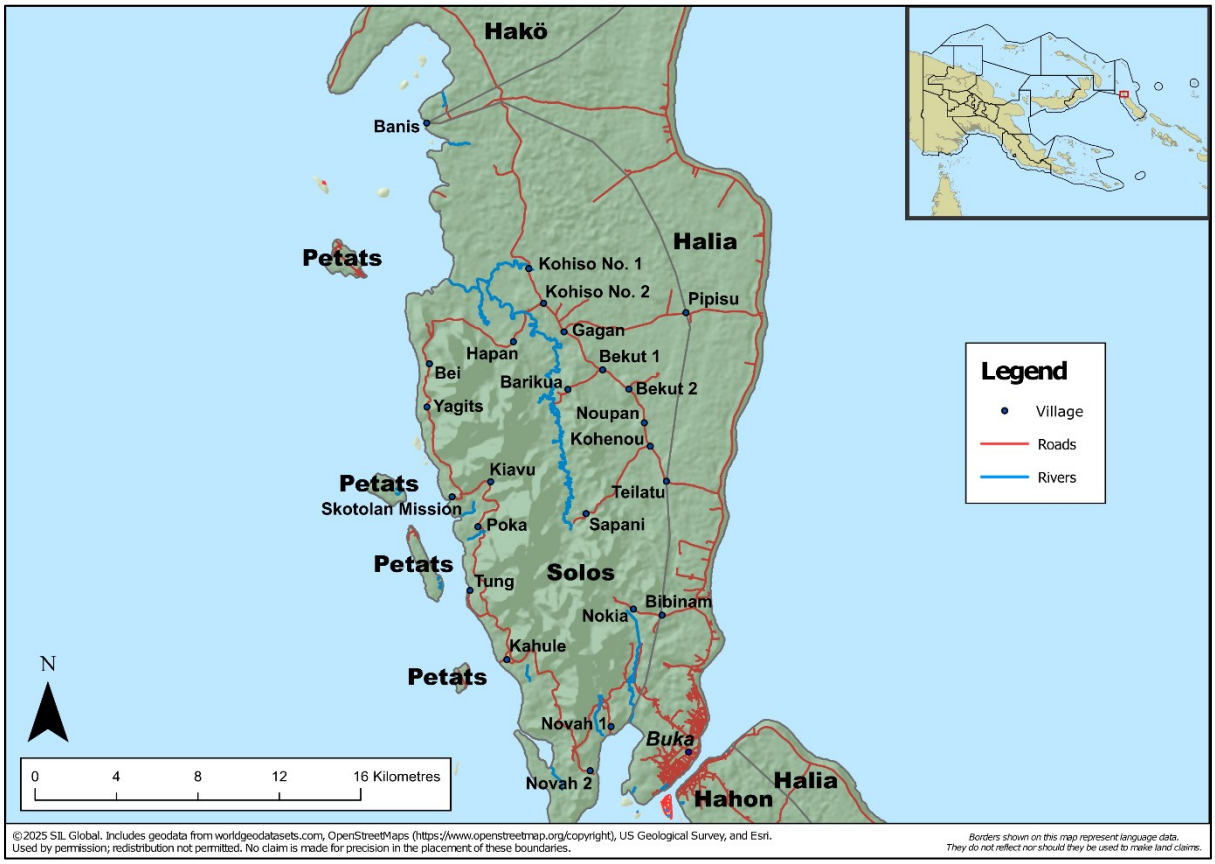
This brief paper on the orthography situation in the Solos [sol] language was written up in 2025 by Larry Doyle under the auspices of SIL-PNG, and presented at Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea (LSPNG) Conference 2025 at the University of Goroka. Larry has been an advisor to the Solos Language Program since 2011, having spent approximately two years living in Tung village up until the end of 2013, and visiting regularly in the years since.

Much credit for the current trial orthography goes to previous work done by mission teachers (both Catholic and Methodist) and their Solos-speaking students, who transferred their English literacy skills to the Solos language, thus creating a writing system that has worked for about a century. Additionally, officials of the Gagan Parish produced a Catechism in the Solos language, possibly in multiple versions, and probably all in the early to mid 1960s, although historical data is sparse. SIL-PNG staff and local educators also produced some literacy materials in Solos in the early 1990s, with some additional revision and work in the 2010s (not published). Many Solos-speaking teachers, especially at the lower grade levels, have also instructed their students in reading and writing their own language across many decades, resulting in a population that largely knows some way of putting Solos into a written form and reading what others have written in Solos. Without the innovation and hard work of these countless individuals, Solos would not have its current written forms.

1.1 Language Name and Classification

Solos is a language primarily spoken on the central plains, interior hills, and west coast of Buka Island in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. Roughly following Ross (1988, p.217, 258), Solos is an Austronesian language with the following classification groupings in descending order: Malayo-Polynesian, Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian, Eastern Malayo-Polynesian, Oceanic, Western Oceanic, Meso-Melanesian, New Ireland, South New Ireland-Northwest Solomonic, Nehan-North Bougainville.

1.2 Language Location and Boundaries



Solos is traditionally the primary language spoken across 19 villages in and around the southwestern hill chain on Buka Island. Four additional villages (Bibinam, Teilatu, Pipisu, and Banis) serve as border villages where a majority primarily speak other languages, but a minority speak Solos and those villages influence rural areas where primarily Solos-speaking people live. There are also a number of hamlets, plantations, and other smaller groupings that are not official villages where Solos is a primary language.

2. History of Solos Writing

Solos has a long history of being written and read. In the early 1920s missionaries arrived both on the southwestern coast (Methodist) and northern coast and interior (Catholic) of Buka Island, and set up schools. In these mission schools, English was the primary language of instruction, and the first generation of literate Solos people were trained, many of them becoming teachers as well. As this system of education spread to almost every part of the Solos area, people who were learning literacy skills in English transferred those skills to their own language. No records exist of the first time people wrote letters and notes to one another in Solos or posted Solos-language signs, but by the 1930s it is reported that notable Solos speakers, such as Herman Somuk, were writing stories and other materials in Solos. Somuk is also reported to have written a Solos dictionary at some point in his life, but no extant copies or any publication information have been discovered.

The Catholic Church, via the Gagan Parish, did publish one or more Catechism books in Solos, starting in the early 1960s. *O Ketekismo O Gakei* [The Small Catchism] is mentioned by Allen & Hurd in their survey (1965), while *Ena Haman Gue God* [I Believe in God] is attested via a few extant copies, but with no publication date. In 2007, a team from Gagan village drafted most of one chapter of Genesis from the Bible, but it was not published.

Various SIL-PNG personnel and local teachers and artists produced two different versions of Solos literacy materials (a series of five books) for the Tok Ples Prep Schools in the 1990s on behalf of the then-provincial Division of Education. One version was for Coastal Solos, and the other was just labelled "Solos", and so presumably was for Inland Solos. Only the final book in each series, which was an alphabet book, was preserved: *O Hapita 5* [The Steps 5] for Solos and *Hahatania 5* [Beginnings 5] for Coastal Solos. The contents of the other four books in each series are unknown, and no extant copies or digital records have been found. The Coastal Solos version of the alphabet book was revised and updated in 2015-2018 by an SIL literacy consultant from Australia in cooperation with local literacy workers while in Buka working for another agency, but was never published (G. Waters, personal communication, December 2023).

During the whole period from the 1920s to current times, children have been taught to read and write Solos as a side-product of their formal education in English. Many current and recent elementary/primary teachers and students, as well as elderly people, report the teaching of the Solos alphabet and basic spelling conventions as either an intentional topic in school, or as a cursory by-product of the instruction methods trying to get students to understand English phonics, spelling, etc. The exact method of instruction depends greatly on who was the teacher in which grade at what time, with some early grade teachers reportedly being quite formal about teaching Solos writing in a systematic way, and others not teaching it at all. This has partly depended on the various curricula used over the decades as different missions, communities, and government agencies have been to different degrees involved in overseeing education.

Solos is and has been in common use in writing local notices, notes and private letters, in songs written down for church use, and in more recent years, in communicating via texts and on social media. There are significant variations in how people write, but for multiple generations, most Solos people have had the ability to look at Solos as written by others and read it.

3. Current Solos Orthography Development

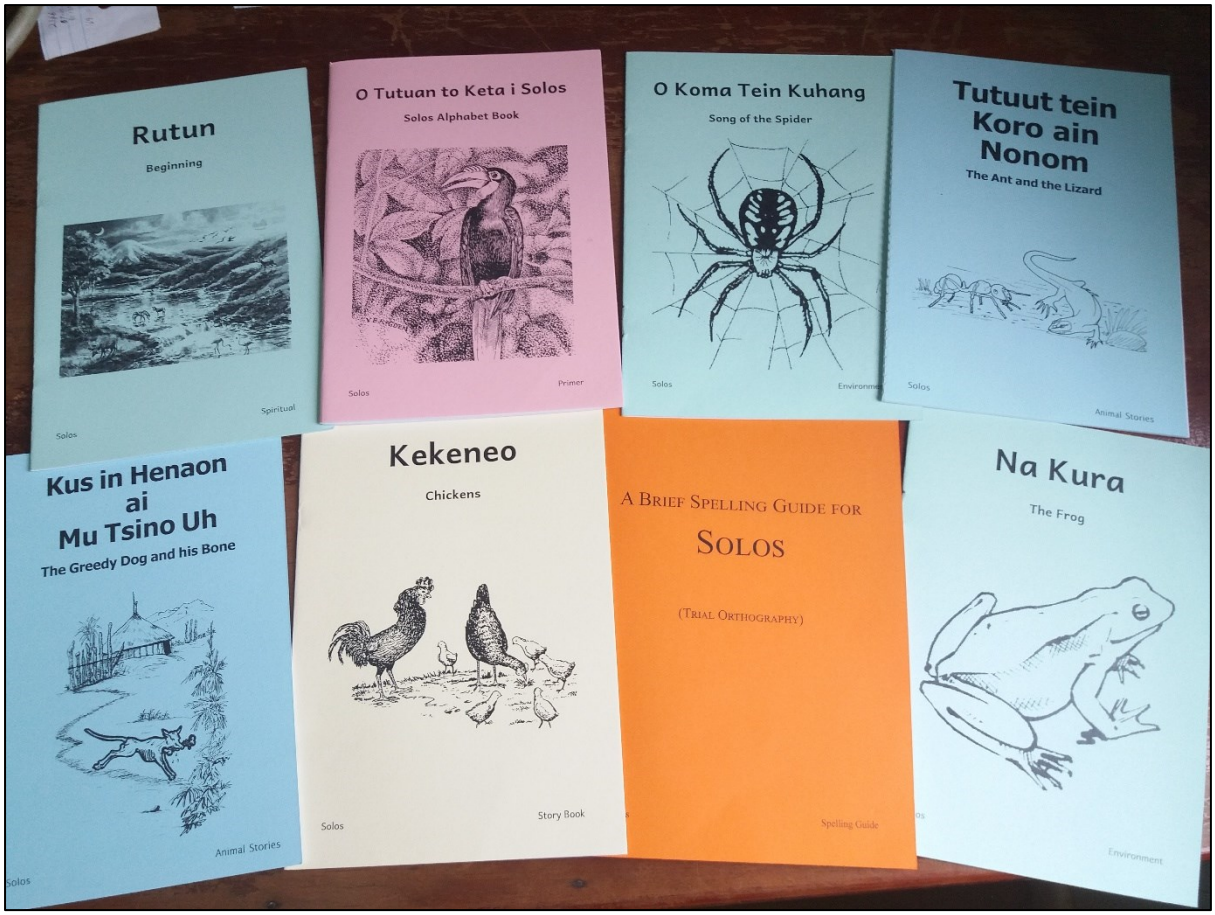
Since 2011, the author has been involved in orthography development in Solos as it relates to a broader Solos Language Program, which features Bible translation, literacy materials, some linguistic description, etc. as is typical for SIL-PNG involvement in a language. In this program, orthography development plays a foundational role.

To that end, in 2013, a Writer's Workshop was held in Kahule village by an SIL-PNG literacy worker. Some small books and stories were produced, some of which were authored at the course, and some of which were pre-existing shell books that were translated into Solos from English. A "Tiny Alphabet Book" was also produced, as well as a "Brief Spelling Guide". None of these books were published at the time, but the draft spelling guide was used, with modification, as a rough guide by the translation team as they worked on Bible translation to maintain consistency in spelling, word breaks, and letter choices.

Larry Doyle also published an Organized Phonology Data in 2013, revised in 2017, and revised again in 2021 (Doyle 2021). The 2021 revision in particular was completed in order to achieve "trial orthography" status under the SIL-PNG system for orthography stage development. This is marked by having an orthography established by local authors based on a reasonable phonological analysis and a limited number of locally-authored texts. Testing with increasing amounts of locally authored text is required to progress to "approved" and finally "established" orthography status.

While not much progress was made in actually testing any materials in the decade between 2013 and 2023, in 2024, six Solos stories were published as trial versions (four original works, and two updated shell book translations from the 2013 Writer's Workshop), along with a compiled and updated

alphabet book, *O Tutuan to Keta i Solos* [The Marks of the Solos Language] based on all the previous versions, and an updated *A Brief Spelling Guide for Solos (Trial Orthography)* based on the work done at the 2013 Writer's Workshop as modified by the way the translation team had been writing Solos in their translation work and separately written stories.



These trial version books were distributed to all nineteen Solos villages in mid-2025, as well as on a Facebook page dedicated to the Solos language. Some feedback has been received, resulting in a few minor changes to spelling of particular words. Other feedback will have to be evaluated in the future to determine whether to make systemic changes and what any such changes should be.

4. Problems in Orthography Development

In this section we aim to lay out some of the issues faced in trying to standardize an orthography for ongoing use in the Solos language. Much of the Solos data in this section is taken from work done toward a Solos Dialect Survey (Doyle, in preparation).

4.1 The Expected Problems

In any orthography development, there are some things that are going to cause problems in almost every language, such as variation (Clifton 1987, p.4), dialect differences (Sanders, in Clifton 1987, p.88), influence of languages of wider communication (Smalley 1964, p.15), and phonology (Nida 1954, in Smalley 1964, p.24). Solos has its share of these issues. There are two main dialects, and although there is some lexical variation, most of the difference is marked by phonological variation or an extra syllable on certain words. These are recognized by Solos speakers as the "same word" but are pronounced and spelled differently.

While most words are identical across both dialects, some words can end in different nasals, depending on dialect. Example: the Solos word for 'five' can be *tanim* or *taning*. 'Dark color/black' similarly can be *koun* or *koung*. The 'ng' ending is more common for these types of words in the Inland Dialect, rather than 'n' or 'm', even though there are plenty of other words that do end in those nasals in both dialects. *Bepen* or *pepem/bepem* 'skin' also varies according to dialect, with the 'm' ending begin more common in the Coastal Dialect.

Some other words change voicing for their initial consonants. Example: *gukubei* or *kukubei* 'young girl' differ only in voicing the initial consonant in the reduplicated syllable. Similarly, *bipit* or *pipit* 'star' also differ by dialect in initial voicing. The voiced version is more common in the Inland Dialect for the types of words that show this variation, although there is some free variation throughout the language area, and even within villages.

Other word-initial changes, such as *deke* or *reke* 'flying fox' and *un* or *hun* 'hair' are fairly strongly dialect related (Inland and Coastal, respectively), while similar variations, such as *haobot* or *aobot* 'all' seem quite free across the language area, and other h-initial words, such as *heis* 'wild animal' are never pronounced without the 'h'. *Tinon* or *tsinon* 'man/male' also varies by dialect (Inland and Coastal, respectively) along with other t/ts-initial words, even though 't' and 'ts' (phoneme: /ʧ/) are quite commonly used in and across both dialects. This is somewhat complicated by the phonology of 't' being followed by a high vowel 'i' or 'u' shifting slightly toward 'ts' in rapid speech, as evidenced in words like *tiunaon* or *tsunaon* 'old man' in the Inland and Coastal Dialect, respectively, with some variation by village even within dialect boundaries.

Some word-final changes are also dialect related. Example: *kunup* or *kunuk* 'red' vary according to dialect, with the 'p' ending more common in the Coastal Dialect and the 'k' ending in the Inland Dialect.

There are also several vowel variations that trend according to dialect. Example: *yan* or *yen* 'fish', with the 'e' sound being more common in the Coastal Dialect in these types of words. Many words keep their vowel sounds consistent across the dialects. Another similar difference in some words is with 'o', 'u', or 'ou' such as in *riouh* or *rioh/riuh* 'sun', which are the Inland and Coastal norms, respectively. Although I will not exemplify them all here, similar types of dialect-related vowel variation have been observed for 'u/i', 'e/i', and 'ao/a/o'. These can be quite difficult to tease out, since there is some degree of free variation or village-level variation regarding many of these vowel combinations in certain words.

Solos also varies in the addition/deletion of syllables in the 'same word' in different locations. Some of the free variation observed in this category is undoubtedly phonological simplification, but there are some instances that are quite clearly dialect-related. In the Coastal Dialect 'brother' is most often pronounced as *mu.ni.sin*, while most places considered Inland Dialect would render it *mu.ni.a.sin*, with each spelling it as *munisin* or *muniasin* respectively. This is not limited to vowel-only syllables, with examples like *penangen* 'claw' being rendered *penunangen* or *peninangen* in two neighboring villages (this one not strictly a dialect variation), with the variation of a whole two-letter syllable, *nu* or *ni* versus most villages not having that syllable at all.

Another variation axis exists specifically in borrowed words. Some phonemes, like /l/, seem not to natively exist in Solos, but are used in borrowed words, at least until those words have ben 'Solos-ized' after some longer period of time or by migrating to parts of the language area less affected by the original language(s). This happens most frequently and notably in words borrowed from Halia [hla] and Petats [ptx], since those seem to be most closely related, and have quite high percentages of cognates with Solos. Halia has between 43-50% lexical similarity on wordlists, and Petats 56-71% lexical similarity (MacKenzie, et al, 2013, p.28-29). While the waters can be muddied on what is a borrowing and what is just a similar lexeme, some more modernly introduced words, like *tolala*

‘white man’, which has the common /l/ from Petats and/or Halia, but is more consistently pronounced *tonana* in villages toward the interior of the Solos area. Even in coastal or border villages many people are quick to point out that it is more properly pronounced *tonana*, even if they often say it ‘wrong’ in their village. Similar trends can be seen in words borrowed from English, Tok Pisin, and German, with the words taking on more and more Solos-like pronunciation and syllabification over time, particularly as they are spread to places where people are or were less aware of their borrowed status.

As can be imagined, the combinations of these variations can be difficult to reconcile as people in different areas want to spell their words in the same way that they pronounce them. Some compromises are easy, as in the ‘riouh’ example above, where we are trying to convince everyone to spell all versions of it with the ‘u’, even though that’s an added phoneme for some. So far there have been no objections to that. Others are more difficult, and so far, we are following Elke Karan’s advice not to rush the process of writing system development. Her proposition that multiple standards can exist, early solutions may not be best, and that standardization can take decades if that is even a desirable goal seems to fit well in the case of Solos (Karan, *Standardization: What’s the Hurry?* in Cahill & Rice 2014, p.109-119). So, for the moment, we are asking any authors or translators to write the way they would normally say things in their village, and only later will we try to standardize where possible in publications meant for the whole language area.

4.2 The Inherited Problems

Since we have published several books on a limited basis (aimed at the very earliest grades of formal schooling) across the Solos-speaking area, we have run into a number of issues of spelling that do not arise from phonology, variation in pronunciation, dialect, or borrowing. These arise from the nearly century-long practices of writing that have developed in slightly different ways across the language area, and have been taught differently by different teachers at various times across the decades, and from the influence of published materials in the past.

These should be expected obstacles to a practical and standardized orthography in situations like this, since Fishman noted in 1977 that “the truly vast amount of linguistic effort invested in these reforms has yielded such meager results” (p.XVI), and Jones & Mooney note that any pre-existing orthography will have an impact, and must be taken into account when developing a new one (2017, p.30).

The Solos informal orthography has several competing opinions as to how to spell. Some of these have been influenced by neighboring languages, and others seem to have developed independently. These ideas about orthography will collectively be referred to in this section as the ‘informal orthography’ as opposed to the evolving ‘trial orthography’ that has been introduced to a small group in 2013 and first published in trial versions in 2024.

The ʧ sound

Solos has a fairly straightforward system of phonemes, but there are some areas where it is difficult to match one character with one sound. The two most obvious examples of this are /ʧ/ and /ŋ/, which have various ways of being portrayed. /ʧ/ is most commonly expressed as <ts> as a number of related languages in the Bougainville area do, but has also been written by some as <j>, probably as influenced by the Petats orthography. The trial orthography has gone with the majority opinion here and attempts to consistently portray /ʧ/ as <ts>. So far people have made no complaints about adopting the most common solution.

The ŋ and ɡ sound

/ŋ/ has a fairly standardized form, <ng>, following English and Tok Pisin, but some write it as <g>. This is of course confusing, since /ɡ/ exists as a separate phoneme in Solos, and is represented in

English, Tok Pisin, and all the surrounding languages as <g>, but those who write /ŋ/ as <g> have a solution for that conundrum: writing /g/ as the otherwise unused <q>! This system has the benefit of being elegant, only using one symbol per sound, and avoiding such problems as 'ng + g' boundaries in the middle of some words, but it is definitely a minority position, and seems to have been the pet method of a few teachers some decades back. It also obviously suffers when teaching students to transfer their reading skills over to (or from) the languages of wider communication, Tok Pisin and English. Here again, the trial orthography follows the majority in using <ng> and <g>.

The β sound

Solos also has an allophone of /b/, [β] a bilabial fricative, that has traditionally been written with a <v> in the informal orthography. This most often shows up intervocalically, but can, in reduplicative or pseudo-reduplicative settings, be used word-initially. Some people, however, have consistently written this 'soft b' as <b> instead of <v>. The trial orthography has here attempted to follow the phonemic principle and use the minority style of using <b> for all instances of /b/, even when pronounced as [β]. So far this has been successfully used by writers who have been introduced to the concept, and usually accepted by readers once it is explained briefly. It remains to be seen whether this change will be more widely accepted or not.

The glottal stop

Solos uses a glottal stop quite frequently, most often at the end of words. There are three types of potentially 'vowel-final' words: those that end in the simple vowel, those that end in /h/, and those that end with the glottal stop. If there is a bare vowel at the end, that is unmarked and the word simply terminates with the vowel sound. If it ends with an /h/, then people always write <h> at the end, and that <h> is pronounced except when the next word starts with a consonant. When these h-final words end an utterance or are followed by a pause, the /h/ is theoretically pronounced, but often very lightly, and it can be hard to hear, or it may be elided altogether. The word-final /h/ is most clearly heard when the next word starts with a vowel sound, in which case it is phonetically joined to that next word as the initial consonant. The glottal stop at the end of such words is in theory always pronounced, but can be hard to hear (or elided) if the next sound is a hard consonant. At pauses or the end of an utterance it is usually clearly heard, and it is definitely clearly pronounced when the next word starts with a vowel sound. However, in the informal orthography it was never written.

When the glottal stop shows up in the middle of words (always intervocalically), it has been written with an apostrophe <'> in the informal orthography. However, apostrophes have also sometimes been used to mark other things, such as morpheme breaks. The trial orthography calls for the use of the apostrophe only for the word-internal glottal stop (the saltillo symbol ' is used in formally published works), which is a rare phoneme in that position, and leaves the word-final glottal stop unmarked. Other places where apostrophes were used by some have been replaced by spaces for some morpheme breaks, making them separate words, or left unmarked. So far, this slight change has been well-received, where it has been noticed at all.

The semi-vowels

Probably the most controversial changes to this point have been the use of the semi-vowels <y> and <w>. In the informal orthography there are a number of syllables and words that simply start with an 'i' or 'e' followed by a different, lower vowel sound, which equates roughly to 'y', or that start with 'o' or 'u' followed by a different, more open vowel sound, equating to approximately 'w'. Examples of this would be *ien* for 'fish' and *uen* for 'coconut palm'. These spellings were not the only way to write this, and there were some who would use a 'y' or 'w' in these situations, but the vast majority of people just used the vowels to start this type of word or syllable. One exception is the preposition-like marker *ye*. While in some environments, such as when contracted with a preceding word, it is commonly spelled *ie*, it is and has been quite regularly written with a 'y', particularly when standing alone or contracted with a following pronoun.

The trial orthography has introduced a standardized way of expressing these types of vowel-like sounds at the onset of syllables with a different vowel sound as the syllabic core as the as either <y> for the /i/ and /e/ sounds and <w> for the /o/ and /u/ sounds. The above examples of 'fish' and 'coconut palm' would be *yen* and *wen* in the trial orthography. Many people who have tried writing in the trial orthography readily take to the idea of writing the consonant-like function of these vowel sounds as a semi-vowel, and most people reading it have no trouble with it and make no comment. But the most common complaint in the limited feedback received so far about the trial publications has been the inclusion of 'w' and 'y'. "Solos does not have those letters," is the refrain. It remains to be seen whether these additional letters will be widely accepted, or whether the opposition to their presence in common words is such that they need to be switched back to spelling used most frequently in the traditional orthography.

Vowel length

One factor that is highly variable in the traditional orthography is how often or whether to mark vowel length. Solos has a short vowel sound and a lengthened vowel sound for each of its five phonemic vowels. Some people have marked this with a doubling of the vowel when it is long, and many others have not marked it at all, while most inconsistently mark it in some places and leave it unmarked in others. Some writers even over-use the double vowel convention for words which do not contain lengthened vowels, or when some vowels seem longer due to intonation or other clause-level influences. Certain words containing lengthened vowels seem to be more consistently marked for length, such as *toon* 'stand' (as opposed to *ton* 'island' or *ton* 'native of'), while others, which seem equally contrastive in minimal pairs are rarely or inconsistently marked. The trial orthography attempts to delineate a list of words which require double vowels to show the vowel length, while ignoring all other occurrences of vowel length. This list is largely based on the traditional orthography, but also comes down to common writer preference to write a given word with the lengthened vowel noted. One example is *katuun* 'person', which is not contrastive with any shortened form **katun*, but people who regularly write tend to consistently write a doubled 'u' for the long vowel in the second syllable.

Triple vowels

Solos has a wide variety of diphthongs using all five of its vowels in most of the possible combinations. However, it also has, in a few words, a much rarer thee-vowel combination within a syllable. One such combination is [pɛɑɔn] 'pumpkin', which would seem to be logically spelled **peaon*. However, it is spelled in the traditional orthography as *peon*. A graphically similar word, *pion* 'today', is pronounced simply as [piɔn], so it is quite possible to pronounce high and low vowels together without an intervening mid vowel. However, the [ɛɑɔ] combination of sounds seems to always be spelled as *eo*, with another example being *heong* [hɛɑɔŋ] 'to carry on the back'. Triple vowels going the other direction, low to high, also exist and are also written with two vowel letters: *kokoen* [kɔ.kɔɑɛn] 'pudding or cake'; *toe* [tɔɑɛ] 'life'. A third triple combination, [iɔu] is spelled as *ou*, as in *soung* [siɔuŋ] 'return'. This one is interesting in that the initial high vowel is dropped in the orthography, rather than the more middle vowel as in the other two.

In almost all cases of these triples, the trial orthography attempts to follow the traditional orthography in spelling these triple vowels with just two vowel letters. One exception, based entirely on writer preference, is an attempt to write *toe* 'life' as *toae*. So far, this spelling has not been contested, but it is difficult for writers to consistently write the triple vowel as three vowel letters. Reading it does not seem to cause any difficulty for readers at all levels. This remains one of the areas of orthography where significant change is possible, whether to consistently spell all vowel triples with three vowels, or whether to consistently write them all with just two vowels. There are very few words that contain these triples, although most of these words are themselves quite common. This situation is ripe for testing to see which type of spelling is preferred.

The articles

A final category of Solos orthography questions has to do with separation of articles, markers, clitics, etc. from the stems of words. Solos has a complex system of articles that precede nouns, the most common of which are *na* and *o*, which roughly delineate singular and plural in the most common class, and plural and singular in a second major class. There are many other articles that are beyond the scope of this paper, but the orthographic question is whether these articles should be joined to the nouns they mark or be written as separate words. While the majority of nouns have the articles written separately by most people, there are certain words (two examples being *napean* 'child' and *nariouh* 'sun') that people commonly do write with the article joined most of the time. They usually even do so when asked to write a list of nouns. Most of the list will be the bare stems, but some nouns are consistently written with an article attached. There are counter-examples, but the overall tendency is clear. However, these more closely conjoined article-noun sets seem to defy classification, since they represent near-random single instances out of a wide variety of noun classes, often with very semantically similar words not being as closely associated with their articles. While the underlying grammatical reason for this 'article closeness' is yet to be explored, for orthographic purposes, the trial orthography is attempting to keep all articles separate (e.g. *na pean* and *na riouh*, as in the above example). This seems acceptable to all the writers introduced to the idea, and no one has reported any trouble reading such separated articles, although some people have questioned why some words are written without their 'close' article in lists, such as in the alphabet book.

The verb phrase clitic

Some other markers, such as verb phrase clitics that show agreement with the subject, have not been consistently written in the traditional orthography. In some instances, they are combined with the immediately preceding word, following their general phonetic pronunciation, while in other cases they are written separately. This usually depends entirely upon the writer, and naïve writers are often notably inconsistent in whether such clitics are joined or not throughout even a short text. The trial orthography prescribes keeping the verb phrase clitics separate from the final word of the verb phrase. As an example, one question and answer in the Catechism, which is pretty consistent about joining the verb phrase clitics, has the following question-answer sequence showing only the final word of each verb phrase: … *sahison?* 'pass by + SA marker for 3rd singular', followed by a verb phrase ending in *… haovotorih.* 'always + SA marker for 3rd plural. The trial orthography would render these as *sahis on* and *haobot orih*, respectively.

The single vowel markers

Solos also has a large number of single vowel markers (*i*, *e*, *a*). These function (quite separately) as verb aspect markers, as part of the pre-noun article system, and also as part of the relator/preposition system. While these markers universally 'look forward' and impact the following word or phrase, they sometimes will phonetically join with that preceding word, and writers have inconsistently joined such short markers with the preceding word in the informal orthography. They are not hard to read in that position, but they do alter the shape of the word. In one example from the Catechism: *eiouhi* 'relator + 3sg + aspect marker'. The trial orthography would render this as *e youh i*, separating out the components. This type of 'bunching' has on occasion been observed even with longer markers, but is most prevalent with the single vowel markers.

The relators

The preceding example also brings up another class of pre-noun markers in Solos, such as *a*, *e, te, ye, de, ne,* as well as some longer markers that serve other functions, but can be used similarly in the same position. These all serve as what are tentatively classed as 'relators' (somewhat different than the pure prepositions in Solos), and most commonly appear before pronouns, as in *e youh* in the preceding paragraph, but can also be used with nouns. When used with nouns, these are almost always separated, even by beginning writers. However, with pronouns, they often get linked to the

pronoun. This tendency is so pronounced, although not required, that the trial orthography has made a special subsection of the rule about word breaks specifically for these contractions involving pronouns and these markers, "With some pronouns and markers, the separate words can be joined together as a contraction, even though they are normally written separately." (Doyle 2024, p.5) Constructions such as *tenit* (poss.+1pl), *erun* (relator+3pl) and *neyouh* (relator+3sg) are quite common in both the informal and trial orthography, although in both instances they are also commonly written separately as well. Allowing for the contraction drastically reduces the number of 'errors' in any writing.

5. Conclusions

While the problems with standardizing Solos orthography may take considerable time, and not inconsequential effort and expense, to figure out, it is ultimately up to the community of speakers, writers, and readers of Solos to select a system that works for them. While this has been done informally in virtually all the villages and sub-regions of the language area over the decades, it has never been attempted across the entire language area. History, and the literature around orthography development and reform, indicates that the process will probably not be quick and painless.

Also of note is that people have expressed opinions about how Solos 'should be' written, but when given the opportunity to write stories, songs, and poems, they often follow a pattern different from their statements. This should definitely be taken into account when testing variations in alphabet, word breaks, and spelling conventions. If people are easily able to read and understand one way of doing it, or if they are able to easily adapt their writing style to include a particular style of representation, then those are probably acceptable, regardless of the opinions expressed.

A third lesson to be learned in this context is that there is no central authority on how Solos should be written, therefore we are aiming for something that works as broadly as possible. In the short term this involves some ambiguity—"spell it like you say it." It may turn out that this ambiguity is a permanent feature of Solos orthography, with dialect and village-level variations being considered proper writing technique. The end goal is an orthography that is acceptable to all Solos speakers, and one that they can readily use for writing their stories, songs, and histories, as well as for reading their sacred texts, social media posts, market signs, and everything else they have been using their written language for over the past century.

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